

The fantastically natural world of George Saunders

CivilWarLand in bad decline

George Saunders

Riverhead Books, 1996

ISBN 5-73225-79-7

Pastoralia

George Saunders

Riverhead Books, 2001

ISBN 5-73228-72-9

The very persistent Gappers of Fripp

George Saunders

Bloomsbury, 2005

ISBN 0-747576-11-4

The brief and frightening reign of Phil

George Saunders

Riverhead Books, 2005

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Reviewed by Steve Finbow

In the bio on the inside page of his first collection of short stories *CivilWarLand in bad decline* it states that Mr Saunders “is a geo-physical engineer in Rochester, N.Y.” That is apt for a writer like George Saunders. Geophysics is the study of “the physics of the earth”. Physics is the “branch of science concerned with the nature and properties of matter and energy” or “the physical properties and phenomena of something”. The engineered fictional worlds of *CivilWarLand in bad decline* explore the physical properties and phenomena of a narrative earth slightly out of kilter; something is not quite right, but everything is oddly familiar. Saunders subtly undermines and transfigures

the way we see ourselves, America, history, the world. From the opening paragraph of the title story:

We've got a good ninety feet of actual Canal out there and a well-researched dioramic of a Coolie campsite. Were our faces ever red when we found out it was actually the Irish who built the Canal. We've got no budget to correct, so every fifteen minutes or so a device in the bunkhouse gives off the approximate aroma of an Oriental meal.

Saunders gently refreshes our view of reality. Nothing is safe, nothing is sacred, and nothing is solid. He provides an approximation of the known world, one brought to us by manufactured essences, and life-like images. Kurt Vonnegut (a natural precursor) remarked on being called a "science-fiction" writer that he was merely writing about Schenectady and not describing imaginary worlds. Saunders could easily be tagged with the sci-fi label.

"Bounty", the novella concluding this collection, is speculative fiction at its best; a look into a possible future in which the population of a ravaged USA is separated into Normals and Flaws (a flaw being any physical divergence from the norm – such as having no teeth), the narrative is replete with echoes of Auschwitz, the slave trade, and owes a passing nod, in subject matter and style, to the work of Mark Leyner.

Both Leyner and Saunders view the world comically. Leyner's comedy is relenting and his prose experimental. Saunders's style owes more to the pared-down short stories of Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolfe (who Saunders studied under). The story "Isabelle" is closer to Carver's "Popular mechanics" in its poignancy, compassion, and composition than it is to anything by Vonnegut, Pynchon, and Heller. This is not to say that Saunders isn't a superb satirist. The title story is a hilarious take on amusement parks – think Max Appel's *The propheteers* crossed with the medieval theme park in *The cable guy*. The park is a take on America's history and America's present – almost bankrupt, traumatised by teen gangs, employing misfit and incompetent workers, and protected by a Vietnam war criminal. Saunders's comedy lulls the reader into a false sense of innocence. His language – he uses words like "flaky" and "floozy" – leads us through the narrative in wonder until he plunges us into the history of violence and the violence of history, into America's legacy of hate and mistrust, and he does so without using the visceral prose of James Ellroy or Elmore Leonard. Saunders writes with humour and with enviable (even more so than Elmore Leonard) economy.

Saunders's America, peopled by post-modern carnies, celebrity Jell-O wrestlers, alcoholic babysitters, child killers, and 400-pound CEOs, mirrors and simulates the media's obsession with outsiders – the woman swamped by her own skin, the man with the 200 lb tumour, etc. While Saunders's corporations are absurd – CivilWarLand, the

Center for Wayward Nuns, Humane Raccoon Alternatives – are they any more absurd than Enron or McDonald’s? His world of gentle paranoia is reminiscent of Philip K Dick, but the Dick of *Confessions of a crap artist* and *In Milton Lumky territory* rather than that of *A scanner darkly* and *The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*; although the Iliana Evermore Fairy Castle in the short story “Downtrodden Mary’s failed campaign of terror” has its precursor in Dick’s Perky Pat. If Saunders is the lighter side of Dick, he is the darker side of Tim Robbins of whom the story “The wavemaker falters” is reminiscent.

At noon the next day a musclemans shows up with four beehives on a dolly. This is Leon’s stroke of genius for the Kiper wedding. The Kipers are the natural type. They don’t want to eat anything that ever lived or buy any product that even vaguely supports notorious third-world regimes. They asked that we run a check on the ultimate source of the tomatoes in our ketchup and the union status of the group that makes our floaties. They’ve opted to recite their vows in the Waterfall Grove.

They’ve hired a blind trumpeter to canoe by and a couple of illegal aliens to retrieve the rice so no birds will choke.

A slight shift in emphasis occurs from “Bounty”, the last story in *CivilWarLand in bad decline*, to the title story of *Pastoralia*, Saunders’s second collection. This time, the theme/amusement park is caveman-based, disgruntled employees scabbling and scratching for food and meaning. The paranoia here is gentle, the comedy an admixture of Freud and Benny Hill.

This morning is the morning I empty our Human Refuse bags and the trash bags from the bottom of the sleek metal hole where Janet puts her used feminine items. For this I get an extra sixty a month. Plus it’s always nice to get out of the cave. I knock on the door of her Separate Area.

Saunders’s language is more controlled, the hysteria hypodermic rather than armorial, the dialogue sparkingly crystallised. The characters in *Pastoralia*, constantly assessed, reviewed, and monitored, are docile subjects inhabiting sentences and paragraphs that move from truth to emotion via humour and humility. We’re all sitting on our log waiting for the goat to be dropped in the Big Slot. Saunders’s characters are ordinary. Very ordinary. Their dialogue is human. Very human.

