

Empathy in satire

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue



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One of the premier pleasures of reading is discovering a new author. My most recent discovery is short story writer George Saunders. Saunders teaches creative writing at Syracuse University and has published stories in *Harper's*, *GQ* and especially the *New Yorker*. His stories have been gathered into four collections: *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, *Pastoralia*, *In Persuasion Nation* and *Tenth of December*.

Saunders's tales are set in the present or near future. In the earliest stories, a recurring setting is a theme park where workers struggle to survive on minimum wage. Saunders explores their lives with an often comic touch. He even has an eye for the difficulties of faith in such a setting.

"The Wavemaker Falter" features a water park situated near an institution for those with religious vocations who have lost their faith. "Halfway up the mountain it's the Center for Wayward Nuns, full of sisters and other religious personnel who've become doubtful. Once a few of them came down to our facility in stern suits and swam cautiously. The singing from up there never exactly knocks your socks off. It's a very conditional singing, probably because of all the doubt. A young nun named Sister Viv came unglued there last fall and we gave her a free season pass to come down and meditate near our simulated Spanish trout stream whenever she wanted. The head nun said Viv was from Idaho and sure enough the stream seemed to have a calming effect."

Saunders's earliest characters constantly struggle in a world longing for fantasy but marked by brutal economic realities. The Wayward Nuns residents and park workers alike can do little but work harder under disillusioning conditions. Saunders satirizes a world that wants perfection in its simulated forms but is characterized by want and loss in its real forms.

Saunders also satirizes our hyperconsumerist culture. In "My Flamboyant Grandson," a man takes his grandson to New York City to see a musical. As the pair make their way up Broadway, the "Everly Strips" built into their shoes are read by "Everly Readers" that activate screens and speakers installed along the sidewalk to hawk goods and services "reflective of the Personal Preferences we'd stated on our monthly Everly Preference Worksheets." These aggressive ads are personalized, as in, "Mr. Petrillo, you chose Burger King eight times last fiscal year but only two times thus far this fiscal year, please do not forsake us now, there is a store one block north!" Another ad shouts, "Golly, Leonard, remember your childhood on the farm in Oneonta? Why not reclaim those roots with a Starbucks Country Roast?"—this "in a celebrity-rural voice I could not identify, possibly Buck Owens."

In another, darker story, "Escape from Spiderhead," Saunders takes on privatized prisons and the sometime malignancy of scientific research. The protagonist, Jeff, is among the inmates who have done violence in their past. They have apparently lost all rights and are now the subjects of experiments with psychiatric drugs. The operators of Spiderhead put their subjects in experimental conditions and then inject them with a series of cleverly named drugs. "Verbaluce" leaves "you feeling the same things but saying them better." "Docilryde" renders the subject pliant and obedient. "Darkenfloxx" is an incredibly strong, even suicide-inducing, depressant.

In one experiment, Jeff is given an aphrodisiac ("Vivistiff") and makes love vigorously to two female inmates. To test whether or not he actually has any feelings of love for the women, he is then supposed to choose one to suffer an administration of Darkenfloxx. When he refuses this choice, the scientist overseeing the experiment chooses which woman to torment. Jeff weeps as he witnesses her agony, and the scientist admonishes, "Jeff, stop crying. Contrary to what you might think, there's not much data in crying."

Despite the drugs bombarding his system, Jeff feels compassion. "Basically, what I was feeling was: Every human, at birth, is, or at least has the potential to be, beloved of his/her mother/father. Thus every human is worthy of love. As I watched

Heather suffer, a great tenderness suffused my body, a tenderness hard to distinguish from a sort of vast existential nausea; to wit, why are such beautiful beloved vessels made slaves to so much pain? Heather presented as a bundle of pain receptors. Heather's mind was fluid, and could be ruptured (by pain, by sadness). . . . Poor child, I was thinking, poor girl. Who loved you? Who loves you?"

Saunders's sympathetic characters struggle to realize simple human connections. They wish and reach for redemption. In portraying them, Saunders is only getting better and more affecting.