

Swimming with Russians

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life
George Saunders (Random House 2021), 433 pages

Ian Gallacher, rev'r*

This is the best book you'll read about writing and reading this year. Perhaps ever. You owe it to yourself to buy this book and read it often. I'll repeat this opening paragraph at the end of the review because it should be said twice. This book is that good.

It's a challenge to review, and recommend, a book about writing for a group of professional writing teachers and people who are deeply thoughtful about the writing and reading process. But think of it this way. When we stand in front of our students, on a grey Wednesday morning in October when the first excitement of being in law school has left them and all they can think about is the torts midterm that's coming up tomorrow, we are delighted when we see one student—maybe more, but let's not get above ourselves here—have one of those “ah-ha” moments. The student's facial expressions change, reflecting the internal analysis and comprehension that's going on, and the eyes suddenly glint a little, reflecting the new possibilities and opportunities that have suddenly been revealed. It's the moment we live for.

Well, think of us as the students, in the grey October mornings of our careers. It's my guess that we've thought about writing for so long, and taught it to others for so many semesters, that we're all a little (a lot?) jaded by it. It's not that we don't enjoy what we do, of course, but we've grown used to the magic of it. We haven't had those “ah-ha” moments for some time now, and we don't expect them anymore. This book has them on almost every page. It's a book for anyone who loves writing and

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reading, but it's particularly exciting for a group like us who perhaps think that the magic has gone. It hasn't. It's here.

So. The basic information first. This is a book by George Saunders, perhaps the most distinguished writer of short stories in America today and certainly one of the most respected writing teachers. Professor Saunders is on the faculty of the writing program at Syracuse University (the one on main campus, not the College of Law) which, technically, makes him my colleague. I say this in order to shed light on what some might feel is a conflict of interest, but let me assure you: Professor Saunders and I move in very different circles, and I have not met him, nor am I ever likely to meet him except by pure accident, probably in the checkout line at Wegmans. Even then, I wouldn't recognize him.

As part of his class load at Syracuse, Saunders teaches a class in the Russian short story and it's an abbreviated, and certainly simplified, version of that class he presents in this book: the title of the book is drawn from events in one of the stories; *Gooseberries*, by Chekhov. Now, if you're like me, Saunders' chosen medium presents a significant roadblock. I don't enjoy short stories. I recognize the technical opportunities they present but for me they always feel like etudes, those things you practice alone in a room to perfect your technical skills on an instrument but nothing you would play in public. So for me, they're almost always unsatisfying and I choose not to read them most of the time. You might love them. Potato, potato.

After reading this book, nothing has changed. I still find short stories unsatisfying, and I still dislike Russian nineteenth-century literature. Neither of these roadblocks prevented me from devouring this book, though, and if you have similar reservations they should not stop your forward momentum to buying and reading this book. I'll try to explain why.

The book is organized simply. Saunders presents seven short stories by Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Gogol. (Gogol's *The Nose*, is a story I love, and therefore the exception that proves my feelings about Russian short stories.) With the exception of the first story—Chekhov's *In The Cart*—Saunders lets you read the story through without interruption, and then writes his "thoughts" on the stories and includes an "afterthought." For the first story, Saunders weaves his thoughts into the text, giving you an insight into the level of reading detail he's expecting of you and showing you how to think about what the writer is doing and why. At the end, he includes three writing exercises as "appendices." And that's it. Four hundred and six pages of the most intense education you will ever receive about writing and reading.

Examples of that education? No. It wouldn't be especially revealing if I tried to excerpt some of what Saunders says, and it would be unhelpful as well. This is an organic work, in which everything builds on, and is related to, everything else, and to excerpt, or synopsise, some of Saunders' commentary would be to diminish it without demonstrating its value. So no, I'm not going to try to pick a passage or two that shows you why this book is so magical. I will say this, though. While, as you would expect, the book is generally generous in its praise of the short stories it uses to make its points, Saunders is not afraid to criticize or draw attention to a lapse in either technique or motivation. The stories he uses are impressive vehicles for the lessons he wants to teach, but they're not perfect and he's not afraid to point out a deficiency when it occurs. Whether or not Saunders intended it this way, this warts-and-all approach (and, truth to be told, there aren't many warts) makes you trust him more. If you spotted a problem and he didn't comment on it, you might think him to be an uncritical booster for Russian short stories. Not George Saunders.

