

Lincoln in the Bardo

George Saunders

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER - WINNER OF THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE

The long-awaited first novel from the author of *Tenth of December* a moving and original father-son story featuring none other than Abraham Lincoln, as well as an unforgettable cast of supporting characters, living and dead, historical and invented

Named One of the Ten Best Books of the Year by *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and Maureen Corrigan, NPR - One of *Time's* Ten Best Novels of the Year - A *New York Times* Notable Book

February 1862. The Civil War is less than one year old. The fighting has begun in earnest, and the nation has begun to realize it is in for a long, bloody struggle. Meanwhile, President Lincoln's beloved eleven-year-old son, Willie, lies upstairs in the White House, gravely ill. In a matter of days, despite predictions of a recovery, Willie dies and is laid to rest in a Georgetown cemetery. "My poor boy, he was too good for this earth," the president says at the time. "God has called him home." Newspapers report that a grief-stricken Lincoln returns, alone, to the crypt several times to hold his boy's body.

From that seed of historical truth, George Saunders spins an unforgettable story of familial love and loss that breaks free of its realistic, historical framework into a supernatural realm both hilarious and terrifying. Willie Lincoln finds himself in a strange purgatory where ghosts mingle, gripe, commiserate, quarrel, and enact bizarre acts of penance. Within this transitional state--called, in the Tibetan tradition, the bardo--a monumental struggle erupts over young Willie's soul.

Lincoln in the Bardo is an astonishing feat of imagination and a bold step forward from one of the most important and influential writers of his generation. Formally daring, generous in spirit, deeply concerned with matters of the heart, it is a testament to fiction's ability to speak honestly and powerfully to the things that really matter to us. Saunders has invented a thrilling new form that deploys a kaleidoscopic, theatrical panorama of voices to ask a timeless, profound question: How do we live and love when we know that everything we love must end?

"A luminous feat of generosity and humanism."--Colson Whitehead, *The New York Times Book Review*

"A masterpiece."--Zadie Smith

Lincoln in the Bardo Details

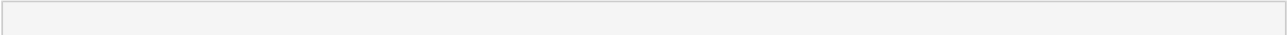
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From Reader Review Lincoln in the Bardo for online ebook

Jeffrey Keeten says

”The rich notes of the Marine Band in the apartments below came to the sick-room in soft, subdued murmurs, like the wild, faint sobbing of far off spirits.” Keckley, op. cit.

William Wallace Lincoln is sick.

He is burning up with fever.

His head is pounding to the beat of a song with a faster tempo than what he hears seeping through the floorboards from below.

He...can't...breathe.

It feels like a fat man is squatting on his chest.

His father comes to see him. His eyes are hollowed out cinders. His skin is stretched tightly against his face. He hovers over him like a disembodied skull. His beard tickles his cheek releasing a flood of memories of being held, being indulged, being love.

His mother comes to see him. Her pretty dress rustling like a cat moving through the river rushes. Her breathing is constricted. He wants to ask her to loosen her corset, but what passes through his mind never makes it to his lips. Her eyes are pinched with worry.

He dreams about his pony and wonders when will he be well enough to ride him again.

He'd cry, but he is too tired to cry. Crying leads to weeping, and weeping leads to coughing.

And then something unexpected happens...he dies.

That isn't supposed to happen. His father is clothed in immense power. Some might even say he is the most powerful man in the world. How can this be?

Fix it, Daddy.

”Great sobs choked his utterance. He buried his head in his hands, and his tall frame was convulsed with emotion. I stood at the foot of the bed, my eyes full of tears, looking at the man in silent, awe-stricken wonder. 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 lost idol.” Keckley, op. Cit.

Lincoln had already lost one child, Eddie, back in 1850. Was he punished for his own indulgence in sadness? He'd paid his price for his melancholy. Was Willie a payment for the war? Was this his blood gift? His sacrifice to save the Union? Where was his reprieve, like the Abraham from the Bible? God didn't say, stay

thy hand. He let the reaper do his work.

"The saddest eyes of any human being that I have ever seen." Joshua Wolf Shenk, account of John Widmer.

They buried the boy in Oak Hill Cemetery.

Lincoln came to see him, cloaked in darkness.

Willie is there, sidestepped away from his carapace. He is trapped in the bardo, held by the love of his father, as he watches his father weep, holding the body so tenderly taken from his sick box.

