

Michael Johnston in conversation with George Saunders

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Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a literary podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies. I'm one of your hosts Aarthi Vadde. John Plotz is my co-host and partner in pod. You may have heard some of his episodes earlier in the season. At Novel Dialogue, we believe critics and novelists belong in conversation and we talk about novels from every angle: how we read them, write them, publish them, and remember them. We strive to bring you, our listeners, friendly and sophisticated dialogues that dissect the art of novel writing and consider the influence of characters, plots, and stories on how we think about our world.

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For our final episode of the season, I am thrilled to be in the virtual studio with the extraordinary and much beloved writer George Saunders and the always insightful critic Michael Johnston. Michael is an associate professor of English at Purdue, where he teaches courses on the history of fiction. He has written a book called *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England*, and he brings a long a view of the classics to his reading of contemporary fiction, so thanks for being here, Michael.

Michael Johnston

It's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me to do this, Aarthi.

Aarthi Vadde

Sure. George Sanders is widely recognized as a master of the short story form, and he gives a master class in reading and writing in his latest book, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. His first, and we hope not his last novel is *Lincoln In the Bardo*. It debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list and won the Man Booker Prize in 2017. The novel beautifully weaves together historical quotation and original prose to bring us a version of Lincoln we could only see and feel through fiction. It offers a world inhabited by the flawed and hilarious characters who make it into the bardo but not into the history books. Although George Saunders is often compared to great American authors Mark Twain, Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, I found myself connecting *Lincoln in the Bardo* back to James Joyce's *Dubliners*. I was reminded of Joyce's scrupulous portraits of ordinary people, full of regret, but also capable of great hospitality. George, it's an honor to have you here with us. Thank you for making time.

George Saunders

Oh, thank you for asking me and any relation to Joyce I appreciate.

AV

Yes, OK, well without further ado, Michael, I'm going to hand it over to you and let's get started.

MJ

Okay great, thanks Aarthi. I'm really looking forward to this and thank you George for joining us. I think I've asked you to prepare a passage and I was honored that you were willing to take a nomination from me. So I had asked you to prepare something from near the end of *Lincoln in the Bardo* to read from to get us started. So I'll turn it over to you to start us off here, George.

GS

Sure, this is in the book, one of the sort of underlying ideas that these spirits are stuck in this kind of afterlife place called the bardo and they're stuck, kind of by their own will that something in their life was unsatisfying. So by sort of repeating their gripe basically or their life story they're able to sort of stay temporarily in this kind of space, so this is just a moment when one of our characters, this guy Roger Bevins, finally succumbs and goes on to whatever the next thing is and in life he was a young gay man who had been sort of disappointed in love and in a kind of rash moment of passion he killed himself and at the very last moment as he was dying, he really regretted it. And so his particular sort of manifestation in this place is that he just longs for the things of the world. He realized in that last instant how beautiful the world was, and so that's kind of where we find him here when finally it's time for him to go.

"From within the train came the familiar yet always bone chilling fire sound of the matter light blooming phenomenon. The train began to vibrate. The hogs squeal. I threw myself down on the good and blessed Earth soon to be mine no more. The train exploded, seats rained down, hog parts rained down. Menus rained down, luggage, newspapers, umbrellas, ladies hats, mens' shoes, cheap novels, rained down. Rising to my knees, I saw that where the train had been was now only the dreaded iron fence and there was nothing left for me to do but go.

"No, the things of the world were strong with me still. Such as, for example, a gaggle of children trudging through a side blown December flurry. A friendly match share beneath some collision tilted streetlight. A frozen clock bird visited within its high tower. Cold water from a tin jug. Toweling off one's cleaning shirt post June rain. Pearls, rags, buttons, rug tufts, beer froth. Someone's kind wishes for you, someone remembering to write, someone noticing that you are not at all at ease. A bloody roast death-red on a platter, a hedge top underhand as you flee late to some chalk and wood fire smelling schoolhouse geese above, clover below the sound of one's own breath when winded. The way a moistness of the eye will

blur a field of stars. The sore place on the shoulder a resting toboggan makes. Writing one's beloved name upon a frosted window with the gloved finger. Tying a shoe ,tying a knot on a package, a mouth on yours, a hand on yours, the ending of the day, the beginning of the day. The feeling that there will always be a day ahead.

“Goodbye, I must now say goodbye to all of it. Moon call in the dark. Calf cramp into spring. Neck rub in the parlor. Milk sip at end of day. Some bandy legged dog proudly back plows the grass to cover its modest shit. A cloud mass downvalley breaks apart over the course of a brandy deepened hour.

