

**Lincoln in the Bardo**  
Reflective Paper  
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As a child growing up in the 1940s in Memphis, family celebrations often fell into talks about “the war.” It was not the war in Europe in which my father and uncles had fought; it was the war fought almost a century earlier, the one within our own country between our own kinfolk, north and south. In school, our elegant headmistress, Emma Desaussure Jett, born 1862, trembled when she described the soldiers in blue camped in the front yard of her family home.

In hindsight, it occurs to me that “the War,” was a good topic for our family. —one of the few topics that did not rouse contrary opinions or stir discord. (Unlike, for instance, the animosity that poured into the dining room when my father lauded FDR.)

When speaking of the “War Between the States” (never the Civil War), most Southerners of my parents’ generation seemed to agree that though Grant and Sherman were scoundrels, Lincoln was a decent, gracious leader and that the South would have fared better had he been allowed to live.

In George Sanders’s novel, Lincoln is a captivating, admirable figure, a man above reproach, without pretensions, one to whom present Americans open their hearts. Raised in a log cabin in frontier Kentucky, apparently without formal education, he wears the mantle of selfless leadership, tireless labor, and, ultimately, grief. Unpretentious. Mythic and mysterious. Above all, a fellow sufferer.

His suffering? A father whose own son, Willie, has died; the tormented leader of fathers and mothers whose sons may also soon die—not like his own son in his own bed—but mercilessly on the battlefields of a war he has reluctantly sanctioned. A generation of unfinished lives. Still boys.

Lincoln in the Bardo is the only contemporary novel I have read whose action takes place in the underworld, in this case in the “Bardo,” a Tibetan conceit, close, of course, to the Christian allegory of Purgatory, but without ritual prayer or the wailing of sinners. Without much drama either! In fact, Saunders’s Bardo is a rather boring habitat: all men, except for a girl with a frozen face attached to a fence, all unexceptional in their human dailyness. Vollman, a widower, and Roger Bevins, a suicidal poet, do not know or accept that they are no longer living. Bevins, a rejected homosexual lover, believes he failed to kill himself and is still lying on the kitchen floor awaiting his repentant lover’s discovery and their reunion. Vollman who wanders naked through the Bardo, exposing his unfailingly tumescent penis, has forgotten he died on the brink of consummating his new marriage. He believes he will soon return to the marriage bed. For these men, in their own minds, the future is still ahead of them.

Lincoln in the Bardo is Saunders's first novel. It has been well received. Critics especially note the humor in his writing. I, however, often found the humor heavy handed, dark, almost adolescent: e.g. Vollman's extraordinary penis; the Trayner girl locked up in vicious, strangling "tendrils," the tendrils themselves—composed of the evil souls of "bean-sized" people. All these details veer far off the track of 21st century literature into the realm of wicked fairy tale! Who, in our age, writes about Purgatory, divine punishment, life after death? Whose characters are ghosts, speaking to today's readers from their graves? These are literary techniques, devices and themes of an earlier age. They are also the novel's strengths and often the source of its humor.

I especially admire Saunders's sympathetic portrayal of the grieving Lincoln visiting his son's tomb and embracing the dead boy. And I felt enormous sympathy for Thomas Havens as well—the wounded former slave, left to die on the roadside by the family to whom he had once belonged. Saunders has Havens ultimately journeying with Lincoln from 1862 into the future. Is the author suggesting that Havens may have been influential in Lincoln's racial enlightenment and sympathy for the black race?

One of Saunders's characters' most distinguishing—and disquieting—features is their ability to enter and exit one another's brains and bodies. It is the source of their purgatorial insights and crucial to their motivations. Otherwise, death has placed them beyond or outside of time and history, pondering, for instance, who now, they ask is president: Polk, Fillmore, Taylor, Buchanon perhaps?—names we, today, are often surprised to read in our own history books. Saunders's characters are surprised by Lincoln!!

I suppose when one reads or writes about the denizens of Purgatory, she should be cautioned not to expect their motives or behavior to be guided by reason. Indeed, Reason did not bring—or sentence—them to Purgatory and may not aid in their further advancement. As readers, our task is to accept them and believe them as their author created them. They belong to him and are shared by him.

They also may belong, metaphorically, to the present. To dinner table chat, to history as it is still being interpreted and handed down to eager listeners.

For example, in 2022, the Confederate-flag-draped remains of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, reputed to be the creator of the KKK, and his wife were transported by court decree from Memphis to Munford, Tennessee, to be reburied for the fourth time—this time in Columbia, Tennessee, the location of the Sons of Confederate Veterans headquarters, in graves facing Forrest's birthplace in Chapel Hill, Tennessee. Their reburials were well attended.