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More Scope & Kindness & Power in My Books

An Interview with George Saunders

by Heather Sappenfield

George Saunders's most recent story collection *Tenth of December* (Random House, 2013) is a National Book Award finalist, and it won the PEN/Malamud award, the Folio Prize, and the Story Prize. It was named one of the ten best books of the year by reviewers. Among his accolades are fellowships from the MacArthur Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, four National Magazine Awards, and a World Fantasy Award. In 2013, *Time* included Saunders in their annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world, stating he was "The best short story writer in English."

At twenty-three, Saunders headed to Sumatra and Indonesia to begin his professional life armed with a degree in geophysical engineering from the Colorado School of Mines and an Ayn Rand-inspired Objectivist world-view. As an insider, he observed that landscape's industrial rape. After three years, he returned to the United States with a perspective drifting toward liberalism. He lived and worked "not great jobs" in Texas—guitar player in a bar band, slaughterhouse worker, and roofer—until deciding to pursue his graduate degree in writing at Syracuse

University. There, he studied with Tobias Wolff and Douglas Unger. Upon graduation, Saunders worked as an engineer/technical writer, while also writing and finally publishing his first story collection, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (Riverhead, 1997). A *New York Times* Notable Book and a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, it launched his career and has never been out of print. In 1998, Wolff invited Saunders to apply for a teaching position at Syracuse, and Saunders has taught there since. He has written two other story collections, *Pastoralia* (Riverhead, 2001) and *In Persuasion Nation* (Riverhead, 2007), the stories in them winning O. Henry Prizes and inclusion in *Best American Short Stories* and defining him as a unique and influential voice in American literature. His collection of essays, *The Braindead Megaphone* (Riverhead, 2007), garnered appearances on *The Colbert Report* and *Late Show with David Letterman*. Saunders has also written a political novella, *The*

Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil (Riverhead, 2005), and a children's book, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (McSweeney's, 2006). He is a frequent contributor of fiction and

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nonfiction to the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *GQ*, and *McSweeney's*.

Heather Sappenfield: What is the first piece of fiction you wrote?

George Saunders: I was a big Thomas Wolfe fan in college, so I remember writing these "stories" that

were really just lists of things I'd seen that day, punctuated by the ecstatic utterance "O!" And then usually something about my girlfriend. So it would be like: "O, strewn leaves, 1930s-looking saloon, O bike rack: dost thou know the breadth of my love?" That sort of thing. I was Kahlil Gibran with 1978 Farrah Fawcett hair. The truth was, I hadn't read very much then, so didn't know who I was supposed to be emulating.

Sappenfield: Of course graduate school at Syracuse University shaped

I go through my pieces many times. And the total effect is that, slowly, they start to get better, or at least to move in some direction of which I'll eventually approve.

you as a writer, yet is there something you learned there that sticks with you, that you are mindful of, even today?

Saunders: The most important thing I learned was that good writing is about good writing. Not travel or attitude or repartee or personal wildness or anything else. I'd come to grad school thinking that a writer had to be out of control and decadent and barely functional, and felt a little guilty because I wasn't any of these things naturally. But then meeting Tobias Wolff, I saw that he was a genuine and kind guy, good family man, excellent teacher—and a truly great artist. So it was what went on in

the writing room that mattered. I also got, from Douglas Unger, a great piece of dialogue-writing advice that I still use today. That is top-secret.

Sappenfield: Tobias Wolff invited you to apply for a teaching position at Syracuse. Why you?

Saunders: Well, my first book had come out and we were just up the road, in Rochester.

Sappenfield: In an interview with *Wag's Revue*, you described yourself, when it comes to writing, "like a welder designing dresses." Can you explain this?

Saunders: I feel like my strange background gave me an untraditional and flawed set of skills—so the things that I make always seem a little abrupt and awkward and misshapen to me. I mean, I like them—I think they are emotional and urgent—but in a dorky way. Like someone who is feeling something very intensely and sort of rushes it all out

and trips as he says it. So part of the journey has been to gradually come to accept this flawed quality of the final product as part of what I do.

Sappenfield: What things have you learned not to do in your writing? Do you have a bad habit you watch for?

Saunders: Well, I know that, for my prose to work, I have to keep the pace up. Not get self-indulgent. Not make the mistake of thinking that I'm trying to laboriously catalogue or document something actual. I have to keep my attention on the quality of the prose itself: Is it working? Can I cut it to make it work faster?

Or conversely: have I switched off of actual awareness of the prose and gone on auto-pilot? There's just a certain feeling I get when my prose seems to be working. And so the skill set is: steer toward that feeling. It has to do with admitting that prose and reading and literature are supposed to be deeply enjoyable for the reader—that this is an OK aspiration for the writer: to please someone.

