



LINCOLN

IN THE

BARDO

A Novel

GEORGE

SAUNDERS

New York Times bestselling author of
TENTH OF DECEMBER



LINCOLN
in the
BARDO

A NOVEL

GEORGE
SAUNDERS



RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

Lincoln in the Bardo is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure into the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2017 by George Saunders

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

RANDOM HOUSE and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC: Excerpts from *The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage* by Daniel Mark Epstein, copyright © 2008 by Daniel Mark Epstein. Reprinted by permission of Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

The Family of Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr.: Excerpts from *Twenty Days* by Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., and Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). Reprinted by permission of the Family of Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Saunders, George, author. TITLE: Lincoln in the bardo : a novel / George Saunders. DESCRIPTION: First edition. | New York : Random House, [2017] IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2016004993 | ISBN 9780812995343 | ISBN 9780812995350 (ebook) SUBJECTS: LCSH: Lincoln, Abraham, 1809–1865—Fiction. | Presidents—United States—Fiction. | Grief—Fiction. | GSAFD: Biographical fiction. | Historical fiction. CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS3569.A7897 L56 2017 | DDC 813/.54—dc23 LC record available at lcn.loc.gov/2016004993

Ebook ISBN 9780812995350

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Chelsea Cardinal

Cover illustration: *Landscape with Abraham and Isaac*, engraving by John Pye and E. Webb after Gaspard Dughet (courtesy of nicolas-poussin.com)

v4.1_r1

ep

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Part One

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

VI.

VII.

VIII.

IX.

X.

XI.

XII.

XIII.

XIV.

XV.

XVI.

XVII.

XVIII.

XIX.

XX.

XXI.

XXII.

XXIII.

XXIV.

XXV.

XXVI.

XXVII.

XXVIII.

XXIX.

XXX.

XXXI.

XXXII.

XXXIII.

XXXIV.

XXXV.

XXXVI.

XXXVII.

XXXVIII.

XXXIX.

XL.

XLI.

XLII.

XLIII.

XLIV.

XLV.

XLVI.

XLVII.

XLVIII.

XLIX.

L.

LI.

LII.

LIII.

LIV.

LV.

Part Two

LVI.

LVII.

LVIII.

LIX.

LX.

LXI.

LXII.

LXIII.

LXIV.

LXV.

LXVI.

LXVII.

LXVIII.

LXIX.

LXX.

LXXI.

LXXII.

LXXIII.

LXXIV.

LXXV.

LXXVI.

LXXVII.

LXXVIII.

LXXIX.

LXXX.

LXXXI.

LXXXII.

LXXXIII.

LXXXIV.

LXXXV.

LXXXVI.

LXXXVII.

LXXXVIII.

LXXXIX.

XC.

XCI.

XCII.

XCIII.

XCIV.

XCV.

XCVI.

XCVII.

XCVIII.

XCIX.

C.

CI.

CII.

CIII.

CIV.

CV.

CVI.

CVII.

CVIII.

Dedication

By George Saunders

About the Author

ONE

—

I.

On our wedding day I was forty-six, she was eighteen. Now, I know what you are thinking: older man (not thin, somewhat bald, lame in one leg, teeth of wood) exercises the marital prerogative, thereby mortifying the poor young—

But that is false.

That is exactly what I refused to do, you see.

On our wedding night I clumped up the stairs, face red with drink and dance, found her arrayed in some thinnish thing an aunt had forced her into, silk collar fluttering slightly with her quaking—and could not do it.

Speaking to her softly, I told her my heart: she was beautiful; I was old, ugly, used up; this match was strange, had its roots not in love but expedience; her father was poor, her mother ill. That was why she was here. I knew all of this very well. And would not dream of touching her, I said, when I could see her fear and—the word I used was “distaste.”

She assured me she did not feel “distaste” even as I saw her (fair, flushed) face distort with the lie.

I proposed that we should be...friends. Should behave outwardly, in all things, as if we had consummated our arrangement. She should feel relaxed and happy in my home and endeavor to make it her own. I would expect nothing more of her.

And that is how we lived. We became friends. Dear friends. That was all. And yet that was so much. We laughed together, made decisions about the household—she helped me bear the servants more in mind, speak to them less perfunctorily. She had a fine eye and accomplished a successful

renovation of the rooms at a fraction of the expected cost. To see her brighten when I came in, find her leaning into me as we discussed some household matter, improved my lot in ways I cannot adequately explain. I had been happy, happy enough, but now I often found myself uttering a spontaneous prayer that went, simply: *She is here, still here*. It was as if a rushing river had routed itself through my house, which was pervaded now by a freshwater scent and the awareness of something lavish, natural, and breathtaking always moving nearby.

At dinner one evening, unprompted, before a group of my friends, she sang my praises—said I was a good man: thoughtful, intelligent, kind.

As our eyes met I saw that she had spoken in earnest.

