

## BRIDGIT HENRY

*Memory Diver*, 2006  
Woodcut, 30 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## GEORGE SAUNDERS

# The Haunting

Charnel grounds, ghosts,  
and fictive realities:  
Dan White interviews  
George Saunders

*George Saunders became famous for writing darkly funny stories that unfolded in strange and seedy theme parks that existed in a sort of limbo. On the one hand, the stories seemed to take place in a not-so-distant future. At the same time, the hapless employees of those parks were obsessed with recreating the past. In his celebrated story “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” an actual Confederate ghost comingles, hilariously, with ghostly holograms. Saunders’s new novel, Lincoln In The Bardo, takes place in a clamorous Georgetown cemetery during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Glancing at the first few paragraphs, even Saunders die-hards may be flummoxed; where are the author’s fingerprints? Is this a jarring break from the past? But the deeper they delve into the new one, the more they will see Saunders’s impressions—the wild surrealistic and absurdist flourishes. Angry spirits with unfinished business may bring back memories of the implacable and potty-mouthed zombie grandmother in his short story “Sea Oak.” The early stories disarmed the readers with their finely tuned comedy, only to drop them down through a trap door leading somewhere unexpected—a revelation, heartache, an act of violence. The new novel does something close to the reverse; it allows for tenderness and hilarity in the last place where you would ever expect to find such things.*

*In March, Catamaran reached Saunders in the midst of his busy tour to promote Bardo. Here is our interview, which covered everything from Victorian attitudes about death to the way his engineering background informs the structure of his writing.*

—Dan White

**Dan White:** I was just thinking about all the unsettled ghosts in your work, even before you wrote this latest novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, whose main character is Willie, Abraham Lincoln’s son who died at a young age. There’s the ghost boy in your story “The Wavemaker Falter” that haunts the man who kills him accidentally and imagines his life going forward, and there’s also the incredibly profane zombie grandmother in “Sea Oak.” I’m wondering what is it about these unsettled phantasms that just keeps taking ahold of you and pulling you back.

**George Saunders:** It’s about making sure the story has energy. A lot of times, I’ll be working in a pretty realist mode. You know, normal people. And then somehow

the story will just seem insufficiently energetic. Turning to those ghosts is just one way of kind of shattering that frame that we tend to be in when we think in a realistic framework. So that's one level.

There's also this notion that we all share that we'll all be living forever and that we're totally in control of our phenomena. But we know it isn't true. For instance when you visit a historical place, you're in a room where hundreds of people have been, a good number of whom have died. That's pretty crazy. So, I find myself wanting to tell the real truth of that in fiction. Realism just involves the senses and what's happening right now, apparently, right in front of us. In the story "Sea Oak" that you mentioned, I didn't have any idea that she would die or come back from the grave. The story was kind of dictating that. And the story killed her. And then the story wanted her back. In a certain way the ghost tendency is just a way of mechanically enacting that which the story seems to want to do.

It's never because I'm simply fascinated with ghosts. And it's not really even that I want to talk about death. It's just the story itself has a certain thing that it wants to do. For me, it's mostly about trying to keep the energy up.

**Dan White:** I look at the graveyard community that you've created in your new novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*. It feels strangely plausible to me. In the sense that there are certain rules and constraints that govern the ghosts. Even the way a ghost can kind of change form or stretch, almost like taffy in the way they merge consciousnesses and bodies, even take on additional limbs. I just want to know how it was that you worked out the particular cosmology and the rules that govern this place.

**George Saunders:** That's a very astute observation. And not a lot of people are picking up on that. I think in a certain way, I still am a realist. Because in realism, when we do conventional realism, we're doing just what you said: honoring certain rules. We live in this world. We know there are physical and social rules. And we're sort of demonstrating them.

I think the same thing with the crazy, supernatural world. It's the boundaries that make the meaning. When I was working on this, I was discovering the rules and then I was living by them. And if, for example, late in the game

I would discover a new rule, I would have to go back and revise accordingly.