Louvered blinds yield dusty beneath your dragging finger and it is nearly noon and you must decide. You have seen what you have seen and it has wounded you and it seems you have only one choice left.

Bloodstained porcelain bowl wobbles facedown on wood floor. Orange peel not at all stirred by disbelieving last breath there among that fine summer dust layer. Fatal knife set down in passing panic on a familiar wobbly banister, later dropped, thrown by mother. Dear mother, heartsick, into the slow flowing chocolate brown Potomac.”

Let me try that last line there.

“Later dropped thrown by mother, dear mother, heartsick, into the slow, flowing chocolate brown Potomac.

“None of it was real, nothing was real. Everything was real, inconceivably real, infinitely dear. These and all things is nothing, latent within a vast energy broth. But then we named them and loved them, and in this way brought them forth. And now must lose them.

“I send this out to you, dear friends, before I go in this instantaneous thought burst from a place where time slows and then stops and we may live forever in a single instant.

“Goodbye goodbye good-“

The end.

MJ

There is a bit more for those of you who have read *Lincoln in the Bardo*. But that is of course quite near the end. Thank you for reading that, George. I really wanted to hear you read that piece because I just find that the way you condense all of those moments of happiness and sadness of a life down into almost like a series of. Flashes of insight at the end before he, as you said, goes on to wherever he's onto next. Did you have anything you wanted to say about that particular passage?

GS

No, I mean it was just one of the interesting things about this book was that you know by my construction of it, everybody who is a ghost in the book should have some reason. You know, there's some something in this life that just wasn't right for him or her. And so it was, and then the other sort of idea was that there was always either a physical manifestation of that longing or sometimes a linguistic

longing. So in Bevin's case, he had the physical thing of being kind of Shiva, like he had a bunch of arms and ears and noses and mouths with which to you know, experience the things of the world.

And then I just kind of stumbled on this verbal patterning. It's kind of a modernist riff. You know of just trying to take different little, mostly minor physical sensations and then produce, present them in the most crunched down language I could, like to really compress it and actually kind of freak-ify a little bit and make it seem almost difficult to unpack. I had in mind the idea of like one of those candies that you bite down and you get this big burst of flavor. Like these things should be so compressed and dense that they didn't, you know they didn't read naturally, but if you stay there a second they would, you know, make a whole vignette.

MJ

I think we'll circle back to that very passage because it sets up a kind of contrast with the humorous bit that follows.

But I'll start a little bit more generally and just think about what you think good fiction should do. You've just written this whole book on Russian writers that that Aarthi mentioned in her intro, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* and you really, in that book you frequently talk about the different, the things you think good fiction is supposed to do for us as readers. So I'd like to start by asking you where did you come up with your ideas for good fiction? What were the sort of formative influences on you and thinking about the concept of what fiction ought to do in our world as readers?

GS

Yeah, I think the first thing was that just, you know, early on it just thrilled me to be reading a scale model of the world I was in. I still don't know why that should be interesting to us, but I remember in the book I write about being in Texas and working at a geophysical job out in the desert. And then coming back at night and reading *Grapes of Wrath* and just that kind of feeling of, oh yeah, so that book it didn't come out of nothing like somebody lived a life similar to mine and then made this highly artificial beautiful thing out of that experience. And I always I always was excited by that.

And then I think also I had an idea that I kind of associate with being working class. I'm not sure if that's really right, but the notion just that these stories existed to, well, for fun for one thing, but also to somehow make this life journey a little more sensible. You know that it somehow was an aide to helping you live. And I had come to reading really through kind of a self-help angle, you know, like I read Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and was a big Ayn Rand fan at one point. And so to me it was sort of just tacitly understood that a work of fiction was there to locate you in the world somehow in a way that would be profitable to you, probably.

So that was really it and now I mean my thought about fiction is that it's best to leave it pretty open, what it does. You certainly would want to say what it has to do and the best way to know that is to observe what it does to you, the reader, you know when you read your favorite passage or your favorite book. How are you when you start and where are you at the end? That's a pretty grounded almost scientific way to think about.

MJ

Yeah, I assume the Ayn Rand has been left in your past or do you still read her?

GS

It has, it has been very much left in the past, yeah.

AV

You know you had compared fiction to a laboratory, I think in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* and you also talked about, you know, having gone to school for geophysical engineering, and I think scientific metaphors really populate your work from time to time. And so I was just curious whether you, to kind of ask it in maybe bigger terms than I would even want to, but do you think that the sciences and the humanities should be talking to each other more than they do? Do you feel like fiction, your fiction has been informed by your scientific background, and do you think that fiction informs the sciences at all? I mean, as someone who's crossed the boundaries, so to speak.

