

**His Weak, His Dumb, His Fat, His Lazy:  
An Introduction to George Saunders**

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George Saunders is a new author who has garnered praise from such literary luminaries as Tobias Wolf and Thomas Pynchon. Both *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine* have named him one of the most important new writers of our time because of his witty and thought-provoking fiction. His only book, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline: Stories and a Novella*, is plastered with kind blurbs on front and back. *Publisher's Weekly* notes his "feverish imagination" and "heart-melting prose" (46). Joanne Wilkinson, a reviewer for *Booklist* writes, "These stories are inventive, hilarious, and terrifying" (792). Indeed, Saunders' work is at once incredibly funny and morbidly dour. Reviewers have noted time and time again that the *CivilWarLand* collection is a strange juxtaposition of feelings – happy and sad – that captures readers. It is impossible to read his stories without finding yourself feeling deep sympathy and compassion for otherwise repellent characters. While Saunders is a master of absurdity, irony, and satire, his real talent is showing us that these elements can work together to create emotionally charged pieces that hit deeper than the old funny bone.

Saunders was born in 1965. He grew up in Chicago, and has had a typically atypical writer's life. He got his undergraduate degree in Geophysical Engineering from the Colorado School of Mines. Afterward, he spent two years in the Sumatran jungle exploring for oil. Upon returning to the states, he worked various odd jobs, such as doorman, convenience store clerk, guitarist in a bar band, knuckle-puller in a slaughter house, and technical editor at an engineering firm. During this period, he returned to

school at Syracuse University, where he received a graduate degree in writing. He has a wife and two daughters, and now teaches writing at Syracuse University. Aside from being picked by *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine* in 1999 as one of the most important up-and-comers in contemporary fiction, he has published several stories in notable periodicals. In 1994 he won the National Magazine Award for "The 400-pound CEO," and in 1996, the year *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* was published, he won the same award for his novella, "Bounty." Even after three years without a follow-up to *CivilWarLand*, Saunders is still a hot commodity. He is remains quite talked about, and his more recent stories are up for awards.

Still, Saunders has an awareness of his place in literary history. He draws from other writers, while innovating and creating fiction that feels very modern. Judith Wynn, in her piece for the Boston Phoenix, notes that Saunders had plenty of time to read and write during his stay in Sumatra. He said, "At first I'd imitate Conrad and Somerset Maugham because I was in Asia" (Wynn). That imitation soon gave way to original fiction, influenced by Saunders' favorites, Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison. In addition to his confessed influences, Saunders is often compared to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. The comparison is apt, and a reader is hard-pressed not to think of Vonnegut classics like *Slaughterhouse Five* when reading Saunders' work.

Saunders says that he likes the way Pynchon warps reality, "you can't read it as realism or as pure fantasy" (Wynn). Saunders, too, is interested in blurring those lines. Like Pynchon, he works with popular culture and brings in elements from the scientific world. In "Bounty," the McDonald's restaurants have been commandeered by a group of religious fanatics called The Guilters. Saunders writes, "In Guilter epistemology the

arches represent the twin human frailties of arrogance and mediocrity" (123). "The Wavemaker Falters" begins with a scene full of pseudo-scientific lingo to describe the, presumably, technically complicated simulated Spanish trout stream. The stream is located in a theme park that, through the wonders of modern technology, reproduces the Basque countryside. Also, both writers have an affinity for setting up conspiracies and secrets in their stories. In "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," the nameless narrator is caught in a cover-up involving a deranged security guard, the theme park owner, and multiple murders. Saunders' protagonists each try to keep something hidden from others, be it immoral, embarrassing, or just insane, and succeed to varying degrees. Pynchon is suitably impressed with Saunders' efforts, writing that Saunders is "telling just the kind of stories we need to get us through these times" (*CWL*).

The Toni Morrison influence manifests itself a little more rarely than Pynchon's influence, but she is nevertheless a powerful presence in the book. Saunders takes her ghosts and incorporates them into his stories. That is not to say that you will find *Beloved* roaming around in *CivilWarLand*, but the way that Saunders portrays and uses ghosts in his stories is very identifiably in the vein of Morrison. Ghosts appear in "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" and again in "The Wavemaker Falters." In "CivilWarLand" the narrator is the only person who can see the Civil War era family who walk the grounds. Later in the story, Samuel, the deranged security guard, shoots a teenager, who immediately becomes a ghost, visible only to the narrator. In "The Wavemaker Falters" the narrator, Mr. Guilt, is visited several times by the ghost of Clive, a boy he accidentally crushed to death in the pool's wavemaker unit. Like Morrison, Saunders is concerned with presenting the ghosts as though they could be real:

