



e. e. cummings: A Life

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From the author of *American Bloomsbury*, *Louisa May Alcott*, and *Home Before Dark*, a major reassessment of the life and work of the novelist, painter, and playwright considered to be one of America's preeminent twentieth-century poets. At the time of his death in 1962, at age sixty-eight, he was, after Robert Frost, the most widely read poet in the United States.

E. E. Cummings was and remains controversial. He has been called "a master" (Malcolm Cowley); "hideous" (Edmund Wilson). James Dickey called him a "daringly original poet with more vitality and more sheer uncompromising talent than any other living American writer."

In Susan Cheever's rich, illuminating biography we see Cummings's idyllic childhood years in Cambridge, Massachusetts; his Calvinist father—distinguished Harvard professor and sternly religious minister of the Cambridge Congregational Church; his mother—loving, attentive, a source of encouragement, the aristocrat of the family, from Unitarian writers, judges, and adventurers.

We see Cummings—slight, agile, playful, a product of a nineteenth-century New England childhood, bred to be flinty and determined; his love of nature; his sense of fun, laughter, mimicry; his desire from the get-go to stand conventional wisdom on its head, which he himself would often do, literally, to amuse.

At Harvard, he roomed with John Dos Passos; befriended Lincoln Kirstein; read Latin, Greek, and French; earned two degrees; discovered alcohol, fast cars, and burlesque at the Old Howard Theater; and raged against the school's conservative, exclusionary upper-class rule by A. Lawrence Lowell.

In Cheever's book we see that beneath Cummings's blissful, golden childhood the strains of sadness and rage were already at play. He grew into a dark young man and set out on a lifelong course of rebellion against conventional authority and the critical establishment, devouring the poetry of Ezra Pound, whose radical verses pushed Cummings away from the politeness of the traditional nature poem toward a more adventurous, sexually conscious form.

We see that Cummings's self-imposed exile from Cambridge—a town he'd come to hate for its intellectualism, Puritan uptightness, racism, and self-righteous xenophobia—seemed necessary for him as a man and a poet. Headstrong and cavalier, he volunteered as an ambulance driver in World War I, working alongside Hemingway, Joyce, and Ford Madox Ford . . . his ongoing stand against the imprisonment of his soul taking a literal turn when he was held in a makeshift prison for "undesirables and spies," an experience that became the basis for his novel, *The Enormous Room*.

We follow Cummings as he permanently flees to Greenwich Village to be among other modernist poets of the day—Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas—and we see the development of both the poet and his work against the backdrop of modernism and through the influences of his contemporaries: Stein, Amy Lowell, Joyce, and Pound. Cheever's fascinating book gives us the evolution of an artist whose writing was at the forefront of what was new and daring and bold in an America in transition.

(With 28 pages of black-and-white images.)

e. e. cummings: A Life Details

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J. Alfred says

According to this book,

- Cummings was "this country's only true modernist poet" (in what sense "true," wonders Pound Williams Stevens Moore et al)
- Pound, HD, and Aldington together changed imagism to vorticism when Amy Lowell took over (HD and Aldington published in all of Lowell's Imagist Anthologies)
- A Unitarian is a Puritan (theology explodes).

Here is one of the treatments of poems:

"He uses the word 'defunct' to create a syllabic meter in the second line": meaning that it has two syllables?
"Is dead" would do the same thing. Come on.

It is repetitive and tendentious, somehow alternately gossipy and sermonizing.

There is a charming section at the beginning where the author tells about her personal interactions with Cummings, who was a friend of her father's, but the next part of the book that was useful is the end, where other, presumably more scholarly, biographies are listed.

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GraceAnne says

Susan Cheever is such a graceful writer, and she makes the illimitable Estlin Cummings truly come alive. I have loved his poetry all my life, and often visited Patchin Place and thought of his words. I was surprised, however, by two things, and almost gave it only three stars in consequence. One was an over-reliance in Freudian psychology in almost every aspect. That is a biographer's prerogative of course, but I did not like it. The other was a multiple repetition of a number of phrases, which was jarring and took me out of the flow. I don't know if that were sloppy editing or if she chose to do that, but I didn't like that either.