The Tibetan word bardo means literally "intermediate state"—also translated as "transitional state" or "in-between state."

Willie would go, but his father said he'd be back.

There are other trapped souls there in a form of purgatory, snared by their own fears at what awaits them in the next world.

"And yet no one had ever come here to hold one of us, while speaking so tenderly." Hans Vollman

"Ever."

Roger Bevins III

As various forces vie for the soul of young Willie, and Lincoln is exactly who we expect Lincoln to be, the Civil War rages in the background, and Mary Todd Lincoln finally lets loose the bonds of her mind and goes... briefly mad. As much as Lincoln would love to swim in the bitter, black soup of his own depression, the fate of a nation lies squarely on his shoulders. He cannot falter. He cannot grieve freely as a father should. In the darkness of night, among the gray black tombstones, he can for a time let loose the torrent of his tormented mind.

George Saunders has written a book in a style I have not encountered before. He mixes quotes from journalists with observations from people who were there, and with ghostly comments from those trapped between worlds. It makes for a heady mix of snippets that weave themselves into a whole cloth story. Obviously, to write a book like this he has to research the material as if he were writing a nonfiction book. I can almost envision this moment when Saunders is looking at the notecards tacked to his wall, each containing a quote that he wants to use in his novel and thinking...this is my novel.

I do have to give Saunders creative points for the concept, but there is a part of me that thinks that this is a short story specialist who is trying to find a way to write a novel. Clever little bastard that he is, he pulls it off. As we listen to the ghosts and the people surrounding the tragic events of Willie's untimely death, we also hear their stories, and though few can claim the extent of tragedy that finds the Lincoln family time and time again, there are some absolutes that govern everyone's life. No one gets out of this life unscathed. Once you experience love, you will experience loss.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>

I also have a Facebook blogger page at:<https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Liz says

I should have known. I really don't do well with the avant garde. I want a plot, I want a story. I want character development. This offers none of the above. I felt lost. Vague memories of Ionesco and Beckett kept cropping up as I tried to plough through this. The book alternates between reading like a thesis, full of quotes from "other" sources and then almost more like a play. Ghosts come and ghosts go. They each have their own little mini-story but there is little continuity. Some ghosts appear more often; Blevins and Vollman act as narrators, moving the meager story forward. The Rev. Thomas provides a glimpse of a sort of Revelations style individual reckoning. There are sections that are enticing or interesting. But they are small glimpses of jewels.

I am clearly in the minority here. All the wonderful reviews had me doubting myself. But in the long run, reading is all about pleasure. And this book brought me very little of that.

Emily May says

What a painfully boring book. 166 narrators chiming in and overlapping in a story that seems so random and disconnected for the most part. It might be deep, and it might be clever, but if there isn't the barest spark of something to make you care what's on the next page - then why even bother turning it?

I gave up at 35%. Life is way too short.

Taryn says

I had a complicated relationship with this book. The writing was exquisite and I was amazed at the brilliance of the author, but there were also long sections where I felt completely lost.

The tide runs out but never runs in. The stones roll downhill but do not roll back up.

What I'm about to write doesn't even begin to sum this book up! President Abraham Lincoln's beloved eleven-year-old son Willie passes away after an illness. However, Willie doesn't realize he's dead. His soul is stuck in a transitional phase along with the other ghosts who populate the cemetery. On the evening of the funeral, Lincoln returns to the cemetery and cradles his dead son's body. The ghosts are amazed at the rare scene of a tenderness towards the dead. Lincoln leaves, but promises to return. It's unwise for a child to stay in the transitional realm for long, so some of the ghosts attempt to usher Willy into the next realm. Willie is determined to stay and wait for his father, so the ghosts must concoct a plan to convince him to move on.

Trap. Horrible trap. At one's birth it is sprung. Some last day must arrive. When you will need to get out of this body. Bad enough. Then we bring a baby here. The terms of the trap are compounded. That baby also must depart. All pleasures should be tainted by that knowledge. But hopeful dear us, we forget. Lord, what is this?