I try not to have too many concepts or plans or ideas or misgivings, and just get started. Then see what the prose is doing that day and respond accordingly. This means you have to have confidence in your taste and your ability to revise, and a lot of patience. I go through my pieces many times. And the total effect is that, slowly, they start to get better, or at least to move in some direction of which I'll eventually approve. One of the symptoms of this positive movement is that the actions I am describing start to seem real to me. The beauty of this approach is that you don't have to worry so much, or do a lot of planning—as long as you're willing to put in the hours—you can just have confidence that, over time, the boulder will move in a positive direction.

Sappenfield: When and where did you first get published? Did it change things?

Saunders: There were three things that came out at about the same time: "A Lack of Order in the Floating Object Room," in *Northwest Review*; "The Compassionate Groundsman" in *Nit&Wit*; and "In the Park, Higher than the Town," in *Puerto del Sol*. They were all around 1986, I think—before I went to Syracuse. It gave me a lot of hope, that little run. I felt like I was in the ballpark, maybe. But then I hit about a four-year drought. Wah.

Sappenfield: The word genius is often used to describe you. In 2006, you won a MacArthur Fellowship, aka

Genius Grant, but when did that term first become affixed to you? Did it affect how you viewed yourself?

Saunders: I'd never heard that applied to me before I got the MacArthur, except sarcastically, as in this true life vignette:

INT. BUILDING SITE, DAY:

George nail guns himself in the hand. Co-worker: "Nice job, genius."

The term has not affected how I view myself. And how dare you ask! Don't you know who I am? Ha ha. (Hint: I am the guy with the nail gun scar on his hand.)

Sappenfield: How do you define genius?

Saunders: I really am not sure that that's even a thing. I can see it when I look at someone like Dylan or Faulkner or Picasso; someone who just produces and produces, unobstructedly, on a very high level. That is not me, for sure.

Sappenfield: At this point in your career, do you ever receive those pesky little rejection slips?

Saunders: Oh yes. Not slips, but emails.

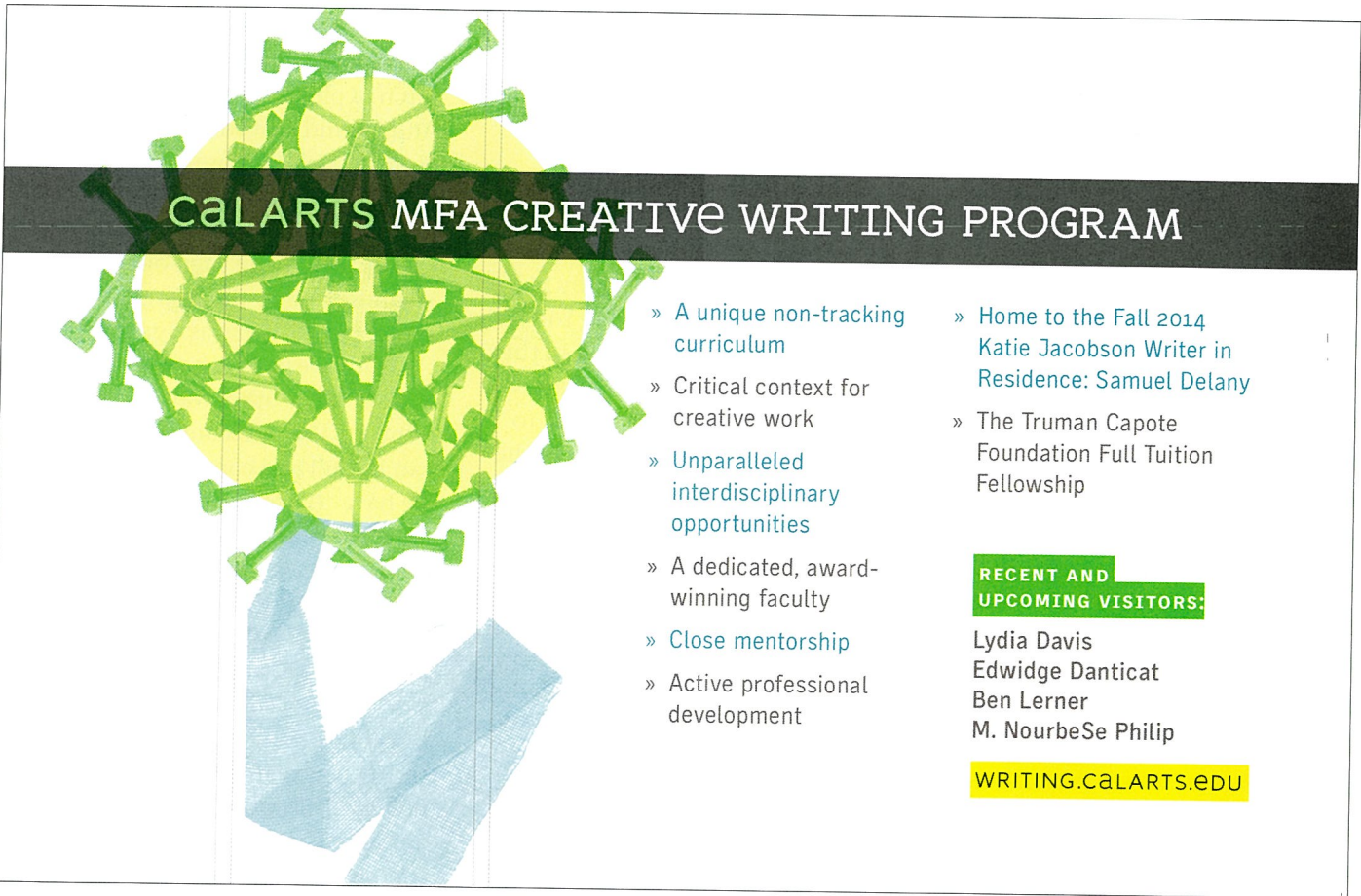
Sappenfield: Do you ever worry you could have a bad story published?

