



## **Specimen Days**

*Michael Cunningham*

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Lucas, Catherine, Simon: three characters meet time and again in the three linked narratives that form 'Specimen Days'. The first, a science fiction of the past, tells of a boy whose brother was 'devoured' by the machine he operated. The second is a noirish thriller set in our century, as a police psychologist attempts to track down a group of terrorists. And the third and final strand accompanies two strange beings into the future.

A novel of connecting and reconnecting, inspired by the writings of the great visionary poet Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* is a genre-bending, haunting ode to life itself – a work of surpassing power and beauty by one of the most original and daring writers at work today

## Specimen Days Details

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Author : Michael Cunningham

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## From Reader Review Specimen Days for online ebook

### Dale says

I haven't done this in a while, but today seems like a good day to bring it back to the fore: I started my current job exactly one year ago, June 18, 2007. I've been doing the Metro commute for a whole year. And today, as the Blue Line train pulled into Crystal City, I finished my sixty-fourth book. (Don't worry, I have number sixty-five with me as well, to start on the commute home. I've gotten pretty good at knowing when I'll finish a book and having backup available.)

I wanted to spread around the kind of books I was reading, so how did I do?

Classics: 9

Modern Lit: 24

Genre (sci-fi/fantasy/horror): 17

Non-fiction: 14

Considering that I probably could have spent the past year reading nothing but genre-dork stuff, I think that's pretty good. A little slack on the classics, but I did read both Ulysses and Gravity's Rainbow in the past twelve months. I expect that number will be higher in the next year.

But let's pause a moment in appreciation of Specimen Days, which I filed under "Modern Lit" for my tallying above, but which actually has a pretty high genre content level as well. The book is actually three stories told consecutively which aren't so much interwoven as indebted to one another. It starts with a tale of immigrant factory workers in late 19th century New York City. The middle part concerns a forensic psychologist dealing with terrorist-inspired murders in early 21st century New York City. The last third chronicles the pilgrimage of a cyborg man, an alien woman and a mutant child from NYC to Denver in an unspecified future (though for symmetry's sake and from other clues I'd guess early-to-mid 22nd century). The connective threads (besides New York) are slight - a beautiful painted bowl that passes from owner to owner, the names of the main characters (always variations on Simon, Catherine and Lucas), the poetry of Walt Whitman cropping up in almost entirely non sequitor ways. Each story examines what relationships are, what they mean, how they work - and if that isn't a summary that applies to almost every single book I've read in the past year, I don't know what is.

Cunningham looks at a lot of old things in new ways and gets to a lot of truths, and I enjoyed reading the stories very much. The only know I have against the book is that it claims to be "A Novel" but in my opinion it's really not. I was expecting the third story to tie everything together and show me the hidden connection between all three by the time it ended, but that never happened. Or maybe it did and I'm a bit too obtuse to see it, but the three stories seemed to be distinct and separate with some clever overlaps but no real unity. Still, whether it truly deserves to be called a novel or is just a short collection of long stories, it was worth reading.

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### ?????? ????? says

I knew little of Michael Cunningham's work (I just knew that he wrote *The Hours* which was an Academy

Award-winning film my parents loved) so I had no fixed expectations. I gave myself four days to finish this book but managed to do so in three days. That's how captivating it was. Cunningham's experimental fiction was masterfully told, like a musical composition that rises and falls with the right notes. In Specimen Days, he writes in three genres, dividing the book into three breathtaking novellas.

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*"A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; How could I answer the child?... I do not know what it is any more than he." ~Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass*

### **(1) "In The Machine" A Historical Dickensian Tale**

The first novella was written in the boy Lucas' POV. It was set sometime during the industrialization age of America. Lucas' brother Simon has just died and this left his fiancee Catherine uncared for and with child. Though already shouldering the financial burden of supporting his parents, thirteen-year-old Lucas still felt it was his responsibility to watch out after Catherine. He was a peculiar boy, reciting Walt Whitman poetry as his way to express his feelings or to make conversation. Through Lucas' narrations, Cunningham's knack for weaving lyrical phrases is astounding. The paragraphs contain such breathless pacing and descriptive precision which magnified the strength of Lucas' evocative insights about his surroundings as he tries to understand the concept of labor and death. He wants to de-mystify such adult concepts and it is Whitman's poetry that guides him. At the very heart of it all, Lucas begins to explore the possibility that his brother's soul was trapped inside the welding machinery that Lucas uses at his work in the factory. Believing that if men die and they spread out among the leaves and grass (as Whitman eloquently wrote), Lucas was convinced that ghosts dwell among the machinery across New York, including the sewing machine that Catherine tends to at her own workplace. He ventures on to save her.

