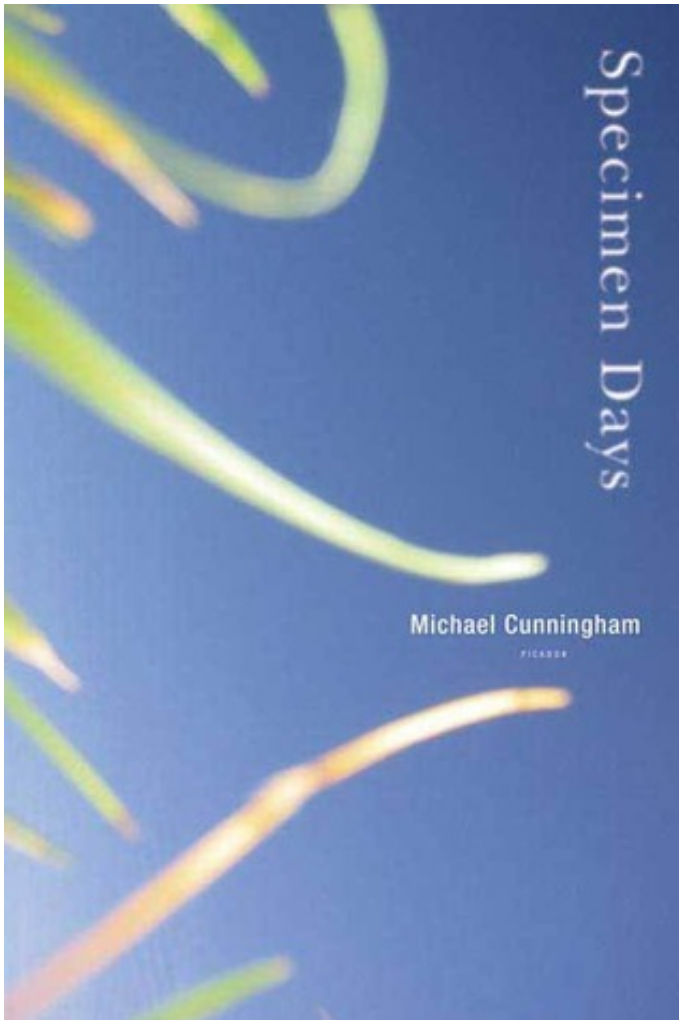

Michael Cunningham

Specimen Days



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Description

In each section of Michael Cunningham's bold new novel, his first since *The Hours*, we encounter the same group of characters: a young boy, an older man, and a young woman. "In the Machine" is a ghost story that takes place at the height of the industrial revolution, as human beings confront the alienating realities of the new machine age. "The Children's Crusade," set in the early twenty-first century, plays with the conventions of the noir thriller as it tracks the pursuit of a terrorist band that is detonating bombs, seemingly at random, around the city. The third part, "Like Beauty," evokes a New York 150 years into the future, when the city is all but overwhelmed by refugees from the first inhabited planet to be contacted by the people of Earth.

Presiding over each episode of this interrelated whole is the prophetic figure of the poet Walt Whitman, who promised his future readers, "It avails not, neither time or place ... I am with you, and know how it is." *Specimen Days* is a genre-bending, haunting, and transformative ode to life in our greatest city and a meditation on the direction and meaning of America's destiny. It is a work of surpassing power and beauty by one of the most original and daring writers at work today.

Insightful reviews

Emmanuel Medina: Alguien que me conozca al menos tres rayitas sabe que mi autor favorito es el señor Cunningham desde que vi la adaptación fílmica de "Las Horas". En este "Días Memorables", tres pequeñas novelas o cuentos largos componen un vitral donde el tiempo en sus tres modalidades (el ayer, el hoy y el mañana) son la maquinaria que mueve el espíritu humano: un adolescente empieza a trabajar en una Nueva York industrializada mientras sobrevive a la muerte de su hermano mayor; una detective persigue después de los atentados a las Torres a una banda de terroristas que usa niños para destruir y al final, un robot semihumano escapa de la La Gran Manzana en busca de redención. Relato intenso, con aromas intensos y emociones traslúcidas, esta novela es recomendada para quien quiera iniciarse en leer a uno de los nombres más importantes de las letras en EU. Y para quienes el tiempo apremia a no malgastarlo...

