

An interview with George Myers Jr., author of *Worlds End* (Paycock Press, January 2025).

By Barbara Templeton

George Myers Jr. is the author of *Worlds End.*, a genre-bending novel coming from Paycock Press in January 2025. Myers, a painter, illustrated *Worlds End.* His books include *Mixers: On Hybrid Writing* (Cumberland), *Fast Talk with Writers* (Sandy Press), and *Atmospheric Landscapes of North America* (Cumberland).

In his episodic novel, an amateur naturalist named Mr. K is trying to get his collection of nature drawings, writing, research, and photos included in his town's time capsule, but the town wants none of it. By story's end, we understand why Mr. K has been so persistent.

Interviewer: Are you ready to unpack *Worlds End*?

Myers: I'm not sure, but let's give it a go.

Interviewer: This book, a novella, I think, really, feels in the tradition of Cortazar, Borges, and Calvino. How important are they to you as a writer?

Myers: They don't play a role that I know of, except they likely infiltrated my mind as a reader, and I liked what they did. I suppose that must impact me as a writer. None plays a conscious role within *Worlds End.*

Interviewer: But magical realism has a place in *Worlds End.*

Myers: I suppose, yes, and magical thinking, which is something very different.

Interviewer: Let's go there. Is Mr. K. insane?

Myers: No, but as I write in the book's "World's End" chapter, mid-way through the book and chapter, we learn he's been diagnosed with onset Alzheimers. So, he's in a hurry. A hurry to get everything down, to get his memories preserved beyond their being kept in that cabinet of his. What happens with Mr. K is probably the best we can hope for, I think.

Interviewer: All those references to Prague and Kafka. I guess we won't go there, or readers will skip ahead and make some connections and conclusions. There's the dung beetle. I note that the beetle is stepped on in one of the two chapters set in Kenya, losing a leg at that moment, and then the beetle shows up later in a field notes, illustrated without a leg.

Myers: I set up those Prague references as red herrings, because that's the mystery: Who is this guy, why Prague, and why are his field notes as they are? I'm trying to not describe the notes. The chapters are aggregating — like a highway with many exits, many on and off ramps. More off ramps, because quite a few endings and full stops occur.

Interviewer: Entire species vanish, literally. So would you say *Worlds End* is a dour and dark vision?

Myers: I hope not. The way we remember our past can be quite funny, even untrue at times, and often fictional. Memory work requires a bit of creativity, the stitching together of disparate events. *Worlds End* seems somewhat celebratory to me in that everything continues, despite the endings, and gets re-created, is given new life, in memories.

Interviewer: Mr. K's friends or associates, or subjects, include Charles Darwin, Andre Malraux, Maria Sybilla Merian, and others. They seem to exist, as Mr. K. does, in an unfixd time and place.

Myers: Memory is like that. One moment you're thinking of your beloved old dog who's been gone four years and the next split second you're thinking of a brush you had with a celebrity 10 years ago, or about your school days. Gertrude Stein spoke of "the continuous present" and that's the where and when the little chapters in the book occur.

Interviewer: And the Middle Kingdom woman, with the prehensile hair. That would be fiction.

Myers: How do you know it's fiction? I know I don't know.

Interviewer: J.M.W. Turner's painting of an old ship appears on an old postcard. On it, someone named Cheddie has written to someone named Artie about the painting. Can you say what's going on there? That's one of the shortest chapters in the book.

Myers: *The Fighting Temeraire*. Turner's painting is of a blackened, dirty steamship pushing a ghostly white non-sailing vessel to a port, where the old ship will be taken apart and destroyed. The painting about the onset of the industrial age, which meant end times for sailing ships and certain ways of life. Look at Turner's blazing sunset, and the black coil floating at sea. The end. It's one of many endings in *Worlds End*, and a harbinger of things to come. Looking at that painting got me going on the book.

Interviewer: A relationship ends, species die off, a prize bee escapes, and dead things like the waxwing are given a new but fictional life, as a stuffed bird. Your characters have such brief appearances.

