

By Osman Can Yerebakan

Michael Cunningham on His Decades-Long Relationship with Provincetown

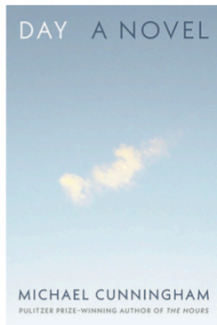
A residency at Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC) brought Michael Cunningham to Provincetown in 1981. For his first night, the twenty-something decided to see a film at the town's one of only three movie theaters. This was in fact not the future Pulitzer winner's very first time in the quaint New England alcove but on the East Coast in general. Once *Gone With The Wind* wrapped in the chilly October evening, a voice from a loudspeaker thanked everyone at the theater for coming and hoped to reunite again in May. Baffled, young Cunningham then stopped at a bar for a drink where the bartender reminded the crowd of the last call with the similar wish to see them again in late spring. "It then dawned on me that the town was going to shut down until next summer," he remembered from the Center on a sun-kissed late August day.

Four decades later, he was once again at FAWC, a routine the longtime New Yorker makes sure to commit to every summer when he vacations in Provincetown. The author's perpetual return (he proudly assures that he has not missed a summer in decades) each year with diligence owes at great length to the community he indeed found during that long first winter he spent with other residents. "Once I bonded with other writers and artists, it was fine that everything was closing down for the winter." Back then, he had just graduated from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and was at a crossroads about his next step when he heard about FAWC's residency program. On a whim, he applied and soon he found himself driving cross-country from Midwest towards east in his "third hand Datsun."

A few weeks into his program, the sense of camaraderie he encountered among his peers amazed the emerging writer. "This was my first experience of meeting people who could in fact become my family out of a blood relation," he



Left: A portrait of Cunningham by Richard Phibbs. Below: The cover of *Day*, Cunningham's forthcoming novel. Opposite: A collection of book covers/works by Cunningham. Courtesy of the artist.

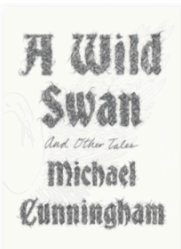
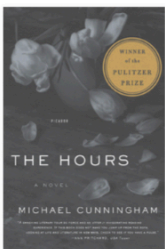
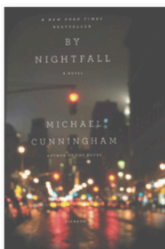
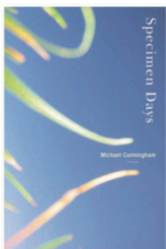
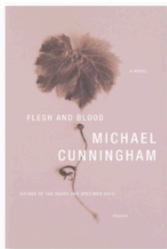
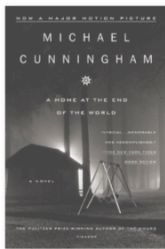


today added. This epiphany would later evolve into a narrative thread in his books such as *A Home at the End of the World* and *The Hours*, which depict characters who build themselves families with those without a genetic tie. In his work over four decades, artists and writers—occasionally vagabonds or luminaries in other cases—have commonly appeared as wounded protagonists, in search of a belonging within themselves and others. Acceptance is a common need in their journeys, whether they are portrayed as outsiders or heroines.

At the beginning of his own journey, however, Cunningham relished himself with the inspiration he found in the creative exchange,

as well as the friendships, among other novice minds. "Back in Iowa, we were all writers with similar goals so there was a sense of competition in the air," he remembered. "Everyone was careful about sharing their ideas because we were all looking for similar inspirations." FAWC's openness to applicants without published or exhibited work was perhaps a lifesaver for a fresh-off-the-school amateur with promise. "Each of us was sort of a blank canvas without a track record," he said.

