

We the People Book Club

TENTH OF DECEMBER

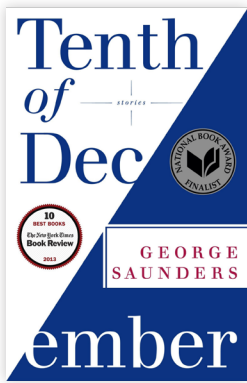
Reading Guide

Tenth
of ——— *stories* ———
Dec



GEORGE
SAUNDERS

ember



GEORGE SANDERS' great gift, in the story collection *Tenth of December*, and in all of his work, is that even while he is being brutally honest about his characters' darker sides, he writes them with so much genuine compassion and love that he can make you cringe and feel warmth almost simultaneously. We both laugh at and root for his characters. As Sarah Vowell (another *We the People* author) put it, Saunders “talks you into loving people.” Now, that’s a service to democracy!

Before *Tenth of December*, Saunders had already won MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellowships. This collection won him further acclaim, and the accolades increased from there. The book itself won the 2013 Story Prize and the 2014 Folio Prize, was a finalist for the National Book Award, was named one of the “10 Best Books of 2013” by the *New York Times Book Review* and was judged “the best book you’ll read this year” by the *New York Times Magazine*. Its publication prompted the PEN/Faulkner Foundation to recognize Saunders with the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story in 2013. Saunders’ first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, won the Man Booker Prize in 2017.

You may also know George Saunders for his graduation speech on kindness that went viral in 2013. His concern with the theme of kindness as well as his insistence that we “pay attention” (unkindness is what happens when we don’t) make his work essential for our exploration of what promotes and inhibits democracy.

About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018–2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on George Saunders, an overview of *Tenth of December*, and observations on Saunders’ literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on four themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel’s democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

Background

George Saunders was born in Amarillo, Texas and grew up in Chicago, Illinois. His working-class background meant that college was not a foregone conclusion, but a couple of his high school teachers made sure he matriculated. He received a degree in Exploration Geophysics and, after graduation, worked in the oil fields of Sumatra.

Before, during, and after his MFA in creative writing from Syracuse University, Saunders held a variety of jobs — from “knuckle-puller” at a slaughterhouse to technical writer — more than enough variety to settle in him an understanding of “capitalism as a benign-looking thing that, as Terry Eagleton says, ‘plunders the sensuality of the body.’”

Saunders met Paula Redick at Syracuse, and they began a famously fast-paced love affair: engaged after three weeks, pregnant with their first girl on the honeymoon! They have now been married for over thirty years and have two daughters.

Saunders has published four short story collections and a novel and regularly publishes in *The New Yorker* and *GQ*. He teaches in the MFA program at Syracuse and lives in the Catskill mountains.

Overview

Because Saunders' imagination finds inspiration primarily in characters and their voices, the settings are mostly unnamed suburban areas in unnamed regions of America. The notable exception is "Escape from Spiderhead," which is set in an alternative prison complex.

Saunders' sensibility when it comes to his characters owes much to the work of Flannery O'Connor, and the stories in *Tenth of December* certainly bear out this comparison. Like O'Connor, Saunders allows his characters to lean into their flaws, so that they are apparent from the first. If O'Connor's light was that of an unforgiving fluorescent bulb, Saunders' light, though equally bright, is that of a warm, soft bulb. In gentleness and attention, he searches his characters until, in their total exposure, they show a complement of kindness, love, and courage. Where O'Connor's characters are often unredeemable in some metaphysical way, Saunders' characters are more sociologically contextualized, compromised by their economic circumstances. These are flawed individuals trying to do their best, challenged by a world that is itself deeply flawed.

The stories in *Tenth of December* engage with the pressing questions of *our* time and with the pressing questions of *any* time. They explore class consciousness in a consumer society, the seductive dangers of technology, the exploitations of capitalism, and the ethics of modern war. Equally, they explore timeless issues like strict parents, ungrateful children, soul-numbing jobs, insecurity, disease, and poverty.

