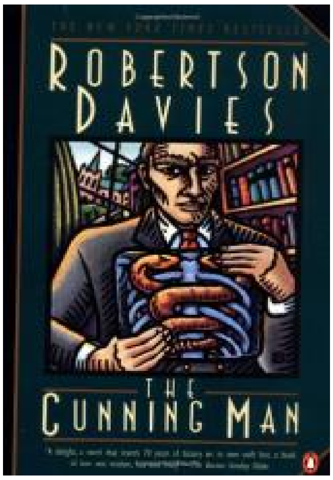
The Cunning Man

by Robertson Davies



About the Book

One of the joys of Robertson Davies' fiction is its easy commerce with the full sweep of western culture from the ancient Greeks to the present. Another is its vigorous, talky characters, whose challenges, exhilarations, defeats, and ultimate destination are bodied forth in telling details. And a third is an old-fashioned, attention-grabbing theatricality. *The Cunning Man*is as broadly learned as its predecessors, as replete with vividly realized characters, and as dramatic in its presentation.

The declared subject of the novel (which shares several major figures and events with its immediate predecessor, *Murther & Walking Spirits*) is the cultural life of the city of Toronto in the years before and after World War II - or rather, that of the small area around St. Aidan's Church. Here "The Ladies" - the minor artist Miss Pansy Freake Todhunter and her friend the sculptor Emily Hart-Raven - resided and entertained the artistic community at their "Sundays." We learn about what happened through Miss Todhunter's letters to the sculptor Barbara Hepworth back in England, and through Dr. Jonathan Hullah, who is stirred to record his reminiscences by a young journalist, Esme Barron, who is herself bent on writing a series of articles about The Toronto That Used To Be. Miss Todhunter is especially good at conveying the peculiar mixture of accomplishment and parochialism that characterized the cultural life of the period.

Dr. Hullah, the story's chief narrator, takes the view that to understand a city's cultural past it is necessary to understand the people who created it. And so he tells the life stories of a number of the key figures, and provides capsule histories for many others. The life he explores most richly is his own. His account makes it entirely plausible that he should introduce many of the novel's learned references. He is comfortable with the thinking of Paracelsus, Thomas Browne, Robert Burton, and Sir William Osler, and refers easily to a wide range of novels and poetry. Without saying so directly, he makes it obvious that he himself has been a major contributor to The Toronto That Used To Be. So too was his old schoolfriend, Charlie Iredale, priest of St. Aidan's, passionate high Anglican and lover of its ritual and fine music. But Iredale's life had gone off the rails, and he was exiled to a minor parish, slid into alcoholism, and, after a brief period of reprieve, into death.

The Cunning Man is Davies' eleventh novel. In it he has drawn once again on his seemingly inexhaustible hoard of intuition, formidable memory, and astonishing erudition to produce a truly entertaining story.

Discussion Guide

1. The story of Dr. Hullah's life and times emerges in reaction to a series of interviews with the young journalist Esme Barron. What does she add to the story? What happens to shift Hullah from his initial mistrust of her to "love?"

2.*The Cunning Man* turns on Father Ninian Hobbes' death. The event is recounted at length three times, at the beginning by Dr. Hullah, in III:18 in a letter by Miss Todhunter, and in IV:21 by Charlie Iredale, and it is referred to more briefly again and again. Why is the old priest's death given such prominence?

3.Interspersed through the third section of the novel are letters written by Miss Pansy Freake Todhunter ("Chips") to the English sculptor Barbara Hepworth. Chips and her companion, Emily Raven-Hart, observe The Toronto That Used to Be using the standards they had absorbed in Britain. Consider what the letters add to the story.

4. Contrast Davies' view of Toronto's cultural life in the thirties, forties, and fifties with the cultural life of a mid-sized U.S. city during that period.

5. Dr. Hullah has Emily Hart-Raven sculpt a four-foot tall version of the caduceus, the symbol of medicine, for the wall at the entrance to his clinic. This, we are told, is "Hermes' walking-stick with two snakes curling around it." Why does Hullah specify a pair of Massassauga rattlers? Why does Davies link this Greek mythic symbol to Canadian Indian lore?