George Saunders is always recommended to me when I mention my love of Helen Phillips, and now I know why! The **storytelling is surreal** and the **imagery is bizarre, sometimes grotesque**. *Lincoln in the Bardo* is both **humorous and devastatingly sad**. This 368-page book is actually rather short on words (the audiobook is only 7 hours and 25 minutes). Part of it is like a **play** and the other part is constructed from **excerpts of other sources, both real and imagined**. Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins, and Reverend Everly Thomas serve as our guides in the **transitional stage between life and death**. The form these ghosts take relate to unresolved issues at the time of their death. Hans Vollman died before he was able to consummate his marriage, so he walks around naked with a massive, swollen "member." Roger Bevins became hyper-aware of the world's beauty right before his death, so he's covered with eyes, hands, and noses. In a sad twist, these ghosts don't realize they are dead; they refer to their corpses as "sick-forms" and their coffins as "sick-boxes." They believe they will resume their lives eventually.

One feels such love for the little ones, such anticipation that all that is lovely in life will be known by them, such fondness for that set of attributes manifested uniquely in each: mannerisms of bravado, of vulnerability, habits of speech and mispronouncement and so forth; the smell of the hair and head, the feel of the tiny hand in yours—and then the little one is gone! Taken! One is thunderstruck that such a brutal violation has occurred in what had previously seemed a benevolent world. From nothingness, there arose great love; now, its source nullified, that love, searching and sick, converts to the most abysmal suffering imaginable.

It was really interesting how fact and fiction work alongside each other in this story. I was amazed at how Saunders juxtaposed pieces from various sources to create a complete picture, especially since many of the reports are contradictory. Some of the historical chapters were especially memorable:

- 1) *Conflicting descriptions of the moon on the night of Willie's death* - There's something beautiful about the unreliability of our memories.
- 2) *Descriptions of Lincoln's appearance* - He's described as an ugly man by many, but those who are more closely acquainted see him a little differently.
- 3) *Criticism of the Lincoln during the Civil War* - I couldn't help but think of the modern day while reading the intense and sometimes vulgar criticism of Abraham Lincoln. One of the detractor's comments would've been right at home in a YouTube comment section!

I was in error when I saw him as fixed and stable and thought I would have him forever. He was never fixed, nor stable, but always just a passing, temporary energy-burst. I had reason to know this. Had he not looked this way at birth, that way at four, another way at seven, been made entirely anew at nine? He had never stayed the same, even instant to instant. He came out of nothingness, took form, was loved, was always bound to return to nothingness.

The heart of the novel is the strength of the bond between President Lincoln and Willie. In one interview, Saunders mentions the idea for this novel started with a vision he had of the Lincoln Memorial and the Pieta combined. That image came through crystal clear in the text, because the first thing I thought of when Lincoln holds his son was Michelangelo's Pietà. The **pathos** permeates the pages. Willie's intense need to be close to his father broke my heart. I felt the **immense weight of both grief and the presidency on Abraham Lincoln's shoulders** in a way that I've never gotten from my nonfiction reading. As he grieves for his beloved son, he agonizes over the decisions he has made as president. **He was intellectually aware of the casualties of war, but there's a shift in him as he's forced to deal with the loss of his own son.**

We had been considerable. Had been loved. Not lonely, not lost, not freakish, but wise, each in his or her own way. Our departure caused pain. Those who had loved us sat upon their beds, heads in hand; lowered their faces to tabletops, making animal noises. We had been loved, I say, and remembering us, even many years later, people would smile, briefly gladdened at the memory.

I enjoyed the idea of visiting with the other ghosts more as a general idea than in practice. There were so many characters and I didn't have patience for all of them. Maybe it was that we didn't get to spend that much time with them. Most of the time I wanted to get back to the Lincolns. A combination of the strange imagery and each ghost's distinct nineteenth-century speaking style made some of their voices difficult for me to read. The style was sometimes so opaque, that my mind couldn't penetrate it; sometimes I was just reading words, unable to extract any meaning from them. It didn't help that the names of the speakers were placed after they spoke, especially with the longer passages. Perhaps that's less of a concern in audio (distinct voices) or print (easier flipping). The hype around this book intensified my frustration. I checked the average rating after a sixty-page struggle and had one of those "Oh crap! I'm the only person in the world that doesn't understand this!" moments. **If you hit a section that makes you feel more frustration than transcendence, you're not alone!** I'm not saying any of this to discourage anyone from reading it, but to help anyone who is having similar struggles. It was worth it for me to continue through my frustration because some of my favorite moments are at the end, when Lincoln wrestles with decisions about the war.

Pale broken thing. Why will it not work. What magic word made it work. Who is the keeper of that word. What did it profit Him to switch this one off. What a contraption it is. How did it ever run. What spark ran it. Grand little machine. Set up just so. Receiving the spark, it jumped to life. What put out that spark? What a sin it would be. Who would dare. Ruin such a marvel. Hence is murder anathema.

