

Woodlands hairstylist
Dennis Clendennen
shares fashion sense
with Johnny Cash.

Page G6

Houstonians
mourn the death
of comedian
Robin Williams.

Page G4

Inprint brings a literary who's who to Houston

By Maggie Galehouse

Vampires in a lemon grove. Life aboard an aircraft carrier. A sensitive teen who's a lightning rod for psychic phenomena.

The 34th season of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, which begins next month, will entertain these plots — and more.

For decades, Houston's literary nonprofit has brought a heady mix of esteemed writers to the city to read from their works and sit for candid, onstage interviews.

Some are household names among the literary set, some aren't. Many are seasoned, with major book awards behind them; others are just beginning their



David Mitchell

Paul Stuart

careers.

Highlights of the upcoming season include David Mitchell, best known for his novel "The Cloud Atlas"; Michael Cunningham, author of "The Hours"; and Kazuo Ishiguro, of "Remains of the Day" fame, who will read from "The Buried Giant," his first novel in 10 years.

Ishiguro appears in March 2015 as part of his book tour. Catching authors on tour is one way to lure big names, but Inprint also will pay a premium for talent. The most the nonprofit has paid an individual author is \$25,000, says Rich Levy, Inprint's executive director. Amy Tan, Tony Kushner and Margaret Atwood have been the highest-paid guests.

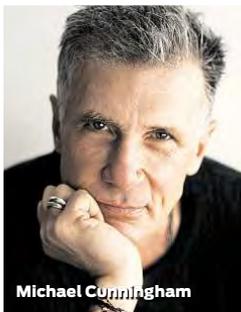
Authors continues on G7

BOOKS



Antonya Nelson

Dana Kroos



Michael Cunningham

Richard Phipps



Karen Russell

Michael Lionstar



Mary Szybist

Jodi Kabana

Authors give candid onstage interviews

Authors from page G1

Last year, Inprint drew its largest single audience, selling more than 2,400 tickets for Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan-born novelist and physician who wrote "The Kite Runner," "A Thousand Splendid Suns" and, most recently, "And the Mountains Echoed." Hosseini's ticket sales trumped Salman Rushdie's, twice an Inprint guest, who sold 2,200 tickets when he appeared in 2010.

And here's the thing about those tickets: General admission to a reading costs \$5. That price hasn't changed since 1980. "The price is so low, you get a broad spectrum of people," says Marilyn Jones, Inprint's associate director.

"We emphasize to authors on tour and to our audience that there's lots of money left to buy books," Levy says.

Season ticket holders really help support the series, Levy adds. The \$175 season ticket fee includes reserved seats, two guest passes, free parking for half the readings and a signed copy of Mitchell's latest novel, "The Bone Clocks."

This year, all the authors will appear at the Wortham Theater Center's Cullen Auditorium, which seats 1,100 — a large venue for the series.

"We're hoping more students can attend," Jones says. "Students tend to make last minute decisions."

Levy, nodding, deadpanned: "We cater to the impulsive."

Here's a look at the new season:

DAVID MITCHELL, Sept. 21: Those who haven't read "Cloud Atlas," Mitchell's 2004 novel, may have seen the 2012 film starring Tom Hanks and Halle Berry. Mitchell often writes about the future, isn't afraid to experiment with form and has the temerity to bend genres. The author of "The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet," "Big Swan Green," "Number9dream" and "Ghostwritten" will read from his upcoming novel, "The Bone Clocks," to be published Sept. 2. The new book explores the surreal world of Holly Sykes, a teen who has captured the attention of a dangerous group of mystics.

DEBORAH EISENBERG and ANTONYA NELSON, Oct. 13: All hail the short story. This pairing of Eisenberg, a short story master (and wife of Wallace Shawn), and Nelson, a University of Houston professor who has published both novels and short story collections, will be an evening of "writers' writers," Levy says. Eisenberg, who won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for "The Collected Stories of Deborah Eisenberg," is "almost the opposite of David Mitchell," Levy says. "You feel like a whole novel is compressed in 90 pages." The same goes for Nelson, whose short story collection, "Funny Once," was released in the spring. Both of these authors operate like fictional spies, observing the smallest details and human foibles for maximum comic — and tragic — effect.



Kevin Young

Michael Lionstar



Kazuo Ishiguro

Phil Weedon



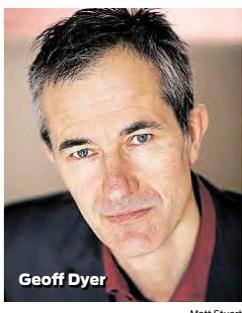
Cristina Henríquez

Michael Lionstar



Marlon James

Jeffrey Skemp



Geoff Dyer

Matt Stuart

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, Nov. 10: "The Hours," Cunningham's 2000 novel that combines the final days of Virginia Woolf with stories of fictional characters searching for love and acceptance, won a Pulitzer, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and became a critically acclaimed film starring Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore and Nicole Kidman. "The Snow Queen," Cunningham's sixth novel, follows two grown brothers in their search for transcendence in present-day New York. "They're looking for the meaning of life — or just trying to grow up," Jones says. "The book is unhurried in a way that made me want to savor it. This is Cunningham taking stock of the world."

KAREN RUSSELL, Jan. 26: Russell got rave reviews for "Swamplandia!" The 2011 novel about an Everglades theme park was a finalist for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize — the year no Pulitzer was awarded for fiction. Russell's 2013 short story collection, "Vampires in the Lemon Grove," has been praised as magical and far-reaching, gathering everything from stolen rabbits to werewolves to human silk worms. The 33-year-old writer also

surprised readers this spring with "Sleep Donation," an e-novella set in the future that imagines an insomnia epidemic and the perfect donors for uncurrupted sleep: babies.

MARY SZYBIST AND KEVIN YOUNG, Feb. 23: It's poetry night. Szybist won the National Book Award for her poetry collection, "Incarnadine," which massages the myth of the biblical Mary. The judges' citation for the award noted: "This is a religious book for non-believers, or a book of necessary doubts for the faithful." Young won the 2012 American Book Award for "Ardeny: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels." His most recent collection, "Book of Hours," chronicles his personal journey through the loss of his father and the birth of his son: "her face/ full of fire, then gloaming your face/ out like a flower, blood-bloom, crocused into air."

KAZUO ISHIGURO, March 23: Ishiguro's most famous novel, 1989's "Remains of the Day," won the coveted Man Booker Prize and was made into an unforgettable film with Anthony

Hopkins and Emma Thompson that won four Oscars. Born in Japan in 1954, Ishiguro moved with his family in 1960 to England, where he still lives. His most recent works include "When We Were Orphans" (2000) and "Never Let Me Go" (2005), which follows a love triangle that begins at a home for children who are raised — cloned — to be organ donors. Readers have waited a decade for Ishiguro's upcoming novel, "The Buried Giant," about which very little is known. His British publisher, Faber and Faber, describes it as a story of "lost memories, love, revenge and war."

CRISTINA HENRÍQUEZ AND MARLON JAMES, April 20: Henríquez has gotten stellar reviews for her recent novel, "The Book of Unknown Americans," about a family who emigrates to America from Mexico and meets several other families who made similar journeys from Latin America. "This book brings up the question that many immigrants still struggle with: Was it worth it?" notes Krupa Parikh, Inprint's director of marketing and outreach. The Jamaican-born James, whose "The Book of Night Women" won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, will read from his highly anticipated "A Brief History of Seven Killings," about the 1976 attempted assassination of Bob Marley — though the reggae artist is never named.

GEOFF DYER, May 11: This English writer won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism for his essay collection "Otherwise: Known as the Human Condition," but he has written four novels and several other works less easy to categorize. In Houston, Dyer will discuss his latest book, "Another Great Day at Sea: Life Aboard the USS George W. Bush," a narrative of his residency aboard an aircraft carrier.



Home » Arts

BOOK SMART

Celebrity authors with Hollywood cred heading to Houston: This new Inprint schedule is star studded

BY [TARRA GAINES](#)

8.17.14 | 1:28 pm



SHARE



TWEET

13



EMAIL



PIN

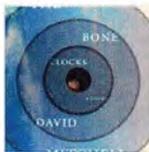


ENLARGE SLIDESHOW

promo ALERT

Blanket Bingo "Dog Days of Summer" at Market Square Park!

AUTHOR DAVID MITCHELL. PHOTO BY PAUL STUART



Every spring when [Inprint](#), Houston's foremost literary arts organization, begins looking for authors for the next season of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, executive director, [Rich Levy](#), says they have one, main objective: "To get the best possible writers and to get a mix of genre, style, ethnic backgrounds."

But sometimes, mostly accidentally as the season begins to form, some themes become apparent.

This year after getting a look at the stellar selection of authors, I noticed that the 2014-2015 season appears positively cinematic, thanks mostly to three literary stars: [David Mitchell](#), [Michael Cunningham](#) and [Kazuo Ishiguro](#).

While it's not unusual for a lineup to include one or maybe two authors who have a novel or short story adapted as movies, these three have a combined eight films with their name on them, either because the film was inspired by one of their best-selling works, like Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Cunningham's *The Hours* and *A Home at the End of the World* and Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, or in the case of [Ishiguro](#) and

[Cunningham](#) they've also tried their hand at screenwriting.

Viewing this impressive list of award winning novels adapted into Oscar nominated and winning films made me realize how much cinema spring from books, but also wonder what the allure is for movie directors. I thought perhaps Levy, who is also on the Museum of Fine Arts film committee, might give me some perspective.

Team Book vs. Team Film

When it comes to film adaptations, Levy is not surprisingly on Team Book, arguing: "Usually, the film versions of books are not satisfying for people who love the books," but he also thinks the stories in books can be great inspiration for filmmakers.

He does note that there are some great films out there that have introduced a novel to a new audience and that book and film can "coexist pretty nicely."

"I don't think film makers necessarily want to redo what's been done on the page, and they can't. But then they can bring it to life in a way the writer only has words to work with," he says.

After discussing what filmmakers get out of using a novel as a source for a movie — an already proven good story that probably got under the filmmaker's skin — I asked what's in it for writers like Cunningham, Mitchell and Ishiguro.

Money, of course, was Levy's first answer. A film version of an author's novel can certainly give the writer the monetary space and time to work on the next novel. But Levy, a poet in his own right, moves on from the practical to the artistic.

"I think it's probably very interesting to see how this thing — that came out of your head, that you invented and then put down on the page in words — how someone is going to create a two dimensional version of that," he muses. "That must be a surreal and marvelous experience, if you can let go the fact that it's no longer yours."

So what will be the next great novel enticing filmmakers to bring it to the screen? Could it be Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*, which he'll be reading to Houston audiences on Sept. 21, only a few weeks after it debuts? Maybe they'll feel a chill from Cunningham's *The Snow Queen*, like Houston fans undoubtedly will on Nov. 10.

Is Ishiguro's first novel in a decade, *The Buried Giant*, which he reads on March 23, the one? Or perhaps it will be [Karen Russell](#), reading on Jan. 26, whose *Swamplandia* came close to being the next big [HBO series](#).

Still, we can't count out the other highlights of the season.

A Celebration of the Short Story on Oct. 13

One of the greats of the short story form, Deborah Eisenberg, and UH's own [Antonya Nelson](#), whose latest collection *Funny Once* just came out this summer help us remember some tales are best told in bite sized pieces.

One (actually two) for the poetry lovers on Feb. 23

As a reminder that we don't have to wait for April to celebrate poetry, Inprint presents 2013 National Book Award winner Mary Szybist and National Book Award finalist Kevin Young.

Up and Coming Voices on April 20

Cristina Henriquez and Marlon James are telling vastly different stories in their new novels. Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* gives readers distinctive and timely stories of immigrants. James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* recalls the 1976 attempted assassination of Bob Marley.