Genre, Language, and Structure

Saunders' work, including *Tenth of December*, is often referred to as "experimental": the weird, quirky, and dark aspects of his stories make them eccentric to the conventions of realism, yet neither are the stories as a whole complete departures from realism. Saunders insists that his experiments in fiction be essential, that they somehow get the reader closer to some truth: "My idea is that life is so strange and so unknowable and so beautiful that you might have to resort to extraordinary means in order to get some of that on the page."

As a result, the stories in *Tenth of December* have elements of science fiction, futurism, and fantasy. These elements often appear in unexpected and subtle ways — there is no big announcement that the "representational mode" is shifting — which is a hallmark of Saunders' style and also, perhaps, another reminder to stay awake and pay attention. (Saunders is a Buddhist, and one can sense a Buddhist's worldview in the stories.)

The essential creative engine for these stories, however, is voice. Saunders is a master at crafting unique, believable, “hearable” voices for his characters: carefully chosen diction that expresses their quirks, their way of thinking. In fact, Saunders finds his “plots” (a word he does not much care for) by exploring his characters’ verbal expression; “what happens” grows out of what they say.

This collection also explores voice in terms of owning one’s own convictions over against those received from the outside — from systems like capitalism, from consumer and corporate culture, from social media, and from authority figures like parents or supervisors. His characters’ fates depend on finding an inner voice they can trust.

Themes

Systems and Technology

Many of these stories rest on the tensions that result when we give ourselves over to systems. These systems range from capitalism to the expectations of corporate and consumer culture to the authority of parents to modes of thinking or behaving constructed as necessary for survival and success. Saunders explores technology as a special manifestation of the pressure and temptation of systems.

Tenth of December explores both sides of the dynamic: the issuing of imperatives and the submission to imperatives. “Exhortation” is an intimate look at a middle manager’s mode of thinking. The work being done in Room 6 is surely gruesome but otherwise unclear. His memo exhorts his team not to get distracted by the moral taxation of their project and praises record-breaking exertions of Andy, a team member who has since become depressed and despondent. He attempts to root out any “namby-pamby thoughts of right/wrong etc.” that get in the way of productivity. To satisfy the demands of upper management, Todd casts their ethical misgivings as a weakness that must be overcome, a stage of immaturity they must move right on through. The profit system necessitates that they replace perverse ethical qualms with the “natural feelings” of energetic productivity.

“Escape from Spiderhead” and “Semplica Girl Diaries” explore how a love of system and faith in the “improving” power of technology turn humans into experimental objects. In “Spiderhead,” the desire for drug technology that could, if regularly administered, bring about world peace makes researchers blind to the emotions and pain of actual humans; to sell peace and love, they devalue life.

The cause and effect in “Semplica Girl Diaries” are similar — a desire for progress that leads to the devaluing of life — but rather more striking because the form of “progress” (materialism) is so superficial. The Semplica Company sells angel-like lawn ornaments called SGs that have become a status symbol in suburban America. The lure of these status symbols blinds nearly everyone in the story to the fact that SGs are actually human beings strung up using a special technique that “safely” runs a wire through their brain. SGs are then tied to one another and hung on a rack as decoration. Enthralled to the imperatives of consumer culture, which confuse status with worth, the father who writes the diary revels in the triumph of being able to

supply his family with these symbols of success. It takes a radical act by his daughter Eva to make him see how the imperative he follows is exploitive and cruel, devaluing human life: the girls are indentured servants enduring torture in order to support families in impoverished or war-torn regions of the world.

THINK

1. When the dad in “Semplica” resolves to call the company and have them take the rack down, is he awakening to the exploitation his consumerism implicates him in, or does he just not want to be reminded of his failure?

REFLECT

2. Reflect on a system that you feel works for the good and one that does not, either in your own life or in some kind of community life. What differentiates the two?

