

The long wait for a novel from short story genius George Saunders is finally over. And as anyone who knows Saunders's work would expect, his first novel is a strikingly original production, a divisively odd book bound either to dazzle or alienate readers.

Distinct from the poignant satires he has published in the *New Yorker* and elsewhere, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is an extended national ghost story, an erratically funny and piteous séance of grief. The *Lincoln* of the title is our 16th president; the *Bardo* is probably far less familiar. That Tibetan concept refers to an intermediate plane between our world and the next, a kind of Buddhist limbo experienced just after death.

The spirit of this story arises from a tragic footnote in American history:

A TRAGIC FOOTNOTE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

The Man Booker Prize 2017 winner is an experimental debut about life, death and that which lies in between

RON CHARLES

During the second year of the Civil War, in February 1862, the Lincolns' 11-year-old son, Willie, died of typhoid fever. The horror of that loss was compounded by cruel circumstances: encouraged by their son's doctor, Lincoln declined to cancel a party at the White House, which later gave rise to accusations that the president and his wife were celebrating not only as their country was bleeding, but even as their own child lay dying upstairs.

But *Lincoln in the Bardo* is no solemn work of historical fiction. This is a book that confounds our expectations of what a novel should look and sound like. It seems at first a clever clip-job, an extended series of brief quotations from letters, diaries, newspaper articles, personal testimonies and later scholars, each one meticulously attributed. We hear from people who worked for the president, his friends, colleagues and enemies, 19th century biographers and more recent ones such as Doris Kearns Goodwin. Saunders has said he came to see his role as a novelist expanding to include the role of “curator.”

So, is this actually a novel or a script? At first, the conscientious reader struggles to consider these passages as though they comprised a tall stack of individual epigraphs. But quickly, *Lincoln in the Bardo* teaches us how to read it. The quotations gathered from scores of different voices begin to cohere into a hypnotic conversation that moves with the mysterious undulations of a flock of birds.

This form, though, is not the novel's only radical element. Stirred heavily into the mix of what Saunders calls “historical nuggets” are the voices of

fictional characters, invented witnesses and commentators. And the majority of these are dead people.

Yes.

The lead characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* are corpses in Georgetown's Oak Hill Cemetery, where Willie is laid to rest. From the moment the little body arrives, the shades gather “round and strike up a boisterous conversation that lasts all night.” (The audiobook version released alongside the novel employs a glitzy constellation of 166 stars, including Lena Dunham, Susan Sarandon, David Sedaris and Ben Stiller — arguably the largest cast ever assembled for a single audiobook. A film deal is also reportedly in the works.)

Saunders has said he was inspired by *Our Town*, but his ghoulish gabfest is

not about wealth,” the Reverend Everly Thomas explains with antique gentility. “It is about comportment. It is about, let us say, 'being wealthy in spirit'.” But that is a quality in short supply among these graves. As the night wears on, Bevins, Thomas and their companion Hans Vollman—the novel's leading trio—struggle to maintain order in their chaotic cemetery, arguing and pleading with alcoholics, murderers, victims and all manner of raging, despairing spirits.

Through willed ignorance, these ghosts floating around their graves don't allow themselves to acknowledge that they're dead. Instead, referring to their coffins as “sick-boxes”, they insist that they are merely suffering “with some previously unknown malady” from which they will eventually recover. And

Indeed, the ghosts threaten to overtake the novel. Clearly, Saunders enjoys their macabre antics, but the heart of the story remains Abraham Lincoln, the shattered father who rides alone to the graveyard at night to caress the head of his lifeless boy. He barely speaks, but as Bevins and Vollman pass through the president's body like light through a glass, they catch his thoughts and fears. We can hear Lincoln wrestling with his faith, struggling to maintain his composure against an avalanche of grief and a torrent of criticism from a nation shocked by the American carnage.

