

From Books to the Silver Screen: Transformations of Michael Cunningham's Fiction

Ivan Burda

Abstract

*By 1999 when Michael Cunningham published *The Hours* not many people had known his name although he had already written two other novels. The success of *The Hours* followed by a movie of same name made Cunningham world-wide known. Soon afterward he himself wrote a screenplay for another movie based upon his earlier novel *A Home at the End of the World*. This paper deals with some differences between the novels and their film adaptations.*

Although Michael Cunningham is often referred to as a gay author, he declares he does not write only for gays (Bahr). Nor does he write only about gays since his five novels are populated with characters of different sexualities.

Cunningham was born in 1952 in Ohio but the family soon moved to California. The first novel he published was *Golden States* (1984), a coming-of-age novel narrated through twelve-year-old David Stark. However, Cunningham no longer lists it in his biography. He explains *Golden States* was just a warm-up (Canning, 91). Six years after *Golden States* was published Cunningham finished a novel about a new type of family called *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) which brought him more appraisal than his previous work had done. In 1995, it was followed by another family novel, *Flesh and Blood* (1995). When Michael Cunningham's fourth novel *The Hours* (1998) was issued three years after *Flesh and Blood*, he did not predict it to be any extraordinary success (Pela). However, it was this book for which he received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award a year later. The latest book Michael Cunningham has written is *Specimen Days* (2005) which consists of three novellas. Each of them takes place in a different time period, but whether it is the 19th century, the present or the future, the characters and their experiences are similar. Through these similarities the novellas create a whole like in *The Hours*.

In 2002 *The Hours* was turned into an Oscar-winning movie which ensured Cunningham immense popularity. Soon afterwards in 2004 another motion picture based on another of Cunningham's novels was

released. This time it was *A Home at the End of the World*, based upon the book of the same name that has been considered by many as the author's real literary debut (Literature Online). There may have been more reasons for adapting this earlier novel just after the success of *The Hours*, not before. One may ask whether it was an effort to bring another of Cunningham's novels into cinemas, the intention of making some more money from the previous success, or both together.

Since in the case of *A Home at the End of the World* Michael Cunningham wrote both the novel and the screenplay, this essay will deal with the differences between the book and the movie. Some of the differences which are crucial will be discussed in more depth. Once the comparison has been made, we will also look briefly at the book version and the film version of *The Hours*. The movies and the novels will be evaluated from the basis of their quality and possible similarities on account of which it will be possible to say why *A Home at the End of the World* was shot.

A Home at the End of the World is the story of the pursuit of family happiness. However, it is not just some ordinary family that is formed. The story is narrated by four major characters; i.e. Jonathan Glover, his mother Alice, Bobby – Jonathan's friend, and Clare, a woman who later on dramatically influences the fates of both male protagonists.

The book covers four periods of the main characters' lives. The first one is their childhood, when Jonathan is portrayed as a boy who plays with dolls and spends most of his time with his mother at home. In contrast with that, young Bobby is introduced into a life of sex and drugs when he spots his older brother Carlton making love with his girlfriend, and is later on given a tiny piece of acid by him. It is also Carlton who, through his own sudden and tragic death, introduces Bobby to another aspect of life – to death.

Jonathan and Bobby meet during their high school studies, which is another major period of the story. They soon become friends and it does not take long before their friendship shifts into sexual intimacy. When Bobby's mother commits suicide and his father dies being burnt to death in bed by his cigarette, Bobby moves to Jonathan's place to live with him and his parents. Coming out of his teenage years, Jonathan moves to New York to study at a university and to establish himself as a gay. When Bobby is in his twenties, he is told by the Glovers, "it is time to get out (and) on [his] own" (Cunningham, 127). He therefore calls Jonathan and asks him whether he can stay with him in New York for a while.

New York City is the place in which the third major period of the book is situated. Although Jonathan is gay, he lives with an extraordinary

woman – Clare. When Bobby comes, he is surprised that Jonathan and Clare are speaking about having a child. He thinks they are lovers, which Jonathan denies saying: “Lovers? We’re not. We are just talking about becoming parents” (Cunningham, 139).

