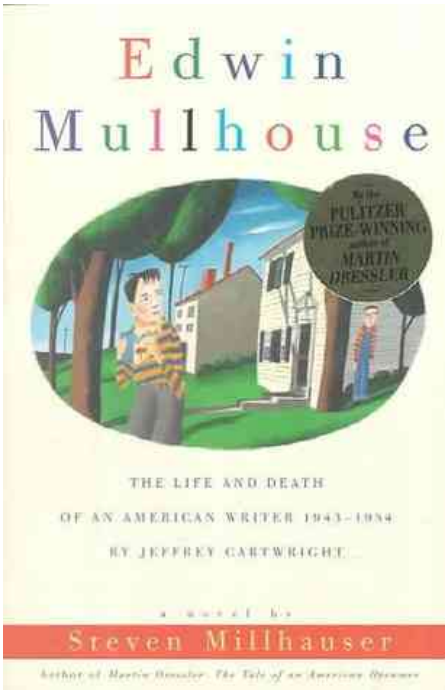

Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954 by Jeffrey Cartwright

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Edwin Mullhouse, a novelist at 10, is mysteriously dead at 11. As a memorial, Edwin's bestfriend, Jeffrey Cartwright, decides that the life of this great American writer must be told. He follows Edwin's development from his preverbal first noises through his love for comic books to the fulfillment of his literary genius in the remarkable novel, *Cartoons*.

Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954 by Jeffrey Cartwright Details

Date	:	Published April 16th 1996 by Vintage (first published 1972)
ISBN	:	9780679766520
Author	:	Steven Millhauser
Format	:	Paperback 305 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Novels, Literature, American

From Reader Review Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954 by Jeffrey Cartwright for online ebook

Mark says

I originally read this book in my sophomore year of high school, and remember little about it except that I liked it. Reading it again, it turns out that Edwin Mullhouse is actually one of my favorite books; if I didn't know any better, I'd also venture that it's been a fairly significant influence on my own sporadic attempts at fiction. Huh.

There's a lot going on here: a parody of the impulse to biography (since the narrator is a sixth-grader and the subject is his next-door neighbor and playmate, the parody is mostly implicit, so that Millhauser can go in for some straight-played analysis and leave it to the reader to remember who's doing the talking), a pretty sophisticated first-person narrator of uncertain reliability, and so on. Mostly, though, it's a precisely described, regally dictated catalog of childhood memory (that is, personal) and postwar Americana (that is, universal); the idea, which is a dominant and explict theme in Millhauser's recent short fiction, is that language (or, more generally, any kind of art or other vehicle), if utilized to its fullest potential, can grant us access to the totality of experience. We would be able to remember *everything*, if only we could find the right words for all of it.

Nagisa says

Boring. I don't understand why Jeffrey is so much attracted to Edwin. He seems like an ordinary kid to me, especially a selfish and grumpy one. I find Jeff's devotion to Edwin rather creepy.
I also find it weird that Jeff doesn't show grief and gets to work on a biography right after Edwin's death.
And why should other young characters die suddenly as well? Are their deaths necessary in the story?
This book is creepy.

George says

the novel i keep recommending to my students and anyone who will listen - no one ever reads it - it is a marvel!

My best of the 20th century pick - i love this novel in every way possible - also read his other marvel - "portrait of a romantic"

p.s. if you saw the movie "The Illusionist" - this was based on a short story by Stehphen M.

Nils Samuels says

A truly strange read, best absorbed by those with a taste for the minutae of childhood -- toys, stray books, the ephemeral artifacts of long ago postWWII suburbia. Premise is consistent with Boswell's =Life of Johnson=

and VN's =Pale Fire=. Form, though, is very different, with an all-knowing child biographer memorializing a life still in its preteen years. The relentless detail can sometimes be a bit much, but then again that is the point: cataloging the pieces may or may not capture the elusive quality of remembered childhood. Those whose childhood years match the subtitle may enjoy this novel the most.

Mark Hammond says

A touching and fresh depiction of childhood combined with a parody of literary biography.

