BECAUSE IT'S FUN

Whenever it comes time for me to introduce George Saunders's novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* to my Readings in Contemporary Fiction class, I always imagine myself standing in front of the classroom, my white board entirely covered in scrawls, red yarn connecting different parts of my presentation to others, a crazed look on my face while the students cower away.

Luckily for the class, I don't actually create a murder board for this novel but instead begin by sharing a PowerPoint presentation, having learned that when I have a lot to say about something, some kind of structure is necessary. Yet I almost always begin by proclaiming, with a slightly manic edge, that the novel is weird but great, or hard but good, or that they're going to struggle with it but be able to proudly claim that they've read it. Then, when everyone looks faintly concerned (or even *very* concerned), I abashedly retreat to my slides, the first of which much more calmly gives the basics: "*Lincoln in the Bardo* is a 2017 work of historical fiction

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by George Saunders, which focuses on the death of eleven-year-old Willie Lincoln, Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln's third son." Everyone eases up then; no matter how strange this novel might be, it can be summarized, apparently. The world will not crumble.

But inwardly, I'm still burbling with excitement, jumping from point to point of the many things I have to tell them. *L in the B*, as I affectionately call it, is the weirdest novel I've ever read, and I adore teaching it, even more than I like reading it. I'm always so excited to hear what my students have to say about it, probably because the very first time I taught it was almost a massive disaster… but my students saved it (and me) just in the nick of time.

As a career teacher, I worry about keeping the work of educating engaging for me. Of course, I value expertise, my own and others', and have methods and best practices I'll always rely on. But I don't want to teach by rote, insisting that my students read *The Giver* because I've been teaching *The Giver* for the last 30 years and already have lesson plans and a test made up for it.[86] One of the methods I use to bring the fun back into teaching is to select a new-to-me novel and read it with the class. My students seem to enjoy that I do this, as if it's some kind of high-wire act of scholarship, which I suppose it is. There is always the chance that I might say, "Oh, wow, I don't get it" and tumble off the wire into the net below. I don't know what would happen then. Would I have to start from the bottom rung of my career again as a TA in English Composition 101?

86 This very often happens at the high-school level, but secondary teachers get a pass, in my opinion, because they have so much to do. Professors have less to do.

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L in the B was one of the first novels I chose to teach this way, off the cuff, for my Readings in Contemporary Fiction class several years ago. I taught (and teach) several Saunders short stories in my Intro to Writing Fiction classes, so some of the students who stuck with me to take Readings would be familiar with his work, which they had liked. And the novel was highly anticipated, the beating heart of whatever Contemporary Fiction was in early 2018.

I specifically remember sitting down with my copy a few days before we were scheduled to begin it in class. I had the hardcover, the only version available then. Pleasingly thick paper, a deckle edge, and no epigram at the beginning but a reminder that Saunders has written and published many other books. I felt a frisson of self-satisfaction that I was introducing my students, and myself, to such a cool new novel. Stepping out onto that high wire, I flipped past the deliberately fading page reading *1*, and started to read at the Roman numeral I:

> *On our wedding day I was forty-six, she was eighteen. Now, I know what you are thinking: older man (not thin, somewhat bald, lame in one leg, teeth of wood) exercises the marital prerogative, thereby mortifying the young—*
>
> *But that is false.*

No more than five minutes later, having made it to the end of that speech (attributed to a "hans vollman"[87]) and then through what appeared to be, sorta, dialogue between vollman and a "roger bevins iii," I put the book down, com-

87 Why no capital letters? I did not know, but that was the least of my problems, frankly.

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pletely confused and very concerned. I sat down on the wire to avoid falling off. What the hell had I done?