For such a comical angle to the story, Cunningham was still able to approach it with great sensitivity, providing passages that brood over the simplest but unanswered questions about life which gives Lucas' character a crushing sort of loneliness. He is a child who tries to make sense of the world by allowing poetry to fill the gaps. It's a feat that manages to intensify the reading experience even more, and Cunningham drives it home by using Lucas' "ghost" as an allegory of the American industrialization's hovering presence, and the gradual withdrawal of human spirit from the organic towards the mechanical. Lucas' belief of souls being trapped in the machines is a symbolism easy to pick up on, but Cunningham's beautifully convoluted prose is rich with details that it was able to keep everything subtle. The climactic ending was even transitory to the next novella. Reading In the Machine was like stumbling in the dark, and trusting all the sensory directions given, but never truly seeing the big picture forming until the novel moves into the second story.

*"And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier."*

### **(2) "The Children's Crusade" A Detective Psychological Thriller**

The sudden shift of genre by the second novella was not at all jarring. This time it was set on a post-9/11 New York with Cat Martin, a forensic psychologist, as a focus character. She works for a hotline division who handles calls from possible terrorists. She got a message from a young boy who talked about "the family" and recites mantras like "Every atom belonging to you as well belongs to me," which she recognized to be a verse from a Walt Whitman poem. Days after, news of child terrorists have spread across the city, claiming both the rich and the poor as victims of homemade bombs. At first glance, this story doesn't have any sort of connection to the first one until the reader realizes that Cat was short for "Catherine" and her boyfriend's name is "Simon" and she has a son named "Luke" whom she lost to an illness. But these are

different characters with the same names and are a century apart from each other, yet Cunningham weaves these two stories—one of the past and one from the somewhat present—as a dissonance of worlds that are created through the choices of these three central characters. Whatever the boy Lucas from the first story feared about then, those ghosts he talked about, have now taken shape into something horribly concrete in Cat Martin's New York where a heightened sense of paranoia and grief is exploited by a terrorist cell composed of children.

It was a detective story, hard-boiled and suspenseful with every turn of the page—right until the moment of a chance meeting between Cat and one of the child terrorists. In this story, Cunningham delves into the scarlet thread so immensely significant in detective stories and *The Children's Crusade* became a harrowing tale that overflows with the twisted reflections of humanity's fears. It was by this installment that I started to tear up completely because Cunningham has a way to string along certain phrases that provokes such a visceral, emotional response that a reader just surrenders without even knowing it. It was juxtaposed perfectly with *In The Machine*, especially since he used the three characters (Catherine, Simon and Lucas) as representations of man, woman and child; three aspects poignantly enhanced by the last novella.

*"Fear not O Muse! truly new ways and days receive, surround you,*

*And yet the same old human race, the same within, without,*

*Faces and hearts the same, feelings the same, yearning the same*

*The same old love, beauty and use the same."*

### **(3) "Like Beauty" A Sci-Fi Love Story About Birth and Destination**

The final novella was set 150 years in the future in New York. Humans have already made first contact with aliens and they are lizard life-forms called Nadians who are now living as refugees in planet Earth. They are domestic helpers, treated as secondary citizens and enslaved by mankind. Simon—a biomechanical cyborg—is the focus character, and he was programmed as a mugger in the New York streets, sought after by tourists who want to be victimized because of the adrenaline release it provides. He was captivated by a Nadian called Catareen whom he starts an adventure with when they decided to escape to Denver. On the road, they met a homeless boy posing as Jesus in a Halloween costume named Lucas. This story was the most challenging of the three because it was science fiction and there is always a strange pull with this genre that Cunningham was able to give justice to. Simon was a biomechanical conception; half-human and half-machine (a literal representation of Lucas' ghost of a brother from the first story) and his 'maker' has included Whitman poetry in his software which he recites every time under duress. What follows after is a redemptive tale about the power of technology and a more humane understanding of how it can enrich lives instead of destroy them.

There is an enduring quality to the prose of this story that was magnified by the previous events from *In The Machine* and *The Children's Crusade*. It seemed to me that these versions of Simon, Catherine and Lucas are products of the past and present colliding together to form a future defined by beginnings and endings that mirror each other. So many imagery and symbolism come full circle by this last story. Religious allegories were also used. I was listening to Death Cab For Cutie's "Tiny Vessels" so I was positively imbued with emotions and sensations that can only be expressed in tears. It didn't feel cheesy at all because it seemed like a perfectly acceptable response to cry about this book because of its overwhelming poetry in its vitalizing prose.

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Overall, Michael Cunningham's Specimen Days is a treasure. As you read through, it feels like seeds are sprouting out from your heart and flourishes within, transforming you as a reader into a person more aware of transience and embracing its trappings.

**RECOMMENDED: 10/10**

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### **Xandra says**

Three novellas set in New York in different centuries, linked by three similar characters (a woman, a man and a disfigured kid), the poetry of Walt Whitman and, why not, a small white bowl. It took me about a year to get through this book, so I can't guarantee that the presence of the bowl doesn't have a deeper signification. If it does, I missed it. Must be a pretty special bowl though, to get through the industrial revolution, present day America, post-apocalyptic alien populated world, and then be flown into space to some distant planet. In any case, the stories are good.

