

Vigil

by George Saunders



About the Book

An electric novel from the #1 *New York Times* bestselling, Booker Prize-winning author of *LINCOLN IN THE BARD*, taking place at the bedside of an oil company CEO in the twilight hours of his life as he is ferried from this world into the next.

Not for the first time, Jill "Doll" Blaine finds herself hurtling toward earth, reconstituting as she falls, right down to her favorite black pumps. She plummets towards her newest charge, yet another soul she must usher into the afterlife, and lands headfirst in the circular drive of his ornate mansion.

She has performed this sacred duty 343 times since her own death. Her charges, as a rule, have been greatly comforted in their final moments. But this charge, she soon discovers, isn't like the others: the powerful K. J. Boone will not be consoled, because he has nothing to regret. He lived a big, bold life, and the world is better for it. Isn't it?

VIGIL transports us, careening, through the wild final evening of an epic, complicated life. Crowds of people and animals --- worldly and otherworldly, alive and dead --- arrive, clamoring for a reckoning. Birds swarm the dying man's room, a black calf grazes on the love seat, a man from a distant, drought-ravaged village materializes, two oil-business cronies from decades past show up with chilling plans for Boone's post-death future.

With the acuity and explosive imagination we've come to expect, George Saunders takes on the gravest issues of our time --- the menace of corporate greed, the toll of capitalism, the environmental perils of progress ---- and, in the process, spins a tale that encompasses life and death, good and evil, and the thorny question of absolution.

Discussion Guide

1. How do K. J. Boone's memories of his childhood shape his understanding of guilt and morality in his current life

decisions?

2. In what ways do the contrasting scenes of celebration and despair enhance the themes of the book?
3. How does Jill's relationship with Lloyd illustrate the themes of love and identity amidst loss?
4. In what ways does the surreal element of the multiplying characters contribute to the overall narrative?
5. How do the elements of humor in the book enhance the darker themes of mortality and regret?
6. How does the character of the Frenchman function as both a guide and a challenge for K. J. Boone?
7. In what ways do K. J. Boone's reflections on environmental issues reflect broader societal challenges?
8. How does the theme of redemption play out in the interactions between K. J. Boone and Jill?
9. How do the nuances of character interactions enhance the exploration of regret and forgiveness throughout the book?
10. What role does nostalgia play in shaping the characters' identities and choices in their present lives?

Author Bio

George Saunders is the author of numerous books, including the novel *LINCOLN IN THE BARDO*, which won the Man Booker Prize, and the story collections *PASTORALIA* and *TENTH OF DECEMBER*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. He has received fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 2006 he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. In 2013 he was awarded the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction and was included in *Time*'s list of the 100 most influential people in the world. He teaches in the creative writing program at Syracuse University.

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