



WINNER  
of the  
PULITZER  
PRIZE

PICADOR

# THE HOURS

A NOVEL

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

"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



- born November 6, 1952
- American writer.
- He is best known for his 1998 novel *The Hours*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1999.
- Cunningham is a senior lecturer of creative writing at Yale University.

# His Novels

- 1984 *Golden States*
- 1990 *A Home at the End of the World*
- 1995 *Flesh and Blood*
- 1998 *The Hours*
- 2005 *Specimen Days*
- 2010 *By Nightfall*
- 2014 *The Snow Queen*

# The Hours - Plot

- The book concerns three generations of women affected by a Virginia Woolf novel-*Mrs. Dalloway*(1925)
  1. **Virginia Woolf** writing *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923 and struggling with her own mental illness.
  2. **Mrs. Brown**, wife of a World War II veteran, who is reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1949 as she plans her husband's birthday party.
  3. **Clarissa Vaughan**, a bisexual, who plans a party in 1999 to celebrate a major literary award received by her good friend and former lover, the poet Richard, who is dying of an AIDS-related illness.



# Characters in Virginia Woolf's Story

**1923**

- Virginia Woolf
- Leonard Woolf- Virginia's husband;
- Vanessa Bell- Virginia's sister.
- Nelly - Virginia and Leonard's cook.
- Julia, Quentin and Angelica- Vanessa's children.

# Characters in Laura Brown's Story

**1949**

- **Laura Brown**
- **Dan Brown**- Laura's husband;
- **Richie Brown** - Laura's son;
- **Kitty** - her neighbour.
- **Mrs Latch**- Babysitter.

# Characters in Clarissa Vaughan's Story

1999

- Clarissa Vaughan
- Sally- Clarissa's partner;
- Richard Brown- Clarissa's friend, Laura Brown's son;
- Louis Waters- Richard's former lover, friend of Richard and Clarissa;
- Julia Vaughan- Clarissa's daughter;
- Mary Krull- Julia's friend.

# Prologue

- The novel begins with the suicide of Virginia Woolf in 1941 by drowning herself in the Ouse, a river in Sussex, England.
- Even as she is drowning, Virginia marvels at everyday sights and sounds.
- Leonard Woolf, her husband, finds her suicide note
- Virginia's dead body floats downstream where life, in the form of a mother and child going for a walk, goes on as if Virginia is still taking in all the sights and sounds.
- *I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.*



She hurries from the house, wearing a coat too heavy for the weather. It is 1941. Another war has begun. She has left a note for Leonard, and another for Vanessa. She walks purposefully toward the river, certain of what she'll do, but even now she is almost distracted by the sight of the downs, the church, and a scattering of sheep, incandescent, tinged with a faint hint of sulfur, grazing under a darkening sky. She pauses, watching the sheep and the sky, then walks on. The voices murmur behind her; bombers drone in the sky, though she looks for the planes and can't see them. She walks past one of the farm workers (is his name John?), a robust, small-headed man wearing a potato-colored vest, cleaning the ditch that runs through the osier bed. He looks up at her, nods, looks down again into the brown water. As she passes him on her way to the river she thinks of how successful he is, how fortunate, to be cleaning a ditch in

- *“She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric”(p.4)*
- *“She imagines turning around, taking the stone out of her pocket, going back to the house. She could probably return in time to destroy the notes. She could live on; she could perform that final kindness. Standing knee deep in the moving water, she decides against it” (p.5).*
- *“I don’t think two people could have been happier than we two have been” (p.7)*
- *“Virginia’s body at the river’s bottom, as if she is dreaming on the surface, the stick, the boy and his mother, the sky and the rooks”(p.8)*



news. He finds a blue envelope, addressed to him, on the table. Inside is a letter.

*Dearest,*

*I feel certain that I am going  
mad again: I feel we can't go  
through another of these terrible times.*

*And I shant recover this time. I begin  
to hear voices, and cant concentrate.*

*So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have  
given me*

*the greatest possible happiness. You  
have been in every way all that anyone  
could be. I dont think two  
people could have been happier till  
this terrible disease came. I cant  
fight it any longer, I know that I am  
spoiling your life, that without me you  
could work. And you will I know.*

*You see I cant even write this properly. I  
cant read. What I want to say is that  
I owe all the happiness of my life to you.  
You have been entirely patient with me &  
incredibly good. I want to say that—  
everybody knows it. If anybody could  
have saved me it would have been you.  
Everything has gone from me but the  
certainty of your goodness. I*

*cant go on spoiling your life any longer. I dont think two people could have been happier than we have been.*

*V.*

Leonard races from the room, runs downstairs. He says to the maid, "I think something has happened to Mrs. Woolf. I think she may have tried to kill herself. Which way did she go? Did you see her leave the house?"