**In The Machine** is my favorite and, taking the shape of a ghost story, a great metaphor of the industrial revolution. The narrator assumes a depressing tone to covey the threatening nature of the machines in a world afraid and overwhelmed by rapid change. The lower class characters fill every page with palpable sadness and hopelessness and with the fear that an increased use of the machines will lower their worth. Walt Whitman appears as a character.

**The Children's Crusade** is a crime thriller revolving around a forensic psychologist who fields calls from potential terrorists. When one of her callers, an orphaned young boy, is involved in a suicide bombing, a police investigation is launched. Not a genre I favor, I consider the police story to be the low point of the book (albeit good).

The last novella, **Like Beauty**, is set in a future where humans have made contact with lizard-like aliens, some of whom were shipped to earth to do menial jobs. It's a story of friendship, which could also be read as a love story, between a male android and a female alien lizard, who are on the run from the authorities. Tomcruise and Katemoss make an appearance as little brats.

An enjoyable book overall, I only wish I'd stuck with it for a few days instead of dragging it out for months.

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### **João Roque says**

Michael Cunningham nunca nos deixa indiferentes.

Neste seu livro ele conta-nos três histórias diferentes, bastante espaçadas no tempo, mas com alguns pontos comuns - Nova York, Walt Whitman e uma singela tigela...

A primeira história é triste, cinzenta e reflecte muito bem a era da industrialização, nos finais do século XIX; o poder da máquina é total e o ser humano a ela é subjugado.

Na segunda, aquela que mais perto está dos nossos dias, vemos todo o efeito que hoje continua ou mesmo se acelera do medo e da realidade do terrorismo, que pode e isso é um facto real, não ter razões específicas,

políticas ou religiosas.

Finalmente a terceira história mostra-nos uma América pós-apocalíptica, numa ficção científica de certo modo não totalmente convincente mas com pontos de interesse.

Todas as histórias escapam a um fim trágico, embora também não enveredem por um "happy-end" - é como que um adeus aos problemas que cada uma mostra, mas sem entusiasmo e sem chama.

De todas elas, gostei essencialmente da segunda - A Cruzada das Crianças - e ela é de todas aquela com um fim mais positivo.

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### **Annabel Smith says**

I was surprised and delighted by every element of Specimen Days: the precision and freshness of the language, the startling imagery and metaphors, and the utterly novel way of looking at the world. Because of the beauty of the prose I was expecting a story about nothing but the plot quickly became intensely dramatic and entirely unpredictable.

Every detail is meaningful, not just decorative, and the motifs that link the three stories are subtle and clever. The changes in register - from historical, to contemporary to speculative - were so assured, my suspension of disbelief wasn't strained for a moment, despite the audacity of the concept.

It is wry, funny, insightful and disturbing and provokes thought on an incredible range of contemporary issues including poverty, immigration, race, media, pollution, development, loss and death, without ever feeling preachy or didactic.

Specimen Days is nothing less than astonishing.

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### **Julie Christine says**

I recommend this because I think Cunningham stretched here. He took chances- not all of which really work- but I respect the risks. He follows a similar MO to The Hours- taking the works of a famous writer/poet and using an acknowledged theme to tie together different eras, voices, styles (in the case of Specimen Days, it's Walt Whitman and the theme of welcoming death). What makes the novellas in Specimen Days work for me are the characters- Cunningham creates intense humanity in the most bizarre or unbelievable circumstances.

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### **Schmacko says**

I generally LOVE Michael Cunningham, but I felt he was copying his "literature borrowing" idea from The Hours. He was experimenting with form, but it didn't work for me. Three stories linked to one work - the author shows up in the earliest story - that's what he borrowed from The Hours.

In Specimen Days, Cunningham offers three novels based on Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman. In the first novella, set in Victorian NYC, a mentally-challenged factory worker has taken his dead brother's job even as the boy obsesses about the poet. The boy starts to hear his brother's ghost in the machines. In the second, a

modern, NYC police woman investigates a gang of terrorist children motivated by Whitman's work. The third is about an android and an alien trying to escape future NYC; the android has a Whitman app built into his brain...

The first story is Grand Guignol, like Sweeney Todd - melodrama. The second is a modern urban terrorist plot with child gangs, with a little VC Andrews thrown in. The third is speculative science fiction. Weird combo.

It doesn't jibe as well as *The Hours*; the disparate styles create distance instead of unity. I felt like he was experimenting, like what Michael Chabon does more successfully, but Cunningham is more interested in prose than plot, so the drive wasn't as there to captivate the readers. These stories are pretty, just not gripping. There was no party to anticipate, like in *The Hours*. In the third story of *Specimen Days*, the big climactic moment happens halfway through the tale. In the second novella, the overlap of themes of terrorism and child-rearing seems odd. I liked the first tale the most (even though I generally ain't a fan of melodramatic ghost stories), and I like that each of the three tales explored forms of resistance and terrorism - though I wish, again, they'd been more unified. And I'm not sure what this sort of defiance has to do with Whitman.

