Book Exploder, Episode 7
George Saunders: "Victory Lap" from *Tenth of December*

Hrishikesh Hirway: You're listening to Book Exploder, where authors break down a passage from their work to show us how they write. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

Susan Orlean: And I'm Susan Orlean.
Today I'm speaking with author George Saunders.

Hrishikesh: George Saunders has won the Booker Prize, and he's the recipient of a MacArthur Genius Grant. He won the Folio Prize for his collection of short stories, *Tenth of December*, which includes the short story "Victory Lap." In this episode, Susan and George talk about a passage from "Victory Lap." Susan, do you remember when you first read George Saunders?

Susan: I would say reading George Saunders for the first time is like taking LSD for the first time. I mean, things are familiar and yet they become very strange and unrecognizable in a way that's completely engaging. Nobody writes like George Saunders. Probably no-one on the planet thinks like George Saunders.

Hrishikesh: Okay. Here's Susan's interview with George Saunders.

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Susan: So, if you can identify where this story came from… did it explode out of an image, a phrase?

George Saunders: It actually came out of a sense of inadequacy, because my work tends to be pretty dark. And so I was at a point where I'm like, maybe, 50 or something and thinking, like, "Why can't I do anything uplifting and lovely?" You know? And I'd read a Chekhov story called After the Ball, or After the Opera or something like that. But it's basically just a little girl, a young teenage girl, who comes home from her first social event, and she's in a room kind of bouncing around thinking about these different things that happened, and it's just a beautiful little perfect story in which really nothing happens, except it feels like it has. So I thought, "Okay, why don't I just challenge myself to try to write something as sweet as that." So, I started writing this kind of stream-of-consciousness piece, from the point of view of this girl. That's really where it started, was just that. And what I tend to do is make something like that just for fun, with no ulterior motive and then start tuning it. I'm a real obsessive reviser. So, I start cutting it, trying to make the jokes a little better, trying to make one thing lead to the next in a natural way. And as you do that, it starts to refine itself into something with a little more of a - a dramatic arc, I guess.

Susan: MHmm. Can you give us an idea of what the story is about?

George: Basically, it's just a story about a young girl who's in her house, she's a would-be ballet dancer, and she's kind of bombin' around waiting for her mom to pick her up, having a lot of thoughts. Then, there's an attempted abduction, basically, not to - spoiler alert. And then there's a little boy next door who's the same age as her and, you know, together we hope that they can thwart this abduction attempt. That's basically it, in a nutshell. It's uplifting, you know, very uplifting.

Susan: Ha. Ha. You know, one thing about this story is, it's so dependent on voice.

People were amazing. Mom was awesome, Dad was awesome, her teachers worked so hard and had kids of their own, and some were even getting divorced, such as Mrs. Dees, but still always took time for their students. What she found especially inspiring about Mrs. Dees was that, even though Mr. Dees was cheating on Mrs. Dees with the lady who ran the bowling alley, Mrs. Dees was still teaching the best course ever in Ethics, posing such questions as: Can goodness win? Or do good people always get shafted.

Many years ago, I had the pleasure of hearing you read this story, and when I heard you read it, I almost couldn't imagine it on the page. It felt like it was meant, always, to be performed.

In their straw poll, she had voted for people being good and life being fun, with Mrs. Dees giving her a pitying glance as she stated her views which were: To do good, you just have to decide to do good. You have to be brave. You have to stand up for what's right.

So, when you're writing, do you compose out loud, and fine-tune the voice literally as a voice?

George: I do something close to that, and it has to do with the fact that as a kid, some of the first moments of artistic power I ever had were in school, uh, making jokes, you know, imitating a teacher or imitating a neighbor, sort of improv that depends a lot on inhabiting a character and then making that character real. That's still something that really comes alive for me. And you're exactly right: This piece came entirely from that impulse, first to try to figure out what she sounded like. And then, there's something in the overflow mode that I go into when I'm doing an improv - Well, for me it's really good, because I tend to overthink things. But when you're riffing like this, your subconscious is really available and it's doing kind of crazy stuff that can't be planned. So, here, you know, when she says:

To do good, you just have to decide to do good. You have to be brave. You have to stand up for what's right

That was me at 16, for sure. I - I was kind of an Ayn Rand guy, just a control freak, and my thought was, all these adults in the world who are, you know, depressed and divorced and alcoholic or whatever, they just weren't trying hard enough. You know, they didn't understand goodness like I did.

Susan: Ha. Ha.

George: And that -- you know how sometimes if you've got prose, part of it is just warmer than other parts. It's like if you had to make a graph of power -- certain parts of the text just peak a little bit, and I always liked that bit. So, it's kind of a throw-down where she says, "Here's my claim: To do good, you just have to do good."

Susan: MHmm.

George: And I imagine the story being a little sweet like, "Really? Do you really believe that?' Oh, don't think that, because then I'm going to have to challenge you." You know.

Susan: Right.

When you were writing a teenage girl -- and having been a teenage girl myself -- I can say this felt so deeply authentic.

But seriously! Is life fun or scary? Are people good or bad?

Did it just feel right as you were writing it?

