



The Hours

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The acclaimed author of the novels *A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD* (1990) and *FLESH AND BLOOD* (1995), Michael Cunningham won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *THE HOURS*. The very title “The Hours” is taken from Virginia Woolf. It was an early working title for Woolf’s *MRS. DALLOWAY* (1925). Woolf is even a character in one of Cunningham’s three tales. The novel opens with a “Prologue” detailing Woolf’s suicide in 1941. She left a note for her husband Leonard and proceeded to drown herself in a nearby river. With this shattering event hanging over the novel, Cunningham commences with the first story “Mrs. Dalloway.” In this story, Clarissa Vaughan is living in present-day New York City. A longtime friend and poet Richard Brown is to receive a poetry prize on this day in June. He had given Clarissa the name “Mrs. Dalloway” years ago. She spends her day putting the finishing touches on a party for Richard. Unfortunately he suffers from AIDS and Clarissa ponders their past together, life with her longtime lover Sally, and how life takes such strange turns.

The second story “Mrs. Woolf” takes place on a day in June, 1923, with Woolf busying herself writing the novel that would become *MRS. DALLOWAY*. She is distracted by a visit from her sister Vanessa and also the growing friction between her and her husband. The last story “Mrs. Brown,” takes place in 1949 Los Angeles. Sally Brown has a young son, is pregnant again, and makes plans for her husband’s birthday. She also reads *MRS. DALLOWAY* and struggles with her own despair. Each of these stories alternates chapters so as to give the reader only a sliver of light at a time. Cunningham has much to juggle and does so with such dazzling ease. As both a homage to Woolf and a comment on contemporary life, *THE HOURS* succeeds brilliantly and completely.

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