Alice says

Perhaps the best thing about this book is that my book club had a lively, thoughtful discussion about it. Three stars because it piqued my interest in Cummings and his world, but not a really good or well written biography. Repetitious and at times condescending to the reader. Doesn't really deal with his anti-semitism or his sexuality. Or convey why he is the great poet Cheever thinks he is. Enjoyed the poetry selections and loved the photos.

Jerry Delaney says

Perhaps we shouldn't read biographies of artists we admire. It can make it difficult to then read the poems without a veil of distaste getting in the way.

Cheever tells us cummings wasn't irresponsible he just loved the innocence of childhood. Yes, and he was irresponsible. And anti-Semitic. And he was a bohemian who wanted to shake off the rigidity of the Cambridge society he grew up in. But he borrowed money from his mother constantly. Cheever portrays him as the victim in his relationship with his daughter, without giving us any indication that he really tried to keep in touch with Nancy or see her.

Beyond my dislike of cummings, the book is just poorly written. Many judgements are just told to us rather than shown through illustration. The book doesn't doesn't flow easily but is held up by repetitions and explanations and theories being rehashed.

Other times I would have welcomed an explanation. Marion, who was so kind and welcoming to everyone throughout the book, suddenly has a change of character concerning his daughter Nancy. Why might that be? She put up with former wives and girlfriends but becomes jealous and hovering when his daughter is around.

Oh well, maybe I'm a cranky old man like cummings and need to stop complaining. Up next: Marge Piercy. Maybe she will make me more reasonable.

Patrick Sprunger says

True to it's title, *E. E. Cummings: A Life* shows the life of America's first modernist in all its banality. Readers gravitate toward biography partly for this precise reason: it reassures us that our lives are not so different than those of our favorite personalities by demonstrating how their lives were not so different from our own. In many ways, Cummings needs this kind of treatment, because he was not only the *first* American modernist, he was - arguably - the *only* American modernist. His apparent descent from outer space and fleeting time on the scene creates an enigma that isn't explained by the two or three poems we're treated to as undergrads. Understanding his pseudo-Brahmin roots (replete with childhood melodrama) and romantic failures only serve to enhance our understanding of Cummings's poetry.

Of course, between those two existential bookends comes the e. e. cummings we all know and love. Cummings had a notoriously Good Time as an itinerant ambulance driver in Paris during the first World War. But while he could be lumped in with other Americans of his approximate generation who enjoyed themselves immensely in Europe (Dos Passos, Hemingway, etc.), this only represented a *time* for Cummings. And unlike so many bohemian/academic junketeers who went to the Soviet Union in the 1920s, Cummings evaded the seduction of the pink siren of utopianism.

And like so many others of his approximate generation, Cummings practiced free love. But here his biographer makes her first in a series of salient observations. Unlike the libertines, Cummings understood relationships to be an emotional contract freely entered into by consenting parties. He did not (with a few occasional exceptions, of course - Cummings did, after all, have some riotous Good Times under the influence of alcohol and comely companionship) undertake sex casually. He was not a creature of one night stands. He believed that his partners - by virtue of the consent that consummated the relationship - were free

to go as soon as they wished. But this was more like a standard prenuptial agreement Cummings carried with him than the abandon of "free love." And it means that when Cummings's partners tired of him - especially if they tired of him before he tired of them - Cummings was deeply wounded.

This, along with the moving chapter on Cummings's eventual reunification with his only daughter, could tempt more licentious biographers to psychoanalyze the man. Cummings's poems are - after all - virtual invitations to speculate on the artist's id. I admire Cheever's bold choice to ignore this path. It would have undoubtedly led *A Life* into a cul-de-sac.

