



# The Cunning Man

*Robertson Davies*

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## **The Cunning Man** Robertson Davies

"Should I have taken the false teeth?" This is what Dr. Jonathan Hullah, a former police surgeon, thinks after he watches Father Hobbes die in front of the High Altar at Toronto's St. Aidan's on the morning of Good Friday. How did the good father die? We do not learn the answer until the last pages of this "Case Book" of a man's rich and highly observant life. But we learn much more about many things, and especially about Dr. Hullah. From an early age, Jonathan Hullah developed "a high degree of cunning" in concealing what his true nature might be. And so he kept himself on the outside, watching, noticing, and sniffing, most often in the company of those who bore watching. Among them, flamboyant, mystical curate Charlie Iredale; outrageous banker Darcy Dwyer; cynical, quixotic professor Brocky Gilmartin, whose son Conor, also Hullah's godson, makes a fateful and too brief appearance in Robertson Davies's last novel, *Murder & Walking Spirits*. Hullah also lives in close proximity to Pansy Freake Todhunter, an etcher in Toronto. Indeed he becomes privy to her intimate letters to British sculptor Barbara Hepworth. It is "Chips," as she is called, who writes Dame Barbara: "The doctor is a bit of a puzzle. Long and cornery and quiet and looks like a horse with a secret sorrow." As the Cunning Man takes us through his own long and ardent life of theatre, art, and music, varied adventures in the Canadian Army during World War II, and the secrets of a doctor's consulting room, his preoccupation is not with sorrow but with the comedic canvas of life. Just as Dr. Hullah practices a type of psychosomatic medicine "by which I attempt to bring about changes in the disease syndromes through language," so does Robertson Davies intertwine language and story, as perhaps never before, to offer us profound truths about being human.

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