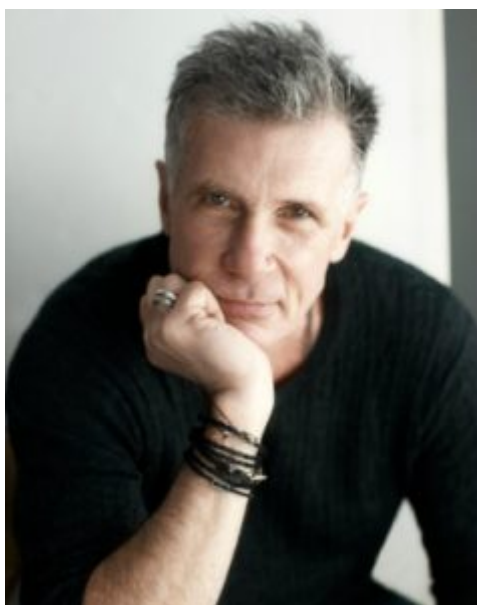




# Guest Blog: "A Few Feet from Michael Cunningham" by Susan Hodara

December 5, 2016 by Laura Schroeder



Michael Cunningham. Photo Credit ©  
Richard Phibbs

A few months ago, I met arts journalist **Susan Hodara** through a mutual friend, photographer Margaret Fox. Susan told me more about the Hudson Valley

Writers Center, which recently featured "The Hours" author, Michael Cunningham, for one of their events.

## A Few Feet From Michael Cunningham

By Susan Hodara

*"We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep – it's as simple and ordinary as that. A few jump out windows or drown themselves or take pills; more die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease or, if we're very fortunate, by time itself. There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more."*

– Michael Cunningham, "The Hours"

My friend Joan and I sat mere feet from **Michael Cunningham**, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Hours" and other fiction and nonfiction books. Tall, lithe and ruggedly handsome, he stood at the front of the **Hudson Valley Writers Center**, facing a group of about fifty, and behind us, what would have been, in daylight, the glorious Hudson River.

Then Cunningham began to read – or, more accurately, perform – stories from his newest book, "A Wild Swan and Other Tales," his reimagining of ten classic fairy tales. His words were accompanied by gestures: an expressive unfolding of his fingers, a coy lifting of his head. When he curled his lips into a sardonic grin, we smiled, too, and often we laughed. His stories blend princes and princesses with contemporary attitudes, pain with humor, darkness with love.

In the discussion that followed, Cunningham addressed questions eloquently and illuminatingly. He talked about his first decade as a writer, when no one seemed interested in his work and he considered – then decided against – abandoning his passion. He described the confluence of factors that led to the New Yorker magazine's first acceptance of one of his short stories, and the flurry

of unexpected attention that followed. When someone asked whether he ever experienced "crises of confidence," he spoke of stretches when he could barely write a single sentence in a day, then, assuring us that these periods passed, said (twice), "Don't panic!"

Whenever I attend a literary reading, I ask myself why I don't go to more. Sitting among an audience of readers, listening to an author whose work I know and adore, or maybe one whom I have never read, is utterly different from reading in solitude. The writers, as they read, bring their characters to life as excerpts from their books transform the room. It is an experience of the moment, but its impact lingers long after the night has ended.

At the conclusion of his reading, Cunningham reminded us that the written word, in whatever form, is a gift to be received by readers. As an author, Cunningham has truly gifted the world. And at his reading, he gifted us, not only with his words, but with his openness, his honesty, his wit and his humanity.

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The **Hudson Valley Writers Center** is located at 300 Riverside Drive, Sleepy Hollow. For a schedule of upcoming readings, events and classes: [writerscenter.org](http://writerscenter.org) or 914-332-5953.

*Susan Hodara is a journalist, memoirist and educator. She has written more than 350 articles about artists and the arts for the New York Times and other publications, and she is co-author of a collaborative memoir, "Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance With Our Mothers" (Big Table Publishing, 2013). And, full disclosure, she teaches memoir writing at the Hudson Valley Writers Center. More at <http://www.susanhodara.com/>.*

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