

INTERVIEWS



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GEORGE SAUNDERS

George Saunders is the author of six books, including *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, *Pastoralia*, and *In Persuasion Nation*. His short stories and essays appear regularly in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *GQ*. In 2006, he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant." Fiction editor Will Litton corresponded with him via email.

Will Litton, Wag's Revue: You've talked before about struggling to find your voice as a young writer, perhaps imitating Hemingway a little too much. What helped you settle into your own britches?

George Saunders: The honest answer is probably just: attrition. After awhile the act of falsifying yourself in order to sound like someone else gets exhausting. I remember this feeling of relief that some very natural inclinations of mine could finally be allowed to the table. This was around the time we had our second daughter. So I was working my main job, and teaching part-time, and also teaching guitar. Time was short and getting shorter and I think that helped too: I could see my writing dreams sinking fast. There was a bit of a feeling like you'd have if you were getting beat up in a fight and then noticed you'd been fighting with one hand behind your back. I lost some of the pompous control-freak tendencies I'd been nursing, and was just like: "Please, give me a victory here, by any means necessary."

WL: At this point in your career, you now share something with Hemingway: a very distinct, identifiable style. If you're reading Hemingway, you know you're reading Hemingway. The same is true of a Saunders story. Now that you've so thoroughly cemented the "Saunders aesthetic"—easily one

of the most unique and inimitable styles in contemporary fiction—do you ever feel limited by it?

GS: Well, thanks. There is sometimes that feeling, I guess, but rather than try to think that I have to sound a certain way, I just concentrate on trying to write prose that has a sort of...I don't know how to describe it...fierceness? Compression? Prose that has a kind of non-accidental quality about it. I try, in other words, to set some kind of stylistic bar for myself and get over it, whatever the particular tonality of a story might be. The goal is just to not let anything settle into mundanity out of sloth...to force myself to make a lot of choices over the course of revising a story. The sheer variety of the preceding answers should indicate that I don't really know what I'm talking about, or that what I'm talking about is beyond language and has more to do with a certain visceral feeling I get when I'm writing.

WL: *Many of your most famous stories—“CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” “Pastoralia,” “Sea Oak”—are set in commercial dystopias. What draws you to these atmospheres and to characters stuck with bizarre and terrible jobs?*

GS: Those choices are driven by the kind of language they produce. I found that if I set something in one of those places, the language would be more interesting to me. And all of the thematic stuff just comes out of that.

WL: *Apparently, as a younger man, you had the Hemingway-esque idea that one should indulge in a working-class lifestyle. What were some of the worst jobs you ever took? Do you think the kind of writer you've become today—and your success—is in large part thanks to whatever inspiration you were able to mine from the drudgery? Any advice for young writers suffering through the workweek?*

GS: I actually had the idea, from Hemingway, that a writer should be a kind of adventurer: like running with the bulls in Spain, going to war, etc. And I did that a little, during the period when I worked in Asia, in the oilfields. But then I came home, spent the money I'd saved. So the really bad jobs were more out of necessity. I think the worst was being a knucklepuller at a slaughterhouse. (Although that was a long time ago, and I feel a little weird at milking that long-ago job for working-class cred, when now I am a highly paid professor and actually own over a hundred serfs.)

Ha ha.

What made these jobs useful was the fact that I so badly needed to have them at the time – that I had no money and no cushion. And it was degrading. So I came to understand the big dark secret at the heart of capitalism, i.e., per Terry Eagleton: “capitalism plunders the sensuality of the body.” If you have no money, you have to get it, and if you have to get it through labor, you will be tired and, eventually, you will be lessened.

WL: *You have an incredible knack for making your fiction sound spoken rather than written. So much of your style hinges upon bizarre and hilarious speech patterns, it's no surprise that the majority of your stories are written in the first person. What do you do to inhabit and perfect a narrator's voice? Has anyone ever caught you in your writer's den, reading a draft aloud with cartoonish inflection?*

GS: No, it's all internal. I guess for me the key is the think of prose as a form of poetry—even inefficient speech can be poetic. I don't worry much about naturalism, but just look at the words on the page and read through them again and again, believing

that even an omitted syllable can make a passage come alive. When we were kids we used to really admire comics like Rich Little and Frank Gorshin—guys who could do imitations of famous people—and also Jonathan Winters, who was a master of creating characters, mostly through weird speech, a deep attention to diction, etc. To be able to do that was a real source of power, so maybe some of that rubbed off...but again—I think the ability to create voices, like so many things connected with writing, is probably (1) innate, and (2) hard to reduce. We always like to think—or I do, anyway—that if we can talk about something we can understand it, and if we can understand it we can learn it—and to some extent that's true. But my experience has been that people can do certain things naturally, and that a good part of the so-called apprenticeship is just remembering and accepting—and then refining—those things that come relatively naturally for us.

WL: Occasionally, as in one of your more recent stories in The New Yorker, “Al Roosten,” you’ll dodge the first person and pull this terrific acrobatic maneuver with your POV: the story is written in the third person, but the narrator frequently inhabits Al’s interior and speaks in Al’s voice. So you can have moments that are essentially third-person inner monologue—“Was Donfrey attractive? Cute? Would the bidders consider Donfrey cuter than him, Al Roosten?”—but also moments of pure exteriority—“Roosten was deaf to the charity in this.” Are you conscious of exactly what you can accomplish with your narrative positioning when you’re composing a story, or are these choices more instinctual?

