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## Interview with George Saunders

By Abbey Numedahl

George Saunders teaches creative writing at Syracuse University and is the author of a collection of essays, two novellas and four collections of short stories, including *Tenth of December*, which was recently nominated for the National Book Award. For the fourth issue of Floodwall, Saunders took some time to discuss short story collections vs. novels, his stunning narrative voices and the importance of what he calls "ass-time."

**I recently read an article that took the stance that George Saunders should and must write a novel; that the novel is somehow the next step, an obligation for a writer at your level. Do you have any idea why this is a commonly held idea?**

Saunders: A "goddamned novel" if I remember the article correctly.

Well, I think it's a pretty natural expectation and, in a way, sort of flattering – it implies that the person liked the stories well enough to tolerate another 700 pages. I don't agree with it, really – one only has to think of the great writers who have written only stories (Carver, Chekhov, Alice Munro, to name just a few) to see that there's no basis in truth for the idea. And the bottom-line is, a writer writes what interests him and what he can manage, and what he can make live, as Flannery O'Connor said. So my reaction to someone saying "You must!" or "You should!" or even "Hey, why don't you?" is basically to sort of shrug and politely walk off and do whatever I want to do. It's nobody else's business, really, and even if I happened to agree with one of those "musts" or "shoulds" what would I do about it, if my heart wasn't in it?

**More importantly, why do you write stories? What do you love specifically about story-writing?**

Saunders: Honestly, I love it because I can (more or less, on occasion) actually DO it. That's really the truth. I like that I've become better at it. I like the compression and the speed and the do-or-die aspect of it – if a story bombs, everyone immediately knows it. I like the idea that a story is sort of a site for making cool language effects – a site for celebrating language, and,

therefore, the world. And the brevity is part of the challenge. But really, these are just sort of after-the-fact justifications. I like stories because I get them – I know how to make beauty, or something like beauty, in that mode.

**When I read your stories, I am sometimes left with the impression that I have just been immersed in a kind of folktale. I think particularly of stories like "Sea Oak," where the reader is removed from reality through the strangeness, but also pulled into the story through elements of the familiar. What is (pleasantly or unpleasantly) familiar about these stories seems to be both the intimate voice and interiority, and also the aura of commercialism, which creates a patina of sorts for the experiences of your characters. So I wondered: what do you see as the role of the commercial in your stories? Is the commercial a central shared American experience, at this point?**

Saunders: I think so, sure. Just imagine: someone my age and someone your age both know what "Pringles" are. And can imagine that action of taking out a few between thumb and first finger, like they are poker chips. So if that's not community and shared experience, what is? (Or, on a more serious note – we both know what big city lights look like from a mountainside – that weird flickering thing they do, the occasional plane coming in, the insect sounds from above and behind you, and yet down there, all that traffic, two separate Wendy's visible, etc., etc.)

On a more technical level, a story takes a lot of words. And to generate words and phrases and images and so on, that will compel the reader to continue reading– that stand a chance of really grabbing a reader – the writer has to work out of a place of, let's say, familiarity and affection. The matrix of the story has to be made out of stuff the writer really knows about and likes. She can't be stretching and (purely) inventing all the time. Well, I can't, anyway. So I take a lot of pleasure in the way things actually are here in America – the actual vistas, the oddball urban scenes, the way the high and the low don't even know which is which anymore – and so when I go to make up twenty pages of matrix, that's what I turn to – the regular, common stuff that we almost take for granted, and that I can produce pretty much at-will.

**How do you find your voices? Are they based on people you know or have met? Do you start writing a story with the idea of a character in mind, or a voice, or some combination of both?**

Saunders: Usually it's just a voice that I can hear in my head and can reproduce fairly reliably. Sometimes I don't know at all who that person is –

this was the case with an older story of mine called "Jon." Or it might start (in a story like "Tenth of December") with a thought like: "Well, I need a 12-year-old boy here." And then the push is to try and make a particular 12-year-old boy – not the one from Central Casting but some particular human being. And those two things can happen in tandem – I am ostensibly trying to "make" a little boy, while at the same time trying to feel some funny (and fun-to-do) voice that I might associate with him. Thereby finding out who he is. Something like that. And a lot of that comes through revision – you start with a rough idea of the voice and then revise it into particularity.

