

## Author Spotlight

# GEORGE SAUNDERS



George Saunders was born in Texas in 1958, grew up in Chicago, and trained as an exploration geophysicist. After a stint in the oil industry in Indonesia, a quarter-life crisis sent him on a Kerouacian voyage home. He worked as a doorman, roofer, convenience store clerk, and a slaughterhouse hand before entering the MFA writing program at Syracuse University in 1988, where he now teaches. He has published four short story collections, including the Folio Prize-winning *Tenth of December* (2013). His first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*—a quasi-historical novel with profound supernatural elements—won the 2017 Man Booker Prize.

February 1862: As the U.S. Civil War rages on, President Abraham Lincoln's 11-year-old son, Willie, dies of fever after a brief illness. Mary Todd Lincoln, whose fragile mental constitution was already fuel for society gossip, takes to her bed for weeks and requires the constant ministrations of a nurse. For once, the stoic President Lincoln is as inconsolable as his wife, as Mrs. Lincoln's dressmaker and personal confidant, Elizabeth Keckley, later recalled in her 1868 memoir:

*I never saw a man so bowed down with grief. He came to the bed, lifted the cover from the face of his child, gazed at it long and earnestly, murmuring, 'My poor boy, he was too good for this earth. God has called him home. I know that he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!'*

*Great sobs choked his utterance. He buried his head in his hands, and his tall frame was convulsed with emotion ... His grief unnerved him, and made him a weak, passive child. I did not dream that his rugged nature could be so moved. I shall never forget those solemn moments – genius and greatness weeping over love's idol lost.*

Saunders was first captivated by the story of Willie Lincoln's death when he visited a Georgetown crypt where the boy was laid to rest, and where, he learned, President Lincoln made repeated trips to hold his son's lifeless body. He found the mental image of Lincoln cradling his dead boy a source of tremendous creative inspiration ("a melding of the Lincoln Memorial and the Pietà"). After almost 20 years of contemplating the imaginative prospects of Lincoln's personal tragedy, Saunders set out to fictionalize the president's heartrending grief in a short story that, in due course, became his first novel.

*Lincoln in the Bardo*, a highly experimental work of prose, brings together extensive historical research and Saunders' interest in the Tibetan mystical tradition. The novel situates the deceased Willie Lincoln as an unmoored ghost in the *bardo*—a type of Buddhist purgatory between rebirths. Trapped in this liminal state between life and death, a large cast of ghosts consorts, laments, sympathizes, feuds, and acts out bizarre scenes of penance, as all the while a cosmic struggle is fought over young Willie's soul.

*Lincoln in the Bardo* received near-universal critical acclaim and was named one of the best books of 2017 by the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *NPR*, *USA Today*, and *Time Magazine*.

Prepared by Jody Smith  
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Sources: GeorgeSaundersBooks.com, MrLincolnsWhiteHouse.org, *Chicago Reader*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*



## Discussion Questions for *Lincoln in the Bardo*

1. The presence of a child in the bardo is rare, but what other things about Willie make him different from the other ghosts?
2. Which of the ghosts' stories resonated with you the most?
3. How did the style and form of the book enhance or detract from your experience of the story? What did you think of the author's decision to include snippets of real, historical sources among the fictional narration?
4. In what ways do the social structures of this time period manifest in the bardo? How does Saunders play with and explore historical attitudes towards race and class throughout the novel?
5. In what ways does Saunders challenge and expand the genre of historical fiction? Why do you think Lincoln and his legacy remain such popular subjects in literature today?
6. It is unknown, both to the reader and to the character of the Reverend Everly Thomas, why he is damned, even though he understands that he is dead. What do you think is meant by this omission?
7. On page 87, the Reverend Everly Thomas explains the Barons' existence on either side of the dreaded fence as not about wealth per se, but about being "wealthy in spirit." Discuss what this means, and how it relates to the slaves' ability to be near the fence while the other ghosts remain unable to stand such proximity.
8. Roger Bevins says that "all were in sorrow, or had been, or soon would be." Vollman responds by saying "It was the nature of things" and that we are all "suffering, limited beings." Do you agree?
9. George Saunders has described the question at the core of this book as, "How do we continue to love in a world in which the objects of our love are so conditional?" Did you find this to be true, and do you feel like you came to a deeper understanding of mortality?
10. Towards the end, the ghosts unite in an attempt to "enter" Lincoln's mind and stop him from leaving the graveyard. In doing so, they find themselves transformed from their wretched states, remembering parts of their lives that had been lost to them since entering the bardo. Discuss the significance of this transformation.
11. Discuss the final scene, in which Thomas Havens follows Lincoln out of the graveyard on horseback. What do you think this foreshadows?

Source: [www.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com)