I really just was playing, but then the plot would actually teach me a rule. For example, the rule in the book that all children aren't allowed to stay in this world of ghosts in the graveyard—that came about because I needed a narrative driver. If it would be okay for Willie to stay there and it was the happy place for kids, then in a way, I wouldn't have a very good story. There was a kind of a back calculation I did when I thought, "Oh, it would be really wonderful if it were dangerous for him to stay."

Then the second part of that was to try to make it plausible that it's dangerous for him. To make the rules seem organic, so that the reader doesn't exactly notice the contrivance, notice the machinery.

In other places, I was just kind of just using other sources. Like the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and just basic ghost mythology that comes to us through movies and TV and everything else. I'm kind of a pop culture geek and I like ghosts. I like supernatural stuff. As you're saying, I did have to be strict about it. I had to be absolutely sure of what the rules are so I could make the characters react to the rules.

**Dan White:** Speaking of those rules, I was especially fascinated by the concept of the carapace of these ghostly vines that were made up of the sort of lost souls. I just kept thinking of Rodin's *Gates of Hell*. The way that these lost souls are incorporated into the architecture of the gate. I want to know how it was that you discovered that carapace concept, which creates the sense of peril in the graveyard.

**George Saunders:** Oh thanks. If you're gonna make a seven-minute film in which a baby falls over a cliff—which I hope you're not, but if you are—then you know for it to be wonderful, you have to fill every minute up with tension. You will want that whole seven minutes to be full of a gradual progression towards the baby going over the cliff. I knew that a lot of my tension depended on Willie being understood to be in peril. So the pacing of that had to be good. I needed specific markers to show us how close he is. In other words, we see the Traynor girl early. Her deal is she's become part of the fence by what

we assume that carapace—a long process that Willie is only at the beginning of. So, it's really just a matter of pacing. I think, also, part of the motive there was to keep him in one place so he wasn't free to run around the whole graveyard. It seemed better that he be anchored in one place and the other people could move around.

So I had to have some active way of constantly reminding the reader that things were getting worse for him. When I'm working on something, it's very technical. And it's always a technicality that's moored in a particular scene.

**Dan White:** Is that where your background, as an engineer, geophysicist comes in? In the writing process?

**George Saunders:** For sure. It's very much related to mathematical proofs for me. I really believe in the fictive moments when I'm doing them. I'm not trying to make a conceptual show or trying to illustrate a point. I'm just believing the people, or in this case, the ghosts as real things. That's one thing. But the second thing is almost like an equation, where I think if my character does A then there's three possible results. Or if he does B, there's this specific outcome. It is a matrix-like cause and effect thing that's in my mind. When I'm rewriting, it's a bit like playing a chess game. I can kind of feel, if I do this move, here are the consequences. If I do this move, here are the consequences. Then there's a sense, a vague sense, of which move is going to be more powerful. Then I know to go in that direction, execute it, do a lot of rewriting to make sure it works. But often a move will end up to be a dead end. So, it's very intuitive. I'm doing a lot of iterative work every day. A lot of these decisions, I can't really trace them back to when I "decided" them. Because I didn't really. I feel my way along and then I look up one day and, in this case, I've made up this carapace idea. I honestly don't exactly remember where it came from. It was more responsive to what was going on in a particular moment.

When we learn about writing in school, we always assume that the writer had an intention and just executed it. But my experience is the opposite. I go in, at first, and the only intention is to make something good—to honor the particular fictive moment. And then along the way, these millions of microdecisions create a much more complex pattern than I could ever have thought of in advance.

**Dan White:** Your new novel dramatizes an attitude about death that may be utterly foreign to twenty-first-century Western minds. It seems to me that maybe the Victorians were just more up-front about death. They engaged in it a different way than we do now.

