

MY WRITING EDUCATION: A TIME LINE

By George Saunders October 22, 2015



George Saunders and his wife, Paula, in 1986.

February 1986

Tobias Wolff calls my parents' house in Amarillo, Texas, leaves a message: I've been admitted to the Syracuse Creative Writing Program. I call back, holding *Back in the World* in my hands. For what seems, in chagrined memory, like eighteen hours, I tell him all of my ideas about Art and list all the things that have been holding me back artistic-development-wise and possibly (God! Yikes!) ask if he ever listens to music while he writes. He's kind and patient and doesn't make me feel like an idiot. I do that

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Mid-August 1986

I arrive in Syracuse with \$300, in a 1966 Ford pickup with a camper on the back. Turns out, here in the East, they have this thing called “a security deposit.” For the next two weeks I live out of my truck, showering in the Syracuse gym, moving the Ford around town at night so as not to get nabbed for vagrancy, thinking it might reflect badly on me if I have to call Toby, or Doug Unger, my other future-teacher at Syracuse, and request bail money.

One day I walk up to campus. I stand outside the door of Doug’s office, ogling his nameplate, thinking: “Man, he sometimes *sits* in there, the guy who wrote *Leaving the Land*.” At this point in my life, I’ve never actually set eyes on a person who has published a book. It is somehow mind-blowing, this notion that the people who write books also, you know, *live*: go to the store and walk around campus and sit in a particular office and so on. Doug shows up and invites me in. We chat awhile, as if we are peers, as if I am a real writer too. I suddenly feel like a real writer. I’m talking to a guy who’s been in *People* magazine. And he’s asking me about my process. Heck, I *must be* a real writer.

Only out on the quad do I remember: oh, crap, I still have to write a *book*.

Late August 1986

After the orientation meeting the program goes dancing. Afterward, Toby and I agree we are too drunk to let either him or me drive the car home, that car, which we are pretty sure is his car, if there is a sweater in the back. There is! We walk home, singing, probably, “Helplessly Hoping.” In his kitchen, we eat some chicken that his wife Catherine has prepared for something very important tomorrow, something for which there will be no time to make something else.

I leave, happy to have made a new best friend.

The Next Day

I wake, chagrined at my over-familiarity, and vow to thereafter keep a respectful

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For the rest of the semester, I do.

Classes Begin

I put my copy of *Leaving the Land* on my writing desk so that, if anyone happens to walk in, they will ask why that book is there, and I will be able to off-handedly say: “Oh, that guy’s my teacher. I sometimes go into his office and we just, you know, talk about my work.”

And then I’ll yawn, as if this is no big deal to me at all.

September–October 1986

I start dating a beautiful fellow writer named Paula Redick, who is in the year ahead of me. Things move quickly. We get engaged in three weeks, a Syracuse Creative Writing Program record that, I believe, still stands. Toby takes Paula to lunch, asks if she is sure about this, the implication being, she might want to give this a little additional thought.

Later That Semester

At a party, I go up to Toby and assure him that I am no longer writing the silly humorous crap I applied to the program with, i.e., the stuff that had gotten me into the program in the first place. Now I am writing more seriously, more realistically, nothing made up, nothing silly, everything directly from life, no exaggeration or humor—you know: “real writing.”

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Toby looks worried. But quickly recovers.

“Well, good!” he says. “Just don’t lose the magic.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. Why would I do that? That would be dumb.

I go forward and lose all of the magic, for the rest of my time in grad school and for several years thereafter.

Every Monday night, Doug’s workshop meets at his house. Doug’s wife, Amy, makes us dinner, which we eat on the break. We first-years are a bit tight-assed and over-literary. We are trying too hard. One night, Doug has us do an exercise: after the break, we are going to tell a story from our lives, off the cuff. We are terrified. We don’t know any good, real stories, which is why we have been writing all of these stories about kids having sex with crocodiles and so forth. And an audience of our peers is going to be sitting there, wincing or declining to laugh or nodding off? Yikes. We drink more on the break than usual. And then we all do a pretty good job, actually. None of us wants to be a flop and so each of us rises to the occasion by telling a story we actually find

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everyday lives to, for example, get out of trouble, or seduce someone. For me, a light goes on: we are supposed to be—are required to be—interesting. We're not only *allowed* to think about audience, we'd *better*. What we're doing in writing is not all that different from what we've been doing all our lives, i.e., using our personalities as a way of coping with life. Writing is about charm, about finding and accessing and honing ones' particular charms. To say that "a light goes on" is not quite right—it's more like: a fixture gets installed. Only many years later (see below) will the light go on.