However it is Bobby and Clare who later on become lovers and have a child. Jonathan, who feels left out, leaves them but they all reunite again afterwards to buy a house in Woodstock where they want to raise the child – Rebecca – and to find their “home at the end of the world.” Then they invite Jonathan’s former lover, Erich from New York City, for a visit. Nevertheless, when he comes, something is wrong with him. It turns out that Erich has AIDS and Jonathan is afraid he may be sick too. “Through his clothes – black jeans and a blue denim shirt – I could feel the true thinness of him. It was like holding a bundle of sticks,” Jonathan explains. (Cunningham, 296)

Clare realizes she is probably more ordinary than she had thought herself to be and that her vision of family no longer corresponds to the current situation. Moreover, she is encouraged to leave by Alice who says that not leaving but “staying is the cowardly thing” (Cunningham, 239), as she herself had lived the life of her husband, not her own. Above all, Clare does not want Rebecca to see Erich and maybe even Jonathan – two people Rebecca is falling in love with – dying, so she takes her and leaves, never to come back.

At the end of the novel, Bobby and Jonathan take care of Erich and when he is on the point of death, they help him to take a last swim in the cold water of a nearby pond. This is a kind of rebellion against death – and also an event that “encircles” the story since a first spring swim is one of the first events Bobby and Jonathan experienced together at the beginning of their friendship.

It is obvious that everything in a novel cannot appear in a movie based upon it. The same is true for *A Home at the End of the World*. Since there are dozens of insignificant differences, I will highlight just some of them, and then I will deal with the major ones which shift the story and the final effect of the movie.

For instance, one of the less important differences is that the movie begins with Carlton making love with his girlfriend at home whereas in the book the two are having sex in a nearby cemetery. Another is that when Bobby in the book comes to New York City, he brings nothing but his LPs and Jonathan does not have a turntable. In the movie, Jonathan has the player and many records as well. In the book, Jonathan, Clare and Bobby open a café where they just hang some pictures bought “five for a dollar at

a junk store" on the walls, but in the movie there are pictures from their own childhoods and family lives.

There are also major differences, though. The first of them is that Jonathan's childhood as it is portrayed in the novel, is completely omitted in the movie. In the book, the young Jonathan is formed by spending a lot of time with his mother and playing with dolls. If this common stereotype from a life of a gay were in the movie, it would put more light on later events such as the scene in which Jonathan takes care of Rebecca with passion or the fact that he shares a flat with Clare, who might be a substitute for his own mother.

Another major difference is that in the novel, Bobby's father burns himself to death in bed after falling asleep while smoking. In this way the movie is different and even illogical. What happens (in the film) is that one day Bobby wants to wake up his father who seems to have overslept in the morning, but realizes his father has died in his sleep – peacefully. Obviously, it is not appropriate to show a burnt corpse in a movie like this; however, there has already been another quite naturalistic scene – in which Carlton bleeds to death. The problem is that there has already been a scene in which Bobby removes a cigarette from his sleeping father's possession. Thus this evident hint serves no useful purpose since there is no ensuing tragedy.

The most important difference between the novel and the movie is that Jonathan's lover Erich is completely missing in the film version. This is a radical change but it makes the movie more compact. In the book, it is explicitly said Erich is the one who has AIDS, while there are only some hints that Jonathan may have the disease too (Cunningham, 305). Neither Bobby nor Clare ask themselves whether they might be infected too. Instead, they console Jonathan, trying to deny the possibility.

Since there is no Erich in the movie, Jonathan must bear the burden of the illness himself and Clare is not aware of it. On the other hand, in the novel she does know Erich and maybe even Jonathan are sick.

Above all, in the original, it is Erich's and possibly Jonathan's illness that makes Clare take her child and leave. She is afraid of Rebecca seeing the men dying. In the movie, the reason for her leaving is that she is not extraordinary enough to live with two men in a family and besides that, when she sees them dancing on the porch and enjoying each other, she realizes Bobby and Jonathan can get along without her.

In contrast to the novel, some scenes in the movie are more impressive because of the appropriate background music. For instance, Laura Nyro's song *Gonna Take a Miracle* which is playing when teenage Jonathan and Bobby are smoking dope in Jonathan's bedroom and his

mother Alice comes in lured by the music. In another scene, it is the song *Because the Night* by Patti Smith that is playing while adult Jonathan and his random lover ferociously strip each other down.