PRACTICE

3. The Practicing Democracy Project has identified anger, fear of strangers, rigid thinking, and violence (among other qualities) as obstacles to democracy. All of these are markers of O’Connor’s “sinful” characters. Search yourself for such obstacles and, rather than meditating to bring yourself to a new awareness, seek a relationship with someone in your community who will lovingly challenge you to reframe your thinking and behavior.

Tough Ethical Decisions

The systems we are implicated in by exhortations, imperatives, and our own love of simplicity and status pave a way that leads to ethical quandaries. This is the storyline of many of the characters in this collection, one introduced in the very first story, “Victory Lap.” Alison is dedicated to a naive belief in total control: “To do good, you just have to decide to do good.” By contrast, Kyle submits to the total control of his parents. In Kyle’s house, personal conviction is eclipsed by parental directives and a precise economic system of reward and punishment. By the end of the story, both of their belief systems have proved wanting, and Kyle especially must decide whether to submit to the directives that please his parents and keep him physically safe or listen to the voice inside that answers to a higher law and keeps him morally safe.

The utter control of imperatives is much more intense in “Escape from Spiderhead” as Jeff’s body is literally not his own but permanently hooked to the drug technology of the researchers. Any sense of voice he feels is illusory, simply the effect of a protocol in which demands are politely asked as questions; he has no power to say “no.” When Jeff realizes that the pursuit of this technology, designed to bring love and peace, is itself destructive, he must decide whether to continue following deadly orders in the name of technology and progress or to act on his empathy and put a wrench in the system by sacrificing himself for another inmate.

Saunders is at his best exploring ethical quandaries in “Home.” The dehumanization necessary to fight in a war leads veteran Mikey down a “shame slide.” He has returned home to poverty and to estrangement from his wife. Everyone he loves has moved

way up or slipped further down the economic ladder. They presume to judge him for what happened at Al-Raz, though Mikey never actually reveals what he did. With nothing to lose, he heads towards the house of his ex-wife's new family intent on doing harm, and as he walks he remembers the first time he experienced the "shame slide":

Once, back in high school, this guy paid me to clean some gunk out of his pond. You snagged the gunk with a rake, then rake-hurled it. At one point, the top of my rake flew into the junk pile. When I went to retrieve it, there were like a million tadpoles, dead and dying, at whatever age they are when they've got those swollen bellies like little pregnant ladies. What the dead and dying had in common was their tender white underbellies had been torn open by the gunk suddenly crashing down on them from on high. The difference was: the dying were the ones doing the mad fear gesticulating.

I tried to save a few, but they were so tender all I did by handling them was torture them worse.

Maybe someone could've said to the guy who'd hired me, 'Uh, I have to stop now, I feel bad for killing so many tadpoles.' But I couldn't. So I kept on rake-hurling.

With each rake hurl I thought, I'm making more bloody bellies.

The fact that I kept rake-hurling started making me mad at the frogs.

It was like either: A) I was a terrible guy who was knowingly doing this rotten thing over and over, or B) it wasn't so rotten, really, just normal, and the way to confirm it was normal was to keep doing it, over and over.

Years later, at Al-Raz, it was a familiar feeling.

Submitting to the authority structure of the military and the inhumane imperatives necessary in war leaves Mikey with a history of unethical behavior that haunts him and gives him little incentive to be a better person. He couldn't "save," and he can't undo. He can only justify his behavior and blame the frogs or admit he's a terrible person and stop the violence — both painful options either for him or for the "tadpoles."

Saunders' description of this "shame slide," however, transcends the epic struggles of soldiers with PTSD. The "A) ... B)" reasoning is an everyday inventory. Making the right decision after making the wrong decision hinges on one's ability to take personal responsibility, to be humble, and to forgive oneself — countercultural actions whether the system you are resisting is the military command structure, the perfection expected on social media, or the status and materialism of American consumer culture.

Well, it had been an accident. He had just accidentally misplaced some things inadvertently. With his foot. Via spontaneously kicking them erroneously.... What was he supposed to do? Go racing back, lead them to the keys? They'd know he'd done it....

