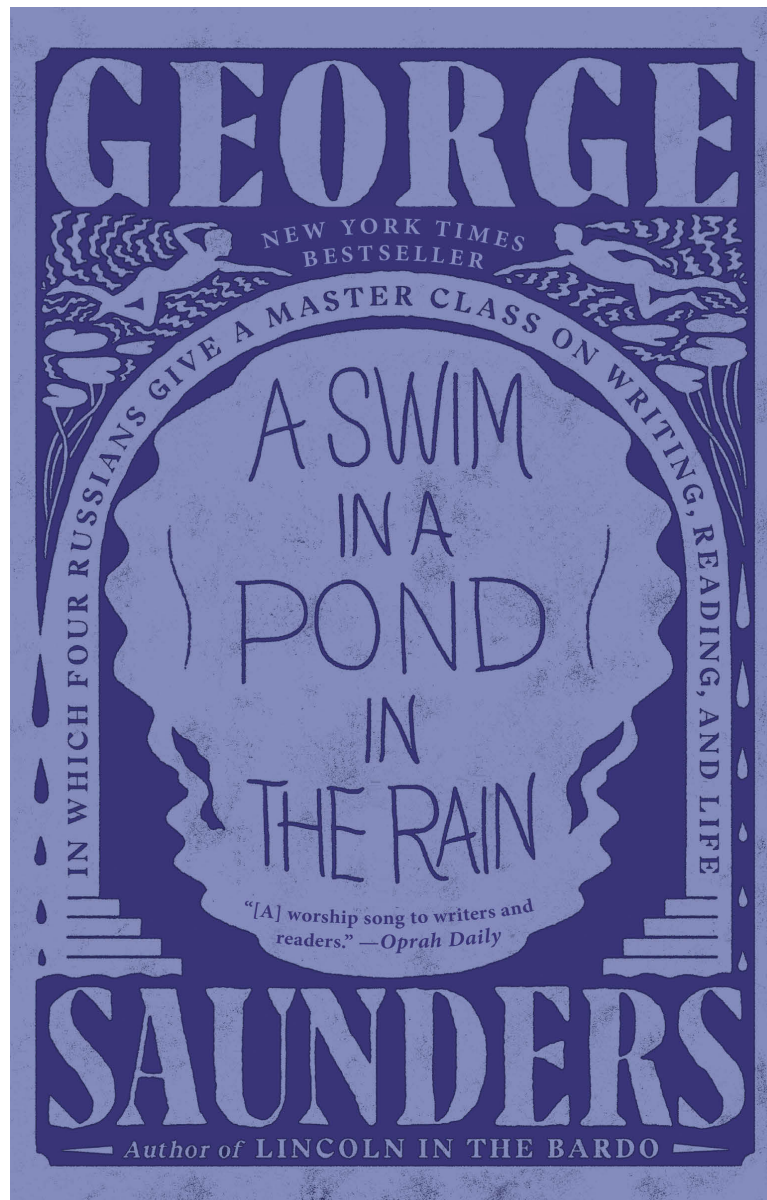


DO YOU READ ME?

Thoughts on *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*

BY SARA CAMP MILAM



ON A RECENT TRIP I SPENT MOST OF A DAY alone in airports and on airplanes, and I had the opportunity to read deeply for the kind of long, uninterrupted stretches that are extremely rare in my everyday life. The book I brought with me was George Saunders' *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life*.

Rather than the light reading I usually pick up for travel, this was a book with something to say. A great deal to say, actually. And I was a captive—and captivated—audience. The premise is this: Saunders, one of the most respected writers of his generation (he's in his sixties), has long taught a course on the nineteenth-century Russian short story to MFA students at Syracuse University. *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* is a truncated version of that class in book form.

Each of the book's seven sections begins with a full reprint of a story; there are three by Anton Chekhov, two by Leo Tolstoy, and one each by Nikolai Gogol and Ivan Turgenev. Saunders follows each story with two postscripts. First comes an analysis of the text, then comes a shorter, more personal Afterthought. The Afterthoughts—my favorite sections of the book—include insights into Saunders' own writing process as well as his broader, more philosophical ruminations on the power of fiction and the dual experiences of creating and consuming it.

In other words, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* is a love letter to both reading and writing. Over the course of the book, Saunders makes a clear and compelling case that literature's superpower is its ability to connect writer and reader across space, time, and any number of other differences or distances. Toward the end of the book, he lays out a vision of the writer's best self connecting with the reader's best self: "That's a pretty hopeful model of human interaction: two people, mutually respectful, leaning in, one speaking so as to compel, the other listening, willing to be charmed."

This was my first time reading Saunders. I'd been aware of his work for years but had never picked up one of his books. I knew that his writing had a reputation for being darkly funny and satirical, sometimes surreal or dystopian. While these qualities don't necessarily turn me off, I incorrectly turned them back on the author, assuming he must harbor a cynicism that is nowhere in the pages of *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. Instead, Saunders—Professor Saunders, at

least—exudes a remarkable generosity of spirit. I found myself keeping a list of the qualities he exhibits or gestures to over the course of the book: Kindness. Open-mindedness. Playfulness. Persistence. Attentiveness. Humility. Outside the pages of a book, in the much messier real world, these are characteristics I admire—in family members, in friends, in public figures. Some of them I might euphemistically term "growth areas" for myself. As I read, I thanked him for reminding me that these traits matter, and why: They lay the groundwork for human connection, and they give us the courage to change our minds.

Even so, Saunders is skeptical of the grandiose. His focal point is the specific connection between

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reader and writer, and he explicitly doubles back against a facile argument that fiction can save the world. Still, I closed the book with a renewed optimism that the benefits of reading can and should and do spill over into the reader's everyday life. And, in my case, professional life.

Gravy, of course, deals in nonfiction. We publish pieces of journalism, personal essays, and other types of stories under the umbrella of narrative nonfiction. We even employ a fact-checker (read about Katie Carter King in this issue's Featured Contributors), whose meticulous work allows us to stand behind the accuracy of what we publish. Setting aside some of the appeals to imagination, a good bit of the writerly advice in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* translates to the practice of writing nonfiction. As I read, I thought about how Saunders' lessons apply to my own work, primarily that of an editor. And I thought about how and where the editor fits in the connection between writer and reader. It feels like the best thing I can do—and do it invisibly—for each story I work on is to inhabit both reader and writer, looking for places where gaps can be bridged, where connections can be made that much stronger. To have played a part, however small, in those rare moments where words meet mind and mind shifts ever so slightly—I'll take that. 🍷