But both juggle numerous narrators in order to give us multiple points of views into these worlds.

Nonfiction Takes a Bow on May 11

To sail the season into the sunset, celebrated essayist Geoff Dyer will read from his *Another Great Day at Sea*, a chronicling of his two weeks with the men and women aboard the aircraft carrier the USS George H.W. Bush. Inprint has frequently brought nonfiction giants to the stage, but they're now making an effort to have a creative nonfiction night every year, bringing "memoirist, a lot writers who, like Dyer, are not afraid to insert themselves in the work."

The season brings many new worlds to explore and a multitude of new voices, real and imaginary, so enjoy immersing yourself, while knowing that there's probably a director out there reading with you, wondering if there's another Oscar in here for [Meryl Streep](#).

ZEST

REVIEW

'Bone Clocks' runs on souls, survivors

By Maggie Galehouse

On the phone from his hotel in Washington, D.C., David Mitchell is pleasant. Chatty.

Readers know from his books — “Cloud Atlas” and “The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet” among them — that this is a man with expansive ideas, a grand imagination. His plots cross time and space, soaring with speculations (and judgments) on love, memory, technology, energy consumption, race, gender, even the transmigration of souls. In conversation, I sensed a similar omnivorousness, as if he didn't want to be corralled into either/or questions or simple ideas.

So when asked which books and authors have influenced him — a dull enough question, but one that can be fruitful — I wasn't surprised when he trotted out a list and then backed off with a double negative.

In his 20s, he says, he enjoyed “the usual,” “To the Lighthouse,” “Dubliners,” Hermann Hesse, Milan Kundera, Gabriel García Marquez, Günter Grass and (the not so usual) Tobias Smollett. (“He's quite rude and quite funny. Quite ribald.”)

“But it's hard to imagine influences,” Mitchell says, starting to retreat. “To what degree they made who you are, I'm not really sure. But this list is not unrepresentative.”

Mitchell, 45 — “though I feel about 90; I'm in the middle of a book tour” — will be in Houston tonight to read from his new novel, “The Bone Clocks,” currently No. 3 on the New York Times best-seller list.

His appearance launches the 2014-15 season of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

Like earlier works, “The Bone Clocks” — a reference to our mortal bodies — is a time-traveling supernatural saga, in this instance pitting two groups of immortals against each other: Anchorites, who prey on living souls to extend their lives, and Atemporals, whose souls naturally inhabit new bodies 50 days after their current bodies expire. Among this latter group is Marinus, a wise man and a major character in “The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet.”

The understory, though, follows the arc of one mortal life: Holly Sykes, whom we meet in 1984 as a teenager in the suburbs of London, and say good-bye to on Ireland's Sheep's Head peninsula in 2043.



Robert Wuensche photo illustration / Houston Chronicle | Fotolia

Why a female protagonist?

“Because I've never written a full-length novel with a female protagonist,” Mitchell says. “I knew there'd be difficulties. I wanted to incorporate those difficulties into something good. It stretched me. My wife helped me a lot. She's not backward in being forthright ... I'm always very grateful, even if it's only afterwards.”

Holly's arc coincides with some very old souls, who have visited many different bodies in many different centuries, which make for compelling back stories.

There is no one thread Mitchell aims to unravel in “The Bone Clocks.” “Reality is much more messy than that,” he observes.

Which is to say, there are many threads.

“I was greedy,” he laughs. “I wanted more than one thread. I wanted a kind of compendium of all significant human relationships: mother-daughter, father-daughter, sister-sister, aunt-niece, parent-parent, lover-lover, guardian-ward.... These are sort of basic elements in the periodic table of human relationships.”

He also wanted a thread about mortality. “There is this middle of your life point. Death

Author appearance

David Mitchell Kicks off the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series 7:30 p.m. Sunday at the Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. Doors open at 6:45 p.m.; general admission tickets are \$5. Information: inprintheouston.org.



Mitchell

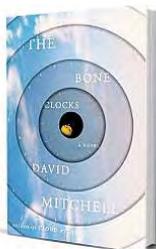
is not imminent on the horizon. But it's there in the mirror and in your back and in your

shortness of breath when you take the stairs instead of the elevator. ...What would you be prepared to pay to cheat this process if you could keep your youth, your health, your looks and this bottomless wealth of time?”

And finally, Mitchell says, when he shows the different stages in Holly's life, he must show the world in different stages, as well. That allows him to slip from the Swiss Alps to the Australian bush, from the world we can only imagine.

By the end of “The Bone Clocks,” what civilized society now takes for granted — connectivity, technology, abundant food from anywhere around the globe — is fast becoming a distant memory.

As one of Mitchell's characters has predicted, the future looks a lot like the past.



'The Bone Clocks'

By David Mitchell
Random House,
640 pp., \$30

“An addicted industrial society has fallen to its knees,” Mitchell says.

“The Bone Clocks” is Mitchell's sixth novel and seventh book. In 2013, he and his wife, Keiko Yoshida, released a translation of Naoki Higashida's “The Reason I Jump,” an intimate journey into the mind of autism. One of the couple's two children is autistic.

All of Mitchell's novels except the first, “Ghostwritten,” have

been short- or long-listed for Britain's highly regarded Booker Prize. He occupies an enviable place in the literary world: his action-fueled, genre-bending books are imaginative enough for voracious fantasy readers (geeks), and literary enough for people who aren't looking for a steady diet of the supernatural in their fiction, thank-you-very-much (snobs).

He already is working on his next book.

“I'm trying out some ideas that didn't make it into “The Bone Clocks,” Mitchell explains. “It could be supernatural again. Marinus will be in it.”

Because Mitchell's stories are so detailed, so thick with symbols and signs and processes hatched by an inventive mind, I ask if he has groupies akin to Trekkies — readers who really get into the minutiae.

But “groupies” is the

wrong word.

“Sounds a bit condescending?” he half-asks. “I guess you could say hyper attentive readers. HARs, we'll call them. EAR. I just did a question and answer on Reddit and some people must have spent hours composing their questions. Sometimes I do have conversations with that level of fine detail. You don't have to get all the details to get pleasure from the books, but people who are interested in details ... I put them in there.”

Not bad for a man who never really decided to be a fiction writer.

“I would have sharp, visceral fantasies — I imagine my name on the cover of a book — but that's when I was young,” Mitchell says.

“I don't think I ever did decide to be a writer. I was aware of the possibility it was something I might like to try.”

maggie.galehouse@chron.com

BOOK EVENTS

SUNDAY

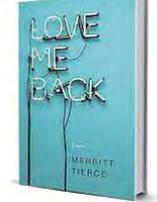
Susan Wittig Albert: Author will discuss and sign “The Darling Dahlias” and the “The Silver Dollar Bush”; 2 p.m. Murder By The Book, 2342 Bissonnet; 713-524-8597, or toll free 800-424-2842 or murderbooks.com.

Chris Gullebeau: Author will discuss and sign “The Happiness of Pursuit”; 2 p.m., Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 or brazosbookstore.com.

David Mitchell: Author will discuss and sign “The Bone Clocks”; 7:30 p.m. (doors open 6:45 p.m.), Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas, as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. \$5. Information: inprintheouston.org.

MONDAY

Melissa Gulon: Author reads from her children's books “Baby Penguins Everywhere!” and “Baby Penguins Love Their Mothers,” and invites attendees to create their own Penguin masterpieces with provided art materials, noon-1 p.m., Heights Neighborhood Library,



1302 Heights, 832-393-1810 or houstonlibrary.org.

Harry Greene: Author will sign “Tracks and Shadows: Field Biology as Art,” following a lecture entitled “Why Should We Care About Nature?” 6:30 p.m., Houston Museum of Natural Science, Wortham Giant Screen Theatre, 5555 Hermann Park, \$18; 512 HMNS members. Information: 713-639-4629 or hmns.org.

TUESDAY

Cynthia Kadohata: Author will discuss and sign her new novel for children, “Hill a World Away,” 5 p.m., Wall World Agency,

14532 Memorial; 281-497-8675 or bluewillowbookshop.com.

WEDNESDAY

Merritt Tierce: Author will discuss and sign “Love Me Back”; 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

THURSDAY

Barbara Barnes Sims: Author will discuss and sign “The Next Elvis: Searching for Stardom at Sun Records”; 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

FRIDAY

Deborah Crombie: Author will discuss and sign “To Dwell in Darkness”; 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book.

Margot Backus: Author will discuss and sign “Scandal Work: James Joyce, the New Journalism and the Home Rule Newspaper Wars”; 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

SATURDAY

Twins Read 2014: Tween reading event with appearances by several authors including Jackie Woodson (“Brown Girl Dreaming”) and Margaret Peterson Haddix (“The Living”), 9:30

a.m.-5 p.m., South Houston High School, 3820 Shaver Street; twinsread.com.

Katie Clark and Sarah Wynne:

Authors will read and discuss “Five Royals”; their picture book for children, 11 a.m. at the Big Blue Whale, 237 W. 19th; 832-623-6990.

LibroFEST: Houston Public Library presents inaugural poet Richard Blanco and National Book Critics Circle's Ivan Sandrol Lifetime Achievement Award-winner Rolando Hinojosa, as part of a day-long festival celebrating Latino literature and culture. Festival runs Noon-9:30 p.m. at the Central Library, 500 McKinney, Blanco and Hinojosa appear 6 p.m. in the Julia Ideson Building, 550 McKinney; 832-393-1313. Additional authors, musicians and writing and arts activities will be part of a LibroFEST celebration from 12:45-5 p.m. at the Flores Neighborhood Library, 110 North Milby; 832-393-1780.

Whit McCleendon: Author and martial arts instructor signs fantasy novel, “Mage's Burden,” 1-2 p.m., Katy Budget Books, 2450 Fry, Houston; 281-578-7770 or katybooks.com.

CLIFFORD CATWALK NYC FW SPR '15 EDITORIAL SPECIAL SERIES

Search CultureMap



culturemap HOUSTON

PLAY YOUR PARK! Become a Hermann Park Conservancy Member today



HOME

RESTAURANTS + BARS

ENTERTAINMENT

ARTS

SOCIETY

PLUS

SPORTS

CITY LIFE

FASHION

REAL ESTATE

HOME + DESIGN

Home » Arts

AUTHOR IMAGINES UNIVERSE

The author as God: In trippy interview, best-selling novelist David Mitchell reimagines the universe

BY TARRA GAINES

9.20.14 | 9:27 am



SHARE



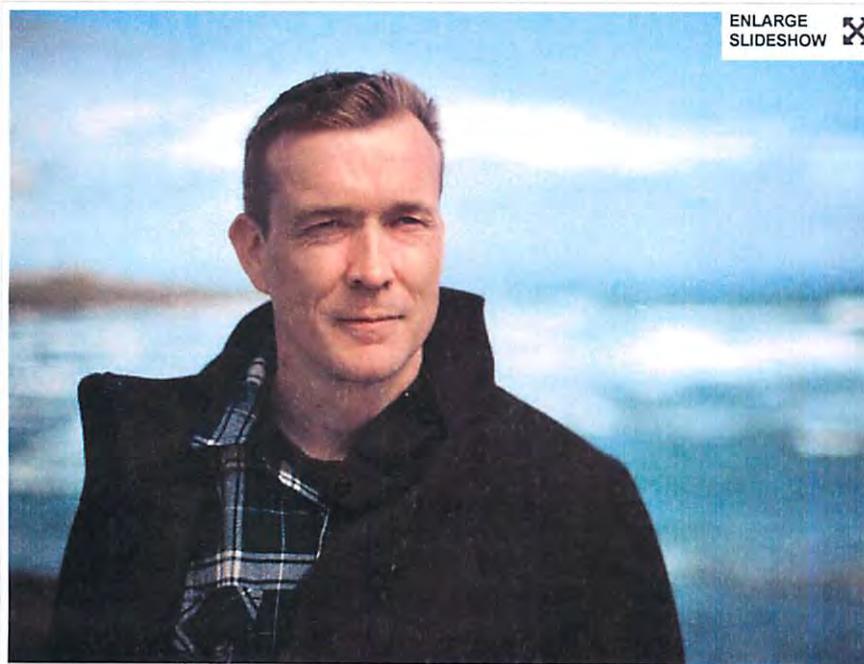
TWEET 7



EMAIL

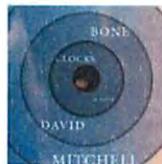


PIN



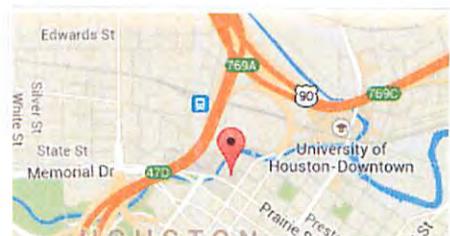
ENLARGE SLIDESHOW

David Mitchell, author of *The Bone Clocks*. Courtesy photo



Warning: Buckle up your brain because this interview gets trippy.