— from "Al Roosten" in George Saunder's *Tenth of December*



THINK

1. In "My Chivalric Fiasco," Ted tries to do the right thing, and it causes harm. Is there an ethical right and wrong in this story? What should he have done? Does he bear responsibility for his missteps?

REFLECT

2. Think back on a time when you made the wrong decision. What motivated or influenced you? Did you know it was the wrong decision at the time? What did you do (if anything) when you realized you had been wrong?

PRACTICE

3. Resolve to interrupt some behavior that is not healthy for you or for others. This could be as small as not obsessively checking your bank balance or as large as offering an apology.

Class

A great many of the voices Saunders creates in this collection are working class people not only struggling to make ends meet but also striving to keep up with, or feel less humiliated by, the affluence adjacent to them. As a theme, class works on at least two distinct levels: there are the facts of one's material resources and there is the response to this reality in the form of class consciousness.

"Puppy" is a tour-de-force ride that tests the reader's capacity to radiate disgust, sympathy, and grudging admiration towards the same individuals. Saunders brings a family in a Lexus out to the country to buy a puppy from a family so strapped they must either sell the puppy to make some money or kill it because they lack the means to keep it up. The juxtaposition makes for an electric read: Marie, the bourgeois mom,

is a woman haunted by her own childhood neglect who annoys her ungrateful children with her forced joy and her attempts to manufacture pleasant family memories; Callie, the puppy's owner, is a woman who, overwhelmed by the demands of her special-needs son (Bo), ties him to a tree in the backyard to keep him from once again wandering across the interstate.

Saunders packs the description of the house with details that are funny and also "deeply sad": "the dry aquarium holding the single encyclopedia volume, the pasta pot on the bookshelf with an inflatable candy cane inexplicably sticking out of it," "the spare tire on the dining room table," the basketball in the sink. The humorous pairings inside the house jolt the reader to attention and recall the essential disorder outside the house: the brutality of chaining one's son to a tree while in the living room the puppy poops on the carpet.

Though she lives a comfortable life, the apparent disorder is too much for Marie. She identifies with Bo but, driven by the imperative of proving her family better than Callie's, refuses to "contribute" to the situation by buying the dog.

Meanwhile, though straitened by circumstance, Callie's apparent disorder belies a heart for sacrifice. Callie lacks the dignified sheen with which Steinbeck brushes the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but the similarities are there. Callie loves Bo and is doing all she can to protect him, and she loves her husband and does all she can to protect him: putting this love into action means securing her son to a tree and abandoning the puppy to starve in a field. These are unfortunate choices we are free to judge. One wonders, though, if that gets to the heart of it, if the brutality we need to awaken to is *prior* to the chained-up son and starved puppy.

While Callie's class-consciousness extends only as far as quickly picking up dog turds from the carpet, "Al Roosten" and the dad in "Semplica Girl Diaries" share Marie's fear and envy. Al Roosten feels so beset by those more successful than he that, in the end, a desperate sense of inadequacy overcomes the "moral courage" his mother always saw in him. He snaps the way Marie does when confronted with an image he is afraid may be his own: "The old man in filthy clothes staggered up the street, dragging a cardboard square on which, no doubt, he slept. His teeth were ghoulish, his eyes wet and red. Roosten imagined himself leaping from the car, knocking the man to the ground, kicking him and kicking him, teaching him, in this way, a valuable lesson on how to behave."

The violence in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" is less intense and fairly invisible, but for all that, ultimately more real. A sense of falling behind his neighbors and not wanting to scar his daughters with feelings of material inadequacy is what leads the dad to engage in the exploitive economy of the SGs. While trying to shield his daughters from humiliation, he exposes them to spiritual poverty — and Eva, sensitive and kind-hearted, refuses to cooperate.

Stood awhile watching, thinking, praying: Lord, give us more. Give us enough. Help us not fall behind peers. Help us not, that is, fall further behind peers. For kids' sake. Do not want them scarred by how far behind we are.