George: *Specimen Days* is divided into three sections -- each set in a different time period in New York. A man named Simon, a woman named some variation of Catherine, and a boy named Lucas/Luke appear in each section (rotating who takes the lead in each), and a couple of settings, as well as a minor character or two, also repeat. The poetry of Walt Whitman also threads through the whole book, with Whitman himself actually making a cameo at one point, in the kind of gratuitous appearance that you expect from a bad television show (or from the Simpsons), rather than from a book that has this kind of literary pedigree.

In the first section, we're in New York in the 19th century. There are lots of exciting changes afoot -- it's the Industrial Revolution after all. The star of this section is Lucas, who works in a factory, but has no idea what exactly he's making (I love that part). Lucas spouts Whitman poetry in the midst of normal conversations, something that grows old pretty quick (I can only imagine how quickly it'd grow old if you were actually talking to the kid). I'm torn between whether this section should have been longer or shorter. As it is, it reads like one of Stephen King's lesser short stories.

The second section zooms us forward to a more modern New York. This time we've gone from Stephen King to a crime show -- not a Law & Order type, but one of those ones where we get to follow the detectives home after work and realize that they're human too. There's a glimmer of something interesting in this section (I admit it, I'm a sucker for those crime shows), and I think it's overall the strongest of the three, but on the last page, Cunningham manages to suck all life and hope right out of the story in a matter of a couple of sentences. That's fine -- I was an English major, I can handle that kind of thing -- but it was a disappointing end to a fairly promising set-up.

The final section is where Cunningham tests how many readers can give up on a book after reading 2/3 of it. I, for one, can't, so I followed him from crime show to science fiction -- fearfully, because science fiction is a genre that should be attempted by precious few "serious" writers. Unfortunately, Cunningham is a weak science fiction writer, and seems to have nothing to offer here other than a pasted-together version of half a dozen other books and movies (and don't get me started on his choice to name a character Tomcruise).

What's going to save this book for me, I think, is trying to connect the three stories. The repeated themes of love, sacrifice, and discrimination are all relevant, important themes, and maybe this book will go down as capturing some sort of post-9/11 zeitgeist. I have not read *The Hours*, so I came to this book with some uncertainty about what to expect. I can appreciate an author's foray into genre fiction (Michael Chabon has demonstrated both the good and the bad sides of this), but there was something about this one that read a little bit like a writer's workshop exercise (I imagine the as-yet-unpublished fourth section takes us to the world of fantasy, where Simon is a gallant knight, Lucas a gnome abandoned by his parents, and Catherine a talking unicorn). All in all, it just felt a little too slight for an author of this supposed caliber.

Keep the Ekairidium: I knew little of Michael Cunningham's work (I just knew that he wrote *The Hours* which was an Academy Award-winning film my parents loved) so I had no fixed expectations. I gave myself four days to finish this book but managed to do so in three days. That's how captivating it was. Cunningham's experimental fiction was masterfully told, like a musical composition that rises and falls with the right notes. In *Specimen Days*, he writes in three genres, dividing the book into three breathtaking novellas.

"A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; How could I answer the child?... I do not know what it is any more than he." ~Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass

(1) “In The Machine” A Historical Dickensian Tale

The first novella was written in the boy Lucas' POV. It was set sometime during the industrialization age of America. Lucas' brother Simon has just died and this left his fiancée Catherine uncared for and with child. Though already shouldering the financial burden of supporting his parents, thirteen-year-old Lucas still felt it was his responsibility to watch out after Catherine. He was a peculiar boy, reciting Walt Whitman poetry as his way to express his feelings or to make conversation. Through Lucas' narrations, Cunningham's knack for weaving lyrical phrases is astounding. The paragraphs contain such breathless pacing and descriptive precision which magnified the strength of Lucas' evocative insights about his surroundings as he tries to understand the concept of labor and death. He wants to de-mystify such adult concepts and it is Whitman's poetry that guides him. At the very heart of it all, Lucas begins to explore the possibility that his brother's soul was trapped inside the welding machinery that Lucas uses at his work in the factory. Believing that if men die and they spread out among the leaves and grass (as Whitman eloquently wrote), Lucas was convinced that ghosts dwell among the machinery across New York, including the sewing machine that Catherine tends to at her own workplace. He ventures on to save her.