In acclaimed author, and Inprint 2014-2015 season opener, [David Mitchell's](#) 2001 novel *number9dream* the protagonist describes a movie he's watching. In the [film within the novel](#), a psychiatrist is asked by a prison warden to assess the



sanity of an inmate, named Voorman, who claims to be God. Voorman is worshipped by the other prisoners and is quite content behind bars, snug in a straightjacket, maintaining this universe he proclaims he called into being nine days previously. Within a day he has the psychiatrist doubting his own sanity.



Wortham Theater Center
[Get Directions - 501 Texas St. Houston](#)

Stay with me, because real life gets as weird as fiction. While no film director has attempted adapting *number9dream* for screen — unlike Mitchell’s time and space jaunting novel *Cloud Atlas* — this snippet of a movie summary inside *number9dream* has been turned into an Oscar nominated short film, *The Voorman Problem*, starring everybody’s favorite Holmes sidekick and Hobbit, [Martin Freeman](#).

Now David Mitchell’s latest epic *The Bone Clocks* has been released, and in one of the six novella sections that create the novel, readers meet the character Crispin Hershey, an author once the darling of the literati, now soon-to-be has-been, who in his youth wrote a stunning short story titled. . .*The Voorman Problem*.

Which is the real Voorman?

When I got to speak to Mitchell recently before his trip to Houston for the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series Sunday night, I asked him if he would help me separate this tangle of fiction, film, reality and imagination all making claim on the same material: God imagining the world into being from a prison cell.

And so I went straight to accusation: Does this make you Voorman?

unassuming British accent.

A connected world

This is the kind of “what is fiction?” “what is reality?” rabbit hole readers willingly dive into when they read a Mitchell novel and especially if they read more than one. There’s been quite a lot of sifting through his work by critics and fans looking for connections between his worlds. Those connections are there and real because Mitchell is on his way to creating a kind of career spanning fictive universe, an “Über-novel” as he calls it.

This is the kind of “what is fiction?” “what is reality?” rabbit hole readers willingly dive into when they read a Mitchell novel and especially if they read more than one.

“It’s a nice knot, isn’t it?” said with a chuckle was Mitchell’s oh so unhelpful answer.

And so I went straight to accusation: Does this make you Voorman?

“Does this make me Voorman? Well, all novelists are Voorman, and all artists are Voorman, and Voorman is all artists.” Mitchell added a spooky “Oooohh” to the end of his statement made even funnier to American ears when said with a quiet,

And how does he organize this galaxy of characters, who might literally span a literary galaxy?

“I don’t really,” he admits. “I go back and see what they [the characters] were doing and who they were and their original carnations and incarnations in previous books, and if I think they’ll fit the job then I’ll reemploy them in a different phase of their life and often in a different area of the world in the uber-novel.”

He admits it might be better if he was the kind of author who could connect plots, characters and books as lines on “a massive corkboard,” but he says, “I’m happy for it to come along nicely without me looking at it.”

The Bone Clocks, the latest novel within the Uber, spans the life of one English girl, Holly Sykes, but takes detours across a millennium. Each of the six novella sized sections sends readers into a new decade, inside the head of a new narrator and many times into a new genre: a runaway girl story, a privileged man’s Faustian bargain, a Hemingway-esque war correspondent’s tale, a satire on the writing life.

This change in narrator and genre “make the six novella distinct and gives them their own flavors and textures,” Mitchell explains. And those disparate genres remarkably build into a fantasy/sci-fi battle between good and evil, until it all falls

Crowd sourcing

Hidden away within these stories are connections to many of his other works. I asked Mitchell what happens if, as his readership grows as big as his uber-universe and fans begin to comb through his work for those connections they find inconsistencies, because let's face it that's what fans do best.

No one forces you to sign the options papers at gunpoint," he says, but in his case he was very glad the filming of *Cloud Atlas* happened.

Mitchell seems cheerful at the prospect. If readers are fans enough to find contradictions, that's less organizing work for him and he can fix them in the next work. "The supervision and management and sort of time lord-ship of the Uber-novel gets crowd sourced out," he says.

With Inprint having it's most [cinematic season](#), I couldn't end our talk until I asked Mitchell how he braved that other knot of fiction, film, and shared realities, the movie [Cloud Atlas](#).

Mitchell knows this is a story that doesn't always have a happy ending for an author.

"What you then feel depends on whether you're happy or not with the film. If you think it sucks, it would be most wonderful that it's happened, then horrendous and mortifying. You should get a sense of what the director really wants to do with it from their past record and from talking with them. That's your responsibility. . .No one forces you to sign the options papers at gunpoint," he says, but in his case he was very glad it happened.

"It's quite metaphysically interesting, I suppose, to have something from your imagination then appear 10-foot high on the screen of a multiplex. Yeah, it's quite a kick," he concluded.

David Mitchell opens the 2014-2015 Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on Sunday, Sept. 21 at 7:30 p.m. in Cullen Theater at the Wortham Theater Center.

 [SHARE](#)  [TWEET](#) 7  [EMAIL](#)  [PIN](#)

RELATED NEWS



9.23.14

[Top 5 arts videos: From devil fiddle to dancing on water, Houston is a creative powerhouse](#)



9.21.14

[Prada Marfa Lives! West Texas tourist attraction is classified a museum, not outdoor advertising](#)



9.20.14

[International artist puts a tiny piece of Texas in each of his paintings at Houston Fine Art Fair](#)



9.20.14

[From Houston to the World: Recycled ballets suffer from a Midsummer Night's letdown](#)



9.18.14

[Your weekly guide to Houston: Five \(plus\) don't-miss events — Discovery Green beer fest included](#)

COMMENTS

RELATED EVENTS

promo ALERT  [Movie at Market Square Park: The Big Chill](#)

STYLE

Get into pink with items that help support breast cancer awareness.

Page G6



ZEST

DINING OUT

Two women chefs take over the Main Kitchen at the JW Marriott Houston Downtown.

Page G12

AUTHOR Q&A

Eisenberg on Eisenberg

By Maggie Galehouse

In conversation, Deborah Eisenberg speaks slowly and deliberately, often in complex sentences.

Her short fiction reads like her conversation sounds, as if she had circled back once, twice, several times to revisit each word, taking care to express herself precisely. Intimately. As if the writing itself was a form of thinking.

The best short-story writers are masters of compression, packing a lifetime's worth of baggage into one small carry-on. Eisenberg, who appears in Houston on Monday as part of the Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, is



among the best of a small cadre of short-fiction writers that includes Alice Munro, George Saunders, Charles Baxter and Antonya Nelson. Nelson, who teaches at the University of Houston's creative writing program, will share the stage with Eisenberg on Monday.

Eisenberg continues on G2

Author appearance

Deborah Eisenberg and Antonya Nelson will read from their works as part of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday,
Where: Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas.
Cost: \$5; doors open 6:45 p.m.
Information: inprinthouston.org.

Eisenberg says she's catching up on hundreds of years of reading

Eisenberg from page G1

Eisenberg's four short-story collections were reprinted in 2010 as "The Collected Stories of Deborah Eisenberg," which won the Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction. A recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" fellowship and the Rea Award for the Short Story, Eisenberg, 68, also teaches creative writing and literature in Columbia's MFA program.

Q: You told the Paris Review that you sense a condescension toward short fiction, as if it were "a kiddie form, appropriate to women, as if stories were the equivalent of knitting socks for the men, who are out in the mines, actually doing something." Did Alice Munro's Nobel Prize in 2013 do anything to elevate short fiction in the literary hierarchy?

A: Certainly it doesn't change what I think about it. I always thought short fiction was possibly a more serious form than longer fiction, although it's ridiculous to divide fiction because there's just one piece of fiction and another, and each is as serious—or not—as it is.

Q: Do you stay plugged into fiction trends? Do you ever write for what the market seems to want?

A: I'm really not aware of the publishing or business side of literature at all. I never have any idea what's going on. I don't read reviews. I don't make any attempt to keep up. I'm trying to catch up. I'm literally hundreds of years behind. I'm just interested in discovering what fiction can do and what is

expressible in my own mind.

Q: When you teach, do you share certain strategies for writing or understanding fiction?

A: I would say it's impossible to extrapolate rules or principles. I don't believe that a really good piece of fiction can be cracked. That is, you can articulate certain principles that you infer, but they're never really correct. That's an a priori way of looking at fiction. Of course, you can see or say certain things, but you can't learn to replicate anybody's work. You'd need a soul transplant for that. So really, the reason to read with close attention is simply for the sheer aesthetic thrill of taking a walk through somebody's brain. And of course, reading. One thinks, oh yes, you learn to read in second grade. But actually it's a lifelong process—the refining of your attention to and appreciation for the way words can be used.

Q: You were 26 when you met your life partner, Wallace Shawn, a playwright and actor best known for "My Dinner With Andre," "The Princess Bride" and his play, "The Designated Mourner." Do you benefit from having another creative brain in the house?

A: It's absolutely wonderful to live with him. He has a great brain. A certifiably great brain. He's just the most wonderful and generous person. He's always my first reader. I show him my work when I believe that I am absolutely finished. But I don't show him my work in progress—at least I don't think it's in progress. We once

wrote a screenplay together which, like most screenplays, was never made. ... And I performed in his play, "The Designated Mourner," one of the great thrills of my life.

Q: "Twilight of the Superheroes," your story about a handful of people living in New York during and after 9/11, articulates an era of confusion and decline. Did you write the story with any clear sense of what you were trying to say about the attack on the twin towers?

A: I didn't intend to write a story about what we call 9/11. I hate that term. I find it appalling. It sort of institutionalizes a certain attitude of justification for crimes that we've subsequently committed, terrible crimes both against ourselves and others. It's a very pompous piece of rhetoric. I did start to keep notes. I was afraid that my own understanding of what was happening—of what had happened, a process that even now has not really been revealed—would become confused and subject to the construction that one automatically puts on memories. I really tried to keep some record of what I was seeing as I was seeing it. Over a long period of time, it became a matter for me that I wanted to explore in fiction. It was a sort of elegy to me, a consideration of a great alteration in our national attitudes, our feelings about ourselves and the way we see ourselves. That group of stories ("Twilight of the Superheroes" also is the title of a collection of stories Eisenberg published in 2007), they tend to collect around a feeling of the end of empire.



Diana Michener

Deborah Eisenberg celebrated with partner Wallace Shawn after winning the 2011 Penn/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

And it's the empire I grew up in and, of course, have allegiance to, whether it's conscious or not. That's my world, which has undergone vast and sudden alterations and disruptions.