Martin Amis has written about the history of literature and how literature’s earliest texts were about gods, then about kings and other royalty, then courtiers, and then landowners, and then the middle class, and then tradesmen, and then the working class, and then the underclass – thieves and murderers.

Saunders writes about the losers, the lost, and the lonely. If Martin Amis has his Keiths and Johns, Saunders has his Lens and Phils – the dispossessed, the not-ever-possessed, possessed with making their lives better, fuller, more meaningful. Language and character strive to be different but are fundamentally simple.

Saunders has written:

Certain kinds of language walk hand-in-hand with falseness: vague language, humourless language, sloppy language, language that strings together code words, language that eliminates the doer and the done to, that shuns people and things in favour of the abstract.

“The doer and the done to” are Saunders’ characters. “That shuns people.” Saunders never shuns people. He writes about the disabled, the abled, the unable. He writes about people who spend the best years of their lives swearing at photocopiers. In “Winky” convention-eers, labelled with their own shortcomings, reify being and identity with the (small) world. Saunders reifies our hopes, our disasters, our dreams.

He writes with humour about subjects that other writers would treat with pathos.

Min and Jade put down the babies and light cigarettes and pace the room while studying aloud for their GEDs. It doesn’t look good. Jade says “regicide” is a virus. Min locates Biafra one planet from Saturn. I offer to help and they start yelling at me for condescending.

He even makes bad jokes. Auntie Bernie has returned from the grave and is rotting away in the parlour:

“What a nice day we’ve had,” Aunt Bernie says once we’ve got the babies in bed. “Man, what an optometrist,” says Jade.

He is also sometimes blissfully unaware of his humour. This is from “The barber’s unhappiness” and the barber is attempting to achieve and sustain an erection.

It wouldn’t be easy. It would take hard work. He knew a little about hard work, having made a barbershop out of a former pet store. Tearing out a counter he’d found a dead mouse. From a sump pump he’d pulled three hardened snakes.

Empathy and sympathy. Emancipation and seduction. Eros and sloth. Entertainment and seriousness. Saunders’s characters are fully dimensional and are so within the space (fourteen pages) and time (immemorial) of the story.

Observe the indecisive decisiveness of Morse and Cummings in “The falls”, a masterful short story, similar to T.C. Boyle’s “Heart of a champion”. Saunders makes the Happy Man feel uncomfortable and the Uncomfortable Man feel happy.

Although marketed as a children’s book, *The very persistent Gappers of Frip* is an extraordinary prose work, documenting prejudice, outbreaks of NIMBYism, snobbishness, falsity, and hypocrisy in a political fable in the mode of Swift, Rabelais, and Pynchon. *The very persistent Gappers of Frip* shows Saunders at his most playful and compassionate. Here’s Capable – the heroine of the story.

And she soon found that it was not all that much fun being the sort of person who eats a big dinner in a warm house while others shiver on their roofs in the dark.

And here the Gappers are deciding what next to love:

So the gappers took a vote. And though they were not in perfect agreement – one believed they should begin loving wadded-up pieces of paper, another believed they should begin loving turtles, particularly turtles who were dying, particularly dying turtles who nevertheless kept a positive attitude – the gappers still very much admired and trusted that less-stupid gapper, and voted to begin madly loving fences.

If Gappers is a moral fable aimed at children, then *The brief and frightening reign of Phil* is a political allegory for our century. Set in the lands of Inner Horner, Outer Horner, and Greater Keller, *Phil* satirises democracy, war, and the media, drawing from Saunders's previous themes of longing and loss. The prose is hard, clear, and proximal – by which I mean that it creates within its 130 pages a world as approximate to ours as is possible – the same but other. Is Phil (later Phil Monster) George Bush? This is Phil after his brain has fallen out.

Actually, Phil felt, he wasn't feeling all that well. He was feeling totally devanced in terms of how good he could think. Where was that stupid brain? Where did he left it? That thing had been offen a long time. No wonder no salvation thoughts were come winging out of him. He wanted to communerate tothese idiotic circle-walking invaders they couldn't know how it was like, forced to lived close to a national of unhuman puny coveting your wide open, claiming to be just as human, giving those hostility look just because you lived in a spacious total bounty of righteous plenty. Only suddenly he couldn't seem to speak so super.

Is the mirror-faced advisor Donald Rumsfeld or 'Phil's Special Friends' Tony Blair and Gordon Brown? This is satire at its most incisive, cutting, and unlike some satire *Phil* is very funny. Here are a few headlines from Outer Horner's media:

AIR CONTINUES TO FLOAT AROUND, BEING BREATHED BY MANY!
 SKY REMAINS DARK AS NIGHT PROCEEDS!
 DOG PEES ON SHRUB, LOOKS ASKANCE AT OWN REAR!
 NEIGHBOR LADY DRAWS BLINDS WITH CRABBY LOOK ON FACE!

In an interview with Ben Marcus in *The believer book of writers talking to writers*, Saunders says, "But one could argue that America has ghettoized itself by insisting on a self-reifying view (humanist/materialist) ..." Ben Marcus teases out other Saunders' sound bites – "realism is nonsense when you think about it." If *Finnegans wake* is the most realistic book ever written and therefore unreadable because it would mirror our realism and create a double world in the reader's mind, then Saunders uses naturalism tinged with the fantastic – like his natural precursors Donald Barthelme and Richard Brautigan – to shadow that world, to create a mirrored ethics, and so "all good fiction is moral" and "nothing is true and everything is true."