



Reading Group Gold

A Home at the End of the World

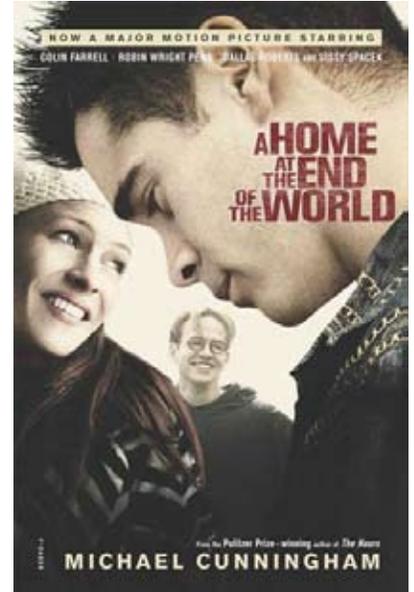
by Michael Cunningham

“Lyrical...memorable and accomplished.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

Reader’s Guide Synopsis

Before the phenomenal success of his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham published *A Home at the End of the World* to critical acclaim. It’s the boldly affecting story of a love triangle between two men and a woman: Jonathan, headstrong and lonely; Bobby, dreamy and vulnerable; Clara, charismatic and adventurous. Challenging conventional notions of family and sexuality, the story spans four decades, reflecting many of the cultural changes and contradictions of America itself. In many ways more relevant than when it first appeared, *A Home at the End of the World* is an unflinching re-examination of the definition of family and gender roles, determined to explore unanswered questions raised by Sixties and Seventies counter-culture that dog us to this day.



ISBN: 978-0-312-42408-4 | 2004

About The Author

Michael Cunningham is the author of *Flesh and Blood* and the bestselling and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Hours*. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Redbook*, *Esquire*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, and *Metropolitan Home*. An excerpt from *A Home at the End of the World* was published in *The New Yorker*, chosen for *Best American Short Stories* in 1989, and featured on NPR’s *Selected Shorts*. Born in Cincinnati, Ohio and a graduate of Stanford University, Michael currently lives in New York City.

Discussion

1. Discuss the significance of the title *A Home at the End of the World*. Does it suggest hope, despair, or both? Explain.
2. Consider the structure of the novel. Why do alternating narrators work for this particular story? How



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would the story differ if an omniscient narrator or only one character told it? Is there one narrator whose voice you found especially compelling or identified with most? Why?

3. If you've read *The Hours* or *Flesh and Blood* by Michael Cunningham, what similarities do you notice in Cunningham's narrative style or themes with *A Home at the End of the World*? What distinguishes this book from his two later novels?

4. The third chapter was an award-winning short story, entitled *White Angel*, published in *The New Yorker* prior to the novel. What makes that chapter particularly effective as a separate story? How does the rest of the novel deepen and expand on that story?

5. On page 6, Jonathan mentions his father's "beauty." Do you agree with him that it is unusual to speak of a father in that way? Why? Is male beauty or behavior portrayed in similarly unexpected or surprising ways in the novel?

6. As a young mother, Alice says of her relationship with her son Jonathan and his best friend Bobby: "Sometimes in those days I thought of Wendy from Peter Pan—an island mother to a troop of lost boys" (p. 87). What do you think she means? How does the theme of "lost boys" figure into the novel as a whole? What role do the women play in relation to this theme?

7. Discuss the eroticism fueling Jonathan and Bobby's childhood friendship. Do you think they view their shared sexual experiences differently? Explain. How does the erotic component of their relationship change as the novel progresses? Is there anything that remains constant?

8. On page 179, Jonathan says, "We become the stories we tell about ourselves." How might this observation apply to Jonathan, Bobby, Clare, and Alice? Do you view the stories these characters tell themselves as a form of self-preservation, self-delusion, or both? Explain with specific examples.

9. Do you think Jonathan, Bobby and Clare's attempt to redefine family succeeded or failed? Why? What do you think defines a family? What do you think the novel is ultimately saying about family?

10. What role does Erich play in the character's lives? In what ways do you think he is a catalyst for change? Discuss the significance of death in the novel.

11. In Bobby's final chapter, he thinks he spots a vision of Clare. "What I saw was just the wind blowing," he realizes. "It was either the wind or the spirit of the house itself, briefly unsettled by our nocturnal absence but too old to be surprised by the errands born from the gap between what we can imagine and what we can in fact create" (p. 336). What do you think he means? Discuss the significance of this statement to the story as a whole.



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Acclaim for *A Home at the End of the World*

“Once in a great while, there appears a novel so spellbinding in its beauty and sensitivity that the reader devours it nearly whole, in great greedy gulps...Such a book is *A Home at the End of the World*.” —*The San Diego Tribune*

“Novels don’t come more deeply felt...[an] extraordinary four-character study...[A] constant pleasure, flowing and yet dense with incisive images and psychological nuance.” —*The Boston Globe*

“Michael Cunningham has written a novel that all but reads itself.” —*The Washington Post Book World*

“We come to feel that we know Jonathan, Bobby and Clare as if we lived with them; yet each one retains the mystery that in people is called soul, and in fiction is called art.” —*The Los Angeles Times*

“Luminous with the wonders and anxieties that make childhood mysterious...*A Home at the End of the World* is a remarkable accomplishment.” —*San Francisco Review*

“Brilliant and satisfying...As good as anything I’ve read in years...Hope in the midst of tragedy is a fragile thing, and Cunningham carries it with masterful care.” —*The San Diego Union*