

*“A novel is no more or less than the best book you can write at a particular time.”*



▶ After Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Cunningham has finished plotting, writing, editing, and rewriting a novel, he’s done with it—absolutely and completely. So he groans at the thought of having to hear the audio version, saying, “I can’t possibly sit and listen to my whole damn book all over again.”

But don’t misunderstand. “Claire is brilliant.” That would be actress Claire Danes, who narrates Cunningham’s newest novel, *The Snow Queen*. “She did such a beautiful job.” He heard just enough to know, and to appreciate her take on his book.

“I love transformations and transmutations. A novel is no more or less than the best book you can write at a particular time. If I were to approach it again in five years, let alone five months, I would do it differently. It’s not sacred text. So I feel, yeah great, do something else with it. I loved hearing how she might turn a phrase differently than the way I heard it when writing.”

Cunningham himself has sat in the narrator’s booth but once, when he was asked to read his breakout bestseller, *The Hours*. “Not discounting my reluctance to read or hear a book of mine all over again, it was kind of a kick,” he says. The producer taught him how to temper his voice so that he wasn’t booming to reach the back of an auditorium. “And then it was a matter of looking at those sentences and thinking about how to speak them.” Despite being fun, and garnering good reviews, though, once was enough.

## THE SNOW QUEEN

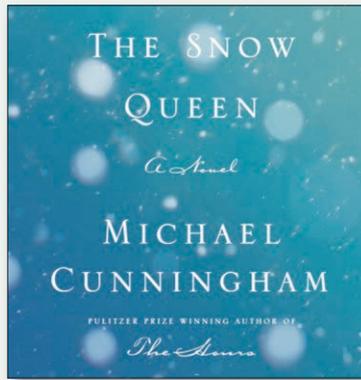
Michael Cunningham  
Read by Claire Danes

A swell of urgent stringed music introduces a lovely narration by Claire Danes of award-winning author Michael Cunningham's latest novel. Danes's melodious voice melds a story that spins from a Hans Christian Andersen fairy-tale quotation to New York's Central Park, where Barrett Meeks sees something wondrous in the night sky.

As Barrett, his brother, and their friends and lovers navigate life's messy, joyous, sad, funny, odd meanderings, we remember the vision in the sky and question with them what, if anything, it meant. Narrating with clarity and a touch of gentleness, Danes voices characters who sound typically American, while also infusing them with a wonderment that subtly signals Cunningham's transcendent examination of love, fate, and the meaning of it all. A.C.S.

Macmillan Audio 6.75 hrs. Unabridged  
Trade Ed.:   ISBN 9781427233387 \$29.99 (also  

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Cunningham listens to audiobooks for pleasure only on occasion, because, he explains, "I associate audiobooks with driving, and I live in New York City without a car." When he does travel, he listens to a plot-driven mystery or thriller.

While he may not consume many audiobooks, he relishes the power of the spoken word. In the depths of his study, he reads his work aloud to himself, although not as often as he says that he should. "But it's one of those things I always tell my students to do," laughs Cunningham, who teaches at Yale University. "The best way to tell shit from shine-ola is to read it aloud. If it feels dull or you stumble over the order of words, pay attention." With a wry chuckle, he adds, "Sometimes when I'm reading someone else's long novel, even a good one, I think, 'If you had to read this out loud to me, you'd cut it in half.' They've lost sight of the fact that a book is something the author is giving to others."

On book tour, Cunningham reads from his most recent novel, but at general readings, he surprises the audience with something unpublished. "Reading for the fiftieth time from a book I wrote two years ago was starting to feel artificial. Even a little dead. So several years ago, I began to read from new work, ideally something I had written just a few days before. It can make me a bit nervous, but that's fun."

In addition to helping "the whole notion of a reading to feel new again," the practice fulfills an editorial role. "When I'm looking the piece over ahead of time, I might think 'Oh, this is going to be a bit boring for them to listen to.'" Out comes a red pen. "If you don't feel like you want to read a passage to a room full of people, then it shouldn't be in the book." Sometimes, he is already reading aloud when the realization strikes. "I make it to the end of the section, but the minute the lights go down, that paragraph is gone." Alternatively, he might decide that a phrase or sentence is "too subtle for its own good," and add some clarification. Whatever the result, Cunningham says that reading new work to an audience "is a nice reminder that you're writing books for actual readers."—Aurelia C. Scott

## More Listening

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Michael Cunningham, read by Hugh Dancy

Macmillan Audio Unabridged  
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### A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Michael Cunningham, read by Colin Farrell, Dallas Roberts, Blair Brown, Jennifer Van Dyck

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### THE HOURS

Michael Cunningham, read by Michael Cunningham

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### SPECIMEN DAYS

Michael Cunningham, read by Alan Cumming

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