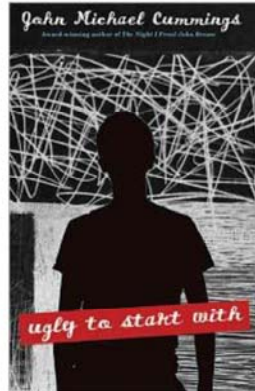


## UGLY TO START WITH, BY JOHN MICHAEL CUMMINGS

JULY 6, 2011 BY NILES REDDICK [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Ugly to Start With

By John Michael Cummings

Reviewed by Niles Reddick

On the heels of his Paterson Prize-winning novel *The Night I Freed John Brown*, John Michael Cummings has offered fans another look at the historical and picturesque Harpers Ferry, West Virginia in his new collection *Ugly to Start With*.

The collection is comprised of thirteen stories, all of which have previously been published in prestigious literary journals across the country, including one, "Scratchboard Project," which landed him a Pushcart nomination and Honorable mention in Best American Short Stories.

In *Ugly to Start With*, Cummings chronicles part of the teenager Jason Stevens' life in the 1970's in Harpers Ferry. Stevens is the quintessential artist, always struggling and finding it difficult to communicate. A sensitive, philosophical, "Mama's boy," he has his sights set on being an artist in Washington, D.C., but what Cummings paints on his canvas for us is a realization that art is life. And that you can find it no matter where you are.

Stevens discovers that he is surrounded by stories and colorful characters to paint—whether it's his angry father who uses profanity to the point that "hell was like a fly that wouldn't leave him alone"; the drunk wife beater Billy who is suffering from mouth cancer and his wife doesn't know it; Rusty, an old deaf man who talks to his dead wife; Junior, who is laid out dead in a mountain shack with a dime keeping one eye lid shut and a quarter keeping the other shut; Carter, the old gay outsider who makes a play for Stevens; or Shantice, who lives in Bolivar where other blacks live and who Stevens sketches in the basement of her family's old house.

It is through Stevens' interactions with these characters, coupled with his own dysfunctional family relationships, that Cummings' talent shines. And while the reader knows Stevens will depart on the Amtrak and head for art school, Cummings leaves us all with a lasting impression of Stevens' community, and the fact that life is ultimately a work of art.