

**TENTH OF DECEMBER****GEORGE SAUNDERS****Random House, 2013,****208 pages, ISBN 0812993802****THE BRAINDEAD MEGAPHONE****GEORGE SAUNDERS****Riverhead books, 2007,****272 pages, ISBN 978-1-59448-256-4**MODERN DAY SATIRE  
AND GEORGE SAUNDERS.

Throughout his works, Saunders guides his readers with a conspiratorial intimacy and phraseology understandable only by those ‘who get it.’ Saunders writes for the “very intelligent reader who can extrapolate a lot from a little,” a reader where the writer “can put a hint on page three, and the reader’s ears go up a bit, as opposed to dropping it all on the first page” (Brookes). Saunders’ oeuvre deftly balances heaviness with lightness and the resultant literature teems with irony and satire of the post- modern strand. His short stories and essays decorate him not only as a gifted and wicked entertainer but also a nervous explorer that unites brutality with humor. Jonathan Swift would have adored it!

*The Braindead Megaphone’s* titular opening essay provides an intriguing entry point into the essay collection as a whole. In brief, it is an exploration of modern America’s 24/7 rolling news coverage and the resultant dumbing down of the entire population. The essay sets the scene of a dinner party where the participants are engaged in

interesting conversation, but “Then a guy walks in with a megaphone. He’s not the smartest person at the party, or the most experienced, or the most articulate. But he’s got that megaphone” (BDM p. 2). Like sheep, the original dinner party guests follow the conversational direction shouted by the megaphone guy. Whether the individuals present agree or disagree with his commentary is irrelevant, “His main characteristic is his *dominance*. He crowds the other voices out. His rhetoric becomes the central rhetoric because of its unavailability” (p. 3). Ultimately, this intrusive character “has, in effect, put an intelligence-ceiling on the party” (p. 4) by forcing his language into the minds of the party-goers. It’s a genuinely frightening and concerning metaphor. Indeed, whether one is physically at the dinner party, is in some sense irrelevant as his shouted words will eventually seep outside the dining room and indirectly proliferate throughout society via the interactions of those individuals present. Curiously, however, this essay’s opening paragraphs holds a self-conscious acknowledgment by Saunders that he himself is becoming one of those megaphone voices in the brain of the reader (Saunders 2). Call it Menippean with a 21st century twist.

However surreal the megaphone man metaphor or Saunders’ admission of himself, the entire spectacle is convincing and rings as true as reality. Saunders’ self-conscious awareness that he is in a position of power simultane-

ously reveals a potential solution to the dumbing down of contemporary society via mass culture. The creation of exquisitely complex fictional microcosms enables him to explore specific events or people in deep and linguistically colorful ways. For literary theorists and Critics alike, it might be read as a hint, namely that present day satire has chosen other “material platforms” that the original 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century strand. The vivid fictional landscapes Saunders manifests in this short story collection, where economic concerns weigh heavy and infiltrate every facet of each individual character’s life, are complemented by his essaying into the very reality of 24/7 news coverage which distorts our perceptions. In an interview Saunders suggests that one of the themes running throughout *The Braindead Megaphone* is “to the extent that we can imagine the world, we always imagine it smaller than it actually is” and that “when we imagine the world small, and act boldly, we often make mistakes” (Saunders, Google Talks). Saunders’ short stories are therefore prisms through which the more general ideological and theoretical fascinations explored within “The Braindead Megaphone” are transformed in more scientifically specific case studies. Via imaginary characters, Saunders puts his real world theories into fictional motion.

In the collection *Tenth of December*, more specifically, Saunders captures the disjointed sensory input, fragmented rhythms, as well as wild absurdity