Even Later That Semester

Doug gets an unkind review. We are worried. Will one of us dopyly bring it up in workshop? We don't. Doug does. Right off the bat. He wants to talk about it, because he feels there might be something in it for us. The talk he gives us is beautiful, honest, courageous, totally generous. He shows us where the reviewer was wrong—but also where the reviewer might have gotten it right. Doug talks about the importance of being able to extract the useful bits from even a hurtful review: this is important, because it will make the next book better. He talks about the fact that it was hard for him to get up this morning after that review and write, but that he did it anyway. He's in it for the long haul, we can see. He's a fighter, and that's what we must become too: we have to learn to honor our craft by refusing to be beaten, by remaining open, by treating every single thing that happens to us, good or bad, as one more lesson on the longer path.

We liked Doug before this. Now we love him.

Toby has the grad students over to watch *A Night at the Opera*. Mostly I watch Toby, with his family. He clearly adores them, takes visible pleasure in them, dotes on them. I have always thought great writers had to be dysfunctional and difficult, incapable of truly loving anything, too insane and unpredictable and tortured to cherish anyone, or honor them, or find them beloved.

Wow, I think, huh.

Doug gives me the single greatest bit of advice on writing dialogue I have ever heard.

And so I am not going to share it here. It is that good, you

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I notice that Doug has an incredible natural enthusiasm for anything we happen to get right. Even a single good line is worthy of praise. When he comes across a beautiful story in a magazine, he shares it with us. If someone else experiences a success, he celebrates it. He can find, in even the most dismal student story, something to praise. Often, hearing him talk about a story you didn't like, you start to like it too—you see, as he is seeing, the seed of something good within it. He accepts you and your work just as he finds it, and is willing to work with you wherever you are. This has the effect of emboldening you, and making you more courageous in your work, and less defeatist about it.

December 1986

End of our first semester. We flock to hear Toby read at the Syracuse Stage. He has a terrible flu. He reads not his own work but Chekhov's "About Love" trilogy. The snow falls softly, visible behind us through a huge window. It's a beautiful, deeply enjoyable, reading. Suddenly we *get* Chekhov: Chekhov is funny. It is possible to be funny and profound at the same time. The story is not some ossified, cerebral thing: it is entertainment, active entertainment, of the highest variety. All of those things I've been learning about in class, those bone-chilling abstractions *theme*, *plot*, and *symbol* are de-abstracted by hearing Toby read Chekhov aloud: they are simply tools with which to make your audience feel more deeply—methods of creating higher-order meaning. The stories and Toby's reading of them convey a notion new to me, or one which, in the somber cathedral of academia, I'd forgotten: literature is a form of fondness-for-life. It is love for life taking verbal form.

May 1987

Paula and I are married in Rapid City. We get a nice chunk of money at the wedding. We honeymoon on the island of St. Bart's, in a madly expensive villa, which happens to be right next to an even more madly expensive villa being rented by Cheech, of Cheech & Chong fame. We spend all of our wedding money. Why not? Soon we will be rich and famous writers and money will mean nothing to us.

September 1987

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I am in a workshop with Toby. One night, our workshop is being disrupted by the Syracuse University cheerleading squad practicing loudly in the room above. Toby grows increasingly annoyed. Finally he excuses himself. We're worried. In Syracuse, the cheerleading squad is about equal in status to the Mayor. We think of how we might console Professor Wolff if he returns with an S.U. megaphone squashed down on his head.

But no: instead, here come the chastened cheerleaders, humbly toting their boom box, muttering obscenities.

Toby sits down.

"Let's continue," he says.

We feel that the importance of what we are doing has been defended. We feel that, even if we are members of a marginalized cult, our cult is tougher and more resilient than theirs, and has cooler leadership.

Later that Semester

Toby is a generous reader and a Zen-like teacher. The virtues I feel being modeled—in his in-class comments and demeanor, in his notes, and during our after-workshop meetings—are subtle and profound. A story's positive virtues are not different from the positive virtues of its writer. A story should be honest, direct, loving, restrained. It can, by being worked and reworked, come to have more power than its length should allow. A story can be a compressed bundle of energy, and, in fact, the more it is thoughtfully compressed, the more power it will have.

His brilliant story "The Other Miller" appears in *The Atlantic*. I read it, love it. I can't believe I know the person who wrote it, and that he knows me. I walk over to the Hall of Languages and there he is, the guy who wrote that story. What's he doing? Talking to a student? Photocopying a story for next day's class? I don't remember. But there he is: both writer and citizen. I don't know why this makes such an impression on me—maybe because I somehow have the idea that a writer walks around in a trance, being rude, moved to misbehavior by the power of his own words. But here is the author of

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bourgeoisie is, exactly, or a demigod, but I understand this to mean: “live like a normal person, write like a maniac.” Toby manifests as an example of suppressed power, or, rather: *directed* power. No silliness necessary, no dramatics, all of his considerable personal power directed, at the appropriate time, to a worthy goal.

