

## A 'Russian' Writer Born in the U.S.

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Author Michael Cunningham believes Russians ask the “big” questions. **Michele A. Berdy**

*Correction: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of Michael Cunningham's most recent novel. The book is called, "By Nightfall."*

On most days, author Michael Cunningham sits in his studio in lower Manhattan and writes. On a good day, he says he writes several pages; on a bad day, he forces himself to write at least one sentence. Fortunately for his readers, most of his days go well. He has written six novels, including "The Hours," which in 1999 was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature and the PEN/Faulkner Award, a book about Provincetown, Massachusetts, and several screenplays. Although he has traveled widely, he had never been to Moscow. That changed in late November, when he was invited by the U.S. State Department's Speaker Program and Corpus Books, the publisher of his works in Russian, including his most recent novel, "By Nightfall." He had a packed program of meetings with his Russian readers, but still found time to visit with an old friend, Moscow Times columnist Michele A. Berdy, to talk about the duties of a novelist, the uniqueness of Russian readers, and his surprisingly controversial private life.

**Q: How did you imagine Moscow before you came here?**

A: The current American idea about Moscow is that it is some hybrid of Tokyo and the Wild West, that it is incredibly prosperous and has as many Pradas as we have delicatessens in New York City, and that gangsters are driving their Mercedes on the sidewalks, shooting at random pedestrians.

**Q: When your friends in the U.S. ask you about Moscow, what are you going to tell them?**

A: That the vitality of the city is palpable even from a moving cab. That it is inspired and chaotic and full of energy. It's full of greed and life and fear and all the qualities that animate the great cities: New York, Tokyo, maybe Berlin, London. There is a fabulous combination of hope and discouragement and incredible materialism. Food, beautiful clothes, beautiful stuff. Will it end tomorrow? Maybe, so we better grab it while we can.

I've been staying at the Ritz-Carlton, which is full of more men in suits who are clearly doing some kind of damage to the world than in any other place I've been. ... I'm not so drawn to the more benign places in the world. I like Zurich and Copenhagen. But I prefer a place like Moscow where there is so much going on. There are so many schemes and plans and old women hobbling along looking for change dropped on the sidewalk alongside 25-year-old women wearing — on a Sunday afternoon — \$25,000 worth of clothes.

**Q: Your works are informed by much-loved British and American writers and set in specific time periods in America, and yet you have passionate Russian readers. How and why do your novels work in Russia?**

A: What I do is more emotional, more earnest, more psychological than a lot of what is fashionable in America right now. A lot of American books are wry and ironic and satirical. It's something that I get criticized for in America, but it seems that that's a quality that works very well for Russian readers. I may be a Russian writer born accidentally in America.

**Q: What questions have Russian readers asked you?**

A: Russians ask questions unlike questions I have encountered anywhere else. One man asked me, "What is the meaning of life?" No one has ever asked me that question before. A woman asked me, "What are your dreams?" I started to talk about my aspirations. She said, "No, I want to know what you dream about at night" — which seemed a very personal question in a room with 150 other people. Russians want to pose the big questions.

**Q: Was your homosexuality an issue here in a way that it wasn't in other places?**

A: I really hadn't been in a country that is still so fixated on the gay question. In most places, including in the U.S., it's agreed that the rights of gay people are a given. I'm not even talked about as a "gay writer." I'm considered a writer who is gay and white and American and tall with brown eyes and flat feet — this is all part of what I bring to my view of the world, which is reflected in my novels. One of the duties of the novelist is to try to see the world, on the one hand, in toto, and on the other hand, to bring to that world what the world may have shown you because you are black, because you are a woman, or because you are gay.

For quite some time the gay thing has been a non-issue. I can't think of the last time a journalist or a member of the audience in another country wanted to know about the gay stuff. But it has not failed to come up in any conversation in Russia. I mean no offense to the Russian people when I say that I am a little bit mystified that a country this advanced, a country of such sophistication, and such high culture and such high thought is still struggling with the question of whether or not gay people are sort of strange and icky

and unsuitable to be presented in society.

**Q: Did you have the sense that there were people in the audience who were thinking, "Thank God someone is saying this"?**

A: People actually said that to me: "Thank God you are saying this." On a television show I talked openly about being gay and expressed my hope that people who hate gay people can find a way to stop hating gay people — not just for the sake of gay people, but for their own sake. I cannot imagine that it's good for anybody to sit in a parlor thinking: I hate people who are unlike me. People have expressed to me what felt like undue appreciation for what felt to me like a perfectly simple and obvious statement.

**Q: Do you want to come back?**

A: I would come back to Russia tomorrow.

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