All that being said, there were exceptions. I was touched by the woman who worried about the three daughters she left behind and the stories from the black contingent of ghosts was highly relevant. Some of the most heartbreaking scenes were watching the ghosts cycle through forms they were never able to realize. I've never felt more confronted about the **transience of life** or how our **physical bodies are just temporary vessels**. Tomorrow is never a guarantee, but it's easy to forget as we live our day-to-day lives. **There's so much to learn from these ghosts as we see how they view their past lives and learn about their regrets. Somehow everything looks completely different once there are no more chances!** I was hopeful that the inhabitants of the cemetery, including Willie, would be able to make peace with themselves and find a way

to complete their journey.

He is just one. And the weight of it about to kill me. Have exported this grief. Some three thousand times. So far. To date. A mountain. Of boys. Someone's boys. Must keep on with it. May not have the heart for it. One thing to pull the lever when blind to the result. But here lies one dear example of what I accomplish by the orders

I don't always have the easiest time with ghost stories, but the way these ghosts affect President Lincoln reminded me of the power of reading--how it allows the voices and experiences of those real and imagined, dead and alive shape who we are and influence our viewpoints. As the weight of new experiences overwhelms President Lincoln, **a stronger empathy and sense of purpose arise in him**. He knows what he must do to preserve the union. Under the disapproving eye of a nation, we watch as he comes to the steadfast conclusion that the *"the swiftest halt to the thing (therefore the greatest mercy) might be the bloodiest."* (Hans Vollman's words)

Reading this novel is a **wholly unique experience. It's brilliant and emotionally powerful, but sometimes confusing (for me)**. ~~My lack of star rating is not the same as zero—it's just an indication that I can't fit this book in any kind of rating system! One, two, or three stars seem too low because there were parts that I was amazed by, but four or five stars doesn't seem honest to my overall experience.*~~ This book is hard to compare to anything else. As far as oddness, **eerie atmosphere** and the depth of emotion I felt, I was reminded of *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro. For a more resoundingly positive review, I recommend reading Colson Whitehead's analysis in *The New York Times* and watching the "immersive narrative short" at the end.

Edit 3/20/17: Decided on 3 stars. I liked it, but not overwhelmingly so.

I received this book for free from NetGalley and Random House in exchange for an honest review. This does not affect my opinion of the book or the content of my review. Its publication date is February 14, 2017.

Sam says

Lincoln in the Bardo is such a beautifully crystallized portrait of life, death, grief, and getting on, and really emphasizes our shared humanity in its unusual storytelling. I started and stopped in fits, but one massive read in a single sitting was the way for me to go on this, allowing it to crash and wash over me completely, and get acquainted with the style and be fully receptive to the ideas expressed here. Once submerged in the unique format, I was incredibly moved by the way Saunders is able to link the singular sadness and pain of one man losing his son (one great, historically critical man) to the comings and goings and suffering and salvation of all. This read was a force of nature for me: random, unexpected, bold, brilliant. It was unable to be fully pinned down into thought or analysis by me, but so easily appreciated and awed by its power and beauty. A full **5 stars** for me, and likely to be my favorite read of the month (if not the year), as it's continued to haunt me since finishing it.

All were in sorrow, or had been, or soon would be. It was the nature of things. Though on the surface it seemed every person was different, this was not true. At the core of each lay suffering; our eventual end,

the many losses we must experience on the way to that end. We must try to see one another in this way. As suffering, limited beings - perennially outmatched by circumstance, inadequately endowed with compensatory graces.

The particulars are a matter of historical record and the book blurb: eleven-year-old Willie Lincoln has passed away and been laid to rest in February 1862, and amidst turmoil and war and death of the increasingly bloody Civil War, his father, President Abraham Lincoln, visits Willie's tomb and spends a night with his son's body. The novel focuses on that one night, as Willie's spirit is in the bardo (the space between life and death, lingering between states of reality). We're given a historical and cultural context and contemporary views of Lincoln, his family, and his performance as President and as a father to help us better understand his guilt, his loss, his suffering and his strength on that evening via a selection of quotes from actual biographical sources and those Saunders has imagined and created to better strengthen his portrait of the President in 1862. Fact and fiction weave together to display a complex view of Lincoln, compounded by getting into the President's mental space as he holds his son's corpse in the tomb.

All over now. He is either in joy or nothingness. (So why grieve? The worst of it, for him, is over.) Because I loved him so and am in the habit of loving him and that love must take the form of fussy and worry and doing. Only there is nothing left to do.

