

An Interview with George Saunders

by Adam Smith

George Saunders is the author of several volumes of short stories including In Persuasion Nation, CivilWarLand in Bad Decline, and Pastoralia, along with the novella The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil. He has written for both GQ and the New Yorker, and is a professor of writing at Syracuse University

Smith: I feel the need to congratulate you at this time, though I'm a few months late, on receiving a MacArthur Fellowship. And with that I would like to ask if the "genius" label has affected you or your work in anyway, both positively and negatively?

Saunders: Thanks. So far, I'm not any smarter, that's for sure. It's made me happier and this feeling of being recognized or acknowledged is very nice. I had a brief period of Planning Big, but then fortunately recovered. Now am just trying to stay on the same path as before, using the extra time to go a little deeper and get there a little sooner, maybe.

Smith: You've been labeled as both satirist and social critic and in your novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* has been compared to Orwell's *Animal Farm*. How do you feel about the process of being labeled by critics, readers and such?

Saunders: I like it, since it means that critics and readers are reading the stories. I think the trick is to keep reinventing yourself so that whatever labels are used are already out of date. I suppose being labeled could be limiting (if you started changing what you were doing in order to stay within your label) but I think as long as we don't take ourselves too seriously, not much worry of that.

Smith: In that novella, there is a scene where Phil, brainless at that point, makes his first Outer Horner nationalistic speech to which fellow Outer Hornerite Melvin says, “He just comes right out and says it.” Do you feel that this is your job as a writer, to just come out and say it?

Saunders: Yes, even if you’re not sure it’s true. Dylan said something along these lines, like some things he writes, he knows are true, some he knows are false, and some he doesn’t know whether they’re true or false. I like this idea that one consciousness holds all kinds of things (attitudes, beliefs, fears, etc.) and none of them completely define who we are. It’s the pattern of variance that makes an individual. So writing is one way to sound one’s own pattern of variance, if you will.

Smith: You’ve talked about politics as inevitably creeping into any writer’s work in a politically charged time. Do you ever find yourself holding back from something that may be taken as a blatant outing of your political views? Do your publisher or editors make any comments on the politics of your work?

Saunders: I think just simple aesthetics would argue against that. The fictional form has no real tolerance of the writer’s “viewpoint.” A person using a story to “express” his or her political stance is using the wrong tool; like using a hammer to open a can. I mean, it would be admirable to be able to express one’s views in this way, I guess, but the form won’t really allow it. What stories “like” (i.e., what makes a given story grab us) is ambiguity and truth and complexity. If a writer scrimps on any one of these to make his or her political pt, the story suffers. In other words, since everything is made up, it’s hard to use a story to (prove) something. Or at least not the primary, “surficial” things (since we run the risk of making too easy a target, then clanging the target and claiming marksmanship. Still, yes, writing can feel political) but I think what that ultimately reduces to is that stories about human beings are almost always about power and desire and love, and in times where these things are being messed with, stories about people will feel like stories about politics. I keep in mind what Chekhov said: “Art doesn’t solve problems, it only formulates them correctly.” So in an inhumane or aggressive or fear-drenched time, stories should be formulating the problems correctly, i.e., asking: What is the cost of all this aggression and fear, how

does it affect individuals? Where is it coming from? I don't really find my work political, not in the Advocating sense. Something like *The Red Bow* is about (at least in my mind) a certain human tendency, the tendency, when afraid, to become aggressive, say. Or for love to convert to aggression. That comes out of and, I hope, resonates with, the current cultural moment, but I don't know what exactly I'm advocating or expressing, if you see what I mean. . .

Smith: I've heard you describe your writing style as more phonetic, steering with sound and feeling your way through instead of over thinking the realism of the sentence. Do you find that this relates back to your study of math in engineering school? Do you look at sentences in the same way you might have looked at equations in a mathematical proof?

Saunders: Not sentences; maybe larger structures (paragraphs, sections etc). I know I retain a way of breaking down a larger thing into smaller parts, then polishing these smaller parts. Also, there is a sense of understanding a small unit in terms of its function in the greater whole. Also, I am pretty comfortable suspending judgment on the larger unit until the lapidary thing's been completed in the sub-parts. . .

Smith: You've said, "Fiction is most interesting on the worst possible day. When everything goes to hell." To me, this seems like the root convention of *Ulysses*, finding the humanity or heroism in Bloom on his worst day. How does a desire to find that humanity shape your work?

Saunders: I think it's just a way of testing end conditions. I feel like, most of the time, people are pretty decent. But "an untested virtue is not a virtue." So stories tend (have always tended) to be situated on the exceptional day (see the Bible, for example; Job's previous life is unnarrated, the focus on the expulsion from the Garden, Christ's story culminating in the crucifixion?) Of course, Christ's story also includes the Resurrection: a very wonderful, but also exceptional, event?

