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A Conversation with George Saunders

Abstract

George Saunders is a fiction writer and essayist whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *McSweeney's*, *Harper's*, and *GQ*, earning him the National Magazine Award for fiction in 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2004. He is also responsible for several acclaimed short story collections, including *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, a finalist for the 1996 PEN/Hemingway Award, and *In Persuasion Nation*, a finalist for The Story Prize in 2007. On his way to becoming a professor at Syracuse University, Saunders worked as a technical writer and geophysical engineer, a member of an oil exploration crew in Sumatra, and as a knuckle-puller in a Texas slaughterhouse.

Keywords

fiction, writing, interview



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In February 2011, Saunders was a writer-in-residence at Butler University. Chris Speckman, a contributing editor for *Booth*, sat down with Saunders to discuss biking on the Erie Canal, the Van Halen brown sound, and Ben Franklin playing Nintendo Wii. The following is an excerpt from their discussion. The entire interview will appear in our Spring 2012 print issue.



Chris Speckman: You've held down a variety of occupations other than author and teacher. How much have these "outsider" experiences influenced your writing?

George Saunders: Early on in life, it allowed me to see to a lot of places I wouldn't have been able to get into. My first job was on an oil crew in Indonesia. There were all sorts of scandalous things going on. If I went back there as a journalist, they would have tidied it up. It gave me access to specialized experiences.

CS: Did these experiences push you towards writing?

GS: Kind of, because I was so inept at it. I felt pain at the thought of a life of engineering. I worried I would be bad at my job for the rest of my life.

The other thing that it taught me was that in engineering, if you do the problem nine times and it's wrong, it's still wrong, and you don't get any credit for having tried it. When I switched to writing, there was a lot of that idea. *I did 20 drafts already. It still sucks.* Therefore, you're not done. There's not a sense of shame or entitlement. You do as many drafts as you need. That really was helpful, transplanting that idea of scientific rigor to literary rigor.

CS: Do you think aspiring novelists stand to benefit from getting a taste of the world outside of creative writing and academia?

GS: There are exceptions to every rule, but I've noticed that if two people come in equally talented, and one has been out in the world for three years and the other has come from undergrad, the first one has better luck. The one who just came from undergrad will often feel like, "I know my chops are as good. Why are my stories not being received as well?" She hasn't found anything to subjugate her chops to.

You never know, though. We're reading applications (from the Syracuse Creative Writing MFA program) now. There hasn't been one application of the 500 that didn't have some talent. What you see is that there are some people who are lacking urgency – they're undergrads. My baseline advice is to go out and do something for three or four years, and when you can't stand it any more, then come back.

CS: When did you first take an interest in fiction and consider a career as a writer?

GS: It happened about 12 years apart. My interest in fiction came early and was full-bodied. When I was in third grade, a nun gave me *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes, and I just loved it. She was a real stylist. You could tell that it was sweated over, and there was a lot of her on each page. I had a real visceral reaction of pleasure to that, but I didn't know what to do with it. It didn't occur to me I would want to be a writer. I just enjoyed the book.

And then many, many years later, after engineering school, when I was working in Sumatra, I was reading Kerouac or something, and I got the impulse. *Somebody did this. I'm not stupid, and I'm having some pretty cool experiences, does it make sense that I could maybe do it?* For whatever complicated reasons, it didn't occur to me to do it until much, much later in the game.

CS: I read that before the stories in CivilWarLand in Bad Decline were published, you were content writing on the side without worrying about the ultimate fate of your work. What compelled you to keep writing even when you didn't have much to show for it?

GS: It felt like it was the only way out. My wife and I had two kids at that point. I was 30ish and working a job. I could see that it wasn't the worst life, but I could also see that it was going to get pretty tedious. It was a little bit like the bliss of exhaustion. I'd been through the MFA program, the rollercoaster of praise and complaint, and I got out and had nothing to show for it. Another two or three years passed and I couldn't get anything that I wrote to make sense, even to me. It's like a relationship where you try and try and try and it doesn't work. At some point, you just go, "Fuck it." And in that energy of saying, "Fuck it," your true inclinations are then

free to play a little bit. At that point, I thought, “Obviously, I’m not a child prodigy.” It’s almost like I tried so hard to do what I thought would get me success. *Well, that didn’t work. Alright, why not just do what you like? If you fail, then you’re in the same place that you were in before.*

I remember I was actually riding my bike to work at the time along the Erie Canal, and it was such a pleasurable thing to just go “Nobody knows I’m writing. Nobody’s waiting for anything. I’m just riding my bike, and today I hope to do a paragraph.” It was sweet. It was really, really fun.

