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E. E. Cummings: A Life



Synopsis

[Read by Stefan Rudnicki] From the acclaimed author of *My Name Is Bill and Home before Dark* comes a major reassessment of the life and work of one of America's preeminent twentieth-century poets. -- E. E. Cummings' radical experimentation with form, punctuation, spelling, and syntax resulted in his creation of a new, idiosyncratic means of poetic expression. And while there was critical disagreement about his work (Edmund Wilson called it "hideous," while Malcolm Cowley called him "unsurpassed in his field"), at the time of his death in 1962, at age sixty-seven, he was, after Robert Frost, the most widely read poet in the United States. -- Now, in this new biography, Susan Cheever traces the development of the poet and his work. She takes us from Cummings' seemingly idyllic childhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts, through his years at Harvard (rooming with Dos Passos, befriending Malcolm Cowley and Lincoln Kirstein) where the radical verse of Ezra Pound lured the young writer away from the politeness of the traditional nature poem and towards a more adventurous, sexually conscious form. We follow Cummings to Paris in 1917 and, finally, to Greenwich Village to be among other modernist poets of the day, including Marianne Moore and Hart Crane. -- Rich and illuminating, *E. E. Cummings: A Life* is a revelation of the man and the poet, and a brilliant reassessment of the freighted path of his legacy.

Book Information

Audio CD: 1 pages

Publisher: Blackstone Audio; Unabridged edition (February 11, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1482958368

ISBN-13: 978-1482958362

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.7 x 5.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 38 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,318,299 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #120 in [Books > Books on CD > Poetry & Drama](#) #145 in [Books > Books on CD > Literature & Fiction > Poetry](#) #1060 in [Books > Books on CD > Biographies & Memoirs](#)

Customer Reviews

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 *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—œ—œa 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’s —œ,œ 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’s —œ,œ 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 —œ,œ reconsideration of Cummings and his work charms, rattles, and enlightens in emulation of Cummings’s —œ,œ radically disarming, tender, sexy, plangent, and furious poems. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

—“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 —œ,œ 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 —œ,œ biography stands as a welcomed introductory attempt to understand Cummings’s —œ,œ 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 —œ,œ] 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’s radically disarming, tender, sexy, plangent, and furious poems. — Booklist (starred review) — “This sympathetic life may win Cummings a new generation of readers. — Kirkus Reviews — —This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Great read if you like poetry and E. E. Cummings. The author does a good job of writing about his poetry and his life. I learned so much and it was hard to put the book down. Very informative.

Quick moving biography of E. E. Cummings, clearly greatly admired by the writer. Not nearly as detailed as the biographies of Cummings by Robert Kennedy and Christopher Sawyer-Laucanno, particularly in regard to discussions of poetic techniques, yet providing faithful overviews of what made Cummings an appealing poet. A good, faster-read introduction to E. E. Cummings.

I was very curious about ee cummings’ life loving his poetry for as long as i remember. Ms. Cheever did not disappoint telling his story. Thank you.

Cheever wrote an interesting 200 page introduction into the life of ee cummings. She gives a great overview of his history, his poetic influences, his relationship with his family, especially his father, his anti-Semitism, and his life in Greenwich Village and the people who surrounded him. Parts of his life would require their own books but this is a great first read to learn more about him, his poetry, and who he was as a man. Rebellious to a fault, cummings was a modernist poet who broke all the rules, not always to good advantage. Reading about his time as an ambulance driver in WWI, his marriages, his relationship with his daughter, all show a man conflicted and unable to be content in his own skin.

Great insights into the life of one of my favorite writers. A good read for any fan of his work.

An excellent and thoughtful biography of an undervalued American poet

goes down easy

good but not great. I lost interest halfway through

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