But back to the original sentence. Cummings was America's only modernist. Why? The answer cannot be that the times were not ripe for modernists. Europe produced them like a factory (Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein (albeit a little later), the Italian futurists) - and many of them came to America! Why, then, did America not produce her own? And why did Cummings, being the prototype, fail to thrive? The answer lies in the fact that America itself was the problem. Cummings was beloved within certain circles. Clearly, liberal arts colleges were his stock-in-trade. But Cummings ran afoul of his Greenwich Village neighbors with his conservative politics and anti-semitism. And during the Depression and post-war years, America didn't seem to *want* Cummings at his most candid. (It wanted him at his most statuesque.) The author puts it well toward the end of the book:

"Cummings's (book) sales are a barometer of the national mood. In confident times his poems are beloved. Their questioning, their humor, and their rule-breaking formalism seem to gibe with a democracy ready to ask hard questions and make fun of itself. In precarious times, readers seem to want an older, more assured poet, someone who speaks with authority rather than scoffs at it."

I believe we still live in that America. It has changed since Cummings's time. Modern students easily confuse cummings's syntax and meter as informalities, rather than the dense, experimental forms they are. This mistake is made because the lowercase "i" is no longer a character, but a manifestation of the new communication (which is a mixture of knee-jerk (ABC Family-fied) civil disobedience and dangerous contempt for intellectualism). Modern students are in danger of misunderstanding modernism for anarchy. Cheever's biography clearly shows how Cummings was anything other than undisciplined and casual. The irony is that the people who read it aren't the ones in need of the demonstration.

Mark Flowers says

A fair enough biography, but with some qualms:

- 1) possibly because Cheever herself is the daughter of a famous writer, she seems a bit more hung up on Cummings's daughter than seems strictly necessary
- 2) she makes a couple of waves at addressing Cummings's alleged anti-Semitism, but never really grapples with it in any prolonged way
- 3) building off 2, she makes a couple of excellent forays into laying bare the mechanics of writing a biography, but only a couple--I'd have preferred either a more thorough metabiography or to drop these sections entirely. As they are, they are out of place.
- 4) It's riddled with factual mistakes. The one that really stuck out was an almost incomprehensible attempt to explain annulment by referencing Henry VIII. But she also gets a lot wrong (or blithely accepts the high school textbook version) about US and world politics during Cummings's life. (for example: Herbert Hoover was not "oblivious . . . purposefully fail[ing] to understand what was happening"--he was simply ineffectual

or wrongheaded about what he tried, not to mention unlucky). There were more examples - don't remember them right now.

Joseph says

...I value freedom; and have never expected freedom to be anything less than indecent.
e.e. cummings

E.E. Cummings: A Life by Susan Cheever is a biography of the American poet, Cheever is a graduate of Brown University, a Guggenheim Fellow, and director of the board of the Yaddo Corporation. She currently teaches in the MFA program at Bennington College and the New School. Cheever is the author of over a dozen books, including *American Bloomsbury*.

The book is short for a biography of a man with a long history, but it concentrates on the high and low points and avoids the lulls that are found in longer biographies. The life story, however, seems to be complete. Cheever met Cummings when she was still in school. Cummings was performing a lecture and reading at the Masters School. Her father was friends with the poet. The young Cheever was impressed by Cummings anti-established opinions. At that time, his work was compared to Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." The comparison is more than subject matter, but style. Duchamp attempts to capture the entire descent down the staircase, start to finish, in a single image and Cummings attempts to capture the same effect with words. It was at Cummings's suggestion to her father that Cheever was moved from her uptight school to a very progressive one.

Rather than summarize Cummings's life in this review, I will look at something Cheever does in the book. Late in the book Cheever compares Cummings to Wordsworth. Wordsworth's love for the outdoors, "Tintern Abbey" for example, and Cummings's Joy Farm. Both men idolized youth and saw that youth had a purity that was missing later in life. I also found a few parallels myself. Both men had daughters out of wedlock and were separated from them. Both men traveled a great deal for their time and class. Also, both men had a negative view of the establishment. Wordsworth support for the Republican movement in France, but was abhorred the Reign of Terror and the subsequent crowning of an emperor. Cummings also had his problems with authority and the establishment that went much further than youthful rebellion. Much like Wordsworth, revolution excited Cummings. He wanted to see the paradise that the Soviet Union had become, but left disillusioned. Cummings became disenchanted with many things in his life he hated Jews and he hated Hitler. He hated Roosevelt and he hated Stalin. He was an equal opportunity hater.