Q: You appeared in an episode of "Gossip Girl" as yourself. I can't think of many shows in which you'd be less likely to appear!

A: Isn't that hilarious? It was the idea of one of the writers on the show and it just, I think it amused her. I'm not an actor; I actually prefer the word actress, I must say. But I'm not one. I had seen a couple episodes that Wallace was on (Shawn appeared in the recurring role of lawyer Cyrus Rose). I'm not a big TV person. I don't like the sound, even. It was lots

and lots of fun, but I had this very odd experience. For "The Designated Mourner" I had an extremely big part. Really huge. A solid hour of text. But I had no trouble with it at all. And then I had one line for "Gossip Girl." I had a week to learn it. I suppose it was a sort of hysteria. I simply could not learn that line. The scene I was in was very complicated with a zillion extras—a challenge to direct. When it came time for my line, with the greatest difficulty I managed to dredge it up into my consciousness. After it was over, the director said, "Excuse me, but you forgot to say 'I'm Deborah Eisenberg.' The only part of it I forgot was my own name.

maggie.galehouse@chron.com

Artist and teacher Bennie Flores Ansell has unexpected fashion sensibilities.

ZEST

Choreographer Julie Taymor presents her version of 'A Midsummer's Night Dream.'

BOOKS

Author inspired for 'The Snow Queen'

As an interviewee, Michael Cunningham is a man of candor and humor.

When asked about working at Yale — the author teaches two courses at the Connecticut university each spring — he quipped:



MAGGIE GALEHOUSE

"It's my favorite job of all time. It has replaced, on my list of good jobs, bartending at the Boom Boom Room in LA and wearing a grass skirt."

Best known for his 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "The Hours," which borrowed bits of plot and characters from Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway," Cunningham appears Monday at the Wortham

Cunningham continues on G7



Richard Phillips

Michael Cunningham

Author appearance

Michael Cunningham will discuss his latest novel, "The Snow Queen," as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday (doors open at 6:45 p.m.) at the Wortham Theater Center, 500 Texas. Tickets: \$5 general admission. Information: inprintheat.org.

BOOK EVENTS

MONDAY

Shannon Messenger: Author will discuss and sign "Earthquake," 5 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop, 14532 Memorial, 281-497-8675 or bluewillowbookshop.com.



Stuart Neville and Paul Charles: Neville will discuss and sign "The Final Silence" and Charles will discuss and sign "Down on Cypress Avenue," 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book, 2342 Bissonnet, 713-524-8597 or toll-free 866-424-2842 or murderbooks.com.

Michael Cunningham: Author will discuss and read from his latest novel, "The Snow Queen," as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. (doors open at 6:45 p.m.) at the Wortham Theater Center, 500 Texas. Tickets: \$5 general admission. Information: inprintheat.org.

TUESDAY

Alex Marwood: Author will discuss and sign "The Killer Next Door," 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book.

Garth Stein: Author will discuss and sign "A Sudden Light," 7 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop.

Women & Their Beautiful Words: Dinner and a panel discussion on women and writing with authors Katherine Center, Sarah Swire and Monette Chilson, 7-8:30 p.m., Duo Houston, 1924 Calmes, bfgbooks.com/beautifulwords.html.

Jewish Book & Arts Fair: Highlights of the fair, which runs through Nov. 16, include TheMinds discussing her novel "Visible City" at 6 p.m., Nov. 11 and Ari Shavit discussing his book, "My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel," 7:30 p.m., Nov. 16. Most events take place at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center of Houston, 5601 S. Braeswood, 713-729-3200 or ejcchouston.org. Fair pass: \$60; \$50 JCC members; \$10 senior discount.

WEDNESDAY

Will Oettinger: Author will discuss and sign "A Season for Ravens," 5-7 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore, 3270 Westheimer, 713-520-0061 or riveroaksbookstore.com.



Marie Duess: Author will discuss and sign "The Heart Has Its Reasons," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet, 713-523-0701 or brazosbookstore.com.

THURSDAY

Robin McCorquodale: Author will discuss and sign "Falling Into Harmony," 7 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore.

Ted Flato: Author will discuss and sign "Lake Flato House: Embracing the Landscape," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

Jeff Waggoner: Author will discuss and sign "Discover the Unseen," 7 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop.

Cunningham is keeping busy

Cunningham from page G1

Theater Center to discuss his latest book, "The Snow Queen." The new novel captures subtle and seismic shifts in the lives of two brothers, Barrett and Tyler Meeks, in two separate Novembers — 2004 and 2008.

Cunningham assured me this time-frame was deliberate.

"I was struck by the four years separating the day when the American public reelected George W. Bush and the day the American public elected Barack Obama," said the author, who visits Houston as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. "That's a sea change, right? Even if you feel better about George W. Bush than I do."

Cunningham, who lives in New York, also is the author of "A Home at the End of the World," "Flesh and Blood," "Specimen Days" and "By Nightfall," as well as the nonfiction book, "Land's End: A Walk in Provincetown." Farrar, Straus and Giroux will publish a collection of his short stories next fall and he's already 100 pages into a new novel. In addition, Cunningham is writing a pilot for Showtime — a fictionalized version of late 1960s Hollywood, when "brilliant young directors came out of nowhere and created an American cinema," he said.

Cunningham's novels are intimate. Most explore the interior lives of a small group of characters over a brief period of time. They also are, by current standards, brief — often coming in under 300 pages.

"Every narrative sort of suggests, as you write it, its own length," offered Cunningham, who's a bit mystified by the trend of 800-plus-page tomes. "A piece of 12-gauge wire will stretch taut across your living room, but not across the Grand Canyon. You have to ask yourself, 'Is this a 200-page story or a 700-page story?'"

Despite ongoing comparisons to Woolf, Cunningham is very much a writer of his time, grounded by contemporary politics and social issues. In "The Snow Queen," Tyler Meeks is Cunningham's own concerns about "a president who destroyed the economy and declared war on a country that was not responsible for 9/11."

Cunningham has long felt that a lot of American novels are "weirdly devoid" of politics. "That's not to say it's a novelist's job to promote one political view over another, but many novels seem to occur in this political vacuum, as if who's in power had no effect at all," said the author, who was part of a group of protesters who once heckled George H.W. Bush at the Waldorf Astoria. "And that is a uniquely American notion. I can't imagine a contemporary African novel, or South American novel, or Turkish novel that narates the stories of people's lives as if they were not affected by the political system in which they lived. Hey, it matters who's in power. Big time."

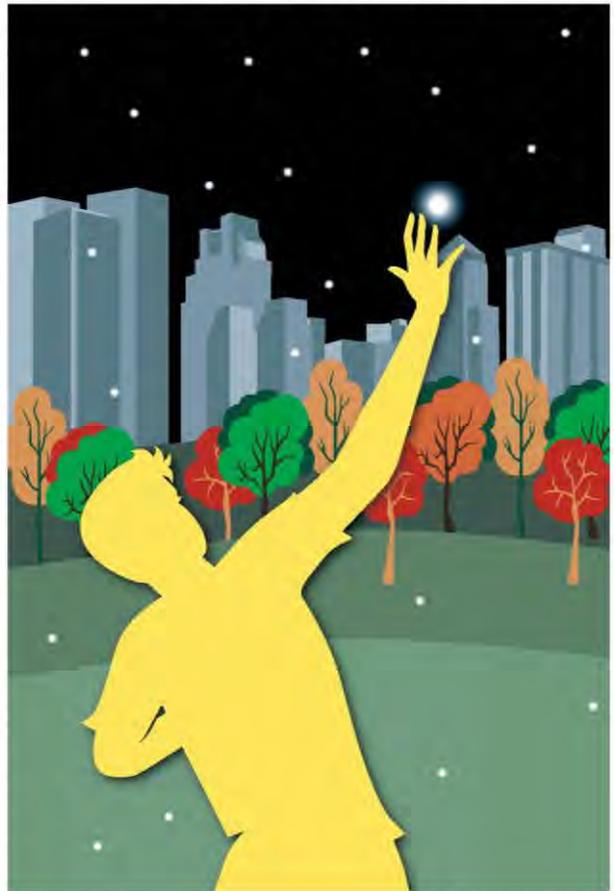
In Barrett and Tyler, Cunningham delivers two middle-aged men who ache to live — to achieve — beyond their capabilities.

Barrett, who opens the novel, sees an apparition in Central Park, a snowy luminescence that he interprets as a life-altering event whose meaning changes as the years tick by. An intellectual wunderkind in his youth, Barrett finds himself in his late 30s living in Brooklyn with his older brother, working at a friend's retro clothing shop and cultivating a world view spun from "Madame Bovary."

Barrett is a lumbale shopboy," Cunningham writes. "He moves the merch. And in private, for his own benefit, he's compiling his Unified Field Theory of Everything, which, like so many projects worth undertaking, is doomed, and at least semi-delusional. ... Barrett is trying, as best he can, to fit it all together. Starting with Madame Bovary and moving outward."

Tyler, a musician with a drug habit, wants to write a song for his wedding to Beth, who is seriously ill. But the song he delivers isn't up to snuff.

"He knew he'd run out of time, he'd run out of talent, and delivered a ballad, a nice little bal-



Glady Ramirez Illustration/Houston Chronicle



'The Snow Queen'
By Michael Cunningham
Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
256 pp., \$26

is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q."

"Nothing could make me happier than to be associated with Virginia Woolf," Cunningham said. "One of many things that I sort of got from Woolf, as typified by a character like Mr. Ramsay, is that sense of striving for more than you can accomplish, that human desire to transcend your limitations."

And yet "The Snow Queen," he said, probably owes more to Gustave Flaubert.

"Mrs. Dalloway" was the first great book I read, hence many years later "The Hours," Cunningham

explained. "But in fact 'Madame Bovary' is seminal to me. I gave it to Barrett for his attempt to discover a Unified Field Theory of Everything. Flaubert was among the first novelists to insist on writing a novel about someone like Emma Bovary, who is not only a relatively ordinary person, but not in any particular way an admirable person. She's petty and naive. Not even a very good mother. But Flaubert just looks at her so unwaveringly as to insist on her humanity, on the notion that Emma Bovary is worth looking at simply because she exists. In so doing, I believe he opened the doors of literature. Books until then are about characters who are remarkable. Flaubert said, in our own way, we are all remarkable."

maggie.galehouse@chron.com





Search CultureMap

culturemap

HOUSTON

STUDIO
(713) 522-0855 | www.st...

- HOME
- RESTAURANTS + BARS
- ENTERTAINMENT
- ARTS
- SOCIETY
- PLUS
- SPORTS
- CITY LIFE
- FASHION
- REAL ESTATE
- HOME + DESIGN

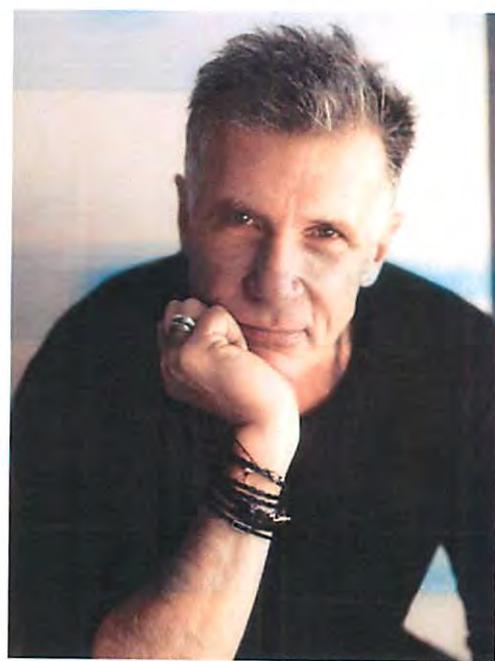
Home » Arts

THE CULTUREMAP INTERVIEW

Fairy tales, politics and TV: Acclaimed writer Michael Cunningham merges fantasy and reality in new novel

BY [TARRA GAINES](#) 11.9.14 | 11:04 am

- SHARE
- TWEET
- EMAIL
- PIN



ENLARGE SLIDESHOW

Author Michael Cunningham. Photo by © Richard Phibbs



Once upon a time in a city of enchanted towers in a time of snow, two brothers set out on two quests. Tyler was in search of magical song to save his



... dying princess, while Barrett was visited by a celestial light in a forest's sky and journeyed to find the secret of the light's message. But these brothers did not live in some never ever fairytale land, but instead reside in the Bushwick Brooklyn of *The Snow Queen*, the latest novel by Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Hours*, [Michael Cunningham](#).