CS: Did you ever entertain the idea of giving up writing and moving on to something entirely different?

GS: Not really. But there was a time when I got so hungry for power, any kind of power. At work, I didn’t have it. And I was a musician, so I thought, “Maybe I’m barking up the wrong tree.” So I played a couple of open mic nights, and then I thought, “Maybe I’m a comedian instead.” There was definitely a feeling of *this is not paying off*. But I knew from having been a musician and having done stand-up that at the end of the day it was kind of writing or nothing. That was the thing I felt the most articulate about and that I had the strongest opinions on. That is actually something that I teach to my students: trust strong opinions. If you have a strong opinion about something, that’s good – that’s like a light on top of your helmet. The scary places in writing are when you don’t have an opinion. *Is it getting better or worse? I can’t tell.* That’s hell.

CS: How do you come up with the unusual subjects and settings that have become a hallmark of your fiction?

GS: For me, I learned early to keep the playing field as small as possible. I try not to do a lot of thinking beforehand about theme or any of that stuff. *Just give me one paragraph that’s got a little bit of energy, for whatever reason.* Hopefully, you don’t really know why. It just has a little bit of jangly energy. If I had an idea that was spontaneous like that, immediately some conceptual part of me said, “Oh, that’s good. What does it mean? Why does it matter?” To me, that was a death sentence. Whenever I would think that, the story would always go off into a ditch, the ditch of being too predictable, the ditch of being preachy. So what I learned to do is to just say, “OK, look. If you can write one paragraph that doesn’t suck and that has a little bit of ambient energy, and then just refine it – poke around

at it, make it a little better – eventually it will sprout a little tendril, usually a very natural one: curiosity.” *Why did he say that? How does she respond to that? Where are they?* They you just very cautiously go, “Let’s find out,” and you do the next thing. In a perfect world, it’s like a seed crystal – it just grows outwards. And you might not know what it means, but it’s grown spontaneously. Like a relationship. When you meet this person, you don’t know where it’s going, but if you follow the natural energy, you look up and three years later, you’ve got a kid. If you didn’t falsify the energy, then that kid makes sense. It’s that kind of process. I never think, “I need a bizarre idea.” It’s just, “Does this core idea interest me?” OK, then start. Trust that your process will force some meaning out of it.

CS: So you don’t consider the mind of George Saunders to be a dark, twisted place?

GS: I don’t think my mind is particularly dark, but it might be. If I say to you, “Imagine a terrible thing that could happen right now,” you could do it. Everybody has the capability of negative imagination. That isn’t so hard. So why do my stories seem to be darker than most? Is it because I have a dark inclination in my imagination? Maybe. Is it because when I have that impulse, I don’t block it? Could be that. But the thing I’ve concluded is what Flannery O’Connor said, that a writer can choose what he writes about, but he can’t choose what he makes live. I’ve noticed that if I go dark, there’s energy.

It’s like if you were a musician, and all the songs you played in a minor key were really good. Does that mean you’re sad? No, I don’t think so. It’s a mystery to me. And I’m struggling with it. I don’t mind being dark, but I don’t want to be habitually knee-jerk dark.

CS: During your reading last night you mentioned that you want to bring more light to your work. How do you plan to do this?

GS: Light is a funny term. I don’t necessarily mean happiness. But I like the idea of writing that has a broad stance so that any phenomenon could be voiced in that style.

For example, one time I was walking through Rockefeller Center in New York, just minding my own business. And there’s a really high-end chocolate shop in there. I looked over at it, and I saw a beautiful Christmas

window display. And my heart kind of rose like when you're a kid and it's Christmas vacation. And I thought, "Wow, that's interesting. I wonder if I could write that." I thought I could do justice to that moment, but my inclination would then be that an icicle would have to come down and kill the guy (who is looking at the display). I thought that was interesting. Dickens could write that scene and let it stand. Why is it that moment isn't quite at home in my fiction? I don't know the answer to that. When I say more light, I'm asking if my prose style is big enough to accommodate actual phenomenon. Why would I have to have a shrunken vision of the world? It doesn't mean that the stories will get less weird. I'm just trying to push the walls of the room out a bit.

CS: Many of your stories, most notably The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil, might be considered fables or parables. Do you have a message in mind when you start writing something like Reign of Phil?

GS: When you start to tell a story, there's the apparent topic of the story. I used to live on the south side of Chicago and that's a rough part of town. And you go, "OK, this is a story about how rough the town is." If it's only about that, I think at the end you feel a little let down. We both understand that's a gateway to something hopefully deeper that happens.

