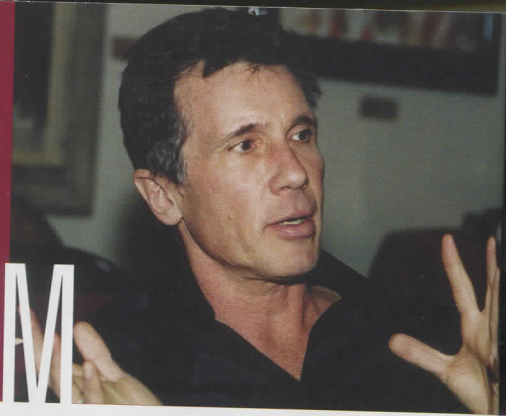


# AN HOUR WITH MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM



**W**hen Michael Cunningham won the Pulitzer Prize for his 1998 novel *The Hours* just days after receiving the PEN/Faulkner award for the same book, a reporter asked if he was on his way to becoming an overnight sensation. Cunningham responded, "One of those overnight sensations who's been doing it for 15 years." Questions of timing aside, few fiction writers receive the mixture of critical and popular acclaim that Cunningham has garnered for his fourth novel, a work structurally and stylistically based on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The film adaptation of *The Hours*, starring Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, and Nicole Kidman, won a Golden Globe Award for best motion picture and was nominated for nine Academy Awards.

On Feb. 3, as part of a visit to CMC that culminated in his reading to a packed house at the Athenaeum and an overflow audience in McKenna Auditorium, Cunningham sat down with Audrey Bilger, associate professor of literature, and a small group of students, staff, and faculty in the afternoon to talk about literary influences and the success of his fourth novel.

**BILGER:** Could you tell us about the influence of Virginia Woolf on your work?

**CUNNINGHAM:** I grew up in La Cañada, California, where I was a not-very-precocious student. I wasn't exactly opposed to books: I just thought of them as dusty objects that were kept in the book jail over there, and I was over here, where life was. I was nattering on to this older girl—I was 15, and she must've been 17—about how much I loved Leonard Cohen's new album, and how I really thought that he was pulling ahead of Bob Dylan as an artist. And she looked at me and said, 'Have you ever thought of being less stupid? Why don't you read a book?' She said, 'Here, read this: *Mrs. Dalloway*.'

And I did. I tried to read it. I had no idea what *Mrs. Dalloway* was about. I couldn't find the story in it. But I could see the density and complexity and music in those passages, which was a revelation to me. I hadn't known you could do that with language. This was a rare flower. And I remember thinking, 'Oh, she was doing something like what Jimi Hendrix does with the guitar. She was like a rock star.' It was the first book that led me to understand how words could fly up off a page—how vital and transforming and juicy and alive the printed word could be. It made me into a reader, and then, ultimately, made me begin to want to be a writer.

As I kept trying to write fiction, I was bothered by the fact that to write a book about reading a book was deemed dry and academic. Why should the experience of reading, when it can be so enormous, be off-limits for novelists, except for very arcane experimentalists? That

really was how it started. I wanted to write something about what it had meant to me to read *Mrs. Dalloway*.

