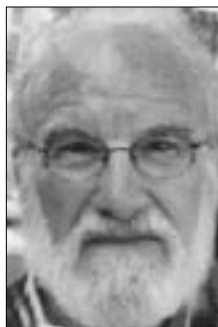


WALTER CUMMINS



“I set myself a goal of publishing enough stories to match the years of my age,” Walter Cummins said in a 2008 interview. He likely has that goal well in hand, having compiled four short-story collections, two novels, and published well over 100 stories in literary journals to date. In addition to co-authoring with Thomas E. Kennedy a book of travel essays, he joined with George Gordon to write a book about the impact of television on American culture; he, with Kennedy, co-edited *Writers on the Job*, a book of authors’ essays about how authors finance their lives while writing, published in 2008 by Hopewell Publications.

Since 1983, he has served as editor-in-chief and later editor-emeritus of the international journal *The Literary Review*, where he commissioned close to 40 non-American issues, showcasing contemporary writing from Asia, Iran, North Africa, Germany, and Denmark. Additionally, in 2008, with the support of Fairleigh Dickinson University and *The Literary Review*, Cummins helped to launch *Sphere*, an online journal of international student writing.

Cummins continues to serve on the faculty of Fairleigh Dickinson University’s low-residency M.F.A. program and is a member of the editorial committee of Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. He is a contributor to *Web Del Sol*, a literary Web site, where he edits and co-edits several columns, and is a co-publisher of Serving House Books. Cummins’ latest short-story collection, *The End of the Circle*, was published in 2010 by Egress Books of Hopewell Publications.

Wonderful Places, Desperate Lives

AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER CUMMINS

Conducted by Joyce J. Townsend

NEW LETTERS: You refer to having gotten into the Iowa Writers' Workshop by accident. Will you elaborate on what you mean by that?

WALTER CUMMINS: What I mean is another verification of Woody Allen's theory that 90 percent of success is showing up. To that, I'd add at the right time. After I did my six-month Army Reserve training in 1959, I moved to Brooklyn Heights for a year, while my first wife finished college. I knew I didn't want to go back to being a corporate advertising and sales promotion trainee in upstate New York. My plan was to get into graduate school, a writing program my dream, with literature as a fallback. In 1960, writing meant Iowa and a couple of other places.

While in the city, I signed up for a New School class in fiction taught by R. V. (Verlin) Cassill. The first night, Verlin warned the 20 people in the room that most of us would drop out, and we could get refunds if we did it now. All stayed then, but after a few weeks there were only five or

six of us left. He and I ended up going out for a beer and a burger after class. At that time, in my early 20s, I was writing what Verlin called E. M. Forster-like fantasy that he had no taste for, and he had no advice to give me. But he was moving back to Iowa, his home state, to teach in the Workshop again, and he invited me to apply. Today, when getting into Iowa is as difficult as, say, winning a Pulitzer, I feel, if not guilty, then like a pretender because I applied at the right time and knew the right person.

NL: In much of your work now, place, not fantasy, appears central. Would you say you are generally first inspired by place, or by character or situation?

CUMMINS: Most of my stories of recent decades—perhaps always—have been about place. Those in the collection *Local Music* are what I call domestic in two senses of the word: as they are distinct from international, and as they center on people's lives in distinct houses, apartments, and small towns. The European settings in *The End of the Circle* are stories even more fixed in a particular city or landscape. Most of that collection arose from my initial desire to write about a place and try to capture the feel of it. The people are made up, often based on someone I saw on the street or in a restaurant or on a train. At times, it is the brief interaction of two people, and me, contriving their lives. The descriptions of places, in contrast, are literal, or at least my impressions of the literal. But my experiences of the places aren't the stuff of stories. In a sense, I take happy travel days with my wife, Alison, and turn them into traumas for the invented people. Occasionally, it's a two-step process, with me seeking a way to turn a place into a story, and then seeing people whose brief behavior or even appearance serves as the germ of a plot.

NL: "Canals," in *The End of the Circle*, contrasts the austere theme of an existentially adrift male with the backdrop of

placid fields of nodding tulips. I couldn't help contrasting that darkness with your earlier lustrous travel essays.

CUMMINS: Travel pieces don't have to be stories: They are direct outpourings of my enthusiasm for the locations. In stories, my world view is different, informed by the words Maxim Gorky reports Chekhov said, "with a sad smile, with a tone of gentle but deep reproach, with anguish in his face and in his heart, in a beautiful and sincere voice, he said to them: 'You live badly, my friends. It is shameful to live like that.'" The places are so wonderful, the lives so flawed.

The rest of this interview is available only to *New Letters* subscribers. Use our "Comments" box to request that the issue with this interview start your subscription.

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