Saunders: I do worry, yes. But I'm lucky in that I send all of my stories to Deborah Treisman at the *New Yorker*. She told me once that part of her job is to protect her writers—to make sure that she publishes their best work, work that moves the ball forward, so to speak. She has great taste and really knows my work and is a dear friend—so that all combines to be a great protective blessing.

Sappenfield: In your conversation with Jonathan Safran Foer at the *New Yorker* Festival, you stated that you wrote better when you moved from

the world of realism to the surreal. That it freed you from trying to emulate the likes of Hemingway. Why do you suppose that is?

Saunders: I think it's because my real nature is goofy. Sort of celebratory and silly. When I go authentically into that mode, the language takes off, which, in turn, makes the fictive reality more rich and (important) believable. I don't understand why that should be the case, but I've felt it again and again. I suppose the inverse way of saying it is that, when a writer is consciously (or even not so consciously) imitating another writer, he is also divesting himself of some authentic part of himself—and that is felt to be a drag on the prose—and it's a joy and a relief to get that authentic stuff back, and that joy and relief is also reflected in the prose. I think the analogy would be a singer who feels he "has" to sing like Sinatra, even though his



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name is Neil Young, and tries, but eventually, feeling it's false, reverts to his normal voice—and the listener feels something real in this.

In my case, I loved the minimal and efficient quality of Hemingway's prose. And for a while I was working at getting that quality into my prose, but also making the mistake of trying to channel his gestalt—the mindset and ethos and even the settings of his stories (i.e., lots of cafés). The big moment came for me when I realized I could keep the minimal/efficient quality but use it in a story that was almost automatically comic, because I'd set it in a futuristic theme park. This move disabled the lame aspects of the imitation. The prose was still tight and abrupt, but that disruption of the object of the prose made all the difference. Like playing Beethoven on a kazoo. And then there was something about that change in setting that brought the stories closer to my lived experience (i.e., American and suburban, mostly) which, in turn, had the effect of raising the ethical and aesthetic stakes.

Sappenfield: Within these surreal worlds, how do you establish credibility with your reader?

Saunders: I think a writer always establishes credibility with the reader in the same way: by respecting her. Or another way of saying it: by anticipating just where the reader is at a given point in the story and taking that into account as you proceed. I always imagine that I want my reader to be leaning forward, liking me, feeling honored by the extent to which I am crediting her intelligence and humanity and giving her the benefit of the doubt in all ways. We're in this together, and I am taking her at her highest level and trying to present myself at my highest level. It's like a date, maybe. You have to be really paying attention to the other person, trying to be aware of how you're doing—and willing to change what you're bringing to the table accordingly.

And this is true no matter what sort of story you're telling. It may be that with a weirder story, the flavor of that maneuver is a little different. Say you're writing a story about a talking piano. The reader's first reaction will likely be: "Oh no, you don't." To which you reply: "Oh yes, excuse me, but I do"—and then you make that piano say something surprising or funny or, you know,

perfectly pianistic, something that has the effect of disabling the reader's skepticism—of charming her so much that she re-enlists, so to speak. And then: rinse, lather, repeat. Always the same cycle: know where the reader is, adjust the story accordingly, to keep her leaning in.

Sappenfield: In an interview with *GutCult* you stated, "Writing is basically entertainment." I've also read that you write from sentence to sentence with the intent of keeping the reader engaged. Can you speak to this?

Saunders: That's true. At one point I had this breakthrough where I stopped trying to intellectually justify my stories and just thought: The reader relates to this thing called a story a sentence at a time, and that reader is a pleasure-seeking entity. This simplified everything. I could just try as best I could to imitate or imagine the experience and mindset of that first-time reader. When he/she/I felt bored, something had to change. When he/she/I felt that lurch of pleasure, that was good. And I found that when I used this approach, all of those things like "theme" and "politics" and "character development" appeared very naturally in the story, all on their own—as if summoned by the energy of the sentences. Which was a great relief.