Even though he's dead, he's still basically a kid. When he tries to be scary he gets it all wrong. He can't moan for beans. He's scariest when he does real kid things, like picking his nose and wiping it on the side of his sneaker. (39)

This strategy of characterization is, in part, what makes *Beloved* such a memorable character, and Saunders uses it effectively. The result is an emotion in Saunders' work that is similar to Morrison's, and a further skewing of the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Add to the ability to represent the paranormal Saunders' concern for downtrodden protagonists, and we can see another connection to Morrison's writing. "Bounty" contains a full-blown slave narrative, and "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror" is a nearly absurd story of a woman who has fought her whole life for survival. What keeps it from being just another funny story is the deep sympathy Saunders elicits for Mary, in a way that is reminiscent of Morrison's effect, if not her exact techniques.

While Morrison and Pynchon top Saunders' list of major influences, it is undeniable that his stories seem to draw from Vonnegut. They share a similar clean prose style. Saunders has said, "I have this anal thing about sentences" (Wynn). In addition, both of them use their clean styles to create zingers and one-liners that are absolutely hilarious. A good example of the way Saunders' prose affects the humor in his stories is in the opening of "The Wavemaker Falter." Mr. Guilt is monitoring the trout stream when a young nun dives in to commit suicide. Guilt jumps in after her, and pulls her out of the water:

Finally I get her out on the pine needles and she comes to and spits in my face and says I couldn't possibly know the darkness of her heart. Try me, I say. She crawls

away and starts bashing her skull against a tree trunk. The trees are synthetic too.

But still. (35)

While the passage is full of irony, and not a hint of melodrama or sarcasm, it is the capping, "But still," that serves as the punchline. The humor is conscious, and while we can occasionally see both Saunders and Vonnegut working for a laugh, for the most part the humor is entirely enjoyable. Another point where Vonnegut and Saunders intersect is in their affinity for stories with a moral/ethical message. Vonnegut's alternative title to *Slaughterhouse Five* is *The Children's Crusade*, a cutting commentary on World War II and a lucid illustration of Vonnegut's anti-war views. Similarly, Saunders creates stories that rail, at least thematically, against discrimination, slavery (both physical bondage and governmental/corporate domination), and more general human tendencies toward cruelty. It is difficult to read a story by either author without feeling that you have been slipped a mickey of social instruction while you weren't looking. They both conflate typical realist or naturalist stories with elements of absurdity and science fiction in a way that makes many readers react to the work as if it were straight science fiction. But neither Vonnegut nor Saunders are just science fiction. In brief, concise pieces, the two authors venture into territories that are supposed to remain separate. Saunders has been concerned by his inability to write a novel, and laments his lot as a "literary pamphletist" (PORT). Both writers also have similar ideosyncratic relationships with popular culture. For Vonnegut, the world is a Howard Johnson's. For Saunders, it is a theme park.

And the theme park is not a bad metaphor for Saunders' collection. Each of the stories, six in all, and the novella, "Bounty," present another facet of Saunders' world. The book is a freak show of the guilty, the downtrodden, the revolting, and the

heartwrenching. As a spectator it is difficult to not turn away in sadness because Saunders deftly elicits a real sympathy for his characters. Sure, they might be unduly guilt-ridden, they might have claws for feet, they might not be well-educated or pretty, and they might be incredibly overblown, but they still manage to possess a certain human dignity and convey the weight of their stories onto the reader's shoulders. While Saunders exhibits plenty of correlations to more established authors that give his fiction a certain clout in the literary world, his use of different techniques and motifs makes his writing incredibly unique. The stories in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* are cut from the same mold. They echo each other throughout the book, giving way to an overall view of humanity that is at the same time bleak and positive.

There are some similarities that are very evident in all of the *CivilWarLand* stories. Each is narrated in the first person point of view, and all of these narrators, save one, are pitiful men. From Jeffrey, the 400-pound CEO, to Cole, the claw-footed protagonist of "Bounty," Saunders' primary male characters are always plagued by financial, personal, or emotional problems. Mr. Guilt, in "The Wavemaker Falters," is a prime example. He is riddled with guilt over the accidental death of a teenage boy, Clive. Clive was crushed in the pool's wavemaker unit, and has, literally, haunted Guilt ever since. Guilt has lost his sexual desire, a metaphor for his lust for life, because of the incident, and as a result his wife has embarked on a sultry affair with Guilt's arch-nemesis, Leon. The one story that doesn't center around a sad man is "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror." Mary narrates the story, which revolves around her being discovered as the saboteur of the see through cows in the "Our Nation's Bounty" exhibit. She, too, has had an incredibly difficult life. In her nineties when she's narrating

the story, Mary recounts her abusive, physically and mentally, relationship with her husband, and the cruelty of her superiors. In the end, she is denied even the release of suicide.