Next day, she left a note on my desk. Although shyness prevented her from expressing this sentiment in speech or action, the note said, my kindness to her had resulted in an effect much to be desired: she was happy, was indeed comfortable in *our* home, and desired, as she put it, to “expand the frontiers of our happiness together in that intimate way to which I am, as yet, a stranger.” She requested that I guide her in this as I had guided her “in so many other aspects of adulthood.”

I read the note, went in to supper—found her positively aglow. We exchanged frank looks there in front of the servants, delighted by this thing we had somehow managed to make for ourselves from such unpromising materials.

That night, in her bed, I was careful not to be other than I had been: gentle, respectful, deferential. We did little—kissed, held one another—but imagine, if you will, the richness of this sudden indulgence. We both felt the rising tide of lust (yes, of course) but undergirded by the slow, solid affection we had built: a trustworthy bond, durable and genuine. I was not an inexperienced man—had been wild when young; had spent sufficient time (I am ashamed to say) in Marble Alley, at the Band-box, at the dreadful Wolf’s Den; had been married once before, and healthily so—but the intensity of this feeling was altogether new to me.

It was tacitly understood that, next night, we would further explore this “new continent,” and I went to my printing offices in the morning fighting the gravitational pull that bid me stay home.

And that day—alas—was the day of the beam.

Yes, yes, what luck!

A beam from the ceiling came down, hitting me just *here*, as I sat at my desk. And so our plan must be deferred, while I recovered. Per the advice of my physician, I took to my—

A sort of sick-box was judged—was judged to be—

hans vollman

Efficacious.

roger bevins iii

Efficacious, yes. Thank you, friend.

hans vollman

Always a pleasure.

roger bevins iii

There I lay, in my sick-box, feeling foolish, in the parlor, the very parlor through which we had recently (gleefully, guiltily, her hand in mine) passed en route to her bedroom. Then the physician returned, and his assistants carried my sick-box to his sick-cart, and I saw that—I saw that our plan must

be indefinitely delayed. What a frustration! When, now, would I know the full pleasures of the marriage-bed; when behold her naked form; when would she turn to me in that certain state, mouth hungry, cheeks flushed; when would her hair, loosened in a wanton gesture, fall at last around us?

Well, it seemed we must wait until my recovery was complete.

A vexing development indeed.

hans vollman

And yet all things may be borne.

roger bevins iii

Quite so.

Although I confess I was not of that mind at the time. At that time, there on the sick-cart, as yet unbound, I found I could briefly leave my sick-box, darting out and causing little duststorms, and even cracked a vase, a vase on the porch. But my wife and that physician, earnestly discussing my injury, did not notice. I could not abide it. And threw a bit of a tantrum, I admit, and sent the dogs yipping away, by passing through them and inducing in each a dream of a bear. I could do that then! Those were the days! Now I could no more induce a dream of a bear in a dog than I could take our silent young friend here out to dinner!

(He does appear young, doesn't he, Mr. Bevins? In his contours? His posture?)

In any event, I returned to my sick-box, weeping in that way that we have—have you come to know this yet, young fellow? When we are newly arrived in this hospital-yard, young sir, and feel like weeping, what happens is, we tense up ever so slightly, and there is a mildly toxic feeling in the joints, and little things inside us burst. Sometimes we might poop a bit if we are fresh.

Which is just what I did, out on the cart that day: I pooped a bit while fresh, in my sick-box, out of rage, and what was the result? I have kept that poop with me all this time, and as a matter of fact—I hope you do not find this rude, young sir, or off-putting, I hope it does not impair our nascent friendship—that poop is still down there, at this moment, in my sick-box, albeit much dryer!

Goodness, are you a child?

He is, isn't he?

hans vollman

I believe so. Now that you mention it.

Here he comes.

Nearly fully formed now.

roger bevins iii

My apologies. Good God. To be confined to a sick-box while still a child—and have to listen to an adult detailing the presence of a dried poop in his sick-box—is not exactly the, uh, ideal way to make one's entree into a new, ah—

A boy. A mere lad. Oh dear.

Many apologies.

hans vollman

II.

“You know,” Mrs. Lincoln said to me, “The President is expected to give a series of state dinners every winter, and these dinners are very costly. If I give three large receptions, the state dinners can be scratched from the programme. If I can make Mr. Lincoln take the same view of the case, I shall not fail to put the idea into practice.”

“I believe you are right,” said the President. “You argue your point well. I think that we shall have to decide upon the receptions.”

The question was decided, and arrangements were made for the first reception.

In “Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House,” by Elizabeth Keckley.

Abolitionists criticized the merry-making at the White House and many declined to attend. Ben Wade’s regrets were said to have been harshly worded: “Are the President and Mrs. Lincoln aware that there is a civil war? If they are not, Mr. and Mrs. Wade are, and for that reason decline to participate in feasting and dancing.”

In “Reveille in Washington, 1860–1865,” by Margaret Leech.

The children, Tad and Willie, were constantly receiving presents. Willie was so delighted with a little pony, that he insisted on riding it every day. The weather was changeable, and exposure resulted in a severe cold, which deepened into fever.

Keckley, *op. cit.*