I think we writers have a tendency to go at it the other way—"decide" on a theme, then execute. That approach can be dull and condescending—we have "the answer" and we are basically shitting that answer down on the reader, who is supposed to sit there and be edified. But that's a pretty static and insulting model. The one I prefer is that I, the writer of the story, am not sure what it's "about" but am working through it honestly, trying to give my reader credit for being a little more intelligent than I am. And then if things work correctly, we might simultaneously discover

what the story is about—and that thing might be irreducible and impossible to articulate—and yet we've both felt it, together.

Sappenfield: *The Boston Globe* lauds your ability to “construct a story of absurdist satire, then locate within it a moment of searing humanity.” Is this something you taught yourself to do? How?

Saunders: Well, no. I mean—it's a priority of mine, to speak directly to you, the reader, in a very honoring and intense way. So that should, ideally, beget some emotional connection and payoff. But beyond that, I honestly don't do much conceptualizing—thinking in terms like “humanity” and “absurdism” tends to do me more harm than good. Why is this? Well, it's hard to do anything with that sort of construction—at least it is for me. It would be like if you were trying

to make love to someone and that person said, “Hey, do something that will shoot me into a transcendent yet nostalgic trance that contains yet subsumes every previous experience of love.” You'd go: “Uh, ok. I'll try.” And then you'd run out of the room.

Having said that—the idea that absurdism and humanity might not, or should not, exist in the same story—I don't feel that way. They're not different. When Hamlet's father comes back as a ghost, it's totally perfect and necessary—the best possible way of objectifying the actual psychological reality of the moment. Plus it kicks ass. So I put a so-called “absurd element” in because I think it is the best way of describing the way life really is, and really feels, when we can momentarily shuck off our habituation. Or, to be more honest, I put it in there because it seems enlivening at the moment. I am trying to kick ass. It shakes things

up, or raises the stakes. Or because that “element” presents some prose that is good and surprising and that I refuse to not have in the story. It surprises me as I do it and (best case of all) stupefies me. Suddenly I don't know what's going on anymore. The story has jumped the tracks. And that's just where you want to be. You've erred on the side of being daring, or open, and now your craft and vision are going to have to stand on their toes to accommodate this new model of the story. That is a thrilling space, when all of the good things we associate with storytelling start to happen.

The analogue might be that moment when, in conversation, someone blurts out the thing that everyone has been thinking but no one wanted to say. Suddenly everyone is free. Hooray! Who doesn't want to be free? But with freedom comes responsibility. Everyone is going to



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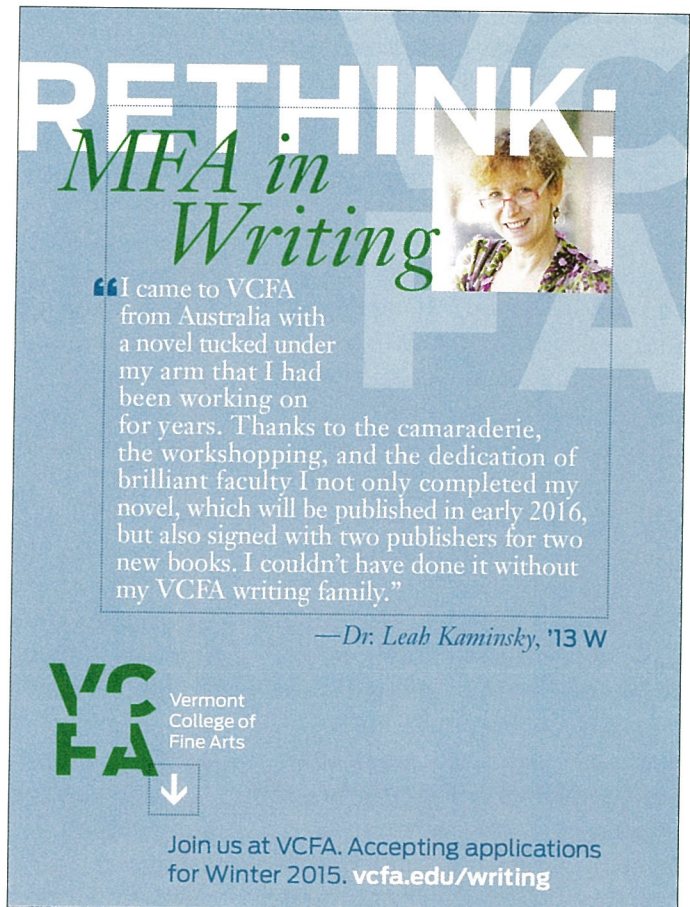
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have to now rise to the occasion and honor/acknowledge this odd new space. But the great thing is, everyone is free of that lying, avoiding, flinching person they were just a few seconds before. Likewise in a story,

are “normal”) the wolf is still there, always—and will show up at the end, for sure. Stories can exist to remind us—in small, manageable doses—that this is the case. Like scale models of the true lay of the land.