Jeff Jackson says

The book's conceit is instantly intriguing: The biography of an 11-year-old writer. But where most authors would milk this for broad comic effect, Millhauser uses it to plumb the deepest mysteries and complexities of childhood. It's full of casually profound observations about genius, biography, and schoolyard friendships. There's also a series of doubles, books within books, and secret treacheries. The rich prose is a direct homage to Nabokov and the closest I've seen anyone come to capturing that style. One of the best debut novels in American lit. It's hard to believe this isn't already a classic.

Angie says

I really wanted to like this book a lot more than I did. The concept I found to be quite charming if a bit strange. It is the tale of young genius Jeffrey and of his obsession in detailing the life and relationships of his best friend, Edwin. This story chronicles their lives from toddlerhood up until Edwin's unfortunate demise during the last of their grade school years.

I found Jeffrey's attitude and style of writing to be humorous in a weird ironic way. It was more the fact that the precise, educated writing contained in the novel is supposedly straight from the pen and ponderings of an ordinary caucasian twelve year old. Very dry stuff -- no antics from the stooges are to be found here.

The book, although quite slowly paced, did have a handful of truly awesome moments. There was more than one opportunity where I felt to reread a passage so that I would have a chance to take a nice soak in the picture of a time that I had all but forgotten. It made me miss being a kid.

I loved this book in small doses, but it is not something that I would be overly excited to reread anytime soon. I do believe that the experiences contained within are worth the journey through a few hundred pages at least once.

Megan says

I tried, and tried, and tried some more, to finish this book. (I'm stubborn like that.) I never got through this. From what I remember, it chronicles the life of an extremely gifted, and boring child. I'm guessing by the title that he died somewhere in there, but I didn't get that far.

Distress Strauss says

Along with JR, this is father and the God of the superkid smart-beyond-their-years trend, and it drives a skewer through its infantile heart before it even gets a chance to be born. Also part Boswell parody and part Pale Fire (which is also a parody, of course). So ahead of its time that it exists out-of-time.

Tony says

Millhauser, Steven. EDWIN MULLHOUSE: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954 by Jeffrey Cartwright. (1972). *****. This is probably one of the strangest books you will come across in a long, long time. It purports to be a biography of Edwin Mullhouse as written by Jeffrey Cartwright and discovered and republished by a Walter Logan White. It is, in fact, a novel by Millhauser cast in the form of a biography – a biography of Mullhouse as written by his childhood friend Cartwright. The beginning is preposterous, as Cartwright tries to capture the essence of the early Edwin by taking facts from his baby book, and reproduces the traces from the pages marked “My Hand,” and “My Foot.” From there, Cartwright tries to catalog Edwin’s progress from baby talk to real words, with all the slurring and silliness thrown in. As a concept, the book is brilliant, and the writing is exemplary. In parts it is funny, sad, insightful, and even profound, but mostly it is creepy. The author – the real author, Millhauser – was only 29 at the time he wrote this, but he manages to convince us that this work is really that of a 12-year old author. As the novel flows on, we do believe it; that a sixth-grader could write such an insightful biography of his friend. His friend, Edwin, managed to achieve only one meaningful act in his life – the writing of a book, at age 11, titled, “Cartoons.” I won’t say how the biography ends, because that would give it all away, but I will say that the book is certainly worth reading, and may well become one of those cult classics that will live forever. It certainly introduces the talent of the author and justifies the recognition he has garnered in the body of his later works. There’s a lot of child-leading-to-adult psychology here that we could dwell on forever, but the book can be read on a basic level with full enjoyment. If you’re working on your doctoral thesis, however, you might want to take a look a little closer at this book. You’d certainly have a good time with it. Highly recommended.

Aubrey says

It seemed like a cute premise, but I did not like much about this book at all. It was difficult for me to read due to the heaps of description and OH MY GOODNESS the lists! If they walk into a store, the author provides a list of every item they saw in the store, sometimes taking up more than a whole page. It's not cute, it's completely useless, unnecessary, and incredibly annoying.