MC is a gorgeous writer. And I love that he went out on a limb. It's a nice, interesting read - just not emotionally or intellectually gripping.

BTW, I met Cunningham in 2007, and he signed all my books at the time, filling them with personal notes. We both went through the Iowa Writer's Workshop, so we had that...and other stuff...in common. He's extraordinarily intelligent and witty; if you hear of a speaking engagement, go.

#### UPON FURTHER THOUGHT:

I should add that Whitman was very much an admirer of the common man and the disenfranchised. With the characters in all three books (minus the maternal detective of the second), Cunningham tries to capture this.

Whitman opposed slavery, and he was the "American poet" at a time of great upheaval in our country. He worked through the Civil War, the influx of immigrants into the West for riches, that same influx into the Midwest for farmland, the changing of the Northeast by pogrom immigration, the birth of unions, and the start of American anarchy and communist sentiment.

The idea of the need for uprising and anarchy run through all three stories, but I don't feel Whitman wrote about those political ideas specifically. Whitman was interested in true equality of all people, including the slaves. Maybe Cunningham is saying something about how respect of the common person and the disenfranchised is the start of them respecting themselves, leading to their unionizing, their uprising. Maybe Cunningham is showing how Whitman's peaceful work can be turns to revolution and violence. Maybe Cunningham is showing that there will always be a disenfranchised, the handicapped, children and – in the future – aliens and androids, possibly.

Whitman was gay, and Cunningham is. Cunningham seems to shy from pulling in this aspect. Again, perhaps that's on purpose.

In short, I love leaving a book asking questions. I could've asked questions about the common people, the disenfranchised, and how great works inspire and goad them throughout time. I don't, though. The only question I don't like asking at the end of a book is, "What the heck was the author intending?" With the

disparate styles, the unstated disunity of theme and subject, I'm asking it here.

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### **Ann says**

"Specimen Days" shares its title with a collection of notes and essays written by Walt Whitman, as close as he ever came to an autobiography. It was published near a time Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" was re-issued, 'Leaves' being his masterwork poem which celebrated mankind and nature, and addressed the eternal cycle of life. During this time New York was becoming a major city, and symbolized for Whitman the growth of modern America. Whitman also did his own version of 'Lighting out for the territories' by traveling to the West in 1879.

Cunningham's 'Days' consists of three linked stories, taking place for the most part in NYC: first around 1900, then a few years after 9/11, and at last about 150 years in the future. In each case, there is a woman named Catherine (or some variation), and man named Simon, and an imperfect child called Luke. The thread connecting them all is the poetry of Whitman, "The first great American visionary poet. He didn't just celebrate himself. He celebrated everybody and everything." Many of the characters struggle in various ways to discover their souls, to witness 'the birth of stars'. Each story is in a different style and focuses on a different member of the core trio, but the life force present in Whitman's poetry is always paramount. I found this novel hypnotic and enthralling, and I now have an entirely new appreciation for Whitman.

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### **J. Kent Messum says**

I don't know what it is about this novel, but I'm convinced there is some kind of magic weaved into the pages. I found it to be a captivating read, extremely well written, and certainly thought provoking.

'Specimen Days' is made up of three different novellas set in New York City that are separated by time (past, present, future) but deal with themes of society, humanity, and what happens when abnormality threatens the fabric of civility. They stand alone as individual stories, but are also connected through plot devices and the poetic works of Walt Whitman. Part literary, part thriller, and part history, Specimen Days covers a lot of ground, and covers it well. There are paranormal, noir, and science fiction elements in play which serves to create a book that certainly ain't like the rest.

From a ghost story set against the backdrop of the industrial age, to a thriller featuring a children's cult that have been brainwashed into becoming suicide bombers, to a barely recognizable NYC a hundred years from now where a lower class alien race and synthetic humans are being brutally oppressed by a society that has largely gone backward as much as forward, 'Specimen Days' is big book brimming with big ideas.

I've read the novel several times now and found it just as engaging and transformative as the first time. Cunningham's prose and ideas always play on my mind long after I put the book down. Definitely worth checking out.

\*This book was one of the '10 Books That Stuck With Me' piece I wrote. See which others made the list...

