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[Home](#) > E.E. Cummings

E.E. Cummings

E.E. Cummings (1894-1962) is a poet beloved for his unpretentious, irreverent, and rule-breaking approach to modernism.

Cummings was born in Cambridge, Mass. and educated at Harvard (1911-1916), spending four years in undergraduate study followed by one year as a Masters student. In 1917, during the Great War, he volunteered as an ambulance driver in France. After three months at the Front, he and his friend, William Slater Brown, were arrested on account of frank letters written by Brown concerning atrocities of war, the demoralization of the French soldiers, and other topics displeasing to the French censors. Cummings and Brown were deemed "undesirable in the war zone" and incarcerated in a detainment centre at La Ferté-Macé: Cummings later recounted these experiences in his first work of prose, *The Enormous Room* (1922). In the following year, Thomas Seltzer published Cummings's first solo collection of poetry: *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923). (Seltzer stripped more than half of the poems from the manuscript and altered the title; the preferred text is now *Tulips & Chimneys (1922 ms)*, which restores Cummings's cherished ampersand along with the rejected poems.)

In the 1920s, Cummings flourished in the little magazines of modernism. His fortunes outside of the little magazines, and beyond the 1920s, fluctuated greatly. Weathering the bad times, he published over the course of his lifetime many volumes of poems; two long works of prose (*The Enormous Room* and *Eimi*); plays; casual short stories, miscellaneous prose, and satires; a book of short fairy tales for children; and more. He was, in addition, a visual artist, and he was committed throughout his life to his painting and sketching.

Why E.E. Cummings and not ee cummings? Lower-case cummings was a *persona*, created as much by Cummings's readers as by Cummings himself. There is no evidence that Cummings ever intended that he should be "known" as ee cummings. (See Friedman, Norman. 1992. "Not 'e.e. cummings'." *Spring: the Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society* 1: 114-21 and 1996. "Not 'e.e. cummings' Revisited." *Spring* 5: 41-3.) Cummings treated the persistence of the ee cummings *persona* with some ambivalence and some amusement. What was truly important to him was not "cummings" but rather the lower-case "i". The "i" of his poetry served as an expression of personal humility and an embrace of the smallness of childhood. It also reflected his feeling that the English language "unusual in its capitalization of only the first-person pronoun" thereby embedded an egotism which was not found in other languages which Cummings knew of, studied, or spoke.

General references / further information

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