Like with *Reign of Phil*, I think anybody reading that will go, "Well, it's a fable about world politics." And when I started it, I thought, "I'm going to do a riff on genocide." But every message that's in there is pretty obvious: *be kind, don't kill people*. So it's almost like using that as an excuse to do what I think is the real work of the book, which is to be funny, to make weird images, to make good sentences.

I think often people who ask me about my work are asking about the surface politics of it, which is there. But for me, 99 percent of the energy is the stuff that's going on to the side.

CS: I want to talk a little bit about your book of essays, The Braindead Megaphone. In the title essay, you say the Iraq War was a "literary failure" because of the way it was recorded and covered by the media. If the contemporary news cycle is failing us, who do you think people should turn to for information and guidance?

GS: I'm always a little bit queasy about questions that are so big because I

don't really know. In that essay, the idea is that when a person turns to another person for counsel or comfort or information, if that other person has not much of an agenda besides truth and has had sufficient time to put together whatever he is putting together, then the information that comes from that person is more heartfelt and truthful.

Our set-up is that you get information from someone with a big ass agenda who is doing shit really quickly to advance his own program. So it's rickety. If that's the only place we have to look to, it makes us stupid. But if you turn to Tolstoy, you're getting a bigger sounding board. For me, I turn to novelists, good essayists, playwrights.

CS: Do you think more writers and intellectuals should step up and voice their opinions on important issues?

GS: I do think so, but I can't really defend thinking that because it is what it is. But I did feel after 9/11 you saw the number of random assholes who were happy to step up to a big microphone and not only make pronunciations, but lead troops. I thought, 'Why is it that the smartest and most compassionate people I know – my poet and fiction writer friends – why is it that we are so reticent to do that?'

But now I'm not sure if that was the right thing. I put myself into a different role for a while. I was writing essays more and political satires and going on TV and stuff. And, in retrospect, I don't think that's a good fit for me, but who knows? The people I know who are the brightest and the most well informed and the most curious are not the people that you see on TV. Those people are marginalized, whether self-marginalized or marginalized by the culture. That's dysfunctional. If you had a family and the smartest, most articulate, curious, compassionate people were kept in the basement, and moronic Uncle Craig spoke for everyone, you would think, 'This house isn't running very well.'

CS: What drew you to writing essays? What did you get out of trying something different for a while?

GS: It's lifeblood. You have to. I can say now that I don't want to do that. But at the time, that's what I was really feeling. Part of the thing is that no one has infinite talent – well, maybe Shakespeare did or Tolstoy. Most of us have a little wedge of cheese for talent, and it's the work of a lifetime to try

to keep working without being repetitive. For me, one of the risks is knowing what I do so well that I just keep doing it. You have to push yourself out, and when you push yourself out, you're going to blunder off the reservation sometimes. And that's fine. You have to.

I saw Vonnegut one time. Someone asked him which book is his favorite. And he said, "You know, for me it's like you were skiing on a hill by yourself all day, and at dusk you look up and you go, 'That's where I was at 10 o'clock this morning. And that's me at 3.' You were just exerting your energy in the way that felt appropriate at that time." And I love that. It shows in his work – that sort of freedom and experimentation. And it's a form of ego puncturing because instead of saying, "I must write the perfect novel," you're saying, "Fuck it. I'm going to write something that's interesting and fun right now. In a year, it might be stupid. So what?"

CS: In the essay you wrote about Vonnegut, you talk about truly successful stories being the ones that change the reader and not necessarily any of the characters. How do you go about having this kind of effect on your readers?

GS: It's a funny kind of paradox because, when I had that realization, it actually freed me up from those kind of concerns. I'll try to explain. It seems to me like if you say, "I'm entering into a sacred compact with you, reader, that I promise not to condescend to you, I'm going to treat you like you're as intelligent and attentive as I am," then you're taking yourself out of a manipulative relationship with your reader, and you're brothers. You're walking into this thing together. That means, if you can surprise and satisfy yourself in the process, you can know that your brother is feeling the same thing because you're joined at the shoulder. You don't have to worry about anything other than your own reaction to your own piece as you're rereading it, trusting that if you can keep yourself interested, you can keep your reader interested.

If you do it the other way around and think that your reader is stupid and that you need to jerk him around, he's going to feel that. And also, you'll find that you're not smart enough to stay ahead of your reader that far. You're going to be telegraphing things all over the place.

If you're too sure of what you're doing, the reader is way ahead of you. But you can use it the other way, too. I call it the "motorcycle-sidecar theory." If the writer is doing his job right, he's driving the motorcycle, and the

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reader is right there. *When I go left, you feel me going left.* If you're writing a bad story, that sidecar is like six-miles away, and there's no connection between the two.

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