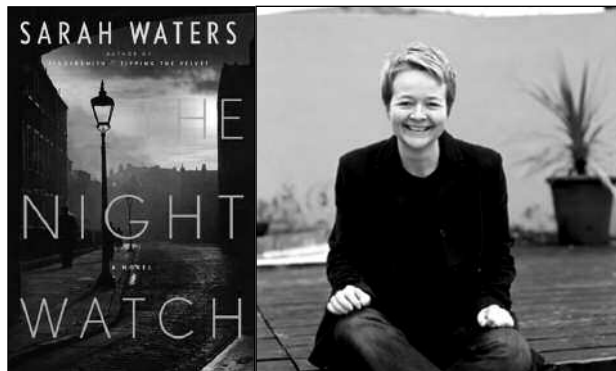


books

Love and War

Tipping the Velvet author returns with another sensuous, seamless story



Sarah Waters reads from *The Night Watch* 7:30 p.m. March 30 at Powell's, 1005 W. Burnside St.

The Night Watch

by Sarah Waters; Riverhead Books, 2006; \$25.95 hardcover

Sarah Waters hasn't caught up with the 21st century yet, but at least she's made her way out of the Victorian era.

Her first three novels—*Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and the Man Booker Prize finalist *Fingersmith*—were set in and around London in the 1800s. Like the works of Jeanette Winterson (*Written on the Body*), they've won critical acclaim and a devoted lesbian following.

In her latest novel, *The Night Watch*, the London setting remains the same, but it's set in the 1940s. Judging from her formidable bibliography, Waters spent ages researching this tender, seamless tale of relationships amid the chaos of World War II.

Her last novel, *Fingersmith*, was lots of fun, but the endless plot contrivances became exhausting and distracting after a while. Coming out March 23, *The Night Watch* is a more mature work that favors complex character development over dizzying twists and turns. The story is enormously gripping nonetheless, apart from a few slow-going scenes in the middle section.

The novel's structure seems challenging at first, but it's actually quite accessible. We meet the characters in 1947; the two subsequent sections take us back in time to 1944 and 1941. This unconventional approach sends readers scurrying for resolutions about the plot's origins. Think of it as *Memento* without the amnesia.

The central characters include Kay, an ambulance driver betrayed by her lover, Helen. Viv, a typist, is the pregnant mistress of a married soldier. Her brother, Duncan, is an imprisoned conscientious objector who pines for his cellmate, Fraser.

Waters writes beautifully about intimacies and sexual longings of all stripes, as though she's equally comfortable in the skins of her gay, lesbian and straight characters. Her empathy and eloquence

yield dozens of sensuous, life-affirming moments that offset the wartime brutalities she describes in gruesome detail.

—Stephen Blair

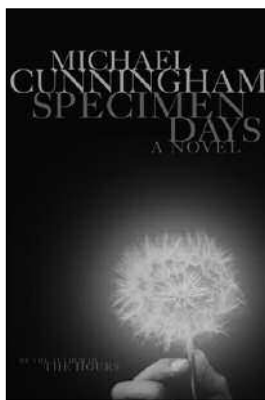
Specimen Days

by Michael Cunningham; Picador, 2006; \$14 softcover

Queer writer Michael Cunningham's status in the canon of modern literary fictioners was assured when *The Hours*, his rethinking of Virginia Woolf's fabulous *Mrs. Dalloway*, won the Pulitzer Prize. He's regularly a best seller and the object of adulatory reviews from the literary establishment. And some queer readers cheered *A Home at the End of the World*, which explored bisexuality and made for a dandy underrated movie starring hunky Colin Farrell. Now we have *Specimen Days*, which veers so far off the deep end into pretentiousness and preciousness that it's tempting to ask Cunningham to return that Pulitzer.

Coming out April 18 in paperback, this three-part "experimental" novel is set in different eras with recurring characters, all presided over by the spirit of Walt Whitman. (The poet's 1882 autobiography provided the book's title.)

The first part, "In



the Machine," is a tedious ghost story set in New York in the 1860s, the height of the Industrial Revolution. Twelve-year-old Lucas works at the same factory where his brother Simon died. Poor Simon was sucked into "the machine" and apparently is not resting in peace but dwelling extradimensionally inside it and occasionally singing a ditty to his sibling. Lucas, who confounds those around him with inexplicable quotes from Whitman, is infatuated with Catherine, Simon's pregnant ex.

In the improbable second story, "The Children's Crusade," Catherine reappears as a police psychologist in post-9/11 New York trying to solve a string of suicide bombings committed by a gang of children who scrawl Whitman lines on a wall as clues. In this neo-noir pastiche, Lucas is Catherine's dead son and Simon is her boyfriend.

The third part, "Like Beauty," riffs quasi-coherently on a dystopic future, reintroducing Simon as a robot with feelings programmed to spout Whitman. Oh, and it takes place on the planet Catareen and features two kids named tomcruise and katemoss. Are you fascinated yet?

The author's silly, unbelievable plots are part of the problem. It's always dicey when "literary" writers take on genres like horror and sci-fi and noir. More seriously troubling is his use of language, widely hailed as Cunningham's strength. He seems less inspired by Whitman's garrulous *joie de vivre* than Virginia Woolf's impressionistic stabs at rendering life. But he lacks Woolf's power and control, trapping his characters and ideas in a toxic goo of smarmy imagery that looks impressive at first glance but fake and foolish on closer examination. Fans of Whitman and Woolf—and, indeed, of the kind of brilliant writing too many have attributed to Cunningham—are advised to skip this one.

—Gary Morris

Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality

by Dwight McBride; New York University Press, 2005; \$19 softcover

"Who you calling 'natural,' white man?"

With a title as confrontational as this one, you know there's more than just dry academic discussions inside, and *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch*

takes a refreshing new approach to African-American and queer studies.

In this collection of essays written between 1991 and 2003, Dwight McBride deconstructs the myths and realities governing the United States through an analysis of sexual and gender identity and the dominant culture's attempts to pigeonhole normalcy and desire.

McBride's writing is driven by the high stakes of this challenging discourse as he attempts to find a place for those who don't fit neatly into the rules dictated by the infamous A&F *Look Book* and its depiction of "natural" and "classic" as an idealized, upper-middle-class, 20-year-old whiteness. The real challenge for McBride is how the repressive A&F look became such a figurehead of queer desire, effectively devaluing other, more diverse images of the American populace, including potential sales representatives in their stores across the country. Fortunately for A&F, its sometimes racially questionable decisions didn't affect sales to its target demographic.

McBride's views are the revolutionary and radical ideas of one who is not wearied, but rather invigorated, by the continuing struggle against institutionalized racism and homophobia. Diverse targets—the backlash against the coming-out episode of *Ellen*, the academic double standard governing the appointments of black professors, white flight and the media's tendency to create a monolithic picture of the "black community" and the "gay and lesbian population"—give McBride plenty to work with. He also performs cultural and literary discussions of the writings of prominent black thinkers such as Cornel West, Essex Hemphill, Gary Fisher, Toni Morrison and bell hooks as well as an alternately hilarious and sobering examination of interracial gay porn.

"He who controls the form...ultimately goes far in controlling what it is we can know. The victor in any war is the author of its history." McBride would like us to know that, as far as he's concerned, the war against racism and homophobia, even in the most benevolent terms, is far from over.

—Jemiah Jefferson

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