# 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.**

> **"I like it when truth comes up from underneath and shatters the nice clean floor we've made."**

***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?**

**"Writing is like any essential skill: we are better able to do it than explain it."**

**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, your 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.**

**"It's probably not even defensible, this reading/ writing thing... except it works."**

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.**