The maid, panicked, begins to cry. Leonard rushes out and goes to the river, past the church and the sheep, past the osier bed. At the riverbank he finds no one but a man in a red jacket, fishing.

She is borne quickly along by the current. She appears to be flying, a fantastic figure, arms outstretched, hair streaming, the tail of the fur coat billowing behind. She floats, heavily, through shafts of brown, granular light. She does not travel far. Her feet (the shoes are gone) strike the bottom occasionally, and when they do they summon up a sluggish cloud of muck, filled with the black silhouettes of leaf skeletons, that stands all but stationary in the water after she has passed along out of sight. Stripes of green-black weed catch in her hair and the fur of her coat, and for a while her eyes are blindfolded by a thick



# Mrs. Dalloway

- *“There are still flowers to buy. Clarissa feigns exasperation, leaves Sally cleaning the bathroom, and runs out, promising to be back in half an hour. It is Newyork city. It is the end of the twentieth century”(p.9)*
- *“She, Clarissa Vaughn, an ordinary person at this age,( why bother trying to deny it?), has flowers to buy and a party to give” (p.10)*
- *She is 52*
- *“The name Mrs. Dalloway had been Richard’s idea”*
- *“It would have been almost a full month since Richard left Louis’s bed and came into hers”*



- *“Tonight she will give her party. She will fill the room of her apartment with food and flowers, with people of wit and influence. She will shepherd Richard through it, see that he doesn’t overtire, and then she will escort him uptown to receive his prize”(p.13)*
- *“Richard has always been Clarissa’s most rigorous infuriating companion, her best friend, and if Richard were still himself, untouched by illness they could be together right now, arguing about...” (p.19)*
- *“Richard will neither admit to nor recover from his dislike of her, never; he will never discard his private conviction that Clarissa has, at heart, become a society wife, and never mind the fact that she and Sally do not attempt to disguise their love for anyone’s sake..”(p. 20)*

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- We are having a party tonight, for a friend who's just won his big-deal literary award"

"the Pulizter"?

'No. It's called the Carrouthers Prize"



# Mrs. Woolf

- It is a suburb of London. It is 1923
- Virginia awakens. This might be another way to begin, certainly, with Clarissa going on an errand on a day in June.
- Dreams that she is in a park
- “Virginia awakens again. She is here, in her bed room at Hogarth House”.
- “He is still at times astonished by her. She may be the most intelligent woman in England, he thinks. Her books may be read for centuries. He believes this more ardently than anyone else”
- She picks up her pen.
- “*Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself*”

Mrs. Dalloway said something (what?), and got the flowers herself.

It is a suburb of London. It is 1923.

Virginia awakens. This might be another way to begin, certainly; with Clarissa going on an errand on a day in June, instead of soldiers marching off to lay the wreath in Whitehall. But is it the right beginning? Is it a little too ordinary? Virginia lies quietly in her bed, and sleep takes her again so quickly she is not conscious of falling back to sleep at all. It seems, suddenly, that she is not in her bed but in a park; a park impossibly verdant, green beyond green—a Platonic vision of a park, at once homely and the seat of mystery, implying as parks do that while the old woman in the shawl dozes on the slatted bench something alive and ancient, something neither kind nor unkind, exulting only in continuance, knits together the green



# Mrs. Brown

- It is Los Angeles. It is 1949.
- Laura Brown is trying to lose herself. No, that is not it exactly- she is trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world. She lays the book face down on her chest. Already her bedroom(no, their bedroom)feels more densely inhabited, more actual, because a character named Mrs. Dalloway is on her way to buy flowers
- Laura glances at the clock on the night stand. It is half past seven.
- She should be there, shouldn't she?



- She will read one more page. One more page, to calm and locate herself, then she will get out of the bed
- In another world, she might have spent her whole life reading.
- So now she is Laura Brown. Laura Zielski, the solitary girl. The incessant reader, is gone, and here in her place is Laura Brown
- She does not dislike her child, does not dislike her husband. She will rise and be cheerful
- About to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she is not adequately rehearsed. What she wonders is wrong with her(p.43)

held down by cord and salmon-colored buttons in a diamond pattern. In the morning heat of June, with the robe whisked away, the chair in its bold new fabric seems surprised to find itself a chair at all.