While Saunders' stories are invariably sad, they often contain a quick reversal of fortune at the end. In "Isabelle," a story about a young man who deals with the guilt of witnessing a brutal murder by taking on the care of the murderer's invalid daughter, the reader doesn't learn the handicapped girl's name until the last two lines. She is called Boneless throughout the story, but at the end the narrator tells us, "Her name is Isabelle. A pretty, pretty name" (33). Not only do we find out Isabelle's name, but we know that she is now living with the narrator in a relatively happy situation. After the trauma of the story, it is an unexpected ending. In "The Wavemaker Falters" Mr. Guilt eventually pulls himself out of his doldrums. He ends the story with a commitment to change: "enough already, enough, this is as low as I go" (44). After ten pages of self-effacing behavior, Guilt finally finds the strength to make a change.

"The 400-pound CEO" revolves around Jeffrey, the narrator, and an obese cubicle monkey pushing paper for a raccoon disposal company. Jeffrey is less degrading toward himself than the others only because throughout the story he keeps the possibility of change open. Even so, he is still very critical of his size and appearance. After continually trying to do the right thing, he ends up incarcerated for killing his truly evil boss. From prison he reflects on his life, and the story ends with this vision:

And I will emerge again from between the legs of my mother, a slighter and more beautiful baby, destined for a different life, in which I am masterful, sleek as a deer, a winner. (64)



Unfortunately, there seems to be no room for winners in Saunders' work, and, indeed, these are the last lines of the story. In "Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz," which revolves around a man who runs a virtual reality shop, the narrator resorts to extreme measures to alleviate his guilt. Although he is a truly kind man, giving free virtual reality experiences to people in true need of escape, such as the armless, legless man who enjoys reliving a limbed existence, he is racked with the guilt of his wife's death. After a fight that he started she was run down by a car while walking down the sidewalk. He eventually resorts to erasing his memories up to the present of the story, and leaves himself a note that says:

Find someone to love. Your heart has never been broken. You've never done anything unforgivable or hurt anyone beyond reparation. Everyone you've ever loved you've treated like gold. (77)

The note does not lie to him. In fact, he has done nothing wrong in the story.

The final example of Saunders' fondness for the last-minute hopeful turn around is in "Bounty," the story of a deformed young man, Cole, who is enslaved at a medieval theme park called Bountyland. Bountyland harkens back to the golden age of humanity (get it, the dark ages?) in a world that has been poisoned through and through. The massive contamination of the environment by man-made chemicals and waste has caused some of the population to spontaneously mutate. Individuals with mutations are called Flaweds, and subject to slavery because of an edict issued by the government. Cole has claws on his feet, like a bird's, but is lucky enough to work at Bountyland with his sister, Connie. Connie is bought out of Bountyland by a rich Normal who wants to marry her, and then Cole hears that her future husband is notorious for selling his wives into slavery

when he tires of them. Cole sets out across the country to track down Connie and prevent her sale. Along the way he runs into a myriad of tribulations. He is bought and sold a few times, forced into work and prostitution, beaten, and eventually finds his sister. In fact, the man she married has been very nice to her, and allows Cole to work on his ranch. After a short time things are well, but nothing has really changed in the country. Eventually, Cole decides to make a difference, and the story ends with him entering the hideout of a Flawed resistance organization, telling them he is there to help. At that point, things look a little brighter for the rest of the enslaved masses.

These little reversals are essential to the success of Saunders' stories. Without them, the collection would be one harsh blow after another. But because of them, the reader can see that change is possible. Things can get better. Saunders has said that he hoped to avoid any real political criticism, but it is obvious that the strong moral messages in his stories come from somewhere. Saunders says that in *CivilWarLand* he wanted to mask any distinct political position:

I worked with this idea of how people are always being broadly classified as okay or not-okay. That's always being done, whether it's racial, gender, national, or whatever. If you get four people together, two of them are looking down on the other two. (Wynn)

The idea is most obvious in the slave-narrative of "Bounty," but permeates Saunders' other stories as well. Jeffrey is judged by his peers because of his weight. He is ridiculed and hurt by his co-workers and boss because of that, and in spite of the fact that he's a competent worker with a good heart. Mary is a similar example. Because of her age, she is discriminated against. She comments that, "At ninety-two years old people assume

you're dense. They assume you don't remember being young and have corny moral values and can't hear well" (81). But Mary is quite the contrary. Despite her rocky past, she recounts certain events happily, is still quite aware of interpersonal politics, and forwards her plan to get her boss fired. She is anything but passive or useless.