Myers: Lives are momentary. Yours, mine, theirs.

Interviewer: So, remembering the past, the difficulty one has in keeping it, is a theme.

Myers: Yeah, there are braids. That's one. Another is who is Felice and why does she keep showing up. To that extent, the book is a mystery, which is revealed. It's also has an epistolary braid. If you read just those four or five letters exchanged between K and the town, you get the full trajectory of the story that's completely linear. But the chapters individually stand out if time, apart from a linear progression. Follow the story's waxwing - it reappears - and you get another straight line, from beginning to end. It feels piecemeal because this is the info that K has in his cabinet. Open any drawer and you start the story.

Interviewer: Or end a story. The landscape and all its poppies are blown apart in Belgium, during World War I and II.

Myers: They are, but a man survives to write about it, and that's something to cheer.

Interviewer: That's your grandfather, in real life, who volunteered for the French, as an ambulance driver, according to the novel's concordance, at book's end.

Myers: The driver in "Poppies" is based on him, yes. It's strange how family memories get into stories about the past, almost uncalled for. At any moment, your childhood stands there, clear as day, as a demented adult.

Interviewer: Are the memories in the book your memories?

Myers: Some; hard to avoid. Just the two set in Kenya and the ending, though I took the Xi'an photo in China. I've poured fiction over the memories and the images. I cast the young white fellow in the "Hearts of Darkness" chapter something of a colonial racist, which I hope I wasn't when I lived in Kenya. But you always travel with your shortcomings; I didn't give that character the benefit of a doubt.

Interviewer: I'm not sure what's true, in the book.

Myers: I think that's OK. It's fiction. And Mr. K's cabinet is a colorful place. Do you mean, the book's field notes, the nature writing, being true or not?

Interviewer: Yes, I guess so. The talking tree, the vengeful squid, the sounds of the stars.

Myers: The poplar tree is true, if you believe National Public Radio. And the stars, too. The squid might not be vengeful. It would probably depend on the squid. It can be a surprising thing, to find out that what we think is untrue is actually true, and what we think is true is fiction. Not exactly a revelation, there.

Interviewer: Is *Worlds End* the novel you intended, from the start?

Myers: That's a good question. The chapters are based on just the things that Mr. K stored in his map cabinet, but I didn't have the stories ready made for the cabinet drawers. I had a few pieces, flash fictions or prose poems, that were about time and the past, and there was a through-line to them, a through-line that might have been caused by my age. I'm 72 and won't last forever, and what will become of my memories when I'm gone? Then I wrote more, imagining what might be in Mr. K's cabinet, and it became all about what he stored in each map drawer.. He's there, in them.

Interviewer: The images, they're his.

Myers: He collected them or they were his illustrations of what he wrote about. Because Mr. K. was so obsessive, I knew he had to illustrate his papers, as any would-be naturalist would.

Interviewer: *Frankenstein* is alluded to. Is it because he, the monster, was essentially put together by spare parts?

Myers: I allude to the *Frankenstein* story, which everyone knows, to telegraph *World End's* ending. But and I get what you're saying, the chapters are somewhat disparate. Most stand alone, like parts.

Interviewer: Charles Darwin appears in *Worlds End*, and the German naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, Felice Bauer, and others. Those were real people.

Myers: But fictions, each one, in *Worlds End*. I'm aware that in real life there were characters who had those names, but mine are different characters who have those names. Mr. K knew a lot of interesting people. They'll become memories, or fading ones, to readers of the book.

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An interview with George Myers Jr., about his artwork in his hybrid novel *Worlds End* (Paycock Press, January 2025).

By Barbara Templeton

Worlds End is about an amateur naturalist, named Mr. K., who keeps his field notes, records, drawings and memories in an old map cabinet. He's trying, vainly, to have his materials preserved in his town's time capsule, but the town wants none of it. Readers begin to understand why Mr. K is so insistent as they meet characters like Charles Darwin and John Edmonstone,

Felice Bauer, and other real and fictional people; and page through dozens of Mr. K's paintings and photos.