I had a chance to speak to Cunningham recent before his Houston visit for the [Inprint](#) Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on Monday night and had to ask him how his latest work creates a kind of magical marriage between fairytale and a realistic story of fraternal relationships, drug use, infidelity and cancer all amid the general background hum of 21st century anxieties.



Wortham Theater Center
Get Directions - 501 Texas St. Houston

Queen vs. Queen

The Snow Queen resonates with echoes of the Hans Christian Andersen's *Snow Queen*, but the plot is not based on classic fairytale, which Cunningham describes as a "very strange tale" that's "kind of shaggy and all over the place."

"If I only borrowed a couple elements from the Hans Christian Anderson stories, I very much borrowed that kind of fairy tale tone, that once-upon-a-time thing. It's kind of dark, urban fairy tale."

"If I only borrowed a couple elements from the Hans Christian Anderson stories, I very much borrowed that kind of fairy tale tone, that once-upon-a-time thing. It's kind of dark, urban fairy tale," Cunningham explained.

One of the fascinating elements of *The Snow Queen* is Cunningham's ability to balance that fairy tale atmosphere, that never feels inauthentic, with a very realistic 21st century setting where people talk about and feel the affects of national politics on their everyday lives. The novel jumps years between its three main sections, peeking in for a few days and nights on Barrett and Tyler, Tyler's wife Beth and her business partner Liz, right before the 2004 and then 2008 elections.

"I don't feel a purpose of the novel is to promote one political ideology over another," Cunningham insisted. "What is puzzling for me about a lot of contemporary American novels is the way they seem to take place in a political vacuum, as if it just didn't matter who's running the government, who's running the media, who's

running the corporations," he said, adding that this seems to be a particular issue of American fiction.

Adapting to Adaptations

Cunningham is one of the major novelists who is making this 2014-2015 Inprint season one of its [most cinematic](#), but he is also one of those rare authors, with a novel that has been adapted into an Oscar-winning film, who has also seen from all sides the process of turning novel to film.

The playwright David Hare wrote the screenplay for *The Hours*, while Cunningham wrote the script for his novel *A Home at the End of the World*. A few years ago he was one of the screenwriters and executive producers for the movie version of Susan Minot's *Evening*.

"Part of what was so thrilling about David Hare did in adapting *The Hours* was bringing new ideas to it, his ability to see it with a fresh eye and take it to other places. I loved that."

Bucking the stereotype of the writer who jealously guards his own vision, it's Hare's adaptation that Cunningham seems most comfortable with.

"One of the lessons I learned by adapting *A Home at the End of the World* is that if a novel is going to be adapted, it should probably be adapted by someone other than the novelist," Cunningham told me with a laugh. "Part of what was so thrilling about David Hare did in adapting *The Hours* was bringing new ideas to it, his ability to see it with a fresh eye and take it to other places. I loved that."

While he doesn't at all regret adapting his own novel nor writing the *Evening* screenplay, he's put both experiences on a list of adventures he's in no hurry to repeat.

promo ALERT Get in the Mood for the All New Mood Lounge at Via Colori

make it work as a movie. I don't regret it, but I wouldn't do it again anytime soon."

Golden Age of Television

That new "original something" just might be television. He's responsible for one episode of the Showtime series *Masters of Sex* and is now working on a pilot for the network about "brilliant young directors in late '60s America, that time when one minute Hollywood was making *Doctor Dolittle* and *Cleopatra* and suddenly it was *Easy Rider* and *The Graduate*."

"Hardly a day goes by when I don't talk to somebody about some great show way more often than I talk to somebody about a book or a movie. We're talking about television."

He's only at the point of writing the pilot episode and makes it clear that nothing is definite, but talking with Cunningham it becomes quickly apparent how much this acclaimed novelist respects television.

When I agreed with him, but said I hated to use the cliché of describing this television era as a golden age, Cunningham has few qualms about the term.

"I don't take exception with the phrase. Hardly a day goes by when I don't talk to somebody about some great show way more often than I talk to somebody about a book or a movie. We're talking about television."

When I asked if one of the allures of writing for television is that the multi-episode form is much closer to the novel, his "first and abiding love," he agreed.

"Oh, absolutely, I'm finding that as a novelist the idea of writing a television series is just more in sync with what I do writing a novel than trying to make a whole story happen in two hours in a movie. I feel much more at home doing this."

Cunningham will give a [craft talk](#), which is open to the public, at 1 p.m. on Monday (Nov. 10) at the UH Honors College Commons. He then reads from *The Snow Queen* that evening at 7:30 at the Wortham Center.

SHARE TWEET EMAIL PIN

RELATED NEWS

COMMENTS



11.7.14
Your weekly guide to Houston: Five (plus) don't-miss events — evil puppets included



11.4.14
Photographer takes urban exploration to new heights with amazing rooftop views of Houston in unique exhibition



11.3.14
Confessions of a famous river: Insider reveals the *real* story of life with Monet



11.2.14
Stand-in steals the show in HGO's bland *Così fan tutte*, but the music still scores



10.31.14
Your weekly guide to Houston: Five (plus) don't-miss events with international flair

RELATED EVENTS

11.10.14

Janet Mock's Best Damn Reading Series

promo ALERT Get in the Mood for the All New Mood Lounge at Via Colori

Beyoncé's stylist launches her own fashion capsule collection.

Page G8

ZEST

Aggies and Longborns find something to unite them — barbecue school.

Page G11

Houston Chronicle | @HoustonChron

Houston Chronicle | Sunday, January 18, 2015 | HoustonChronicle.com and Chron.com

Section G ★★

BOOKISH

Author balances fantasy with ordinary life

Appearance

Karen Russell will discuss her fiction and sit for an onstage interview as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Jan. 26 (doors open 6:45 p.m.), Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas.

General admission tickets: \$5

Information: inprinthouston.org

A disarming paradox permeates Karen Russell's fiction.

Her strange, confident stories are, at once, other-worldly and down-to-earth. In two story collections and her 2011 novel "Swamplandia!" — nominated for a Pulitzer the year the committee declined to award a prize for fiction — Russell balances the fantastical and the mundane like an acrobat



MAGGIE GALEHOUSE

spinning plates on tall poles.

It's all about locating the logic inside the crazy. Or the quotidian in the absurd.

The title story in Russell's latest collection, "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" (2013), asks readers to accept not just vampires, but an aging vampire couple who quench their chronic thirst with lemonade instead of blood.

Russell continues on G6



Michael Lionstar

"Being surprised into laughter is such a pleasurable experience," Karen Russell says.

G6 | Sunday, January 18, 2015 | Houston Chronicle | HoustonChronicle.com and chron.com ★★

Russell's stories begin with wacky premise, build to deeper stuff

Russell from page G1

"I can't joke about my early years on the blood, can't even think about them without guilt and embarrassment," confides Clyde, the narrator. "Unlike Magreb, who never had a sip of the stuff, I listened to the village gossips and believed every rumor, internalized every report of corrupted bodies and boiled blood."

Another story from the collection, "The Barn at the End of Our Term," transports readers to a barn that houses for-

mer U.S. presidents who have, somehow, transmogrified into horses. Many dream

about their days in the White House, but Rutherford B. Hayes, "a shrew-bald pinto with a golden cowlick and a cross-eyed stare," occupies himself with finding the soul of his wife, Lucy — the first president's wife to be called the first lady. Could Lucy be a barnyard sheep with misty eyes?

Russell, who visits Houston on Jan. 26

as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, published her first story collection, "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised By Wolves," in 2006. In 2010, she was a featured author in the New Yorker's "20 Under 40" fiction issue. And since "Swamplandia!," a Southern Gothic fantasy about a young girl who heads for the underworld after her family's amusement park in the Everglades goes broke, Russell has enjoyed a peripatetic existence.

The Miami native traveled to Berlin for a

fellowship; to Iowa to teach at the Iowa Writer's Workshop; to Philadelphia while she

taught at Bryn Mawr and Rutgers-Camden; and most recently to Portland, Ore., where her partner works as a book editor for Tin House Books.

As a fiction writer, Russell says she's always suspicious of origin stories. Even her own.

"I don't know if it was a given I was going to be a writer," she says, on the phone from Portland.

"I just wanted to read books in air-conditioning. From a very early age, I loved to read, and I felt like the real living I was doing was happening between book covers. I was a pretty anxious kid. Reading was a portable door to another universe."

Russell enjoyed fantasy — "Alice in Wonderland," "The Last Unicorn," the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis — but only the kind grounded by "something deeply true."

"You read Tolkien as a child, and then, as a freshman in high school, you learn about our world wars and discover the resonance in those books," she says. "Even if you don't understand where a book's tentacles reach, you have a sense that this is how people would behave in these situations."

A quick and effusive talker, Russell, 33, doesn't want to jinx herself by saying too much about her current writing projects.

"I'm working on several nonfiction pieces and a novel set in a mythic town during the Dust Bowl drought," is what she finally says.

Starting a story with a wacky premise is "a way



'Vampires in the Lemon Grove'

By Karen Russell. Knopf Doubleday, 256 pp., \$14.95 (paperback).

to keep things playful and light and fun at the beginning," she ventures, which gives the story a chance "to build up its momentum and take on a deeper dimension."

Many of Russell's characters seem unable to let go of their dreams.

"Swamplandia!" is about that," the author says. "I was writing during the mortgage crisis and economic downturn, a juncture where you could really double down and hold onto a hope that could expose your family to danger. Or, you could confront this

new reality. That's a real driver of fiction: trying to understand characters' ambitions and how they might play out in tragic ways."

"Proving Up," a story from the recent collection, imagines what could happen when the optimism of homesteaders in parched 1870s Nebraska slides into delusion. Russell got the idea for the piece from a chance encounter with a couple whose ancestors found a way to work around the Homestead Act, which required dwellings to contain at least one glass window before homesteaders received the title for the land. Neighboring families simply shared one window between them, delivering it to wherever the inspector was expected to appear.

In Russell's story, a zombie homesteader approaches a young boy charged with transporting his family's window to another family. In part, says the author, she was thinking about "zombie hope — the hope that can outlive any real possibility of its fulfillment."

For every sad or spooky moment, though,

Russell's fiction offers a comic counterpoint. One-liners litter her stories. She has an excellent ear for the elaborate wind-up and quick plunk of a joke.

"I love the humor in George Saunders and Lorrie Moore," Russell says. "The deadpan delivery that follows overblown lyricism. Being surprised into laughter is such a pleasurable experience."

A high suture in her new collection, "Douglas Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating," offers a tailgating checklist for Team Krill fans who plan to attend the Team Krill vs. Team Whale match (the whales always win) of the Food Chain Game.