pertaining to 21<sup>st</sup> century reality. Like *The Braindead Megaphone*, this collection of short stories is inspired by the ills Saunders witnesses in the society within which he lives. In each story, Saunders mocks the strange institutional structures contemporary human society has established, immoral goals that are endorsed by rah-rah corporate techno-talk, mindless bureaucracies and stale theme parks (Ciabattari p. 1). *Tenth of December* constitutes a linked story collection, whereby each individual story grapples with the same themes: class and power. This is not dissimilar to the shared themes of “The Braindead Megaphone”, where Saunders dejectedly accepts how huge capitalist institutions have come to dominate the individual. Monetary concerns saturate the individual stories of *Tenth of December* and the subsequent somber tone weighs the collection down. In the short story “Puppy” a lady who has been lifted from dysfunctional roots by her marriage becomes so horrified by the squalor in which a poor family lives that she is incapable of finding any empathy for them. Money issues are explored from another angle “Home” where a soldier who has returned home from Middle East discovers his ex-wife with a new, much wealthier, husband (Williamson p. 34). The soldier cannot comprehend how two individuals can have three cars. Similar worries abide in “The Semplica Girl Diaries” where a father frets over the fact that he is unable to provide his children with

the luxuries their classmates have. He ultimately resorts to capitalistic prayer asking that “*Lord, give us more. Give us enough*”. Furthermore, the father expresses his disgust for rich people who he thinks make the poor feel inadequate. He continues on to console himself that he may not be that poor but is instead middle-class. The relief is, however, fleeting since despite the relativistic luck of being middle-class, the rich still have the power to make them feel insufficient and stupid. The rich are those wielding the metaphorical megaphone, there words are impossibly loud and impossibly piercing. This story, in particular, reminds one of *The Braindead Megaphone* and how wealth eventually wends its way into mental influence.

In “The Semplica Girls Diaries” the competitive materialism of America is clearly demonstrated with its narrator planning to compose a single page every day to better witness the material difference of life over time. This activity immediately recounts Saunders’ chief concern within *The Braindead Megaphone* – how the need for 24/7 rolling news coverage has deteriorated, perhaps beyond repair, the modern capitalistic American mind. The narrator is distraught that his daughters are incapable of having the material possessions that other individuals in their class have (Tarnoff p. 49). This includes the “Semplica Girls”, or SGs, who are essentially women seeking refuge from third world horrors such as brothels and human trafficking by offering their services

as lawn ornaments for rich Americans. This underlines the dangerous materialism that plagues American society and reveals the extent to which they see other people as objects to be used and discarded at will. It is quite telling that the narrator feels suddenly affluent when he finally manages to acquire some SGs for his family (Simms et al 32). Similar sentiments emerge in “Al Roosten” where the distance between the reality of the characters’ situation and their hopes is illuminated (much like in Saunders’ self-reflexive essay “Nostalgia”). In this story, the title character is an extremely jealous and self-loathing “round bald guy”. He fantasizes about having richer, better-looking and happier acquaintances. So self-deluded is Roosten that he does not realize how his anger denies himself a happier life. In “Exhortation” an employer sends a memo to his staff. Initially, the memo appears to communicate positive outlook (Simms et al, p. 35). However, upon closer examination, it is actually a veiled threat to the employees to eliminate any morals that they may have if they hope to succeed in his workplace.

It is not only themes that are shared by these short stories, they also exhibit the same prose style and hallmark humor of previous Saunders work. Cowles notes that anybody who has read Saunders’ three earlier collections would immediately be acquainted with the gonzo ventriloquism that imbues comic energy to his literature. It is noteworthy that Saunders manages to tap into continu-

ous interior monologues (a device employed in *The Braindead Megaphone*) of fragile and hopeful characters, creating a signature voice that seamlessly blends demotic and baroque characteristics (Rankin and Murphy, p. 47). This is accomplished by recognizing the floral fluidity of human thought, as well as the delusions, selfishness and grandiose that human beings possess at any given time. The reader is inundated with an enlivening explosion of neologisms and slang flowing through the protagonist's mind, which raises questions as to whether these are first or third-person stories. One of the most distinguished accomplishments of Saunders' collection is that readers inhabit an almost unauthored space, a space through which a fictional character's thoughts are given free rein to wend into fantasy and daydream territory.