GS

Yeah, I think, I know I learned a lot about well, about rigor, for one thing, you know 'cause in science there it doesn't matter how hard you tried, you know. The School of Mines where I went to school, there was a kind of an unofficial mantra which is "no partial credit". So if you did a 15 page proof and it was wrong, you got 0, you know, and nobody cried about it, so that was helpful to a writer.

But I also think the other thing that's been helpful to me is to think that, you know a work of fiction, it's a rhetorical argument, basically, at least the way I understand it. It's raising certain questions, and it's kind of ruling out certain solutions, then forcing itself onto a narrower logical path and so on, which is very much like a proof, you know, a kind of a loose groovy, you know, beautiful proof. But it's been a real comfort to me to think well if a piece I'm working on isn't flying I don't have to despair. It's not because of some existential defect in me, it's just needs more work and you can section off parts and work on those. You can have faith in the power of iterations, so I think there's a lot of crossover and maybe the biggest one is just that in both systems you know, I think both systems are about truth, they're about a kind of truth, and they're also about seeing what's actually there.

So in you know, a science experiment, you have a hypothesis. The experiment shows that your hypothesis is wrong. That's actually not a tragedy. It's good, you know. Likewise in a book, you know if you have a certain model of the book and your model turns out to be not very interesting, then that's not really a tragedy, it leads you to higher ground.

So I felt a lot of cross firing, and I think we should talk more because they're not--I think what's happened in the sciences is it's gotten so specialized that it's very hard to have the kind of generalist

conversations that we might have had in the 19th century. But the you know, divorcing those two things is detrimental to both, I think.

AV

Yeah, I know, literary critics would read Darwin and it's hard to imagine doing that today with the leading scientific figures of our day, for sure.

GS

Yeah. I've been reading some books about the brain. Lisa Feldman Barrett has a kind of a, you know it's a generalist summation of her research, but it's really interesting the cross firing about, for example, she says that the way the brain processes reality is basically to in every instant, quickly propose a scale model based on your past experiences and then in a much lighter ratio than was previously thought your senses then augment and correct and revise that picture. And this happens you know many, many times instantaneously, but it apparently starts at the back of your brain and moves forward and the thing that it's gaining as it moves forward is specificity, which of course rang all kinds of bells for me in terms of the process of revising fiction.

MJ

Somewhere in the middle of you're a *Swim in a Pond in the Rain* when you're talking about Gogol's *The Nose*, which was absolutely fascinating, I'm so glad that you introduced me to that story, but in your discussion of the story you ask, and Aarthi, I don't know what the policy on swearing is here when I'm reading Georges words?

AV

You can go for it, no policy.

MJ

So, alright, so here we go. You ask that, given how generally sweet people are why is the world so fucked up. And as I thought about that question, it really occurred to me as kind of something that a lot of your fiction seems to be circling around. But in the book you tell us what you think Gogol's saying about that, but you don't give us in your own words how you answer that question, so I'd be curious to hear from you both why do you think the world is so fucked up if people are so sweet. And also then, how do you think, how do you see your fiction sort of stepping into that question?

GS

Yeah, well, I think, I mean I'm a Buddhist and so my basic belief is that the world is fucked up and we're sweet because we believe a little too much in the fiction that the self exists. You know, we believe it viscerally within every breath that George is real and permanent and central and a big deal and you know this is his movie and you guys are just you know co-stars. So then I think with that delusional idea in place, it's possible to be completely well intentioned and completely sweet, you know, in other words, you wake up in the morning thinking you're a good person and you want to help and then you can go out and because you're not fully accepting other people as being as real as you are, you can then walk right over them, you know and in the other direction too.

So I think it's basically just that idea. You know that we, I don't really think, and at least yeah, I'm 62 years old and I've been in a lot of situations, some dangerous, some you know, violent. I've never really met anybody who you know, had the, comes off as intentionally evil. You know, the Cruella De Vil model of morality where "haha." And now you see it a lot in movies, you know the really bad guy who's really enjoying being bad but in real life I haven't. I, you know, I met people who did really terrible things and in their recounting of those things they were quite aware that they had done horrible things and they were working very hard to justify it. But they hadn't quite given up on the idea of themselves as being a good person, so I think it has to do with this you know, being trapped in one's own phenomenon and then yeah, something like that.

In terms of fiction, I'm not really sure. I mean I think what happens is some of my stories illustrate that by having multiple narrators, and so you can see Person A thinking he's doing one thing and you can see Person B regarding in a different way. So in some ways it's sort of an enactment of that arrangement.

MJ

Yeah I just I really love that questioning. It's so it's so simple and direct. You know, why is the world so fucked up, people are so sweet but I just love how it balances the cynicism, the recognition of the world's problems but also at the same time really kind of valuing the human and the sanctity of each individual.