E.E. Cummings: A Life is a well researched and well written biography of one of America most read poets. Cheevers captures the life and the mind of the poet. Like most writers of his time he lived an exciting life, filled with controversy, alcohol, and prescription drugs. His life can be compared to that of a modern rock star. The highs and lows of fame. He had the groupies and the crowds. And like very few rock stars he was able to rise above the moment of fame and produce a lasting work and a lasting name.

Maggie says

my favorite poet. and a thoroughly engaging biography on him.

LibraryReads says

“Cummings is a pivotal figure in the creation of modern verse, and Cheever conveys his journey with color, warmth, and understanding, especially his imprisonment in France during the First World War, his father’s death and his final reunion with his daughter. She leaves the reader with only one wish: to be a fly on the wall while the poet held forth to his friends.”

Linda Jeffries-Summers, Howard County Library, Columbia, MD

James Murphy says

When we begin this biography of E. E. Cummings we're aware that Susan Cheever knew him through her father, John. The opening is fascinating as she tells of the night in 1958 she met him following a poetry reading. She sat in the back seat and studied him while her father drove Cummings from the reading in Westchester, at Susan's school, to his home in Patchin Place in Greenwich Village. Her portrait is of a puckish and likable man.

It's unfortunate that what looks at first to be an intimate book on Cummings, a memoir of their connection, quickly turns into conventional biography. Friendship seems to be acquaintance. And perhaps it's because she's unable to draw on a close and personal association with him that the book settles into a study as thin and frail as Cummings himself.

I'm generous with stars these days. Still, this book doesn't deliver. I don't think Cheever tells us anything about Cummings we didn't already know. Or any perspective on his character and work that we haven't come across before. She more than once emphasizes his childlike, playful nature and sees it reflected in the poetry and his own lowercase persona which bucked against authority, any authority. Yet she also claims Cummings as one of the century's high modernists, even as she admits his reputation is waning under repeated charges by academics and poets that his work shouldn't be taken too seriously. Somehow it means a lot to me that in discussing language and style in a poet most widely known for that rather than content she never uses the word lyrical.

Some aspects of the life and work aren't developed. At one point she writes a sentence hinting he was bisexual. She goes no farther with the thought than that sentence. She spends time describing the correspondence of Cummings and Ezra Pound, but the content of the correspondence she chooses to discuss has to do with their disagreement about the true nature of blue jays.

Cummings is here, the poet I love is here. But there are better biographies.

Elyse Walters says

I'm glad the author included this e.e. cummings poem. I think I had it memorized in High School! :)

may I feel said he
(i'll squeal said she
just once said he
it's fun said she

(may I touch said he
how much said she
a lot said he)
why not said she

(let's go said he
not to far said she
what's too far said he
where you are said she)

may i stay said he
(which way said she
like this said he
if you kiss said she

may i move said he
is it love said she)
if you're willing said he
(but you're killing said she

but its life said he
but your wife said she
now said he)
ow said she

(tiptop said he
don't stop sad she
oh no said he)
go slow said she

(cccome?said he
ummm said she)
you're divine!said he
you are Mine said she

I enjoyed reading this book. (An e.e. Cummings fan from way back). --
Yet--I'm not sure how to rate this book. I never know how to rate 'personal' (life story) books.

A few things 'new' I learned about e.e. Cummings:

...He graduated Valedictorian from Harvard

...He had a distaste for Harvard's intellectualism

...He loved naked women, was addicted to striptease and burlesque theater

...He was a conversational genius, creating dazzling monologues.

...He thought his mother was the most amazing person he ever met.

...Married 3 times

...1 daughter (for 22 years he had no contact with her)

...His personal and professional life were strangely divided. "As a man he was spiraling toward agonizing loneliness; as a writer he was never more popular or successful."

..."Cummings was an equal-opportunity hater. He hated Hitler and he hated Jews" [NOTE: this part was not clear to me in the book --and did not go into any detail].... I didn't find it' fitting that e.e. Cummings would hate Jews ---(I personally found it hard to believe)...

when all the reading in this book 'before' said things like how Cummings had an intolerance for 'evil' and

'freedoms'.

With only 'one' sentence in the book about Cummings hating Jews...

I wonder how much force was behind that word 'hate' used in the book.

