

Jeanine Cummins

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## 'The Outside Boy': My Journey From Memoirist To First-Time Novelist

My editor once remarked that it was "interesting," given my background in sales and publishing, that I chose to write about Irish gypsies in 1959 -- not exactly the most commercial topic ever. But for me it seemed obvious: after writing my memoir, *A Rip in Heaven*, about my brother's survival of a violent crime in which two of my cousins were raped and killed, I wanted to get as far away from writing about my life as possible. I'd had enough of ripping open the emotional scars of my childhood for other people's examination. Or so I thought.

Writing about Ireland was a natural choice -- I come from an American-Irish family. We were raised on a stern diet of Yeats, the Clancy Brothers, and skewed politics. I spent wonderful years living in Ireland, and then I moved to New York and found myself a west-coast Irishman to marry. When I started writing my novel *The Outside Boy*, I looked beyond the mainstream Irish tradition, and chose to set my story among Irish Travellers because I felt theirs was a community that was largely misrepresented. But I also chose them as my subject because they were so different from me, so foreign. I needed the comfort of that anonymity.

So imagine my surprise when, several hundred pages into the narrative, I started recognizing familiar traits in my narrator, Christy. He is a nomad, whose family moves every few weeks; my dad was in the Navy, so our family moved every couple of years when I was little. Christy feels torn between two cultures and slightly rejected by both; I'm an American, with Irish and Puerto Rican heritage, and have struggled with issues of identity at times. Claustrophobia? Yeah, Christy and I both have that. So much for emotional distance.

I've never tried to outrun my traumas. If anything, I've dwelled too much in them. For years after my cousins were murdered, I immersed myself in that loss with the determination of a super-monk. When I was ready to heal, I was lucky enough to have a foundation of faith and family. Writing my memoir also helped.

But trauma leaks, no matter how vigorously you guard against it. With the passage of time, the fallout may slow from a deluge to a trickle, but it never dries up completely. I still shudder when I see the gap in my sky where the twin towers used to be. So I chose to write fiction, and I developed characters who felt reassuringly insulated - at first. But in the end, I could have dressed them up as storm troopers or hobbits or politicians. I could have sent them to the prairie, or Uranus, or even Los Angeles. It wouldn't have mattered. These characters are still my family; they're still me.

After I realized my folly, I read back through the manuscript looking for clues, for links between the characters and my life. Even then, I was surprised by the rawness of the associations -- by how much of my personal grief and triumph saturated the book. This really is the story of a boy whose life changes forever in a single, lynchpin moment that can never be undone.

At first, I felt disappointed by my unwitting self-indulgence. Then I got over it. The best of fiction has always reached beyond gender, culture, class, and pigment. It speaks into the place of our collective humanity. It shows us the acute ways in which we are all the same. And we can't get to that place without clawing out our own insides and having a good look around.

**The Outside Boy**

A Novel

Jeanine Cummins - Author

NAL



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**Pronunciation Guide**

*an Taoiseach* (awn THEE-shuk) – the prime minister of Ireland

*Ballycinneide* (BAL-ee-kin-EY-juh) – an invented Irish place-name, combining the Irish word "bally" for "town" with the Irish for the surname "Kennedy"

*bansidhe* (ban-SHEE) – from ancient Irish myth, the bansidhe is a fairy woman (usually characterized as a hag) whose appearance and blood-curdling cry portend a death

*bodhrán* (BOWH-ron) – a flat frame drum

*ciúnas* (KYOO-niss) – silence

*craic* (krak) – there's no literal translation for this word in English, but it's roughly translated to mean "fun."

*Croagh Patrick* (kroh PA-trik) – a mountain in County Mayo famous for its affiliation with Saint Patrick. Barefoot pilgrims climb the mountain annually, as a remembrance.

*Cullohill* (kuhl-uh-HIL) – a village in County Laois

*Dia duit* (JEE-uh gwitch) – traditional greeting. Literally "God bless you."

*Di is Muire dhuit* (JEE-uhs MuR-a gwitch) – response to traditional greeting above. Literally "God and Mary bless you."

*Donaskeagh* (duh-nuh-SKEE) – a village in County Tipperary

*doolally* (doo-LAH-lee) – loopy or crazy

*Eamonn* (EY-min) – a traditional boy's name, usually anglicized as Edward or Edmund

*eegit* (EE-jit) – slang for idiot

*Finnuala* (fin-NOO-lah) – a traditional Irish girl's name

*garda* (GAHR-duh) – a police officer (singular)

*gardai* (garh-DEE) – police officers (plural)

*greeshuk* (GREE-shuk) – a Pavee word for a small, handheld oven that cooks bread directly in the coals of a campfire.

*Ha'penny Bridge* (HEY-pen-ee brij) – one of Dublin's most famous landmarks, the pedestrian bridge was the first to span the River Liffey in the city centre.

*Luimneach* (LEM-uh-nuhkh) – Limerick, both a county and a city in southwestern Ireland

*Malachy* (MAL-uh-kee) – traditional Irish boy's name, pronounced with the long "ee" sound at the end, which distinguishes it from other cultural pronunciations.

*Nenagh* (NEE-nuh) – a town in County Tipperary

*Pavee* (pa-VEE) – a traveller

*poitín* (PUH-cheen) – moonshine

*Rathnaveen* (RATH-nuh-VEEN) – a small village in County Tipperary

*Roscrea* (ros-KREY) – a town in County Tipperary

*Seamus* (SHAY-muhs) – traditional Irish boy's name, anglicized as James

*seanchaí* (shawn-uh-KHEE) – storyteller

*siopa leabhar* (SHUP-uh LOU-er) – book shop

*slán abhaile* (slawn oh-WAHL-yuh) – goodbye. Literally "safe home."

