

INTERVIEW

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GEORGE SAUNDERS

**S**O MANY OF US LOVE GEORGE SAUNDERS, author of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, *Pastoralia*, and *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*. And why not? He soars above boundaries of class, genre, and aesthetic. He's one of us from the block, but he hasn't forgotten where he came from, and he doesn't think he's better than us. He's had bad jobs. Really bad, as bad as any of ours and all the while he wrote through them and even on them, and he thinks we should, too. He's funny. He's not afraid to write like people talk or to talk about pop culture in his stories. And he's made it—an entire collection's worth of stories and then some were published in the *New Yorker*.

For these reasons and more, he is our first *Night Train* "Interview."

*Night Train's* Julie Benesh brings us George Saunders:

*George, you wrote a touching essay about being first published in Quarterly West. How long had you been writing up until that point and what kept you going?*

That was in about 1991 I think, and I'd been writing since 1982, seriously since 1985. And that was after two years in the Syracuse creative writing program and three out of it, three failed collections and two failed novels.

*In that essay you said, “Publication in Quarterly West was a huge and defining moment for me because it meant that, to somebody out there, I was making sense.” What advice do you have for writers in how to better integrate their desire to simply set down their vision on the page with their desire for external validation and dialogue with other writers and readers? How do they avoid getting distracted by “fame” and losing focus on creating? Can you say more about that “spiritual benefit of writing” that you tell your students about?*



Photo by Thomas Mason

All great questions. My feeling is, if you write for the correct reasons, 1) you will be better served in terms of “career,” because 2) you will write better stuff, and 3) you will be happy no matter what the world says, because you will feel the nobility of the task. What are the correct reasons? I would say: To write as beautifully as anyone ever did. That is such a great aspiration, when you think of it: To see the world (in prose) as generously and clearly and joyfully as Dickens, Tolstoy, etc. And even if you don’t get there, you tried.

So then the question is about what the world likes versus what you like. But my experience was, all those years I was getting rejected, I didn’t really like what I was doing. I sort of thought I did, I could kind of convince myself that I did—but when I started on the stories in the first book, that was a whole different deal: I loved writing those. And I thought: Well, if the world doesn’t like these, too bad, I really like them, and there’s nothing else I could possibly write at this moment.

*You’ve written a lot about work. What advice do you have for how we can make our day jobs inform and inspire us as writers?*

That of course depends on the individual—we all have different metabolisms and needs and so on. But I would say: don’t exclude anything from the realm of the literary. Whatever is happening to you (in your job, in your love life, in your emotional life) *has* to be a fit subject for literature. Absolutely has to be. Why wouldn’t it be? You’re human, you’re a citizen. So then, originality, style, form—all of those things—are just the accommodations or strategies you use to make whatever is happening to you literary, if you see what I mean. If your life seems dull, your job idiotic—then your job as a writer is to invent a style, voice, etc that makes that dullness and “idioticness” alluring and

narratively engaging and full of emotion. So that way, whatever terrible thing you end up doing is part of this larger story: Young Writer on Front Lines, Engaging in Life.

*Where do your stories come from, anyway? You have compared your process to “pointillism”—that you look intensely at bits of data and something emerges. How do you choose what data to focus on?*

I just look for one sentence or stretch of dialogue that seems to have energy. Then I mess around with it until it starts to grow new text, either in front of it or after it. My approach is just to keep trimming and adding and changing until all the text seems interesting and “non-sucky.” And all of the stuff like plot and theme and character comes naturally out of what I will call—being slightly technical—Non-Sucky Language (NSL).

*You mentioned that you use setting, such as a particular type of theme amusement park, as a sort of shortcut, a way to drop yourself into a story and create a particular tone and impetus. Do you have other means of entering a story, and helping a reader enter it?*

Mostly just the language stuff mentioned above. The other thing is simply to try and make your reader like your character. This involves not puppeteering with your characters. Let them be very much like you, in their basic desires and fears and motivations. Often I think writers have a tendency to look down on their characters, to treat their characters as lower beings than themselves. Why? Well, because it’s harder to do it the other way. But I think this is something we all look for when we read: a reflection of ourselves and our experiences in the main character.