Willie is not in the bardo alone: a veritable Greek chorus of spirits accompanies him, urge him to move on while simultaneously rejecting their own status of death and clinging to the beauty, large and small, of life. It's this Greek chorus that helps round out the universality of Saunders' novel: Willie as one soul among many, all important, all meaningful, all moving toward the same fate and state. But the spirits are also individuals, even if they say similar things: each has their past and their death, a manner of speaking and a way of dealing with their bardo state. There's humor and introspection, ribald pronouncements and dark truths, trite obsessions and larger worries that come to the forefront with this group of spirits from backgrounds rich and poor, black and white, the array of personalities and issues in death as varied and interesting as in life. Those in the bardo must decide on this evening who is to ascend to the next state and leave behind their ties to their earthly existences, and who shall remain, and many look to Willie and his father as a means to connect with their own loved ones, while others take pains to help Willie move on, and Lincoln to be at peace with the loss of his son (and the deaths of the young men and boys on the battlefield, of Union and Confederate forces alike, and the captivity and dehumanization and death of the American slaves that also weigh on his conscience).

He was an open book. An opening book. That had just been opened up somewhat wider. By sorrow. And-by us.

...Taken! One is thunderstruck that such a brutal violation has occurred in what had previously seemed a benevolent world. From nothingness, there arose great love; now, its source nullified, that love, searching and sick, converts to the most abysmal suffering imaginable.

This is a novel that really brilliantly weaves the details of Lincoln's life in 1862 and specific pain of the loss of his young son, with larger themes connected to all humankind, past present and future, of our particular and universal fate, the horrible and yet beautiful "trap" of life and death, death's inevitability and unpredictability, and the glorious nature of love and pleasure and beauty and peace that a human life can contain is both tainted and yet more deeply beloved for that simple fact. ***You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore***, repeat visions that implore souls in the bardo to move forward. And so too has Saunders' novel utterly crashed upon me, a brilliant, breathtaking meditation on the human experience: grief, life, death, and all in between. A hypnotic, powerful, entirely memorable read that I recommend to any and all

who live and love and lose, as we all do.

-received an e-galley on edelweiss, thanks to Random House

LeAnne says

**"And if you go.. chasing rabbits,
and you know you're.. going to fall
Tell 'em a hookah-smoking caterpillar
has given you the call."**

The unusual format, like oddly punctuated and inverted lines of a play, was fine by me. It just took some adjustment, and then it was easy to read.

But the random, psychedelic-seeming thought trains were way too artsy for me, and the periodic sophomoric vulgarity struck me as stupid (sorry). I did not titter for an instant. There was definitely a plot to follow, but like from the thick main trunk of a vine, there were tendrils of offshoots that obscured the main body at times. Some of these shoots were their own little stories, but some were just weedy backdrop. I'm all for setting a mood or seeing a theme evinced in different ways, although here, I just did not care about any of it.

I did have empathy with Lincoln and his boy, but this story robbed me even of that. Others have complimented the depth of research that went into the accounts, primarily at the front end of the story, but using two books and Google can cough up many quotes and accounts, and for me (who is a boring and methodical scientist), quantity does not equal quality. As a reader, some of them were entertaining (like opposing descriptions of the moon's phase, Lincoln's appearance, etc), but a handful would have sufficed. Thankfully, these barrels full of quotations took up more space such that I did not have to spend too much reading time in the bardo.

Oops. I've gone too far perhaps and ticked my five- and four-star friends off. But I'm not the "magical realism" type. Dull, grounded, and bound with facts, this story just isn't my thing. I do love Yann Martel's work and that of Gabriel García Márquez, though. Heck, I even adore reading *The Master and Margarita* every few years around Easter! Talk about the surreal! But this story went too far for me without a meaningful payoff. My 13 year old sister died pretty suddenly - within a week's time - many years ago, and maybe the deterioration of dead 11-year-old Willie speaking from the half-life added to my distaste. I felt a bit protective of and angry on behalf of President Lincoln, too. He was a real person - a heartbroken dad with a helluva stressful job. How dare we pull his memory and that of his little boy out and sandwich it with these absurd ghosts, ones with giant phalluses and multiple noses, just for our entertainment? Shall we next exhume Martin Luther King?

The recurring matterlightblooming phenomena and Mr Bevins' ever growing number of appendages were just too ridiculous for my taste. If *Edward Scissorhands* or *the Mad Hatter* or *Beetle Juice* thrilled you, be my guest - you'll love this. I just do not have an active enough imagination to have taken the plunge into the bardo.

