

Press Release



Yellowcake

by Ann Cummins

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Ann Cummins](#)
- [Advance Praise for *Yellowcake*](#)
- [2007 Tour for Ann Cummins](#)

"[A] complex, unusually mature debut novel . . . interweaving the personal and political with quiet authority." — *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"Cummins brilliantly conflates the insidious damage wrought by radiation sickness with the maladies of the soul caused by prejudice, poverty, nature's abuse, and love's betrayal." — *Booklist*, starred review

"A tightly drawn and absorbing novel of the modern American Southwest." — *Library Journal*

About the Book

For Ann Cummins's acclaimed collection of stories, *Red Ant House*, Joyce Carol Oates hailed her as a "master storyteller." The *San Francisco Chronicle* called her "startlingly original." Now, in her debut novel, Cummins stakes claim to rich new literary territory with a story of people straddling cultures and cheating fate in the American Southwest.

An ambitious multigenerational, multicultural story, *Yellowcake* introduces us to two unforgettable families — one Navajo, one Anglo — some thirty years after the closing of the uranium mill near where they once made their homes. When young Becky Atcity shows up on the Mahoneys' doorstep all grown up, the past comes crashing in on Ryland and his lively family. Becky, the daughter of one of the Navajo mill workers Ryland had supervised, is now involved with a group seeking damages for those harmed by the radioactive dust that contaminated their world. But Ryland wants no part of dredging up their past — or acknowledging his future. When his wife joins the cause, the messy, modern lives of these eclectic individuals collide once again, testing their mettle, stretching their faith, and reconnecting past and present in unexpected new ways. *Yellowcake* is a moving story of how everyday people sort their way through life, with all

its hidden hazards.

Ann Cummins's father was a uranium mill worker, and she spent much of her childhood on an Indian reservation, experiences that enable her to handle the themes of converging cultures with authority and insight. Her astute understanding of the human condition shines through on each page of *Yellowcake*, as she captures the raw essence of her characters, who are living, breathing, normal folk, authentic to the core.

"This is a gorgeous novel about people who are as tender and ornery and passionate and mixed-up and real as the people we know in real life," as Ann Packer has said. "I loved them, and I love this book."

About the Author

Ann Cummins is the author of *Red Ant House*, a *San Francisco Chronicle* bestseller and Best Book of the Year. Her short stories have been published in *The New Yorker*, *McSweeney's*, and *The Best American Short Stories 2002*, among other publications. The recipient of a Lannan Fellowship, she divides her time between Oakland, California, where she lives with her husband, and Flagstaff, Arizona, where she teaches creative writing at Northern Arizona University.

A Conversation with Ann Cummins

Why is your novel titled *Yellowcake*?

My novel is set in the uranium-rich lands of the American Southwest, the Four Corners area, including the San Juan Mountains of Colorado and the Navajo Indian reservation in northern New Mexico and Arizona. My subject is the lives of Navajos and Anglos for whom the mining and milling of uranium was a way of life from the fifties through the early seventies. *Yellowcake*, a controversial energy source used to power both nuclear bombs and power plants, comes from processed uranium ore. I titled my novel *Yellowcake* in part because the making of yellowcake was such an important element of my characters' lives, but also because it's a long-lived energy source emitting radiation for years after the ore is mined. My novel is set in 1991, twenty years after the closing of many uranium mines and mills on the Colorado Plateau, but my characters continue to feel the industry's effects in many ways — physically, emotionally, and spiritually. History and the present converge in the characters. *Yellowcake*, or rather the "half-life" of the processed ore, represents the echoes and consequences of historical events and how they play out in the present.

So is it like the Karen Silkwood story about environmental hazards associated with uranium?

Only a small part of the story explores environmental hazards. I'm more interested in creating complex characters driven by a range of interests in the land and in each other. I tell the story from five points of view. One character, an ailing man in his sixties, a former uranium mill foreman, comes from generations of miners and has always seen mining as his legacy, his right. Even though he's sick, he is not quick to blame, and environmentalists irritate him. Another, a twenty-five-year-old Navajo woman whose

father worked in the mill and was diagnosed with cancer at an early age, is angry at the industry, and yet she feels conflicted, too. She turns to Western medicine to help her father and thereby alienates her Navajo grandmother, who is as suspicious of Western medicine as of the uranium industry that she believes made her son sick. My other characters play out different conflicts. An Anglo mill worker who had an affair with a Navajo woman who was a rodeo pro obsesses about his lover twenty years later, though he rarely sees her. His mixed-blood son, virtually fatherless and raised by a mother who was always on the road, has grown up to be a solo flyer. For this young man family is tenuous; he has come to believe he has only himself to rely on, but still his big passions get him into trouble. There is also the story of a uranium mill divorcée who lives in the half-life of a marriage gone bad, still haunted by memories of her ex-husband.

Why did you choose this subject?

