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Interview with George Saunders

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George Saunders, author of Pastoralia and CivilWarLand in Bad Decline, among other titles, talks with CutBank about writing and life.

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE SAUNDERS

Your writing often deals with larger societal concerns. Do you think writers have a responsibility to engage these topics in their work?

I don't really think a writer has any responsibility except to his or her own sense of freedom. That is, I think a writer should just do what seems vital and intense, even if that consists of detailing the way a forest looks at various times of day or tracing the imaginary mental life of a certain poodle. But there would be, I expect, politics even in those two bits of prose. As Orwell said, the idea that politics can be kept out of a piece of writing is, in itself, political. Because what is politics, really, but the personal, enacted multiply? One guy, a tech writer, say, has a crap job where he spends fifteen hours servicing shareholders he has never met, who have spent that same fifteen hours in Cannes, chewing out their household staff, and he goes home to his miserable little apartment, to find that his wife is just as grouchy as he is, from chasing the nine kids around the two tiny rooms all day - that is personal. But when there are other guys with crappy jobs, etc - then it's "political." So I don't really make a distinction between "societal" issues and other sorts. All issues are societal. Even the most "domestic" story, if told beautifully, will resonate outwards towards the big questions (e.g., "Lady With Pet Dog").

Is this something you do consciously in your own work?

So (see #1), the answer would be no. But then I would qualify it a bit - I am aware that certain stories are easier to read politically than others. But I think the only way to write anything is to imagine your character, as well as you're able, to be a real, three-dimensional person, not radically different from yourself. In other words, if I find myself thinking: I am writing a Scathing Critique of Contemporary Capitalism - well, it's time for a break. Be-

cause then the best that you can hope to do is Critique – and fiction is capable of doing so much more than that, which is make mystery, enlarge our sense of healthy ambiguity, etc. In other words, doing social commentary normally implies that you already know what you think, whereas the thrill of fiction, for both reader and writer, has to do with the process of discovering what you think, and also discovering that every easy answer has an equal and opposite contradiction, or complication built into it. So after reading a piece of fiction, the ideal reaction is a sort of humbled befuddlement at the complexities of the world – a renewed interest, a vow to honor that idea from (I think) Sir Thomas Moore: “For the love of God, man, think it is possible you are mistaken.”

What writers have influenced you?

Isaac Babel was a big influence, for compression and velocity. Stuart Dybek for a sort of permission-giving: Your life too is the stuff of literature. Tobias Wolff for artistry and integrity and the idea that a great artist could also be a great and responsible human being. Monty Python for the way that absurdism could accrue into something deeper. Beckett for the minimalist ethic. I think the whole question of influence is interesting, because this sort of discussion often assumes a sort of parental model (I got my love of surfing from Dad, but diverged from Dad in that I surf nude, whereas he wore a cardigan). But there is another model, which is more of the Things-I-Saw-At-The-Train-Station Model; we catch a glimpse of something that stays with us forever, giving us permission to access some part of our artistic palette that, without that glimpse, might never have been allowed into play. In this category: I once read the first three pages of that Celine WWI novel and found something about it so exciting (something in the verbal quality of it) that I rushed out of the library and into this whole new artistic phase, writing the story that eventually got me into grad school, where I met my wife, with whom I soon had two kids etc. – but I never went back and read the rest of the book. And from what I know of Celine, he was a turd – anti-Semitic, quasi-delusional. But still, talk about

an influence. It opened up something in my head, along the lines of: "Oh, I didn't know that was considered literary, I can do something sort of like that, and have always wanted to, but didn't know that was allowed."

What's your favorite thing to do when you are avoiding writing?

I really don't do much avoiding of writing these days. I mostly am scrambling to get enough time. It's become more pleasurable and essential as I get older, although I think I've become less efficient at it. So I am more often avoiding everything else in my life, to get to writing.

What's the biggest risk you have ever taken?

I used to take a lot more risks than I do nowadays. I once swam drunk in a river in Sumatra, and got a viral infection. I went on foot to the Cambodian border when the Vietnamese were on the other side, massing for the spring invasion. Nothing bad happened but it was embarrassing, because I walked into a Thai army camp and, also, I was wearing white overalls at the time. I think they might have thought I was a potential "comfort woman." I once jumped 50 feet into a river without knowing how deep it was. I got married with zero money in the bank. I have remained married for sixteen years, still with no money in the bank. As a grad student I once asked Robert Stone, at a party, what the "next big literary thing" was going to be. He was very generous about it but even as the words left my mouth, I felt like doing away with myself, by, possibly, flinging myself into a virally infected river of uncertain depth, while wearing white overalls.