**George Saunders:** For sure. I think much more healthy. One of the moments in the book is when Lincoln is actually looking at his son's body. I think how these days we have this idea that as soon as death has happened, the body is suddenly a corpse. Scary, yucky, get it out of here. But really, if you love somebody, the gateway to your love is the physicality, the way they move and smell and the contours of their body. It would be really strange if your love ended the minute they died just because the spark left the body. I don't think that's the case. I think part of the grieving process would probably be to let that settle in. The presence of the body would be pretty helpful.

**Dan White:** The attitude about death that you talk about in the novel, it seems like it's part of a whole system. I know that the Tibetan tradition has a very frank relation to the dead body; some monks even meditate in the charnel grounds where bodies are lying around and birds are feeding on them. This frank attitude towards death seems alien to a lot of Western people.

**George Saunders:** Actually, I don't think it's that alien. One of the books I found when I was researching was, it's called, *A Lesson in Dying*. It's an old Christian text. Basically, it's an almost unbearable reiteration of the Buddhist idea that if you think you're permanent, you're an idiot, you're just deluding yourself. That the way to get right with God is to say, "I'm this little temporary blooming phenomenon, and I can look down the road and see everybody's dropping to the grave." The idea is that as healthy as you might feel right now, the trajectory is towards disease and towards death. The Buddhist ideas are sometimes presented in a way that's a little unusual to us. I think at the core, my sense is all the spiritual traditions say the same thing.

Here's how I understand it. In every moment, maybe for Darwinian reasons, we're very deluded. Our thoughts are constantly telling us that we're real and that we are separate. I think all those spiritual traditions have different

ways to break down that idea. Why? I think partly to make the end easier. If you really understood that, it wouldn't surprise you when you die. As much, I guess.

But I think in a more positive sense, it's to make your day-to-day life more meaningful. If we really believe that idea, that we were just these little flowers; that we have only have a brief time in the sun, then imagine what that would do to your day-to-day interactions.

I think about those times when we're so split wide open by the death of somebody we love. It's a different state of being in those four or five days after we lose somebody. We're wide open and almost like a different species altogether.

**Dan White:** Another way of looking at *Lincoln in the Bardo* might be to look at this graveyard as an illustration for the experience of creating this book and sharing it with readers. The spirits keep talking about the mysterious architecture of the place. Who is this architect and what is he doing to us? And it's you the writer who is doing it.

And just as these spirits can kind of pass into a person and temporally occupy them and come together, it reminded me of the transference of consciousness of one person to another. You the writer to me the reader, in a sense.

**George Saunders:** You're my ideal reader. That's perfect. I agree with that. I hope people read it that way. I think it had something to do with what I mentioned earlier. My belief that fictive reality is very strong. During the four years I was working on it, it was as real to me as anything in the world. Maybe realer in some ways because I could actually alter it.

I think that somehow all those kinds of secondary metafictional effects and the psychological effects carry over. I think they get triggered when the author really inhabits that world with no irony and no remove. Those characters, I was thinking about them all the time. In revision, I was refining them all the time. I think that's why that effect happens.

Again, I almost don't want to think about it too much. Because I don't want to be self-aware about it. Ever since I've been writing, I have this thing where I take that fictive role really seriously. It is a game, but it's a game in which I believe 100 percent. I'm glad you read it that way, that's wonderful.

**Dan White:** In other nonfiction pieces when you've traveled abroad and gone to various places, there was an underpinning of some research there. In this novel you're writing in fiction, but you have these verbatim chunks of research incorporated into the text. I just wanted to know about the ripple effects those created in your fictional graveyard. What was it like for you as a creator to incorporate those blocks of actual letters and factual research from other people and introduce them into your fictional graveyard?

**George Saunders:** On a mechanical level, I felt I could get away with more speculation if I had that factual spine. It was almost like a counterweight. I would have a section of the ghost and I'm asking my readers to go with me in a lot of weird directions. Like when those angels come, there's a lot of great orchestration of weird physical things. I could almost feel that the reader might want a sense of relief from that with some apparent facts lined up.

