

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

***A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life***

**By George Saunders**

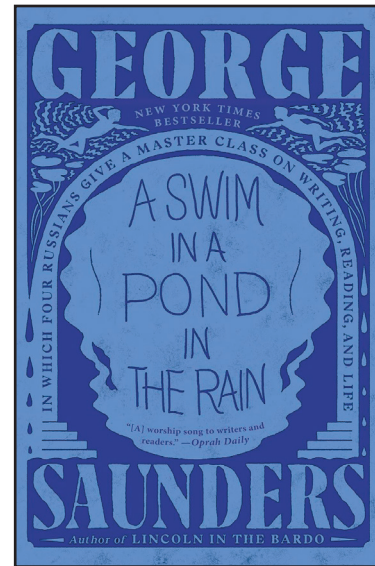
**Random House Trade Paperbacks (April 12, 2022)**

**ISBN 978-1984856036**

*Review by Joseph Carrabis*

### ***Three Attempts to Get Wet***

The subtitle of this book is “(In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading and Life).” The first thing we learn from this is Russians don’t accept the Oxford Comma.



Okay, seriously (caveat lector: a serious review of this book will be Sisyphean)...

I read books for three basic reasons; study writing craft, research for my work, entertainment. I’ve been a relentless reader since childhood and read anything and everything.

A friend who knows my reading habits suggested *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* (which is a scene in Chekhov’s *Gooseberries* and discussed in the book) as something I might enjoy.

I’ve since disowned that friend.

### **Attempt #2 at seriousness...**

I learned a lot from this book. Primarily I learned why I never read Russian authors. Ever have somebody try to convince you that their \$600US bottle of wine is better than your \$6US bottle of *Rex Goliath*? There’s a great line in the book which (slightly edited) is “Someone can spend several hours (or close to four-hundred pages) explaining what makes something great but in the end you like what you like and bollocks on people who try to tell you different.” That sums up my reading of this book (which took me a full year because I kept finding more interesting things to do...such as watching paint dry and air move). Lots of excellent lessons which could’ve come from any piece of excellent writing and definitely didn’t have to come from mind-numbing analyses of work which wouldn’t catch my interest if it included strippers and drugs.

Anybody having to work this hard to explain some subtlety which requires a postdoc in Russian literature indicates the subtlety didn’t work.

It’d be nice to sit in a reading circle and discuss a book in detail, it’s great to be able to do it because the book is genuinely interesting and has meaning in the reader’s life.

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I'd slit my wrists if I sat in a reading circle and somebody suggested this book.

However, I can imagine these stories and related works being read by sturdy Russians eeking an existence from the bleak, cold, Russian tiaga and associated regions somewhat south.

I mean, they're already suffering, what's a little more?

### **Attempt #3 at seriousness...**

George Saunders is a multi-award winning author. I don't doubt it. I doubt he has a large reading public. Except among 1950-1960s Commie Leftists Effete Intellectual Snobs who gather to drink dry white wine and nibble select chunks of stilton and camembert while wondering where they can get a beer and burger without being seen, who want people to know they've read "The Russians" and don't have a clue what they were about but are comfortable with their white wine, cheese nuggeting compatriots who'll nod at the vacuous, vaporous comments they make to each other about how Author X's description of the dying wheat fields in Murmansk moved them so without realizing Murmansk is north of the Arctic Circle hence wheat fields would only be planted by a vegaphobic sadist.

### **Okay, my attempts at seriousness are failing miserably.**

Let's turn the analysis inward.

My attempts at seriousness are failing because...?

I suppose because this book's reward wasn't worth the reading effort. This book was - to me - a lot of effort. Too much. I read lots of books on writing technique, how-to's, analyses, and such. Most of them are blatantly accessible. The lessons may not always be obvious and they become obvious with non-Sysiphean effort. Some books are a bit beyond me, and I'll get a less-beyond book to learn what I need so the beyond book isn't beyond me. Some books are such gems of knowledge and wisdom I mark them for rereads, reading and rereading and rereading until I'm sure I've sucked all the marrow from the book's bones.

One thing about all such books is their hint of greater insight is obvious to me. The insight itself might be seen through a glass darkly and it's seen never-the-less.

Not so with *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. Without Saunders leading us, each tied to a single rope so we formed a line as we traversed the treacherous landscape of literati ignorance, he alone holding a lantern and admonishing we watch our step, there was no such hint.

Were the lessons obvious once explained?

Yes. Were the lessons worth the explanation?

Let me do another type of analysis to make my point:

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| <i>Author &amp; Story Title<br/>(pages)</i> | <i>Story Length (pages)</i> | <i>Analysis Length</i> |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Chekhov's In the Cart</i>                | 11                          | 39                     |
| <i>Turgenev's The Singers</i>               | 18                          | 33                     |
| <i>Chekhov's The Darling</i>                | 13                          | 30                     |
| <i>Tolstoy's Master and Man</i>             | 50                          | 32                     |
| <i>Gogol's The Nose</i>                     | 25                          | 35                     |
| <i>Chekhov's Gooseberries</i>               | 11                          | 24                     |
| <i>Tolstoy's Aylosa the Pot</i>             | 6                           | 28                     |

A better subtitle (or even title) for this book would be "A Forensic Analysis of Writers Not Many People Read Anymore."

Yes, there's lots to be learned here. I worked as an anthropologist for several years. I know what it's like being on a dig, being able to recognize a Stone Age pot shard from a chipped piece of rock, and I enjoyed my work, my research, my studies.

I also know there's not a big call for such skill in the general population, and authors need to get their work in front of the general population to be recognized in their field.

Makes me wonder what kinds of fields award-winning author Saunders works in.