

# Amazing Grace



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*PASTORALIA*

George Saunders

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*Pastoralia*, the second collection of stories by George Saunders, happily defies categorization. Saunders is most often described as a wide-brush satirist, here skewering the cult of capitalism, there the oligarchy of the self-help empire. At other times he seems like a fabulist, dressing his characters in impossibly strange settings. In the title story of this collection, for instance, a couple lives as authentic Stone Age cave-dwellers, part of an exhibit in a Disney-gone-very-bad museum/theme park.

Reading “Pastoralia”—a story that appears as a wonderful peculiarity here but would be right at home in Saunders’s first collection, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996)—makes one think that it is the kind of *fin de siècle* story that Kafka might have written if he’d lived in our times and had the humor of Mark Twain. Such juxtaposed associations inevitably come to mind in a story where characters live in a cave eating roasted goat, yet keep contact with the outside world by fax machine.

The central conflict involves the narrator’s difficulty with his work partner Janet, who continually violates the park’s rules of authenticity by speaking English in the cave or doing crossword puzzles: “very verboten.” There is an unmistakable Kafkaesque feel to these proceedings, as the “organization” attempts to wheedle the narrator into blowing the whistle on his partner’s insubordination by way of the ominously-titled Daily Performance Evaluation Forms.

The simple naming of these forms suggests a society that has long accepted a controlling and suspicious bureaucracy, as if the world that Kafka feared has now become a matter of fact.

However, unlike Kafka’s world, we meet the members of this bureaucracy—they have names and faces, and they spout advice heavy on self-helpspeak. The advice often contains uncomfortably enticing truths. In “Winky,” the guru/demagogue Tom Rodgers speaks at his *People of Power* seminar:

Now, if someone came up and crapped in your nice warm oatmeal, what would you say? Would you say: “Wow, super, thanks, please continue crapping in my oatmeal”? Am I being silly? I’m being a little silly. But guess what, in real life people come up and crap in your oatmeal all the time—friends, co-workers, loved ones, even your kids, especially your kids!—and that’s exactly what you do. You say, “Thanks so much!” You say, “Crap away!” You say, and here my metaphor breaks down a bit, “Is there some way I can help you crap in my oatmeal?”

Reading passages like this makes it impossible to hear the words “self-empowerment” or any of the other current pop-psychological catch phrases without a knowing—perhaps even guilty—chuckle of awareness of our own over-therapied world.

Saunders does not limit himself to the easiest targets, either. He battles the forces of political correctness by taking on established behavioral theories such as positive reinforcement in this exchange between father and son:

Daddy’s always wrong,” says the little boy.

He just said I’m always wrong,” the dad says. “Did you hear that? Did you write that down? In the memory book? Talk about assertive! I should be so assertive. Wouldn’t Norm and Larry croak if I was suddenly so

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## *The world that Kafka feared has now become a matter of fact.*

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assertive?”

Well, it couldn't hurt you,” the mom says.

Believe me, I know,” the dad says. “That’s why I said it. I know very well I could afford to be more assertive. I was making a joke. Like an ironic joke at my own expense.”

I want to stab you, Dad,” says the little boy. “With a sharp sword, you’re so dumb.”

Saunders allows us uncensored access to his characters’ speech and thoughts, where the results are often screamingly funny. Sometimes you get the feeling that Saunders-the-author is the victim of an extended adolescence, unable to resist the easy—sometimes even crude—joke. “Sea Oak,” a goofy farce partially set in a male strip club called Joysticks, knowingly crosses the borders of good taste. Its raunchy sexuality is actually tame in comparison to perhaps the foulest and most hilarious resurrection in literature. But while Saunders certainly takes liberties with the humor, he does not make the mistake of offering up the humanity of his characters at the expense of a punchline. At every turn, Saunders allows his core characters to retain their dignity. By letting us in on their weaknesses, their vulnerabilities, we sense the pathos in the humor.

This is perhaps most evident in “The Barber’s Unhappiness,” in which a middle-aged man who still lives with his mother finally finds a woman he thinks could make him happy, but as he is about to meet her for a date he wonders if she is too fat.

Oh my God she was big. She’d dressed all wrong, tight jeans and a tight shirt. As if testing him. Jesus, this was the biggest he’d ever seen her look. What was she doing, testing him by trying to look her worst? Here was an alley, should he swerve into the alley and call her later? Or not? Not call her later? Forget the whole thing?

In the full context of the story, we want desperately for the barber to make the right decision. However, the true impact of the story

does not lie in the outcome of the plot, but in the fact that we actually come to sympathize with the barber. This, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the fact that his latter-day Walter Mitty fantasies would garner an NC-17 rating. The genius of the story is that we do not convict the character for *thoughts*, fantasies, which, if our own were voiced, would certainly damn us all.

In many ways, the entire collection is about conviction: In an age of moral relativism, where actions can be endlessly rationalized, what happens to right and wrong? Characters are constantly forced into situations where they must decide between the welfare of themselves versus that of others. Nowhere is this dynamic so apparent—or affecting—than in “The Falls,” where



Saunders’s craft works at its highest level. The story alternates between the points of view of two men, both of whom witness two young girls in a canoe heading helplessly over the falls. The final paragraph—in which one of the men considers his options and then makes a decision—represents one of the most challenging measures of the worth of a human being that I’ve ever read. The dramatic situation is so pure, so evocative in the questions that it turns toward the reader as well as the

characters, that I have no doubt “The Falls” will deservedly become a fixture in literary anthologies.

Flannery O’Connor’s famous comment on her own writing is apt for Saunders as well: “...my subject of fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil.” In Saunders’s case, while a “devil” might not present itself as a single force of evil, gestures of complicated grace occur with regularity. In the midst of the figures of the grotesque, the caustic humor, and the biting satire, an opportunity for redemption arises.

Yet despite the comparison to O’Connor and others, Saunders never feels derivative; he is an absolute original—satirist, fabulist, allegorist, humorist—but above all, he is a writer of the imagination who remains firmly grounded in the paradoxes of this world. He is that rare author who will certainly inspire others to become writers. In years to come, we will be asking ourselves in what ways the new generation of writers have been influenced by George Saunders.

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