Despite the constellations of five stars out there, this thing went dim for me at the halfway point. . I'd have to have eaten some sort of magic mushroom to have liked this...just not my taste.

Diane S ? says

Wow, this wasn't just reading a novel it was a true reading experience. Wholly inventive, imaginative, the amount of research staggering, something totally new and different. Will admit having some trouble in the beginning, couldn't see where the author was going with this, wondering if it was going to progress, it did in a very interesting way. Not going to rehash the plot, the description only loosely defines this. The book is helped along by some very unusual narrators, Vollmam and Bevins, along with a Reverend that can't figure out why he wasn't let in the pearly gates. There is a cast of many others, all with their own stories to add to the mix.

This novel takes a little patience, a willingness to embrace the unusual and an imagination that lets one see outside the norm. I thought it was brilliant.

ARC from publisher.

Release date February 14th.

Diane Barnes says

ADDITION TO REVIEW AFTER LISTENING TO AUDIO

This is the most unusual, incredible reading experience I have ever had. George Saunders is either a genius, or an other-worldly creature living among us and posing as an author.

I will leave the book description to Goodreads and the book jacket. I will only say this: if you enter this world and let yourself be carried along, you will emerge a different reader at the end. Some of you may not be able to do this, some of you may not wish to accept what is presented, but those who continue will be rewarded with a better understanding of what it means to be a living, loving human being in this imperfect world.

As I was reading I was thinking that there was no way I could follow this story on an audio book, but others reviews have convinced me that listening to this one adds another dimension to this novel. I intend to download it from my library when available, and will add to my review at that time.

I will go out on a limb right now and predict a Pulitzer for George Saunders. And a National Book Award. Deservedly so.

ADDITION: March 12th, 2017

I downloaded this book on audio from my library 4 weeks after reading the print version. I am not a fan of audio books as a rule, I get impatient with the narrators and lose focus because my mind wanders as I'm listening. But after hearing all the praise for the audio, I decided to give it a chance. It proved to be just as incredible. This was more of a performance than anything else, with a different narrator for each voice, and real emotion behind the words. I used earphones and closed my eyes, and entered the graveyard again. I could actually see the action, and some things I had missed the first time around were made clearer to me

this time. It also helped that it is only 7 1/2 hours, so the time investment wasn't that great. Recommended in both forms, but I am glad I read the print version first.

Lisa says

Yes, I know I stand alone in my dislike for this book. EVERYONE loves it. Nope, not me. I actually hated it. I've heard people say they wanted to throw a book across a room and I never understood that desire to harm a book, but for me, this is one to throw. I should know better than to read a book in which the review says something like "an alternative writing" "a different way of telling a story". That just means it's weird, no plot, no character development, an author trying something new that works for others, but not me.

This is not historical fiction, this is not even a novel, this is a series of short paragraphs that are only semi-linked. This book is not about Lincoln, so if you're a President Abraham Lincoln lover, you will likely not like or appreciate this book. There's no story here. I read reviews in which people said they were moved to tears over Lincoln's sorrow. Huh? It's a bunch of ghosts talking to each other who don't even know they're dead.

I hated all the voices and I hated the short quotes from people who were supposed to be there. Some of these were real quotes and other were made up. Even this bothered me, either use all real quotes or make it completely fiction. I felt like I was reading George Saunders spiral notebook where he was jotting down his notes and footnotes, it was just a list.

There were over 160 narrators voicing the audio book. This could have been cool, and for those listeners who love this book, will love this idea as well, but because I hated it, it bugged me that so many great actors, authors, narrators, got pulled (suckered) into this mess. David Sedaris, Megan Mullally, Lena Dunham, Ben Stiller, Susan Sarandon and the list goes on.

I realize I stand alone and the rest of you will love this book. Go ahead, love it. We will connect on a different book on a different day.

October 17, 2017

This rubbish just won the Booker Prize and I could not be more unhappy about it.

Cheri says

!! NOW AVAILABLE !!

4.5 Stars

How does one review a book such as this one? No words could possibly truly convey the potential journey a reader is embarking on when they open this novel. This is certainly nothing like any other book I've read, in concept or in style.

Before I requested this, I looked up several references to the definition of the bardo, both the Tibetan definition and how it's meaning carries beyond the definition. Bardo is the "in-between place" a "transitional

state,” the period of the afterlife between two states – our former “reality” is no longer, the bardo seems much like a waiting space before you enter into your next phase of “life.” I would say this applies to the bereaved, as well as the deceased. Your former life has changed, and a period of time must pass before one may move on to the next phase, rebuild.