She brushes her teeth, brushes her hair, and starts downstairs. She pauses several treads from the bottom, listening, waiting; she is again possessed (it seems to be getting worse) by a dream-like feeling, as if she is standing in the wings, about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed. What, she wonders, is wrong with her. This is her husband in the kitchen; this is her little boy. All the man and boy require of her is her presence and, of course, her love. She conquers the desire to go quietly back upstairs, to her bed and book. She conquers her irritation at the sound of her husband's voice, saying something to Richie about napkins (why does his voice remind her sometimes of a potato being grated?). She descends the last three stairs, crosses the narrow foyer, enters the kitchen.

She thinks of the cake she will bake, the flowers she'll buy. She thinks of roses surrounded by gifts.

Her husband has made the coffee, poured cereal for himself and their son. On the tabletop, a dozen white roses offer their complex, slightly sinister beauty. Through the clear glass vase Laura can see the bubbles, fine as grains of sand, clinging to their stems. Beside the roses stand cereal box and milk carton, with their words and pictures.

"Good morning," her husband says, raising his eyebrows as if he is surprised but delighted to see her.

"Happy birthday," she says



- “Good morning”..her husband says
- “Happy birthday”..she says
- For a while they are absorbed in the ritual of his leaving: the taking on of jacket and briefcase; the flurry of kisses; the waves, he from over his shoulder as he crosses the lawn to the drive way, Laura and Richie from behind the screen door.
- Here is then, is the daily transition. With her husband present, she is more nervous but less afraid. She knows how to act. Alone with Richie, she sometimes feels unmoored-he is so entirely persuasively himself. He wants what he wants so avidly.
- Alone with the child, though she loses direction. She cant always remember how a mother would act.


lawn to the driveway, Laura and Richie from behind the screen door. Their lawn, extravagantly watered, is a brilliant, almost unearthly green. Laura and Richie stand like spectators at a parade as the man pilots his ice-blue Chevrolet down the short driveway and into the street. He waves one last time, jauntily, from behind the wheel.

"Well," she says, after the car has disappeared. Her son watches her adoringly, expectantly. She is the animating principle, the life of the house. Its rooms are sometimes larger than they should be; they sometimes, suddenly, contain things he's never seen before. He watches her, and waits.

"Well, now," she says.

Here, then, is the daily transition. With her husband present, she is more nervous but less afraid. She knows how to act. Alone with Richie, she sometimes feels unmoored—he is so entirely, persuasively himself. He wants what he wants so avidly. He cries mysteriously, makes indecipherable demands, courts her, pleads with her, ignores her. He seems, almost always, to be waiting to see what she will do next. She knows, or at least suspects, that other mothers of small children must maintain a body of rules and, more to the point, an ongoing mother-self to guide them in negotiating the days spent alone with a child. When her husband is here, she can manage it. She can see him seeing her, and she knows almost instinctively how to treat the boy firmly and kindly, with an affectionate maternal offhandedness that seems effortless. Alone with the child, though, she loses direction. She can't always remember



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- She says: “we are going to make him the best cake he’s ever seen. The very best. Don’t you think that’s a good idea”?
  - Laura watches him through the meandering vine of cigarette smoke. She will not go upstairs, and return to her book. She will remain. She will do all that’s required, and more



She goes to the nearest of the three windows and, with some difficulty, raises the oiled-canvas shade. A compromised daylight—that which angles down between Richard's building and its chocolate-brick sister fifteen feet away—falls into the room. Across the alley is the window of a peevish old widow, with its glass and ceramic figures on the windowsill (a donkey pulling a cart, a clown, a grinning squirrel) and its venetian blinds. Clarissa turns. Richard's face, its hollows and deep, fleshy folds, its high glossy forehead and smashed pugilist's nose, seems to rise up out of the darkness like a sunken sculpture hauled to the surface.

"Awfully bright," he says.

"Light is good for you."

She goes to him, kisses the curve of his forehead. Up close like this, she can smell his various humors. His pores exude not only his familiar sweat (which has always smelled good to her, starchy and fermented; sharp in the way of wine) but the smell of his medicines, a powdery, sweetish smell. He smells, too, of unfresh flannel (though the laundry is done once a week, or oftener) and slightly, horribly (it is his only repellent smell), of the chair in which he spends his days.