Saunders has also commented that, "Ideas cause Problems. . . . I mean dogmatic Ideas, Ideas which purport to be final" (PORT). The rejection of organized politics and dogmatic ideas can also be seen in his stories. In "Bounty" the nation is in such a mess largely due to the federal government. He lampoons religion through characters such as The Guilters and products like the Jesus and Buddha camp coolers Jeffrey buys to keep raccoon carcasses in. The dogmatic American pursuit of financial superiority is satirized as well. Those who have succeeded at becoming fiscally robust are evil, cruel characters. The nice guys are the average Joes schlumping along just above the red line. In Saunders' stories, money allows you to forget about the mean things you've done, while poverty makes you painfully aware of each emotional papercut you may have inflicted.

Along with degrading the American financial ideal, Saunders satirizes contemporary consumer culture. He is aware that we build our identities in large part by brands and objects. It is interesting to note that none of Saunders' protagonists fall prey to the worship of commercial items, but they exist in a landscape composed of them. Sometimes Saunders uses real brands and items to get his point across, as with The Guilters taking refuge in abandoned McDonald's restaurants. As Cole travels across the wasteland of the United States in "Bounty," he passes burned-out Wal Marts and a firebombed Wendy's. These stark images show the impermanence of the quick fix. Fast food and convenient, all-in-one shopping don't last. In addition to using real businesses

and products, Saunders portrays other items in ways we aren't used to thinking about them.

In "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror," Mary must clean the pickled babies and visible cows. We are used to seeing pickled fetuses in the sideshow world, where they are called pickled punks. Saunders, however, puts them into the ultimate museum of science and industry, giving the place an ambiance of doom and bad taste. Pickled punks were outlawed decades ago, and many people alive today have never seen one. Likewise, many reviewers and readers have taken the visible cows to be a creation of Saunders' imagination, but they aren't. I have only to walk a couple of blocks from my office in Moscow, Idaho to see uncomfortable-looking heifers with little portals in their sides, oozing pus and goo. As an agriculture experiment in the field, one can understand the motives and educational benefits behind the procedure. But the see-through cow seems like a bad idea for a museum. The smell alone would be overpowering, and, as Saunders points out, bovine hygiene becomes an issue. The inclusion of these real items creates a touchstone that lets us know we are not entirely divorced from our reality. Instead, we inhabit a skewed reality in Saunders' fiction, one that is not entirely pleasant.

More often, Saunders likes to play with imaginary corporations and products to make his point. He creates parodies of products that parody those of our real lives. For example, in "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," the narrator tells us about Mr. Haberstrom, who is the founder of "Burn 'n' Learn." Saunders writes, "Their gimmick is a fully stocked library on the premises and as you tan you call out the name of any book you want to these high-school girls on roller skates" (3). In "The 400-pound CEO" Jeffrey

ends up buying the "Chill 'n' Pray, an overpriced cooler with a holographic image of a famous religious personality on the lid" (56). These two examples are fairly typical of Saunders' use of satiric and parodic fictional products. He uses them in much the same way as he uses real world objects in his pieces, but their absurdity lends a cutting humor to them. Surely we have no need of religious icons on our picnic cooler. But although the catchy name and silly descriptions sound completely unrealistic, it wouldn't be so bad to have a tanning parlor cum library. Or an iconic cooler, for that matter. Ultimately, the products that Saunders creates to call attention to the absurdity of our consumer culture are only slightly more absurd than what we actually experience in the real world, again lending to the blur between reality and fiction.