"At minimum," Russell writes, "you will need to bring Zodiac boots and gaiters; first-aid kits; survival bags; both VHF and HF solar-powered radios; a SeaRover Remotely Operated Vehicle; a Conductivity, Temperature, and Depth Sensor; a Bio-Optical Multifrequency Acoustical and Physical Environment Recorder; an Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler; nachos."

maggie.galehouse@chron.com

The 32nd annual Houston Heart Ball raises almost \$2 million for the American Heart Association.

ZEST

Kevin Young's poetry reflects on death, birth and rebirth — in that order.

BOOKISH

Loss and gain in Kevin Young's poetry

Poems 'speak to grief and joy better than most anything,' says poet

"Grief isn't something you can think your way through." So observes Kevin Young whose latest poetry collection, the bittersweet "Book of Hours," emerged from two life-altering events: the death of his father and the birth of his son.

"Poems speak to grief and even joy better than most anything else," Young tells me, during a recent morning phone call. "That's why we read poems at weddings and funerals. We remember the way words can make us feel and transport us."



MAGGIE GALEHOUSE

Young, 44, is the Charles Howard Candler Professor of Creative Writing and English at Emory University. In nine books of poetry and prose, many of them grounded in African-American culture and history, Young casts a wide net over a range of subjects — from race to blues to film noir to the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

"Book of Hours" (2014) is a finalist for the \$100,000 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. "The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness" (2012), a finalist for the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, won the Graywolf Nonfiction Prize and the PEN Open Award. "Ardency: A Chronicle of the A.Mistad Rebel" (2011), Young's 2011 poetry collection, won a 2012 American Book Award.

Young appears in Houston on Monday as part of the Margaret Root Brown Reading Series offered by Inprint, the city's leading literary nonprofit. In anticipation of that visit, I asked him to walk me through a short poem, "Bereavement Fare," from the recent collection.

There are, of course, as many ways to read a poem as there are readers of a poem. Young's comments shouldn't be interpreted as a definitive road map of the poem, but rather as field notes to a journey that's both personal and universal.

Q: The title of the recent collection, "Book of Hours," resonates as far back as the Middle Ages. Books of hours were Christian devotional books — often beautifully illustrated — that became hugely popular in Europe from the 5th to 15th centuries. What's your



Michael Lovestart

Kevin Young

"Book of Hours" about? A: It's really a book about family and about loss and sort of what comes after. I usually say it's about death, birth and rebirth — in that order. The rebirth I think of as sort of emotional... I was really trying to find the metaphors in the experience. There's a poem about my father's dogs and their response to his dying. It's about how loss works differently, about envying the dogs their dogginess and short memories. Trying to write about about birth, especially from the perspective of the person who isn't pregnant, required, I guess, empathy. I was trying to understand what I was going through and what we're all going through. To name it in order to go past it. That's something I learned from the blues.

Q: Such a great — and specific — concept for a poem: the bereavement fare. In my experience, they're often more expensive than ordinary airline tickets.

A: Yeah. They don't really exist. You call up and hope for the best. But there's something so compelling about the idea of it — that phrase and its tone. It's one of the worst calls you'll have to make. I have another poem about bereavement specialists, about talking to people who are supposed to be nice but aren't. And another poem called "Charity" about people who are nice but don't have to be.

Q: The play of "fare" and "fair" in the title and first line introduces the notion of justice with a jolt. But

Bereavement Fare

Nothing fair about it —

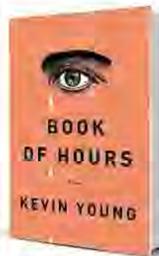
Heaven on the layaway plan.

Huge interest.

Now the world's only noun —

A weather no map dare measure.

by Kevin Young



Author appearance

Poets Kevin Young and Mary Szybist will read, discuss and sign their works as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday (doors open 6:45 p.m.), Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas \$5 general admission. Information: inprint@houston.org.

then the poem returns to the language of finance, of loss and a "layaway plan." A: It's playing on the metaphor of money. There's literally a fare you're having to pay. And there's also the older idea of the ferryman who'd take you into the land of the dead. The huge interest is the price you pay... I think it's that weird mix between your lifetime boiling down to the creamy set of phone calls to get a bereavement fare, but also the sense of the human cost of that, which isn't monetary at all.

Q: "Now the world's / only noun..." steps into a metaphor about grief. Can you unpack it?

A: For me, what's great about the world is that it isn't made up of just things — nouns — but of being. Of actions. Verbs. When the world is only noun, it's stripped down. In the way grief happens, the world becomes objects. You become this body. Your loved one becomes a body or ash. I was trying to get at the feeling of that.

Q: The poem's final stanza returns again to the language of accountability, to the challenge of quantifying something that is unquantifiable.

A: What's horrible about grief is not understanding it. There's no map that can measure your grief or your feelings. For me, the tension in those final lines is: Is it really that grief can't be understood, or is it that we don't dare to understand it?

maggie.galehouse@chron.com

DINING OUT

STARS ALIGN

Weights and Measures was “meant to be” says chef/owner. **Page G10**



SOCIETY DIARIES

BIG EVENTS

Former President George W. Bush entertains at an exclusive dinner. **Page G14**

BALLET

BARD BARRE

Stanton Welch debuts his take on Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet.’ **Page G2**



GRAY MATTERS

Leonard Nimoy’s Mr. Spock was one of the most counterculture figures of the 1960s.

HoustonChronicle.com/GrayMatters

ZEST

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Symphony pops conductor has big plans for final years in Houston.

Page G14

f Houston Chronicle @HoustonChron

Houston Chronicle | **Sunday, March 1, 2015** | HoustonChronicle.com and Chron.com

Section G ★★

Ishiguro on war, forgetfulness and cowboys

In 1987, Kazuo Ishiguro holed up in his South London home and wrote maniacally — not caring about style or finer plot points, writing freehand as fast as the words and phrases came.

He wrote 12 hours a day, six days a week, for four weeks. And when he finished, he had a first draft of “The Remains of



MAGGIE GALEHOUSE
Bookish

the Day,” a Booker Prize-winning book that brought him international acclaim and became an

Oscar-nominated film.

“The Buried Giant,” Ishiguro’s strange and

haunting new book — his first novel in 10 years — had a longer gestation.

“As much as 15 years back, I wanted to write about society’s remembering and forgetting,” said Ishiguro, 60, on the phone from his home in England. “It was triggered by what happened in the 1990s, when Yugoslavia

Bookish continues on G6

Kazuo Ishiguro

The author will read and discuss his work as a guest of Inprint’s Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

When: 7:30 p.m. March 23

Where: Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

Tickets: \$5; inprintheouston.org.



Columbia Pictures

“The Remains of the Day,” based on Ishiguro’s novel, stars Emma Thompson and Anthony Hopkins.

BOOKS

Bookish: 'Giant' crosses genres

Bookish from page G1

and Rwanda disintegrated into horrific civil wars. In both cases, people who had been living very harmoniously, sometimes next door to each other, turned on each other and massacred each other. So I had a story in my head, but it took me a long time to find a suitable setting."

Setting is a stepping-off point in all of Ishiguro's books. A careful and subtle writer, he lures readers into the realm of plausibility — his 2005 cloning novel "Never Let Me Go" was set in an alternative dystopian 1990s England — and once they're snared, he's free to focus on the more timeless troubles of humanity.

In "The Remains of the Day," Ishiguro considered the personal cost of obsessive professionalism. In "Never Let Me Go," he examined the slow destruction of hope. In "The Buried Giant," he contemplates the pros and cons of collective forgetfulness — in a married couple and in society at large.

The new book is set in late-fifth-century Britain, when settlers were arriving in ships from the North Sea. Several genres are represented, including Arthurian legend (an aged Sir Gawain rides in on his aged horse), fairy tales (dragons and giants) and British history.

"I had it in my mind it was 490 A.D. — a period no one really knows about," Ishiguro said. "It was truly a dark century. The Saxons basically settled the country around this time. And the general consensus is there was some sort of genocide, with new people landing steadily on the coast, coming in from the European mainland."

Despite the historical specifics, Ishiguro's book retreats into a kind of fantastic realism.

"My settings tend to be metaphorical," said the author, who was born in Japan and moved to England as a boy. "I did have a rule: If it was conceivable that the people of that time could believe certain things existed, those things were allowed to exist. So, no flying saucers."

War is in the air in "The Buried Giant," and something else about the air makes people forgetful. The cast includes a brave knight named Wistan; a young knight named Edwin, bent on avenging his mother's death; Gawain, a solitary knight charged by the late King



Jeff Cottenden

Kazuo Ishiguro



'The Buried Giant'

By Kazuo Ishiguro.
Knopf, 320 pp., \$26.95.

Arthur to slay a she-dragon; and Beatrice and Axl, an elderly couple who have set out on a perilous journey to help them remember their past.

"Many of the same questions we ask about societies apply to relationships," Ishiguro said. "Most have their dark corners.

They've weathered through something, and they've agreed to bury it. But is that right? Does there come a point when a society or a married couple need to remember?"

Ironically, it was Ishiguro's longtime partner, Lorna MacDougall, who read a draft of the book's first 60 pages and returned it with some pointed advice.

"She told me it would not do," said Ishiguro, who's been married to MacDougall since 1986. "She said, 'There's no way. You're going to have to start again from scratch.' It was because of the language, which she felt was too ornate. She thought it was laughable."

It took Ishiguro a bit of time to recover from this critique. He wrote "Nocturnes," his 2009 short story collection. When he went back to "The Buried Giant," he began simplifying the language.

"I started to subtract by tak-

ing out little words here and there, and I rather liked it," he said.

The book's diction does have a stripped-away quality — a spare formality reminiscent of a fairy tale.

Ishiguro said he's grateful for his wife's truth telling.

"She knew me before I was a writer," the author said. "She met me when I was trying to be a musician. Because we've had so many discussions and arguments about books and movies, I know where we tend to disagree and agree. And we agree about language."

MacDougall also has set aside a copy of Larry McMurtry's "Lonesome Dove" for her husband to read.

"There it is in the bedroom," Ishiguro said. "She says it's an utter masterpiece."

In December, Ishiguro wrote an essay for the Guardian explaining how Francis Ford Coppola's film "The Conversation" and Tom Waits' ballad "Ruby's Arms" influenced "The Remains of the Day."

Does "The Buried Giant" have a sound track? Or a film track?

"Those elegaic westerns by Sam Peckinpah," Ishiguro said. "The lone figure on the horse, out of time, his era passed. He's aging, but he still has some martial skill. Gawain owes a lot to those characters."

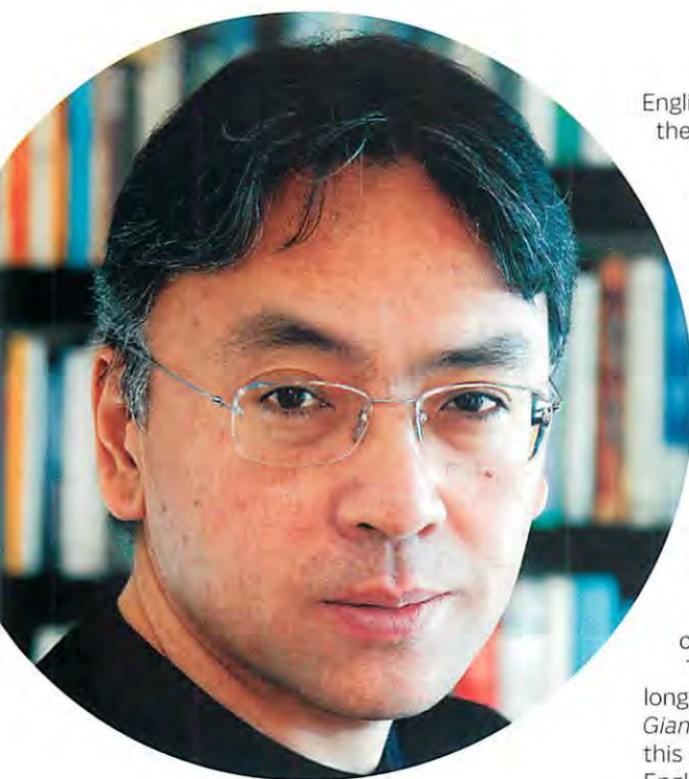
The samurai stories he grew up with also crept into "The Buried Giant."