*slán leat* (slawn lath) – goodbye. Literally "health with you."

*Thurles* (THUR-lis) – a town in County Tipperary

*tober* (TOH-bur) – Pavee word for "road"

*whisht* (wisht) – an exclamation meaning "be quiet!" or "shhh!"

## Reading Guides



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### INTRODUCTION

Ireland, 1959: Young Christy Hurley is a Pavee gypsy, traveling with his father and extended family from town to town, carrying all their worldly possessions in their wagons. Christy carries with him a burden of guilt as well, haunted by the story of his mother's death in childbirth. The peripatetic life is the only one Christy has ever known, but when his grandfather dies, everything changes. His father decides to settle down temporarily in a town where Christy and his cousin can attend mass and receive proper schooling. But they are still treated as outsiders.

As Christy's exposure to a different life causes him to question who he is and where he belongs, the answer may lie with an old newspaper photograph and a long-buried family secret that could change his life forever...

### ABOUT JEANINE CUMMINS

Jeanine Cummins lives in New York City.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Christy and his grandfather have a very special relationship, so when Grandda dies, it's a particularly difficult loss for Christy. What is it about their bond that makes the two of them so close? In what ways does Grandda, and even the memory of Grandda, enrich Christy's life, and make him feel less alone? Has the absence of Christy's mother made him feel less like a part of his own family?
2. Throughout the book, Christy struggles to find his place in the world, to become comfortable in his own skin. Would you describe Christy as happy, despite his uncertainties? Why or why not?
3. What things does Christy like about being a traveller, and living on the margins of society? Are there ways in which he is ever ashamed of his family or their way of life? Are there moments when he admires or even envies the settled lifestyle? Would Christy be happier if he lived in a house?
4. Are Christy's questions about his identity inevitable, or is there something about the family's extended stay in one place that ignites his struggle to figure out who he is, and where he belongs? How does Christy change during his stay in the town, and his time at school? Who and what are the catalysts for these changes?
5. Christy cherishes books and stories. How do language, stories, and books help Christy to define himself? In contrast, why is his cousin Martin so defensive about his illiteracy?
6. How are Christy and Martin similar, and how are they different? Which of the two boys has a more realistic view of life? Who is the more romantic character? Which of the two do you think is better prepared for the life ahead of him?
7. Is Christy's attitude toward his father typical, for a boy his age? Or is Christy's anger specific to his father's character and the circumstances of their life together? By the end of the book, Christy comes to find out that his father has lied to him about many things. Is this deceit by Dad's fears for Christy's stability, or are the lies indefensible? Is there ever a time when it's acceptable for parents to deceive their children?
8. Does Mrs. Hanley do the right thing in helping Christy to solve the mystery of the photograph, or is her choice a reckless one? She seems to know that she might be opening a can of worms; should she have spoken to Christy's father before agreeing to help?
9. During his stay in the town, Christy becomes very attached to both Sister Hedgehog and Mrs. Hanley, the bookshop owner, after they treat him with basic kindness. Is he looking for a mother figure in these women? Or is he simply grateful for their compassion?
10. Why is Christy unable to find a suitable mother figure among the female characters in his own family? The women in this community tend to have many children. Are Granny and Auntie Brigid simply overextended? Or is Christy looking for something beyond what they have to offer him?
11. Is Christy's budding romance with Funnuala Whippet a viable relationship, or is his friendship with a settled girl doomed by the same obstacles Christy's parents faced? Does this relationship have anything to teach him about his parents and their struggles?
12. Why does Christy react so impatiently with Beano? What is it about Beano that makes Christy so uncomfortable? Despite Beano's awkwardness, he seems to feel entirely comfortable with himself. Could Christy learn anything from Beano about self-acceptance and/or inclusion in society?
13. Christy has an incredibly strong bond with his horse, Jack. Is this a friendship that any young boy might have with his pet, or is there something special in Christy's circumstance or lifestyle that makes the attachment more intense? Who or what does Jack represent to Christy?



14. What is Christy's predominant emotional response when he finally meets his mother? Does he feel like he has things in common with her? If so, what things? Does he admire her, or feel disappointed by her? Or both? Why?
15. Christy is stunned when his mother reveals that she actually *asked* his father to kidnap him, when he was still just a baby. Why did she do this? Was it the right decision for Christy? Was it the right decision for Christy's mother, for his father? Was it a selfish act, or a selfless one? Does Christy understand why his mother did what she did?
16. In the end, Christy makes a decision that is a singular act of self-definition. Does Christy's extraordinary action at the end of the book make sense? Is it an act of joy or of grief, or of both? In his heart, Christy believes that his mother will understand the decisions he makes. Do you agree? Why or why not?
17. Christy makes the choice in the end to embrace himself as a traveller, and to return to the only life he's ever known. Is this the right decision for him? As a traveller, Christy comes to value his culture, his family, and his freedom. Do you believe there is intrinsic value in the traveller's nomadic way of life? Why or why not? What aspects of their culture are most valuable? And what features, if any are dispensable?
18. The moral code of travellers is different from the moral code of the largely Catholic, settled community in Ireland. How can two cultures like these, with divergent ethical standards, learn to live together peaceably? Is there ever a time when one's group moral code should trump the other's?
19. Outsiders might be confused by the apparent dichotomies that exist within the moral fabric of the traveling community. For instance, most travellers are strict Catholics who observe their faith with rigor, but within the traveller's code of ethics, there are times when stealing is acceptable. This is a truth that Christy struggles to reconcile throughout the book. In the end, is he successful? What are your thoughts on these ethical disparities? Do similar discrepancies exist in our own moral code? Are these discrepancies harmful or reasonable?
20. Has this story changed your perceptions of gypsies in general, or of Irish Travellers in particular? If so, how?