**BILGER:** How do you see your work as taking its place within a literary tradition?

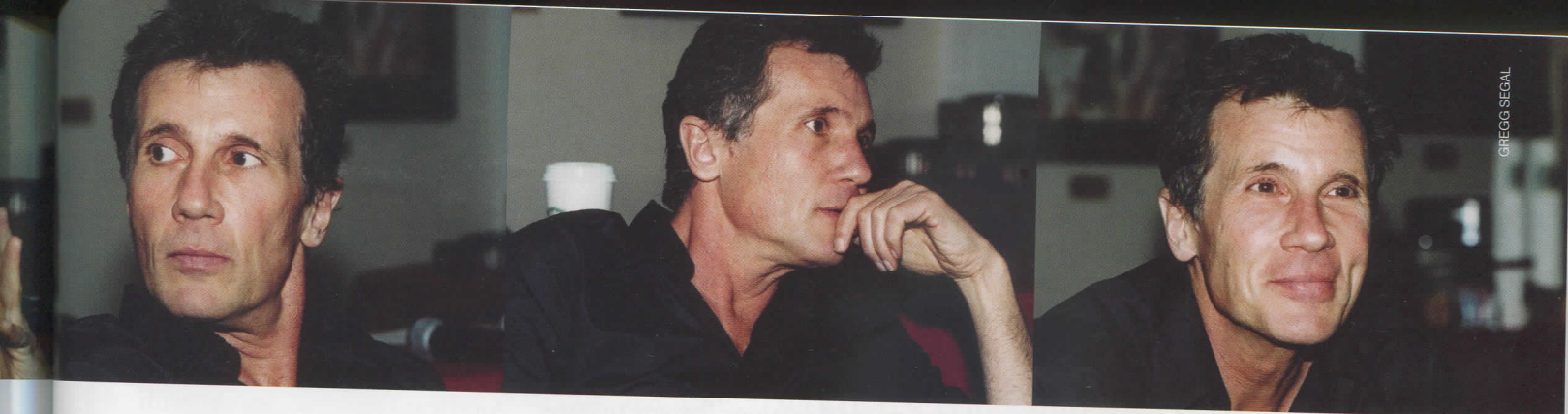
**CUNNINGHAM:** I think we can't help but come out of a tradition, no matter how wild and wooly you may be. On one hand, Hemingway said no great work of art resembles any work of art that came before it. On the other hand, the books that came before your book are like your personal history. You couldn't exist without them.

What Woolf did is directly meaningful to me. She was one of the first to come along and insist on the epic proportions of the ostensibly ordinary. Woolf looked at the novels being written around her and said, 'These are perfectly fine books. These are great books. But I don't see my life in these books. My life is mostly made up, to the outside observer, of errands and naps, and every now and then I give a party that doesn't go all that well. It doesn't look like anything, and yet I know that my life could not be more enormous to me and I know all my friends feel the same way.' Her work is, to me, in a deep way, all about insisting that the whole human story is contained in any day in anybody's life. Almost the way the blueprint for the organism is contained in every strand of DNA. I love her for that.

She was, to me, the first great writer who insisted on a subtly but profoundly altered relationship between the writer and the reader. Most writers before Woolf, and even her contemporaries, even Joyce, are basically about sticking

Claremont McKenna College





GREGG SEGAL

to what beauty is, you know, 'Sit down, open up, here it comes.' Woolf came along and said, 'No, no, I'm standing beside the reader talking about what we all know.'

**BILGER:** In *The Hours*, you inhabit Woolf's voice, and Woolf inhabits your novel as a character. Could you discuss the experience of living with Woolf in order to write this novel?

**CUNNINGHAM:** When I began to imagine that I would try to write about Woolf in the sense of actually trying to write from her point of view, I thought, 'I can't do that.' It is, number one, a violation of somebody's privacy, purely and simply. She's somebody who's lived. Number two, she was a great artist. If you stand too close to a very large figure you're likely to feel very small about yourself. She was a woman. A great feminist. I'm a man. I finally made the decision for no more complicated or exalted reasons than, 'Why not?' Why not try the thing you don't think you can do, and, if you're going to go down in flames, pour gasoline all over the place and light a big match?

Once I got past that, it was very much like spending time with an incredibly, sometimes exhaustingly, intelligent, stimulating person. One of the reasons I love her so much as an artist and, again, as a human being, is the extent to which, social snob though she was, so much of her work was about coming down out of the tower and writing about shopping and taking naps. There's no reason at all to be afraid of Virginia Woolf. That's part of what she's about, to remind us that we're all characters in great novels, it's just most of us don't get written

about.