Paycock Press releases the in January 2025.

Interviewer: *Worlds End.* is hybrid fiction in many ways, including that you've illustrated it. Can we focus today on the book's visual aspect?

Myers: Sure.

Interviewer: Why are your visuals — paintings, photos, and other representations — important to the telling of this story.

Myers: The novel's narrator is a naturalist who naturally would want to illustrate what he's writing about — shells, trees, things he's studied, and seen.

Interviewer: OK, the book's format threw me a curve already. You call it a novel, but it doesn't look like one. The book is formatted in two columns per page. Why?

Myers: It is a novel intended to resemble a book of field notes. It focuses on one character, Mr. K., who is trying to jam his research on poplars, stars, insects, sand crabs, and characters from history into his town's time capsule. Lots of characters float in and out of the story — usually one or two different ones in each chapter.

Interviewer: The text is set in two columns per page ...

Myers: Yes, I think I failed there, in my idea about the design. I was attempting to present Mr. K's field notes like nature books often are presented, with photos, or a map or two, between two columns, and with an image accompanying every chapter. A good designer could have better approximated that idea.

Interviewer: So the images are all Mr. K's.

Myers: Those he signed, with a K., are his, or mine, but his. Mr. K is a strange collector with an unusual collection, like those in curiosity cabinets of centuries ago, and so he includes images that he's found, or that illustrate his purposes, like the torn page from medical books or sea shell drawings from the British museum.

Interviewer: You created some with Adobe Firefly, and others look heavily processed or altered in some way.

Myers: The book is fiction, so I wanted the images to look fictional as well, as though from an unfixed times, or long ago. My own photos are in the mix, pictures I took when I lived in Kenya

in the 1970s and visited China. But I aged them or made them black-and-white, to give them an older, historic feel. . Others I found or painted.

Interviewer: Are you a portraitist? You include several.

Myers: No. Mostly abstracts and seascapes, with an occasional animal thrown in. The magazine *Utriculi* just published two of my acrylics, in its first issue. I'm keen on the English alphabet, its letters, and have made a few dozen paintings of letters. Some of those were published in two issues of *Otoliths* magazine, in 2023 and 2024. I recently released *Love Letters* on my Cumberland imprint. Each page is a letter of the alphabet, with a chosen word related to some aspect of love or agape, or sadness.

Interviewer: Cumberland, the imprint. That's an offshoot of *Cumberland Journal*. You published that in the 1970s and 1980s.

Myers: The quarterly, yes.

Interviewer: How large are the paintings in *Worlds End*?

Myers: Varies. The image of Gruner Lake is roughly three feet by two feet. The others are about the size, not surprisingly, of a page of a book. I tend to think of books, and in terms of series. I might make, for example, 10 images of one thing and then choose one for *Worlds End*. But then, I have to think, could Mr. K have painted that? So, I might have to swap it out for something more sketch-like, or a water color.

Interviewer: Not every image you made for the story made it into the story?

Myers: No. There were two drawers filled with images that didn't make it into the book. I'd considered making those images part of an appendix to the book.

Interviewer: Mr. K served in World War I. Is that him in the chapter's first illustration?

Myers: That's right. I got the idea for that piece, at least part one, from my grandfather's diary. He, too, was an ambulance driver for the French. I had hoped I could create a comic book chapter using his photos from the war — to tell that chapter in another way — but I don't have the skills for it. In my head, that chapter lives as a comic book, colored by mustard gas.

Interviewer: Lots of characters show up in the book, in addition to your grandfather: the writers Mary Shelly and Andre Malraux, the naturalists John Edmonstone, and Kafka's fiancée, Felice Bauer. And Mr. K's granddaughter shows up at the end. Some of the images look like oils.

Myers: Nope, I'm allergic to oil paint and break out around their vapors. The images are everything but. Fortunately for me, Mr. K is an amateur at everything, including illustrating, so I can hide sort of comfortably in his lack of skill.