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Fiction review: 'By Nightfall' by Michael Cunningham

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"You're a kind man," a friend tells Peter Harris, the main character in "By Nightfall," Michael Cunningham's exquisitely written, taut and tense new novel. "Not a nice man. People tend to get the two mixed up."

She may be right. An affluent 44-year-old, New York City art dealer, Peter "has never graduated to the majors." He wants, desperately, to "procreate" something beautiful and enduring, something that will show the world that he mattered, in what he left behind and in his "proud but perishable flesh." Ambitious and sometimes self-absorbed, he's been guilty "not of the epic transgressions but the tiny crimes." He has neglected those he cares most about: his wife, Rebecca, once the most sought-after girl in Richmond, Va., who has taken on "a hint of mortal weariness"; his daughter, Beatrice, who has dropped out of Tufts University to work in a hotel bar in Boston; and Rebecca's much younger brother, Ethan (or "Mizzy," meaning "mistake"), a drug addict, whose visit causes Peter to question his philosophy of life, his sexuality and his sense of self.

With a terrible honesty, Cunningham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Hours," penetrates to the essence of loneliness and longing, resentment and rage. As Peter stands at a railing in the middle of the night, cell phone pressed to his ear, staring at Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, Bea accuses him of negotiating a deal instead of watching her perform in "Our Town" years ago:

"Why don't you come home for a while, baby?" he asks. "I am home," she replies. "I love you," is all he can think to say. "Good night, Daddy," she says and hangs up. Why is it so reprehensible, Peter will wonder, to want his daughter to share some of the blame for the rupture in the relationship?

Equally penetrating -- and more provocative -- is Cunningham's assessment of the allure of the addict. Even "after we've learned how bad it really and truly gets," Peter observes, those who go down seem "more complicatedly, more dangerously, attuned to the sadness" of human existence. Such romantic musing is a reason -- or is it a pretext? -- for Peter to contemplate, for more than a moment, abandoning "the realm of the sensible," where good people take responsibility, for this "other darker world," to let his brilliantly deceitful and deluded brother-in-law "court his own destruction."

Like Mizzy, like an insect, perhaps like Cunningham himself, Peter is drawn, not to the candle's flames, but to the light on the far side of the flame. He's in danger of sizzling "to nothingness" because he's so eager to get there.

After two (pretty predictable) plot twists, Peter hasn't resolved much. Modern novels, after all, rarely end with a happily ever after. But, as its title suggests, "By Nightfall" isn't entirely dark. It's enlivened by a mordantly witty

deconstruction of the art business. And, by nightfall, Peter may be on the road to something somewhat better. By then, you're rooting for him. He's decent. And nicer.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

BY NIGHTFALL

Michael Cunningham

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