Also, I won't spoil it, but WTF - that ending?! That's all kinds of messed up.

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izrtkfliers says

Wow. Just wow.

I started reading Millhauser with Dangerous Laughter in high school. I loved it, and progressed to Martin Dressler, which I also enjoyed, but from then on thought that Steven Millhauser was best at writing short stories and novellas as opposed to full length novels.

As I grew older, I read Millhauser occasionally, whenever a new collection came out (We Others, then Voices in the Night) or whenever I found one of his books in the used bookstore. And on a whim one Friday I decided to read Edwin Mullhouse, which I had bought at the end of college out of obligation to my devotion to owning all of his works, but never read as the summary didn't interest me at the time.

Now, though, I paid more attention to it, and suffice to say Edwin Mullhouse blew me away. I pored over every page. Highly recommended, and my favorite work by Millhauser.

Christian Schwoerke says

I recall reading this book sometime in the late 70s; a recommendation of a college classmate addicted to novels. The subtitle sets up the novel's premise: "The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943 – 1954 by Jeffrey Cartwright." One notes that this American writer might be no more than 11 years old at his death, and I wonder, "Just what could this wunderkind write that might earn him the honor of a biography?"

The perception that Millhauser is presenting an elaborate farce is further supported by the "Introductory Note," whose fictive author claims to have known the biographer, Jeffrey Cartwright, when he wrote the biography in 1954-1955. This farce, then, is the story of an "author," 11 years old, told by a "biographer" who is himself 11 years old. The stage is nearly set. An epigraph, a quote by Edwin Mullhouse ("Phew! A biographer is a devil."), stands on a facing page before the Jeffrey's "Preface to the First Edition" (1955), which lauds his (the biographer's) own efforts to complete the book. A "Chronological Table" appears on the next page and it divides the author's life into "Early," "Middle," and "Late" periods, which pretty well sums up the tri-partite structure of the biography Jeffrey constructs.

Millhauser has the biographer intersperse metacommentary about the respective roles of biographer and fiction writer, achronological asides, and faithful transcriptions of the author's life, as he perceives it. This faithful recording is typical of novels with a recessive first-person narrator, one who withdraws into the shadows while trying to account events and characters to whom he is fortunate to have tangential access. Jeffrey is a precocious pedant, and he writes as such, grandiosely and ponderously verbose, though the actual events and situations remain essentially juvenile. In fulfilling his role as biographer, Jeffrey indulges in some high-flown lit-crit jargon, especially when discussing the particular "influences" for the author Edwin's masterpiece, "Cartoons."

During a 15-month period, Edwin wrote his novel "Cartoons," composing it entirely with cartoon tropes, seemingly a transcription/description of what one might seen in a 30s-, 40s-, or 50s-style cinematic cartoon, all of this done up as a longer three-part story. Jeffrey is in awe of the work, envious too, and he types it up for Edwin, and, after Edwin's suicide, sees to it that the books are published. ("Cartoons" is, alas, misunderstood and mis-marketed, as explained in the "Introductory Note," and it came to languish, unread in the section of libraries and stores designated for 5- to 8-year-olds.) After typing up the 28 handwritten blue books that compose the novel, Jeffrey decides he must become Edwin's biographer, and Edwin laughs at him, saying, "…but anyway I'm not dead."

Millhauser's art in this is having created a pedantic biographer, albeit with the naive persona of a child

(incapable of seeing beyond the evocative landscape of toys, cartoons, books, games, and other childish activities that surround him and Edwin). Millhauser has Jeffrey recount three primary events in Edwin’s life, which exactly synch up with the three episodes in Edwin’s novel. While these life events are narrated almost straight, there are proleptic hints about how the events will re-appear, transformed in Edwin's novel, which is to suggest that Jeffrey is fudging the biographical process, especially as there are numerous instances when he thoroughly discounts Edwin's activities as puerile and unworthy of being recounted.