It is obvious that reviews on the movie are mixed – and that what one likes, another may not (see Rooney and Scott). Although there are major differences between the novel and the film, the final result as seen in the cinemas is satisfying, and in my opinion, neither those who have read the book, nor those who have not, would be disappointed.

The fact that Jonathan's childhood is omitted does not have any crucial impact on the final effect of the movie; however, leaving out Erich makes it more compact and moving. In the movie, Jonathan is the one who has AIDS and that is more emotive since he is a major character.

A Home at the End of the World is a better-than-average movie that should not displease the majority of moviegoers, regardless their sexuality.

From the perspective of differences, the situation regarding *The Hours* is not alike. Speaking about novels and movies, Michael Cunningham says that “novels are like very big ships that can hold lots of passengers but a movie is different” (McGee). From this it can be assumed that movies are like small vessels with limited capacity. When *A Home at the End of the World* was turned into a movie, Michael Cunningham as a screenplay writer and Michael Mayer as a director had to drop many a thing.

However, David Hare and Stephen Daldry managed to put all the passengers of the novel into the small vessel of *The Hours*. *The Hours* is a movie based on Michael Cunningham's novel of the same name. The novel consists of three stories that are mutually interconnected.

The first one is about Virginia Woolf who is writing her *Mrs. Dalloway*. Another one is about Laura Brown, a Los Angeles suburb housewife who is reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the third story is about Clarissa Vaughn – nicknamed Mrs. Dalloway by her friend Richard – a poet who is dying of AIDS.

Although the stories do not seem to have much in common, at least at first glance, they blend together in the end to create a solid whole. Richard, for whom his friend Clarissa Vaughn is throwing a party, kills himself by jumping out of a window of his flat. Then it is revealed that he is the son of Laura Brown who had left her family and fled to Canada. There are also many other connections between the three stories - such as Laura Brown kissing her neighbor Kitty, and Virginia Woolf kissing her sister Vanessa.

While a novel of three different story levels is certainly a great challenge for anyone who would like to turn it into a movie, Stephen

Holden from *The New York Times* says the result is amazingly faithful to the book.

However, there are many who are not that satisfied with the movie. One of them is Jane Marcus, an English professor at the City University of New York Graduate Center. She and other Woolfians say that the movie deceptively shows their idol Virginia as a pathetic, suicide-obsessed creature (Cohen). It is also worth mentioning that Woolf drowned herself sixteen years after finishing *Mrs. Dalloway* at the age of 59, although one may have the impression based on the movie that she commits suicide right after finishing the novel.

Nevertheless, Michael Cunningham says both the movie and the book honor Woolf's vitality, charm and brilliance (Cohen). No matter what, the indisputable truth is that *Mrs. Dalloway* has become a bestseller and number one paperback on Amazon's sale list for the first time since it was published in 1925 (Cohen). Obviously the reason is that it served as an inspiration for *The Hours* with which it is tightly interconnected.

The main purpose of this work was to compare Michael Cunningham's novel *A Home at the End of the World* with the movie based upon it and then briefly, to do the same with *The Hours*. Afterwards, it was intended to discuss possible reasons for the differences in the case of *A Home at the End of the World*.

Speaking about *A Home at the End of the World*, three major differences have been pointed out. First of all is that Jonathan's childhood as portrayed in the book is completely missing in the movie. Secondly – and the most important difference, that Erich was left out and Jonathan took his position as an AIDS victim. The last difference is connected with the death of Bobby's father and, although it is rather illogical, it neither disturbs nor spoils the final impression. The fact that the burnt corpse of Bobby's father as well as that of Erich – a gay dying of AIDS – are not in the movie, makes it more suitable for families and the wider public. In this regard, *A Home at the End of the World* can be considered a good movie.

On the other hand, *The Hours* is much more faithful to the novel and although there are some who grumble about it, its qualities are supported enough by the cast, the soundtrack and the award of the Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role – Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf.

In my opinion, an average moviegoer would be satisfied with both the movies; however, some hardcore fans of Cunningham's novels might be disappointed that the movie *A Home at the End of the World* does not follow the novel as much as *The Hours* does.

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Ivan Burda is currently a third-year student of English for Business Administration in the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Czech Republic. He is interested in American and British literature, especially in horror and modern fiction. Recently, he has been studying the works of Michael Cunningham and is writing his bachelor's thesis on the role of sexuality in Cunningham's novels.