### **James Murphy says**

I think this is a beautiful novel. Because for me imagination in fiction counts for a lot, I admire this novel very much. In some ways it's a stronger work than I originally thought when I 1st read it a few years ago. This reading, however, I thought the 3d section, "Like Beauty," is weaker than I remembered, making it somewhat less novel, though still very impressive. Specimen Days is 3 novellas built around the model of Dante's Divine Comedy. Each novella uses some of the same elements: names of characters, New York City localities, the fact of a bowl passed through time from "In the Machine" to "The Children's Crusade" to "Like Beauty." And, of course, Cunningham's most distinguishing unifier is that Walt Whitman has a presence in characters who compulsively and at random, inappropriate times quote him. In fact, Whitman himself appears in the 1st novella, set in the New York City of the late 19th century. What function do Whitman's expansive and rapturous quotes from Leaves of Grass serve in the novel? I think Whitman is the Virgil guiding Dante through his metaphysical model. Dante himself in each story is a young deformed boy named Luke. Beatrice, Dante's love and model of spiritual perfection, is Catherine or Cat or Catareen. What's different for me this reading is that while I'd recognized in the previous reading that each novella represents in turn Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, I think I discovered that each of them moves completely through the Dantean model. Dante/Luke is shown Paradise 3 times. Every section is redemptive. While it's still true in a very general, loose sense that the successive stories represent the 3 sections of Dante's universe, so that "In the Machine" parallels Inferno, for instance, it's also true that Dante's journey is completed 3 times. I like this novel very much. I like this kind of novel very much, what Harold Bloom says we used to call imaginative fiction. Reading and understanding a novel like this, a novel erected around such a heavy theme, discovering its particular beauty, is to be led into Paradiso itself. I begin reading early each day before daylight, and in front of a large window facing the street. Reading, I'm aware of morning filling the street while the grandeur of a novel like Specimen Days fills my mind. At some point I can look up to see that, just as Cat/Beatrice showed Luke/Dante at the end of "The Children's Crusade," morning is everywhere. Splendor in the street, splendor in my lap.

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### **Peter says**

A preface: It has been a good long while since I read this book, and whether or not my glowing review is one-hundred percent genuine or I've simply romanticized my enjoyment of it based on my preconceived notions that it was going to be a work of genius and my subsequent recommendations to anyone and everyone I know who likes to read (you know, when the book comes to mind, at any rate), remains to be seen.

And that's not even true, because how could I ever recapture how I felt after reading the last word of the last line of the last chapter? There's no way. I could reread it of course, but there's something missing from the experience of reading a book a second time. The mystery, the enigma, the wide-eyed expectation of something exciting and new; none of that lives beyond the moment you experience it.

And so, what I am taking a damn long time to say is this: I can't be extraordinarily specific about the details of why I enjoyed this novel so much, I can only color it with the broad strokes of someone whose spirit overrides their intellect (at least with regards to reading...).

All that being said...

This book is actually a collection of three books bound tightly together by shared symbolism, characters, themes, props, and the reverence for Walt Whitman. A man, a woman, and a small boy find their lives intertwining in a cosmically profound way in the New York City of three different centuries. The past, the present, and the future provide the landscape in which these stories roam free.

And that's exactly what it feels like at first: a wild roaming experiment. I actually felt a bit of trepidation at picking this book up at the local Barnes (or was it Borders? [does it really matter? {NO!}]) because of the very idea that part of the book takes place during the Industrial Revolution (which I know nothing about because I wasn't there) and another part takes place in the future (which none of us know anything about because we have yet to arrive). I don't know why it is, but it takes a lot for me to connect with a story from a different era. I'm sure that's just a symptom of some much more terrible disease along the lines of century-centricism, or datism, or, you know, some vague form of voluntary illiteracy, but I can't help it. I want to love Dickens, I want to enjoy "Jane Eyre," I would kill for the ability to hold Chaucer, Proust, or Voltaire close to my heart. But... I don't.

So, it was with a heavy shrug and a deep sigh that I finally plucked this novel from the stacks. And I'll be goddamned if that wasn't one of the best literary decisions I have ever made.

Nothing I say could prepare you for just how fantastically gripping this novel is. With only a single exception, or maybe two, I have never been so affected by the decisions a character makes, the environment that forces them to change, or the opposition that allows them to stand up for who they are.

You know what, I won't even allow myself to continue along these lines, because I sound like I'm just giving hideous little sound bites trying to entice a reader to flip through the pages. I don't want to do that or sound that way.

The book is amazing. Period.

You should just read it. And when you do, you'll understand how difficult it is to put what you're feeling into words.

Hence...these jumbled ramblings.

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## **K.D. Absolutely says**

American writer who is more known for 1988's Pulitzer awardee for Fiction *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham (born 1952) first published this book, *The Specimen Days* in 2005. If *The Hours* is based on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Specimen Days* is based on the Walt Whitman's complete collection of poetry and collected prose bearing the same title.

If there is an award for the most organized and ambitious structure for a trilogy, it has to be this Cunningham

work. The reason is that this book is divided into 3 parts. Each part has its own 3 characters (a man, a woman and a boy), its own setting and time and its own genre:

Part I - *In The Machine*: **Simon, Catherine, Lucas** - Past: Industrial Revolution - horror

Part II - *The Children's Crusade*: **Simon, Cat, Luke** - Present: 20th century - noir thriller

Part III - *Like Beauty*: **Simon, Catareen, Luke** - Future: 150 years from now - science fiction

What these 3 stories have in common:

- 1) All set in New York (but at different periods of time)
- 2) They all have Walt Whitman either as a character or the lines in his Leaves of Grass are read or become basis of the story
- 3) There are only 3 main characters: a man, a woman and a boy but they may or may not be related to each other.