Millhauser has created in Jeffrey a psychopath or a naïf, but enough leeches out in Jeffrey’s account of Edwin's suicide that we knowing readers see that it is probably the former. By all reckoning Jeffrey must be a creepy little boy (he is the lone child of the next door Cartwrights), a dark cloud/shadow hovering about, always insinuating himself in Edwin’s company and often into the company of Edwin’s family when Edwin has made himself scarce. Jeffrey is insincere and smarmy, both to those around him and with his readers. Millhauser modulates Jeffrey’s voice so that he is at times reliably transparent (sincere) and at other times variably opaque (being disingenuous and sometimes unself-aware) in his distortion of the facts.

All of this is fun to contemplate, but Millhauser has to take this concept and continue to execute it over the length of 300 pages, and some of the sprightly kick in the concept begins to lag. The prospects for great things loom large, and there are some very funny moments and episodes, and there are even moments when the farce verges into an elegiac evocation of the appurtenances of childhood. I categorize this novel as kin to “Lolita,” comparing favorably in concept and authorial control of voices and style, just a tad jejune, a child’s story that goes on too long.

One favorite part of the novel is Edwin’s poem to Hass, which is emblematic of the style employed in his novel “Cartoons”:

To A.H.

Streetlamps, fellas, all in a row,
Like cartoon men with ideas in your heads,
Come walk in a loonytune night with me.
Changing, a stoplight blues red

As the big-eyed moon looks winding down—
And blows out a star with a sudden sneeze.
A skeleton dressed in a tall silk hat
Chases a mailbox (rattling knees)

And mails a DEAD LETTER. Close-up, now:
My eyes show waves with sinking boats,
And terrified tears jump overboard
As the circle closes. That’s all, folks.

Kate says

I understand that this is a spoof on biographies: for a 25 page New Yorker story, interesting; for a 305 page book tedious. I did not enjoy reading this.

John Pappas says

Millhauser mines familiar ground as he blurs the borders between fiction and reality, calling into question historical veracity, memoir "truth" and possibility of objectivity. Jeffrey Cartwright is my new favorite unreliable narrator.

Vit Babenco says

"Isn’t it true that the biographer performs a function nearly as great as, or precisely as great as, or actually greater by far than the function performed by the artist himself? For the artist creates the work of art, but the biographer, so to speak, creates the artist".
In the end every story becomes different from what its author wanted it to be. In the end our life turns out to be a different story than we wished it to.

Jeni says

I wanted to like this more than I did. I'm a fan of Steven Millhauser and I get that he likes to use lots of detail. But in this story the detail gets so laborious, the lists so long and obscure, the sidetracks and permutations so great--I lost the story somewhere along the way. I don't even really know what happened.

Fred says

On the one hand, I found this a wholly original and interesting novel, but on the other hand, I sometimes found the execution of its premise (the biography of an 11-year-old by the subject's next-door neighbor and obsessive admirer) wearying in its detail and layers of imagery. This the the kind of book that presents itself a particular challenge, which is to make its narrative true to its conceits while simultaneously engaging readers. It's on this point that I found the novel lacking at times, because I wanted the story to come more fully alive for me, but I understood that the tone of the narrator had a purpose of its own, and that purpose didn't fall into line with my own desire to see the story move along at a faster clip.

I think, therefore, that this will be a novel I appreciate more in hindsight than I did in the reading. There is a lot being said about language, creativity, childhood, and the nature of friendship. Also about interest vs. obsession. I won't forget some of the incidents or imagery, I know. I'm just sorry that I found myself at times feeling frustrated with the narrator and wanting to skim portions of the text. This is a well-written novel, and Millhauser creates some very affecting passages, so it's all the more frustrating to feel the impulse to avoid such craft out of impatience.

Lisa Kusel says

One of the greatest living writers alive.