The short stories within *Tenth of December* bring to the fore a dark underlying sense of class anxiety concomitant with the desperate need to define oneself in an age of shifting and, potentially, even nonexistent definitions of class and identity. In "The Semplica Girls Diaries", the narrator labels himself middle class. He resultantly adopts all the characteristics that define this class, among them inhumanity. In fact, he cautions his own daughter about feeling sorry for the Semplica Girls, explaining how the money they receive for their services as lawn ornaments goes a long way in allowing them to take care of their loved ones when they return to whichever

war-torn or impoverished country from which they originally came (Amodio, p. 67). This is a clear demonstration that the rise of an individual to another class necessitates the elimination of their morals. It may be acknowledged that the poor man has a moral compass similar to that of the rationalizing technicians in "Escape from Spiderhead" who often administer mood-altering chemicals to inmates with the aim of creating a formula which would give human beings total mastery over volatile emotions such as sadness, anger and lust (Rankin and Murphy, p. 54). At one point, the test-subject narrator of the story comprehends the lengths he is expected to go to for the sake of science and the pharmaceutical industry's profits, something that makes him go crazy and vow to defy. His act of defiance raises the thought that society may be redeemed, something that was considered impossible, even by the jailers.

There is also a shift away from the surrealism that was dominant in Saunders' early works. Take, for example, a story such as "Puppy" where class prisms distort a woman's vision of poverty, even though she herself once suffered in similar conditions. Some scholars suggest that Saunders does not see the middle class as existing, but rather that it is a fiction that enables downwardly mobile characters to extract some consolation. The fiction of a middle class, illustrated within Saunders short stories, is paralleled by his essay "Proclamation" within *The Braindead Megaphone*. The basis

for “Proclamation” is a fictionalized speech by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whereby he outlaws the usage of the English language and American vernacular in a paltry attempt to get back at the West for its economic sanctions. The essay opens with the following lines:

OK, so this is it. I am telling you now. Our Jihad declares this: no more English. Wait, I know, I am speaking English, but just this one last time. No more English, once I am done speaking. When done speaking, I will do that zipping thing one does with the lips, and after that: our glorious linguistic jihad begins! (Saunders, p. 119)

Ahmadinejad is absurdly employing English in order to ban its use. However, just like how there is, for Saunders at least, no middle class, here there is no genuine linguistic sovereignty. Ahmadinejad must break his own rule in order to enforce it. Even more peculiarly, were the rule to ever become fully actualized, it would cease to exist – the decree to no longer use English exists in English and when all Iranians speak only Arabic then the rule would cease to function since English holds no sway.

Saunders’ stories, however, are far from being unbearably grim and despairing, rather they are extremely entertaining and brisk, which may be attributed to the fact the author retains his compassion, even while appearing to take a wicked delight in the characters’

misfortunes. Moreover, the interconnectedness of Saunders’ individual short stories is mimicked by the more general interconnectedness of his fiction and nonfiction output. *The Braindead Megaphone* and *Tenth of December* each lean on each other and viewing one through the other provides a more full-bodied platform from which to evaluate what is truly going on. The economic and more general power-play concerns of *The Braindead Megaphone* have been reproduced and color the individual lives of the characters which inhabit *Tenth of December*. Jason Roberts writes specifically of *The Braindead Megaphone*, suggesting that “While meticulously reported, the book’s travelogues best deploy his unique authorial voice, in large part because of his penchant for stumbling onto scenes as surreal as any in his fiction” (Roberts). While Saunders’ fiction is stranger than fact, our reality is also stranger than we at first consider. Fiction, therefore, can better help us understand the interconnected strangeness of the modern capitalistic world. Ultimately, Saunders’ works form a Mobius strip of confusion and revelation upon which we as readers gently tread, lulled by the humorous insight he unendingly offers forth. *The Braindead Megaphone* informs us, our words may not be our own, but at least we have Saunders guiding us through the revelation, in both his fiction and his essays.

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**PORTUGAL – BRASIL – ÁFRICA:****RELAÇÕES HISTÓRICAS, LITERÁRIAS E CINEMATOGRAFICAS****CRISTINA COSTA VIEIRA, PAULO OSÓRIO E JOSÉ HENRIQUE MANSO (COORD.)****Covilhã, Universidade da Beira Interior, 2014****484 páginas, ISBN: 978-989654-148-4**

O triângulo intercontinental Portugal – Brasil – África revela-se de extrema importância no que respeita à consolidação das potencialidades estratégicas da Língua Portuguesa. Num cenário de crescente globalização alimentada pela economia de mercado, o valor emergente dos países de expressão portu-