Each story can stand on its own. Although I am not really fond of the three genres, I liked the first one better because of the way the scare was handled. I just cannot associate ghost with machines but it helped when if I imagined how people during the Industrial Revolution probably felt about machines taking over their jobs. Also, prior to this book, I had no idea who Walt Whitman was but I understand that he was suspected to be gay and based on Wiki, Michael Cunningham (who is openly gay to but he does not want to be called gay writer as his being gay is not all about his being a writer) worked his Laws of Creation as editor of Walt Whitman's poems and he also its introduction. So, while reading, I had to check entries in Wiki what the Whitman (as character) or Whitman's poems being read in the story probably meant. Thus, it took me awhile to finish this book and for most times, I just got tired of reading and understanding those lines from Whitman's poems.

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### **stephanie says**

i was SO looking forward to this book, it's kind of ridiculous. i mean, i own the first edition copy, because i BOUGHT it right then.

and then. it was so disappointing. part of it may be personal, but i don't think all of it.

he does (or tries to do) what he did with The Hours, but i think he fails spectacularly. there are three stories, in three separate time periods, and there are things interwoven between each of the stories that links them together. instead of virginia woolf, it's walt whitman (who makes an appearance in the first section, least you think i'm reaching too far). there's whitman's poetry, this china cup, and something else that i forgot. the first story is set in whitman's new york, the second is set in early twenty-first century new york, and the third is manhattan, 150 years in the future. the first part is tolerable, the second part is eerily believable given our government, but feels extremely heavy-handed and disconcerting in a not-good way, and the third piece is just utterly, utterly bizarre.

then the whole thing ends, and you aren't left with a shred of hope. the lesson i learned from this book was - the world is spiraling into decay and has been since we started relying on machines, and there's not a single fucking thing we can do about it. we just die.

normally, i love shit like that. this? this was poorly executed, relied on gimmicks he'd already used, and was just depressing. i mean, i can't think of anything good to say about it, except that i obviously remember it and

have an opinion about it, so, yay?

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### **Teresa says**

Before reading this book, I came across a couple of comments (one that I heard directed to Cunningham himself at the Tennessee Williams Festival in N.O. last month) that addressed Cunningham 'copying' himself, that he was doing here with Whitman what he did with Woolf in *The Hours*. It is true that each writer has a lot to do with each respective novel, but beyond that I see no similarity.

At the aforementioned literary fest, I heard Cunningham call himself a 'language queen' and then later in the day a 'language crank,' meaning that what he looks for when he reads are beautiful sentences. He writes them too. Last night after finishing this book, I dreamed of his sentences, a sure sign of a book that has implanted itself in my brain.

The first section was my favorite, not surprisingly, since it's set in the 19th century. The writing, with the foreboding and visionary thoughts of Lucas, is exquisite. At times (as in each of the later sections as well) it's even creepy and tension-filled. Maybe it's meant to evoke a sensational novel of the time period, and though I know it can be read as a ghost story, I think it can also be read as not one. (A la James' "The Turn of the Screw"?)

Even in the second section, which is of a crime-thriller style (not my favorite genre), I was won over, though I wasn't sure of it at first and in certain passages. It may not have been a fit for me, but looking back on it, I think it fit the overall pattern and scheme of the book.

To say what I liked about the speculative, dystopian third section might spoil the experience for another reader. I'll just say that it addresses what it means to be human, and what it might mean to be human in the future, and that who turned out to be a Whitman figure in this section surprised me and perhaps is what turned the whole work from 4 to 5 stars for me -- that, and my dreaming of its sentences.

I have my friend James Murphy and his review to thank for my reading this novel, and for my seeing the parallels to Dante (I don't know Dante well enough to have seen that on my own), making the read even richer. Now I wish I had read this before the Fest, so I could've asked Cunningham about that!

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### **Marwan Hamed says**

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## **Anthony Panegyres says**

Michael Cunningham's Specimen Days is composed of three neat novellas, which all contain a twist at the end. In all three there is Lucas (Lucas, Luke and Luke), a small boy, with a weak body and oversized orange-shaped head; and Simon (whose character varies from a deceased brother; to a wealthy collector and seller of antiques; to an android searching for his soul); and Catherine (a street-smart impoverished girl; to Cat, a lit-loving African American detective; to Catareen, a Nadian - a species of alien that forms the persecuted class on Earth).

The three novellas are interlinked via Walter Whitman's poetry, which actually services the stories without jarring as much as I had anticipated, and a unique bowl (I will leave the later for the lit critics to analyse). The linked stories move from New York past, to the contemporary city, before culminating in the New York of the future (although this final piece is largely based outside of the Big Apple).

Cunningham's prose is lyrical and effective for the most part. Although there were a couple of questionable bits of writing that stood out where Cunningham strives to be too clever and falls short. No guessing as to which adverb stands out below:

"Perhaps he had gotten up during the night and moved them, somnambulistically. No. They were nowhere."

And although Cunningham is an astute user of repetition - he uses it to considerable effect throughout Specimen Days - the following felt like a poor man's version of Cormac McCarthy's The Road:

"The horse whinnied insistently. It needed to be fed. He went and fed the horse."

