



Book Review Lincoln In The Bardo

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Lincoln in the Bardo features ghosts inhabiting a graveyard who have all the time in the world to tell and retell their stories to one another. Like the denizens of Dante's *Inferno*, these spirits are eager to rehash their memories, and unwilling to accept that life has been taken from them. Their graveyard is more a purgatory than an inferno. The 'bardo' of the title refers to the Buddhist concept of a limbo state between one life and the next. But there's still plenty of lamentation to go around. A trio of ghosts serves as the novel's protagonists and a Greek chorus of sorts, narrating events and commenting on their fellow specters. But when their stasis is interrupted by the arrival of Willie Lincoln- the son of Abraham Lincoln- these unquiet spirits are forced to confront the facts of their circumstances.

With *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the author combines personal tragedy with the fate of an entire nation. The date is 22nd February 1862, and the body of Abraham Lincoln's eleven-year-old son William has just been laid to rest in a marble crypt in Oak hill cemetery, Georgetown. Far away the Civil War is raging, and the Confederate forces are celebrating their recent success in The Battle of Valverde. The nation is in the process of tearing itself apart. Meanwhile, Lincoln is pacing the graveyard, unwilling to leave the body of his boy, and unsure what to do about the war. He doesn't see it, but he is surrounded by the restless spirits of dead.

While history is constantly present in the background of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, it pointedly happens off-centre. The actions of great men are momentarily forgotten, drowned out by a multitude of voices incessantly speaking of individual pain from an otherworldly space between life and death.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Bardo is a plane populated by spirits who are either ascending towards Nirvana or falling backwards through increasingly frightening hallucinations until they are ready to be reborn. In Saunders' interpretation of the afterlife, he combines Bardo with something of Dante's *Inferno* and the Christian idea of Purgatory, and populates it with spirits who are in different ways haunted by their past mistakes and the future they never had.

Just as in *The Divine Comedy*, Saunders' Bardo has become a place of personalised punishment inhabited by people from all layers of society. Misshapen by their attempts to cling on, they have become tragicomic manifestations of their unfinished business. There's the middle-aged printer, who died before he could consummate his happy marriage to younger bride, and is walking around in the afterlife sporting a constant, abnormally enlarged erection. There's the young homosexual who killed himself before he really got to live, and has sprouted ears, noses and eyes all over his body. There's the priest who has figured out that he is dead,

and whose face is permanently stuck copying Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893). Sometimes the damned speak British (apparently, they always did, so it's not part of the punishment). Sometimes they used to be slave-owners and insistently still try to lord over the spirits of former slaves, suggesting that the border between life and death is sometimes easier to cross than the walls people put up between each other.

All in all, in their diversity and flawed humanity, the restless spirits of Oak Hill Cemetery can be understood to represent the American people. Not as a unified whole, but as a collection of individuals each with their own motivations and anxieties. The elegance of the author's writing is that he manages to include it all: the dirty, the ridiculous, and the heart-breaking, and make it funny but also kind. As a connection between the individual tragedy of personal loss and the common destiny of mankind, Saunders posits a fragile idea of salvation.

One cannot really discuss *Lincoln in the Bardo* without highlighting the style in which it is written. Narration is shared between the great number of spirit characters in the form of a polyphonous collection of memories and ongoing report which flows back and forth between them, occasionally interrupted by quotes from history books and memoirs, some real, some faked.

Saunders has his characters narrate the story as part of an ongoing, constantly changing conversation which transforms back and forth between dialogue and monologue, and which mixes the current time of action with vivid memories. The form borrows stylistically from a Samuel Beckettian and James Joycean stream of consciousness – a mode of narration that performs characters' thoughts and feelings as a continuous flow, undistracted by normative expectations of form. Beckett's *Play* (1963), which also takes place in an underworld type setting, especially echoes in Saunders' spirit voices.

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Politics, War, and History are ever-present in the corner of the reader's eye. However, as demonstrated by the spirit narrators, the dominating theme lies with so-called smaller things. Things known privately by each lonely soul and common to all humankind. The story is told by the voices of individuals who were never all that important in the great scheme of things. In their lives they were workers, mothers, slaves, or soldiers with names that won't be found in any history books. Even their names are written all in small letters. But in their (after)lives, they are the main characters. As they are also the narrators, with each of them the story gains a new focus. In the Bardo, they've lost contact with their humanity – they've become misshapen monsters carrying the weight of their sorrows in their flesh.

Although, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is narrated with a focus on thought over action, it does have a plot. The spirit of little Willie must be saved before it is forever lost to the hellish illusions of the truly damned. With an actual task at hand, the spirits of Bardo make the discovery that some things are important even when all seems lost, and as they struggle to save the innocent Willie, they teach each other empathy. Empathy, it appears, is the way to salvation, and with it many of the spirits move on – to Nirvana, Heaven, rebirth, or just off the page – we can't tell. Once they've dared open their hearts, to listen instead of speaking, they can move forward. It can be revealed that as Lincoln rests in the place of the not-quite-dead, they do manage to influence him ever so slightly and significantly, and though he is there for his son, he leaves with something else too, leading to the eventual abolishment of slavery.