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when you write yourself out of that smug place of “knowing,” you are free of that smug iteration of yourself and are thereby obliged to be... something else, something more. Scary but wonderful.

Sappenfield: So you feel then that absurdism is at the heart of being human?

Saunders: We sometimes talk about it like it's the village idiot, or some freakish thing we will occasionally allow in, just for fun. But my view is that when we call something “absurdism” we are making a bourgeoisie distinction. We are claiming that life is sane and orderly and controllable, but that, yes, OK, admittedly, every now and then, weirdly, things get out of control. I'd claim the opposite: that at its core life is terrifying and uncontrollable—a wolf that is always walking around behind you, just out of sight. And that those times when we are allowed to be sane and safe (i.e., allowed to feel that life is under control and basically benevolent) are freaks, anomalies. Even though statistically the majority of our days (at least right now, in America) are spent in times like those (i.e., times that are not catastrophic,

I think we read to get that lightning bolt of surprising energy that reminds us, indirectly, of this prickly and unpredictable quality of the world. All of us running around down here, feeling pretty good, believing we are the center of the world, and are eternal, and then—wham: death. Ha! What a riot. That is absurd—not the death part, but our reaction in the face of it, our denial of it. Very funny, when you think of it.

I sometimes think of a story as being like a baseball game, or a ballet performance: a performance enacted in an extremely artificial forum, under strange and arcane rules. But in that forum, we see distilled and rarefied human stuff—emotions and failure and heroism and so on. And we see these things *because of* the artificiality. A third-baseman dives into the stands after a foul ball: heroism. A ballerina gets some extra inexplicable beauty in a turn: mystery. A pitcher suddenly goes wild and loses the game: failure. Just so in a story: we make this artificial construct so we can observe human behavior in an exaggerated presentation. And mostly we do that because it is pleasurable to do so, for mysterious reasons.

Sappenfield: There is so much satire and just plain humor in your writing. Does this come to you naturally, or do you have to work at it? Is there a sticky note on your computer monitor that says *Funny?* How do you know when it's working?

Saunders: I had always been funny, or tried to be, in real life—it was sort of my go-to when I was feeling nervous or happy or desirous or awkward. But early on, when I was first trying to write, I was always trying to keep the humor out—I felt it was low. And then finally, under the duress of being thirty-one or so and not writing anything I would stand behind, I finally said: “Humor—I've been keeping you out of the room, for complicated reasons having to do with my intellectual constipation—many apologies, please come back in.” And really—it was almost an overnight change, and I started getting published. Suddenly I always, or mostly, knew what to do when I was working—it was as if my taste suddenly reasserted itself.

But I'd have to say I don't write funny by trying to write funny. The best way I could put it is that I try to keep my eye on some other quality—like speed, or truncation—and the humor just sort of shows up. I think the best humor comes from being truthful at a time when we would normally be politely dishonest.

Although really—I try not to think about humor too much, in fear that, by thinking about it, I might scare it away.

Sappenfield: Your stories are usually told in American pop-culture vernacular, often by characters doing unsavory things. Even in your first-person stories, though, there is often an overarching narrator who the reader senses is very much in control and who we trust and like. How do you weave the presence of this narrator with your protagonist?

Saunders: I guess I try to mind meld with that character—try to let him have access to my intelligence and view and diction and, in turn, I try to lean a little toward him—I consider him me, on a different day, maybe, or in a slightly different life. We’re not two separate people, not at all. But to be a degree more honest, and as suggested above—I don’t think things out all that much—a lot of what we do in writing is intuitive. That is maybe one of the great unspoken truths about art, the omission of which may have to do with the structures we’ve made to teach it and get paid for it—but at the end of the day, the ability to make a good move in your prose, or do an authentic voice, or get emotion into a story, may be more a matter of split-second insight than anything intellectual. It can’t be controlled or reliably summoned. You are somewhat at its mercy.

I think there are ways we can prepare the space for that split-second thing to happen: reading aggressively, putting in those 10,000 hours of work that Malcolm Gladwell writes about. But it seems to me a lot of it is innate and maybe even biological.

We seem to take comfort in the idea that we can have thoughts and theories about art—and of course we can—but the relation between our thoughts/theories and the actual production of good writing is nebulous, alas. I see thinking and theorizing as support activities, the purpose of which is to get us to the main activity—which is instantaneous and intuitive and irreducible.

Sappenfield: In your latest work of fiction, *Tenth of December*, many of your stories have stream-of-consciousness narrators. What about this style of storytelling interests you?

Saunders: Well, it’s a great prose-generating technique: to try and simulate human consciousness. To ask: what would a mind sound like if we could somehow hear it and amplify/exaggerate it? It is, of course, an impossible task—the mind does so many swerves and dips in even a split-second—but, as I say, it’s a good way to generate text—attempting to make these imitations of the mind. It is also strangely intimate—we can feel very close to a fictive creation if we see that he/she shares some of our most private thoughts and brain-farts and mind-swerves and vulnerabilities. And then the writer can lower the boom, by making big things happen to the union of reader/character that results.