GS: That’s a really acute observation. I think of that voice as “third-person ventriloquist” and your description of it above is right on the money. The choices are, as you suggest, instinctual, but I think the key is to be very aware, at every

instant of the story, of where you are, and hence where your reader is. The most important part of this is being able to precisely attribute every phrase of the story. I think the writer should know who is behind a given phrase. For example, as you point out, “Was Donfrey attractive?” is in Roosten’s head. That’s his thought. Then there’s a shift that lasts for one phrase (“Roosten was deaf....in this.”) That’s the narrator now. If you know this as you’re writing—if you have a clarity about where the shift is, and how long it lasts—then you can guide the reader, putting in little reassurances, etc.—and the reader will sort of feel your hand at her back, offering guidance, like: “Yes, you are reading it correctly: I just violated my own POV convention. Hope that’s ok. We’re going back into it now, no worries...” I think the trick is awareness: being aware of precisely where you’ve lead your reader to. And then the rules can kind of go out the door.

WL: While the stories in your first two collections, CivilWarLand in Bad Decline (1996) and Pastoralia (2000), seem to entertain general ruminations on corporate America, many of the stories in In Persuasion Nation (2006) offer very pointed social and political critiques. Obviously 9/11 and its aftermath was a big influence on this shift. Do you think the Bush years prompted and justified a serious change in American letters, or were they just a mutant breed of the same old dog? How do you digest the contemporary sociopolitical scene and inject it into your writing? Do you find any residue of the Obama mystique coating your stories these days?

GS: I think things changed in a very profound way during those years. Anyway, I felt pretty obsessed and sad and confused, and that made its way into the stories. It seemed to me that we were in a national crisis and so I just was doing what I was

always doing before, which was try to bring what was really in my mind and my heart directly into my writing. But what was in my mind and heart was, I guess, more linearly related to what was in the news. I'm not sure if that was good for the writing or not but I'm glad I did it—mainly because if I wasn't writing those stories, I have no idea what I WOULD have been writing. To be honest, I'm feeling relieved that Obama's in office, because I really like what I've seen of him and I really trust him as a thinker and as a human being...and am also feeling a corresponding relief that my fiction is shifting back to being concerned with what I think of as general human foibles, instead of particular temporal human foibles...I'm kind of sick of politics, or, more precisely, sick of all of this right vs. left fighting, which seems so boring and predictable and also so designed to line the pockets of the pundits on both sides and is doing so little for the actual nation.

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WL: In your capacity to occupy very prominent column inches—in The New Yorker, in GQ—do you consider yourself (though many have attempted to sully the word) an “activist”? How do you view your role—or more generally, the role of a fiction writer and essayist—in the contemporary American cultural landscape?

GS: Well, I don't know. That's a tough one. The main job is to be interesting. I mean, I love the idea that a writer could make a

difference and all of that, but if that's your main goal you run the risk of becoming a mere polemicist. And the truth is, it's not so easy to be interesting. A person can only be interesting, let's say, in his or her higher register, and that register may not feel like being righteous—it might not tolerate it.

I like it best when I'm just trying to make something funny and crazy and somehow a deeper truth comes out, that may not even be what I "think" I believe. I think that type of story is the best for the writer and the best for the reader. Because in a given day, don't we all already know what we think? And can't we defend it rigorously, without faltering? And isn't that dull? I like it when truth comes up from underneath and shatters the nice clean floor we've made.

WL: What is your process when you're writing a story that contains a fairly vivid social/political critique or is obviously allegorical—like "In Persuasion Nation" or "Adams"? Do you sit down at your desk and think, "I am going to dissect gross materialism and ad-psychology, and maybe I'll dabble in Marx's theory of the commodity fetishism," or "I am going to write a parable of the terrifying thought process behind, and consequences of, the Bush Doctrine"—or does the story always come first?

GS: Those two stories were actually conceived in two different ways...

"Adams" was really just a thought experiment, along the lines of: This thing going on in Iraq is confusing. Can I come up with a simple metaphor and then wind that metaphor up and let it play out? Just to help me see what I think? And then, during the actual writing, I had to perform a bunch of tinkering with the metaphor, etc, and in the process it

bolted off in another direction, sprouted some unpredictable pleasures. And in the end I'm not sure how accurate a mirror it is of the Iraq deal. It's a kind of story that I would hate if someone told me to write it ("Critique the Iraq war, but use a neighborhood metaphor") but the reason I don't hate the story is that it kind of wandered off from the job I gave it and did something different...I'm not really sure WHAT it did. I think it became about violence in general, and not just about Iraq. And it became goofier than I meant it to be. I think it works okay as a critique, but there had better be something else, or you just have a self-reifying scale model. Snore.

The other story you mention ("In Persuasion Nation"), in my understanding of it, has very little to do with advertising. It has all those ads, yes, and seems to be critiquing them, but I think that's just the fuel that runs the story. Like—Turgenev seems to be writing about peasants, but is really writing about, say, the human heart, or love, or whatever. For me that story was about that process wherein someone deeply involved in something finally realizes that everything he's accepted as reality is actually a delusion and a construction, and a harmful one, at that. (That would be the polar bear. And that was, kind of, me in the Bush years: sad to see that his country had, in fact, succumbed to its own aggressive/violent/ dopy/ reactionary tendencies...but this is also a very after-the-fact and clever reduction. Stories, when you get right down to it, are about a shape that shifts. It's the shifting that we enjoy: the pace of the shifting, the way the shifting both honors and defies our expectations...stories are more about patterning than they are about meaning, let's say...)

Most of the reviews assumed the "point" of the story was to slap advertising—and it is, I guess, a little—but again: if that's all the story does, it's not very much. But I should say that the

‘method of composition’ was to take all these commercials (that I’d originally written for another story, “Brad Carrigan, American”) and just start working with them—putting them in different order, revising them to make them funnier—and then wait until some sort of “story” began to appear. The barometer was always: is this collection of weird ads getting funnier/better/more intense? And eventually there started to be a meaning of sorts—the one described above. But I think that what powers a reader through this or any story is the line-by-line virtues of the story, which are pretty hard to articulate. You sort of use the thematics as an excuse to experience the line-by-line pleasures, maybe?