Overall however, Cunningham illustrates with these novellas that he is not a one-trick pony in that he successfully delivers three stories with vastly different voices. And to Cunningham's credit, all three have their own beautiful and steady rhythm. All three, like most ambitious works, also have their flaws. The ghostly-gothic In the Machine seems to climax and resolve too quickly after a slow-simmering build up of tension. The Children's Crusade falls into noir clichés and its attempt to change the African-American stereotype is too deliberate and calculated that it may further polarise readers (Cat, an African-American bomb-squad detective, is a literature major who everyone thinks is white on the phone). And Like Beauty relies on the canons of yesteryear science fiction, with chases, exotic alien prowess and alas, info-dumps.

Yet Specimen Days is certainly worth a look at for both writers and readers. Cunningham wins the reader over with his prose in general but he also embraces our most endearing quality, that of compassion. And in this sense, Cunningham has something meaningful to say. The recurring theme is illustrated in all three pieces via sacrifice of some sort.

All three stories contain their hero, and Cunningham here is a hero too in courageously exploring three genres (historical ghost story, detective thriller and sci-fi) to deliver a fine 'novel' or three 'loosely linked-novellas'. Regardless of what the form is labelled, I am glad that I read it and I am now eager to read another of his other novels, Flesh and Blood.

PS And a big 'thank you' to Deborah Hunn for recommending Specimen Days some time ago.

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## George says

Specimen Days is divided into three sections -- each set in a different time period in New York. A man named Simon, a woman named some variation of Catherine, and a boy named Lucas/Luke appear in each section (rotating who takes the lead in each), and a couple of settings, as well as a minor character or two, also repeat. The poetry of Walt Whitman also threads through the whole book, with Whitman himself actually making a cameo at one point, in the kind of gratuitous appearance that you expect from a bad television show (or from the Simpsons), rather than from a book that has this kind of literary pedigree.

In the first section, we're in New York in the 19th century. There are lots of exciting changes afoot -- it's the Industrial Revolution after all. The star of this section is Lucas, who works in a factory, but has no idea what exactly he's making (I love that part). Lucas spouts Whitman poetry in the midst of normal conversations, something that grows old pretty quick (I can only imagine how quickly it'd grow old if you were actually talking to the kid). I'm torn between whether this section should have been longer or shorter. As it is, it reads like one of Stephen King's lesser short stories.

The second section zooms us forward to a more modern New York. This time we've gone from Stephen King to a crime show -- not a Law & Order type, but one of those ones where we get to follow the detectives home after work and realize that they're human too. There's a glimmer of something interesting in this section (I admit it, I'm a sucker for those crime shows), and I think it's overall the strongest of the three, but on the last page, Cunningham manages to suck all life and hope right out of the story in a matter of a couple of sentences. That's fine -- I was an English major, I can handle that kind of thing -- but it was a disappointing end to a fairly promising set-up.

The final section is where Cunningham tests how many readers can give up on a book after reading 2/3 of it. I, for one, can't, so I followed him from crime show to science fiction -- fearfully, because science fiction is a genre that should be attempted by precious few "serious" writers. Unfortunately, Cunningham is a weak science fiction writer, and seems to have nothing to offer here other than a pasted-together version of half a dozen other books and movies (and don't get me started on his choice to name a character Tomcruise).

What's going to save this book for me, I think, is trying to connect the three stories. The repeated themes of love, sacrifice, and discrimination are all relevant, important themes, and maybe this book will go down as capturing some sort of post-9/11 zeitgeist. I have not read The Hours, so I came to this book with some uncertainty about what to expect. I can appreciate an author's foray into genre fiction (Michael Chabon has demonstrated both the good and the bad sides of this), but there was something about this one that read a little bit like a writer's workshop exercise (I imagine the as-yet-unpublished fourth section takes us to the world of fantasy, where Simon is a gallant knight, Lucas a gnome abandoned by his parents, and Catherine a talking unicorn). All in all, it just felt a little too slight for an author of this supposed caliber.

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## TL says

Read via audiobook and hardcover

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Stories:

In the Machine - 4.5 stars

Children's Crusade - 4.5 stars

Like Beauty - 4.5 stars

Alan Cumming's narration = <3 5 stars :)

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This is a series of inter-connected stories that feature the same souls but in different roles and circumstances. A man named Simon, a boy named Luke, and a woman named Catherine/Catareen.

Each story has it's own feel and vibe but at the same time you can sense this thread connecting everything.. not sure of where it leads but content to go along for the ride.

It made me smile when bits of other stories made an appearance in the following one, making that connection (for lack of a better word) more clear. A certain small thing that seemed to have a certain aura about it had a connection to everyone, drawing them to it even if they didn't understand why. No big purpose in it, just a small beauty in uncertain times.

Throughout it all, Walt Whitman and his poetry maintain a solid presence.. it's felt keenly in some cases and is strangely approiate in one.

