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Book Club in a Box

The Hours

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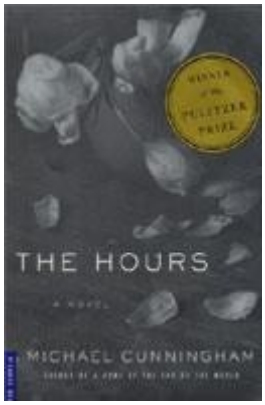
About the Book



In this remarkable book, Cunningham draws inventively on the life and work of Virginia Woolf to tell the story of a group of characters struggling with the conflicting claims of love and inheritance, life and death, creation and destruction. The novel moves along three separate but parallel stories, each focusing on the experiences of a particular woman during the course of one apparently unremarkable but in fact pivotal day.

Clarissa Vaughan, a book editor in present-day Greenwich Village, is organizing a party for her oldest friend, Richard, an AIDS-stricken poet who has just won a major literary prize. Laura Brown, a young wife and mother in 1949 Los Angeles, cares for her toddler and prepares a birthday cake for her husband as she tries to resist increasing waves of panic and feelings of alienation from her humdrum yet demanding life. And Virginia Woolf herself, the third woman, works on her new novel, **Mrs. Dalloway**, chats with her husband and sister, bickers with her cook, and attempts to come to terms with her deep, ungovernable longings for escape and even for death. As the novel jump-cuts through the century, the lives and stories of the three women converge, stunningly and unexpectedly, the night of Clarissa's party for Richard.

Source: *readinggroupguides.com*

About the Author

Michael Cunningham's novel **A Home at the End of the World** was published to acclaim in 1990; an excerpt, entitled "White Angel" and published in *The New Yorker*, was chosen for **Best American Short Stories 1989**. His novel **Flesh and Blood** was published in 1995, and that year he won a Whiting Writer's Award. **The Hours**, Cunningham's third novel, received the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award.

Source: *readinggroupguides.com*

"Sidelights"

Michael Cunningham has won critical acclaim, commercial success, and major literary awards for his novels. His works frequently feature homosexual characters and themes, but they do not lose sight of the world beyond the gay community. "Homosexuality is a lens through which the world is viewed, not a world unto itself," stated Joseph M. Eagan in *Gay & Lesbian Literature.* In novels that explore themes of family, friendship, identity, and commitment, he "places his gay and bisexual characters in the mainstream of American life, [viewing] their homosexuality as only one aspect of their identity," according to Eagan. The critic further noted that Cunningham has "been widely praised for his prose, sense of place, use of imagery, and psychological insight into his characters."

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In 1984 Cunningham published his first novel, *Golden States,* which concerns an adolescent boy coming of age in southern California. The boy, twelve-year-old David Stark, is initially portrayed as a victim of his own preoccupations and manias. Living with his mother, older stepsister, and tirelessly obnoxious younger sister, David seems obsessed with safeguarding his home and family. At one point, he even sojourns, with an unloaded pistol, to San Francisco in a harebrained scheme to "save" his stepsister from her presumably dangerous fiancé. Eventually, David begins to understand and control his fears and anxieties even though his life becomes one of increasing isolation and domestic instability. Though abandoned by his father and rejected by his best friend, David develops a sense of security and self-understanding. Ever the protector, however, he continues to guard his suburban neighborhood home from prowling coyotes.

(Courtesy Simon & Schuster)

The Hours, Cunningham's third novel, received the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award.

Golden States was generally perceived as a successful first venture into novel writing. Elizabeth Royte, writing in the *Village Voice,* deemed Cunningham's debut "a sweetly appealing book," while Anne F. Wittels declared in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that the work was "exceedingly well-written." Wittels objected only to the end, which she claimed "left a bad taste," but conceded that the book's "first seven-eighths was terrific." Ruth Doan MacDougall was more enthusiastic in her *Christian Science Monitor* appraisal. "However much one might object to the theme of the protection of women, one cannot help savoring every moment of this novel," she wrote. "Funny, tender, [*Golden States*] is a joy to read."