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In the end, I think writing is like any essential skill: we are better able to do it than explain it.

WL: The word “satire” occupies rather unstable connotative grounds these days, perhaps because anything that attempts to be humorous and engage politics is given the label. You’ve remarked before that you’re wary of calling your work satirical. Why is that? Are you cautious of “moralizing” too much in your fiction?

GS: I guess I resist this mainly because I’ve always thought that to satirize something you had to know exactly what you thought about it, and situate yourself slightly above it, and take a dump on it, while smiling wryly, and this seems boring.

not that boring—just too easy. I really just think of myself as a fiction writer who hasn't taken any of the available tools off the table. Trying to baffle/shock/move/engage the reader by doing whatever is necessary.

WL: You wrote an essay for GQ about traveling to the jungles of Nepal. Last year I spent about five months in Nepal, and I spent about a month of that time living in the jungle region, conducting research on local development issues. I was supposed to compose this research paper, and I kept thinking to myself, "How the hell do I write this thing without orientalizing? How can I possibly do this impossibly complex place justice on paper?" Obviously an essay is a different bag altogether from a research paper, but when GQ hands you their word limit, do you suffer through similar anxieties? How do you overcome them?

GS: I do have those anxieties. The only way I've found to fight them is to acknowledge that when you write something, you have zero chance of representing something 'correctly' and even less of a chance of somehow transmitting your experience to someone else, except very, very crudely. You are essentially making a (new, charming) object out of words. Or, if you will, you're making a series of words that will induce a certain *new* experience in the reader. Certainly, you are not going to be able to induce *your* experience in the reader. You are having an experience, and, in the attempt to transmit it to the reader, you are fucking it up, but hopefully in a charming way, that gives them another experience—not yours, not theirs if they were there, but some third thing—and that third thing (1) doesn't suck and (2) is not entirely unrelated to the place being described. So it's kind of strange, when you think about it: what do you have at the end? I honestly don't know. It's probably not even defensible...except it works, this reading/writing thing.

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But I know just what you mean when you ask how you can do a place justice. That is always my first impulse and my first reaction: a kind of low despair when I compare my actual experience with the paucity of what my words have conveyed. But then I do this kind of shift, where I say: Well, I *had* the experience, and if the reader wants an experience, he/she can step outside and have one...so

what we’re doing here is playing. It’s for fun. We’re using the detritus of our experience to make some new kind of fun. And in that, of course (mysteriously) there IS some trace of the original experience and the truths you learned – a kind of Platonic reduction of same.

(Again here, you’ll notice, I’m like a dog who chases and chases his tail, then sits down and feigns disinterest when it turns out he can’t catch it.)

WL: That essay and others were collected in your book The Braindead Megaphone. You went on a brief promotional tour and landed on The Colbert Report. Does Colbert brief you on his shtick before the show? What was it like having to jaw with a guy as sharp as Colbert, who’s basically made his career parodying the whole “braindead megaphone aura” of the Fox News crowd?

GS: He does brief you, and you have also briefed yourself, and he still kicks your ass, because of his sharpness, and also

because that is the only way you are going to get any laughs at all: i.e., at the part where he kicks your ass. It's a strange, post-modern format. He seems to grow about a foot taller when the show starts. And you shrink. And everyone laughs at you getting bitch-slapped. Including your relatives.

WL: You were awarded a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" in 2006. Did this reinvigorate you to do more daring things with your writing career? Do you ever play the 'MacArthur Card' to settle disputes or cut corners? For instance: "Snow Caps are the best movie candy ever. I am a certified Genius, end of discussion." Or: "SCUBA lessons? I don't need lessons. Put me in the ocean. I'm a certified Genius for chrissake."

GS: More often than not I will, say, put my finger into a live socket and my hair will go straight up and I'll be flipping around on the floor and someone will walk through and go: Nice work, genius.

But yes: it has inspired me to do more daring things. And gave me extra time to do them.

And Sno-Caps are the best movie candy. Other than those very tiny prime ribs they have now.

WL: In person, you are by all accounts extraordinarily kind and gentle—a loving husband and father. Yet your stories often venture into pretty dark corners. Do your wife and children ever read your drafts and go, "Jesus, George—severed genitals? Where did that come from?" Perhaps the question is vague and unanswerable, but where does that dark streak stem from? Is it urgency, hopelessness? At the very end of one of your most emotionally potent stories,

“Isabelle,” you’ve got that great line: “the sum total of sadness in the world is less than it would have been.” Is this, perhaps, a kind of raison d’être for finding humor in terrible places?

GS: Well, that’s nice to hear. Everyone in my family is a pretty high-level reader, so they get it. We tell those kinds of jokes around the table. And they know me as a guy who will do anything for a laugh. (Stick my finger in a light socket, for example.)

But honestly—I never really found that streak “dark.” I mean—to write about severed genitals is really just a way of saying that (1) there are such a thing as genitals and (2) they can be severed. In my epistemology, the fact that I write “Hal’s genitals got severed” doesn’t mean anything. I’m not, you know, “in favor of” severed genitals. The place where one’s darkness or hopefulness comes into play, artistically speaking, is in the realm of: Well, what happens next? How does Hal deal with his severed genitals? Or maybe in the realm of: What is the writer doing with this conceit that makes it worth the cringing? This may go back to the idea of a story as a thing made of words. I don’t think a story is a depiction of real life, or a scale model, or a rendering, or anything like that—I mean, they can seem like it, and that is a particular narrative strategy, called realism: to make the illusion of life, via words. But fiction can work in other ways too. When Kafka has Samsa turn into a bug, he’s not saying people can turn into bugs, or people are like bugs...he’s really just setting the stage so we can see how people would behave IF someone turned into a bug. So the notion “Man turns into bug” is neither dark nor light—it’s just a notion, a thought experiment: if a guy turned into a bug, how would the people around him react, and what would that tell us about human

beings? To me, what's dark is a story where nobody has a sense of humor and life is presumed to be violent and brutal and nothing ever changes and no one is kind or tries to help one another and violence occurs routinely and unremarkably. Like, you know, *CSI*.