George: I mean, actually I think there was an early draft where I was trying to think, "How would a teenage girl think," and it didn't work. I said, "Forget it. How did *you* think when you were 16?" And it was totally natural. And I think part of that, it's really powerful because what it says is there really is, I mean, it's such a campaign trail cliché, but there really is more that joins us than separates us. So if I say, "All right, I'm going to imagine being a 95-year-old former prison guard," My working theory is, I got him in me, I've got him in there somewhere. And especially since fiction is, you know, it's a magic show. You're making an approximation of a 95-year-old jail guard or a 16-year-old girl or a, or whatever. You're just saying, "I can get close enough on the assumption that we're all fundamentally the same," and then you kind of decorate it with surface things. Like, when I was 16, I was a big hockey fan and I'd sort of skate around the linoleum floor on my socks with a hockey stick. Well, I just

swapped that out and put ballet in there. But I think basically, it's that exciting assumption that - especially since a person really isn't, in the ultimate sense, their gender or their age or their race or their sexual orientation or their anything - they're just a soul, and we all have that. So, I have a lot of confidence that we can get pretty close to another consciousness, just like you don't really chop the assistant in half when you're a magician. You're just trying to make it look like you do and I think that much we can do.

Hrishikesh: We'll be right back with more, after this.

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Susan: I'm just curious if you ever considered writing this interior monologue of a teenage girl that would be just funny and end it there. And instead, we sort of get pushed into a slightly uncomfortable place of the next chapter of the story.

George: Yea. I kind of feel like, with a story, all of the talking and the moving around, and the world description, and the voice, is there to kind of create, uh, what I think of as an understory. You know, okay, she's waiting for her mom to pick her up. That's all that happens. But underneath it, the text is saying, "Uh, you know, I actually want to talk about something else." The text was basically telling me it wanted to be about that issue of, you know, how do your neat 16-year-old moral principles stand up against the big bad world?

To do good, you just have to decide to do good. You have to be brave. You have to stand up for what's right.

And, of course, that's also for those of us who aren't 16. We all make these neat, conceptual models of the world but the world is always so much bigger than we can imagine that it keeps biting us.

Susan: It's interesting that a story that starts out really comic becomes a lot about morality. And that's the magic trick, to me; it's sort of seducing people into thinking thoughts that are sometimes uncomfortable or--or seeing parts of the world that they didn't think they really wanted to see. That's where humor feels like a wonderful handkerchief to wave and lure people in.

George: Sometimes I think it's like, you know, if you're in a park and somebody throws a Frisbee and the person misses and it's coming for you -- should you catch it or not? Well, yeah, of course. Why? There's no reason for you to catch that stupid Frisbee, but humor feels to me that way, like if it's there, it's a joyful thing to engage in it, and it's a death thing if you don't, you know.

Susan: Right. And you can write a very funny story, or a sad story, or a reflective story, but still kind of exploring that same, bigger question of, “What is morality?”

George: Yeah. That's the only thing I ever wanted to do with stories. I don't have any -- other than that, I don't have any interest in them. Like I was an early Steinbeck fan. I remember reading *The Grapes of Wrath* one summer when I was doing manual labor. And it just, I thought, "Oh, that's really what literature is." It's a way of helping you through the day by making the day seem bigger, you know, seem charged. So, I think that's absolutely right. And then, for me, I just found early that if I sit, like I've got a pretty serious, really boringly serious reductive person inside me. If that person writes a story about morality, it doesn't prove anything. It's just -- it's a foregone conclusion with my stupid opinions in there. Whereas if I can figure out a way to leave that guy behind and do something wilder, then what happens is, the story writes itself into a space where I really don't know the answer. So it’s fun, and it's very surprising because, like in this story, I didn't want her to be abducted. I mean, that seems like, you know, boring, artistically boring and also morally not fun and I remember being stuck for a while, like, "Okay, is there any way I can get you out of this?" But you have to be willing to, you know, “Gird up your loins." You might have to actually make this a much darker story than it already is, you know.

Susan: The irony being that you started the story thinking you were gonna write something a little lighter and...

George: Exactly.

Susan: ... not have a dark turn.

George: Well it’s, you know, Flannery O'Connor has that great thing, a person can choose what he writes, but he can't choose what he makes live.

Susan: Hmm.

George: I have found that to be so true. I have all kinds of aspirations to be a more sunshine-inhabited writer, you know, and I know you know this feeling where you're, okay you were working on some concept with some vision of a book, but the thing is like Frankenstein dead on a slab, you know. Well, your whole job, our whole job is to get that thing to sit up and start walking around. And if--if that doesn't happen, nothing happens. All of your moral ideas go down the toilet. I think of it a little bit like if you're in a show and you're a comic or something, and no-one's laughing, no matter how well-thought-out your routine is, or how well-intentioned, if nobody's

laughing, you're finished. And in fiction, it doesn't have to be laughing, but unless the story is up and walking around their room, it's all for naught anyway.

Susan: I think one of the strange phenomenon of writing is that you might start each story thinking, I'm gonna, I'm gonna do something different.

George: Ha. Ha.

Susan: But you do always end up sounding like yourself.