Sappenfield: Does it change the amount you can “lean” toward your characters?

Saunders: Yes, exactly. You start thinking in their diction (which of



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...sex is cool and has the potential to make us uncomfortable. In that way, it's like class. There's something fun about speaking direct truth about a thing that makes us uncomfortable.

course is coming from you—because where else would it come from?) and pretty soon you start to feel your empathy going out to this (invented) person. And it might be a person you wouldn't like or even notice in real life, or someone you would actively avoid. I always find it moving, that moment when a person you were sort of puppeteering comes to life and you start to love him and root for him.

Sappenfield: Years back, after reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, I listened to it as an audiobook, with Kingsolver narrating. It was a revelation. I thought, Oh, that's how she meant that to sound, or, Oh, that's what that meant. Even my perception of the book overall was altered. *Tenth of December* is out in audiobook. Did you narrate it?

Saunders: It is, and I did.

Sappenfield: What might a reader understand about your writing by hearing you read it that they otherwise would not?

Saunders: I think they might hear how much I love the characters. There's the chance, I guess, that on the page the author might seem to be mocking the character—although I hope not. But I've been reading the story "Victory Lap" at different colleges, and I sort of perform it and

do all the voices and so on. People will come up afterward and say that hearing it helped them understand it better, and I get the sense that they feel the story as softer and more sympathetic to the characters when I read it aloud. Which is maybe something for me to think about for the next book: how can I get that warmth right there in the text more?

Sappenfield: You often write about sex, frequently as just another commercial product. At times, as in "Escape from Spiderhead," it hovers near the crux of your story. Can you elaborate on this?

Saunders: Well—sex is cool and has the potential to make us uncomfortable. In that way, it's like class. There's something fun about speaking direct truth about a thing that makes us uncomfortable.

Sappenfield: Do you have any rules when writing about sex?

Saunders: No, I really don't. I guess I just try to think of it as one more thing people do—and what's interesting about it is the play of the mind as it happens.

Sappenfield: When you are reading through your sex scenes, are there any things you avoid, omit, or maybe add?

Saunders: Actually—I'm not sure I've written all that many sex scenes,

per se. There are some in "Spiderhead" for sure. I guess I'd say that I would never write a sex scene just to, like, document the sex. It's not different categorically from a dinner scene. We should be asking (by my aesthetic code): Why THIS dinner? How is this dinner inflecting our understanding of the characters? What about this sex is story-essential? What is this scene doing for the story itself? Also, why are these characters having sex during dinner? Who is going to clean that mess up? Why couldn't they just wait until after dinner? And so on.

Sappenfield: I've read that you feel compression, brevity, and deletion of nonessentials are among your strongest writing skills. With this in mind, do you prefer revision to drafting of stories?

Saunders: Yes. The drafting always feels like I'm writing weak prose—which mostly I am. But then once revision starts I get hopeful again. In revision mode you can just keep coming back at it until you've got it right.

Sappenfield: You write nonfiction for the *New Yorker* that can lead to scathing remarks from readers. After your piece, "I Was Ayn Rand's Lover," someone wrote, "Wow, is this the sort of thing that is passing for humor in the *New Yorker*, now? What an artless piece of schoolboy tripe." Do you read these remarks? Do they affect you?

Saunders: I actually wrote that remark. I was having "a down day." No—those pieces are written quickly, for fun. And there's no accounting for humor. One person might find it hilarious, someone else—someone with no sense of humor, for example, with no life, abandoned by everyone who once loved him, say—might not find it funny at all.

Sappenfield: Your fiction and nonfiction: is there anything you consciously do, say as you sit down

to your desk, to prepare yourself to write one or the other well? Is it ever difficult to move between them?

Saunders: The main difference is that when I am writing fiction I am trying to discover plot. Or just figuring out what the next event is going to be. And that takes me a lot of time—going up dead-end streets and so on. With nonfiction, the events are what they are. And usually by the time I come home from the reporting trip I know that there are, say, five main things that happened, and I know the order in which they happened. So the game becomes: how do I present these things to make drama and forward momentum appear?

Sappenfield: Your fiction is mostly to avoid ambiguity. Who are your influences, your heroes, outside of the literary world? Do they inform your writing?

Saunders: I'm not sure I'd agree with that first bit. I mean—I don't have my characters reading or thinking about books or big ideas, that's true, mainly because I can't quite pull that off on the page, and they do tend to be more working-class than not—but I never think of them as being unlitrary, per se. They think about the big issues, they agonize over them, they sometimes die in service of their beliefs. I think my stories are sort of cartoonish, if we could purge that word of the pejorative aftertaste. They are like line drawings and so I leave a lot out: the trappings of the intellectual life, the music they listen to, and so on.