WL: A wag—I'm sure you're familiar—is a droll wit, a lively joker. Who is your favorite wag and why? It could be a historical figure, a fictional character, or just a friend of yours.

GS: I don't know if Gogol would qualify—I don't think he was much of a joker in real life. But on the page, wow. Was there ever a livelier, more natural wit? I've been reading "Dead Souls" and his short stories in new(ish) translations by Pevear and Volokhonsky and—to go back to an earlier question—there was a guy who could hit three or four different tonal registers in the same sentence. Like in "The Overcoat"—he's got a narrator commenting on a character, but in such an inefficient, pompous way that we indirectly feel the author commenting on the narrator and, by projection, on the character. It's like a very funny, sad, hologram.

LEE GUTKIND

Lee Gutkind is the author and editor of more than 20 books, most recently *Almost Human: Making Robots Think*. He is founder and editor of the literary quarterly *Creative Nonfiction* and most likely the first to use the term. His second memoir, *Truckin' With Sam: A Father and Son*, *The Mick and The Dyl, Rocking and Rolling, On the Road* is forthcoming. He spoke with nonfiction editor Sandra Allen via telephone from Pittsburgh, where he is a professor in the Hugh Downs School of Communication.

Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: I know some writers of what you'd call 'creative nonfiction' who really despise the term, perhaps because they resent the need to emphasize the creativity of the art form ('all art forms should be creative,' 'that's an oxymoron,' etc.), or prefer others terms, like 'literary nonfiction,' 'new journalism' or just 'essay.' You're heavily associated with the term 'creative nonfiction': you edit a journal by the same name and have defined and defended it time and again. Do you ever get sick of your role in defending or defining this genre?

Lee Gutkind: Oh you know, the answer to that is yes and no. 'Yes' because half the people who ask about the meaning of creative nonfiction think they're really clever, the first to figure out that the term could be an oxymoron. And they laugh and make fun and you kind of look at them like, 'Where have you been for the last fifteen or twenty years?' They go on and on and they think they're very cool. So I get annoyed, when people who should know better ask such an empty question.

On the other hand, I feel that it is part of my responsibility as a writer and an editor, as a member of the literary

community, to try to be as articulate and helpful as I can in order to explain and introduce the genre to all kinds of people who will benefit from it. The people that most benefit from creative nonfiction are not necessarily academicians or folks in the writing community, but those who have interesting and compelling stories to tell, whether they're younger or older. There are lots of folks who have plenty of things to say about what has happened to them in the world—new and engaging stuff. The existence and popularity of creative nonfiction, and journals like mine, make it possible for new writers to do so. Providing that outlet is a responsibility I take very seriously.

SA: How have you seen your efforts to carve out and define the genre succeed or fail over the last forty years? Especially in recent years, what have you seen change?

LG: Well, we've already talked about one change—more people understand the term and the genre, know how to write it and read it. Also, it is now a fully accepted concept in academic programs. It was quite a battle to get my colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh to approve an MFA in creative nonfiction—but they did—after fighting for a couple of years. The program was the first. Now, you cannot keep up with how many universities in the world—in the world—where you can get an MFA in creative nonfiction. There has to be at least fifty—and maybe a lot more. Finally, creative nonfiction is not just a term the academy covets; it is literally the most popular genre for readers. Not only is the memoir hot, the whole immersion journalism or dramatic narrative nonfiction concept is a really significant part of the publishing world, in magazines and in books. Science, business, sports—you name it. Nonfiction narrative is what is happening and what sells. That's what's happened over the last fifteen or twenty years, and it's quite amazing, I think.

SA: *It seems to me that what motivated you to begin to use the term ‘creative nonfiction’ in the first place was to get bodies like the National Endowment of the Arts and the wider public to embrace the potential for literature about subjects that happened to be true. You’ve campaigned for decades just to open people up to the possibility that yes, nonfiction can be art. There are some, though, who I think would say ‘The future is hybrid,’ meaning that at some point, we won’t need to delineate between fiction and nonfiction. Do you agree with a prediction like this? Do you see this as a favorable end-result?*

LG: *I’ve certainly heard that a number of times, but I don’t think it is going to happen. Writers are too egocentric; they won’t in the end want to abandon their individuality and personal specific focus. If you combine fiction and nonfiction then you will also “hybridize” poetry and prose. The poets couldn’t live with their loss of identity.*

SA: *I have to ask my obligatory question about memoir and scandal: Anthologized in the first Best Creative Nonfiction collection, which you edited, is Daniel Nester’s essay “Notes on Frey,” which attempts to identify how the genre did, or should, act in reaction to the Million Little Pieces incident. In it, Nester mentions our cultures’ “addiction to veracity.” I was curious about that term because the word ‘addiction’ has a negative connotation, obviously. I’d assume that you’d agree that all the rabble-rousing that we get after one of these false memoirs is outed is distracting to the genre. But do you agree with Nester’s estimation that we’re addicted to veracity?*

LG: *No I don’t. I don’t believe that. I think we just care whether what we’re dealing with is true or not. You’re interviewing me,*

“I gotta tell you, I fear everything about the publishing industry.”

more truthful. But also as people become more sophisticated I hope they can begin to see that there's a big difference between being factual, sticking to the facts and being able to check what you believe and on the other hand providing the leeway necessary to the author who writes about what he or she things and feels even if in the end it might not be exactly true.

