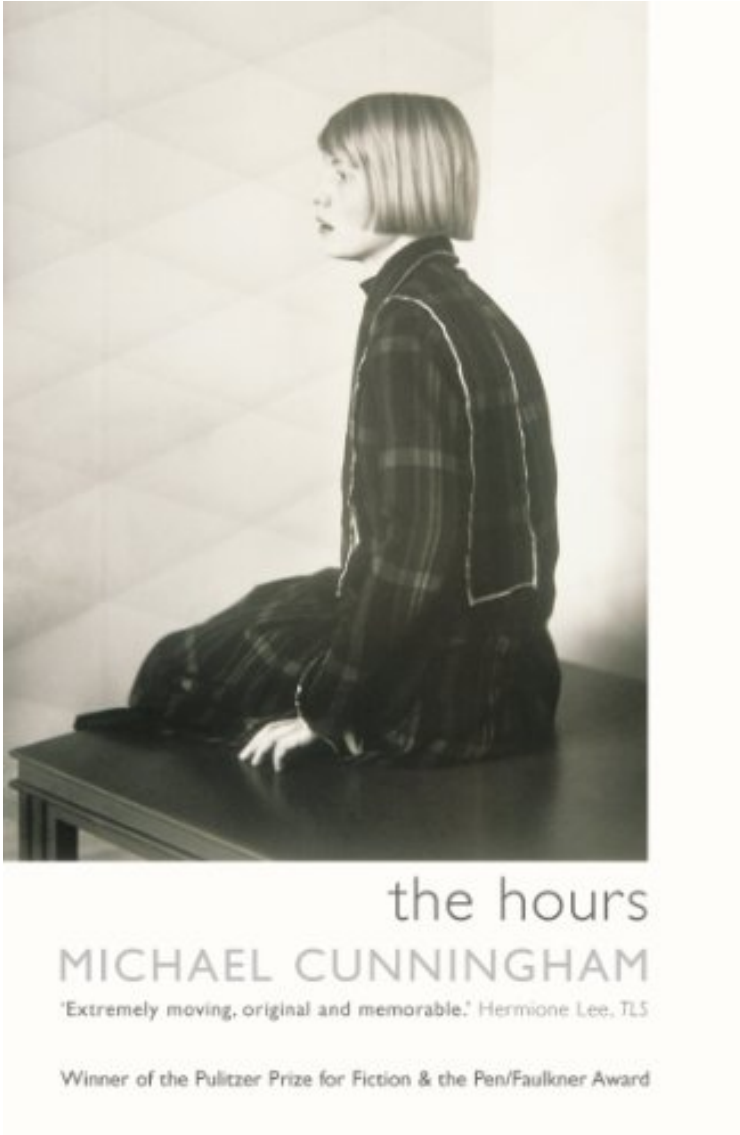


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# The Hours



*Par Michael Cunningham*  
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## Description :

Presentation de l'diteurWinner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize and Pen Faulkner prize. Made into an Oscar-winning film, *The Hours* is a daring and deeply affecting novel inspired by the life and work of Virginia Woolf. Exiled in Richmond in the 1920s, taken from her beloved Bloomsbury and watched by her husband Leonard, Virginia Woolf struggles to tame her rebellious mind and make a start on her new novel. In the brooding heat of 1940s Los Angeles, a young wife and mother yearns to escape the claustrophobia of suburban domesticity and read her precious copy of *Mrs Dalloway*. And in New York in the 1990s, Clarissa Vaughan steps out of her smart Greenwich Village apartment and goes shopping for flowers for the party she is giving in honour of her life-long friend Richard, an award-winning poet whose mind and body are being ravaged by AIDS. Michael Cunninghams exquisite and deeply moving novel is a meditation on artistic

behaviour, failure, love and madness. Moving effortlessly across the decades and between England and America, Cunninghams elegant, haunting prose explores the pain and trauma of creativity and the immutable relationship between writer and reader. The Hours is both an homage to Virginia Woolf and very much its own creature. Even as Michael Cunningham brings his literary idol back to life, he intertwines her story with those of two more contemporary women. One gray suburban London morning in 1923, Woolf awakens from a dream that will soon lead to Mrs. Dalloway. In the present, on a beautiful June day in Greenwich Village, 52-year-old Clarissa Vaughan is planning a party for her oldest love, a poet dying of AIDS. And in Los Angeles in 1949, Laura Brown, pregnant and unsettled, does her best to prepare for her husband's birthday, but can't seem to stop reading Woolf. These women's lives are linked both by the 1925 novel and by the few precious moments of possibility each keeps returning to. Clarissa is to eventually realize: There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined.... Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more. As Cunningham moves between the three women, his transitions are seamless. One early chapter ends with Woolf picking up her pen and composing her first sentence, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." The next begins with Laura rejoicing over that line and the fictional universe she is about to enter. Clarissa's day, on the other hand, is a mirror of Mrs. Dalloway's--with, however, an appropriate degree of modern beveling as Cunningham updates and elaborates his source of inspiration. Clarissa knows that her desire to give her friend the perfect party may seem trivial to many. Yet it seems better to her than shutting down in the face of disaster and despair. Like its literary inspiration, The Hours is a hymn to consciousness and the beauties and losses it perceives. It is also a reminder that, as Cunningham again and again makes us realize, art belongs to far more than just "the world of objects." -- Kerry Fried From Publishers Weekly At first blush, the structural and thematic conceits of this novel--three interwoven novellas in varying degrees connected to Virginia Woolf--seem like the stuff of a graduate student's pipe dream: a great idea in the dorm room that betrays a lack of originality. But as soon as one dips into Cunningham's prologue, in which Woolf's suicide is rendered with a precise yet harrowing matter-of-factness ("She hurries from the house, wearing a coat too heavy for the weather. It is 1941. She has left a note for Leonard, and another for Vanessa."), the reader becomes completely entranced. This book more than fulfills the promise of Cunningham's 1990 debut, A Home at the End of the World, while showing that sweep does not necessarily require the sprawl of his second book, Flesh and Blood. In alternating chapters, the three stories unfold: "Mrs. Woolf," about Virginia's own struggle to find an opening for Mrs. Dalloway in 1923; "Mrs. Brown," about one Laura Brown's efforts to escape, somehow, an airless marriage in California in 1949 while, coincidentally, reading Mrs. Dalloway; and "Mrs. Dalloway," which is set in 1990s Greenwich Village and concerns Clarissa Vaughan's preparations for a party for her gay--and dying--friend, Richard, who has nicknamed her Mrs. Dalloway. Cunningham's insightful use of the historical record concerning Woolf in her household outside London in the 1920s is matched by his audacious imagining of her inner life and his equally impressive plunges into the lives of Laura and Clarissa. The book would have been altogether absorbing had it been linked only thematically. However, Cunningham cleverly manages to pull the stories even more intimately together in the closing pages. Along the way, rich and beautifully nuanced scenes follow one upon the other: Virginia, tired and weak, irked by the early arrival of headstrong sister Vanessa, her three children and the dead bird they bury in the backyard; Laura's afternoon escape to an L.A. hotel to read for a few hours; Clarissa's anguished witnessing of her friend's suicidal jump down an airshaft, rendered with unforgettable detail. The overall effect of this book is twofold. First, it makes a reader hunger to know all about Woolf, again; readers may be spooked at times, as Woolf's spirit emerges in unexpected ways, but hers is an abiding presence, more about living than dying. Second, and this is the gargantuan accomplishment of this small book, it 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. (Nov.) FYI: The Hours was a working title that Woolf for a time gave to Mrs. Dalloway. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.