

George Saunders: Biography

Diane Stupay
February 7, 2023

George Saunders is currently the star of Syracuse University's MFA Creative Writing Program. He writes short stories, essays, novellas, novels and children's books and novels. Saunders writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, and *GQ*. Also, he contributed a weekly column, he called *American Psyche*, to the weekend Magazine of the Guardian between 2006 and 2008. He won the National Magazine Award for Fiction four times from 1994 to 2004. His first short story collection, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* was a finalist for the 1996 PEN/Hemingway Award. In 2006 he received a MacArthur Fellowship. His novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, won the 2017 Booker Prize. His two most recent publications are, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, 2021, essentially a master class on the craft of writing, and *Liberation Day, a collection of loosely connected short stories*, published in 2022.

Saunders discovered literature in his mid to late 20s. He was born in Amarillo, Texas in 1958. He grew up in Oak Forest, Ill where he attended St. Damian Catholic School and graduated from Forest Hills High School. He then worked as a roofer in Chicago, a doorman in Beverly Hills, as well as a slaughterhouse knuckle-puller. (A knuckle-puller salvages the parts of an animal that are not used for human consumption, but are put in

animal feed. In 1981, Saunders earned a B.S. in geophysical engineering from the Colorado School of Mines.

Describing his journey from the mine fields of Texas to an MFA program in Creative Writing at Syracuse University, Saunders says, *I came to fiction late, with a particular understanding of fiction's purpose. I'd had a powerful experience one night reading Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" in an old RV in my parents' backyard in Amarillo, after long days working in the oil fields at what was called a jug hussler. (A party who lays out cables and plants geophones for seismic acquisition and collects them after surveying.)* It was dirty exhausting work. *My fellow workers included a Vietnam vet and an ex-con just out of jail. . .*As I read Steinbeck after such a day, the novel came alive. I was living in a continuation of the fictive world, I saw. I was tired, Tom Joad was tired. I felt misused by some large and wealthy force, so did Reverend Casey. Just as the Okies who'd driven through the panhandle in the 1930's, we too were the malformed detritus of capitalism. In short Steinbeck was writing about life as I was finding it. He'd arrived at the same questions I was arriving at and he felt they were urgent as they were coming to feel to me. A few years later, working as a geophysicist in Indonesia, Saunders discovered Russian literature and creative writing in general.

"I wanted to see the world, and the rigor and logic of engineering eventually seeped into my writing." The Russians when I found them, worked on me in the same way Steinbeck had, Saunders noted. They seemed to regard fiction not as something decorative but as a vital moral-ethical tool.

A Peoples magazine article about novelist Jay McInerney, Syracuse G'86 convinced Saunders to apply to Syracuse's MFA program where director Tobias Wolf "took a shine to his idiosyncratic style." In 1988, Saunders earned an MFA in creative writing. While an MFA student at Syracuse, Saunders met his wife, fellow writer, Paula Redick, also a student in the program. They were engaged 3 weeks after they met, as he says, "a record, even for Syracuse." Married in 1987, they have two daughters currently in their young 30's. Redick published her first novel *The Distance Home* in 2018. It was long-listed for Fiction's 2018's First Novel Prize, and included in The Best Books of 2018 by Real Simple.

The couple live in Santa Cruz, California. Saunders is currently a student of Nyingma Buddhism, the earliest form of Tibetan Buddhism. His primary literary influences are Russian writers, especially from the 19th and early 20th century, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Gabel. To quote the author, "I love the way they take on the big topics. I'm inspired by a certain absurdist comic tradition that would include influences like Mark Twain, Daniil Kharms, Groucho Marx, Monty Python, etc. And then on top of that I love the strain of minimalist American fiction writing: Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff.

Saunders joined the faculty of Syracuse University in 1997. Currently, he commutes to Syracuse where he is a professor on the staff of the MFA Creative Writing Program. Each year 600 to 700 young writers apply to Saunders' class, The 19th-century Russian short-story in translation. From this application pool, six students are

chosen. As he describes in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, These students are some of the best writers in America. "What we try to do over the next 3 years is help them achieve what I call their 'iconic space'—the place they will write stories only they can write, using what makes them uniquely themselves." I want the Russian stories we workshop to move and change someone as much as these Russian stories have moved and changed me. The focus of my artistic life, Saunders tells us, is trying to write emotionally compelling stories that a reader feels compelled to finish. Or as Bill Buford, then the fiction editor of the *New Yorker* said, "I read a line. . .and I like it enough to read the next."