George: Yea.

Susan: So this takes a dark turn.

Here came a knock on the door. Back door. In-ter-est-ing. Who could it be? Father Dmitri from across the way? UPS? FedEx? With un petit check pour Papa? Jeté, jeté, rond de jambe. Pas do bourrée. Open door, and-- Here was a man she did not know

You must have a dark impulse in there somewhere that pushes a story that could be just absolutely flat-out hilarious, purely comic, and instead this has this kind of resonant theme of goodness versus immorality.

George: You're absolutely right about this thing of, you know, David Wallace said, "In the end, you always end up being yourself." I think for me, if I trace it backwards, it has to do something with -- I don't think really with a dark feeling about the world, I don't feel that way, but I think it's a sort of an anxiety thing, really. You know, if I go to a party, I can pretty quickly list the things to make fun of and if I take a second, I can list the things that are wonderful, but my mind first goes to the sarcastic. It's interesting how writing can make you aware of those tendencies and then you can say, "Okay, that's actually a technical defect." You know, if there are positive and negative valances and I'm over-noticing the negative valances that might want to be adjusted a little bit, and actually revising your work is kind of a way of maybe subtly guiding yourself to that. Like I do think this is a very moral story and I think it says some things about, uh, bravery that I didn't know I knew. And to do that, I had to make some kind of weird-looking puppets, you know, to get to that point.

Susan: Well, I think that's actually why the story to me is deeply optimistic, in the sort of creative sense, which is that you can inhabit another consciousness and get into a different brain and see what the world looks like from that brain.

George: Yeah. I think, I mean, when I read a - a great story, I always feel like, "Oh, I didn't know I could empathize with that person. I didn't know that I could

feel for a person who isn't me." But then I think actually there's a higher level, which is that exhilarated feeling you're talking about where you're feeling just the beautiful surface energy of the thing. It actually just makes you feel something, I'd say like, more alive or more aware. That feeling is actually, I would say, 90% of what you're paying for. If there's a moral part of fiction, it's that. It's that altered state, very brief, very transitory, but very undeniable. That's the thing we're trying to get and it's actually the hardest thing to make happen. And I think it does have something to do with confusing yourself. Like, this story was confusing to me, and every time I read it, I'm confused by it. I always imagine it as being just funny and then you get up in front of a crowd of people and read it and you feel that turn when the abductor shows up. The room gets quiet and people start hating you a little bit.

Susan: Ha.

George: You know, and they start like, you did not make me come out of my house and sit in this uncomfortable chair so that you can torment me with this thing, you know. So it's tense. But even my discomfort in that moment is kind of what you're going for, I think.

Hrishikesh: And now here's George Saunders reading this passage from the short story "Victory Lap" from his book *Tenth of December*.

PASSAGE:

People were amazing. Mom was awesome, Dad was awesome, her teachers worked so hard and had kids of their own, and some were even getting divorced, such as Mrs. Dees, but still always took time for their students. What she found especially inspiring about Mrs. Dees was that, even though Mr. Dees was cheating on Mrs. Dees with the lady who ran the bowling alley, Mrs. Dees was still teaching the best course ever in Ethics, posing such questions as: Can goodness win? Or do good people always get shafted, evil being more reckless? That last bit seemed to be Mrs. Dees taking a shot at the bowling-alley gal. But seriously! Is life fun or scary? Are people good or bad? On the one hand, that clip of those gauntish pale bodies being steamrolled while fat German ladies looked on chewing gum. On the other hand, sometimes rural folks, even if their particular farms were on hills, stayed up late filling sandbags.

In their straw poll, she had voted for people being good and life being fun, with Mrs. Dees giving her a pitying glance as she stated her views which were: To do good, you just have to decide to do good. You have to be brave. You have to stand up for what's right. At that last, Mrs. Dees had made this kind of groan, which was fine. Mrs. Dees had a lot of pain in her life, yet, interestingly, still obviously found something fun about life and good about people, because otherwise why sometimes stay up so late grading, you come in the next day all exhausted, blouse on backward, having messed it up in the early-morning dark, you dear discombobulated thing?

Here came a knock on the door. Back door. In-ter-est-ing. Who could it be? Father Dmitri from across the way? UPS? FedEx? With un petit check pour Papa? Jeté, jeté, rond de jambe. Pas do bourrée. Open door, and-- Here was a man she did not know. Quite huge fellow, in one of those meter-reader vests. Something told her to step back in, slam the door. But that seemed rude. Instead she froze, smiled, did {eyebrow raise} to indicate: May I help you?

CREDITS

Hrishikesh: *Tenth of December* is available in hardcover, paperback, and as an audiobook read by George Saunders himself.

Susan: You can visit us at bookexploder.com for more information.

Hrishikesh: This episode of Book Exploder was produced by Theo Balcomb, Julia Botero, Susan, and myself. Our production assistant is Mary Dolan. Reina Takahashi created the Book Exploder logo, our episode artwork is by Paula Jackson, and I made the show's theme music.

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Hrishikesh: I'm Hrishikesh Hirway

Susan: And I'm Susan Orlean

Hrishikesh: Thanks for listening