December 1987

Paula is four months pregnant with our first child. We are still not rich and famous. While we are out in South Dakota visiting Paula’s family, she goes into early labor. Her doctor says he has good news/bad news. Good news: he thinks he can save the baby. Bad news: she’s going to have to go to bed, and won’t be able to get up until the baby is born in March.

I write my teachers at Syracuse about this, promise to do the work by mail. I try to do so. I read and write like a fiend. I’m worried and distracted, schlepping back and forth from the Rapid City library and home and the post office. Finally I get a call from Doug. I’m afraid he might be calling to say that this method just isn’t working: I’m going to have to drop out, forfeit my fellowship checks. But no. He’s calling to say he thinks I’m worrying about his class too much. You’ve done enough, he says, you pass, knock it off, go spend more time with Paula, that’s what’s important, that’s what you’ll remember years from now.

So that’s what I do.

March 1988

Our first daughter is born. Life goes crazy, in a good way. Artistically, I continue to lose the magic, writing stories in which I am sort of like Nick Adams, but in Sumatra, Indonesia. The guy in the story is a thinly veiled version of me, when I was in the oil business, if I had been more like Nick Adams. Get it? I am not so crass as to name myself “Nick.” Instead I name myself “Casey.” Or, sometimes, when I am really off my game, “Vic.” Once, in a very confused moment, I am “Bernard Casey.” Casey / Vic / Bernard Casey is always silently witnessing petty and / or decadent cruelties, then eventually participating in them himself, because our times are so rotten and we are

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naughty, will often broodingly go off to stand by a river, to feel miserable and think a line that is like an epiphany. Sometimes something in the natural world might metaphorically mimic Vic's mental state:

*Vic thought of the Indonesian village
he had just accidentally burned down
while goofing around. He felt bad.
His spirits drooped, there on the
banks of the river.*

*In the river an elephant's trunk
drooped.*

This story might be called, for example: "On the Dark Banks of the Tragic Sad River."

May 1988

I have my final thesis meeting with Doug. My thesis, with its revised title, "On the Tragic Banks of the Dark Sad River: Stories," is crap. We meet in the student cafeteria. Had there been an elephant in there, his trunk would have been very droopy indeed. I've tried my hardest during my two years at Syracuse but somehow, under the pressure of suddenly being surrounded by good writers, I went timid and all the energy disappeared from my work—I've lost the magic indeed, have somehow become a plodding, timid, bad realist. I'm terrified before the meeting. I know I haven't done good work, but don't want to hear that. But I also don't want to hear that what I know is bad, is good.

What Doug does for me in this meeting is respect me, by declining to hyperbolize my crap thesis. I don't remember what he said about it, but what he did *not* say was, you know: "Amazing, you did a great job, this is publishable, you rocked our world with this! Loved the elephant." There's this theory that self-esteem has to do with getting confirmation from the outside world that our perceptions are fundamentally accurate. What Doug does at this meeting is increase my self-esteem by confirming that my perception of the work I'd been doing is fundamentally accurate. The work I've been doing is bad. Or, worse: it's blah. This is uplifting—liberating, even—to have my

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feel: respected. Doug conveys a sense that I am a good-enough writer and person to take this not-great news in stride and move on. One bad set of pages isn't the end of the world.

August 1988

I graduate and get a job as a tech writer at a pharmaceutical company. At night I leave through the downstairs labs, where the animal tests are done. One night I see a bunch of beagles in slings, awaiting morning surgery. They are in the slings so that their heart rates will stay low. To me, it seems that being suspended in a sling in a dark lab overnight would have the opposite effect. But mine is not to question why: I have a young family to support.

Goodnight, dogs, so sorry.

1988 Or So

On a visit to Syracuse, I hear Toby saying goodbye to one of his sons. "Goodbye, dear," he says.

I never forget this powerful man calling his son "dear."

All kinds of windows fly open in my mind. It is powerful to call your son "dear," it is powerful to feel that the world is dear, it is powerful to always strive to see everything as dear. Toby is a powerful man: in his physicality, in his experiences, in his charisma. But all that power has culminated in gentleness. It is as if that is the point of power: to allow one to access the higher registers of gentleness.

August 1990

Our second daughter is born. We are happier than ever, poorer than ever, busier than ever. Officially I am still a tech writer, but I work for an environmental company now. Really what I do is not so much tech-write, but make copies of reports. My special area of expertise is: doing the covers. I am trying to write at work but have begun to realize that, not only will the world not mourn if I never write again, it would actually prefer it.

