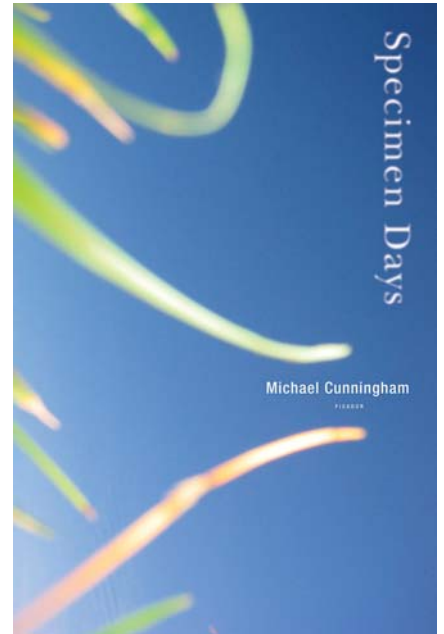


READING GROUP GUIDE

Specimen Days A Novel

by *Michael Cunningham*

ISBN: 0-312-42502-3



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Specimen Days* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Specimen Days*.

About the Book

Specimen Days, the much anticipated follow-up to Michael Cunningham's award-winning international bestseller *The Hours*, reconfirms the author's daring imagination and storytelling gifts. Comprised of three thematically linked novellas, *Specimen Days* is both inspired by, and an homage to, American visionary poet Walt Whitman. The first, "In the Machine," is a ghost story at the height of the industrial revolution; the second, "The Children's Crusade," is a contemporary crime thriller about a kids' terrorist ring; and the third, "Like Beauty," is an inter-species romance circa 2150. Provocative, entertaining, and unexpectedly moving, *Specimen Days* is, as *The New York Observer* states, "an extraordinary book, as ambitious as it is generous."

“Cunningham’s latest novel—actually, three novellas—is breathtaking . . . impossible to put down, so dazzling is its prose, so complex are the ideas it wrestles with, and so generous is its vantage point . . . It is, in three daring swoops, a poetic meditation on what it means to be human, a cautionary tale about the separation of progress from morality, and an eloquent call to rebellion against the powers that be. Walt Whitman, in all of his bearded amplitude, must be smiling.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“Cunningham’s exquisite prose transcends the genres he has set for himself. . . . It is easy to imagine [Whitman] beaming down his approval at Cunningham’s strong-armed embrace of all that is America, as he beautifully articulates the frustrations of modern life. . . . Cunningham too brings that sense of the miraculous to bear on these ordinary, miraculous American lives, and *Specimen Days* is a book of wonders.”

—*The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans)

“Cunningham’s experimentation with the genres brings his prose to new energy. . . . [It] is exactly the kind of bold experiment that a novelist who takes his art seriously ought to make.”

—*New York magazine*

“This is Cunningham’s most ambitious novel and, for me, his finest.”

—*London Review of Books*

“Cunningham weaves a captivating, strange, and extravagant novel of human progress and social decline. . . . With its narrative leaps and self-conscious flights into the transcendent, Cunningham’s fourth novel sometimes seems ready to collapse under the weight of its lavishness and ambition—but thrillingly, it never does. This is daring, memorable fiction.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“[Whitman’s] boundless spirit . . . imbues *Specimen Days* with a sense of wonder and magic.”

—*Vanity Fair*

“From leaves of grass we come and go—and from Walt Whitman’s time to the twenty-second century goes Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days*. Cunningham (*The Hours*, *A Home at the End of the World*) makes the American bard’s visionary democratic spirit the touchstone of this three-part novel set in Manhattan’s past, present, and future. . . . *Specimen Days* vividly underscores the timeless human condition: fragile, lonely, desperately seeking intimacy—but ultimately capable of connection and exaltation.”

—*Elle*

About the Author

Michael Cunningham is the author of the bestselling novel *The Hours*, which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award and was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film, *A Home at the End of the World*, also adapted for the screen, and *Flesh and Blood*, all published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Most recently, he edited *Laws for Creations*, a collection of poetry and prose by Walt Whitman, published by Picador. He lives in New York.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Michael Cunningham chooses the particular epigraph from Walt Whitman to introduce his book? In what ways does it prepare you for the three stories that follow?
2. In the author's note, Cunningham, addressing the issue of novelists using actual events or people in their work, writes: "the strict sequence of historical events, however, tends to run counter to the needs of the storyteller." What do you think he means, particularly in regards to *Specimen Days*? Do you agree with him? Why?
3. Why do you think Cunningham chose Walt Whitman as the representative poet for the story he tells? Could you imagine other poets serving that role? Were you able to identify when Cunningham was quoting Whitman in the text? Do the quotes function differently in each story? How do the quotes serve Cunningham's work as a whole? Which quotes from Whitman did you particularly like? Why? Does there seem to be a particular sensibility or spirit to Whitman's poetry that mirrors Cunningham's own vision for *Specimen Days*? Explain.
4. Would you classify *Specimen Days* as a novel? Why? What themes and motifs link the three stories? What qualities distinguish them? Did you find yourself responding more passionately to one particular story? Explain.
5. Can you identify the different literary genres on which Cunningham models each of his stories? How does Cunningham remain faithful to, or transform, each of the genres?
6. What do you think is the significance of the titles "In the Machine," "The Children's Crusade," and "Like Beauty"? Can you identify specific examples, such as historical events, literary themes, or certain characters, to support your ideas?
7. Which characters did you find most compelling or sympathetic? Why? Do you see any progression or change in each of the three similarly named characters as they move throughout *Specimen Days*? Explain.
8. How does the geography of New York City play an important role within *Specimen Days*? Did you detect any similar geographic details or references to specific historical events within all three stories? If so, what's the effect?
9. How might "In The Machine," "The Children's Crusade," and "Like Beauty" each be described as a love story? Cunningham, who has touched on gay themes in *A Home at The End of The World* and *The Hours*, has called *Specimen Days* a "queer" work but not a gay one. What do you think he means?
10. Do you see *Specimen Days* as a politically or socially engaged novel? Why? Are there events in all three stories that seem to comment on current political, cultural, or social conditions? Explain.

11. One recurring quote from Whitman throughout *Specimen Days* is “urge and urge and urge, always the procreant urge of the world.” How do you interpret that quote? Why is it significant to the book as a whole?
12. Do you find the ambiguity of each story’s ending optimistic or pessimistic? Explain. Consider Simon’s final quote from Whitman: “The earth, that is sufficient, I do not want the constellations any nearer, I know they are very well where they are, I know they suffice who belong to them.” Is it an appropriate closing to both “Like Beauty” and *Specimen Days*? Explain.

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