

LIVING IN THE BARDO

Lincoln in the Bardo • George Saunders

While locked down, I got bored with my monotonous way of life and tried to look for something new and fresh. I decided to step outside my reading comfort zone and picked up *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders, as the book claimed to be an experimental novel. The author had been thinking about writing the novel for a long time and, finally, decided to do this in 2015, saying that he did not want to be the guy whose gravestone would read “Afraid to Embark on Scary Artistic Project He Desperately Longed to Attempt” (Saunders).

In a nutshell, the novel is about Abraham Lincoln’s son, William, who ends up in the Bardo, a space between life and rebirth, after his death. While there, he is surrounded by other spirits, whose conversations construct the major part of the novel. The souls in the Bardo are unable to leave the place and rest in peace because they cannot admit even to themselves that they are dead. President Lincoln refuses to let his son go and, therefore, prevents William from leaving the Bardo.

The cacophony of voices is what pushes you out of your reading comfort zone and even makes you go astray. Reading the novel for the first time, I got lost. Every voice and its story seemed unfamiliar to me. But, all of a sudden, I reached the point where I realized that, side by side with this unusual form, the author brings up universal themes and issues that have been of great concern to humankind, in general, and America, in particular, for ages.

The novel takes place in 1862 and deals with the issue of the enslavement of Black people, a key catalyst that led to the American Civil War, the bloodiest conflict in the American history. As we can see, even now the issue hasn’t been solved. Through his descriptions of President Lincoln, Saunders touches upon the human side of the issue, focusing on the fear of losing his only son and his soldiers rather than Lincoln’s role as a political leader. The author makes us question the historical facts that obliterate personal qualities and create an image of the politician suitable for certain figures. The author provides real and fake historical materials that describe Lincoln from different points of view. These are words of criticism and approval about Lincoln’s contradictory nature, but we can make one logical conclusion – “No one who has ever done anything worth doing has gone uncriticized” (Saunders 236).

All the themes the author dwells on resonate with my point of view, but the theme of regret particularly impressed me as I am one of those people for whom it is difficult to let bygones be bygones. Regrets can haunt my thoughts and prevent me from moving on and living life to the fullest. Lingering in my own ‘Bardo’, I’ve forgotten how to love my present life and feel happy about having everything that I need. My ‘Bardo’ is an intermediate space between my past life and present one. The novel made me realize that I don’t want to end up like one of the characters of the book, Roger Bevins III, who, after breaking

up with his boyfriend, committed suicide but dying changed his mind. Unfortunately, it was too late:

Having come so close to losing everything, I am freed now of all fear, hesitation, and timidity, and, once revived, intend to devoutly wander the earth, imbibing, smelling, sampling, loving whomever I please; touching, tasting, standing very still among the beautiful things of this world (Saunders 27).

This quote is a reminder for all of us who think that they can change things later on. Being engulfed by our desires, vengeance, unfulfilled dreams, and regrets, we keep our eyes closed and miss the opportunity to notice important things happening around us. In the *Bardo*, Bevis III turned into a monster with multiple sets of hands, eyes and noses as if experiencing retribution for his “blindness” and indifference to the surrounding world. I don’t think that anybody wants to end up like this.

Saunders focuses on personal loss and grief, life and death, love and empathy. It is what makes the novel worth reading, especially in this time of global struggle, in which people have lost their loved ones during the pandemic, are no longer able to see their friends and family, and have regrets about not having done what they wanted before being isolated.

George Saunders wrote a successful experimental novel. This is the kind of a book I want to re-read, and I have done so twice in order to take in the entire message. Every time I come to a new conclusion because something, I have missed appears on the surface later. The book leaves you in tears, with your mind exhausted but satisfied. Being locked down, I managed to experience something unknown to me before: to go outside of the traditional novel and expand my world and imagination to new horizons.

Bibliography

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Tanya Levagina is a fifth-year student of the Ryazan State University named for S. Yesenin, who is majoring in English and Chinese. She is writing a graduation paper devoted to the technique of stream of consciousness in Modernist and Postmodernist works. Being interested in unusual forms of narrative, she couldn’t help but analyse the experimental novel “*Lincoln in the Bardo*” by George Saunders.