

PRINT

Our Future; Bleak But Hilarious

George Saunders satirizes all things American in his brilliant new collection of short stories

Review by Al Kaufman

Every generation needs its Mark Twain, its Kurt Vonnegut, its Lenny Bruce—satirists who point out the absurdities of our society and frighten us as often as they make us laugh. In George Saunders, we have all three.



In Persuasion Nation

Stories

George Saunders

IN PERSUASION NATION (Riverhead Books) is a collection of short stories in which Saunders gleefully and wickedly skewers everything American; namely our penchant for consumerism, paranoia, homophobia and fame. It is a world Saunders makes us self-righteously mock, until we realize we are living in it.

Saunders' pure hatred for all things commercial runs throughout the stories. In "I Can Speak," parents spend thousands of dollars to equip their babies with Velcro masks that make it appear the little tykes are actually speaking. "My Flamboyant Grandson" introduces us to a world in which we are forced to wear chips that let us see holographic commercials as we pass certain stores. In the title story, all the victims of pranks in silly commercials battle all the heroes of the same commercials. In "Jon," Saunders' version of THE TRUMAN SHOW, Jon and his girlfriend decide to leave their perfect life, in which they are product testers and celebrities, to live in the outside world.

Fame gets the same treatment. Besides the aforementioned "Jon," "Brad Carrigan, American" conjures up the most surreal of reality shows. But even that is nothing

compared to a reality show tossed off as an aside in the same story in which people are tricked into eating their own mothers.

The paranoia stories are the most chilling. A man trying to keep his job in a dying town resorts to murder (“CommComm”), while in “The Red Bow,” a man whose daughter is killed by a rabid dog decides the world will not be safe until all dogs are killed. While all the stories in the book have at least some hint of truth or possibility to them, it is these two that seem the most plausible. “The Red Bow” beautifully parallels the Bush administration’s use of fear and paranoia to get us into war. It is a theme Saunders used before when he wrote the political novella, *THE BRIEF AND FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL*, which stands as the *ANIMAL FARM* of our time.

From the pen of a lesser man, these stories would amount to nothing more than the vitriolic rants of a mad liberal. But in addition to having strong beliefs and a wild (and somewhat doomsday-ish) imagination, Saunders is also a talented writer. He presents his stories in a variety of forms; be they letters to the editor, letters to disgruntled consumers, first-person accounts or third-person accounts. His pacing and ability to turn a phrase should be envied by all. In fact, in reading through this book, a reader may sometimes long for a good, old-fashioned, straight narrative story. Saunders offers few of those here. Yet he also never makes us feel like we are observing the outcome of a writing technique class.

What we walk away with instead is the feeling that the world is a mess, and it can get a whole lot messier still. But at least with people like George Saunders around, our descent into hell will be softened by some scathing humor.