SA: You've focused some of your recent attention to the matter of blogs. What has led you to embrace and publish and anthologize and defend the blog? Is it some sort of popular pressure? Or is it the idea that there are probably some good ones because there are so many of them?

*LG: Not only are there good ones, I believe in the *Best Creative Nonfiction* both *One* and *Two*, especially our second one, that we've published some pretty good blog entries. I don't know if you saw *Best Three*, which just came out, but we have even more blogs that are even better and in fact one was so effective. I'm not sure if you saw this, but the *New Yorker* in its own blog blogged about how effective a piece we published was. So in fact I'm pretty proud of not listening to all of these*

you want *me*, you don't want me to make up anything, you want me to tell you what I really feel. I think that that whole *Million Little Pieces* incident is gone. There are still scandals that develop but they don't last very long. I think we're all settling down and we're all trying—publishers, editors, writers—are trying to be

people who are constantly criticizing and making fun of blogs and putting them down by moving forward and discovering some really good writers. Not long ago there were many critics of creative nonfiction, including James Wolcott who initially roasted me in *Vanity Fair* for being a navel gazer and dubbed me “the Godfather behind creative nonfiction.” And now Wolcott is blogging. He’s perfected navel-gazing to an art.

SA: Do you ever fear that the blog, this hyper-democratization of self-publishing, could be the end of publishing industry as we know it?

LG: I gotta tell you, I fear everything about the publishing industry. I fear those supposedly slick people who are controlling HarperCollins and RandomHouse and who are giving millions upon millions of dollars to writers who are not nearly as good as some of the bloggers. They are bankrupting the publishing community and slowly diminishing the quality of the work that is getting the most attention. This is not good for writers—or, more to the point, readers.

SA: Have you observed anything about blogs in particular that changes the way people write in a way that you think is interesting to development of the craft?

LG: No I don’t, and this is a problem. One of the reasons that so many blogs are so bad is that most of the people blogging have no respect for or understanding of the craft. One would wish that there could be a czar of blogging. One would wish that the czar could draw a line and say, ‘you may not blog unless you take lessons from an accomplished editor or writer,’ so at least you understand a little bit about what the craft is all about. You are giving a bad name to blogs.’

SA: So you see the blog as a place where content should be favored above perhaps style or form? And that's okay in your opinion?

LG: I think that content is always more important than style. Style can be learned, where content can't so easily be learned. And so I appreciate the content of the blog when it is there and the spirit with which the bloggers do it. I think that lots of times within the publishing world and within the literary world we choose style over substance and I think that that's a mistake and a problem.

SA: During your Jon Stewart appearance he often asked you questions as if you had the ability to predict things in the future, because your most recent book was all about robots. I'll do the same.

“Style can be learned, where content can't so easily be learned.”

What is going to happen to print publishing in light of the internet's rise, in your opinion? Specifically, as founder and editor of a prominent literary quarterly, how do you look at this situation and sleep at night?

LG: If any of us really knew what was going to happen, then we would know where to put our efforts and our money. It seems that what is happening is that to a certain extent literary journals are, not to say dying, but the weak journals are kind of losing support and readers and funding and the stronger journals are remaining—surviving. That's how it should be. In place of the dying ineffective lit journals are online publications which are very good and very strong because

they get and more easily and quickly introduce new voices and new ideas.

I'm thinking that the best of the online publications and the best of the paper publications will last, and that many of the online publications and paper publications will be able to do both. There's nothing more that I'd like to do with *Creative Nonfiction* than publish simultaneously an entire issue online. Before we know it, that's going to happen, and it will expand all of our readerships.

SA: Who would you say are some of the most underappreciated creative nonfiction writers of the moment?

LG: Sometimes I think of the underappreciated writers of my genre are the writers who have been writing creative nonfiction in the past. Like, why do we read George Orwell? I read George Orwell because he was a brilliant immersion creative nonfiction writer. Some of Hemingway's best work was creative nonfiction. I try to get some people who are interested in new creative nonfiction to go back in time. On a more contemporary idea, I think right away of Lauren Slater. Lots of people resent her and don't like her and she's gotten a great deal of criticism for being as quirky and she's so brilliant, she's one of the most brilliant writers as far as the world as ever seen. Philip Roth is the master of masters—but unappreciated by the non-Jewish community. Gay Talese should receive a Pulitzer just for being Gay Talese—and changing the literary landscape.

SA: Are you ever wary of the implications of being called 'the Godfather of creative nonfiction'? Do people mistake you for other godfathers, perhaps bug your house or break your legs because they haven't gotten payment, ever?

LG: People get confused about everything. I cannot tell you how many people have referred to me as ‘the Godfather of creative fiction’ or ‘the grandfather of creative nonfiction.’

SA: *A wag, wag being the odd word in our publication’s title, is a droll wit, a lively joker. Who is your favorite wag and why? It could be a historical figure, a fictional character, or someone you know in real life. Or in your false reality.*

LG: You’re a wag. You are currently my favorite wag.

SA: *No you have to chose someone else.*

LG: I could think about Colbert, Stephen. And I do have this connection with Jon Stewart; he’s quite a wag, don’t you think? I don’t why I keep wanting to say Hilary Clinton because it isn’t right, but when you asked me the question her head popped into my mind. I know it isn’t accurate but I keep wanting to say Hillary Clinton.