I wasn't thrown off by the *in medias res*[88] style of the opening so much as the strangeness of the dialogue attribution appearing at the end. Soon, my students would call this "like a play, but not quite" which is exactly how I felt. It was clear that hans and roger were talking to each other:

A sort of sick-box was judged—was judged to be—
hans vollman

Efficacious
roger bevins iii

Efficacious, yes. Thank you, friend.
hans vollman

But why attribute the speaker at the end? I had to read the entire first two and a half pages to find out that it was hans who was speaking. Also, not for nothing, who is hans? (There was no cast list, as would typically appear at the beginning of a playscript.) Why aren't any of these character names capitalized? Also, who was hans's audience? Was he speaking to me? Is he the narrator? Who is the narrator? And, by the way, what is a sick-box?[89]

Even if I somewhat followed the first chapter, the next chapter blew everything to hell. Where were my new friends

88 This is the kind of term we're supposed to use in academia, so I have here, but I really think of this as *The dude is already talking.*

89 I can answer that one, at least: it's the term a dead person who doesn't want to be dead uses for a *coffin*.

hans and roger? Gone! Instead, I was looking at a series of excerpts, one hundred or so words apparently pulled from four different books, each cited (again) at the end. I bet I don't even need to tell you that none of them had a thing to do with roger or hans, instead focusing on the parties the Lincolns gave at the White House, frowned upon because of the Civil War, and then their children's illness, a bad fever. I knew who Abraham Lincoln and his wife were. But everything else was… uh…

I remember the feeling of dread coming over me—was I hanging off the high wire by one or two hands?—as I turned to Google to look up the titles Saunders cited in the second chapter: *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* by Elizabeth Keckley; *Reveille in Washington, 1860–1865* by Margaret Leech and James M. McPherson; and *Twenty Days* by Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt Jr. Did these sources even… exist?

The Keckley book did. And so did the others! Whew. A relief. Had I just left it there… But no, when I moved on to chapter III, there were two sources that seemed entirely made-up. Also, this chapter was again entirely citations, and I now knew some of them were fictional. Honestly, what was going on? I realized I was now at the equivalent of gently swinging in the net, having fallen, soundlessly, my epic stunt a failure.

I closed the book, having made it all of three chapters in, and stared at the cover. The title contains the word *Bardo*, of course, and I sat there and contemplated teaching a novel I did not understand how to read to my students, many of whom were only very recently converted (back) to liking reading

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at all (thanks to our opener, *Gone Girl*), and I realized that I did not even know what a bardo was.

I am a good reader, an idea this entire book is premised upon. But somehow, I'd ended up in a place where, as a reader, I felt lost and confused. I have never felt less empowered as a teacher, having no real idea what I could do.[90]

I eventually decided that there was only one way I could approach teaching *Lincoln in the Bardo*, short of canceling it. On a cold February day in 2018, I stood in front of the class, clutching my beautiful hardbound copy of the book and admitted that I didn't *get* it. I didn't even try to get up on the high wire. I told them that we would have to figure out what we could together.

Thankfully, because my students at Pitt are wonderful, they found this empowering. Pitiful, perhaps, but empowering.

After some diligent research, I could offer some small help, in that I could give them the context for which Lincoln was in the bardo. (I could also google what a *bardo* was—a Tibetan Buddhist term for a liminal space, which Saunders uses as a sort of stopping point between life and death/the afterlife.) I could fill them in on who those actual, real-life people were. Obviously, my students had heard of Abraham Lincoln. Willie, not so much. He was the second-last of four sons born to the Lincolns. Only his eldest brother, Robert, lived to adulthood, although Willie never knew his next oldest brother, Eddie, who died in 1850, the year Willie was born. (The youngest son, Tad, survived his father but died at eighteen.)

90 As an aside, because the book was so new, there wasn't even much online discussion of it yet, which I would have gladly turned to help me out.

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Saunders portrays Willie as an adored child, handsome, polite, compassionate, and well-liked, and then deeply mourned after he sickened with a fever and died. Mary Todd Lincoln, already fragile, took to her bed for weeks afterward, and Abraham's grief was nearly incapacitating as well. Saunders's inspiration for the novel comes from a story he heard about Willie's resting place in the Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington, DC. Lincoln, Saunders was told, would visit the tomb, pull Willie's body out of its coffin and hold his son's remains.

That's the kind of detail that registers, and the class blinked at me in astonishment. Having done my best to prime the pump, I released them into their day, telling them the reading was going to be hard going, but we'd reconvene and do our best.