Richard's chair, particularly, is insane; or, rather, it is the chair of someone who, if not actually insane, has let things slide so far, has gone such a long way toward the exhausted relinquishment of ordinary caretaking—simple hygiene, regular nourishment—that the difference between insanity and hopelessness is difficult to pinpoint. The chair—an elderly, square, overstuffed armchair obesely balanced on slender blond

wooden legs—is ostentatiously broken and worthless. It is up-holstered in something nubbly, no-colored, woolen, shot through (this is, somehow, its most sinister aspect) with silver thread. Its square arms and back are so worn down, so darkened by the continual application of friction and human oils, that they resemble the tender parts of an elephant's hide. Its coils are visible—perfect rows of pale, rusty rings—not only through the cushion of the seat but through the thin yellow towel Richard has draped over the cushion. The chair smells fetid and deeply damp, unclean; it smells of irreversible rot. If it were hauled out into the street (*when it is hauled out into the street*), no one would pick it up. Richard will not hear of its being replaced.

"Are they here today?" Clarissa asks.

"No," Richard answers, with the reluctant candor of a child. "They're gone now. They're very beautiful and quite terrible."

"Yes," she says. "I know."

"I think of them as coalescences of black fire, I mean they're dark and bright at the same time. There was one that looked a bit like a black, electrified jellyfish. They were singing, just now, in a foreign language. I believe it may have been Greek. Archaic Greek."

"Are you afraid of them?"

"No. Well, sometimes."

"I think I'm going to talk to Bing about increasing your medication, would that be all right?"

He sighs wearily. "The fact that I sometimes don't hear them or see them doesn't mean they're gone," he says.

his defiantly prolix lamentations over worlds either vanishing or lost entirely. While there are no guarantees, it does seem possible, and perhaps even better than possible, that Clarissa and the small body of others have been right all along. Richard the dense, the wistful, the scrutinizing, Richard who observed so minutely and exhaustively, who tried to split the atom with words, will survive after other, more fashionable names have faded.

And Clarissa, Richard's oldest friend, his first reader—Clarissa who sees him every day, when even some of his more recent friends have come to imagine he's already died—is throwing him a party. Clarissa is filling her home with flowers and candles. Why shouldn't she want him to come?

Richard says, "I'm not really needed there, am I? The party can go on just with the idea of me. The party has already happened, really, with or without me."

"Now you're being impossible. I'm going to lose my patience soon."

"No, please, don't be angry. Oh, Mrs. D., the truth is, I'm embarrassed to go to this party. I've failed so terribly."

"Don't talk like that."

"No, no. You're kind, you're very kind, but I'm afraid I failed, and that's that. It was just too much for me. I thought I was a bigger figure than I was. Can I tell you an embarrassing secret? Something I've never told anyone?"

"Of course you can."

"I thought I was a genius. I actually used that word, pri-



sanely relieved. All right, then; nothing was needed but a few kind words, a bit of reassurance. She sighs. She gently touches his hair.

"Now, then," she says. "Are you ready to do another one?"

He nods with such guileless, unguarded enthusiasm that her throat constricts in a spasm of love. It seems suddenly easy to bake a cake, to raise a child. She loves her son purely, as mothers do—she does not resent him, does not wish to leave. She loves her husband, and is glad to be married. It seems possible (it does not seem impossible) that she's slipped across an invisible line, the line that has always separated her from what she would prefer to feel, who she would prefer to be. It does not seem impossible that she has undergone a subtle but profound transformation, here in this kitchen, at this most ordinary of moments: She has caught up with herself. She has worked so long, so hard, in such good faith, and now she's gotten the knack of living happily, as herself, the way a child learns at a particular moment to balance on a two-wheel bicycle. It seems she will be fine. She will not lose hope. She will not mourn her lost possibilities, her unexplored talents (what if she has no talents, after all?). She will remain devoted to her son, her husband, her home and duties, all her gifts. She will want this second child.

thinks, she would like to slit my throat; just so, with an offhand stroke, as if killing me were another of the domestic chores that stand between her and sleep. That is how Nelly would murder, competently and precisely, the way she cooks, following recipes learned so long ago she does not experience them as knowledge at all. At this moment she would gladly cut Virginia's throat like a turnip because Virginia neglected her own duties and now she, Nelly Boxall, a grown woman, is being punished for serving pears. Why is it so difficult dealing with servants? Virginia's mother managed beautifully. Vanessa manages beautifully. Why is it so difficult to be firm and kind with Nelly; to command her respect and her love? Virginia knows just how she should enter the kitchen, how her shoulders should be set, how her voice should be motherly but not familiar, something like that of a governess speaking to a beloved child. Oh, let's have something more than pears, Nelly, Mr. Woolf is in a mood today and I'm afraid pears won't do nearly enough to sweeten his disposition. It should be so simple.