And that's another thing I wanted to talk about. This kind of segues into that. That you really seem to, in your writing I get a real sense of, I don't want to say humanity that sounds a little cheesy, but I get a real sense that you're trying to wrestle with ideas of how of how to treat each individual as sacred.

GS

Well, it might go back a little to the previous question, so if we have a model of the world that disallows the idea of the, you know, the snickering purposely evil person. Let's say we take that person off from it. Then everybody who's doing harm is, we're saying sweet, but what I really mean is they're, in their own narrative they're doing good somehow, or they feel like they're fighting for righteousness. So if you accept that model, then I think it induces a little bit of a more gentle approach to life. Even when you're doing interventions, you know, even when you're really fighting against an evil force, you are mindful of the fact that those people are inside of a deluded fiction and that possibly if you could penetrate that, you might be able to do some good.

So in terms of fiction, honestly no. What I do is I try to live, I try to think a lot about these things. I try to have some semblance of a spiritual life, trusting that when I go to do my writing, all that stuff will come in very naturally with, because otherwise it sometimes comes in programmatically. You know it overrides the energy of the actual story. So I think you have to kind of keep that stuff back. And then this is the part I don't really understand, but as I described in the book, the approach to writing that I use is basically just to try to keep my mind pretty quiet when I'm rereading something that I'm writing. And then be really open to the intuitive split-second urge to fix, to cut, to you know whatever.

Somehow my working model is that all the moral concerns and all the thematic concerns and all the politics is back there, you know like they're really eager to get in this story, but I'm kind of like the bouncer saying okay, but we don't need you in this story you know. Or if you come in now, you're going to come in too hot and mess my story up. So please stay behind the you know behind the red rope there and by way of this instantaneous micro-choosing what needs to come in will come in.

And what I found is that the stories that come out of that you know, mode of production are just naturally more full of moral and ethical wrestling than the stuff I was doing before that method where I was purposely trying to make them little moral documents, and they tended to be sort of preachy and more propagandistic and also dead on the page

AV

I have to ask you, George, about "Alyosha the Pot" and your way that you actually anatomize that story, and I think at some point you said that you know, the ending is so powerful because Tolstoy restrained himself from supplying an answer or an interpretation, and in many ways perhaps the story was better than Tolstoy, because he allowed it to not speak in his voice and when you were talking about the way in which you want to make a story not reducible to a political, moral or message I was thinking about the way in which maybe other novelists have talked about their work being better than they are in some ways. Like there's their opinions, their beliefs. But if that's what they wanted to share with the world, they wouldn't write novels and fiction. And so there's this fundamental belief that they're producing work that is better than what they just have to say. And getting to that place is what makes, marks fiction as such as something that they can believe in and devote their lives to.

And so I was just wondering in trying to get at the heart of that for you if we could talk a little bit about, as you pointed out, the role that intuition plays in your process. But you've also described yourself as a control freak when it comes to revision and sentences. And so I'm just wondering and thinking too about your background in Buddhism, how both dissolution of self and giving up control works with an intense kind of precision and control as an artist, like how you reconcile those two, or is it better that it just exists in tension?

GS

You know that's a great question. The way I would say it is that the control comes in the form of iteration. In other words, in the moment of doing something I'm really trying to just feel what the, I mean, it sounds a little corny, but what the story wants me to do and that just means what scans better.

You know what it can, as I'm rereading what you know is more exciting, I guess you would say. But the control part comes in the refusal to let it go after that time.

So you know on Wednesday I go through a piece with that pencil in hand and honoring the intuition. Retype it up. Come in the next day and do exactly the same thing again. That's the control. You know for someone to do it once and say, ah, you know the muse has spoken would be giving up control, but for me I don't, it's a combination of wild intuition with very, very anal retentive repetition and in time, the weird thing that happens is, and this, I think comes, has come with years of practice. I would say that by and large those micro-decisions start leading in the same direction.

When I was young I would just keep changing stuff and it was like every day it was a new mess. But as I'm getting older the changes seem to have a systemic inclination and the thing does move in a certain direction. So yeah, it's a combination of both of those things. And also I should say, you know, since I mean in fairness and honesty anytime you talk about writing, you're only partly describing it. So I can say that when I'm sitting in front of the story, I'm in this heightened state of low rumination and monkey mind and focus, but also in the middle of that, you know, a little voice will go oh, *The New Yorker* is going to love this, you know, or oh, you got to go to the store later. I mean, it's interesting that the mind is constantly popping on and off in those different modes.