**Your writing feels very original to me, almost its own tradition. However, I read your essay about Huck Finn, and when I returned to that book I saw some major connections, both in terms of narration style and the moral conflicts faced by the characters. Can you share some other writing that has shaped or influenced you?**

Saunders: Well, thanks. The stories of Isaac Babel, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Barry Hannah were all very important to me. I loved Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe. I also was really influenced by certain comedians – Steve Martin and Monty Python especially. I think the idea is to put as much as you can into that hopper called your brain and let your artistic self sort it out, there below the surface. Whatever you love, that will be an influence. It just will. So in effect the young writer's job is: go out and find some stuff to love.

**Your stories deal with class issues in thoughtful and unexpected ways and (in this writer's opinion) they never seem to venture into the didactic, or hit-you-over-the-head as "issue focused." When you sit down to write a story, do you think specifically, this one is going to concern the economic travails of a struggling lower-middle-class father, or do those elements find their way in later as you explore the character?**

Saunders: No – I never think that way. I really try to avoid thinking in terms of "themes" and "issues" and so on. My feeling is, if you just try to make a real person, then whatever happens to him will be interesting. And will very naturally satisfy all of the demands of Literature. Because once it's interesting, it will automatically "address" certain "issues" – but that is just because you've made some urgency and have not been full of shit -you've taken the reader seriously and said, in essence, "Here's something that I think is non-trivial. Care to have a look?" And if you're right – if what you've done IS non-trivial (i.e., is about something real, something that matters to you and your reader, right now, because you are both living and vulnerable and so on) then you will

have theme coming out of every orifice. But first the writer has to make pleasure for the reader – which, I think, is done by taking one's character's seriously and taking one's readers seriously -don't condescend or try to be tricky. Be a friend to your reader – I'd say that's a pretty good first step.

I guess what I mean is: if a story is about something non-trivial that happens to a person we feel as somewhat real – then that story will automatically be (so-called) "political" and will have "moral urgency" and all of that. Whereas, if the writer plans all of this out– makes a story to "illustrate" his or her pre-existing political stance – likely that story will convert no one anyway, because everyone will have closed the book a few pages in, as soon as they picked up the rotten stench of dogma and condescension.

(There's a good title for a memoir there: "The Rotten Stench of Dogma and Condescension: The Bernie Benson Story.")

### **Do you have any advice for beginning writers?**

Saunders: I think it would just be to trust that as many hours as you spend working (even if badly or unevenly or barking up wrong tree after wrong tree), that is exactly how fast you will progress. There's really something to that Malcolm Gladwell idea of the 10,000-hour rule. I get a lot of emails from young writers agonizing over what they should write about, and in what style, and how to alter the conditions of their lives so that they can write more and better– but I really think progress in writing is made by ass-time: having one's butt in the chair and just going at it. The mind is very deep and is always progressing as we try to solve writing problems. So the key thing, I think, is to put whatever problems are naturally occurring right in front of yourself and try to solve them. Just accept them – accept that these problems are what you're supposed to be working on right now – and throw all the energy you can at them. I used to spend a lot of time feeling that my writing problems were too stupid to bother solving – I wasn't writing about the right things, or hadn't lived enough, etc., etc. But your issues are your issues, and writing is one way to grow beyond them – the only way, I think. Certainly the most honest and efficient way. This acceptance of one's current problems as valid does something magical (in time) for one's skills. In a way, this should be comforting. It's a sort of simple solution to all problems: Work, work, work. And, of course, thinking about writing and agonizing about it and conceptualizing are all parts of this "work" – but my advice would be, especially when starting out, to err on the side of the ass-time. And also, of course: read. We can't know what's good unless we've sampled it deeply, again and again. Which, sadly, also involves ass-time. So: learn to read

standing up. While pacing worriedly around your house, going, "Am I a writer or not? Shit, shit, shit!"

That is what I recommend.