William Wallace Lincoln, the third son of President Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln, had been sick off and on since the beginning of the year, as had his brother Tad. On February 20, 1862 at 5:00pm, Willie died – most likely of typhoid fever. Willie was eleven years old.

After Willie’s death, Abraham Lincoln often visited the crypt where Willie was interred, which continued for months. Holding him. This fact is the basis for this novel.

The majority of conversations throughout *Lincoln in the Bardo* are between the deceased who remain in the bardo. The conversations are sometimes more like ramblings, sometimes multiple inputs from the others that are often more a cacophony than harmonious choir of thoughts. Willie waits among them, waiting for his father’s return. Lincoln, in his grief, is in his own state of waiting, his mind unwilling to accept the reality.

Amidst all of the conversations are excerpts of historical texts regarding Lincoln’s behavior, his suffering. Some are letters sent to the President regarding the War from grieving parents. Some are compassionate and lovely. All paint a picture of an unbearable loss. Lincoln’s loss. The loss of the families whose sons were fighting in the war, or who had fought and were never coming home.

Having never read anything by George Saunders before, I am a bit in awe of the thought process that went into this rather astounding and poignant debut novel. I loved this, despite heartbreaking moments, it is strangely wonderful, the brilliance behind it still shone through.

Recommended.

Pub Date: 14 Feb 2017

Many thanks for the ARC provided by Random House

Jen says

Sorry Saunders, but I disliked your novel. Clearly, I'm swimming against the current on this one. Having read some convincing reviews, I thought it must be included in my TBR this year. Well, I almost tossed it aside 100 pages in and probably should have and not given it a rating.

This is a read of loss. A parent - president Lincoln - has lost his 11 year old son to an illness. The bardo - is the place between heaven and hell - a purgatory of sorts. It's a story of ghosts, and of Willie, who are stationed between life and the afterlife - the conversations that take place; the longing of missed ones; missed lives.

I can't give it the kudos others have - for me it was overwrought with too much sadness, despair and ghostly spirits. The writing was fragmented with quotes and no quotations. Maybe I'd have been more sympathetic had I been American and able to relate to some history? Likely not.

I thought as I forced myself to read this, it might be easier to be among the dead than forcing myself to continue on, but I really didn't want to be stuck in some sort of hell with similar characters.

Ok that was harsh - it did have an interesting twist on death and did make me wonder in those short hours just after we lose someone, does this space exist? And did remind me of the accountability we each hold living this human life the best we can.

BUT, there was really no plot, little character development.

I'm glad to be done and returning this back to the shelf where it can sit with other ghostly (ghastly) weirded out stories.

?? and a sigh of relief to be done.

Elyse says

From the first day I saw that George Sanders had a new release--I kept walking. I had a lot of resistance to read George Sanders again.

"The Tenth of December" was the number 1 best seller for months and months.....

Everyone seemed to 'LOVE' it. OUTSTANDING they all said. NOT FOR ME....I didn't understand the hype. It was 'alright'.....but not 'wow' for me by any means.

I remember thinking another 'lesser name' --- at the time --RISING today--was the OUTSTANDING collection of short stories -that people ought to be talking about by Peter Tieryas Liu for his book called "Watering Heaven".....

A collection of short stories that 'still' blows me away to this day! -- The stories all that place in China. Brilliant book!

So....In order to break through my George Saunders resignation--I had to do a ton of homework before investing my actual time and money - on the physical book and audiobook.

NOTE: I'm the type of reader who usually doesn't need to read more than the blurb. I prefer going into a book almost 'blind' - as long as my gut feeling towards it is thumbs up.

Yet - when in doubt - it takes a bulldozer to get through me.

A cyber bet - of an imaginary coin toss - which I won - finally made me realize - I'm not getting out of reading this book so I simply surrendered!

AND MY GOLLY.... THE HYPE IS REAL!!!! It's really REAL!!!! This book is OUTSTANDING IT 'is' at times like a Greek Chorus

The spirit-souls in the graveyard---where Lincoln temporarily buried Willie --- narrate in clear unflinching prose. I had prepared myself to struggle following the different ghost voices. The surprise was - I had little problem with the structure. It was clear as a spotless window....that many of these voices were already dead souls. I personally found their backgrounds fascinating.... (the good and bad people who had died - their crimes - their personalities- their belief that they might return to life.... after all -- they haven't completed their death yet).