What I decided to do was read all of Woolf, and then shut the books, start writing, and not let myself read any more Woolf while I was writing. I'd be writing in my own voice, as influenced by her as I possibly could be. I didn't want to try to mimic her voice. I couldn't. That would be crazy. But I did want the way I write to be filtered through the way she wrote. I'm not as worried as a lot of novelists are about influences, about losing my voice to another. I hope to be as influenced as I can. It all feels fluid to me. It feels like we're all trying together to write a giant book that's too big for the whole race to write together. And everybody is writing his or her own part.

**BILGER:** Where do you see yourself in a tradition of gay, lesbian, or queer writers?

**CUNNINGHAM:** That's a difficult question for me at this point. The first time I had any sort of public forum, I was on *Fresh Air* on NPR with Terry Gross. It was clear that whenever any question about my personal life came up, I would immediately answer it and make it abundantly clear that I was gay, so that it would not be possible for anybody listening to imagine that I felt like I had anything to be discreet about. Ergo, to hide. I just think that's how it's going to work. People just have to understand that's what we are.

I have real unresolved feelings about the whole question of gay and lesbian or of queer literature. I suspect that what's going on for us has to do with access, with questions of who gets to tell a story and what about. There will always be straight white guy writers and there

should be. They are charming and talented and have much to teach us. There are more and more writers who are anything but straight white guys. And that feels to me like the most profound dramatic thing that's going on in letters right now. Not only is *The Hours* for sale in airport bookstores, it's next to Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian writer. I guess I'm mainly interested in queer literature in terms of its place in the much bigger movement in which more people have more access. And that means we have to talk to each other. I just don't think of myself as writing specifically for gay people.

**BILGER:** In *The Hours*, you write mostly about female experience, depicting Laura Brown's cake-baking efforts as an act of creation, an attempt to express the ineffable. In your other novels, there are also women who similarly strive to elevate their domestic activities into art.

**CUNNINGHAM:** All those characters come, to some degree, from my sense of my mother, which is partly true and partly my projection. She always seemed to me like a sort of Amazon queen, kidnapped and made to live in the world of the unfit white people. I had this thing growing up about how she was a princess in a tower, how she was captive, that she was so much more. I do find that I keep writing these women. It is my attempt to see them as artists: as people who are every bit as good at providing images of the ineffable or the ideal, who have the desire to create something perfect, something beautiful, as Virginia Woolf was. The only difference is the final product. And if you take that away, it's



the same concept. These women, although they are not famous and whose names will not live on, are, to me, every bit as entitled to their heights of ecstasy and their depths of despair as Woolf is.

**BILGER:** *The Hours* depicts Virginia Woolf at work on her novel, struggling to hold on to her vision and get it down on the page without being distracted. Could you describe your own writing habits?

store. If I do that, I get to the studio and turn on my computer and look at what I wrote yesterday and all I can think is, 'This is just a story I'm making up. This isn't as profound and mysterious as the dry cleaner. This isn't as deeply real and strangely beautiful as the drug store.' So I go straight to it and sit for at least four hours to see if anything is going to come or not. I'm wildly various. Some days it happens; some days it doesn't happen. But I sit there, regardless of what's going on. Some days I write 10 pages. Some

