

BRIDGIT HENRY

Memory Diver, 2006
Woodcut, 30 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

GEORGE SAUNDERS

The Haunting

Charnel grounds, ghosts,
and fictive realities:
Dan White interviews
George Saunders

George Saunders became famous for writing darkly funny stories that unfolded in strange and seedy theme parks that existed in a sort of limbo. On the one hand, the stories seemed to take place in a not-so-distant future. At the same time, the hapless employees of those parks were obsessed with recreating the past. In his celebrated story “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” an actual Confederate ghost comingles, hilariously, with ghostly holograms. Saunders’s new novel, Lincoln In The Bardo, takes place in a clamorous Georgetown cemetery during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Glancing at the first few paragraphs, even Saunders die-hards may be flummoxed; where are the author’s fingerprints? Is this a jarring break from the past? But the deeper they delve into the new one, the more they will see Saunders’s impressions—the wild surrealistic and absurdist flourishes. Angry spirits with unfinished business may bring back memories of the implacable and potty-mouthed zombie grandmother in his short story “Sea Oak.” The early stories disarmed the readers with their finely tuned comedy, only to drop them down through a trap door leading somewhere unexpected—a revelation, heartache, an act of violence. The new novel does something close to the reverse; it allows for tenderness and hilarity in the last place where you would ever expect to find such things.

In March, Catamaran reached Saunders in the midst of his busy tour to promote Bardo. Here is our interview, which covered everything from Victorian attitudes about death to the way his engineering background informs the structure of his writing.

—Dan White

Dan White: I was just thinking about all the unsettled ghosts in your work, even before you wrote this latest novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, whose main character is Willie, Abraham Lincoln’s son who died at a young age. There’s the ghost boy in your story “The Wavemaker Falter” that haunts the man who kills him accidentally and imagines his life going forward, and there’s also the incredibly profane zombie grandmother in “Sea Oak.” I’m wondering what is it about these unsettled phantasms that just keeps taking ahold of you and pulling you back.

George Saunders: It’s about making sure the story has energy. A lot of times, I’ll be working in a pretty realist mode. You know, normal people. And then somehow