So in a way what you're doing, it's like herding cats. I mean, the cats don't always go in the right direction, but generally speaking you're able to sustain that concentrative state longer, you know, and you're able to recognize when you're blowing it, you know, and maybe you give yourself a little pass. Like, yeah, OK, that you weren't really paying attention, let's read that paragraph again. So it's really interesting, you know, so it's just basically it's a chance to really get in touch with the way your mind actually works, which is, you know, a privilege.

MJ

It sounds like efficiency is a big part of that for you too. I was getting that from a lot of the things you were saying in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* and it sounds like what you're saying now too is the story needs to be, the story that results needs to be efficient. That's like control freak part is that. Is efficiency kind of the goal, one of the goals of your control freak part of editing?

GS

Yes, but efficiency defined really intelligently. So there are times when I get so efficient that it cut all the fun out of something and my wife reads it and says you did it again, you took all this. So too efficient is not, you know if you go on a big car trip to California and your dad never let you get out of the car, 'cause it's inefficient, that's not a good efficiency, you know so for me, it's kind of like...efficiency and also I think efficiency is a function of the short story form for sure. And I'd say maybe the novel too, but since there's only a finite number of pages you know we kind of have, reader and writer have agreed that there's some sense in which this is an exaggerated, purposeful shape, so randomness is kind of the enemy of that.

Now you can have, I think you can have shaggy efficiency, you know where a section when we step back where we can say oh, this section exists to do A. But when you look at it, it does it a little bit slantwise, it does a little in a kind of an anecdotal way, or it puts in some, you know. So all of that is part of sort of meta-efficiency, which I think is really just a function of the form. You know you've only got 9 pages or 300, so therefore you know it's understood that things should be to purpose I guess.

AV

Could you talk more about efficiency in the novel and in *Lincoln* in particular because maybe that was a departure for you too, not just in length, but in pastiche, in bringing other quotations into the work and arranging, in addition to narrating.

GS

I mean, when I first realized it was going to be a novel, I got a little bit ecstatic like, oh now I can be wasteful. You know, I can, just you know. But then it turns out that isn't true, and so one of the you know, what I found writing this book was that I was always developing rules, so rules for the fictive world is kind of sci-fi afterlife, but also rules, formal rules, rules about the form of the book, and one of them that developed pretty quickly, was that if I was going to use, if I was going to interject a historical section, it had to be in causal relationship to what came before and after. So it, you know, because I mean the number of historical sections could be infinite, so therefore you need a basis for selection and it started to become, just like in a story, you know, you look at the section and say why are you here in my story. And it gets a guilty look on its face and goes because I'm really funny and you go uh uh, that's not quite enough.

In the book I mentioned this thing that I called the Cornfeld principle after this guy Stuart Cornfeld who was a friend of mine and a movie producer. And he said that in a script and I think it's true of any narrative. A section, ideally not, you know, not absolutely, but ideally should both be entertaining in its own right and should advance the story in a meaningful way. So if you apply that standard, you know the section that's just funny might have to wait outside because it's you know. Likewise, the section that's only functional, that isn't very fun or vivid but does the work of proving something that also has to be reconsidered.

So in *Lincoln* the structure got strict on me quicker than I would have liked it to in the requirement that these historical sections had to be justified a little bit, so that was another form of efficiency. And actually the book you know I just outlined it. I'm trying to write a screenplay and I was really, you know, kind of happy that it's quite, with a few exceptions, it's caused, you know, section A causes Section B and things aren't there just for whimsicality and partly you know, because in a work like that, or like really my stories too which are kind of strange, there's some kind of mathematical relationship between efficiency of form and strangeness of presentation.

So in other words, if you're asking the reader to believe that Lincoln in a graveyard at night with a bunch of ghosts, efficiency of form is your friend because they say, well, there doesn't seem to be any silliness

in the form, it seems pretty mathematical, pretty real then you buy yourself a little more belief for the things that require more belief, if that makes sense.

AV

Absolutely.

MJ

And it sounds like you're applying the very same principles to the novel as you are to the short story, just expanding them into longer form is that, is that a fair assessment of what you're saying here?

GS

Yeah, I mean the joke I always made about *Lincoln* was that I, you know, before I started I'd kind of sworn off in novels like I tried them and failed and I thought, you know, you got a pretty nice gig with just a story so why, you know, like push it. And I said it was like if you know you had a really nice career making custom yurts, you know little you know 20 by 20 things. And then someone said, oh I would like to commission you to build a mansion and you're like no, I don't do that. And then you thought well wait a minute I could just put a bunch of those little yurts together, you know, and call that a mansion. So that's what the book felt like to me was it's really kind of a, I mean, it's form is a short story, but it's parts are just a little bit heftier, I think.