I grew up in the Colorado Plateau area and, like some of my characters, I'm from generations of Colorado miners. So the history and landscape are personal to me. My father was a uranium mill worker in Durango, Colorado, and his company began operating a mill in Shiprock, New Mexico, on the Navajo reservation when I was nine. So the reservation, too, is personal to me. I lived there for nine years and went to public school there.

To what degree does autobiography play into your fiction?

It's interesting to answer that question at the end of a project rather than at the beginning. When I started this novel, my intent was to write a story based on my parents' marriage, using the uranium industry for plot. My parents had a long marriage; my father was sick for the last nine years of it, and my mother took care of him until he died. It was hard work and literally broke her back. To be honest, such a burden frightens me, so I wanted to create characters that would allow me to explore that sort of commitment. I had Tilly Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* at the back of my mind. That book, so brutal and beautiful, is such a moving portrayal of a marriage that has atrophied under the burden of historical events — in Olsen's case, the Holocaust — that continue to play out for decades in the characters' minds. I wrote a couple of hundred pages about this testy old guy bucking against his growing dependence on others, who all blame his work in uranium for his illness. As usually happens with my characters, this guy quickly developed into somebody very different from my father. As the story develops, the characters encounter problems, and they have to improvise to solve them.

Improvisation is the life source for my characters, who, through the drafts of the book, matured into wholly unique people. I was pretty happy with how my couple wrestled with each other, but the book was turning into bitter medicine because the subject was illness. My editor suggested I try some other points of view to broaden the story. It was a great suggestion. It got me out of the sick room and into New Mexico's high northern desert, a landscape I love, and it allowed me to do something that frightens me, writing from the perspective of characters who are racially and culturally different from me. Risky business, I think, but a challenge worth taking, especially when trying to tell how these events affected a diverse community. I find character-driven fiction liberating. Ultimately, I'm interested in creating individuals, not races or cultures, though I guess individuality, race, and culture are intertwined. It helps to know something about the people one auditions for fiction, which brings me back to autobiography. This is a novel about the kinds of people I grew up among, set in a place I know well, but while the characters and

story germinated — in fact, they matured — in the imagination.

Advance Praise for *Yellowcake*

"Already much admired for her superb short stories, Ann Cummins excels once more with a first novel that places her among the most serious and original writers of her generation." — Sigrid Nunez, author of *The Last of Her Kind* and *A Feather on the Breath of God*

"Ann Cummins has one of the most original and addictive voices around. In *Yellowcake* she uses it to tell a story that's filled with suspense, humanity, and a deep concern for what we make of the world we live in. This novel achieves a rare combination: it's both important and beautiful." — Vendela Vida, author of *Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name*

"A memorable journey behind the buried news article or fleeting sound bite. Cummins's characters inhabit this world with dignity, humor, and complexity, and her treatment of them does what great literature always does better than the evening news: it includes its readers in humanity's profound engagement with righting wrongs. There's no one I wouldn't recommend this book to." — Antonya Nelson, author of *Some Fun* and *Female Trouble*

"Glorious . . . an unflinchingly honest look at the struggles faced by so-called ordinary Americans. But there is nothing at all ordinary about the wonderful, fully fleshed characters that populate this book. Cummins knows the souls of her people — an incredibly wide range of them — and she knows her place, a Southwest that is rendered in all its unromantic but somehow blessed beauty." — Peter Orner, author of *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo* and *Esther Stories*

"*Yellowcake* is about those solid citizens — Navajo and white — whose work helped construct America's postwar prosperity and power, and whose repayment was exploitation and neglect. Ann Cummins is wonderful on the way individuals, just like corporations, seek to erase history; she's wonderful on the way our compassion works in counterpoint to our heedlessness." — Jim Shepard, author of *Project X* and *Love and Hydrogen*

"A gorgeous novel about people who are as tender and ornery and passionate and mixed-up and real as the people we know in real life. I loved them, and I love this book." — Ann Packer, author of *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*

"By fusing suspenseful love entanglements with family angst, Native American concerns, grief over the poisoning of the land, penetrating compassion, and ironic humor, Cummins brilliantly conflates the insidious damage wrought by radiation sickness with the maladies of the soul caused by prejudice, poverty, nature's abuse, and love's betrayal." — *Booklist*, starred review

"[A] complex, unusually mature debut novel . . . Cummins avoids distracting polemics, interweaving the personal and political with quiet authority." — *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"Cummins presents a tightly drawn and absorbing novel of the modern American

Southwest, exploring themes of aging, illness, cultural misunderstandings, and strained family relationships treated honestly and realistically with a strong regional flavor." — *Library Journal*

2007 Tour for Ann Cummins

Bay Area

Diesel Books, Oakland
March 15

Booksmith, San Francisco
March 20

Keplers, Menlo Park
April 9

The Rickshaw Stop, San Francisco
May 17

Arizona

Antigone's, Tucson
April 12

Arizona Book Festival, Phoenix
April 14

Northern Arizona Book Festival
Flagstaff, April 20–22

New Mexico

Garcia's, Santa Fe
April 26

Page One, Albuquerque
April 30

Colorado

Maria's, Durango
May 2