I, who have seen students love *Jane Eyre* and come around on *Hamlet*, should not have been surprised by this, but yet I was: when the students returned to class, having read half of part one, they weren't hostile. No one had dropped the course or refused to attend. In fact, they seemed champing at the bit to get into it. After initial agreement that this book was both weird and hard, the first and most voracious discussion was about those attributions of dialogue that I had found confusing, myself. Were they dialogue or something else? Was it supposed to be formatted like a play? If so, why put the attributions at the end? That was so confusing!

After fifteen minutes of conversation on this topic alone, I felt I had to move us forward to discussing the citations[91]

91 One of my students had already gone through the entire novel and made a list of which sources were real and which fictional, bless him, so we really had to talk about that!

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in the next chapter, so I said, "Well, we'll just have to ask George Saunders about why he set up the dialogue that way, someday, if we can!" and changed the topic. We then discussed chapter V, which consists entirely of contradicting descriptions of the moon on the night Willie dies, for another fifteen minutes. And then we talked about the heart of the novel, at least as we found it so far: the friendship between roger and hans, longtime denizens of the Bardo. We pieced together our understanding that they (and their friend, the rev. everly thomas) wanted to help the newly arrived willie lincoln move quickly through the Bardo because—for reasons we did not yet grasp—to stay was especially dangerous for children. And we met what a student called the "fifty million other dead people" in the book, each of whom spoke—if they were speaking at all? Maybe they were thinking instead? Oh dear, we had not thought of that until someone mentioned that we couldn't be absolutely sure they were talking aloud since no living human could hear them, oh, this book! But anyway, each spoke with a unique voice, rendered on the page by Saunders's creative use of spelling and spacing.

I left class that evening spent but elated. It had been a discussion that required my thorough attention, even if I rarely had anything specifically helpful to say. But I had managed to stay enthusiastic about the book and its many perplexities, keeping the class from slipping into condemnation or despair. We had had fun, I felt, trying to figure out this novel. Weird, writerly fun, sure, but still fun. I don't think any of us had a clear picture of the book yet. But we liked it for its humor and big heart, despite it all, and that was enough, for now. I felt invigorated, even in my fatigue, and I realized that

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I was looking forward to reading more of the novel myself. I wanted to know what smart things the class would say about the next part, and I wanted to hear what smart things they might prompt me to say.

Later that week, I got an email from a student in the class. Coincidentally, when it arrived, I was puzzling through the next part of *L in the B*, thinking about how it was easier to follow, now that I understood how it worked. But it was also more challenging in the world-building Saunders undertook in this next section: now I was reading (still in that strange, play script-ish way) about angels (or demons?) luring (tricking?) the residents into something Saunders called the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" which seemed to be when they abruptly leave the bardo for whatever afterlife came next. And there were still so many characters! I didn't mind pausing to read my student's note.

She hadn't let go of the question around the dialogue and its attribution, it turned out, and had taken me at my word to ask George Saunders. She had emailed him. And he had kindly replied.

Before I go any further with this story, I want to strongly emphasize that you should not email George Saunders, or for that matter, any other author with your random questions. Authors are busy, and so are professors, and he is both. A lot of what you want to know is googleable. Please do not take from this story that I am encouraging you to email George Saunders![92]

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92 As a joke, one of my students once listed *Do not email George Saunders!* as one of the important lessons learned in my class in an end-of-term survey. Correct!

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Anyway, his email was wonderful. I felt such joy in reading it, so happy for my student that she had been rewarded for being brave. Saunders explained—I am paraphrasing here—that he eventually chose to attribute the dialogue at the end after originally doing so at the top of each speech, the way a playscript would indeed do. But it looked ugly, he felt, especially when compared to the citation chapters (always attributed at the end), so one day, he switched them around so all chunks of text ended with a notation at the end whether designating who was speaking or what source had been cited. He liked this better, he explained, and after a while, he realized that it wasn't just an aesthetic choice. The bardo is a place of confusion and unease, and forcing the reader to make their way through the book without quite knowing who was speaking at times emphasized that confusion and unease, allowing the reader to feel almost like a person new to the bardo, just like Willie. Further—and this is where the email really turned into something wonderful—Saunders advised her that sometimes trusting your gut or, as he put it, *trusting the fun*, is a necessary part of being a writer. His gut hadn't liked the more standard formulation; his gut told him to change it; the change released the story a little bit more. It was now more fun. (The very fun we liked, even clung to, when trying to figure out the novel.)