My whole theory about the writer and the reader is for us to be in a very intimate communication. Very intimate. The reader has to trust me and I have to have my eye on her so closely. To know how she's feeling about me. Almost like a date you know? I have to watch her. Is her attention lagging? Oh it is, hmm. Why? Well I've been too long in ghost world. What would help her to believe in me again? Facts.

Or, to look at it another way, I've always had a lot of fun with humor. When I was a kid it was my way of coping with the world. If I wanted to charm somebody or get out of trouble, or diffuse a difficult situation, I'd always be funny. I also had a really earnest sentimental streak. In my writing, I just found a way to accommodate those two different excesses. I'm looking at the reader trying to see where she is. And then correcting. At the same time, having a great deal of respect for the reader. Assuming the reader is very smart and very kindhearted and very attentive.

In a way, the facts stuff was just a way of correcting course a little bit every now and then.

I was moved by the factual story of Abraham Lincoln mourning for his son Willie in the graveyard. Between the time when I heard this story and the time I began writing about this story, I had done some research and

some reading. Every time I stumbled on some backstory about Willie and his death, I would find it more emotionally compelling.

By the time I went to write the novel, I had a lot of feelings about it, and a lot of those feelings were inspired by the facts that I had heard or read. At some point it just became natural to invite the facts in to support my attempt to replicate my own emotional effect for you the reader.

**Dan White:** How are you enjoying your time in Santa Cruz? I hear you've been spending more time out here lately. I'm just wondering how that has affected your creative life? If there might even be echoes of this in your future writings?

**George Saunders:** It might be a problem because we're so happy there. It's so beautiful. And the people are so unbelievably nice that I think I just might have to quit writing because I can't find any misery.

We really love it. It's an incredibly welcoming place. And the physical beauty of it is just staggering. I teach at Syracuse [University] during the fall, and the idea is that we will split time back and forth. It's so nice to be out there. I always was a big Steinbeck fan and a big Neal Cassady, Jack Kerouac guy. And I also love Jack London. So California just opened something up in me.

I made a trip there when I was in my twenties. I drove down the coast. It was so beautiful and literary. So to find myself actually living here is just like a dream. We're very happy. All my books are going to be about happy people being really nice to each other. That'll be a real snore!

**Dan White:** Except for our biblical bout of rain this winter! I think that's more along the lines of a story.

**George Saunders:** I know. I was just leaving when that happened.

There's something nice about changing course now and then that is really artistically important, in a more general sense, that part of the artistic life that keeps stabilizing your self in some way. I'm very settled in at Syracuse. I love upstate New York. It's been kind of good to just say, "Well, yeah. It's a beautiful place. Here's another beautiful place!" To not to have your identity be too tied into your geography.

My life in California is much more active than my life was in upstate New York. It's really good to keep putting challenges in front of yourself. My goal would be to keep expanding as a person and as a writer. Till I die at 397 years old. Just having published my eightieth novel.

**George Saunders** is the author of nine books, including *Tenth of December*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and won the inaugural Folio Prize (for the best work of fiction in English) and the Story Prize (best short story collection). He has received MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellowships, as well as the PEN/Malamud Prize for Excellence in Short Fiction, and was recently elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2013, he was named one of the world's one hundred most influential people by *Time* magazine. He teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Syracuse University.

**Dan White** is the author of *Under the Stars*, an irreverent history of American camping, and *The Cactus Eaters: How I Lost My Mind and Almost Found Myself on the Pacific Crest Trail*, a Northern California Independent Booksellers Association bestseller and *Los Angeles Times* Discovery selection. He has taught composition at Columbia University and San Jose State. He is the contributing editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader* and received his MFA from Columbia University. He lives in Santa Cruz, California, with his wife and daughter.