



[*Lincoln in the Bardo*]

By *George Saunders*

First published in 2017

Genre and Subject

Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865 – Fiction

Grief – Fiction

Biographical fiction

Historical fiction

Synopsis

The extraordinary first novel by the bestselling, Folio Prize-winning, National Book Award-shortlisted George Saunders, about Abraham Lincoln and the death of his eleven year old son, Willie, at the dawn of the Civil War.

The American Civil War rages while President Lincoln's beloved eleven-year-old son lies gravely ill. In a matter of days, Willie dies and is laid to rest in a Georgetown cemetery. Newspapers report that a grief-stricken Lincoln returns to the crypt several times alone to hold his boy's body. From this seed of historical truth, George Saunders spins an unforgettable story of familial love and loss that breaks free of realism, entering a thrilling, supernatural domain both hilarious and terrifying. Willie Lincoln finds himself trapped in a transitional realm - called, in Tibetan tradition, the bardo - and as ghosts mingle, squabble, gripe and commiserate, and stony tendrils creep towards the boy, a monumental struggle erupts over young Willie's soul. Unfolding over a single night, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is written with George Saunders' inimitable humour, pathos and grace. Here he invents an exhilarating new form and is confirmed as one of the most important and influential writers of his generation. Deploying a theatrical, kaleidoscopic panoply of voices - living and dead, historical and fictional - *Lincoln in the Bardo* poses a timeless question: how do we live and love when we know that everything, we hold dear must end?

Author Biography

George Saunders (born December 2, 1958) is an American writer of short stories, essays, novellas, children's books, and novels. 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* between 2006 and 2008.

A professor at Syracuse University, Saunders won the National Magazine Award for fiction in 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2004, and second prize in the O. Henry Awards in 1997. His first story collection, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, was a finalist for the 1996 PEN/Hemingway Award. In 2006 Saunders received a MacArthur Fellowship. In 2006 he won the World Fantasy Award for his short story "CommComm".

His story collection *In Persuasion Nation* was a finalist for the Story Prize in 2007. In 2013, he won the PEN/Malamud Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award. Saunders's *Tenth of December: Stories* won the 2013 Story Prize for short-story collections and the inaugural (2014) Folio Prize. His novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (Bloomsbury Publishing) won the 2017 Man Booker Prize.

Discussion Starters

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?

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- *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell
- *The underground railroad* by Colson Whitehead