*You have quoted Chekhov in saying that writers have a moral obligation to write about misfortune so that we all remember and remain compassionate, even during our own happy times. Does conflict inspire your stories?*

I think conflict is at the heart of all stories. So then it’s just a question of what you feel strongly about. And then maybe remembering Chekhov’s other adage, that art doesn’t solve problems, it just formulates them correctly. What I really believe is that writers have a moral obligation not to be boring. This takes care of all the other stuff: politics, aesthetics etc.

*You say you write slowly, but you have come to be okay with that. How do you compensate for that? What kind of writing hours do you keep?*

I don't really compensate for it. I think I just accept it. Not always happily, of course. But if the choice is 1) Lots of stories, not so good, or 2) Few stories, but not so bad—then you've got to go for #2. I try to write 2-3 hrs a day. Beyond that, I get dull and start making mistakes. Which is not to say I don't write longer. I do. Then I get dull and make mistakes, which I spend the next day fixing. It's weird how much you can get done in 20 focused minutes. No time for farting around or fooling yourself, just trying your hardest to be charming and intense for 20 minutes. Can you write half a page? If so, you will have written 150 pages by the end of the year. (This coming from a guy who has only written 13 stories or so in the last 15 years—but still.)

*Talk about revising. Any advice for beginning writers?*

I think what young writers should hope for is that as they gain experience, their opinions will get stronger—they will set a higher bar. Without that, there's no basis for revising, and that can be frustrating. The trick is to not settle for close. But then the other trick is, to have a standard you can really feel. That's what's changed for me: I know what I like now much more than I did when I first started out, and am willing to wait for it. So I read the piece over and over and over, and the one skill is to get it out of my mind faster—to lose those attachments and loyalties we habitually build up as we work through a piece. If something looked good before but now seems wrong—out it goes.

*Who helps you revise? I know you have had nice things to say about Bill Buford and Dan Menaker. Who else helps you? Have you indeed gotten better at helping yourself?*

I have gotten better at it, I think. That may be all I've gotten better at—having a high standard and not being able to BS myself anymore. I show my wife my stories when I think I'm done. And I've been really fortunate with editors. The two you mention, plus Meghan O'Rourke (who was at *The New Yorker*), Chris Knutsen (who edited *Pastoralia* for Riverhead) and Deborah Treisman, who is the senior fiction editor at *The New Yorker* now, and is fantastic. She is able to help me find the cuts I couldn't find myself. She also has a great gentle style—you really feel she is totally on your side. My experience is that when you are working with a great editor, and she makes a suggestion, something lights up inside you, like if you had the idea yourself. They are *that* close to your writing-mind. So to work with good ones is a great gift.

*You have said that among the most valuable things a person can learn by continuing their education in creative writing are openness, humbling and craft. How important is it that this education be formal?*

I don't think it matters one bit. The advantage of a formal program is that sometimes they pay you, and you are in this sort of Petri dish environment with other talented people, that just speeds the whole deal up. But is it necessary? No way. Look at all the greats who never set foot in a workshop.

*How important is reading to one's development as a writer?*

Critically important. When you say you want to be a writer, you are saying that you want to be able to create effects with language, and to do this in an original and meaningful way. So without a knowledge of what came before, I think this is impossible. Imagine a guitarist who doesn't like to listen to music. Now, having said that, I think there comes a time when you are not directly reading for inspiration, but rather just to get revved up about the word. You read to remind yourself of how powerful it can be.

*What are you reading these days?*

I'm reading stories, to put together a reading list for one of my spring classes. Tillie Olsen is on my list of things to look at over the break, Isaac Babel. I just read *Appointment at Samarra* and *Revolutionary Road*—both gorgeous books. The Yates in particular has really stuck with me. I don't know anyone who writes more beautifully or perceptively about the wonders and terrors of married life. I also love the way he celebrates the American Suburb, reveling in it every bit as much as, say, Turgenev revels in the Russian landscape, or Dickens revels in London. It's as if Yates is saying: "People live here; therefore it must be as worthy as the writer's attention as ancient Rome or fair Verona or Paris in wartime"—which cheers me, because I've never been to Rome, Verona, or Paris.

*How has being a teacher affected your work as a writer?*

Just convinced me, as if I needed more convincing, that the written word is a great thing to dedicate your life to. In this job I meet so many amazing young people—brave and good-hearted and talented. So that is a great gift.

*How do you feel about being the first Night Train interview?*

I feel great about being your first interview. Thank you so much for asking me, and best of luck with the journal.

*George Saunders is finishing a third book of stories and a second kid's book.*