



## E. E. Cummings: A Life

By Susan Cheever

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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.)

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### Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* Cheever, the author of discerning books about writers, alcoholism, and problematic sexuality, begins this dramatic portrait of modernist poet E. E. Cummings, of “when the world is mud- / luscious” fame, with her memories of Cummings performing one of his famed readings and of listening intently in the backseat as her father, fiction writer John Cheever, drove the poet, his good friend, back to Greenwich Village. This intimacy shapes her telling of the up-and-down story of this unlikely rebel—a handsome, “flexible and slight,” rigorously educated “Harvard aristocrat” who discovered “a kind of poetic sweet spot” of scintillating innovation and complex lyric power. Cheever analyzes Cummings’ subterranean anger, anti-Semitism, excessive carousing, and flagrant antiauthoritarianism in France after enlisting during WWI, which landed him in a camp for “undesirables.” Cheever incisively dissects Cummings’ two disastrous marriages and the shocking abduction of his adored only child, Nancy Thayer, who became an artist and poet unaware of who her father actually was. With Ezra Pound as friend and mentor, Cummings deftly created “wild, expressive syntax” and wielded his signature lower-case “i” as critical response ran hot and cold, and ardent fans left flowers on his doorstep. Cheever’s reconsideration of Cummings and his work charms, rattles, and enlightens in emulation of Cummings’ radically disarming, tender, sexy, plangent, and furious poems. --Donna Seaman

### Review

“An absorbing rehearsal of a vibrant life. . . . Cheever revives Cummings as a gregarious, quirky iconoclast through her evocative prose.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“A smart and readable portrait.” —NPR

“[Cheever] is an astute observer of the inner life of writers and how they work. . . . This biography succeeds where other works have failed, by making this tricky poet understandable.” —*The Economist*

“A delight.” —*The New York Times*

“Effectively situates Cummings within a larger literary and cultural movement. . . . Cummings’s life is inherently interesting, dramatic, and sad, and Cheever highlights its colorful and tragic aspects.” —*The Boston Globe*

“Deeply personal. . . . A textured inspection of some of the more intriguing faces of the multifaceted Cummings.” —*The Plain Dealer*

“Cheever’s biography stands as a welcomed introductory attempt to understand Cummings’s impact. . . . One of the best efforts to situate a Modernist inside the larger historical context. . . . Filled in with entertaining research and deep thinking about the lives of artists.” —*Daily Beast*

“[Cummings’s] individualism makes him just about as American as apple pie; and as vital to the tradition of American poetry as Whitman, Dickinson, and Frost. I can only express gratitude to biographers like Cheever for keeping him alive today.” —J. P. Poole, *Bookslut*

“Affecting. . . . Deeply satisfying. . . . Ms. Cheever is the kind of biographer who can maintain both an

intimacy and dispassionate relationship with her subject.” —*New York Journal of Books*

“Cheever’s reconsideration of Cummings and his work charms, rattles, and enlightens in emulation of Cummings’ radically disarming, tender, sexy, plangent, and furious poems.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“This sympathetic life may win Cummings a new generation of readers.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

#### About the Author

**Susan Cheever** was born in New York City and graduated from Brown University. A Guggenheim Fellow and a director of the board of the Yaddo Corporation, she currently teaches in the MFA programs at Bennington College and the New School. She lives in New York City.

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What do you consider book? It is just for students as they are still students or that for all people in the world, what the best subject for that? Just you can be answered for that problem above. Every person has distinct personality and hobby for every single other. Don't to be compelled someone or something that they don't need do that. You must know how great along with important the book E. E. Cummings: A Life. All type of book is it possible to see on many methods. You can look for the internet sources or other social media.

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