For such a comical angle to the story, Cunningham was still able to approach it with great sensitivity, providing passages that brood over the simplest but unanswered questions about life which gives Lucas' character a crushing sort of loneliness. He is a child who tries to make sense of the world by allowing poetry to fill the gaps. It's a feat that manages to intensify the reading experience even more, and Cunningham drives it home by using Lucas' "ghost" as an allegory of the American industrialization's hovering presence, and the gradual withdrawal of human spirit from the organic towards the mechanical. Lucas' belief of souls being trapped in the machines is a symbolism easy to pick up on, but Cunningham's beautifully convoluted prose is rich with details that it was able to keep everything subtle. The climactic ending was even transitory to the next novella. Reading *In the Machine* was like stumbling in the dark, and trusting all the sensory directions given, but never truly seeing the big picture forming until the novel moves into the second story.

"And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier."

(2) “The Children’s Crusade” A Detective Psychological Thriller

The sudden shift of genre by the second novella was not at all jarring. This time it was set on a post-9/11 New York with Cat Martin, a forensic psychologist, as a focus character. She works for a hotline division who handles calls from possible terrorists. She got a message from a young boy who talked about “the family” and recites mantras like "Every atom belonging to you as well belongs to me," which she recognized to be a verse from a Walt Whitman poem. Days after, news of child terrorists have spread across the city, claiming both the rich and the poor as victims of homemade bombs. At first glance, this story doesn't have any sort of connection to the first one until the reader realizes that Cat was short for “Catherine” and her boyfriend's name is “Simon” and she has a son named “Luke” whom she lost to an illness. But these are different characters with the same names and are a century apart from each other, yet

Cunningham weaves these two stories—one of the past and one from the somewhat present—as a dissonance of worlds that are created through the choices of these three central characters. Whatever the boy Lucas from the first story feared about then, those ghosts he talked about, have now taken shape into something horribly concrete in Cat Martin's New York where a heightened sense of paranoia and grief is exploited by a terrorist cell composed of children.

It was a detective story, hard-boiled and suspenseful with every turn of the page—right until the moment of a chance meeting between Cat and one of the child terrorists. In this story, Cunningham delves into the scarlet thread so immensely significant in detective stories and *The Children's Crusade* became a harrowing tale that overflows with the twisted reflections of humanity's fears. It was by this installment that I started to tear up completely because Cunningham has a way to string along certain phrases that provokes such a visceral, emotional response that a reader just surrenders without even knowing it. It was juxtaposed perfectly with *In The Machine*, especially since he used the three characters (Catherine, Simon and Lucas) as representations of man, woman and child; three aspects poignantly enhanced by the last novella.

"Fear not O Muse! truly new ways and days receive, surround you,

And yet the same old human race, the same within, without,

Faces and hearts the same, feelings the same, yearning the same

The same old love, beauty and use the same."

(3) "Like Beauty" A Sci-Fi Love Story About Birth and Destination

The final novella was set 150 years in the future in New York. Humans have already made first contact with aliens and they are lizard life-forms called Nadians who are now living as refugees in planet Earth. They are domestic helpers, treated as secondary citizens and enslaved by mankind. Simon—a biomechanical cyborg—is the focus character, and he was programmed as a mugger in the New York streets, sought after by tourists who want to be victimized because of the adrenaline release it provides. He was captivated by a Nadian called Catareen whom he starts an adventure with when they decided to escape to Denver. On the road, they met a homeless boy posing as Jesus in a Halloween costume named Lucas. This story was the most challenging of the three because it was science fiction and there is always a strange pull with this genre that Cunningham was able to give justice to. Simon was a biomechanical conception; half-human and half-machine (a literal representation of Lucas' ghost of a brother from the first story) and his 'maker' has included Whitman poetry in his software which he recites every time under duress. What follows after is a redemptive tale about the power of technology and a more humane understanding of how it can enrich lives instead of destroy them.

There is an enduring quality to the prose of this story that was magnified by the previous events from *In The Machine* and *The Children's Crusade*. It seemed to me that these versions of Simon, Catherine and Lucas are products of the past and present colliding together to form a future defined by beginnings and endings that mirror each other. So many imagery and

symbolism come full circle by this last story. Religious allegories were also used. I was listening to Death Cab For Cutie's "Tiny Vessels" so I was positively imbued with emotions and sensations that can only be expressed in tears. It didn't feel cheesy at all because it seemed like a perfectly acceptable response to cry about this book because of its overwhelming poetry in its vitalizing prose.

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Overall, Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* is a treasure. As you read through, it feels like seeds are sprouting out from your heart and flourishes within, transforming you as a reader into a person more aware of transience and embracing its trappings.