As for my real-life heroes... my parents are heroes of mine. They were always so supportive and generous—with me, but also with anyone who crossed their paths. They really have a kind of joy for life, even when things get dicey, that I find very inspiring. I've taken a lot of inspiration from music too—Springsteen and


Elliot Smith, but also Copland and Gershwin and Phillip Glass and John Adams. Mostly music just makes me happy, which makes me want to write.

My main hero, though, is my wife. We met in the Syracuse MFA program and got engaged in three weeks, and I can trace anything good that I've done in my life to that meeting. It's a little corny, that idea about someone "completing you." But in this case it is literally and observably true. I was a pretty nice guy, pretty bright guy—but somehow she brought out the other things that would be necessary for me to be a complete person and man and writer, and she did it very patiently and lovingly. So—calling her my "hero" feels kind of weird because, at this point, I have a really hard time separating myself from her, or my accomplishments from her. None of it could have happened if I hadn't met her, period. And it wouldn't have been as much fun either.

Sappenfield: After *The Braindead Megaphone* was released, you appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Colbert Report*. Letterman was, well, Letterman. Colbert was humorous, yet also aggressive about your book's liberal tone and content. Can you speak to these experiences?

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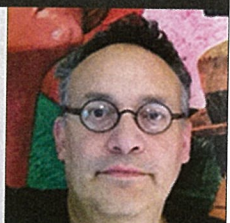
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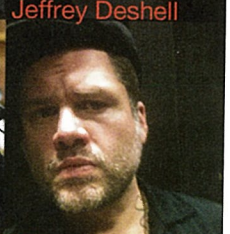
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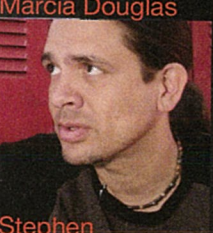
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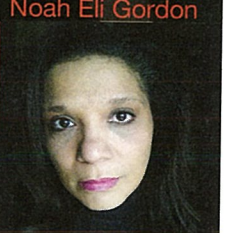
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Saunders: They were a lot of fun, and pretty nerve-wracking. At the time, in the midst of the Iraq War and all of that, I had this feeling that a writer might want to get out there a little more—especially since so many nimrods on the pro-war side were spouting off, stupidly, with utter impunity. So I tried. And honestly—I’m not sure that sort of high-profile stuff is really for me. I need a mix of about ninety-nine parts private writing time and one part public performance in order to disguise my basic want of wit.

What struck me about being on those shows was how artificial they are, how constructed and controlled. And I don’t mean that in a negative way. At one level it makes sense—they are shows, after all. And at the time you are so freaking grateful that it’s constructed and controlled because (if you are me) you are about to wet yourself with nerves and can barely remember your own name. But they are definitely more performance than exploration, if you see what I mean.

Sappenfield: How has your family and community reacted to your writing? Have people where you live ever reacted negatively to what you write?

Saunders: No, not really. Or not at all, actually. My family, on both sides, are very funny people, so they get that it’s comic writing. And in the larger community, people have been very generous. I’ve had one piece of hate mail in my life, re: “Sea Oak.” But I think most people—even if my sort of dark writing isn’t their cup of tea—understand the tradition out of which it comes. We have *The Simpsons*, we have *South Park*, before that we had *Monty Python* or *The Addams Family* and Edward Gorey.

Or it’s also possible that my family and community hasn’t actually read any of it, and a reckoning is yet to come.

It is funny how many times, when I’m out doing a reading at a college or something, I’ll get some version of this: “Oh, wow, you seem so NICE.” I had one student say, very sweetly, that, having read my work, she expected me to be “a sadistic meth-head.” Kind of a low bar there.

There seems to be this assumption that if there’s darkness in the writing that must be your dominant mode as a person. But a work of art is a made thing, the product of choices. And it’s not linear. So, if I am a really happy and grateful person (both of which I try to be) and yet am keenly aware of the times I’ve been unhappy, and of the fact that a lot of other people aren’t happy, and also aware of how brittle my happiness and gratitude are, and so decide to make a scale model of a world where things have gone badly, to look more deeply at the end-conditions of human happiness and gratitude—well, that strange dark product is actually a *result* of my alleged happiness and gratitude.

Sappenfield: You are often called one of the nicest people in writing. Yet Joshua Ferris says in his introduction to the e-book release of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, “He is an entirely autonomous product of his own devising, aided by this new era in our berserk republic.” You have come to a point where you are so unique, with such notoriety, you verge on George Saunders®. How do you find balance in your writing and your life?

Saunders: Mostly just by keeping that public/private proportion correct. My wife is really wonderful and smart and grounding, and we just live a pretty normal life. The one exception is when I go somewhere to read and there’s a little thirty-minute pocket of exaggerated attention in the venue. Then it ends and even two minutes later, outside the venue, all is normal. I am once again a balding old guy in jeans, limping toward the hotel like Willy Loman.

