

# Lincoln in the Bardo

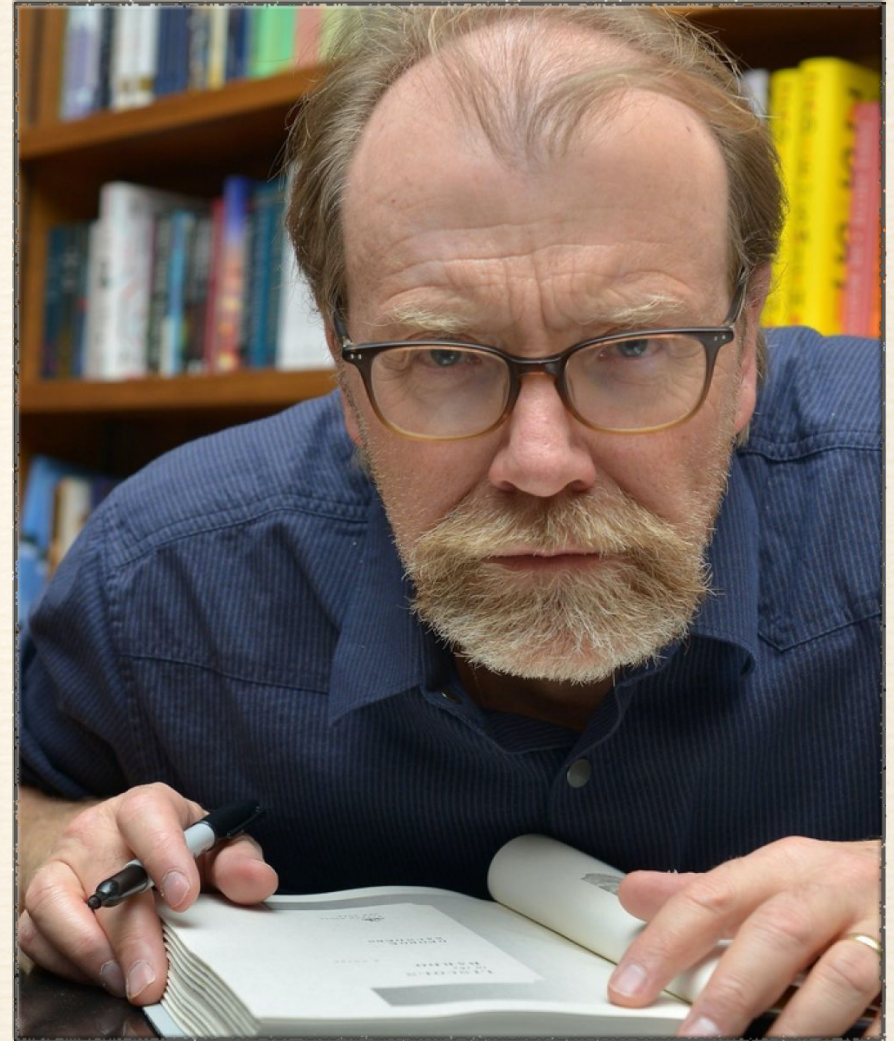


*George Saunders*



## *Lincoln in the Bardo* Introduction

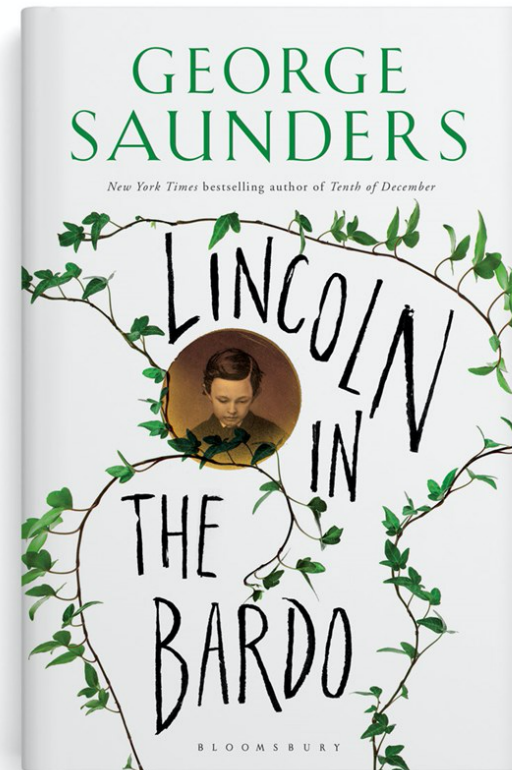
- ❖ Saunders is from Amarillo, grew up in Chicago, has a degree in Geophysics, started reading fiction while working in a Sumatran jungle camp, entered an MFA at Syracuse, got engaged to future wife Paula three weeks after meeting her, worked odd jobs in school, became a tech writer for Pharma companies, published a short story collection, got famous, won awards, wrote more, joined the faculty at Syracuse, and is considered among the best American writers.
- ❖ *Bardo* was a NYT #1 Bestseller and won the Man Booker Prize in 2017.





