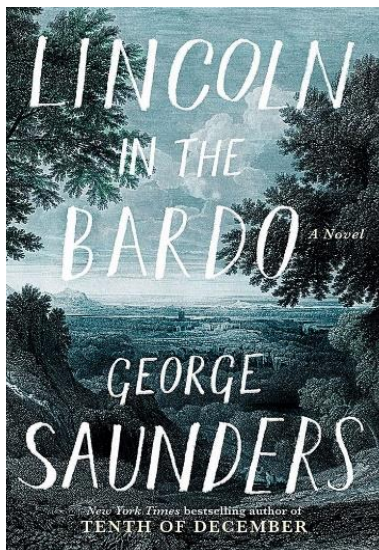


Sisyphus Reimagined



In George Saunders' first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the premise is simple: a grief-stricken Abraham Lincoln visits his dead son, Willie, in a cemetery. The execution, on the other hand, is anything but. This goes for the hardcopy and the audiobook adaptation. Written in small chapters, the book is broken up between the fictional story of Willie Lincoln being visited by his father, being confronted by a large cast of “sick people” in the Bardo (the place between life and the beyond), and historical citations that were recorded before and after Willie's death. The Bardo is an odd place where, for many reasons, the “sick people” are trapped, and forced to retell their lives over and over again to whoever will listen. They also face certain “afflictions” that reflect their greatest sources of conflict in “that other place” (how they describe the world of the living). Some of them stay in the Bardo for decades, others stay for only four minutes.

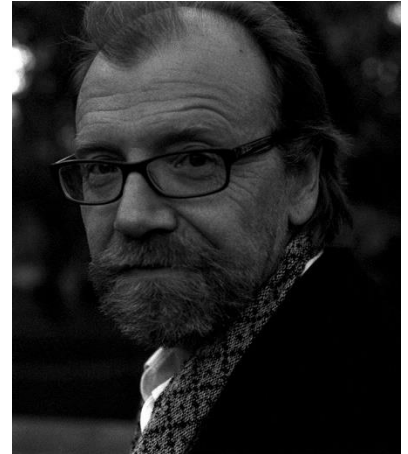
The historical citations, it's worth noting, should be taken with a grain of salt. The historical records of the events are often in conflict with one another to show the diversity of personal experience. Not only that, some of them are fictional. This muddies the waters between what is nonfiction and what is fiction.

If you're used to Saunders' short stories of strange fantastical worlds (think *Tenth of December*), characters so complex they make you feel bad for calling them unlikable, and a sense of humor that only somewhat softens the blow for a profound message, then this novel won't disappoint. Even if this is your introduction to Saunders' work, this novel won't disappoint. It's sad, it's hopeful, it's funny, it's serious. Ultimately, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is the story of characters

in the pursuit of breaking themselves of this Sisyphean (yes, I know this isn't a word, but it's more poetic and fitting than the alternative) train of existence and passivity, and although Saunders uses the fantastical to drive this train on, it's not that far off from the ways we live our own lives.

It's also important to know that this is not just a book about Willie and Abraham Lincoln, or the white guys I'll soon describe; it's about a land of people who are as diverse as the country itself during a time of much unrest and uncertainty. Sound familiar?

Saunders creates characters that tell about issues of race, rape, adultery, motherhood, regret, illusive success, and many other distinct personal problems. These are characters that are full to the brim with the classical Saundersonisms that he developed from his decades of writing short stories.



The novel starts off with a perfect mix of terrible sadness and a dash of humor when Hans Vollman (one of the three main guides of the Bardo) tells the story of how he came to be confined to a "sick box" after just missing out on finally sleeping with his much younger and beautiful wife. In his disappointment, Vollman says, "Sometimes we might poop a bit if we are fresh. Which is just what I did, out in the cart that day: I pooped a bit while fresh, in my sick box, out of rage..." And that's what Saunders is best at; hitting us hard and then letting us down easy with something that is funny in the purest, most childlike way. The next guide to tell his tale is Roger Bevins III, and his story is that of a gay teenager who "had a certain predilection, which to [him] felt quite natural and even wonderful..." The last of the three guides, and the most knowing, is The Reverend Everly Thomas. The Reverend's profundity and knowledge isn't hard to find:

“What I mean to say is, we had been *considerable*. Had been *loved*. Not lonely, not lost, not freakish, but wise, each in his or her own way. Our departures caused pain. Those who 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.”

Now imagine that sweet Chicago accent of Saunders serenading you with this quote, and it raises a question about the best way to consume this book...

Unfortunately, I have been unable to learn from the mistakes made when I watched four Harry Potter movies before reading the books. In my defense, the mistake has evolved, and in this case, I listened to the authoritative Ron Swanson/Nick Offerman (reading Hans Vollman), the iconic David Sedaris (reading Roger Bevins III), and the aforementioned sweet Chicago accent of Saunders (fittingly reading The Reverend Everly Thomas) in the audiobook version before reading the hardcopy. Saunders and Sedaris aren't just two of the best living writers, they're also two of the best readers. I say readers, but the truth is that this doesn't quite do the audiobook version justice. Reminiscent of Chuck Palahniuk's *Rant* audiobook, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is more of a performance than a reading. It involves a cast of 166 different performers, including Ben Stiller, Julianne Moore, Susan Sarandon, Bill Hader, Rainn Wilson, Keegan-Michael Key, Don Cheadle, and many more.

Although I typically prefer the feel of my heart beating life into the hardcopy of a book for the

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first time, I can't deny that this audiobook really brings life to a place that is not quite alive. One downside, the switching back and forth between the fictional story and the "historical citations" can make for a somewhat difficult adjustment if a person isn't seeing the format laid out on the page.

Ultimately though, it doesn't necessarily matter how this book is consumed, just that it is. If you're like me, and drive a lot, this audiobook is perfect because the voices are so engaging, and the adjustments needed to understand the format are not *that* trying. Final verdict: do both. Read the book, and then several months later, listen to it, or vice versa depending on your schedule. Listening to the audiobook really does provide a distinct experience, and the thoughtfulness of this production will only make that experience more worthwhile.

Adam Neider is also a passenger on the Sisyphistic train of life. When something smells bad, he doesn't smell it once or twice, but innumerable times to ensure that the horror of that smell has not changed. To make matters worse, his body is going under a great migration. Hair that was once on the top of his head has left for greener pastures on his back and upper arms.