



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Lincoln in the Bardo

“The novel beats with a present-day urgency—a nation at war with itself, the unbearable grief of a father who has lost a child, and a howling congregation of ghosts, as divided in death as in life, unwilling to move on.” ~*Vanity Fair*

Summary

February 1862. The Civil War is less than one year old. The fighting has begun in earnest, and the nation has begun to realize it is in for a long, bloody struggle.

Meanwhile, President Lincoln’s beloved eleven-year-old son, Willie, lies upstairs in the White House, gravely ill. In a matter of days, despite predictions of a recovery, Willie dies and is laid to rest in a Georgetown cemetery.

“My poor boy, he was too good for this earth,” the president says at the time. “God has called him home.” Newspapers report that a grief-stricken Lincoln returns, alone, to the crypt several times to hold his boy’s body.

From that seed of historical truth, George Saunders spins an unforgettable story of familial love and loss that breaks free of its realistic, historical framework into a supernatural realm both hilarious and terrifying. Willie Lincoln finds himself in a strange purgatory where ghosts mingle, gripe, commiserate, quarrel, and enact bizarre acts of penance. Within this transitional state—called, in the Tibetan tradition, the bardo—a monumental struggle erupts over young Willie’s soul.

Lincoln in the Bardo is an astonishing feat of imagination and a bold step forward from one of the most important and influential writers of his generation. Formally daring, generous in spirit, deeply concerned with matters of the heart, it is a testament to fiction’s ability to speak honestly and powerfully to the things that really matter to us.

Saunders has invented a thrilling new form that deploys a kaleidoscopic, theatrical panorama of voices to ask a timeless, profound question: How do we live and love when we know that everything we love must end? (*From the publisher.*)

George Saunders

- Birth—December 2, 1958
- Where—Amarillo, Texas, USA
- Education—B.S., Colorado School of Mines; M.F.A., Syracuse University

- Awards—PEN/Malamud Award (more below)
- Currently—lives in Syracuse, New York

George Saunders is an American writer of short stories, essays, novellas and children's books. His writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *McSweeney's* and *GQ*. He also contributed a weekly column, "American Psyche," to the weekend magazine of *The Guardian* (UK) until October 2008. In 2017, he achieved wide acclaim for his first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

Early life and education

Saunders was born in Amarillo, Texas. He grew up in the south suburbs of Chicago, graduating from Oak Forest High School in Oak Forest, Illinois. In 1981 he received a B.S. in geophysical engineering from Colorado School of Mines in Golden, Colorado.

In 1988, Saunders was awarded an M.A. in creative writing from Syracuse University. While at Syracuse he met fellow writer and future wife Paula Redick: "we [got] engaged in three weeks, a Syracuse Creative Writing Program record that, I believe, still stands," he wrote.

Early career

From 1989 to 1996, Saunders worked as a technical writer and geophysical engineer for Radian International, an environmental engineering firm in Rochester, New York. He also worked for a time with an oil exploration crew in Sumatra.

Of his scientific background, Saunders has said: "...any claim I might make to originality in my fiction is really just the result of this odd background: basically, just me working inefficiently, with flawed tools, in a mode I don't have sufficient background to really understand. Like if you put a welder to designing dresses."

Welders and dresses aside, those years also proved highly productive for Saunders in terms of fiction writing. In 1994 and 1996, he won the National Magazine Award for his short stories, "The 400-Pound CEO" and "Bounty," respectively. Both were published in *Harper's*. In 1996 he published his first short-story collection, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, which became a finalist for the 1996 PEN/Hemingway Award. That same year, another story, "The Falls," appeared in *The New Yorker*, and a year later won second prize in the 1997 O. Henry Awards.

It was in 1997 that Saunders joined the faculty of Syracuse University where he still teaches creative writing in the school's MFA program. He has continued to publish fiction and nonfiction.

From 2000 on

Saunders won his third National Magazine Award in 2000 for his short story, "The Barber's Unhappiness," published in *The New Yorker*. His fourth NMA came in 2004 for "The Red Bow," published in *Esquire*.

In 2006, he was awarded two highly regarded fellowships: a MacArthur Fellowship (with its prize of \$500,000) and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His first nonfiction collection, *The Braindead Megaphone* came out in 2007. In 2009, Saunders received an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In 2013, Saunders won the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, and in 2014, he was elected to the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Saunders gained national attention with his 2013 publication of *Tenth of December*, a collection of short stories. The book won the 2013 Story Prize for short-story collections and was a finalist for the National Book Award. Editors of the *New York Times* named it one of the "10 Best Books of 2013," and the headline for a cover story in the paper's *Magazine*, called it "the best book you'll read this year."

Lincoln in the Bardo, Saunders' long awaited first novel, came out in 2017 to wide acclaim.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the bardo, and how does it function in George Saunder's book? In what way does the bardo apply to those who are living as well as the dead?
2. Talk about the various denizens of the cemetery, the ghosts who narrate and chatter among themselves. Which ghost stories did you find particularly engaging ...funny ...moving ...sad ...even irritable? Were you disoriented, even put off, by the multiplicity of voices, or were you able to maintain your footing? Was there a point at which the ghosts took on a "life" of their own ... when their actions developed into a cohesive plot?
3. Follow-up to Question 2: How do the ghosts' feelings — their anger, resentments, and desires — reflect the events of their previous lives?
4. Talk about the ghosts' reactions to Lincoln's loving attention to his son. Why were they surprised by the fact that he cradled Will in his arms?
5. What does Lincoln come to understand, through his own personal loss, about the carnage of the war and the cost in lives and misery for an entire nation?
6. Talk about the two old codgers, Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III. Would you consider them the "heroes" of the novel? Why are they so eager to have Will leave the cemetery. Where do they want him to go? What will happen should he "tarry"?
7. Why is the Reverend, unlike all the other spirits, willing to admit he is dead? And why is he convinced he will be excluded from heaven?
8. In what way does the cemetery reflect the class structure of the 19th Century? What do you make of the Rev. Thomas's explanation: "It is not about wealth. It is about comportment. It is about, let us say, being 'wealthy in spirit.'" Who among the spirits, if any of them, are "wealthy in spirit"?
9. Although the preponderant mood of the novel is dark, there is also a fair amount of hilarity. Can you point to some passages/episodes that you found particularly funny? The bachelor ghosts, for instance?

Source: LitLovers.com