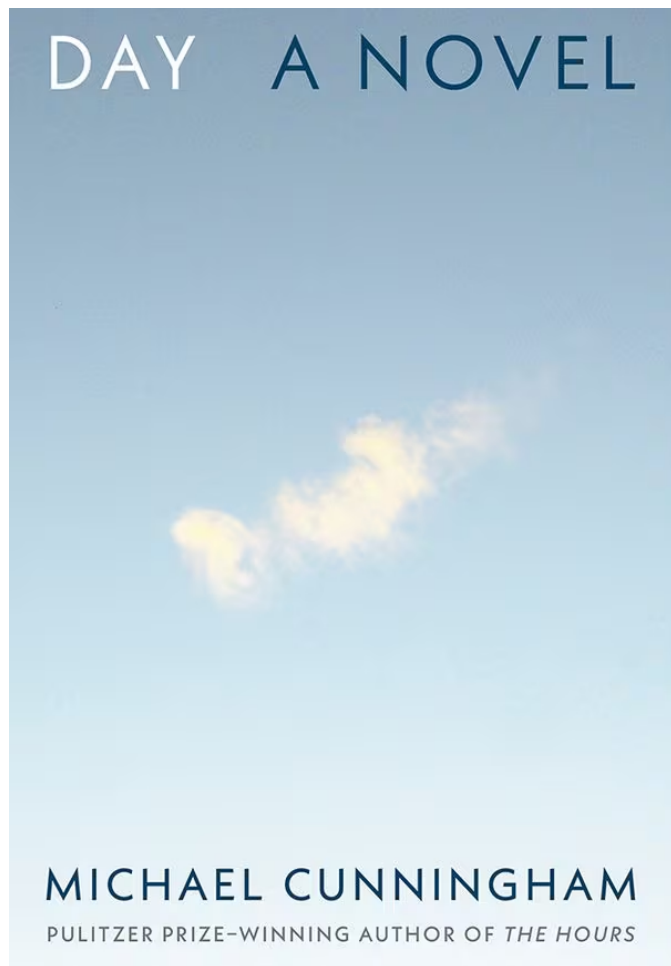


BOOK REVIEW

Michael Cunningham's new novel is at once exquisite, and not enough

'Day' renders the pandemic's personal upheavals in sensitive detail but sidesteps anything more profound

By **Rebecca Steinitz** Globe Correspondent, Updated November 14, 2023, 1:36 p.m.



Michael Cunningham, author of "Day." RANDOM HOUSE/RICHARD PHIBBS

In the nearly 40 years since Michael Cunningham published his first novel, he has become a deserved eminence (bestsellers, movie adaptations, a Pulitzer Prize) and a man

of persistent preoccupations. You can count on elegance and erudition when you pick up a Cunningham novel. You will also likely find a family with a gay brother and intense sibling relationships, New York artists of varying fields and degrees of success, a loveable but slippery drug addict, a plethora of literary allusions, and the endlessly structural and symbolic number three.

Cunningham's new novel, "Day," infuses the pandemic into his trademark elements. It may be that his command of fictional structure and interiority constrains his capacity to grapple with monumental social upheaval. Or he could be grappling with the possibility that the upheaval of the pandemic was in the end more muted than cataclysmic for the bourgeois bohemians he narrates so deftly. Either way, "Day" expands the canon of consummate Cunningham but does little to increase our understanding of the pandemic or its literary possibilities.

"Day" takes place on the morning of April 5, 2019, the afternoon of the same date in 2020, and its evening in 2021: three days, three parts of the day, and three years that encompass the pandemic's before, during, and putative after. It features a triangle of echoing siblings: photo editor Isabel and her gay brother Robbie; Isabel's musician husband, Dan, and his artist brother Garth; and Isabel and Dan's children, Nathan and Violet.

In "Morning," Isabel, Dan, and Robbie are raising the children together in Brooklyn. "Afternoon" documents the beginning of the pandemic. In "Evening," the family confronts the aftermath of the past year.

"Morning" begins with a sense of imminence: "the approaching day," "the first tentative signs of spring," "buds...waiting to crack open." Robbie is looking for an apartment so Nathan can have a room of his own. Dan is attempting a comeback. Nathan hovers anxiously on the border between childhood and adolescence. Isabel, beset at work and home, escapes to the inner stairway of their apartment.

Beloved Robbie seems to hold the household together, though he is its most fragile member, unlucky at romance, unhappy at work, unsure of his past decisions. Which may be why he's created a fake Instagram account featuring a persona he and Isabel have invented, a handsome pediatrician named Wolfe. "One of those guys who appear not only to be getting what they want, but to want what they're getting," Wolfe is named after their childhood "imaginary brother Wolf"; evokes Cunningham icon Virginia Woolf; and serves as the novel's avatar of fulfilled desire. As "Morning" ends, Wolfe blithely drives to the country while Isabel lingers in Grand Central Station, wishing she could board a random train to a new life.

In "Afternoon," Isabel is still sitting on the stairs. "Robbie, as it turns out, is the one who got on the train," but now he is stuck in the mountains of Iceland, where Wolfe frolics on Instagram. Dan has become a pandemic YouTube star. Nathan hides in his room watching "School of Rock" and masturbating. Precocious Violet prowls the house closing windows to keep out the virus.

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The pandemic motifs are familiar from life and literature: sirens, empty streets, online school, “faces...in a grid.” Isabel, Dan, Nathan, and Violet hide from each other, communicating in texts, notes, and the occasional tense conversation. They write Robbie emails and letters he can't receive; he writes them letters he can't send till he returns to civilization. Garth, alone in his studio, exchanges emails with Chess, the mother of his child, whom he can only wave at through a closed window. Whereas 18th- and 19th-century epistolary novels used letters to bridge gaps and jumpstart plot, here the technologies of communication represent fraying connections and abounding symbolism.

Isabel, Robbie, and Wolfe share the dream of a “house in the country” — another pandemic trope. The actual dilapidated country house where the family gathers in “Evening” is more of a consolation prize. Violet's condition applies to them all as they wrestle with new realities and each other: “Violet, recovered, is herself and not quite herself.”

Cunningham excels at articulating the ways his characters experience themselves and their efforts to inhabit their roles — as well as the understandings and misunderstandings with which they encounter each other. In “Day,” he is especially acute on the convincingly aware children and on Isabel and Chess, whose challenges with motherhood, men, and work may be “white lady problems” but resonate nonetheless.

In a recent [New York Times](#) interview, Cunningham explained that before the pandemic he had almost completed a multigeneration family saga that ended in “a present that did not involve a pandemic.” Wondering, “How does anybody...write a contemporary novel that's about human beings that's not about the pandemic?” he abandoned that manuscript and wrote “Day.”

But the pandemic largely affects the human beings of “Day” individually and interpersonally. Some have epiphanies and move forward. Others hover on the verge of new catastrophe. Some end up connected, others alone. Cunningham's version of the pandemic has little in the way of social, economic, or existential consequence and little

impact on the form of his fiction. His characters' outcomes could as easily have been catalyzed by a murder or hurricane; his fictional output is another exquisite Cunningham novel. Meanwhile, I wish I could have read that multigeneration saga.

DAY

by Michael Cunningham

Random House, 288 pp., \$28

Rebecca Steinitz is the author of "Time, Space, and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary."

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