JOHN D'AGATA

John D'Agata is the author of a trilogy of anthologies which trace the history of contemporary essaying: *The Next American Essay*, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, and a forthcoming third. Once called "one of the most significant US writers" by the late David Foster Wallace, D'Agata continues to hash out a place for the kind of writing Wallace did. His second creative work, *About A Mountain*, is to be released in February. He and nonfiction editor Sandra Allen spoke on a café patio in downtown Iowa City, IA, where he teaches at the University of Iowa's poorly-named Nonfiction Writing Program.

Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: *It strikes me that the role you're credited as having on the covers of both The American Essay and The Lost Origins of the Essay—"Edited and Introduced by John D'Agata"—is somehow disingenuous. Really, both of these anthologies seem to be large essays that you're composing, using other works as evidence. Nearly five-hundred pages into The Lost Origins of the Essay, you give what may be called a thesis statement for the entire project: "My point is that the essay exists. And it seems, in fact, to have always existed. But even now, five thousand years since the earliest essay appeared...essayists who are trying to offer more than information are still not being recognized as practitioners of the form."*

John D'Agata: That's not much of a thesis, is it?

SA: Is my reading fair?

JD: Sure. I guess I would say that that's one purpose of the anthology, and of all three projected volumes in the project. It's trying to do two things. The first is to not necessarily to usurp work that has been traditionally read as poetry or

fiction by claiming ‘no, no, this is actually an essay,’ but rather to encourage a broader reading of what we normally call ‘essay.’ Some people are apparently upset that William Blake is in this anthology, and that he’s being called an essayist, and ditto for the inclusion of Rimbaud and Borges and a number of other writers. But what their inclusion is meant to do is ask what happens if we take these texts and we frame them as essays. Does something happen to them, conceptually speaking? Does something change? Do we read them differently? Does the implied mechanism of ‘essaying’ not only alter how we approach these texts but also perhaps even the texts themselves? And, perhaps most importantly, does our perception of what an essay is change? I think these anthologies are trying to say that the essay, the idea of essaying, has been around for, for... whatever I say in there, for a really long time.

And then they’re also trying re-stake a claim for essay form as art, which you would think one wouldn’t have to do. But there is evidence all around us that in most readers’ minds the essay is not an art-form. It’s in fact quite the opposite: you turn to it for information or for criticism, a discussion of literature in other genres and media. But it is not itself art.

SA: When and how did this project become central to your career?

*JD: I started that book, *The Lost Origins*, when I was a graduate student. I was in both a poetry and a nonfiction program at the University of Iowa. And the dirty little secret about creative writing at the University of Iowa is that the genres are segregated, and I didn’t understand that at the time. Actually, to be honest, now that I’m back as a faculty member I still don’t understand it, although I understand the politics that are involved in the segregation a little better. Anyway,*

I started an anthology while I was a student merely as a conceptual exercise to try to find the kinds of writers with whom I felt I had something in common, or whose work I appreciated for what it was trying to do. I don't know how to explain this without it sounding incredibly hokey, but I felt a little displaced while in both of those writing programs simultaneously, and so what I think I was really trying to do was build a little family for myself. I didn't really feel a part of poetry or nonfiction. And I guess it would be honest to say that at the time I especially didn't feel comfortable in nonfiction—not just in the program I was attending but in the genre as a whole. At the time, the nonfiction being produced was primarily personal essay, and by extension of that, memoir. And that was pretty much it. Yet I knew from the start that what interested me about this genre was inquiry, the act of trying to figure something out, and necessarily with the promise that you will be able to figure out what you're pursuing, but nevertheless trying. Attempting. What I was interested in was essaying.

SA: Has it worked? Have you seen things begin to change because of your work, or because of the work of others who are like-minded? Do you think that something is happening?

JD: Yes, absolutely. But I don't think it has anything to do with me. I think that it's the result of more students going through graduate programs specifically in nonfiction and more graduate programs loosening up. Not Iowa, because things aren't loose here at all. But those programs that encourage students to explore a multitude of genres with the belief that all of it is fodder—all of it can be inspiring, either technically or aesthetically or however. Plus more literary journals began appearing that were dedicated to the essay or at least committed to publishing essays (as art), and even more

interested in publishing hybrid work. Where this loosening comes from, I don't know.

SA: And what would you like to continue to see? What's the ideal outcome of this project?

JD: I just want the essay recognized as what those of us who practice it know it is. So I guess ultimately I hope that all three anthologies are pulled from library shelves because they're completely unnecessary. That the few exasperated voices that are out in the world right now encouraging folks to remember the other role that the essay serves will seem silly in retrospect. That's my goal: to seem silly 50 years from now.

**“That’s my goal:
to seem silly
in 50 years.”**

*SA: Your project, in *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, in particular, is looking back to the origins to writing and seeking a through-line with this concept called “the essay.” I guess that struck me as very unusual in comparison to how we view “the essay” in a contemporary genre sense. With contemporary genre there’s a sense that: this writer read this writer read this writer, and there was a school and there was an –ism. What you’re doing instead is you’re pointing out that texts and writers that might not have had any knowledge of one another’s existence had some sort of commonality. I guess in my mind then, the essay becomes more like ‘song’ or ‘dance’—something that continues to emerge regardless of culture or time. Do you believe that the essay is a common, artistic recurrence, and that’s what everyone’s missing?*

JD: Yes, because it is as fundamental to the human spirit as song or as storytelling. But I would also add that I think it's

probably even more fundamental, because most of us are essaying every day. It's how we live our lives. Not all of the essaying that we do is particularly sexy; we might just be trying to figure out where our car keys are. But the same activity that's functioning in an essay by Joan Didion or Virginia Woolf or Thomas Browne or Michel de Montaigne is the same that's been at work in our species since our species became the so-called "thinking apes." To essay—to explore and to be curious and to strive for clarity and answers—is frankly what makes us human.