A.J. Howard says

A lot of times I feel like my preconceived notions of a novel plays a disproportionate role in my eventual reaction to the book. For instance, I'll read a book like *Lolita* and I go into it knowing that it's one of the major works of the 20th century, and that Nabokov is a master of English prose. The same is true with novels that I hear criticism of. If reviewers I tend to a agree with disparage a book, I'll find myself prone a somewhat hidden wish to confirm their opinion. I don't think this is is necessarily good or bad, if anything it's natural.But it's something that I find myself thinking about when I read. I could guess a rating before I start most books and there would be a high correlation with my eventual ratings. This is not to say that I didn't enjoy *Lolita*, or that you can never really appreciate classic works of art once a definite critical group-think has been set. I just sometimes have a hard time sorting any bias that I bring to the reading experience by a semi-conscious wish to see my preconceived notions confirmed from any truly sincere reactions to the novel. Again, I think this is natural, but it still concerns me.

However, every once in a while, I'll read a book that surprises me. When a book that I expect to be great disappoints, me I can get pretty vindictive, as seen here. On the other hand, every once in a while a book will be unexpectedly knock my socks off. Either way, the unexpected reaction gives a certain additional power to my overall feelings about the book. *Edwin Mullhouse* is an example of the pleasant surprise.

The full title really jumps out at you and is probably what inspired me to pick up a copy. Yes, the book is really the biography of a Edwin Mullhouse, deceased eleven year old novelist. The writer of the biography, Edwin's closest friend and neighbor Jeffery Cartwright, is convinced that Edwin has produced a work of transcendent genius, and fills it his destiny to tell Edwin's life story. However, Cartwright is apparently writing his friends biography in the month's after his untimely demise, when he's not busy being a sixth grader.

This could have been gimmicky piece of po-mo, excessively 'cute,' and/or any of the other hazards that modern writers sometimes succumb to. But Millhauser creates Jeffery's voice in a way that avoids any of these pitfalls. Edwin, and especially Jeffery, are not average children. For instance, Jeffery can recall distinct details of his first meeting with Edwin when he was six months old. However, in their relationship there are hints and glimpses of being a kid that are familiar but are, as Millhauser puts it, 'scrupulously distorted.' Parts of the novel surfaced memories of my childhood that I hadn't thought of in years.***** The undeniably alien-Edwin's career as a novelist-is confined to the last quarter of the book. At it heart, *Edwin Mullhouse* is a artfully told and strangely familiar coming of age story, despite the unique narration concept and any scrupulous distortions.******

The narrative device Millhauser uses allows him to do really cool things with the distinctions between childhood and adulthood. Edwin and Jeffery appear in many ways to be almost unrealistically precocious but there are hints of immaturity. I'm not sure if I'm making sense so let me put it this way. Despite the fact that the narrator has a great hand for prose and would be unusually sophisticated for an adult, once you get into the novel you have no problem accepting the premise that the chronicler of the tale is a 12 year old, an exceptionally bizarre and unique 12 year old, but a 12 year old nonetheless.

Edwin Mullhouse is a really multi-faceted novel, and there are other themes that I could dwell on. For instance the novel is also a portrait of Post-War America and a deconstructive critique and parody of the

genre of biographies. Let me just close with a spoiler-free note on the ending. I'm pretty good at picking up narrative clues and hints, but there is a twist in the last quarter of the book that I did not see coming. At first it jarred me, and it still does. But after some reflection, the twist can't be said to be inconsistent with the narrative or themes of the novel. Moreover, it does fit in with my thoughts on the power of the pleasant surprise.

***** Let me illustrate by an example. *Edwin Mullhouse* is without a doubt a novel for adults but for some reasons it reminds me of a book I last read around 15 years ago and haven't thought about in who knows how long: Sideways Stories from Wayside School. Edwin and Jeffery's adventures at Franklin Pierce Elementary for some inconceivable reason made me think of this book. There's a sense of gonzo shadows of the reality of being a pre-teen kid in both *Edwin Mullhouse* and (at least my hazy recollections of) *Sideways Stories*.

****** I would further explain the term, but the passage that it's featured really a linchpin of the actual read and is one of those things that should be encountered in the way the author meant it to be, so I'll refrain.