MJ

I have to say I've never considered the novel as a series of yurts piled together but I like that image.

GS

Probably yeah, you probably shouldn't, since you're a scholar you probably shouldn't.

MJ

I want to ask you about about your voice? 'Cause just sitting and reading across *10th of December* and *Fox 8* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* I struggle, and I don't mean this at all as a criticism, I just find it very interesting. I struggle to like to hear consistent George Saunders speaking to me after I put the book down. Each short story seems to sort of speak in a different register.

GS

I think when I was younger I got really hung up on this idea of you know what is my voice and I thought about Faulkner a lot and I could pick up Faulkner and he always sounds like Faulkner or Hemingway always sound like Hemingway and I felt that very much as a deficiency in myself.

And then I just gave up. I said, you know, I somehow can't find, I can't find a voice that does justice to all the different ways that I feel about the world. That's really true, or another way of saying it might just be I discovered that I could do a multiplicity of voices and that if I just picked up, if you gave me a three sentence swath in a certain voice, I'm pretty good at mimicking it, and I could use it to make a story.

So then at some point, just in the name of, you know, I was, probably, you know, in my 30s and feeling like the ship was leaving the harbor and I thought, well, fuck it. I'm just going to do whatever voice comes to hand. And I'm going to for that one story I'm going to accept that as my true voice, perfect it. And of course, during the course of a story you have to also develop that voice, you know. And then I'm going to leave it alone if I don't want to use it again.

MJ

That also puts me in mind of all of those quotations that you have in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, you've mentioned these a bit already, but all those quotations from 19th century narratives which a little bit of Googling told me that some of them are made up, and some of them are legit? Is that correct as a factual question?

GS

That is correct.

MJ

I just I was really taken by the way that we almost get a story coming, you advance the narrative through this little pastiche of historical anecdotes. And that, I think further really decenters the singularity of your voice there, but could you talk through a little bit about your thought process in throwing those moments of pastiche of historical narratives in?

GS

Sure, well, you know we talked about efficiency and one of the rules you know that I discovered about the book was that because it was going to be so weird and I was going to ask the reader to make so many leaps with me, I had to really be careful about, I guess whimsicality, you know. And so I didn't, I was really like that bouncer saying okay do I need this formal innovation or not? If I didn't need it, I couldn't have it.

So in this case what happened was really simple. I had written an early draft of maybe 30 or 40 pages where the only speakers were the ghosts and it kind of was alright. But then there was something

missing and what was missing was the research I've done for about 20 years on all the historical stuff surrounding this event of Lincoln going in the graveyard and so I thought, well, I need to have some of that, I need to have something about this big party that the Lincolns had and they had this big party when their sons were sick and then maybe because of the party, but certainly after the party the boys went downhill and Willie died, so that would be heavy for a parent, that had to be in there. The fact that all this happens, you know at one of the low moments of the Civil War when Lincoln was really losing control of it. That seemed important. So the question then became well, how do I get these facts in there gracefully?

So for a while I had Lincoln sort of musing about this stuff, which was very false, you know these, your son has just died, and you're going oh, the Battle of Fort Donelson is just occurred I mean, that's bullshit. So then I just, you know, sometimes what I find in art is that if you can work and work and work and clarify the problem you're having, clarify the obstruction so that you can say it, then the solution is kind of obvious. So in this case I said I need to get this history in the book. And then a little voice in my head said, well, how do you know it? I said, well, I read it and then that little voice went kind of put his hands up and went well? I said, are you suggesting that I, you know, put things in verbatim and that voice is like, well, it's your book.

AV

So George, can I ask you a quick question about what Michael was talking about before, all the research you did for *Lincoln* and then how to use that research. One of the things that was really powerful was, I think towards the end of the book where you lined up five or six different accounts of Lincoln that were in direct contradiction with each other. Someone characterizing him as patient, someone saying impatient, someone sentimental, someone highly ambitious and calculating. And so since you'd obviously have done meticulous research to the point where even your fictional voices are informed by you know empirical truths about the court records and how people actually spoke in the period. Was it a deliberate decision to show all the contradictions in the historical record as a way of talking about historical fiction? Or was it more about telling the story in as many different voices as possible?

GS

Yeah, you know, for me the way it works usually is that there's something intriguing about the surface qualities of the prose. So in other words, this thing you're talking about started early in the book with that section about the moon, all the different descriptions of the moon, and I just, you know, thought of that on the spot, did it and so enjoyed it, so liked the way it just you know, the effect it produced of the contradiction.