Despite the favorable reviews, *Golden States* only "sold seven or eight copies," the author joked to *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Michael Coffey. His real breakthrough came with his second novel, *A Home at the End of the World,* a story about sexual liberation in the age of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). The novel provides perspectives on four characters—Jonathan, Bobby, Clare, and Alice—in detailing the complexities of a childhood friendship that develops into romantic love. Jonathan and Bobby meet as young boys in Cleveland, and in the ensuing years they become close friends. When Jonathan leaves for college in New York City, Bobby, whose own family life is empty, becomes a mainstay in his friend's family home. There, Bobby grows particularly close to Jonathan's mother, Alice, whose marriage is collapsing. Eventually, Bobby and Jonathan are reunited in New York City, where they begin living together. They are eventually joined in their quarters by Clare, a young divorced woman who is still rebelling against her wealthy family. Clare hopes to bear Jonathan's child. Instead, she bears Bobby's, a daughter. Jonathan becomes jealous of Bobby and Clare's relationship, but soon all three adults, plus child, begin living together in upstate New York. This idyll is undone, however, when one of Jonathan's former lovers arrives stricken with AIDS.

A Home at the End of the World has earned praise as a compelling portrait of modern times. In the *New York Times Book Review* Joyce Reiser Kornblatt likened Cunningham to Charles Dickens and E. M. Forster, and she hailed Cunningham's work as one of power and depth. She found *A Home at the End of the World* "memorable and accomplished." Another enthusiast, Richard Eder, was particularly impressed with Cunningham's craft, affirming in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that the novelist "writes with power and delicacy" and adding that the entire book "is beautifully written." And Patrick Gale, in his review for the *Washington Post Book World,* noted both the profundity of Cunningham's work and the subtlety with which he wrote it. Observing that the theme of the novel is nothing less than "the family and its alternatives in the overlapping aftermaths of sexual liberation and AIDS," Gale continued by commending Cunningham for his work's "careful structure." Especially successful to Gale is the use of memory, which enables *A Home at the End of the World* to provide readers with "a pleasing sense...of resolution, even if the characters are no less happy at the close than they were before."

Flesh and Blood, published in 1995, demonstrates Cunningham's continuing concerns for honoring all kinds of un-

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conventional family units. This long, multi-generational saga centers around a Greek immigrant and his family. On the surface, Constantine and his wife, Mary, seem to have achieved the American dream: a nice house in the suburbs and three children. But Mary cannot curb her compulsion to shoplift, nor can Constantine resist the beauty of his eldest daughter. A cross-dressing son and a drug-using daughter who raises her illegitimate child with a transvestite partner fill out the picture. All the characters and their troubles "ring true, heartbreakingly true. And beautiful in a way no camera could capture," praised Kelli Pryor in *Entertainment Weekly.* A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer affirmed that, as in *A Home at the End of the World,* Cunningham's prose "is again rich, graceful and luminous, and he exhibits a remarkable maturity of vision and understanding of the human condition." The book was also praised by *Booklist* reviewer Donna Seaman, who called it "empathic and searing," and concluded: "Cunningham, in a remarkable performance, inhabits the psyche of each of his striking characters."

Remarkably, Cunningham received even higher praise for his 1998 publication, *The Hours.* This book, which won a Pulitzer Prize and a prestigious PEN/Faulkner award, is a complex tribute to author Virginia Woolf and her classic novel *Mrs. Dalloway.* Woolf is a character in the book, which is strongly influenced by her unique style. A day in Woolf's life is skillfully meshed with brief episodes from two other lives: a lonely housewife who escapes her family for a day to read *Mrs. Dalloway,* and a Greenwich Village lesbian who is called "Mrs. Dalloway" by her dying lover. *Advocate* contributor Robert Plunket confided, "I have a very low tolerance for arty writers who publish stories in *The New Yorker* and then write novels that turn out to be homages to Virginia Woolf, which makes my reaction to Michael Cunningham's new novel...all the more remarkable….Reading this book, I was overwhelmed by the possibilities of art." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer declared that Cunningham's book "makes a reader believe in the possibility and depth of a communality based on great literature, literature that has shown people how to live and what to ask of life."