The book can be enjoyed on multiple levels. As you become attuned to the way Saunders wants you to read the stories themselves, you start to pull out the coded information that perhaps you recognized but didn't try to decipher before (why does Tolstoy include those clothes, fluttering on a line, in the village in *Master and Man*? Ah. Maybe that's why). Then there's the technical information Saunders imparts, information about how someone—who's thought long and carefully about these stories, and is one of the best writers alive today—wants you to think about the techniques used by the writers and how we might want to adapt those techniques into our writing. And there's Saunders' writing: his masterful use of voice to assume the position of friendly guide who isn't showing off how much he knows but is sincere in his desire to help you get as much out of the stories as possible; his conversational style that is so much more than the conversations we usually have about writing; and his use of the personal anecdote to both explain a point about writing he's making and to draw you closer to him, so you feel you know and can trust someone who's sharing this sort of detail with you. If you use the same techniques Saunders wants you to apply to the short stories to his own writing, you feel as if you're really beginning to delve into the heart of his writing technique and it's a fascinating experience. "Ah-ha's" abound.

Now, none of this has anything to do with the law, of course. And it's a fair criticism to say that lawyers can't write like either nineteenth-century Russians or twenty-first-century writing teachers so what does this book really have to say to us about what we do. I'd answer it by saying what we always say when confronted with this thought: good writing is good writing, and the better we understand how to read and

write—anything—the better legal writers we will be. And the better legal writing teachers we will be as well. And if that doesn't persuade you, then divorce this book from what we do, and look on it as a deeply pleasurable reading experience. It has more to say than your normal beach read, it's written so well that it's just fun to read, and (if you don't share my antipathy to Russian short stories) it's a good excuse to read, or re-read, seven classics of the genre. You might even become a convert to the style although—mercifully—that's not required to enjoy the book.

What else to say? The technical exercises included as appendices to the book are simple but effective reminders of how writing can be taught and could stand on their own. But when you read them after going through the rest of the book first they gain added luster from everything you've read and thought about.

Downsides? Well, in its hardback version it's probably not so easy to lug the book around in a beach bag. But the good news is that it's coming out in a paperback version this spring. In fact, by the time you read this that edition will be on your bookshop's shelves. It's still a substantial book, but portability will be less of a problem.

If you read the book and like the experience (and anyone reading this journal will like the experience), then there's more good news. Saunders has launched a newsletter—Story Club—in which he takes subscribers on guided tours through more short stories, branching out beyond Russian literature; the first story he analyzes is Hemingway's *Cat in the Rain*. (Thanks to David Thomson for alerting me to this.) There's a free layer to the newsletter, but all the meaty stuff is behind a paywall. When I looked, the annual price appeared to be \$50, but prices change so what it might be when you read this I can't say. Whatever the price ends up being, though, I can guarantee you that it'll be less expensive than coming to Syracuse and signing up for the MFA courses Saunders teaches. And you won't have to deal with the snow. In the literature or in person.

Unlike the book, you're not alone when you read what Saunders has to say and the comments section (really some of the most pleasant and supportive comments you'll ever read on the internet) makes the experience feel very much like a writing class. You're welcome to join in or to sit quietly and take in the collective wisdom of Saunders and the participants. There are t-shirts and hats as well, but the only reason to subscribe are the fascinating, engaging, and deep discussions about writing and reading. Sound interesting? The newsletter can be found on Substack.

I'll end as I began. This is the best book you'll read about writing and reading this year. Perhaps ever. You owe it to yourself to buy this book and read it often. This book is that good.