The third story was the most out there, but in a good way. The whole world of that story was done very well and despite being semi vague it gave you enough of the world to understand what was going on.

I have no adequate words to explain how much I love this book... beautiful and gorgeous seem clichéd but I don't care:).

Would highly recommend :)

\*May edit for thoughts and quotes on other stories later... pardon any errors till I can get to my laptop\*

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### **Doogyjim says**

As an admirer of the films of Michael Cunningham's novels (A Home at the End of the World & The Hours) I thought I better get round to actually reading one of his books. Specimen Days sat on my shelf since September of last year when I bought it with an Amazon voucher but for months was ignored as I'd run my finger over the spines looking for my next read. I'd notice it in passing and feel a little sheepish as it sat there, so unassuming with its stark black and white jacket design. Judging books by their covers is bad habit of mine.

Just as The Hours is a voyage round Virginia Woolf, this novel is haunted by Walt Whitman whose work is quoted throughout the book and who makes a cameo appearance at one point. Indeed the same three characters appear in each of the three sections (Cunningham structures many of his works around trios) and all have the same personal traits as if they have been reincarnated. Names, events and objects echo through the book, creating a sense of unity and transcendence. Cunningham never lets his creations have an easy time

of it and their fate at the ending of each section remains ambiguous - but the thematic and visual leitmotifs woven throughout hint at a coherence behind the scenes, as if a grand scheme is afoot.

The first section concerns a boy in 19th Century New York who's convinced his brother's ghost is trapped in the machine that killed him. In the second a NYPD officer is trying to track down a squad of child suicide bombers and the last concerns a cyborg and extra-terrestrial escaping a dystopian future. Poetry, escape, transcendence, mortality and trust are the focuses.

Boldly, beautifully written, it faltered only in the final section for me. The first part I thought hugely moving (the tears could just have been my hangover), the second gripping - I had imaginings about the thriller he could have written based on the child suicide bombers. But the third really wasn't my cup of tea. Sorry, lizard romances just don't do it for me. Maybe I'm not open minded enough. Though at least in future I'll listen to that nagging voice coming from my bookshelf. Now, where did I put that copy of *Finnegan's Wake*....?

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## Cameron says

They say Walt Whitman's beard drew butterflies. This book, I think, would probably draw something far stranger if left out in a field.

A triptych of tightly-wound exercises in genre--a Machine Age ghost story, a whodunnit set in the Patriot Act hysteria of the mid 00s, and a scifi roadtrip through a blighted America featuring lizard people--*Specimen Days* baffled the hell out of me. Is it an extended meditation on the machinations and strangeness of our bodies? A sly, Marx-friendly comment on how we dissolve into our occupations, often without a peep? A hallucinatory glimpse of the humanity behind "terror"? Is Cunningham just outing a long-dormant *Blade Runner* geekdom?

All these things?

I dunno. The title makes me think that Cunningham's aware of the Frankenstein nature of the book.

But, as other reviews note, Walt Whitman is the glue holding together the cobbled-together pieces of the book. Cunningham, I think, is jostling elbows rather uneasily with Whitman and his legacy of heavenly and bodily affinities. "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," once sang Whitman, and Cunningham finds not only solace and empathy in this declaration of our common lot, but also horror. In the novel's second act, orphaned boys become suicide bombers in New York City, quoting Whitman as they fatally embrace random strangers. Joining together the disparate, and "doing something" about the specialized, fragmented mess of our everyday lives, is both the theme and craft of *Specimen Days*. But Whitman's organic, circular nature of existence, and his view of death as something "different from what any one supposed, and luckier" seems to give Cunningham the willies. Death may really only be birth disguised, but Cunningham skews this revelation in interesting, not-entirely-comfortable ways: when people die in *Specimen Days* they return not as benign lyrical grass, but as oily ghosts, haunting phone calls, and alien corpses that must be buried.

In its uneasy relationship with its literary patron, *Specimen Days* is an interesting departure from the glowing, perhaps uncritical relationship Cunningham fostered with Woolf in *The Hours*. Cunningham's craft, too, has expanded here: he writes with abandon about a wide swath of humanity (and nonhumanity), and the

result is dizzyingly pleasing. His characters are compelling, especially in the final two stories, I think. And his ability to shuttle between philosophical musing and plot advancement is inspiring, not ham-handed as some reviewers have complained. (Most fiction, I think, engages in existential inquiry and some degree of navel-gazing... it's just that Cunningham lets himself do it aloud, rather than letting the story's machinery do it for him, and occasionally I \*like\* to have little pithy axioms thrown out at me.)

While I think other books do a more complete job of teasing out the thematic threads present in *Specimen Days* (Evan Dara's *The Lost Scrapbook* comes to mind, especially, and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* does a better job juggling multiple genres, from what I've heard), few so honestly portray the odd weather of our interior lives. And few writers so incisively take the scalpel to specific moments in time and how events unfold before characters in slow, Brownian motion--the novel's title again comes to mind. And few writers have Cunningham's gift for pacing and pleasurable images. Highly recommended.

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