

Coveting his wife's brother

BY NIGHTFALL, by Michael Cunningham. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 256 pp., \$25.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

As he slides ever deeper into a midlife moral crisis, married Manhattan art dealer Peter Harris lies awake trying to figure out what the hell is happening to him: He seems to be falling in love with his young brother-in-law, Mizzy (short for The Mistake). An attractive, intelligent ne'er-do-well with a crystal meth problem, Mizzy has recently drifted into the Harris family's guest room, where Peter can overhear his phone calls and other private activities.

"Maybe it's not, in the end, the virtues of others that so wrenches our hearts," thinks Peter, "as it is the sense of almost unbearably poignant recognition when we see them at their most base, in their sorrow and gluttony



Michael Cunningham

and foolishness. . . . [We] don't care about Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina or Raskolnikov because they're good. We care about them because they're not admirable, because they're us, and because great writers have forgiven them for it."

Peter is the consummate neurotic New Yorker, living with his wife in a loft in Soho ("how '80s is that?") and quick-

ly becomes dear to the reader for exactly the reason he cites with regard to Emma, Anna, et al. He makes mistakes. One of them will be The Mistake. And a great writer, which Michael Cunningham surely is, will forgive him for it.

Cunningham has again pulled off his trick of combining the novel of ideas with the juicy read. The characters in "By Nightfall" deceive, spy on and gossip about one another; but while all that is going on, "Nightfall" also studies the concepts of beauty and genius as they are expressed in the contemporary art world. The artists Cunningham invents for Peter to represent are just perfect: one shows paintings completely hidden in brown paper wrappings; another inscribes pornographic lyrics on bronze urns. Each seems a metaphor for an aspect of the novel itself.

"Nightfall" is seductively

homoerotic, but has memorable female characters, too: Peter's assistant Uta ("a member of what seems to be a growing body of defiantly unassimilated expatriates"), his dying colleague Bette

(silver crew-cut, black rimmed glasses, a serious person "who would wave only if she were drowning"), his savvy client in Connecticut, Carole Potter, who is not happy with the ball of tar and dirt recently installed in her English garden.

Peter's beautiful wife, Rebecca, however, never comes completely into focus. That's because Peter himself has drifted away from her.

The verdict: "By Nightfall" is a delicious book and will make a fine movie, as did "The Hours" and "A Home at the End of the World." A straight man who suddenly falls for his wife's brother may seem like a stretch for mass appeal — but then didn't Mrs. Dalloway?



this week

Readings & events on LI

Tuesday

WFUV DJ Pete Fornatale interviews actor-musician **Rick Springfield** about his new memoir, "Late, Late at Night" (Touchstone). At 7 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



Wednesday

Actress . . . singer . . . author? Triple threat **Hilary Duff** signs copies of her young adult novel, "Elixir" (Simon & Schuster). At 7 p.m., *Barnes & Noble*, Country Glen Center, 91 Old Country Rd., Carle Place; 516-741-9850



Saturday

Children's author **Artie Bennett** reads "The Butt Book" (Bloomsbury). At 10 a.m., *Best Bargain Books*, 217 Centereach Mall, Centereach; 631-737-7777, bestbargainbook.com



Kate and Jim McMullan present their new children's book, "I'm Big!" (Balzer + Bray). At 11 a.m., *Canio's Books*, 290 Main St., Sag Harbor; 631-725-4926, caniosbooks.com

Bloody Mary gets cleaned up

MARY TUDOR: Princess, Bastard, Queen, by Anna Whitelock. Random House, 402 pp., \$28.

BY MATTHEW PRICE
Special to Newsday

History has not been very kind to Mary Tudor. Her short reign, bookended by the long, turbulent rule of her father Henry VIII and the glories of Elizabeth I, her sister, earned her the sobriquet "Bloody Mary." A devout Catholic, Mary is something of an embarrassment to a nation proud of its Protestantism, remembered as "a terrible footnote in English history," writes Anna Whitelock in her new biography of this maligned monarch.

Whitelock gives us a different picture. Mary, she contends, "broke tradition, she challenged precedent; she was a political pioneer who redefined the English monarchy." Though Whitelock makes excessive claims on behalf of England's first crowned queen — it is a

matter of some debate just how much Mary transformed the monarchy — the author gives us a fuller, more rounded image of Mary than the caricatured one of popular history.

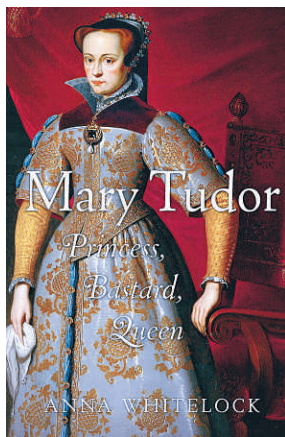
Born in 1516, Mary came of age as the waves of Reformation washed over Europe. Mary was Henry's firstborn child, but her life would be profoundly shaped by her father's obsessive quest for a male heir. Mary's mother, Katherine of Aragon, could not produce a son, so Henry sought a divorce. It was a radical move that put him on a collision course with the Pope and the religious establishment.

For Mary, it was a traumatic moment. She was stripped of the title "princess," and henceforth was to be known merely as "the lady Mary, the King's

daughter"; she became, in effect, a bastard. Whitelock makes a sympathetic case for Mary's plight. She was isolated and frozen out of the court yet persevered, studying the art of rule with her tutors, and keeping true to her Catholic faith, even as Henry stepped up his anti-Papist maneuvering.

The story Whitelock tells is one of fortitude against great odds. Mary's path to the throne was fraught with obstacles. Henry's third wife bore him a son, Edward, who became king in 1547. Under his reign, Protestantism began to firmly take

hold. But, as ever, the issue of royal succession swirled around the Tudor court. A plan was implemented to deny both Mary and Elizabeth the crown, and Edward's death in 1553 unleashed a struggle for power. Mary



TALK ABOUT IT
What are you reading?
Tell us what you are recommending to friends



newsday.com

/books