— from “The Semplica Girl Diaries” in George Saunders’s *Tenth of December*



THINK

1. What less visible systemic brutality might Marie’s tying Bo to a tree symbolize?

REFLECT

2. What preconceptions do you have about people who have a socio-economic status that is different from yours?

What assumptions are they based on?

PRACTICE

3. The United States is still a racially segregated country, but class distinguishes neighborhoods at least as much as race. Set this goal: over the next several months, carefully consider what activities you could engage in — as an employee, volunteer, family member, or neighbor — that would help desegregate your company, neighborhood, or community.

Kindness

Saunders “talks you into loving people” by presenting characters who are never *just* compromised by circumstance or *just* struggling to sense their own convictions. They are also kind. He allows us to see in these characters what we could also see in one another (perhaps this is the point?): that we have good intentions even when we are misguided, that kindness returns us to ourselves, to the voice that will guide us rightly.

Sometimes one’s essential kindness shows up very late and breaks our hearts. Such is the case in “Sticks,” a brilliantly concise story of a family’s life together. The distant and glee-killing father allows one concession: the pole that he decorates for special occasions. As he grows old, well after “the seeds of meanness” have bloomed in his

children, his heart opens wider and he hangs “letters of apology, admissions of error, pleas for understanding, all written in a frantic hand ... He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? and then he died in the hall with the radio on ...” The self-awareness and vulnerability are sweet and sad, a triumph too late, but a triumph to be sure. And perhaps also a warning: hang your signs of love and forgiveness while you still have a steady hand.

In the title story, well-timed kindness proves to be literally life-saving in several ways. The boy, Robin, walks the woods *imagining* kind, brave acts he can perform, lamenting that, these days, you never *actually* get to save anyone. He recalls coming upon a dying raccoon; scared of the desperate animal, he nevertheless returns to the house to get it some water, but by the time he returns, it has died. Because he is always on the lookout for people who need help, he sees Eber’s coat and knows something is wrong. As he tries to quickly get to the coat, he falls in the pond, which instigates Eber’s own kindness.

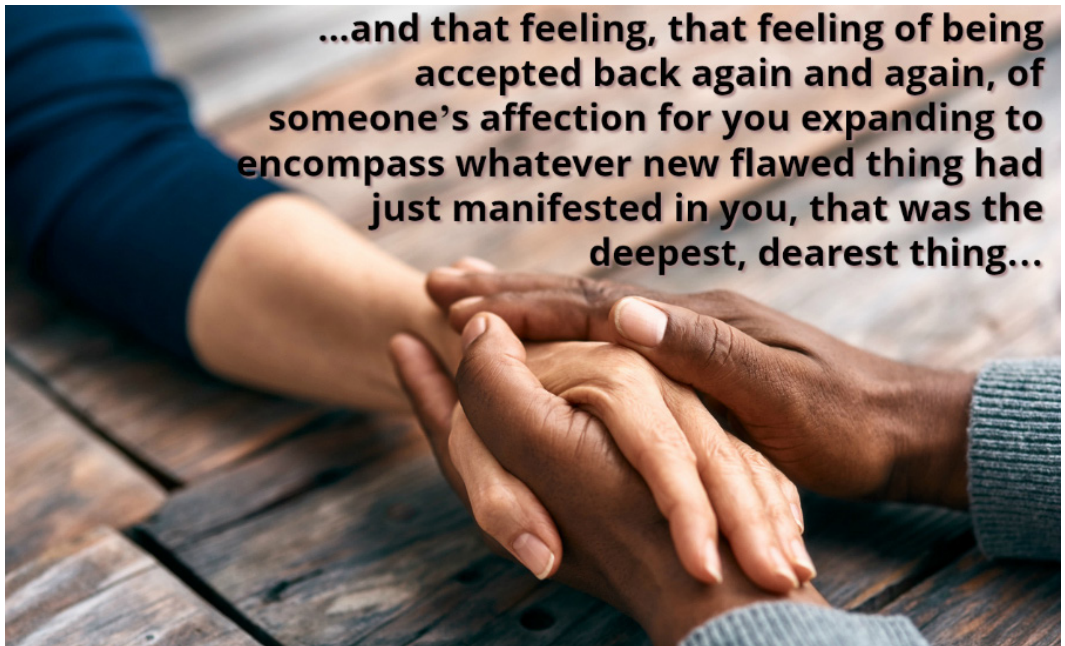
The tables turn and, as Eber gives his clothes to the boy, his attitude towards his cancer begins to change. Caring for the boy restores some of his dignity and distracts him from his disease. He enters the woods and drops his coat intent on freezing to death rather than becoming a burden to his family or debasing himself further. He is determined not to become his beloved step-father Allen, who, deranged by pain, turned ugly before dying. But his perspective changes after the exchange of kindness, and we see yet another aspect of the theme that kindness saves: the demands on his kindness, on his humanity, bring him back to himself. His act of kindness literally strips him and, closer to death than ever, he has a moment of clarity; he realizes that everything he has planned — suicide, abandoning his family — “was not something he would ever do”:

