

Commentary for April 27th, CJ Montgomery

Saunders, George. **A Swim in a Pond in the Rain**, 2021. Random House

As you are all sick of hearing, I have been crushing on this writer and his book for the last two weeks. I came to his writing through the Booker Prize-winning *Lincoln in the Bardo* and his short story collection, *Tenth of December*.

He trained and worked as an engineer before he became a full-time writer and faculty at Syracuse University where he has been teaching for the last twenty years. This book is based on his course on the Russian short story. My previous exposure to the mid-to-late 19th-century Russian renaissance literature was unsupervised reading of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and a collection of Chekhov's short stories. I don't think I can count watching the film, *Dr. Zhivago* based on the book by Boris Pasternak.

Saunders has selected seven short stories from Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Gogol and provided a detailed commentary on their interpretation and the nature of their construction. These commentaries are humorous, insightful and packed with structural observations. Interestingly, Chekhov visited the elder Tolstoy and they did swim in a pond. Three years later, Chekhov wrote "Gooseberries" with its swim-in-the-pond diversion.

The stories themselves are typical of the writing of the period and the country. They are laden with clamouring serfs, entitled nobility, the knocking of horses' hooves, steaming samovars, clacking carriages, damp hayricks, dishonest merchants, scythes, sickles and hayricks. And Russian winters with squeaking snow. ("Master and the Man"). Women lose things—their beauty, their honour and their husbands.

Of the seven stories, my favourite as a story and as a learning piece was "Master and the Man" by Tolstoy and written in the voice of an omniscient narrator. The story is a quest with four escalating setbacks due to character flaws in both the protagonists (The master, Vasili and his servant, Nikita).

Things I learned:

Plain but specific prose works.

Factual and detailed descriptions of action let the reader see who the character is.

The internal thoughts and feelings of his characters are succinct and precise without judgement.

The structure and repetition of images can ground the story. (see Pg 224 and 225). I found the repetition of the clothesline with each departure. (Pg 229)

Patterning with escalating repetition leads to expectations in the reader and re-enforces the theme.

As a reader of this story, I was "swept downriver by the overall organizing principle while being caught along the way in a series of small distracting local eddies." (Pg 225)

Plausible causality is **essential**. In this story, the reasons for their failure to succeed, fit the characters and the situations. Consider that a kite lying on the grass is a piece of prose and that *"Causality is the wind that comes along and lifts it up."* (Pg 227)

Effective character development needs a *before* and *after*. The characters defining attribute must meet adversity. Once the reader understands the characters and the situation, they must be questioning will, how or can the character change. And whatever happens, must be plausible. *"A transformation in which we can believe."*

Commented [1]: love this line!

And general notes from the other stories and commentaries:

Do the *"One page at a time exercise"* when you are revising a story. (pg 14)

Read the page

- i. Summarize it (what happened to who?), 2-3 sentence
- ii. What are you curious about?
- iii. Where do you think the story is going?

Commented [2]: this is great and simple advice

Saunders describes the first part of a story like being a juggler throwing bowling pins in the air and then the rest of the story, catching them. Whatever you throw up has to be essential and reconciled in your story.

A story has to have *"Things I Couldn't Help Noticing."* (TICHN)—surface level, plot type things, structural features, parallel plots, syntax, patterns, flash-forwards or backwards, changes in POV. All these must contribute to the story. Avoid unnecessary excesses or emptiness in the TICHN cart. (pg 84-5)

Repetition creates expectations and places for contrast, escalation and surprise. This can be something like the same characters in different situations or the same situation with different characters.

Every image must have a purpose.

Ask yourself, *"What does your story believe?"*

Commented [3]: hmm... I like that question. I've never asked it of my story

And there are lots more gems to think about. This is a book that I will continue to re-read and I expect I'll be able to learn and understand more about what he is saying with each reading. In the meantime, this image about how to make a thrilling and non-trivial story sticks.

Commented [4]: Can't wait to dive into my copy. It's my summer reading. Maybe even companion ;)

"To use an archery metaphor (and how often does a person get to do that?), one way to produce the thrill is to stop aiming at the target and concentrate on the feeling of the arrow leaving the bow." (Pg 306)

For a discussion of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Click here to listen to the 2017 [interview with Eleanor Wachtel](#).

And this link for an [interview with LARB](#) where he talks about *A Swim in the Pond*.