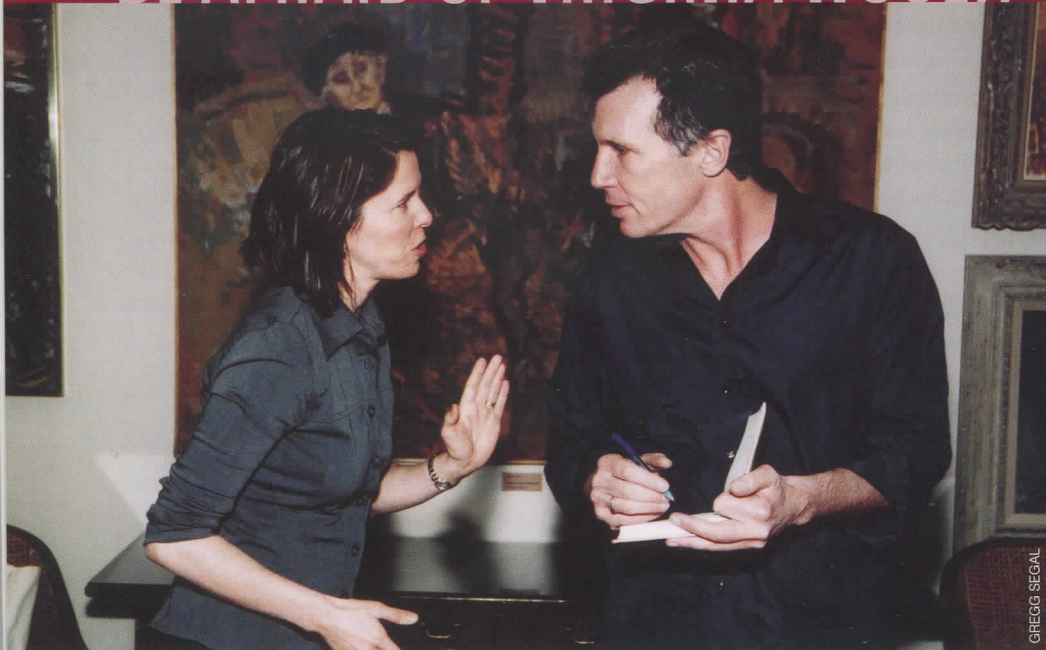
many days without that, I lose it. It thins out.

**BILGER:** What do you think of the movie?

**CUNNINGHAM:** I think they did a wonderful job. I may be the only living American novelist happy with the movie made from his book. If I had directed it there are things I would have done differently. But I have those feelings the way I do about any movie that I love, or any book that I love. Of course you would do it differently, but these are the terms of this writer, this director, this painter—this is how it came out. You just have to let it be. It has its own life. It was clear from the beginning that it was going to involve a body of intelligent, gifted people trying to make the best movie they possibly could. I was a little astonished that they got it out of Paramount. I think it can only have turned out the way it did because nobody at Paramount thought it was going to make any money, so they kind of left everyone alone.

I would bring it down a little bit—the emotional intensity. I would make it a little more subtle. One of the interesting things about the movies is beginning to understand how something that is clear in a novel is going to be lost in a movie. I've really come to appreciate this: the fact that if a novel sells 500,000 copies, it's a huge success. If a movie only sells 500,000 tickets, it's a complete failure. I've actually come to appreciate things that I used to complain about, which is the relative smallness of the audience for a novel—because of what that implies about the way you can push the envelope. You can try things, you can experiment, and still hope that there are enough people out there who will take an interest in it. If I had to write a novel with the knowledge that a minimum of 10 million people needed to buy it in order for it to even break even, I would be paralyzed. **CMC**

"THERE'S NO REASON AT ALL TO BE AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF."



Bilger and Cunningham

**CUNNINGHAM:** My own writing habits are pretty simple and straightforward. What I've found is this: I have a studio about 15 minutes' walk from where I live, in New York City. What I need to do is to get up and to go straight from sleep and dreams to work—turn on the computer, not check the phone messages, not check the e-mail, and certainly not stop at the dry cleaner or the drug

store. If I do that, I get to the studio and turn on my computer and look at what I wrote yesterday and all I can think is, 'This is just a story I'm making up. This isn't as profound and mysterious as the dry cleaner. This isn't as deeply real and strangely beautiful as the drug store.' So I go straight to it and sit for at least four hours to see if anything is going to come or not. I'm wildly various. Some days it happens; some days it doesn't happen. But I sit there, regardless of what's going on. Some days I write 10 pages. Some