Dances With Woolf

Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* proved an AIDS novel can be great art. Joy Episalla spends an afternoon with her old pal in his post-Pulitzer prime.

February 1, 2000 By Joy Episalla

Michael Cunningham stunned the literary establishment last year when his third novel, *The Hours*, grabbed the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, beating out such heavy hitters as Philip Roth. On the eve of *The Hours*' January paperback publication (Picador Press), artist and longtime AIDS activist Joy Episalla spoke with Cunningham, 47, about his book—an exquisite, haunting reflection on AIDS through the prism of Virginia Woolf's 1925 masterpiece, Mrs. Dalloway—and about the prize and other rewards that come from writing about the epidemic.

Episalla and Cunningham are old friends as well—members of an ACT UP affinity group, the Marys, in the early '90s.

Episalla: Is it possible to be both a writer and an activist?
Cunningham: Absolutely. I've heard other writers say, "My work is my contribution to the fight against AIDS," and my response to that is always "Bullshit!" Sure, art is political, but it changes the world very slowly, and people are dying right now. I never believed for one instant that anyone was going to walk into the office of Bill Clinton or those other assholes and say: "Mr. President, I just read this novel by Michael Cunningham and it made me realize we have to…." Come on! I was always aware that it's important for me to write and also to do this other work. I was also aware in ACT UP that I wasn't a gifted activist or organizer. I thought of myself as a soldier, not one of the generals.

Is *The Hours* an AIDS novel?
Yes. I'm a gay man who has lived through the epidemic for 15 years—and who will or won't live through what's still to come. And every book I write is, in some form, a gay book about the epidemic. It's part of my consciousness. I'm infiltrated by it. I don't think I could write anything else.

But one complication is that the art I most admire and strive to create, while it has a huge moral dimension, doesn't advocate for a particular position, doesn't present good guys and bad guys. As a citizen, I'll do anything to keep George W. Bush from being elected president. As a novelist, I'm interested in how George W. Bush explains himself to himself and how he goes to bed at night thinking, "Well, another day's good work done."

And is it any *other* kind of novel?
Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, which takes place in the aftermath of World War I, is subtly, but absolutely, a war novel. It could certainly be shelved with A Farewell to Arms and The Naked and the Dead. My novel is set at the end of World War I, the end of World War II and during the AIDS epidemic. Its three stories take place at three different times—immediately after or during an event that has changed the world. And each involves a woman trying to find a way to live in a world that is no longer what it was.

One thing a novelist does is bear witness to the times in which he or she lives. And I tend to trust the novelist's version much more than I do the historian's. Because unlike normal history, novels are not written by the winners, and I'll take a novelist over a historian any day. So in that regard, as someone who has thus far survived the epidemic, I feel a simple obligation and desire simply to set it down.

How much of your characters are drawn from life?
Any character I write is both an invention and a composite of people I know. In The Hours, Richard is partly invented, and also taken from the writer Harold Brodkey, who died of AIDS in 1997. Harold could be unbearable, but he was also a genius, and profound more often than silly. I don't think I could have written Richard without having known Harold Brodkey.

So when you develop a character dying of AIDS, you're writing partly about something you've seen.
I'm writing about friends of mine who died, and I'm writing about my own death from AIDS, which hasn't happened but is in no way unimaginable.

The Septimus Smith character in Mrs. Dalloway is representative of our times. He is shell-shocked—as many AIDS survivors are.
I certainly am shell-shocked. And my sense of my role in the search for a cure and procuring what's needed for people with HIV is very different from what it was in the heyday of ACT UP. My world is very different now. My friends who are positive are fortunate enough to be able to afford drugs that are keeping them going—for now. So I do feel stunned, and I will spend the years it takes to write the next book trying to figure out how to bear witness to what I know of the epidemic now.

Why Virginia Woolf?
Woolf was the first great writer I read. I was a not-very-promising student at a not-very-good public school in the suburbs of LA. It was the '60s. They wanted us to get in and out of school before we died of drug overdoses or burned the school down. It wasn't until a senior girl who I had a huge crush on threw a copy of Mrs. Dalloway at me and said, "Read this and try to be less stupid." And I did. On the one hand, as a not-all-that-bright 15-year-old I didn't understand it, but on the other hand, I did. I comprehended the depth and complexity and beauty of those sentences, and it was a revelation. I hadn't known you could do that with ink and paper.

***The Hours* has a dialogue between Clarissa and Barbara about winning the Carruthers**

Prize for poetry.
An invented prize.

Barbara says, “The Pulitzer?”
Isn’t it clever the way I planted that?

Good omen.
[Laughs.] I think of it as a very subtle suggestion, very much the way in the movie The Exorcist there were supposedly single frames of the devil.

How do you feel about the Pulitzer?
Lots of ways. I think a prize like this is a bad thing—as an institution. The notion of a “first prize”—saying this book wins and those others don’t win—is antithetical to literature. It’s not about bringing the biggest hog to the county fair and winning. I don’t think it’s good for literature and the whole struggle that everyone who writes as a body is undergoing. Though you notice I didn’t give it back.

I know I was thrilled: Here was a book about things I deal with constantly that many more people would now read.
There are aspects to the Pulitzer that seem good. One is that a book about three women of complicated and ambiguous sexuality and that deals directly with the AIDS epidemic is now part of the essential American experience. And since the prize was announced, a lot of people have said to me essentially: “Isn’t it great that we won this prize?” And I love that. There is a sense that this great big machine that ordinarily doesn’t see any of us oddballs doing work about particular subjects turned around on its big rusty wheels and aimed the beam at us.

Is there anything important that all the interviews or reviews have missed?
First, there’s been surprisingly little mention that this book is set in the AIDS epidemic. And second, I can’t help but notice that when I finally write a book in which there are no men sucking each other’s dicks, I suddenly win the Pulitzer Prize.

PULITZER PROSE

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 upholstered 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 onto the street), no one would pick it up. Richard will not hear of its being replaced.

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