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2003.*

Critical Praise

"An exquisitely written, kaleidoscopic work that anchors a floating postmodern world on pre-modern caissons of love, grief and transcendent longing." — Richard Eder, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"[Cunningham] has deftly created something original, a trio of richly interwoven tales that alternate with one another chapter by chapter...his most mature and masterful work. " — James Currier, *The Washington Post Book World*

"The overall impression is that of a delicate, triumphant glance, an acknowledgment of Woolf that takes her into Cunningham's own territory, a place of late-centurt danger but also of treasurable hours." — Michael Wood, *The New York Times Book Review*

"*The Hours* is that rare combination: a smashing literary tour de force and an utterly invigorating reading experience. If this book does not make you jump up from the sofa, looking at life and literature in new ways, check to see if you have a pulse." — Ann Pritchard, *USA Today*

Further Reading

Other works by Michael Cunningham:

Golden States

Flesh and Blood

A Home at the End of the World

If you liked *The Hours*, you might like:

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

Spending by Mary Gordon

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

Mitz by Sigrid Nunez

The Farewell Symphony by Edmund White

Daughter of Fortune by Isabel Allende

Voyage by Philip Caputo

Ahab's Wife or the Star-gazer by Sena Jeter Naslund

Casanova in Love by Andrew Miller

Discussion Questions

1. Clarissa Vaughan is described several times as an "ordinary" woman. Do you accept this valuation? If so, what does it imply about the ordinary, about being ordinary? What makes someone, by contrast, *extraordinary*?

2. Flowers and floral imagery play a significant part in The Hours. When and where are flowers described? What significance do they have, and with what events and moods are they associated? How do flowers affect Virginia? Clarissa?

3. Cunningham plays with the notions of sanity and insanity, recognizing that there might be only a very fine line between the two states. What does the novel imply about the nature of insanity? Might it in fact be a heightened sanity, or at least a heightened sense of awareness? Would you classify Richard as insane? How does his mental state compare with that of Virginia? Of Laura as a young wife? Of Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway? Does insanity (or the received idea of insanity) appear to be connected with creative gifts?

4. Virginia and Laura are both, in a sense, prisoners of their eras and societies, and both long for freedom from this imprisonment. Clarissa Vaughan, on the other hand, apparently enjoys every liberty: freedom to be a lesbian, to come and go and live as she likes. Yet she has ended up, in spite of her unusual way of life, as a fairly conventional wife and mother. What might this fact indicate about the nature of society and the restrictions it imposes? Does the author imply that character, to a certain extent, is destiny?

5. Each of the novel's three principal women, even the relatively prosaic and down-to-earth Clarissa, occasionally feels a sense of detachment, of playing a role. Laura feels as if she is "about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed" [p. 43]. Clarissa is filled with "a sense of dislocation. This is not her kitchen at all. This is the kitchen of an acquaintance, pretty enough but not her taste, full of foreign smells" [p. 91]. Is this feeling in fact a universal one? Is role-playing an essential part of living in the world, and of behaving "sanely"? Which of the characters refuses to act a role, and what price does he/she pay for this refusal?

6. Who kisses whom in *The Hours*, and what is the significance of each kiss?

7. **The Hours** is very much concerned with creativity and the nature of the creative act, and each of its protagonists is absorbed in a particular act of creation. For Virginia and Richard, the object is their writing; for Clarissa Vaughan (and Clarissa Dalloway), it is a party; for Laura Brown, it is another party, or, more generally, "This kitchen, this birthday cake, this conversation. This revived world" [p. 106]. What does the novel tell us about the creative process? How does each character revise and improve his or her creation during the course of the story?

8. How might Richard's childhood experiences have made him the adult he eventually becomes? In what ways has he been wounded, disturbed?

9. Each of the three principal women is acutely conscious of her inner self or soul, slightly separate from the "self" seen by the world. Clarissa's "determined, abiding fascination is what she thinks of as her soul" [p. 12]; Virginia "can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she were religious, she would

call it the soul…It is an inner faculty that recognizes the animating mysteries of the world because it is made of the same substance" [pp. 34-35]. Which characters keep these inner selves ruthlessly separate from their outer ones? Why?

10. Each of the novel's characters sees himself or herself, most of the time, as a failure. Virginia Woolf, as she walks to her death, reflects that "She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric" [p. 4]. Richard, disgustedly, admits to Clarissa, "I thought I was a genius. I actually used that word, privately, to myself" [p. 65]. Are the novel's characters unusual, or are such feelings of failure an essential and inevitable part of the human condition?