"That's the Japanese part of me, I guess," Ishiguro said. "But I like the anti-samurai movies, the anti-militarist movies made after World War II."

And does he ever wonder if "Downton Abbey" — now muddling through the 1920s — will simply crash-land into "The Remains of the Day?" If Mr. Stevens and Miss Kenton, played by Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson in the film, will suddenly find themselves downstairs at Downton, enjoying a cup of tea with Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes?

"I've never watched 'Downton Abbey,'" Ishiguro acknowledged. "I'm really bad with television. I can't watch one episode and leave it for a week. If I have to watch a television series, I do it with a box set and I watch it in one day. I'm going to do that with 'Downton Abbey.'"

maggie.galehouse@chron.com



MR. TAMBOURINE MAN (BOOKER)

A celebrated author reads from his first novel in a decade.

"FROM ABOUT WHEN I WAS about 15 to when I was about 22, 23, I was very, very focused on wanting to become a singer-songwriter," says Kazuo Ishiguro. "This was in the 1970s, when singer-songwriters were the thing. This was the great era of the singer-songwriter." So what happened when he cut his demo and began shopping it around to record labels? "Complete failure," says the 60-year-old, matter-of-factly. "I wasn't very good." Once it dawned on him that he'd never be the next Bob Dylan, Ishiguro decided to try his hand at fiction. "When I started to write stories, lots of doors opened for me. That's what I was allowed to do."

Today, with seven novels and one story collection under his belt, the Japanese-born British writer is about as far from failure as one can be in the literary world. His 1989 novel *The Remains of the Day*, which depicts the tragicomic life of a quintessentially English butler during World War II, won the Man Booker Prize, England's most prestigious literary award, and was adapted into a critically acclaimed film. 2005's *Never Let Me Go*, a dystopian tale about three friends who discover the horrifying truth behind their seemingly idyllic life at an

English boarding school, formed the basis of another movie.

Ishiguro has many gifts as a novelist, but what really sets him apart from his contemporaries is his ability to transport his readers to worlds that seem both unreal and strangely familiar. Whether depicting postwar Japan, where he lived until he was five (*A Pale View of the Hills*) or some mysterious unnamed Central European city (*The Unconsoled*), Ishiguro always manages to imbue his work with a certain dream-like quality.

This is especially true of his long-awaited new novel *The Buried Giant*, which hits bookstores this month. Set in fifth-century England, it tells the story of two elderly Britons—indigenous Celtic-speaking inhabitants—making their way across the island amid the Anglo-Saxon invasion. "The setting is kind of weird," Ishiguro confesses. But while the book takes place in the early Middle Ages, its themes—war, genocide, shared memory, and kinship—bring to mind other tragic episodes in human history, not to mention present-day realities. "This is an invitation for you to apply [a setting] metaphorically to the world you live in, to the world other people have lived in," he says. "I'm not trying to write a piece of history in fictional form. I'm trying to write something universal and eternal about people, their relationships, and so on."

Ishiguro comes to Houston this month as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, one stop on his first book tour in a decade. The London-based author professes to be "intrinsically interested in" the Bayou City, saying he's been reading up on it recently. "I have been to Houston twice before, and I'm really looking forward to going back there. It does have a very distinct atmosphere, I have to say, Texas. It doesn't quite feel like the rest of the United States to me. It has a very strong flavor." We'll take that as a compliment. —Justin Mitchell

KAZUO ISHIGURO March 23 at 7:30. \$5. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas Ave. 713-521-2026. inprinthouston.org

THURSDAY
PAGE 17

The Ensemble produces another play by Pearl Cleage.



TUESDAY
PAGE 20

A restored sexploitation classic screens at Alamo.



WEDNESDAY
PAGE 21

Harlan Coben dares readers to figure out *The Stranger*.



NIGHT + DAY

WEEK OF MARCH 19 - MARCH 25, 2015 WWW.HOUSTONPRESS.COM/CALENDAR

LITERARY EVENTS

Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series 2014/2015, Monday



Kazuo Ishiguro

Jeff Cottenden

THU

3/19

THEATER

THE POLITICS OF LOVE

Transport yourself back to a time when, in just moments, politician Maynard Jackson will become the first African-American mayor of Atlanta, Georgia. Jackson's historic 1973 mayoral election serves as the backdrop for Pearl Cleage's rich romantic comedy *What I Learned in Paris*.

Ensemble Theatre Artistic Director Eileen J. Morris directs the regional premiere. "This

play deals with the politics of life. The politics of people," said Morris. The play also deals with the politics of love.

Jackson's righthand man, attorney J.P. Madison, is freshly divorced and newly remarried. Madison's new wife is the young, sweet Ann, while his ex-wife is the flamboyant Evie. "Evie is a spiritual and bohemian woman," said Morris. At the start of the play, Evie has just returned to Atlanta from a period of self-discovery in Paris. "She went to Paris and learned to be free," said Morris. In Paris, Evie discovers herself and her feelings for her ex-husband. To complicate matters of the heart even more, Madison's new wife is more interested in Madison's protégé, John, than in Madison.

This is not the first time the Ensemble has produced a Cleage play. "We know this artist. We like the enriched characters she creates," said Morris. "She allows us to...be taken away for [a] moment and wrapped in myriad layers of love and safety...That's the beauty of what Ms. Cleage does."

"This play is very funny [and], even though it's set in 1973, the issues are still current." Morris added, "It has the stuff of a good scandal. Everyone loves scandal."

Returning cast members include Kendrick "KayB" Brown, recently seen in *Fly*; Cynthia Brown Garcia, who was in The Ensemble's premiere of *Christmas with Great Aunt*; Detria Ward, who won a Houston Theater Best Actress award for her performance in Cleage's *The Nacirema Society*; and Mirron Willis, who recently performed in the Ensemble production of *The Meeting*. Yunina Barbour-Payne makes her Ensemble debut. 7:30 p.m. Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays. Through April 12. The Ensemble Theatre, 3535 Main. For information, call 713-520-0055 or visit ensemblehouston.com. \$23. KATRICIA LANG



SCAN THIS CODE TO DOWNLOAD OUR FREE APP FOR MORE EVENTS OR VISIT: houstonpress.com

FRI

3/20

OPERA

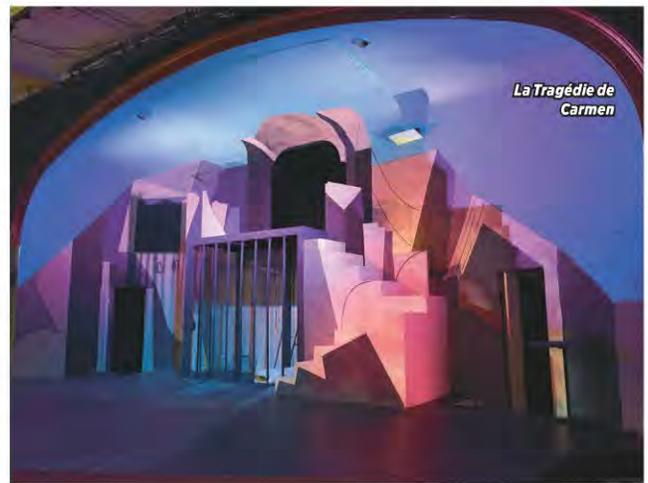
BREATHTAKING FIGHT SCENES

Whether you're a fan of French composer Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, at more than three hours in length, or a novice to opera, you're sure to appreciate the upcoming production of *La Tragédie de Carmen* at Opera in the Heights, the final offering of its 2014-15 season.

"In 1983, a British director, Peter Brook, stripped away all of the nonessential elements and made it more succinct," explained Lynda Keith McKnight, OH stage director. "He stripped it down to four main people and left all of the music intact."

This dark tale of love and jealousy, ending in tragedy and death, retains the well-known musical moments from the original opera: femme fatale Carmen's "Seguidilla" and "Habanera," bullfighter Escamillo's "Toreador Song" and naive soldier Don José's "Flower Song." This will be the second OH production for conductor Dr. Eiki Isomura.

"It's a very intense 80 minutes. This will appeal to modern audiences — it's very visceral. It has amazing fight work," McKnight said, prais-



Zack Varela

ZEST

BOOK EVENTS

SUNDAY

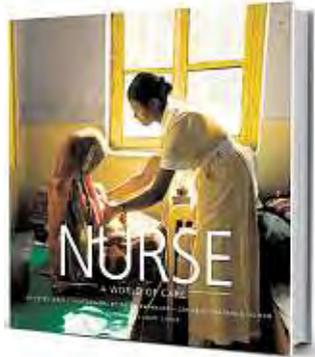
Crimson Romance Author Signing: Authors Karen Sue Burns, Andrea R. Cooper, Nicole Flockton, Elizabeth Meyette and Shelley K. Wall will sign their books, 3-5 p.m., Katy Budget Books, 2450 Fry, Houston; 281-578-7770 or katybooks.com.

MONDAY

Cristina Henríquez and Marlon James: Henríquez ("The Book of Unknown Americans") and Marlon James ("A Brief History of Seven Killings") will discuss and sign their books as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m., Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. \$5 general admission. Information: inprinthouston.org.

TUESDAY

Karen Kasmauski: National Geographic photographer and co-author of "Nurse: A World of Care," will sign 5-7 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore, 3270 Westheimer; 713-520-0061 or riveroaksbookstore.com.



WEDNESDAY

Henry (Hank) Paulson Jr.: Author and former Treasury Secretary will discuss his book, "Dealing with China," in conversation with Ambassador Edward Djerejian, 6 p.m., Asia Society Texas Center, 1370 Southmore. \$30; \$20 members. Information: 713-496-9901 or asiasociety.org/texas.

Ryan Gattis: Author will discuss and sign "All Involved," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 or brazosbookstore.com.

THURSDAY

Connor Franta: Author will meet fans as they receive pre-signed copies of "Work in Progress," 6 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop, 14532 Memorial; 281-497-8675 or bluewillowbookshop.com.

Kevin Prufer and Michael Morse: Poets will read from their works, 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

FRIDAY

Chase Untermeyer: Author and former U.S. ambassador to Qatar will sign "Inside Reagan's Navy: The Pentagon Journals," 5-7 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore.

Duane Swierczynski and Dennis Tafoya: Swierczynski will sign and discuss "Canary" and Tafoya will sign and discuss "The Poor Boy's Game," 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book, 2342 Dissinger; 713-524-9507 or murderbythebook.com.

Author wraps Jamaican truths in symphony of fictional voices

Marlon James' latest novel is a Jamaican symphony, a sea of distinct and unforgettable voices.

"A Brief History of Seven Killings" wraps fiction around one historical fact: the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in Kingston, Jamaica, on Dec. 3, 1976.

The first half of the saga circles this incident, imagining the gang members and schemers who, wittingly or unwittingly, might have been part of this politically charged event. The second half reaches beyond Kingston to Montego Bay, Miami and New York, up through the early 1990s.

"A big book is almost like a double album," says James, 44, whose accent belies his native Jamaica, although he's on the phone from Minnesota, where he now lives. "You give yourself a big canvas to try things. And even if it fails somewhere, well, another 300 pages are coming along."

This attitude squares with one of the more memorable asides in the book: "Jamaicans are so unflappable," James writes, "they might as well be Minnesotans."