It's at this point in the novel that Saunders's deep compassion shines through most clearly. In the darkness of that cemetery, the president realises as never before that his own grief has already been endured by tens of thousands of fathers and mothers across the country. He hovers perilously between giving up or transforming that sorrow into renewed determination to

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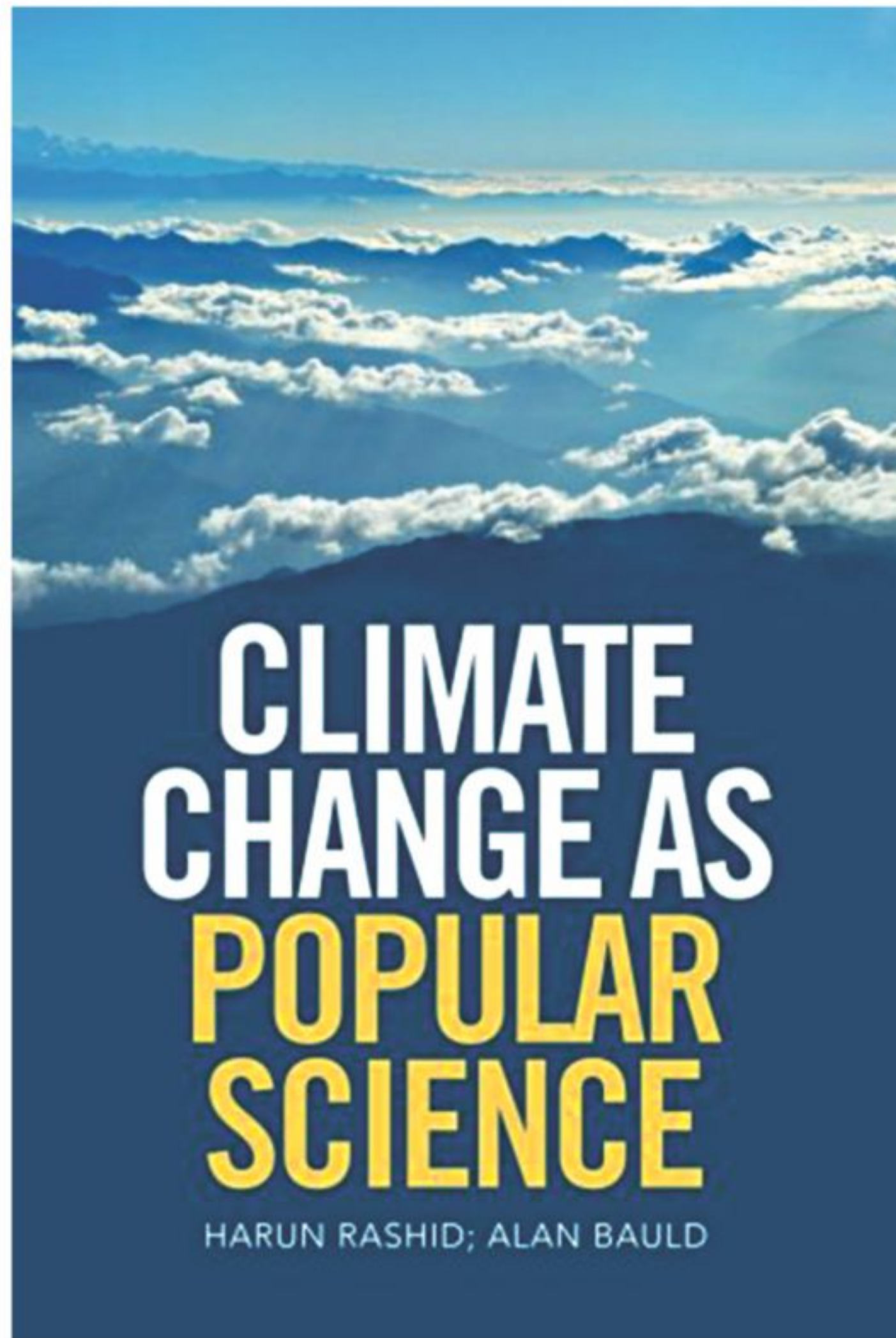
Climate change, though felt ubiquitously across the globe ever increasingly, still remains a bone of contention, sometimes hard enough for many to sink their teeth into. Larger, industrialised economies that evidently contribute to human-induced climate change, as the popular discourse now righteously claims, tend to show nonchalance, if not outright disdain, for the issue. With sharper bites every year in the form of tornados, droughts, floods, avalanches and prolonged summers, the issue became a quotidian experience for almost everybody on earth, but appears as nothing beyond petty nibbling to the political juggernauts that hold real sway on the situation.