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I finally break out of Nick Adams mode and write what I think might be a good story. When I finish it, as in a movie, I hear Toby's voice in my head: "Don't lose the magic." Of course, of course, I finally get it! All these years I've been losing the magic! Toby's comment at that party all those years ago suddenly presents as a sort of hidden teaching moment, a confirmation that this leap I have made is real.

Seeking confirmation, I send the story to Toby. Is he busy, does he have three kids, is he teaching a full course load, is he in the middle of a new book? Yes. Does he read it and send me a generous letter, confirming that I'm on the right track, in less than a week?

Yes.

1996

My first book comes out. Please note that, between this entry and the previous one, six years have passed. I have been working as a technical writer all this time. One of the bosses, all these long years, keeps calling me "GeorgeMan."

Ugh.

1997

I am teaching at Syracuse myself now. Toby, Arthur Flowers, and I are reading that year's admissions materials. Toby reads every page of every story in every application, even the ones we are almost certainly rejecting, and never fails to find a nice moment, even when it occurs on the last page of the last story of a doomed application.

"Remember that beautiful description of a sailboat on around page 29 of the third piece?" he'll say. And Arthur and I will say: "Uh, yeah ... that was ... a really cool sailboat." Toby has a kind of photographic memory re stories, and such a love for the form that goodness, no matter where it's found or what it's surrounded by, seems to excite his enthusiasm. Again, that same lesson: good teaching is grounded in generosity of spirit.

1998

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Chain.” On a section of molding is a penciled chart of the heights of his kids. In the basement, on a workbench, in a childish scrawl, in crayon, is written: DOWN WITH THE REPUBLICANS!

One night I’m sitting on the darkened front porch of our new house. A couple walks by. They don’t see me sitting there in the shadows.

“Oh, Toby,” the woman says. “Such a wonderful man.”

Note to self, I think: Live in such a way that, when neighbors walk by your house months after you’re gone, they can’t help but blurt out something affectionate.

1999

I do a reading at the university where Doug now teaches. During the after-reading party, I notice one of the grad writers sort of hovering, looking like she wants to say something to me. Finally, as I’m leaving, she comes forward and says she wants to tell me about something that happened to her. What happened is horrible and violent and recent and it’s clear she’s still in shock from it. I don’t know how to respond. As the details mount, I find myself looking to Doug, sort of like: Can you get me out of this? What I see Doug doing gets inside my head and heart and has stayed there ever since, as a lesson and an admonition: what Doug is doing, is staring at his student with complete attention, affection, focus, love—whatever you want to call it. He is, with his attention, making a place for her to tell her story—giving her permission to tell it, blessing her telling of it. What do I do? I do what I have done so many times and so profitably during my writing apprenticeship: I do my best to emulate Doug. I turn to her and try to put aside my discomfort and do my best to listen as intently as Doug is listening. I remember this moment as an object lesson in what I take to be Doug’s ethos: be kind, pay attention, err on the side of generosity.

2000

Toby comes back to do a reading at Syracuse. He reads “Bullet in the Brain” to a standing-room-only crowd. Afterwards, there is a stunned, appreciative silence—a little like that moment after fireworks just before the yelling starts. I look at Paula. There are

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cross paths with him, and be his students. Knowing him has helped us grow into better versions of ourselves: more dignified, less selfish. This, of course, is what a ‘role model’ is: someone who, by gracefully embodying positive virtues, causes you to aspire to them yourself.

During the Q&A someone asks what Toby would do if he couldn’t be a writer.

A long, perplexed pause.

“I would be very sad,” he finally says.

The room makes a sound that means “Us too.”

And in Summary

Why do we love our writing teachers so much? Why, years later, do we think of them with such gratitude? I think it’s because they come along when we need them most, when we are young and vulnerable and are tentatively approaching this craft that our culture doesn’t have much respect for, but which we are beginning to love. They have so much power. They could mock us, disregard us, use us to prop themselves up. But our teachers, if they are good, instead do something almost holy, which we never forget: they take us seriously. They accept us as new members of the guild. They tolerate the under-wonderful stories we write, the dopy things we say, our shaky-legged aesthetic theories, our posturing, because they have been there themselves.

We say: I think I might be a writer.

They say: Good for you. Proceed.

This essay is excerpted from "A Manner of Being: Writers on Their Mentors," edited by Jeff Parker and Annie Liantas, which will be published in December by the University of Massachusetts Press.

George Saunders first contributed to The New Yorker in 1992. His book "Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel" won the Man Booker Prize in 2017. [Read more »](#)


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