Another element of Saunders' writing that is connected to his continual battering of consumer culture are theme parks. He and his sister built a scale model of an amusement park when they were young. Saunders said, "Even at 10 I was fascinated with the idea of an artificial environment" (Wynn). The theme park allows for a few different things in his work. It is possible to make a broad statement about culture with a cleverly named theme park. CivilWarLand is an example of how we commodify history, and a constant reminder of just how little we know about our own past. The Basque theme park is a reconstruction of something that exists completely naturally. Furthermore, it's not like Disneyland's reconstruction of famous places, rather it is an imitation of some nameless section of countryside, devoid of monuments or landmarks. Bountyland may be the most disturbing theme park. Amidst the decay of pseudo-post-apocalyptic America, Bountyland shows how plentiful our nation once was. It does that by recreating the Dark Ages, providing prostitutes, "safe orgies," and any other distraction desired by their

clientele. Of course, all of the service is provided by enslaved Flaweds. These environments allow Saunders to create worlds that are not restricted to reality, wherein he can place any manner of bizarre incidents or characters. As a reader, we cannot argue with what he does in his theme parks. Again, if Disney can recreate Africa in Florida, then just about anything is possible in amusement parks. They are, by definition, a place where we go to depart from reality and indulge in a fantasy.

Saunders uses other types of attractions for much the same purposes. The museum in "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror" and the virtual reality arcade in "Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz" work very similarly to the theme parks. The museum is full of exhibits that teach you about science and nature, but it is filled with bizarre displays like the "Pickled Babies" and the visible cows. The arcade is also warped. Saunders doesn't try to make fun of contemporary video games as much as he points out the truly bizarre desires that we could fulfill via virtual reality. Examples of the module titles include, "Bowling with the Pros," "Legendary American Killers Stalk You," "Violated Prom Queen," "Sexy Nurses Scrub You Down," "Viennese Waltz," and more. Through the use of theme parks, the museum, and the arcade, Saunders also shows how seemingly perfect environments are never so. Even in the virtual world, where everything can be controlled by a human being and no physics or weather are going to affect performance, things are not alright. Saunders shows us not that we want our fantasies to be warped in some way, but that we are sold distractions that may not be the most ethically sound.

Of course, much of what makes Saunders' writing so interesting is the ways in which he revels in the bizarre and disturbing. The grotesque runs through Saunders'

stories to further shock us into his world. By including imagery of legless mules, deformed characters, indefensible corporate practices, and a fair smattering of gore and violence, Saunders creates a world full of the undesirable detritus of our reality. Reviewers have picked up on the grotesque content of the stories, and it has become a hallmark of any discussion of Saunders. It amplifies the pitiful nature of his protagonists. They are caught in a world without beauty. Rather, they must deal with the constant ugliness of life, and we can sympathize with them for having a difficult time.

The inclusion of the grotesque with such gusto further blurs the lines between the real and the unreal in Saunders' stories. Because his world is such a mixture of actuality and fantasy, most reviewers have labeled him a science fiction writer. David Gates, writing for *Newsweek*, calls his settings "a cybernetic, post-apocalyptic dystopia" (62). While stories like "Bounty" and "Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz" take place in a future incarnation of our world, the rest inhabit a space that is less obviously science fiction. In this respect, the comparison to Vonnegut is especially useful. Like Vonnegut, Saunders blurs the lines between reality and fantasy through the use of satire, absurdity, and the grotesque. The result is a universe that is at once recognizable and completely foreign.

Saunders describes this situation by noting that "what IS is, at least for me, indiscernable, transient, etc." He says that he creates his stories by selecting things from the real world, "intuitively" (PORT). He has been influenced by our media, and the recent boon in reality-based sensationalism. Saunders says, "We have lost the ability to simply not go places. To say: Why in the world do I want to broadcast that?" (PORT). That statement makes it difficult to reconcile Saunders' own use of the bizarre, sensational, and grotesque. But in another statement he describes the concept of *poshlust*:

Nabokov describes it this way: Once there was a young prince who fell madly in love with a princess. Everyday he could be seen swimming in her moat, tenderly caressing a swan, to convince her of his goodness. Poshlust is this: The swan was fake, put in the moat by the prince. (PORT)

Poshlust is Saunders giving us visions too terrible to actually exist so that we will realize what kind of world we live in. He displays his fake swans, in the form of deformed characters, horrid business practices, and rampant commercialism, so we will see and hear his call for change. Because of poshlust we can understand that in a room with four people, two will be looking down on the others.

You are right to think that if Saunders' work doesn't make you feel incredibly sad, then you don't get it. His sorry, sorry characters are incredibly loveable, and he almost makes you believe that your love, as a reader, will help them get along. His stories resound with a heartfelt emotion that is only enhanced by the bizarre, grotesque, genre-bending, and absolutely hilarious elements. Indeed, Saunders is writing stories to get us through these times. He writes checklists that we can review to make sure we are still on track for being a good person. He warns us of impending troubles, and reminds us that the worries of the past are not behind us.



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