George Saunders
*The Braindead Megaphone: Essays*
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by

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In a serendipitous moment, someone sent me an e-mail quoting from Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s recent non-fiction book, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*:

> Note that art, because of its dependence on word of mouth, is extremely prone to these cumulative-advantage effects... Our opinions about artistic merit are the result of arbitrary contagion even more than our political ideas are. One person writes a book review; another person reads it and writes a commentary that uses the same arguments. Soon you have several hundred reviews that actually sum up in their contents no more than two or three because there is so much overlap...

George Saunders’ latest book, a collection of reportage and satirical pieces that first appeared in popular magazines like *The New Yorker* and *GQ*, has received kudos from other popular magazines and newspapers (*Entertainment Weekly*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Boston Globe*) for his wit and intelligence, and has appeared on the David Letterman and Stephen Colbert shows. Thomas Pynchon calls Saunders “graceful, dark,” and Zadie Smith declares that “Not since Twain has America produced a satirist this funny.” Saunders does not match the blurbs, and this book does not warrant the extravagant media praise. He’s not Twain, and his prose isn’t going to last. The praise raises the questions posed by Curtis White in *The Middle Mind* (2003), a critique of cultural studies and much else: “Since when do we have to put up with ethical diatribes from columnists for *GQ*? Is that where all the decent folk have gone?” However, Saunders is very good in a small clutch of essays.

Let’s get the misfires out of the way first. They are: “Thank You, Esther Forbes” (a dull piece on an inspiring teacher - a moratorium of at least four decades on this topic would be welcome), “A Brief Study of the British” (an unfunny riff on the ignorance someone from the US displays about the UK), “Nostalgia” (a laboured piece about how sex and violence were regarded ‘back in the day’), “Proclamation” (based on Iranian laws about the importation of foreign words), “Woof: A Plea of Sorts” (interior thoughts of a dog - also deserving a moratorium), “Thought Experiment” (advocating acceptance over non-judgement, a worthwhile concept, but not written with much verve), and “The Perfect Gerbil” (about Donald Barthelme’s story “The School,” and here I admit to a bias against Barthelme).

Some pieces rise a bit above the poorest: “A Survey of the Literature” (“fluid-nations,” like People Reluctant To Kill For An Abstraction, replacing such a thing as the United States, which is amusing, though familiar), “Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra” (Saunders’ literary awakening at the age of twenty-three thanks to *Slaughterhouse Five*, which has fine closing paragraphs about war), “Ask the Optimist!” (a demented version of an advice column), and closing the book,
“Manifesto: A Press Release from PRKA” (in which a group claims responsibility for not committing violence).

There are four substantial and provocative pieces. “The Braindead Megaphone” is critical of both George W. Bush’s administration for essentially shouting above everyone else, pressing its opinions into the soft tissue of brains in the United States and in various other countries, as well as the lapdog media outlets who, despite half-hearted displays of regret, annoyance, and anger (authentic in too few quarters), in the end eagerly chose imbedding over detachment, likely because they, too, had quickly come to believe the “fear-based rhetoric” and excessive jingoism post-September 11 that they reported on and spoke themselves. This combination of shouting and hectoring on the part of the State and the Press “degraded” the “national discourse” to the point where not only could little else be heard, but what was said was spiritually and intellectually empty:

Megaphone Guy, it seemed, had gone a little braindead. Or part of him had. What had gone dead was the curious part that should have been helping us decide about the morality and intelligence of invasion... Where was our sense of agonized wondering, of real doubt? We got... a lot of discussion of tactics... and strategy... but not much about the essential morality of invasion. (We did not hear, for example, ‘Well, Ted, as Gandhi once said, ‘What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans, and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?’”)

Looking into the future, Saunders predicts that when “the next attack comes, the subsequent swing to the Stalinesque will be even more extreme, having, as it will, the additional oomph of retrospective repentance of what will then be perceived as a period (i.e., now) of relapse to softness and terror-encouraging open discourse.” If the media can possibly get more supine, it will (as Flat Earth News by Nick Davies shows). Saunders continues: “But if we define the Megaphone as the composite of the hundreds of voices we hear each day that come to us from people we don’t know, via high-tech sources, it’s clear that a significant and ascendant component of that voice has become bottom-dwelling, shrill, incurious, ranting, and agenda-driven.” (The italics are his.) At the close of this admirable essay Saunders, in his soft way, urges people to question everything and rebut the indefensible so that the megaphone gets turned down.

The travel essay “The New Mecca” describes what is happening in Dubai, that new mecca of consumerism, with countless ‘pleasure palaces’ going up. “If America was looking for a pluralistic, tax-free, laissez-faire, diverse, inclusive, tolerant, no-holds-barred, daringly capitalist country to serve as a shining City on the Hill for the entire Middle East, we should have left Iraq alone and sponsored a National Peaceful Tourist Excursion to Dubai and spent our ninety quadrillion Iraq War dollars there.” The rest of the essay sets out to puncture that impression. “Dubai is, in essence, capitalism on steroids,” goes one criticism. “Even the poorest, most overworked laborer”—who has surrendered his passport and must work two years with little compensation as he pays back the government for getting him there—“considers himself lucky—he is making more, much more, than he would be back home.” Instead of complaining, they “model a level of stoic noble determination that makes the Ayn Rand in you think, Good, good for you, sir, best of luck in your professional endeavors!” At a dinner, Saunders asks why Al Qaeda doesn’t target this haven for capitalism. He’s told that Dubai “is like Switzerland during
World War II--a place needed by everyone... And in Dubai,” carries on one dinner partner, “Al Qaeda has millions of dollars in independent, Dubai-based banks, which don’t always adhere to the international banking regulations that would require a bank to document the source of the income.” Saunders is later told contradictory information. He’s a satirist, not an investigative reporter, so his question remains unanswered.

“The Great Divider” is a walk among those with border concerns. In talking to border guards, Mennonites, Mexicans, Minutemen, the Texas Militia, and others, some of Saunders’ satirical flourishes collide, in a fruitful way, with Mexican immigrants (and those who want to be) and men and women who would shoot anyone illegally crossing the border. The naiveté he displays, which I suspect is put on a bit, helps open up those he meets.

“Last December, I got an e-mail from my editor at GQ. A fifteen-year-old boy in Nepal had supposedly been meditating for the past seven months without any food or water. Would I like to look into this?” So begins “Buddha Boy,” and here Saunders’ Buddhism come out most clearly. He journeys to the tree that serves as home for the boy and as a temple for those who worship him. Saunders is there to see if the boy is being fed. He waits through the night with his hosts, undergoing hypnogogic images as he struggles to stay awake and warm. He’s better dressed than the boy he’s checking up on who is wearing a “thin sleeveless garment.” “I feel, to gravely understate it, the monumental distance between his abilities and mine.” There’s true engagement here, and in the other three essays that are the strongest.

One would be hard-pressed to find an essay stemming from the wish to believe in something spiritual in the writings of Mark Twain, whose *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* prompted Saunders to write an introduction to it that rounds out the collection (a general survey of moderate interest). The comparison to Twain, and the hosannas about Saunders’ voice, are disproportionate to what is presented here. For some, his type of satire will be more gum than teeth. Saunders has a notable fiction record, including three short story collections (*CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, 1996; *Pastoralia*, 2000; *In Persuasion Nation*, 2006) a children’s book, and the novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005). These might be better places to start for one wanting to experience his full writing range, but *The Braindead Megaphone* is recommended for its four strongest essays.

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