## *Lincoln in the Bardo* Synopsis

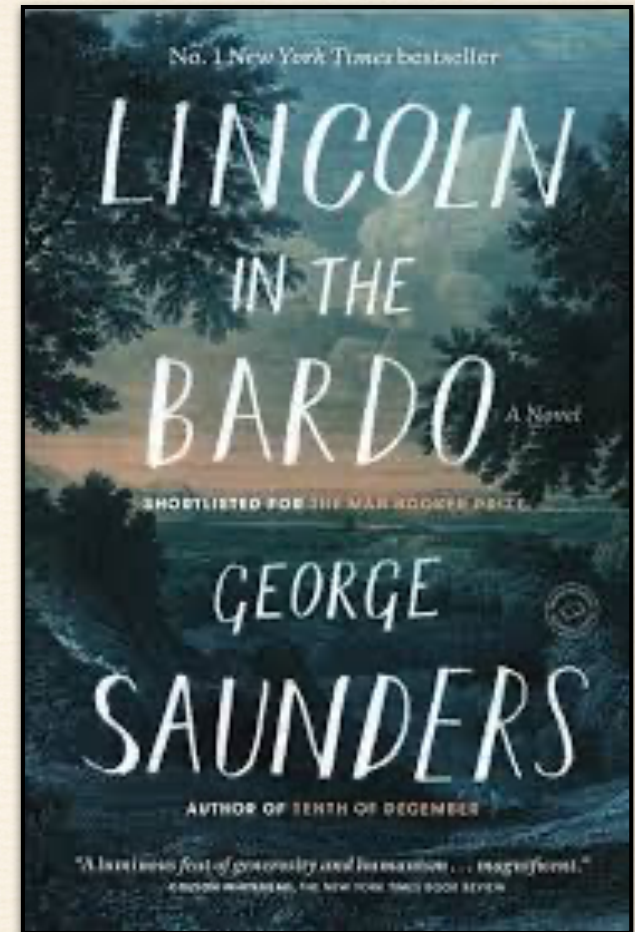
- ❖ The action occurs in a single day, February 25, 1862. Willie Lincoln (11) dies of typhoid fever and is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington, DC. He meets two spirits, who tell Willie he must move on to the afterlife to avoid terrifying consequences. But when Willie's father arrives, everything changes, and a host of spirits join the effort to rescue Willie from being stuck forever in the bardo. In the effort to free Willie, they all make profound discoveries...





## *Lincoln in the Bardo*: a novel like no other?

- ❖ 166 Narrators / Voices
- ❖ Structure: You're a stranger here
- ❖ Dead but in denial
- ❖ Diversity: an oral history?
- ❖ Speech reflects character
- ❖ Blurred genres
- ❖ Euphemisms: ("sick-box" / "walk-skimming" / "matterlightbloom" / etc.)
- ❖ Possible themes: Identity; the Power of Storytelling; Empathy, Mortality; Loss; Sexuality; Materialism; Spirituality; Slavery & Freedom
- ❖ "We were perhaps not so unlovable as we had come to believe."





