

BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S NOVEL

THE HOURS

1-866-578-5571

BOOKCLUBINABOX.COM

INFO@BOOKCLUBINABOX.COM

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Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Michael Cunningham's novel The Hours

Published by Picador USA and Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York, 1998. ISBN: 0-312-24302-2

Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the paperback edition of **The Hours**. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion for **The Hours** has been prepared and written by Marilyn Herbert, originator of Bookclub-in-a-Box. Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed., is a teacher, librarian, speaker and writer. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for The Hours

ISBN 10: 1-897082-032-0

ISBN 13: 9781897082324

This guide reflects the perspective of the Bookclub-in-a-Box team and is the sole property of Bookclub-in-a-Box.

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2007 2ND EDITION

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CONTACT INFORMATION: SEE BACK COVER.

BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

READERS AND LEADERS GUIDE 2	Transcendence38
INTRODUCTION	WRITING STRUCTURE
Suggested Beginnings7	Structure43
Novel Quickline8	Geography44
Keys to the Novel10	Time45
Author11	Narration46
Writer13	Parallel (<i>The Hours</i> , Mrs. Dalloway) . .47
CHARACTERIZATION	WRITING STYLE
Clarissa19	Stream of Consciousness . . .51
Laura, Virginia21	SYMBOLS
Leonard, Richard21	Hours57
Others23	Water, Fame58
FOCUS POINTS / THEMES	Celebrity59
Social, Political, Historical Context28	Flowers, Kiss60
Women's Issues29	Mirror, Book62
Sexuality30	LAST THOUGHTS
Psychology of Relationships 32	Virginia Woolf (mystique, writing)67
Psychology of the Human Mind33	Mrs. Dalloway (the original novel)70
Sanity34	FROM THE NOVEL (QUOTES) . . 75
Death35	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. 83
Failure36	
Life, ordinary/extraordinary . .37	

BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

How to Begin

Relax and look forward to enjoying your bookclub.

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more 'hands-on' support, feel free to contact us. (See Contact Information)

What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.

Do We Need to Agree?

THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences with us. You can respond on-line at our website or contact us through our Contact Information. We would love to hear from you.

Discussion Starters

There are as many ways to begin a bookclub discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)

- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (not necessarily from the novel)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (not applicable to all novels)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the bookclub-in-a-box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

Above All, Enjoy Yourself

INTRODUCTION

Suggested Beginnings

Novel Quickline

Keys to the Novel

Author

Writer

INTRODUCTION

Suggested Beginnings

1. Literary history has often exalted the extraordinary while dismissing the ordinary. *The Hours* and its counterpart, *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, claim to be concerned with the ordinary. But in both novels the line between what is ordinary and what is extraordinary is blurred.

What does it mean to be ordinary? extraordinary? Are the characters in these novels ordinary or extraordinary? And what makes them so?

2. There has always been a perception that insanity and creativity are closely linked. This is a significant topic given Virginia Woolf's personal history.

Is there a link between the two? If so, how does Cunningham use his characters to illustrate this?

3. *The Hours* explores unconventional forms of love and sexuality based on Virginia Woolf's own views.

Discuss what the novel says about traditional forms of love and about the very definition of love itself. Has Cunningham successfully reflected Virginia Woolf's philosophy?

4. Compare Nicole Kidman's movie portrayal of Virginia Woolf with Cunningham's portrayal.

What are the similarities and differences? Which is more or less successful, the novel or the film?

More Questions

1. At one point, Virginia Woolf considered using the title *The Hours* for her novel about Mrs. Dalloway. Michael Cunningham went ahead with the title for his own novel.

Discuss the significance of this title to either novel.

2. Both *The Hours* and *Mrs. Dalloway* have strongly feminine, yet unconventionally feminist, characters.

In what ways do they conform to or differ from the norms of their time? In what ways do they differ from our modern conception of feminists? Why is this so? Connect this to Virginia Woolf herself.

Novel Quickline

"What a lark! What a plunge!" Everyone should read this book for exactly the reason that Virginia Woolf gives us – the sheer pleasure of getting to know it. Read straight through, this novel would take a mere few hours, but most people do not have that kind of time. Whether a slow or a fast read, *The Hours* is a delightful book in which to get lost.

It is the story of three women in three different geographical locations at three different points in the span of the last century. What seems loosely connected at first is tightly wrapped up at the end of the novel.

- Virginia Woolf, the famous British writer from the early part of the twentieth century, is the figure at the heart of this novel. It is her profound influence – as a literary icon and as a human being – that continues to reverberate through the years. We meet Cunningham’s Virginia as she is composing her novel, **Mrs. Dalloway**, and, at the same time, struggling to maintain a hold on her fast-slipping sense of emotional balance.
- We meet Laura Brown, the pregnant mother of the small child Richie, as she is doing the most ordinary of acts – baking a birthday cake for her husband, Dan. This family lives in California in the 1950s, an idyllic time and location in the middle of the twentieth century. We soon realize that, for Laura, all is not ideal. What she really wants to do is escape to a quiet place to finish reading her novel, **Mrs. Dalloway**.
- Clarissa Vaughn is preparing for a congratulatory party for her friend, Richard, who has recently won a prestigious literary award. Richard, Clarissa’s friend and former lover, refers to Clarissa as Mrs. Dalloway, out of respect for her namesake. Clarissa’s story takes place in New York in the last years of the twentieth century.

Each of the three female characters – Clarissa, Virginia, and Laura – draws us into the ordinary, and yet extraordinary, nature of her day. Readers can relate to the activities of baking a birthday cake, buying flowers, having tea with a sister or friend, caring for a loved one, and juggling the needs of a child with our own.

However, Cunningham, like Woolf, so subtly raises the bar of what is “ordinary” that we are swept along by a current that fast leaves our control; it is not until the end that we become aware of the grip of depression that has tightened and won’t let go. While two of the three characters are metaphorically swept away by the events of the day, Virginia Woolf is literally swept away to her death in the stream.



**Thanks for previewing this
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

**If you'd like to purchase the full guide in
print or PDF format, just visit:**

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