A few times I thought of "The Book Thief", by Mark Zusak, with the unusual narrator, Death....because at the time -- I felt it was very effective - profoundly imagined.....

Now, comes "Lincoln in the Bardo"... taking the unusual narrator/narrators to a whole new level - beyond the universal so to speak..... death, grief, and love.....mixed with history of the times.....and moving on ... and

letting go ... and letting go ... and letting go..... A father's love for his son ---the grimmest of prognosis -- hurts deeper than hurt.

GEORGE SANDERS created a deeply emotional beautiful heartbreaking journey.

There is nothing typical about this book. It's extraordinary!

NOTE: Having the PHYSICAL BOOK to read the words is powerful - 'and' the AUDIOBOOK is magnificent. -- great combination. The voice of Lincoln is wrenchingly felt in your gut! Other voices are 'awesome' .. some very modern and contemporary-- others ancient and old feeling --others quite playful..... some faster than the speed of light 'a sentence' spoken.

2nd NOTE: If a parent has recently lost a child - this book could either be impossible for them to read or perhaps it's a comfort. But they would need to tread cautiously.

However....I think this is not only an masterful book - but an important one...'needed'!

We've needed this book written!

Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

Angela M says

It's a beautiful and sad but a strangely told story, and the narrative is different from anything I've read . The back of the cover description tells a poignant detail about Lincoln which Saunders in the Q&A tells us was the thought that formed for him the heart of this story. At the time of his 11 year old son Willie's death by typhoid fever, it was reported that Lincoln went to the crypt at night to hold his son's body. The grief that one can almost feel in that image is the essence of this book and has been fully and imaginatively depicted. The grief - this book is so filled with Lincoln's grief, it will break your heart. While this is told in such a unique way, it took me only a few pages to be pulled in. But the grief became overwhelming at times and I had to put it down for a break once in a while.

The first thing I did before I decided to read this book was look up the definition of bardo. " (in Tibetan Buddhism) a state of existence between death and rebirth, varying in length according to a person's conduct in life and manner of, or age at, death. " (English Oxford Dictionary) I'm glad I did because most of this mixed narrative is comprised of the voices of the dead including Willie who are in the bardo. These conversations are interspersed with excerpts from historical texts mainly describing how they saw Lincoln suffering this tremendous loss, and as mentioned in the Q & A with Saunders, some of the excerpts are imagined. It's impossible to tell which are real and which are created as I read them. I decided not to look them up but to accept Saunders' creative license . This is a novel, albeit not a straightforward telling.

I thought it was a fascinating way to tell the story not just of the death of Willie but it is in many ways a

commentary on the man who was president during a trying time in our history, a commentary on the time, but also on life and death. I recommend this to those who are open to something very different and very moving.

I received an ARC of this book from Random House

Kevin Ansbro says

"My son, here may indeed be torment, but not death."
—Dante (*Purgatorio*)

There really, *really* must be something wrong with me.

Many of my esteemed Goodreads friends, whose rave reviews I put a lot of faith in, are smitten with George Saunders' book. It's even won the blimmin' Booker Prize for crying out loud!

Um, where to begin? *he says, wringing his hands in the manner of a doctor delivering bad news*

I tried my hardest to like it, I really did - in the same way I once tried to like green smoothies, until I came to the realisation that a nice cup of Earl Grey was a far better option!

Booker Prize, or no Booker Prize, I would be lying if I said that I enjoyed this irksome offering. A patchwork quilt of musings, transcripts, obituaries and purgatorial grumblings does not (in my humble opinion) form a novel.

Sandwiched somewhere between Saunders' rectangles of anecdotal nonsense is a soulful, heart-rending human interest tale that deserves to be told. I rather hoped that he would give up on this clunky gimmick and get on with writing something resembling an actual story but, alas, he continued in the same vein until the bitter end.

This, to me, was the literary equivalent of scrolling through someone else's text messages (except I would have derived more pleasure from reading someone else's text messages). And why do some ghosts even bother to self-censor their swear words with dashes? Whose delicate sensibilities are they worried about upsetting? Everybody's dead anyway! It's so f--king annoying!

I apologise to everyone who has swooned over this body of work. There is a very good chance that my antipathy might betray a complete lack of good taste and understanding on my part.

In fairness, I do see this working better as an audiobook, or as a stage play.

But as a novel?

Nope, not for me. Not in this lifetime anyway.

Sorry.

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