She will give Clarissa Dalloway great skill with servants, a manner that is intricately kind and commanding. Her servants will love her. They will do more than she asks.



loss, the end of hope. Richard, her lost lover, her truest friend, is disappearing into his illness, his insanity. Richard will not accompany her, as planned, into old age.

Clarissa lets herself into the apartment and immediately, oddly, feels better. A little better. There's the party to think about. At least there's that. Here is her home; hers and Sally's; and although they've lived here together almost fifteen years she is still struck by its beauty and by their impossible good fortune. Two floors and a garden in the West Village! They are rich, of course; obscenely rich by the world's standards; but not *rich* rich, not New York City rich. They had a certain amount to spend and they lucked into these pine-planked floors, this bank of casement windows that open onto the bricked patio where emerald moss grows in shallow stone troughs and a small circular fountain, a platter of clear water, burbles at the touch of a switch. Clarissa takes the flowers into the kitchen, where Sally has left a note ("Lunch w. Oliver—did I forget to tell U?—back by 3 latest, XXXXX"). Clarissa is filled, suddenly, 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. She lives elsewhere. She lives in a room where a tree gently taps against the glass as someone touches a needle to a phonograph record. Here in this kitchen white dishes are stacked pristinely, like holy implements, behind glassed cupboard doors. A row of old terra-cotta pots, glazed in various shades of crackled yellow, stand on the granite countertop. Clarissa recognizes these things but stands apart from them. She feels the presence of her own



ghost; the part of her at once most indestructibly alive and least distinct; the part that owns nothing; that observes with wonder and detachment, like a tourist in a museum, a row of glazed yellow pots and a countertop with a single crumb on it, a chrome spigot from which a single droplet trembles, gathers weight, and falls. She and Sally bought all these things, she can remember every transaction, but she feels now that they are arbitrary, the spigot and the counter and the pots, the white dishes. They are only choices, one thing and then another, yes or no, and she sees how easily she could slip out of this life—these empty and arbitrary comforts. She could simply leave it and return to her other home, where neither Sally nor Richard exists; where there is only the essence of Clarissa, a girl grown into a woman, still full of hope, still capable of anything. It is revealed to her that all her sorrow and loneliness, the whole creaking scaffold of it, stems simply from pretending to live in this apartment among these objects, with kind, nervous Sally, and that if she leaves she'll be happy, or better than happy. She'll be herself. She feels briefly, wonderfully alone, with everything ahead of her.

Then the feeling moves on. It does not collapse; it is not whisked away. It simply moves on, like a train that stops at a small country station, stands for a while, and then continues out of sight. Clarissa pulls the flowers from their paper, puts them in the sink. She is disappointed and more than a little relieved. This is in fact

the weather—the ecstatic unreality of it all—that helped turn Richard's friendship into a more devouring kind of love, and it was those same elements, really, that brought Clarissa here, to this kitchen in New York City, where she stands on Italian slate (a mistake, it's cold and subject to stains), cutting flowers and struggling, with only moderate success, to stop caring that Oliver St. Ives, the activist and ruined movie star, has not asked her to lunch.

It was not betrayal, she had insisted; it was simply an expansion of the possible. She did not require fidelity of Richard—god forbid!—and she was not in any way extorting property that belonged to Louis. Louis didn't think so, either (or at least wouldn't admit to thinking so, but really, could it have been mere chance that he cut himself so often that summer, with various tools and kitchen knives, and that he required two separate trips to the local doctor for stitches?). It was 1965; love spent might simply engender more of the same. It seemed possible, at least. Why not have sex with everybody, as long as you wanted them and they wanted you? So Richard continued with Louis and started up with her as well, and it felt right; simply right. Not that sex and love were uncomplicated. Clarissa's attempts with Louis, for instance, failed utterly. He was not interested in her nor she in him, for all his celebrated beauty. They both loved Richard, they both wanted Richard, and that would have to do as a bond between them. Not all