

Specimen Days by Michael Cunningham (Fourth Estate)

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In *The Hours* Michael Cunningham devised three disparate and yet related tales: set in three different locations in three different periods, the tales were nevertheless connected through the figure of Virginia Woolf, more specifically her novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Now Cunningham has used the same format – three independent but related tales – in another virtuoso display of his command of genre, period and idiom. This time, instead of the moping presence of Virginia Woolf, we have the brooding figure of Walt Whitman, more specifically his monumental poem *Leaves of Grass*.

The three tales are all set in New York but at intervals of roughly hundred and fifty years – in the mid-nineteenth century, the beginning of the twenty-first, and then some time in the next century.

Cunningham uses as his epigram an extract from Whitman asserting the essential continuity of all people and all times: “the same old human race, the same within without,/ Faces and hearts the same, feelings the same, yearnings the same,/ The same old love, beauty and use the same.” This sameness of people from different eras is, in Cunningham’s novel, signalled also by the configurations of characters he sets up: in all three tales there is a woman called Katherine/Cat/Catareen, a boy called Lucas/ Luke, and a man called Simon. In each tale a different member of the triad is the leading character. Minor motifs connect the tales, such as a mysterious little glass bowl that turns up in all three, or a horse putting in an appearance at crucial moments. And, most intrusively of all, in all three tales there is a character who compulsively spouts gobbets of Whitman. The first, and grimmest, of the tales, “In the Machine”, is set in nineteenth-century New York, amongst the impoverished Irish immigrant community. Lucas is a deformed twelve-year old whose brother, Simon, has been killed by the machine he operated; Lucas now takes over his job, and also concern for Simon’s fiancée, Catherine. He becomes convinced that the machines have a kind of passion for human beings, and that Simon, having been claimed by the machine, now wants to reclaim Catherine as his own. Lucas has been lent a copy of *Leaves of Grass* by a schoolmaster, and in moments of stress, which are frequent, he quotes from it, to the understandable mystification of his associates.

The rest of the novel really draws on this section, in that here we have established the new seductive tyranny of machines that the other two tales will deal with in their different ways. Here, too, Walt Whitman is established as the voice of a rural America that is being destroyed by urbanisation and industrialisation.

The second story “The Children’s Crusade” is a deft thriller about urban terrorism in the aftermath of 7/11. The story’s originality lies in the fact that the terrorists are children, apparently inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman to blow up themselves and whatever unfortunate passer-by they choose to embrace at the moment of their death.

The central character here is Cat, a sassy forensic psychologist whose job it is to deal with these murderously affectionate children. The Simon of the story is her lover, an ultra-smooth, outrageously good-looking futures analyst, the peak of the kind of success offered by this brave new world. Cat finds herself face to face with Simon’s converse, a

deformed, deprived Whitman-quoting twelve-year old boy with a bomb strapped to his chest. . . .

In the third story, "Like Beauty", much of America has been destroyed, some say by the Children's Crusade of the twenty-first century. Old New York has survived, however, as a theme park for foreign tourists. The Simon of this story has a job impersonating a mugger in Central Park, giving tourists a thrill for their money. He also happens to be a simulo, that is, an artificially created human being; his creator, hoping to imbue him with a moral sense, has programmed him with Walt Whitman. His existence is imperilled by the fact that the Christians, who don't like imitation human beings, have taken over the government.

Catareen is a lizard, or at any rate a very lizard-like creature, one of the Nadians who emigrated to earth in search of a better life and ended up as menial labourers for the earthlings, rather like the Irish of three hundred years previously. Luke is, of course, a deformed twelve-year old boy, though this one seems to be more of a survivor than his predecessors: when last seen, he is taking off for a possibly habitable planet in the company of a fetching young Nadian.

Boiled down to its ingredients like this, *Specimen Days* sounds like a rather mechanical exercise in patterning, and indeed, like *The Hours*, *Specimen Days* is at times almost ostentatious in its virtuosity. More crudely put, Cunningham can be a bit of a show-off. But fortunately the experience of reading the book is far more pleasurable than my synopsis suggests. The writing is so very good, and the situations so imaginatively conceived, that the ingenious patterning is seldom obtrusive. Though the stories are often grimly humorous, their cumulative effect is surprisingly poignant, in its lament for a lost agrarian community and in its Whitmanesque vision of the unity of all creatures. Ultimately *Specimen Days* is a commentary on our own days, the days of suicide bombers, global warming and the religious right, against which Walt Whitman seems an ever more fragile defence.