Smith: What have the literary greats of Russia (Gogol, Tolstoy, etc.) brought to your writing that you could not have found in the writers of America or Europe?

Saunders: I think mostly just a concern with the things that really matter – this idea that novels and stories can do more than just kind of document a day in the life of the culture – that moments of luminosity can break through and stories can become about spiritual, transcendent matters. Not that this doesn't happen in English or American writers somehow, though, the Russians seem to (at least in my reading of them) wear their hearts on their sleeves. . .in a way I like very much.

Smith: After working in the oilfields in Asia, you wrote a large amount of work that you have never published and refer to as “Nick Adams goes to Sumatra.” Do you feel that this material was both too real and unbelievable to write about or were you too close to it? Do you pull anything from Sumatra to use in your current writing?

Saunders: The main problem was just that it wasn't written well. It was written in a kind of imitative straightforward realism that failed to catch the real power of the experience. But those experiences have informed everything I've done since, in terms of the awareness I got about haves vs. have-nots, and the way good people do evil things, and the amazing scale/beauty of the world we live in? Maybe another way to say it is, a good story is content & style and, in those early stories, the style was so lame as to eradicate the beauty or interest of the content.

Smith: Roofer, knuckle puller, doorman, guitarist, you've done some of the most interesting jobs around, though these are not occupations of characters in any of your work. Do you find it more interesting to use a job that is new to you that you don't really know that much about and can explore through the writing process?

Saunders: Yes, I guess so, because my feeling is you're never really writing about the job itself. I want to write about something behind the job, if you see what I mean. I don't feel there's any need for me to "describe" what it's like to work in a slaughterhouse. Other people can, and have, done that better than I could. But to somehow use those experiences to write about something else, something more mysterious – even if it means you take those experiences and transmute them...that's interesting. I guess the main thing is, the catalogic/documentary function of fiction doesn't interest me much as a writer. As a reader it does – but not as a writer.

Smith: You started writing by stealing time whenever possible, often at work. You've said that this eradicated "any pretensions about having to write in a particular place or at a particular time of day". If location is not an issue, is technique? Do you prefer longhand as opposed to a computer? Do you use a typewriter?

Saunders: I always use a computer. I think I could write fine without one, but this is just what I've grown used to. And I guess it's affected technique some, sure. I write always assuming a high level of revision, feel more free to just plop stuff down, knowing I can figure out exact locations later, etc etc. I find it kind of freeing, everything is mutable with a computer, which, I find, inspires a certain kind of courage – a sense of exploration...an anti-writer's block feeling.

Smith: What is your main thought process when going back into a story you've just written? What is your revision process?

Saunders: I try to base my revision on a re-reading of what I've done so far, imitating, so far as it's possible, a first-time reader. That is, I try not to bring too many ideas about what the story is doing etc, etc. Just SEE what it's doing. In other words, read along with a red pen, reacting in real-time as I go along, deleting, adding, etc. When the energy drops, then I know that's where I have to really start digging in, i.e., turn away from the hardcopy and go to the computer. Repeat as necessary?

Smith: You claim that you were a Buddhist before you even knew about Buddhism. Can you talk a bit about that and its influence on your writing.

Saunders: As I understand Buddhism, it's partly what I described in the previous question. Rather than pretending to know what's going on via concepts, ideas etc, just look and see what's going on in the world, in your own mind etc – then trust in your ability to react accordingly. Kind of a low-concept way of approaching life that emphasizes that-which-is. I learned a lot about this in my early writing years, writing and re-writing and noticing that if something sucked, and I insisted it didn't, because I had all these ideas of why it didn't suck, it still sucked = big time-waster.

Smith: On your website you have a sort of fundraiser for an uninsured, 21-year old, Mexican roofer who fell off of a roof and may be paralyzed from the neck down. How is/did that fundraiser go? How is the boy?

Saunders: My sister did this and I just helped her. He's doing pretty well, considering. We were able to get him home to Mexico and get him state-of-the-art equipment (wheelchair and pads etc.) so he is not getting bedsores (which apparently are a real problem) and has had some limited movement restored. He is a great, very brave guy. And thanks for asking.

Smith: You have been teaching at Syracuse since 1997 in the creative writing program, among some other highly notable authors. Do you guys talk about your students work amongst each other?

Saunders: Not so much. We mostly just have fun and laugh etc, etc. Sometimes in moments of crisis we'll confer.

Smith: Do you find inspiration in your students work?

Saunders: I do. I find a lot of inspiration in their love for writing and their hopes and dreams about its importance. They turn me on to a lot of great books and make me always feel that I'm just starting out, that big things are still possible, etc, etc.

Smith: How do you feel about the recent death of Kurt Vonnegut?

Saunders: Bereft. He was a great hero of mine. I never met him but I just re-read *Slaughterhouse-Five* and that is one of the great books of the century.