With my student's permission, I shared this email with the class, who were so happy to hear from the author himself the actual, legible reasoning behind the choice that had puzzled us. And the rest of his advice landed, too. For the rest of the semester, I enjoyed hearing them say "Trust the fun" to each other and to report to me that they told themselves that as

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they wrote. I even heard from one former student, long after graduation, that he was still telling himself to trust the fun. Trusting and valuing one's imagination is a key part of being a writer but awfully hard to teach in an academic setting without becoming that professor who insists on taking everyone out on to the quad to smell spring in the air instead of teaching. How lucky for all of us that Saunders took on this task.

The other part of the email worth remembering is that Saunders said something to the effect that he knew the book was a challenge. I was startled by this, and so was the class. We obviously thought it was a challenge; I was still half apologizing at the start of every class that we were reading the book, even though it had won us all over.[93] So to know that the author, the guy who invented or organized everything we were reading, felt his book was a challenge, too? I was so relieved. And the class felt better, too. Saunders's offhand remark made us feel both more invested in the book (We're up for the challenge! We can read your book, Mr. Saunders!) and also more capable of reading it. Even the *author* thought it was a hard book, but we were doing okay! We understood a lot of it!

As we approached the end of our unit on *Lincoln in the Bardo*, someone in the class observed that it taught us how to read it. I agreed and realized that with most books, we have some idea of what we're getting into, some reasonable expectation of how things will go, often due to the genre. Perhaps that's why we find it so aggravating when the book doesn't do what we think we've been promised, the dreaded

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93 Well, most of us. No book ever wins everyone over.

It wasn't what I expected of Goodreads reviews.[94] *Lincoln in the Bardo* challenged us, trusted us to jump in, flail around, and eventually work out how to swim through it. Maybe that's why we liked it so much. It assumed we were smart, and then it turned out that we were.

I've truly only scratched the surface of *Lincoln in the Bardo* here. I haven't even referenced the way the book appears to be in conversation with Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, or the way Saunders brings the Civil War from the rear to the forefront by the close of the book, or his use of specifically Catholic imagery in depicting an afterlife that very much freaks out my Catholic (and Catholic-adjacent)[95] students. None of this was apparent to me during my first reading, and some of it not until my second or third. I have absolutely no doubt that after this book is published, I'll stumble upon some other aspect of that astounding novel that I should've mentioned.

I have to laugh at myself now, at my hubris, really, in believing that there would be no problems in teaching a book I knew almost nothing about—really, could I have not read a review? The *New York Times* called *L in the B* a "weird folk-art diorama" set in a "bizarre purgatory." Was that not a heads-up that it would prove more of a challenge than *Go, Dog. Go!*? Oh, Professor Reed, bless your heart.

But while I've mostly forgiven myself, I do often wish I could go back in time and share some of what I've learned

94 To be fair, there's sometimes a mismatch between the book written and the publishing company's presentation of it, which is not the author's or reader's fault.

95 Everyone in Pittsburgh is Catholic-adjacent.

about *L in the B* with the first students to read it with me. I like to think that they'd be glad to see my enthusiasm for the book and my confidence in teaching it have grown over the years. I'd also really like to correct the absurd fact that we barely discussed Abraham Lincoln—you know, *that* guy—at all.

Alas, as Cher reminds us, we cannot turn back time. I taught what I taught. I did the best I could, and so did my students, I feel certain. And while we left a great deal undiscussed, you know what? We learned from that book. The experience was memorable and unique, I hope, and it was also—I think Saunders would approve very much here—an awful lot of fun.