So for me, to be honest, mostly that's what I'm honoring as I'm writing. I get a certain effect. I go, oh that's nice. I don't really worry about what it means too much because I think that part of the writer's job is to make a meaning that transcends articulation. You know, you can't reduce it. Now, of course we do. And that's criticism. And it's fun. And it's absolutely true. But in the moment of the creation it's more like, oh, that's cool when I do that, that's a nice sound. There's something truthful about that. I like it.

And so that's why for example, in I think in the section you're talking about, some of that stuff is from history books, and some I made up. And it's I'm just steering it towards a certain sound.

AV

I was just going to ask you about the audio version of the book. Given the number of voices that you've written and then the story around the audiobook is just fantastic, you gathered 100, over 100 different people, nonprofessional, professional actors, nonprofessionals, people from your family, or your background. And I was just curious whether you felt that, if the audiobook almost amounts to a different work to you, or if it's just another version of the print? If the different technology, informed how you think readers receive the work? Do you think about audio, given that you're doing a podcast with us, as a significant medium for your writing?

GS

Yeah, I really do. I worked with a really brilliant producer name Kelly Gildea and it was mostly her doing to get all those 166 people and then of course to work the editor. But I thought it was, I listened to it on a drive across the country and I thought it was really a different experience and I loved it. So with this new book we did a sort of a similar thing. I read the narration and then we had seven different readers to read the Russian stories. I think it's really a beautiful form, very, very different and it you know it reads I think more slowly, at least for me. The book I scan faster than I listen, but when I listen to it, there are a lot of things I just wasn't aware was in the book and then by hearing it read I yeah...

So, and I loved you know the collaboration part of it was really lovely, you know, to get to know some of the people involved and hear them reading my work is really great and I think--when I was younger I had a brief, very brief sort of idea of being in theater, you know, when I was in high school and so there's some satisfaction in coming back to that.

AV

Could you imagine writing for audio first and paper second ever?

GS

Sure, yeah, definitely, definitely because I mean I have a story now that's almost all dialogue and it really, I just, I can hear it really well and I enjoy--I think the, and there are people who are definitely doing that and with you know, but for me there's still at the end of the day there's the word on the page is really my first love and I'm not getting any younger so I have to, you know.

AV

Well George, we only have you for a couple more minutes, so there was one question I wanted to ask before I think Michael is going to ask our signature question. And that is because your newest book is based on your experience in the classroom and because you've been such a wonderful advocate for fiction to the broader public, I wonder if you could say anything about not just reading fiction, but learning fiction at the, in the college classroom and the creative writing classroom and the importance of teaching literature and discussing it in a seminar space. Could you talk a little bit about what it's meant to be a teacher of writing for I think almost as long as you've been a writer?

GS

Yeah, yeah, one year less or two, no, four years less or five I think it's, I mean I have a whole soapbox I can get up on, but basically I think that a lot of the problems we're having in our country have to do with the slow but very real erosion of belief in literature that you know that, I think it started when I was a kid and it's you know, this sort of materialist dismissal of anything that's not, you know science basically or math or shareholding. And so I think that we sort of let it go too easily. And I think we are learning that it's a bedrock thing for a culture. It's not optional, it's not a niche thing, it actually teaches how to think, it teaches how to imagine one another, how to imagine people we don't know.

And I think that the process of sitting in a classroom, all focusing on a common fictive object is so powerful because it does so many things at once. One thing it does is it teaches us rational analysis, you know if you think a work is sexist, show me where. If you do, you've proved it. Now we can go on. So many harmful ideas can be transmitted in prose. If we've trained ourselves in reading it, we have a certain amount of imperviousness to that. We can identify BS when it shows up, the way that Orwell talked about in "Politics and the English language." And beyond that, I think it's so important to, you know, in a classroom, to model the way that we can disagree. You know we can maintain civility, but we can also push back and we can respect each other and so on.

So I think it's really, really important, and I think the you know, I think our culture is suffering because we don't really believe in it. We sort of believe in it the way we believe in, I don't know what, you know something, a trivial hobby maybe, or charming little hobby, all you book people reading in the corner, you know instead of being at the party, buying stocks.

And so I think it's very important you know, but I also think you know creative writing is, I have some mixed feelings about it because I think it's imperative that a writer read first, a lot. You know there's no worst nightmare than an undergraduate creative writing workshop where nobody read anything. It's insane, you know there's no basis for discussion. So if I was designing an undergraduate program, I would really front load some serious reading and maybe you know the analysis would be somewhat flavored like the one like in the book where you are taking it apart technically. But you have to read some number of source texts first before you start trying to write your own. Or you're you know, you're like a rock musician who's never listen to a record. It's, you know, it's all futility.