6.The first section of the novel describes a discussion at the Curfew Club at Colborne College, where the supporters of religion (Dunstan Ramsay and Charlie Iredale) confront the advocates of science (Evans). Why does Davies include this scene? Where do you think Hullah stands?

7.At the end of this scene Dunstan Ramsay argues that "The truly historical view was not a tale of man's progress from barbarism or superstition to modern enlightenment, but a recognition that enlightenment had shown itself in the long story of man in a variety of guises, and that barbarism and superstition were undying elements in the human story." How is this observation evinced by the novel?

8. As readers of *Murther & Walking Spirits* know, that novel begins with the murder of Esme Barron's husband, Connor Gilmartin. There, the man who killed Gilmartin eventually confesses to Hugh McWearie, just as, in *The Cunning Man*, Charlie Iredale eventually confesses to Jonathan Hullah. In a scene near the end of *The Cunning Man* McWearie and Hullah exchange secrets, each confirming what the other suspected. What makes us accept their insights? Why is this scene so satisfying?

9. In the last section of *The Cunning Man*, Dr. Hullah, now sixty-five, decides to give his life fresh interest by engaging in a new form of literary criticism. He will "apply modern medical theory to the notable characters of literature" and call the resulting book The Anatomy of Fiction. This project produces a series of "Notes for ANAT." each one a literary excursion inspired by something in the main story. What effect do these literary asides have on you as the reader? Do they distract you from the main story? Are they in some sense part of the story? Does Davies want a slower pace and if he does, why? and does he carry you with him?

Author Bio

Robertson Davies (1913-1995) was born in the village of Thamesville, Ontario (the Deptford of three of his novels), where he lived for five years. His parents were remarkably like those of Brochwel Gilmartin in *The Cunning Man* - great readers, talkers, and singers, but unhappy in their marriage and eager to win his allegiance.

His father's newspaper interests took the family to the town of Renfrew (the Blairlogie of *What's Bred in the Bone*), and then to Kingston (the Salterton of his first trilogy and of his most recent two novels). He attended Upper Canada College in Toronto (the original of Colborne College), Queen's University in Kingston, and Balliol College, Oxford, where he took his B. Litt. in 1938. He then joined the Old Vic Company for two seasons, acting bit parts, teaching theatre history in its school, and doing literary work for the director. In 1940 he married Brenda Mathews, who had been a stage manager with the Old Vic, and returned to Canada.

He was literary editor of *Saturday Night* magazine in Toronto until 1942, then editor of the *Peterborough Examiner*. Until the mid-fifties he threw his considerable "leisure" energies into theatre, writing and directing plays for the Little Theatre and for several professional companies. In 1963 he left the*Examiner* and became Master of Massey College in the University of Toronto (the original of Ploughwright College in *The Rebel Angels*). At the university he taught in the English department and the Drama Centre until he retired in 1981.

Reading the works of Jung in the fifties and sixties changed Davies' outlook and had a strong impact on his writing. Where earlier he had turned away from the images and ideas that rose unbidden in his dreams and visions, he now opened himself up to them. And he came to accept and value his intuitions. He came to see the novelist and playwright as givers of shape to the archetypal material rising from the unconscious. As a result he ceased to write novels that were essentially comedies of manners with distanced, cool, analytic omniscient narrators. Starting with *Fifth Business*, he began to write fictional autobiographies or confessions in which the underlying presence of the archetypes is palpable.

His many works include not only plays and the novels that won him international renown, but criticism, belles lettres, stories, and speeches. He was awarded the Governor General's Award (for *The Manticore*), the National Arts Club (New York) Medal of honour for literature (1987), and was made Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1967), a Companion of the Order of Canada (1972), an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters - the first Canadian to be so honored - (1980), and in 1986 Honorary Fellow of Balliol. The honorary degrees he particularly treasured are those from Trinity College, Dublin (1990) and from Oxford (1991).

Critical Praise

"One comes to the end of *The Cunning Man* reflecting on the sheer pleasure of reading a novel by a writer who has lived a full life . . . and one who has read and thought about everything from Jung and male bonding to medicine and art. What delight to be again in the hands of a master storyteller. "

The Cunning Man

by Robertson Davies

Publication Date: February 1, 1996
Paperback: 480 pages
Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)
ISBN-10: 0140248307
ISBN-13: 9780140248302