## *Lincoln in the Bardo* Chapters I-IX

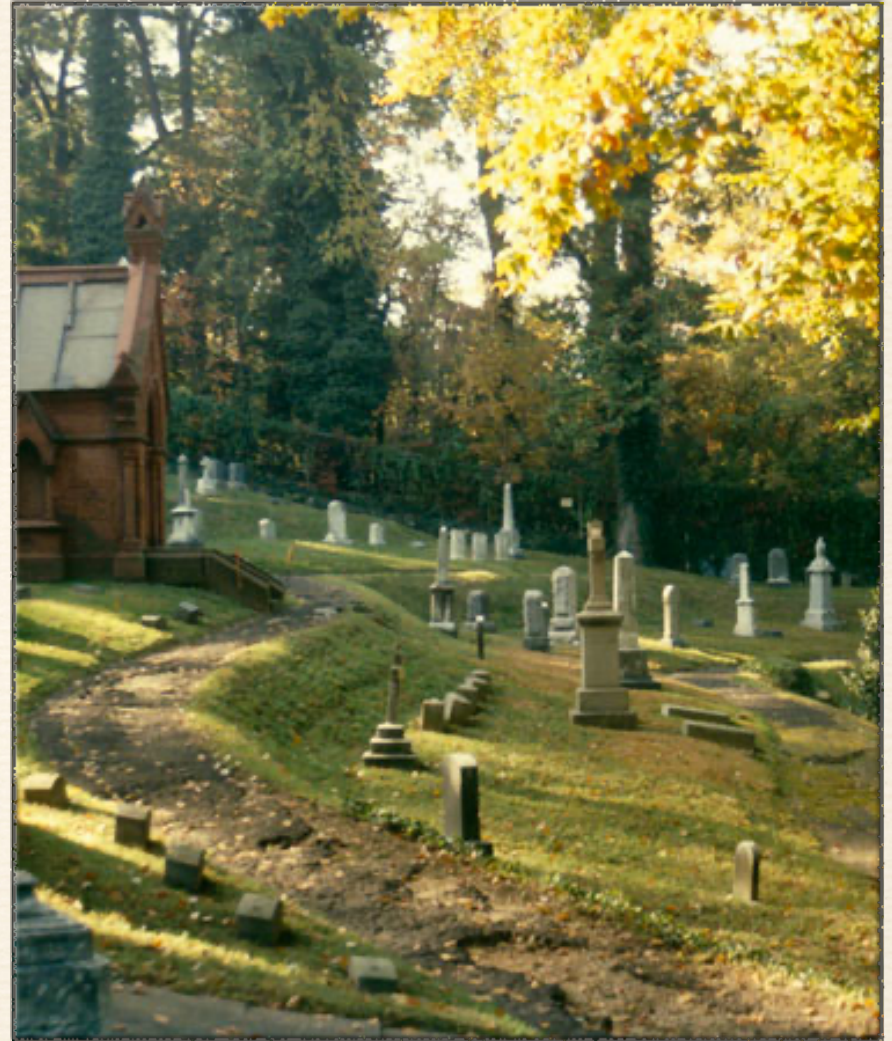
- ❖ What can we tell about the characters of Vollman, Bevins, and Willie from their initial narratives?
- ❖ What do you think is suggested by Bevins's comment, "And yet all things may be borne"?
- ❖ At this point, what capabilities of the spirits are revealed?
- ❖ What contradictions appear in the various reporting on the Lincolns' reception?
- ❖ Can we categorize the sources? What picture emerges?
- ❖ What details of the party are most revealing?
- ❖ Analyze Chapter VIII





## *Lincoln in the Bardo: X-XXVIII*

- ❖ Why do you think young children are not meant to tarry in the Bardo?
- ❖ How do you interpret the life and death of Elise Traynor, and her subsequent experience in the Bardo?
- ❖ How is Lincoln's character revealed in these chapters?
- ❖ What effect does Lincoln's entrance into the Bardo have on the spirits, and why?
- ❖ Discuss the "unlovable" quote by Bevins on p. 70 and Rev. Thomas's explanation in XXV.
- ❖ How is Willie like his father?
- ❖ Consider possible themes represented by the characterizations of Jane Ellis, Abigail Blass, Lt. Cecil Stone, and the Barons: money, parenting, racism...
- ❖ What in heaven is going on in XVIII?