AV

Yeah, you know, it's really interesting. I read a study recently about the perception of the humanities in the United States and for the most part, people are relatively positive when they hear certain words like literature or the arts or philosophy. But one thing that was really surprising to me was that the associations of literature with pretentiousness or elitism had only gone up, so younger people between 18 and 29 were far more likely to regard literature as an elitist or pretentious pursuit than people in the other age demographics, so you know 40 to 59, 60 and above, and I'm just wondering what it is about the culture that has brought us to this place where literature is associated with elitism and pretentiousness and it's becoming concentrated among youth who I would think of as being, you know, the people we most want to reach at this moment so.

GS

Yeah, that's really interesting. I didn't know that. You know something comes to mind is that there's a kind of a death spiral that happens in art forms, I think, where okay so it's first there's a little bit of a slippage where, let's say I hate to use this word, but you know, regular people stop reading fiction. They move away from it. In response to that, the form adapts and becomes more insular. And now we've got protected spaces where it can be done and be funded like MFA programs, for example.

Well then it gets even more insular and fewer people read it and it and it becomes a little bit of a niche activity for real. So that when you show, you know, you're kind of medium literary friend a contemporary novel he can't. You know it, it doesn't speak to him, so it's really tricky because there's also a way in which the culture has become stupider, you know, and become more materialist and more addicted to fast-twitch activities, but I think we're in a little bit of a death spiral now, which is kind of why I felt good about writing this book to say, look, if you like to read anything. And you're interested in making a way back to literature these Russians are a great starting point because they are, you know, they're not fancy, they're talking about people in trouble, mostly, you know people in different species of trouble. And we, the main currency, is that you care about the person who's in trouble and you identify with the person is in trouble, and you recognize that it's just you on a different day. So I think it's a pretty that's a pretty broad doorway.

But it's alarming really, you know, 'cause I mean, you know, I know a lot of people who I love and who basically say, hey, we bought your book, yeah we bought it, you know. So that's not healthy.

AV

Oh, but the other half of that is we didn't read it, per se?

GS

I think yeah, yeah, or you know or sometimes I read part of your, you know I started it.

Yeah and so I think you know the thing is that there's nobody, I really believe there's nobody in the world who doesn't benefit from hearing a story. If that story has something to do with what keeps him awake at night or what they love or what they fear, and that's those stories are essential to what we do

here, on Earth, without them it's such a lonely place, you know, without, if you are having an issue and there's literally no echo from the world affirming that you're not the first person that had that issue, that's an incredibly lonely you know, deathly place.

MJ

I could sit here and ask George questions all day to about the remedies we need for our society and the prescriptions. But I suppose, Aarthi you were saying we should move towards the final question-

AV

The lighter moments of our show, yes, yes.

MJ

The signature question for the podcast. Before we do that, George, I just want to say thank you. I can tell you that I've got at least 20 friends who are going to be extremely jealous. I have told no one yet that I'm interviewing you and I'm going to drop it on people so I'll have a lot of people who are jealous at least there's a lot of readers in my circle, who love your work.

OK, so the signature question that we end this podcast on every time is what is your favorite treat while in the throes of writing and/or what do you play or eat when the going really gets tough?

GS

You know this is embarrassing, but I eat pretzel rods. I get these Snyders pretzel rods and there's a big old vat of them in the closet and I just kind of, I think it's probably the way people would reward themselves with a cigarette. I just, you know, grab one.

And then when I was writing in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the ending, the last third was just a frenzy of beautiful, one of the most beautiful experience I ever had. And at that time it was Graham crackers. Same thing. Those kind of honey Graham crackers, you know, and so I'd be out in the shed working and then come in. And then that with that book there was a time at the end there where you know I could feel all the bowling pins in the air so to speak, you know. And the main thing I was trying to do was just really maintain intensity and not settle into writing, but so I would. I would come in the house and put on either Wilco or Sleater-Kinney and those in a really loud and kind of just get my blood boiling a little bit and like kind of remembering what intensity felt like and then go back to the shed with you know with a couple Graham crackers stashed away.

AV

Riot GRRRL and Graham crackers is an excellent combination. I'm all for that. George, Michael, thank you so much again for doing the show.

And as we approach the end of the first season of Novel Dialogue, John and I would like to thank all the critics and novelists who gave us a chance and made the show such a pleasure to do.

We are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and acknowledge support from Brandeis, the Melon connected PhD program and Duke University. Nai Kim our production intern and designer and Claire Ogden is our sound engineer. Past episodes include Bruce Robbins in conversation with Orhan Pamuk, Ulka Anjaria in dialogue with Madhuri Vijay and Elizabeth McMahon with Helen Garner.

So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening and look out for Season 2 on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.