The debate on climate change, although not quite healthy as it might seem at first blush, now divides academia—from geographers, geologists, climatologists to other relevant professionals. Amid much fury and flailing between the scuffling parties, we need the saner brains to ponder on how the popular mind fares on these issues, since at the end of the day that will shape how the issues should be handled. Harun Rashid and Alan Bauld have just done that job. Drawn from their decades-long experience on a wide gamut of climatology and earth sciences, Rashid, Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and Bauld, an ardent educator on environmental issues, have come forward with a timely book on some familiar questions on climate changes.

Rashid and Bauld's book explores what climate change etches out in the current popular mind. Obviously, more common people are now becoming aware of the issue, as these touch their lives more directly and personally. Climate change is no longer a pet topic for arm-chair environmentalists and upstart NGOs. Newspapers, social media, television talk-shows and political debates now bustle with live discussions on shifty weather, mighty tornados, devastating floods and scorching droughts, as these rip through our daily lives. The book tries to depict the trajectory of both the development in and depth of the understanding of the issue by general people as revealed in popular media.

The book dissects the recent discourse on climate change as a scientific phenomenon, rather than a cultural upheaval or political resentment, not from within, but from the edge through a dispassionate eye. Before going deeper into the study, which might otherwise have been a rather dry academic exercise, the authors took the trouble to familiarise readers with the core issues concerning climate change. Instead of depending solely on definitions, they discuss the topics with rich backyard examples, mostly drawn from their own first-hand research, as well as other scholarly sources. Straying from the usual pedagogic tone, the authors adopt a fluid prose that would reach the average layman. Although this part has taken up the bulk of the book, it successfully works as a cogent introductory guide for readers interested in climate change discourse.

WASIQ AZAD



The book introduces us with the varied terminologies on, factors contributing to, and stakes in climate change. As backdrops, they discuss the geographical and climatic details of a few chosen countries and regions, namely Canada, Bangladesh, India and Saudi Arabia among others, and with threadbare analyses, explain how nature and human civilisations are melding and crafting the contours of the global climate. It also quenches our curiosity in some ordinary but seldom-

answered questions such as why there is no rain in desert areas or how seepage of seawater ruins habitats in the coastal regions of Bangladesh.

While assuring that we are really in an Anthropocene era, where a major part of climate change is anchored on our own economic activities, the authors show through data analyses that there were many natural causes that came full circle over an observable geologic period. Instead of trying to prove one side of the debate wrong, they take a composed position straddling on the middle ground, partly in order to be true to their research findings and partly, in my view, to subscribe to a pragmatic, economic view of the situation.

The book will help the general reader grasp the subject with ease, as it is principally meant for the non-professionals. In particular, the first part of the book should come handy for a thorough understanding of the underlying elements of the core issues. The second part that deals with the discourse analysis will help students fathom the understanding of the popular mind on the subject. The study is academic, but at the same time illuminating for the curious common man. Most readers would of course treasure the first part as a necessary guide to discerning climate affairs.