11. Toward the end of Clarissa's day, she realizes that kissing Richard beside the pond in Wellfleet was the high point, the culmination, of her life. Richard, apparently, feels the same. Are we meant to think, though, that their lives would have been better, more heightened, had they stayed together? Or does Cunningham imply that as we age we inevitably feel regret for some lost chance, and that what we in fact regret is youth itself?

12. **The Hours** could on one level be said to be a novel about middle age, the final relinquishment of youth and the youthful self. What does middle age mean to these characters? In what essential ways do these middle-aged people--Clarissa, Richard, Louis, Virginia --differ from their youthful selves? Which of them resists the change most strenuously?

13. What does the possibility of death represent to the various characters? Which of them loves the idea of death, as others love life? What makes some of the characters decide to die, others to live? What personality traits separate the "survivors" from the suicides?

14. If you have read Virginia Woolf's **Mrs. Dalloway**, would you describe **The Hours** as a modern version of it? A commentary upon it? A dialogue with it? Which characters in **The Hours** correspond with those of Woolf's novel? In what ways are they similar, and at what point do the similarities cease and the characters become free-standing individuals in their own right?

15. For the most part, the characters in **The Hours** have either a different gender or a different sexual orientation from their prototypes in **Mrs. Dalloway**. How much has all this gender-bending affected or changed the situations, the relationships, and the people?

16. Why has Cunningham chosen **The Hours** for the title of his novel (aside from the fact that it was Woolf's working title for **Mrs. Dalloway**)? In what ways is the title appropriate, descriptive? What do hours mean to Richard? To Laura? To Clarissa?

Source: *readinggroupguides.com*

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Praise for the Movie, *The Hours*

This remarkably faithful and moving screen adaptation of Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning theme and variations on Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" stars Nicole Kidman as the English author who committed suicide in 1941, and Julianne Moore and Meryl Streep as two of her literary and spiritual heirs. Ms. Kidman's Woolf is one of the most disturbing portraits of mental imbalance ever brought to the screen. Ms. Moore (as a depressed Southern California housewife in 1951) and Ms. Streep (as a book editor in contemporary New York) give richly shaded portrayals of intelligent high-strung women on the verge. David Hare's lean, incisive screenplay and Philip Glass's churning minimalist score fold stories that take place in different eras into a single timeless plane. Ed Harris gives a furious, anguished portrayal of an eminent poet dying of AIDS.

— Stephen Holden, *New York*

About Virginia Woolf

Born in 1882, the daughter of Julia Jackson Duckworth and Victorian scholar Sir Leslie Stephen, Virginia Stephen settled in 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury, in 1904. This house would become the first meeting place of the now-famous Bloomsbury Group-writers, artists, and intellectuals such as E. M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey who, along with Virginia and her sister Vanessa, shared an intense belief in the importance of the arts and a skepticism regarding their society's conventions and restraints. It was after Virginia's 1912 marriage to Leonard Woolf-a remarkable and supportive twenty-nine-year-union-that she began to publish her major work. Her first novel, **The Voyage Out**, appeared in 1915 and was followed by **Night and Day** (1919), **Jacob's Room** (1922), **Mrs. Dalloway** (1925), **To the Lighthouse** (1927), **Orlando** (1928), **The Waves** (1931), and **The Years** (1937)

Woolf is also admired for her contributions to literary criticism in general and to feminist criticism in particular, with **A Room of One's Own** (1929) and **Three Guineas** (1937) reflecting the full range of her intellectual vigor, insight, and compassion for the role cast for female artists in the modern world. Additionally, Woolf s diary and correspondence, published posthumously, provide an invaluable window into her world offer-flung relationships and interests, imaginative depth, and creative method.

The victim of a lifetime of mental illness, Woolf committed suicide in 1941. She left behind her a literary legacy, including The Hogarth Press, established with Leonard in 1917, which published not only Woolf s own work but that of an increasingly influential group of innovative writers-including T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Katherine Mansfield.

Source:
readinggroupguides.com

Virginia Woolf