Over the years, the bond he has built in the FAWC residency and overall Provincetown has been a guiding light in his professional and personal endeavors. "There is a big contrast



between living here and in the city," he explained and added: "If I didn't have Provincetown, it would be very difficult for me to live in New York." A fundamental trait he cherishes in the community on this hook-shaped land on the tip of Cape Cod is genuine kindness. The land's remoteness to the rest of New England and difficulty to reach by car makes it a place for those who intend to be here rather than just pass by. "Everything comes down to whether you're an asshole or not," he mused, "and those who are not are largely outnumbered here." A small cohort largely made up of queer creatives whether they write, paint, dance, choreograph, sculpt, or design, the town's inhabitants, he observes, unite in a genuine acceptance and ease. This by far is a principal reason behind Provincetown's recognition as a gay refuge since the early 20th century. Tennessee Williams spent four summers here in the early '40s; Eugene O'Neill debuted his first play at the influential theater company Provincetown Players in 1916. Later, John Waters became a longtime fixture. And, there is, of course, Dina Martina, the grand dame of Provincetown, whose drag number is the summer's main gig. "Please quote me on this: Dina is a genius(!)," Cunningham assures. The queer communion he has cultivated in town dates back to that first sojourn during which he stayed off of campus at a house on the

East End. What could be an inconvenience for others was in fact an eye-opening experience for the young man who was indeed the only gay resident in his program. "I was open to exploring the life outside the campus," he recalled. One of his regular spots was the Atlantic House (also known as A-House) which is believed to be the first gay bar in the United States. Besides creative musings, love also found Cunningham during his inaugural time in Provincetown and indeed led to his first return soon after. "The boyfriend I had met here had a restaurant and a year after I had completed the residency, we were trying to make it work," he said about his decision to return a year after his residency. He first told his lover that he can "have the town and I will move to the city," but Cunningham changed his mind and continued an on-and-off three year relationship with the town and its one local while he was also starting to settle in New York. Two loves—one for a man and the other for a place—nourished each other, and when one started to come to an end the other endured and even grew. After many years of renting, serendipity played a key role in the evolution of his relationship with Provincetown. When he sold the film rights to *The Hours*—the book which brought Cunningham a Pulitzer—over two decades ago, the check he received was almost exactly the same amount

of a house that entered on the market in the same week.

Cunningham sold the house a few years ago over concerns about its future. "It was built on the sand right facing the ocean," he explained, "but being a quasi-honorary local, I have been able to find a rental every summer before everything gets taken." Spending a large portion of the pandemic in isolation helped him evolve his relationship with nature: "We were reminded every minute that tide is still coming and going and the constellations are still in the sky—and the birds, they are still here." Herring Cove Beach on the West End attracts gay men with its bumpy dunes and marshland ideal for veiling sea-viewed cruising ventures. Cunningham's beach of choice, however, is the Breakwater, a natural pier made out of an abundant pile of rocks. "Depending on the tide, I usually meet friends there after working for a few hours," he said about a typical summer day. Hatches Harbor is another favorite spot for a hang-out, especially when tidal estuaries reach deeper into the landmass to create oceanic rivers.

"One of my friends put up a cabana there with bamboo poles and canvas—some afternoons five people show up and other times, twenty," he said. Occasional Mondays are for catching a play at Gifford House where young playwrights pen a new text in the mornings and perform it later in the day. Cunningham rarely frequents the town's bars these days, but he admires the crowd that piles inside of Spiritus Pizza on Commercial Street once all the bars close doors at 1a.m.

When Cunningham received a call from Penguin House two decades ago with an invitation to write a travel book, he thought the place he knew the best after New York was Provincetown. "There was a bit of a silence on the other side of the line because they thought I would suggest a book on the city," he said. *Land's End: A Walk in Provincetown* came out in 2002 not only as a love letter to his favorite town but also an illustration of how a place and a mind maintain a decades-long bond. "The local community here is very sensitive and protective of their town," he said. Besides guiding the readers through a drug store or a thrift shop, the book meditates on the necessity of a place to fully seep in—a place where returning to feels innate, especially when being there feels so distant from everything else—yet so familiar.

Osman Can Yerebakan is a New York-based art and culture writer and curator. Among the publications where his writing has appeared are *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, *New York magazine*, *New York Times*, *T Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Artforum*, and *Paris Review*. His essays have appeared in books published by *Rizzoli* and *Phaidon*.