The book may also intrigue environmentalists, who can get a glimpse of the entire pantheon of climate issues in one short compendium. Readers interested in delving more into the subject can take a look at Rashid's two other recent books—*Climate Change in Bangladesh: Confronting Impending Disasters* (Lexington Books, Plymouth, New York) and *Climatic Hazards in Coastal Bangladesh: Non-Structural and Structural Solutions* (Elsevier, Amsterdam and New York), both co-authored with Professor Bimal K Paul of Kansas State University. Equipped with a wealth of their own research, they burrowed far deeper and wider into the climatic impacts on earth along with exploring the reasons behind these, with Bangladesh as a test case.

Wasif Asad is a financial analyst and freelance writer.

Readers interested in exchanging views on the topic may contact Professor Rashid directly at rasid.haru@eagle.uwlax.edu.

nothing like the stock-still pronouncements of Thornton Wilder's sepia-toned play. Saunders's ghosts are in full motion, in a fluid state of decay based on the moment of their deaths. In prose that rivals Hollywood special effects, we see, for instance, Roger Bevins III, a gay man who committed suicide and grows “so many extra eyes and noses and hands that his body all but vanished.” The roof over one burial vault is composed of tiny, shrivelled souls, like a coral reef of wraiths. A lieutenant's corporeal form swells as he roars on about the sexual assaults he committed against his slaves: “Lieutenant Stone's bodily mass would be swept upwards into an elongated vertical body-coiffe,” Saunders writes. “His body-volume remaining constant, this increase in height would render him quite thin, literally pencil-thin in places.”

As in Georgetown proper, the dearly departed of the Oak Hill Cemetery maintain a huffy propriety and class structure, despite their gory frames. “It is

it's not easy to stay here in this liminal state; it requires intense effort, even manic singleness of mind to resist the angels that sweep through periodically to lure souls on to the level beyond.

The spirits of Oak Hill Cemetery present a ghoulish gallery of desiccated lives, minds dehydrated until all that remains are the central anxieties and preoccupations of their lives above ground. Miserly Mr Ellenby is fixated on finding his missing “seven dolers”; the Three Bachelors, “terrified of boredom”, are determined not to feel committed to anything; Mr Collier “was constantly compelled to float horizontally, like a human compass needle, the top of his head facing in the direction of whichever of his properties he found himself most worried about at the moment.” It's impossible to tarry with these spirits—some comic, some tragic, all grotesquely distorted—without reflecting on the pathetic concerns, desires or offences that each of us allows to eclipse our time on Earth.

bring the national crisis to conclusion. Finally, he realises that “though on the surface it seemed every person was different, this was not true. ... Whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering (none content; all wronged, neglected, overlooked, misunderstood), and therefore one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact.”

That's essentially Saunders's Golden Rule, the same moral advice he gave at a commencement speech at Syracuse University in 2013, a speech that went viral online and was later published as a small book called *Congratulations, by the Way*. But now, in the pages of this fantastical book, rooted in the soil of a cemetery and watered with the blood of so many Americans, that advice feels harder won and more necessary.

Ron Charles is the editor of Book World at The Washington Post

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ABOUT TOWN

Dhaka Lit Fest

DHAKA LIT FEST 2017

Organiser: Dhaka Lit Fest

November 16-18, 9 am - 7 pm, Bangla Academy

Meril FolkFest

৫ নভেম্বর
রেজিট্রেশন এর শেষ দিন

DHAKA INTERNATIONAL FOLK FEST 2017

Organiser: Dhaka International Folk Fest

November 9-11, 6 pm, Bangladesh Army Stadium, Banani

SEMINAR & WORKSHOP
"DO DANCE"

৫ নভেম্বর
রেজিট্রেশন এর শেষ দিন

৫ নভেম্বর
রেজিট্রেশন এর শেষ দিন

DANCE TO KNOW
SEMINAR AND WORKSHOP

Organiser: Nadimbo Sports Dance Institute (NSDI)

November 11, 6-8.30 pm, Russian Cultural Centre, Dhanmondi