

COMMENTARY

The Enormous Room (1922)

e.e. cummings

(1894-1962)

"In 1922 E.E. Cummings used devices of fiction in *The Enormous Room*, his brilliant story of life in a French military prison...which though not a novel has been read largely as one...with its biting narrative of unjust imprisonment in France. *The Enormous Room* is the most brilliant, permanent, and important [WWI narrative]..."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939
(MacMillan, 1921-1968) 323,334

"The book has few dead phrases in it--it lives, if somewhat with the horrible life of a centipede. It has fire, now smoldering, now for a bit blazing into unhealthy violet and mustard-colored flame. There is precious metal in it, but Mr. Cummings has brought up from his agonized and subterranean digging along with some nuggets of character and description all manner of sweepings, cobwebs and twisted iron."

Robert Littell
New Republic (May 10, 1922) 321

"Butt of a great white joke, Cummings observed with awe and fascination the perfectly unreasonable geometry of cosmic antics.... A new, crisp, brindled style had presented itself for birth. The prose forming Cummings's vision of the illogical will of things and the unsuspected affinities between pain and delight, leads one out among advertising, skyscrapers, and movies. The verbal integument affirms ultimate values, since it remains organic and subtle; and still it does not contradict the style of life existing in American streets and assembly places.... And shrilly pitched, caricatural, even more in tempo than in tendency, taut of rhythm, Cummings's prose relates rebellious matters, never before associated, with exquisite smoothness of modulation. It juxtaposes ancient elegances and brutalities of expression, sensitively employed traditional idiom and gamiest crudities of the vernacular."

Paul Rosenfeld
Men Seen (Dial, 1925) 192-5

"*The Enormous Room* has the effect of making all but a very few comparable books that came out of the War look shoddy and worn. It has been possible to re-read it, as I have done...and always to find it undiminished.... Cummings...encountered, in that huge barracks at La Ferte-Mace which he calls the Enormous Room, a sad assortment of men. They from being companions in misery become, whether they speak or not--and the most eloquent are those who have the smallest command of words--his counselors in compassion.... The mind provides no answer to the problem of suffering.... The answer, even for a poet, is not in words.... For what can oppose the poverty of the spirit, but the pride of the body?... And in Cummings there is from now on, in all he writes, an exaltation of the lowly and the lively. He is himself, and he accepts his common lot."

John Peale Bishop
Collected Essays (Scribner, 1948) 89-91

"On a false charge of treason, Cummings was imprisoned in a French military camp (1917-18). Ironically following the pattern of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Cummings describes his own experiences and tells how his companions in the camp reacted to their harsh treatment. The book has been compared to John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers* (1921) in its deglamorization of war. Cummings' prose is highly descriptive, lyrical even in its bitter attacks on man's inhumanity to man. Although not well received on its publication, the book has since come to be regarded as one of the finest examples of American writing."

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell, 1962)