SA: *As you mentioned, some people were upset at your inclusion of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in The Lost Origins of the Essay—*

JD: Really upset. And some very surprising people. When I was an undergrad one of the books that came out that really encouraged me was Philip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*. It was inspiring for me, because as an undergrad we had a great little creative writing program but I was the only student doing nonfiction. And I actually think that that's not uncommon, because nonfiction is still perceived to be the far less sexy among undergrads than fiction and poetry. So when this massive volume by Lopate came out it felt like an incredible testament to the genre and its heritage. While I might disagree aesthetically with Lopate today and with some of the writers and essays that are included in his anthology, I think that with that anthology he did more politically for the essay than anyone else. But, I also hear that Philip is sort of upset with the inclusion of Baudelaire and Rimbaud and Mallarmé and Blake in my anthology. So yeah, some people are upset. And I don't dislike criticism—I think sometime's it's quite healthy, although usually not when it's after the fact. But anyway, I just wish we could all be on the same team about

some of this stuff. It's a good sign, though. It's a healthy sign that we feel strong enough as a community to start splitting off into camps. I guess.

SA: *So in your estimation, the term 'essay,' needn't imply 'prose,' or 'nonfiction' necessarily.*

JD: No.

SA: *If you could get rid of the term 'creative nonfiction' tomorrow, forever, would you?*

JD: Fuck yes.

SA: *In the essay introducing Blake in Lost Origins, you wonder if the reason that poets have claimed the text for themselves (despite the fact that only a scant percentage of it is written in verse), is because "it's good," and likewise you wonder if your desire to call it 'essay' as opposed to 'poetry' is because "it's good." I wonder if you're aligning 'essay' as a term that just means 'art'?*

JD: No more so than we tend to assign the term "poetic" to literature that we consider especially good. But I think as long as we have these genre distinctions, I would prefer the term 'essay.' I prefer to be defined by that term, and what I tend to enjoy about the genre seems to fit more under 'essay' than 'creative nonfiction,' if only because it tells us more about the genre.

SA: *In your estimation as both a poet and nonfiction writer, why do we not struggle to define fictional versus nonfictional elements in prose, and yet poetry got away with never having this debate?*

JD: In the seventies there were a lot of poets who called themselves ‘documentary poets.’ But that’s a stupid term, so it went away. That is a great question, though. In some ways it’s poets themselves that perpetuate this image as their genre being the pinnacle of the literary arts. We have the magazine *Poets. . . & Writers*, for example, as if the rest of us are after thoughts, or trying desperately to catch up with the poets and reach their glorious heights or enlightenment. And yet it’s also

the poets who are often bemoaning the state of the genre and how no one is reading it and how it’s always on the edge of collapse, despite the fact that we’d probably have to hunt around to find

*“SA: If you could get rid of the term ‘creative nonfiction’ tomorrow, forever, would you?
JD: Fuck yes.”*

an English Department in this country that actually taught essays. Poetry, on the other hand, is a part of every English major’s basic curriculum. So poetry isn’t going anywhere. But certainly the sales of poetry books are quite a bit lower than prose. While on the other hand there is obviously a much stronger literary marketplace for prose, and because of that prose writers have to concern themselves with some very unsophisticated and spiritually un-enlightening issues, like veracity. If someone uses a persona in a poem, it’s unlikely to cause much drama in the publishing world. But if a James Frey does it then we’re obviously dealing with a different bowl of fruit, because there’s a ton of money involved with a book like that, and unfortunately because there’s a lot of money involved the stakes are higher. So these days books that have

no chance of selling even a fraction of what Frey's memoir sold are affected by this paranoia about veracity because publishers are afraid that Oprah's gonna call them out.

SA: I almost sense a high art versus vulgar art argument here. As in, right now 'essay' is the fashionable term and 'creative nonfiction' is the unfashionable one.

JD: Yes, it is the more fashionable term at the moment. But I do hope it's more than that. I hope that we all recognize eventually that the term "essay" is simply better for us a community because what it does is define us as practitioners of an activity rather than a group of writers fulfilling a set of conditions that have nothing to do with art. *Do we have our facts straight?* That's basically what defines us as "nonfiction" writers—an oxymoron if I've heard one.

SA: When you say that you want to make a legitimate artistic name for 'essay,' who do you want to notice that?

JD: There are three audiences. The first audience is the audience I live with. I live in a odd town, a compact 60,000 people, 30,000 of whom are students. Yet, we're also one of three UNESCO "Cities of Literature." It's got a "literary walk of fame" in its downtown district. And it's a place where you can go to a reading maybe four or five times a week if you want. So despite its size, it's one of premier literary communities in America. But this city, my home, is one that doesn't treat the essay the same way it treats fiction and poetry. And so in some ways, that's my ideal audience. The same tension I felt as a student in this town one that I feel very strongly today.

Then there's the larger American literary community, which in some ways also considers the essay a lesser-form, which

is partly the fault of essayists. We went through about a twenty-year period when all we were producing was memoir, and frankly not very good memoir. There were occasionally phenomenal works in there, but a lot of it was literature that was less about giving the reader an experience and more about relating an experience: “I had this experience, so let me tell you about it,” as opposed to “let me replicate this experience for you.” So that’s my audience too, because I would hope that project’s like these anthologies would help remind people that this genre can do more. For instance, it can give really good experience.