## *Lincoln in the Bardo: XXIX-XXXVI*

- ❖ Note the personal connections of the angels/saints to the spirits. What's the message here?
- ❖ Note Psalm 42, especially v. 7.
- ❖ What is the perspective of the spirits on the angel invasion?
- ❖ What is the lesson of the phenomenon of the carapace?
- ❖ “A Heavy Bough Hung Down”—is it based on 2 Sam. 18:9? Significance?
- ❖ Why is Chapter XXXIII important?
- ❖ What shocking information brought by the Three Bachelors must be kept from Willie?
- ❖ What might the “method of communication” (p. 107) be, and why is it significant?
- ❖ Note the many comic elements in this section...why are they here?





## *Lincoln in the Bardo: XXXVII-XLVIII*

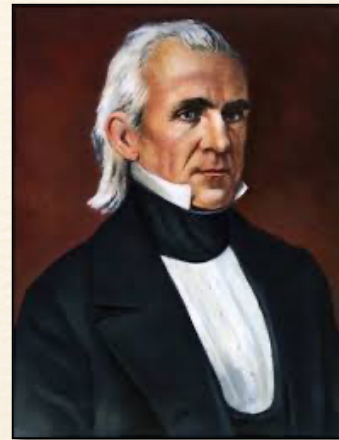
- ❖ What snapshots of Americans' passions and pastimes are glimpsed in Vollman's and Bevins's *walk-skimming* adventure to locate Willie's father?
- ❖ How does the *matterlightblossoming* of Captain William Prince suggest an emerging theme in the novel?
- ❖ What happened at Fort Donelson?
- ❖ Why is the letter from Robert Hansworthy—and its placement in the narrative—significant?
- ❖ Describe the inner world of President Lincoln in all its dimensions.
- ❖ *Was he dear or not?*  
*Then let me be happy no more.*





## *Lincoln in the Bardo: XLIX-LV (End Part One)*

- ❖ What mental exercises does Lincoln perform to deal with his grief?
- ❖ What dark realities are revealed in Chapter 50?
- ❖ By what methods do the spirits attempt to accomplish the “happy confluence” of their “wishes” with Lincoln’s concerning Willie?
- ❖ What explanation is given in Chapter 53 for the negative effects on children who tarry in the Bardo?
- ❖ For the second time, the suggestion of “confusion” is introduced in reference to the spirits’ powers, so it would seem to be important. Is it?
- ❖ Chapter 54: So, *had* they? Explain. Who is having the greater influence on whom? What might this mean?
- ❖ What is the thematic significance of Chapter 55?
- ❖ How does the spirits’ “startling new knowledge” affect them?
- ❖ Why does Saunders end Part One here? What do you think will happen now?



1845-49



1849-50



## *Lincoln in the Bardo* LVI-LXV: Quiz / Discussion

1. Who are Manders and Perkins?
  2. What do the angelic beings do after they say, “Quick Check”?
  3. Why are Mr. DeCroix and Professor Bloomer joined together?
  4. How does Vollman free Willie from the roof of the White Stone Home?
  5. What causes the fight in the graveyard?
- Bonus (+5): What is a DeCroix Ferocious?



### Post-Quiz discussion:

- ❖ What do the details of Rev. Thomas’s description of the afterlife reveal about him? About Saunders’s possible viewpoint?
- ❖ What is the connection between Chapters 61 & 62?
- ❖ Aside from DeCroix and Bloomer, analyze the complaints of the spirits in Chapter 65. What are their regrets? What injustices do they claim?