When a book comes out there’s usually a little bubble of extra attention. Then comes the birthday syndrome. Everyone loves the attention he gets on his birthday—the world is finally getting it right re: him being the absolute center of everything, and is lavishing him, finally, with the correct amount of attention (i.e., infinite) and then suddenly, depressingly, it’s the next stupid day, and no one is calling or cooking us a special meal or buying us presents, and the world stinks.

So I think a person has to be very wary of attention and its negative effects. Even in writing—where the level of fame is, as David Foster Wallace famously said, about commensurate with that of a local TV weatherman—there is some danger. It’s possible to make a little bubble where all you hear is the good news. I think of it this way: if a person eats a lot of beans, he is going to fart. He just is. It’s nothing personal—he’s not a bad person because he farts. It’s just physics. Likewise with attention: if a person gets a lot of attention, he is going to get full of himself. He’s not a bad person, he’s just responding to stimuli. So the answer is three-fold: (1) Moderate your exposure to attention; (2) be aware when you are getting “bloated;” and (3) take whatever is the spiritual/psychological corollary of BeanO.

Sappenfield: You are known for your love of and focus on your wife and daughters. Is this reflected in your writing?

Saunders: Well, my life with them has been everything to me. And loving them the way I do—I think that was a very major development in my artistic life. Suddenly everything mattered. What helped them was good, what harmed them was bad. And then that feeling got writ large. Suddenly the world became political again. I became aware of the effects of power, of big shots bashing around,

hurting people, aware anew of the fact that cruelty or even just mere thoughtlessness had an object: someone was getting bruised. And someone must have (or should have) loved the bruised party as much as I love my family. So the world became morally charged, I guess is how I'd say it. People were precious and not just my people. And all of that started working its way into the stories, I think, or at least I hope it did.

Sappenfield: What is your greatest writing fear?

Saunders: Repeating myself. Expressing the same idea more than once. Saying the same old thing over and over. Being repetitious.

Sappenfield: By most writers' standards, you've "made it." Do you consider this true? What goals do you have for your career?

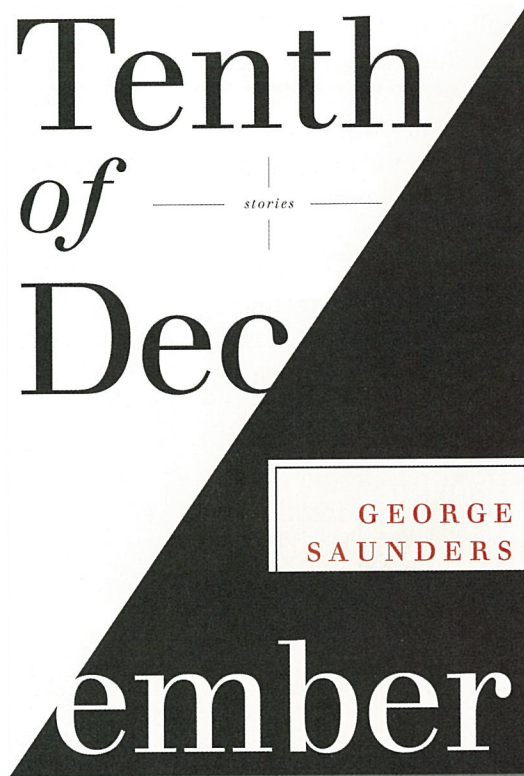
Saunders: I think I've had incredibly good luck in the career sense, yes. And I feel that I've stumbled on to ways of doing things that I couldn't have imagined when I started. But I still sometimes have this weird dream-experience where I bolt awake and go: Wait, how old am I again? Where is that big book I was going to write? Or those four big books? That contain everything I know and have seen and done? And then I think: Well, it's OK, you only have those seven small minor books, but it's OK, since you are, after all, only twenty-nine. And then comes a moment of reckoning.

So I have a lot of things left to do, I hope. But the main thing is: get better, by which I mean get more scope and kindness and power into my books, and into me too. AWP

Heather Sappenfield's fiction has won numerous awards and finalist positions, most notably for the Danahy Fiction Prize, the Writer's Digest Contest, and the Flannery O'Connor Award. She has received a Pushcart nomination, and a novel, The View from Who I Was, is forthcoming in January 2015.

excerpt

from *Tenth of December*



The pale boy with unfortunate Prince Valiant bangs and cublike mannerisms hulked to the mudroom closet and requisitioned Dad's white coat. Then requisitioned the boots he'd spray-painted white. Painting the pellet gun white had been a no. That was a gift from Aunt Chloe. Every time she came over he had to haul it out so she could make a big stink about the wood grain.

Today's assignation: walk to pond, ascertain beaver dam. Likely he would be detained. By that species that lived amongst the old rock wall. They were small but, upon emerging, assumed certain proportions. And gave chase. This was just their methodology. His aplomb threw them loops. He knew that. And reveled in it. He would turn, level the pellet gun, intone: Are you aware of the usage of this human implement?

Blam!

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