And then there’s the much larger community, the one that includes my family, which doesn’t like what I write, doesn’t read what I write, wishes I wrote different things, and doesn’t understand why they can’t go into their big box local bookstore and find what I’m writing. (Even though they don’t like reading my stuff.) So I consider my family to be a good representation of the average reader, whose perception of the essay is that it’s either this thing they had to write in high school in their political science classes, or it’s a how-to manual. If we were to take a field trip to our local Barnes and Noble and we looked at their bestselling fiction and nonfiction shelves, we probably wouldn’t like most of what was on it. But I would bet that we would at least agree that what’s on the fiction shelf is at least fiction. However, if we were to look at what is shelved as nonfiction, we’d be faced with diet books, and exercise books, and how to manage your personal wealth books, or how to accumulate personal wealth books, or perhaps how to communicate with angels. Maybe there’d be a biography on there about a Revolutionary War hero. But that’s it. And so we’d be faced with a very unfortunate choice: to become a snob or to not be a snob. Because inevitably while standing in front of that nonfiction shelf we’d have

“There is a difference between a text that is exploring some cultural issue and a text that is promising you fucking awesome abs.”

to ask ourselves—I would *hope* we’d ask ourselves—is this literature? Are these diet books and these exercise books and these how-to books art? I made the decision a while ago to let myself be a snob in this case, and so I am very willing to say that those texts are not art. That there is a difference between a text that is ruminatively exploring some emotional or intellectual or cultural issue and a text that is promising you fucking awesome abs. And that is where the term ‘essay’ starts to help us, because if we use the term ‘nonfiction’ then we’ve got to let through the gates of the genre all the exercise books and diets books and how-to books. We have to admit it all, and embrace it all, and we can’t complain about any of it. And in some ways we in turn will become defined by those texts as well.

SA: Where did you conjure the authority to do an anthology? You could have just written a normal essay and quoted, instead. Why this form?

JD: When the first anthology came out, I think I was 24 or 25. And I didn’t feel like I had any authority. Who am I to come forth and declare these 30 or so contemporary essays worthy of acclaim? What I did have authority to say, however, was that these were 30 essays I really loved. So I consciously

tried to come up with a way to blunt that omnipotence that a lot of anthologies seem to want to cast over their selections. There's a myth that a lot of editors don't do enough to dispel that the texts that end up in anthologies have been delivered to editors by some messenger of God. That the "cannon," in other words, is not artificial, but the will of some all-powerful literary deity. To me, an anthology is a deeply personal document because it's all opinion. There's always something that you're not going to be able to include in an anthology and there's always going to be stuff that you do include that people don't agree with. So I wanted to embrace that. I wanted to find a way to introduce myself as not so much an authority as an enthusiastic guide. I wanted to create an atmosphere for the essays that was casual and celebratory, and yet still informative and perhaps occasionally argumentative. In that first anthology I chose to do this through a series of introductions that were less about dates and titles and awards but rather why I find the essays interesting. I'm not Harold Bloom (or Marjorie Perloff or Helen Vendler); I can't slap my name on something and expect that everyone's going to rush out and want to eat up what I'm claiming to be a group of really great essays. And that structure that I started using in the first anthology—and will continue to use in all three—wasn't necessarily about giving myself permission to do anthology, but instead a way of justifying, as a 25-year-old, why I wanted to do one.

SA: Do you resent or fear having become John D'Agata: Grandfather of the Lyric Essay?

JD: Grandfather?

SA: That's what people say. I've read it. Or how about hip young uncle?

JD: How about cool cousin. I don't think it's biologically possible for me to grandfather anything just yet.

SA: *Cool cousin doesn't imply authority, though. And you are already gaining that authority, you are a figurehead of the genre. Do you resent this? Do you celebrate this? Am I breaking this news to you?*

JD: I try not to be aware of it. I have my suspicions, I guess. But my students do a really good job of not making me aware of any authority I may have in the larger world.

SA: *Your forthcoming book, About a Mountain, is due out in February. Does this project relate to the three-part Essay series, or is it something else entirely? Would you like to say something about it?*

JD: It's about a mountain in Nevada called Yucca Mountain where we might end up storing all of America's highest-level nuclear waste. And it's also about suicide. And it's also about trying to teach myself how to write a different kind of essay. Although that was more of a private objective; I suspect most readers will be into the nuclear stuff. And maybe the suicides. Cheery stuff.

SA: *Cheery indeed. In The Lost Origins of the Essay, you discuss the birth of the internet, the fact that "more information will be produced in this period than all the information produced in the previous five thousand years." Am I correct to read your hostility towards 'information' here? More importantly, what are your thoughts on the rise of the internet and your defense of the essay? Does the internet abet or hinder your quest to restore the essay to a place of artistic esteem?*

JD: I don't consider it a threat.

SA: *What about blogs, this explosion of popular nonfiction writing?*

JD: I'm not sure I've ever read a blog. I did see that Julia Child movie about blogging, though. And I thought that was charming. So at the moment I don't find blogging very threatening either.

SA: *A wag is a merry, droll joker, a wit. Who is your favorite wag, and why?*

JD: Hmm. I think people will expect me to say some Roman person. But I'm going to go with a Greek. We'll go with Theophrastus. He's in the anthology. He lived a pretty dry life, or at least it would seem so on the surface. He's the guy who succeeded Aristotle at the Lyceum, and he wrote, supposedly, 200 books, nearly all of which are lost. We know their titles though, and they're very exciting sounding: "On Weather," "On Rocks," "On Olive Oil," etc. Basically, in a nutshell, he was an encyclopedist. Pretty boring shit.

However, why I love him is because I think he had a gloriously nasty inner life. About two hundred years after his death, some Roman soldier found a manuscript of his that's a bunch of character sketches of societal types in Greek culture, throughout which he basically pokes fun at ugly personalities. I mean seriously grills them, and there's some suggestion in the text that these "types" are indeed actual figures in Greek society whom Theophrastus knew. Yet Theophrastus was known for being a pretty easy-going diplomat in Athens. A teacher everyone loved and trusted. He even convinced