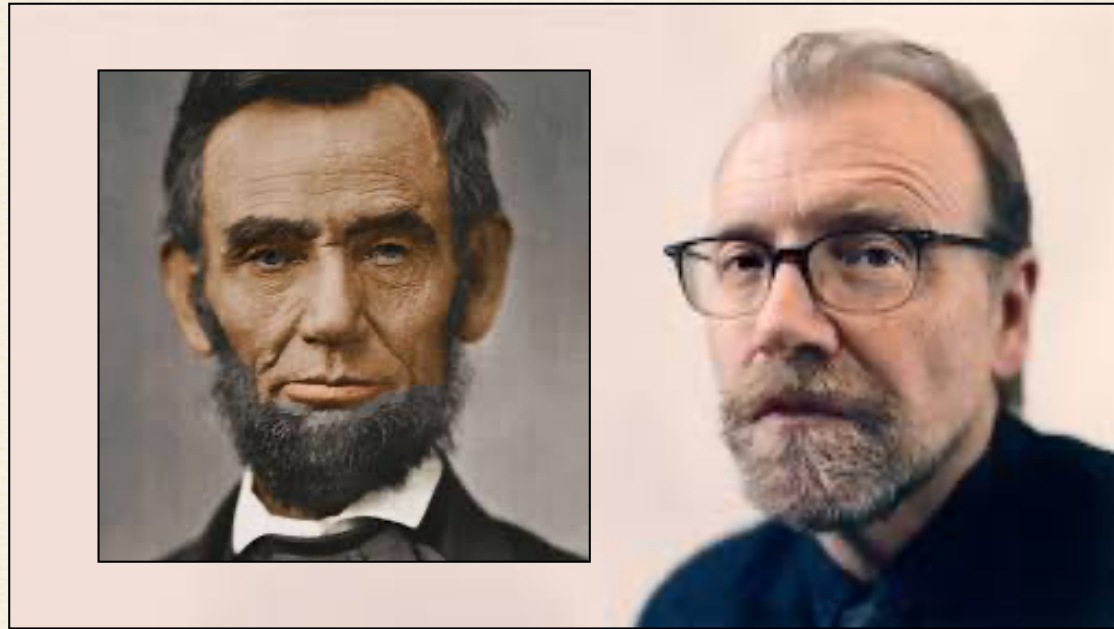
## *Lincoln in the Bardo: LXVI-LXX*

- ❖ What is revealing about Elson Farwell's progressive anger as he tells his story? What do the Barons say to him in ignorance that ironically reflects the challenge of the American experiment?
- ❖ Discuss the variation in the slave-spirits' experiences. What picture emerges? What is significant about Lizzie Wright's speech?
- ❖ Assess Lincoln's guilt or innocence in response to the public view of his management of the war in terms of the evidence presented here.





## *Lincoln in the Bardo: LXXI-LXXX*



- ❖ Were the Lincolns good parents, or bad parents?
- ❖ Does Lincoln's logical approach to dealing with his grief help him?
- ❖ In Chapter 77, the controversy regarding *l'occupation* becomes clearer. But, the spirits decide to attempt it anyway...why?
- ❖ What is the symbolic meaning of the "serendipitous mass cohabitation"?
- ❖ What are the byproducts of same?



## *Lincoln in the Bardo: LXXXI-XC*



- ❖ What concepts of the afterlife resonate in the voices of the spirits in the carapace?
- ❖ What is the effect of these spirits on Rev. Thomas?
- ❖ How do the spirits endeavor to overcome evil with good?
- ❖ What eternal destiny awaits Rev. Thomas?
- ❖ Does Chapter 86 counterbalance the information in Chapter 72?
- ❖ Why does Vollman command Willie to come out of his father? (Clue: note the content of Chapter 88.)
- ❖ Phineas Gurley was Pastor of New York Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC; his funeral sermon for Willie Lincoln is extant. Saunders culls from it an extract in in which he cites John 13:7 (Chapter 90). How are these words ironic in terms of the novel?



## *Lincoln in the Bardo: XCI - C*

- ❖ What do Willie and his father teach the Sprits? How is Willie like his dad?
- ❖ Why does the word *ruinmore* resonate in the thoughts of the spirits?
- ❖ What is the significance of Isabelle Perkins's plight?
- ❖ Why does Elson choose to remain in the Bardo? Why does he weep in the midst of the fight with Lt. Stone? In what way does the fight both illumine and amplify Lincoln's vision?
- ❖ How are Thomas Havens and Elson Farwell different? Is the antonomasia helpful here?





## *Lincoln in the Bardo: CI - CVIII*

- ❖ What distressing truths must Vollman and Bevins confront before they can move on?
- ❖ How does Vollman's selfless act prompt Bevins to let go of his attachment to earthly delights? What do you make of his list?
- ❖ Why do you think Saunders imagines *matterlightbloomings* as a violent explosion?
- ❖ As loose ends are tied up, we realize that some spirits decide to remain in the Bardo. Why?
- ❖ What unnerving application can be made based on Chapter 104?
- ❖ Why do we see images of what the spirits were, and also what they might have been but never were, at the moment of their *matterlightbloomings*?
- ❖ What is wrong with the Bachelors's philosophy?
- ❖ What is suggested by the final chapter?
- ❖ In what way might we say that this novel is about the importance of storytelling?

