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Reading Group Gold

The Snow Queen: A Novel

By Michael Cunningham

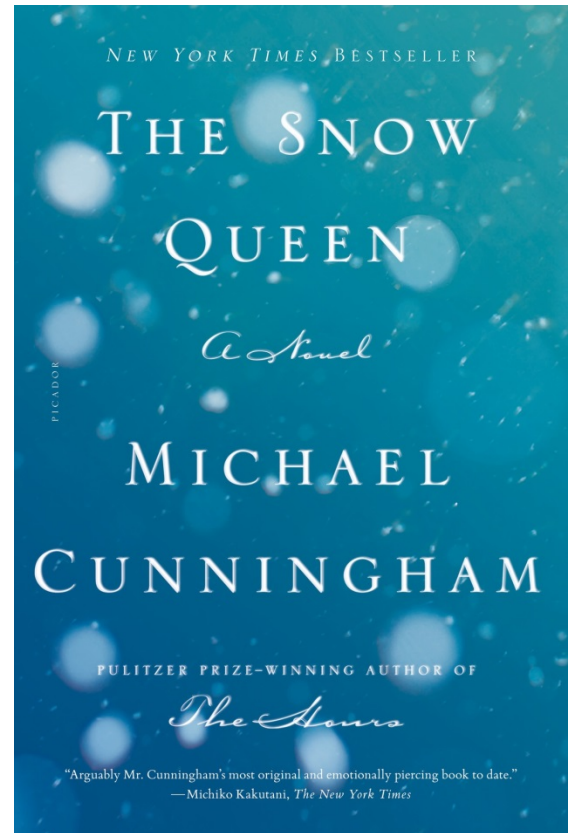
Pulitzer Prize–Winning Author of *The Hours*

"Michael Cunningham's best novel in more than a decade."

—Megan O'Grady, *Vogue*

It's November 2004. Barrett Meeks, having lost love yet again, is walking through Central Park when he is inspired to look up at the sky; there he sees a pale, translucent light that seems to regard him in a distinctly godlike way. At the same time, in Brooklyn, Barrett's older brother, Tyler, is struggling to make his way as a musician—and to write a wedding song for Beth, his wife-to-be, who is seriously ill. While Barrett turns unexpectedly to religion, Tyler grows increasingly convinced that only drugs can release his creative powers, and Beth tries to face mortality with as much courage as she can summon.

Michael Cunningham follows the Meeks brothers as each travels down a different path in his search for transcendence, demonstrating a singular understanding of what lies at the core of the human soul. Beautiful and heartbreaking, comic and tragic, *The Snow Queen* proves again that Cunningham is one of the great novelists of his generation.



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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the novel's title. Did your understanding of it shift throughout the book? How do the characters experience the Snow Queen's "Mirror of Reason," described in the epigraph by Hans Christian Andersen?
2. When we first meet Barrett, what are his impressions of his destiny? What shapes his understanding of fate and love as the novel unfolds?
3. What are your interpretations of The Snow Queen's celestial lights? What is Barrett seeking while he watches the priest and parishioners in the Armenian Church? What does he find?
4. How does Beth's illness inspire those around her? What is her role within her circle of loved ones?
5. How were Tyler and Barrett affected by their mother's sudden death and their father's decision to remarry soon after? As brothers, how do they protect and provoke each other? What are the similarities and differences in their approaches to life?

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6. What does the novel reveal about the many facets of addiction? How does Tyler respond to the various ways people react to his drug habit (including those who want to exploit it to support their own addiction)?
7. Which aspects of the story resonated with your own experience of love in all its forms, including kinship and the bonds of longtime friends?
8. Throughout her life, from defending her fragile sister to becoming an entrepreneur, Liz has put herself in positions of power. What accounts for her strength?
9. How were you affected by the scene aboard the Staten Island ferry? What transitions occur in the characters' lives after that journey?
10. How has Barrett's sense of self evolved by the time he meets Sam? Does Tyler experience a similar change in the way he approaches desire and fulfillment?
11. Discuss Andrew and Stella's final scene. Are they capable survivors, or are they deeply vulnerable?
12. What makes the political climate of 2004–2008 an appropriate backdrop for the fears and longings of the characters? How does it echo the transformations of New York City, particularly Brooklyn that emerged a decade ago?
13. How does *The Snow Queen* enhance the humanity explored in Michael Cunningham's previous novels?

About the Author

Michael Cunningham is the author of six novels, including *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, *The Hours* (winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Pulitzer Prize), *Specimen Days*, and *By Nightfall*, as well as *Land's End: A Walk in Provincetown*. He lives in New York.

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