RECOMMENDED: 10/10

Nick: an excellent exegesis of Walt Whitman, advised as 3 novellas, every one with an identical set of characters, yet in numerous instances and areas and situations. If that makes any experience in any respect to you, you have to learn this book. Cunningham is a talented writer; he retains it easy and spare, with the exception of the flights of Whitmanesque borrowings and interpretations. the result's beautiful, creepy, strange, and haunting.

Jenny: 3 diverse tales addressing ny in 3 assorted genres and centuries. at the beginning I wasn't inspired by way of "In the Machine," the 1st third, the historic novel portion, since it touched on Whitman and James Joyce with no leaving a lot of an effect or making feel of those references. however it fairly cannot stand alone; perhaps not one of the sections can, even if beginning out of order will be an engaging inspiration with a view to get extra out of "In the Machine."The methods the 3 tales attach are the private elements of the novel, in particular should you choose up at the literary (The Odyssey and Whitman) and ny historic references. The publication takes itself lovely heavily yet what humor there's (most of it within the final stories, equivalent to the sci-fi futuristic section's naming young ones "Tomcruise" and "Katemoss") is welcome and entertaining. The final part used to be certainly my favorite; the way in which he treats the extraterrestrial beings as realistically interacting with people lengthy after that stereotypical sci-fi first come upon jogs my memory of ways Jonathan Lethem invents the Archbuilder extraterrestrial beings within the novel woman in a Landscape.

Cameron: they are saying Walt Whitman's beard drew butterflies. This book, I think, might most likely draw anything a ways stranger if omitted in a field.A triptych of tightly-wound routines in genre--a laptop Age ghost story, a whodunnit set within the Patriot Act hysteria of the mid 00s, and a scifi roadtrip via a blighted the United States that includes lizard people--*Specimen Days* baffled the hell out of me. Is it a longer meditation at the machinations and strangeness of our bodies? A sly, Marx-friendly touch upon how we dissolve into our occupations, frequently and not using a peep? A hallucinatory glimpse of the humanity in the back of "terror"? Is Cunningham simply trip a long-dormant *Blade Runner* geekdom? a lot of these things? I dunno. The name makes me imagine that Cunningham's conscious of the Frankenstein nature of the book. But, as different stories note, Walt Whitman is the glue preserving jointly the cobbled-together items of the book. Cunningham, I think, is jostling elbows relatively uneasily with Whitman and his legacy of heavenly and physically affinities. "For each atom belonging to me

nearly as good belongs to you," as soon as sang Whitman, and Cunningham reveals not just solace and empathy during this announcement of our universal lot, but in addition horror. within the novel's moment act, orphaned boys develop into suicide bombers in ny City, quoting Whitman as they fatally embody random strangers. becoming a member of jointly the disparate, and "doing something" in regards to the specialized, fragmented mess of our daily lives, is either the subject matter and craft of Specimen Days. yet Whitman's organic, round nature of existence, and his view of demise as anything "different from what anyone supposed, and luckier" turns out to offer Cunningham the willies. loss of life could quite merely be beginning disguised, yet Cunningham skews this revelation in interesting, not-entirely-comfortable ways: whilst humans die in Specimen Days they go back no longer as benign lyrical grass, yet as oily ghosts, haunting mobile calls, and alien corpses that needs to be buried. In its uneasy dating with its literary patron, Specimen Days is an engaging departure from the glowing, maybe uncritical courting Cunningham fostered with Woolf within the Hours. Cunningham's craft, too, has extended here: he writes with abandon a few large swath of humanity (and nonhumanity), and the result's dizzyingly pleasing. His characters are compelling, specifically within the ultimate stories, I think. And his skill to go back and forth among philosophical musing and plot development is inspiring, no longer ham-handed as a few reviewers have complained. (Most fiction, I think, engages in existential inquiry and a few measure of navel-gazing... it truly is simply that Cunningham shall we himself do it aloud, instead of letting the story's equipment do it for him, and sometimes I *like* to have little pithy axioms thrown out at me.)While i believe different books do a extra entire activity of teasing out the thematic threads found in Specimen Days (Evan Dara's The misplaced Scrapbook involves mind, especially, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas does a greater task juggling a number of genres, from what i have heard), few so in truth painting the bizarre climate of our inside lives. And few writers so incisively take the scalpel to precise moments in time and the way occasions spread earlier than characters in slow, Brownian motion--the novel's identify back involves mind. And few writers have Cunningham's reward for pacing and fulfilling images. hugely recommended.

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