Reading "A Brief History of Seven Killings" — nearly 700 pages and a cast of characters north of 70 — is challenging and intense. Each chapter is told in first-person; chapter headers tell readers who's talking. Sometimes it's a CIA station chief in Kingston. Sometimes it's the don of a Jamaican gang unspooling a thick, stream-of-consciousness patois. Sometimes it's the ghost of a dead politician. Sometimes a Rolling Stone reporter... and the list goes on. Only one voice speaks at a time, but the voices come together in your head. You're still thinking about what the gang member said — "It's a hell of a thing when a gun come home to live with you" — but now you're reading a draft of the American journalist's story: "The Third World slum is a nightmare that defies beliefs or facts, even the ones staring right at you."

The individual voices pile up and before you know it, you've stepped inside 20th-century Jamaica, where rival gangs compete for turf and power, where garbage piles up, electricity is spotty, and curfew is mandatory.

It's a symphony of language, blood, brains, piss, music, death and dreams.

"A Brief History of Seven Killings" is James' third book. His first, "John Crow's Devil" (2005), tells the story of a

Jamaican village held hostage by a spiritual feud between two preachers in the 1950s. "The Book of Night Women" (2009), set on a Jamaican sugar plantation at the turn of the 19th century, won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize.

James thought "A Brief History of Seven Killings" would be a noir novella, until a close friend set him straight.

"I kept writing more characters," said the author, who teaches at Macalaster College. "I kept dancing around the Bob Marley event. And I hit a dead end. I said, 'I don't know whose story this is.' And my friend

Rachel said, 'Why do you think it's one person's story?' When was the last time you read 'As I Lay Dying?'"

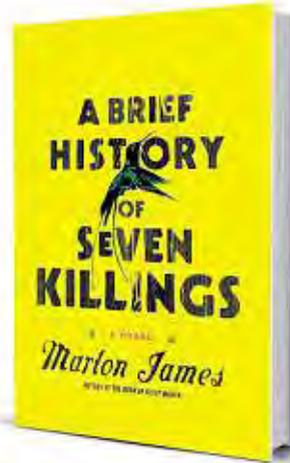
The 1970s Jamaica that James describes in his novel is teeming with civil unrest. The conservative Jamaica Labor Party clashes with the communist-friendly People's National Party and endless turf battles erupt on the street.

"This was a time when the average election had hundreds of people being killed," James says. "A huge body count. It was a very tribalist kingdom. It was still about territory. Whoever controls this territory controls Kingston. Whoever intimidates Kingston intimidates Jamaica."

James was just 6 years old when thugs with guns busted into Marley's home and started shooting. This was only two days before "the Singer" — as Marley is called in the novel — was scheduled to appear at a massive free concert. Marley was injured in the attack, but he performed anyway. All that's in the book.

James grew up in a Jamaican household where crime and politics were discussed openly.

"Because Jamaica is small," the author explained, "you can't really escape it. And both my parents are police. My mom's a detective. My dad left the force to become a lawyer. The joke in my



Author appearance

Marlon James will appear with author Cristina Henríquez ("The Book of Unknown Americans") as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday

Where: Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

Tickets: \$5; inprinthouston.org

family is she locks them up, and he takes them out."

As a child, James also witnessed an explosion of Jamaican culture.

"Jamaican arts, dance, literature developed its own aesthetic," the author says. "The thing about reggae, it reclaimed patois, dialect."

In some ways, James' childhood was an aggregation of Jamaican, British and

American culture.

American TV was hugely popular.

"Growing up in the '70s," he says, "you were raised by 'Sesame Street,' 'The Muppet Show,' 'Charlie's Angels,' 'Starsky and Hutch.'"

At the same time, the British empire was ever-present. Although Jamaica gained independence from Britain in 1962, the island's education system in the 1970s still groomed children to be colonial subjects of the queen.

"I can lay on the straight Jamaican standard English," James laughs. "One aspect of it, we drop adverbs anywhere we want."

He pauses, thinking of an example: "Stop *wastefully* using the water," he says.

One of the biggest influences on "A Brief History of Seven Killings," was James Ellroy's classic crime novel, "American Tabloid" (1995).

"I wanted to know how to tell a story in an expansive way but still have it guided by voice and guided by people in the margins," James explains. "The whole idea of a great American novel is a ludicrous idea we have to get over, but if you were to blackmail me, I'd say it's 'American Tabloid.'"

James is on a "slight" writing break now, but he's researching his next book. A fantasy. "I love Thor and Zeus, but I'm kind of tired of European mythology," the author says. "I'm reading about Sub-Saharan mythology and religion and history. The research is so crazy. Court dramas, kings, princes, political intrigue — and mix that with monsters and ogres and giants."

Long story short, he quips, he's looking to write an African "Game of Thrones."

maggie.galehouse@chron.com



MAGGIE GALEHOUSE
Bookish



Author Marlon James

SATURDAY

PAGE 19

Houston chefs face off in an *Iron Chef*-like sushi roll-off.**TUESDAY**

PAGE 22

Famed pipa player Wu Man joins the Shanghai Quartet.

**WEDNESDAY**

PAGE 22

Watch out for the third act; Christine Goerke tends to cry.



NIGHT + DAY

WEEK OF APRIL 16 - 22, 2015 WWW.HOUSTONPRESS.COM/CALENDAR

LITERARY EVENTSInprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series: Cristina Henriquez and Marlon James
Monday

Jeffrey Shemp

MON

4/20

LITERARY EVENTS**A WEIGHTY STORY**

An odd message accompanied the delivery of Marlon James's novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*: "Good luck, my friend — it's 669 pages!" Actually, it's 688 pages. It's also brilliant. James is in town as part of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, along with Cristina Henriquez. The story of an attempted assassination of Jamaican musician Bob Marley in 1976, *Seven Killings* gives voice to an array of characters — a *Rolling Stone* reporter, CIA agents, corrupt cops, ambitious politicians, drug dealers, gang members, children of the Kingston ghettos and a few ghosts. Most of them relate their stories in colorful, syncopated Jamaican patois.

Interestingly, famed reggae musician Marley, called simply the Singer in the narrative, isn't the focus of *Seven Killings*. Instead, James concentrates on the people around Marley, an eclectic cast of Everymans. Using the assassination attempt as an entry into Jamaican culture and politics, James examines not Marley but the complicated, contradictory world that produced him and his music. 7:30 p.m. Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. For information, visit inprintheouston.org. \$5. **OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ**

ZEST

REVIEW

Geoff Dyer finds inspiration at sea

Writer gains appreciation for the military while working on latest novel

By Maggie Galehouse

GEOFF Dyer's writing is widely, wildly omnivorous. An Englishman who lives in Venice Beach, Calif., Dyer has penned four novels and several genre-defying books on topics ranging from jazz to film to travel. His particular literary cocktail is a heady mix of innocence, observation and wit, offset by a bracing dash of self-deprecation.

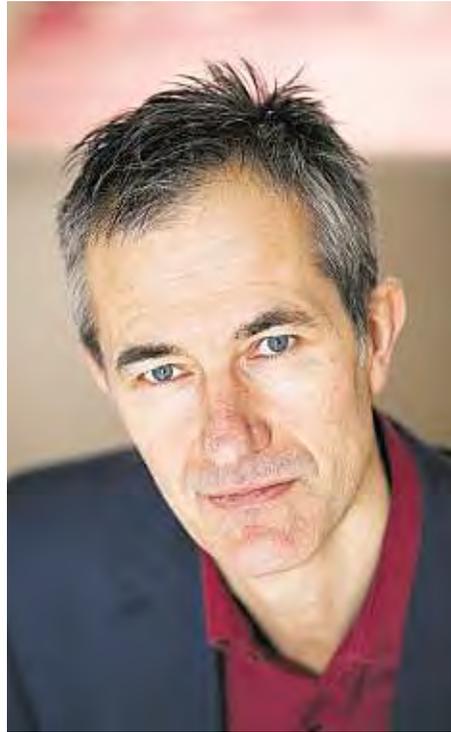
"A tourist with a notebook," he calls himself.

Dyer's collection of essays, "Otherwise Known as the Human Condition" (2011), won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. "Another Great Day at Sea" (2014), his latest book, recounts two weeks he spent aboard a busy aircraft carrier with the U.S. Navy. Dyer never says exactly where he was, but it's a 40-minute flight from Bahrain.

Currently teaching at the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin, Dyer, 56, appears in Houston on Monday as the final guest of Inprint's 2014-15 Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

Q: By my reckoning, you were an outsider several times over on the USS George H.W. Bush aircraft carrier. You're English. You're a civilian. You're in your 50s, which, as you note in the book, is old for the people serving on the ship. And you're tall, which means the threat of bumping your head in a passageway was ever-present. Was this sort of compound otherness a good vantage point from which to report?

A: I love feeling like I belong, and America is famous for how many people want to belong here and how quickly that process of assimilation occurs. Generally speaking, I knew I was going to like being on the ship. It was a sort of concentration of America. I think it's hard to imagine the life these sailors are leading, which is so completely the opposite of mine. My self-discipline is indistinguishable from self-indulgence. There are so many books of reportage about journalists being embedded. My

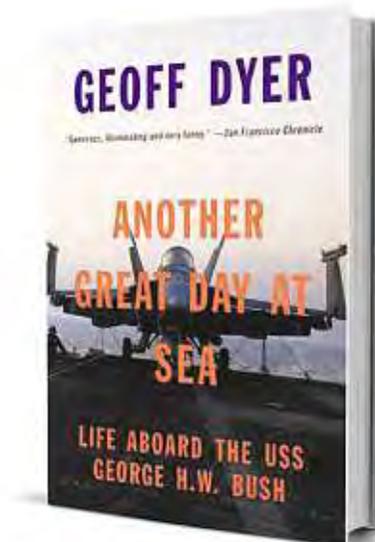


Matt Stuart

Geoff Dyer

Author appearance

Geoff Dyer will appear as part of the Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday, Wortham Theater Center, 500 Texas. \$5 general admission. Doors open 6:45 p.m. Information: inprinthouston.org.



'Another Great Day at Sea'

By Geoff Dyer.
Knopf Doubleday, 208 pp., \$15.95 paperback.

book doesn't merit being spoken of in the same breath. In a sense, I was adamant to avoid that sort of immersion reporting by refusing to share a room. For me, it was a highly unusual pleasure cruise.

Q: There are endless literary references throughout, to Albert Camus, William Cowper, W.H. Auden ... though my favorite is a phrase that invokes Joan Didion: "I'd ended up feeling less conspicuous on the boat, not Didionly invisible but more at ease and confident around the people I ran into every day."

A: Those writers are part of my circuitry, part of my bloodstream really. They helped me make sense of what was going on. The experience of looking at a great expanse of water is inherently meditative. Particularly striking is the hugeness of the ocean compared to the claustrophobic atmosphere on the boat.

Q: At one point you meet with the captain's cook, whose previous experience with journalists — she was miffed when one article claimed she was making *baked* halibut when, in fact, the halibut was *fried* — has been unpleasant. You tell her: "I feel I have to say at the outset that facts are not my strong point ... To be perfectly honest, strong points are not my strong points." So I have to ask: As a writer, what are your strong points?

A: Many bits of my books are funny, but there's also kind of a tendency to go into the metaphysical aspect of things. A quasi-philosophic thing. I would never want to be described as a comic writer. It's so limiting. I hope my humor in no way cauterizes my ability to find things moving. There were so many people I came across on the carrier who were so admirable, even if I was at ideological loggerheads with them.

Q: And you also came away with a profound respect for what we might call a military "attitude."

A: In the military, you've just got to suck it up. It's raining and you're soaking wet? You still have to do your job. Your best friend had his arms blown off? You've still got to do it. I have really become a believer in the idea of sucking it up.

maggie.galehouse@chron.com