Because, okay, the thing was — he saw it now, was starting to see it — if some guy, at the end, fell apart, and said or did bad things, or had to be helped, helped to quite a considerable extent? So what? What of it? Why should he not do or say weird things or look strange or disgusting? Why should the shit not run down his legs? Why should those he loved not lift and bend and feed and wipe him, when he would gladly do the same for them? He’d been afraid to be lessened by the lifting and bending and feeding and wiping, and was still afraid of that, and yet, at the same time, now that there could still be many — many drops of goodness, is how it came to him — many drops of happy — of good-fellowship — ahead, and those drops of Fellowship were not — had never been — his to withheld.

Withhold.

The kindness that strips his clothes and his misperceptions, and the heroic kindness of Robin’s mother save Eber from a destructive, isolationist, prideful way of thinking and awaken him to the reality of compassion — and he gets a second chance to live with this renewed perspective. Sometimes one’s essential kindness shows up *just in time* and warms our hearts!

Finally, Eber reflects again on his beloved Allen, whom his own deranged thinking had turned into an antagonist. This time his memory is guided less by fear and more by generosity, and it restores to him Allen’s acts of kindness. He thinks, “I’ll be like him ... I’ll try to be like him.”



THINK

1. Is Eva's release of the SGs kindness in "Semplica"? Are there complications in answering "yes"? What are they? What would have been more kind?

REFLECT

2. In "Semplica" and "My Chivalric Fiasco," kindness has complex results. Sometimes, what seems to us to be kindness actually causes complications. Reflect on a time when your intention was to be kind, but the impact revealed you had missed the mark. What went wrong?

PRACTICE

3. Eber has committed his energy to death, but he manages to pivot and throw his energy in the opposite direction, to life, to selfless kindness for Robin. This saves him from himself. Why not test out whether this works? The next time you are headed full speed towards any kind of sadness, isolation, or self-destruction, pivot and do something selfless and kind for another.

Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

Tenth of December by George Saunders

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

Puddnhead Wilson by Mark Twain

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin and

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

The Partly-Cloudy Patriot by Sarah Vowell

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Download Reading Guides at [SpiritualityandPractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub)



The **We the People Book Club** is a year-long program contemplating America's past and possibilities as presented by classic and contemporary literary voices. It is a part of The Practicing Democracy Project, a collaboration between **The Center for Spirituality & Practice** and the **Fetzer Institute**.

The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

All commentaries, reading guide questions, and practice suggestions for the We the People Book Club are copyright 2018 by Spirituality & Practice (**[SpiritualityandPractice.com](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com)**), a multifaith website presenting resources for people on spiritual journeys. Julia Davis, a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project, wrote this Book Club Reading Guide.

Tenth of December book cover image courtesy of Random House (**[randomhousebooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)**). Book cover design by Chelsea Cardinal.