About e.e. Cummings estranged daughter: The author writes: "Cumming's connection to his only child is one of the most illuminating, heartbreaking, and startling passages in his life. It is worth a book on its own."

My final thoughts: At times-I didn't think the focus of this book was about e.e. Cummings, *himself* anyway -- (but more a 'time-period' of life) --A group of artists, authors, revolutionaries living in Greenwich Village--bohemian lifestyles ...(smoking, drinking, sex)

A reminder that the best literature came out of World War 1 --

A thrill of the prospect of a new way of seeing the world!

Catherine says

I really enjoyed reading about ee's influences: his uber-yankee upbringing, the mountains of New Hampshire, the joys of Paris, the chaos of Greenwich Village. Cheever also does a decent job tying certain milestones in his life to key poems, which give them an additional and pleasing dimension. most of all the book is a good reminder of how amazing the 1920s and 30s were for Anglo-American literature. immediately I want to re-read William Carlos Williams and all those guys again.

Thomas Armstrong says

This was a special treat coming from the daughter of author John Cheever, and provided an insider's view of the poet. I'd just read *The Enormous Room*, and enjoyed learning about the back-story of Cumming's involvement in WWI. I was initially dismayed to learn about Cumming's anti-communist leanings (since he seemed tailor-made for the liberal's attitude - or as William James might have put it, he seemed "tender minded" rather than "tough minded"). But then I learned in the book about his travels to the Soviet Union in the early 30's, and how he saw, more clearly than any of his liberal colleagues, how toxic Stalinist Russia was, and my faith in him was restored. However, his anti-Semitic poetry still left me very troubled. We can't just chalk it up to the influence of his mentor Ezra Pound, because Cumming's is responsible for his own words, and this cruel, inhuman poetry was totally counter to his love of humanity - did he not think about the Holocaust when he wrote this? Did he even write any poetry about the Holocaust, I wonder? (I have his complete poems, and so will eventually find out for myself). It's not enough to say, as Cheever does in the book that anti-Semitism was common in the first half of the twentieth century. It's like saying, well, Capone murdered a lot of people in the twenties, but murder was common then. Cumming's whole purchase on humanity, as revealed in his poetry, set a standard that he failed miserably at. What a disappointment! I'm much more willing to forgive his poor parenting skills and relationship problems - I mean, after all, he was an artist, for God's sake! Still, his poetry is amazing for all the rules it broke (and the book helped me understand that he did this having received the best training in poetic form). I liked the inclusion of extracts, and in some cases, whole poems, from Cumming's corpus. The book raises the whole issue of neoteny - the holding of youth into adulthood - and the perils and promises that that entails. Clearly, evolution needs the creativity of childhood brought up into the adult years. But as this book suggests, it's a really tricky process, because the adult years also require stability, maturity, responsibility, seriousness, sagacity, and more.

Balancing the two is a little like an Ed Sullivan acrobatic act. The book was I feel, too short, and also, I think, too much focused on his relationship to his daughter, especially at the end (and became even a bit melodramatic). But, in general, I enjoyed this look into the life of an amazing poet, who (as Cheever points out) is no longer it seems relevant in an age of big data, TED talks, and texting (although, now that I think about it, perhaps Cumming's was the original texter with his original spellings and punctuation!)

Lloyd Fassett says

read a very good excerpt in Feb 2014 Vanity Fair magazine

6/29/14 - author is printed in the NYTs about the accident that killed his father, NYTimes: How to Solve an 88-Year-Old Literary Mystery
<http://nyti.ms/1h5L3o>

Olivia says

I loved this. This lyrical biography is a "little" book, anchored by Susan Cheever's personal memory of meeting e e cummings as a girl, and her firsthand experience of the evocative landscapes that shaped him (Cambridge, Patchin Place, Joy Farm). She doesn't gloss over his failings - his anti-semitism not the least among them, but she relishes in his childlike intensity, his frenzied experimentation, and his unique use of poetic forms. The most poignant passages concern his relationship with his only child Nancy, who did not know she was his real father until she was a young mother herself. I also enjoyed the section about his eye-opening trip to Moscow on the eve of Stalin's purges.
