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Archival Work in a Surreal World: The Imagination of George Saunders

Erica Olsen

When George Saunders's first collection of short stories, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, came out in 1996 reviewers emphasized the surrealism of his fictional world of run-down theme parks and virtual-reality franchise businesses: "... a nightmarish post-apocalyptic world that might have been envisioned by Walt Disney on acid," wrote the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, while *Newsweek* called it "a cybernetic, post-apocalyptic dystopia."¹

Saunders's settings may be surreal, but the work that his characters perform in the *CivilWarLand* stories is grounded in the reality of contemporary records management. In "The 400-Pound CEO," the title character works at Humane Raccoon Alternatives, a company that claims to relocate problem raccoons to the countryside while actually killing them. Still a lowly employee, not yet a CEO, he completes routine paperwork—"Post-burial I write up the invoices and a paragraph or two on how overjoyed the raccoons were when

¹ The blurbs appear in the front matter of the Riverhead Books paperback edition of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997).

we set them free”—while lusting after Freeda, the company’s “document placement and retrieval specialist.”² In the title story, “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” the narrator works at a historical theme park of questionable accuracy, located on the old McKinnon family property: “Their homestead’s long gone but our records indicate that it was located near present-day Information Hoedown.”³ Saunders continues the recordkeeping theme in *Pastoralia*, his second collection. In the title story, the main character lives and works in a faux-caveman theme-park habitat where his job description includes creating pictographs, arguably humanity’s earliest form of recordkeeping. Behind the scenes, he faxes in a “Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form,” which he completes with incorrect information in order to keep his underperforming coworker from being fired.

Theme parks and small-animal slaughter aside, Saunders’s fictional world is one that records managers and archivists will find familiar. In the story “CivilWarLand,” records construct the fictional world. Here’s how the characters (and readers) learn that the park is losing money: the boss “pulls out the summer stats. We’re in the worst attendance decline in ten years. If it gets any worse, staff is going to be let go in droves.”⁴ Despite the decline in visitation (for which random attacks by teenage gangs are partly to blame), the narrator carries on with his work, which includes a “Verisimilitude Evaluation,” a “normal clandestine New Employee Observation,” and an “Employee Retrospective”—the last item being paperwork after an employee is fired.⁵ Assigned to find someone willing to take on the gangs, the narrator goes to a coworker described as “the queen of info. It’s in her personality. She enjoys digging up dirt on people.... She has access to all records. I ask can she identify current employees with a history of violence. She says she can if I buy her lunch.”⁶ The queen of info has access to “federal sources”

² Ibid., 45-46.

³ Ibid., 11-12.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 18, 14, 9.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

that reveal one employee's history as a Vietnam veteran.⁷ "She suggests I take a nice long look at his marksmanship scores. She says his special combat course listing goes on for pages."⁸ Even relationships between people are described in terms of records, such as when the narrator describes his wife's lack of respect for him: "She's always denigrating my paystub."⁹ The entire story can be read as a narrative of recordkeeping. It is the routine activity that absorbs much of his characters' work lives, and it is how they track their successes and failures as human beings.

In addition to the informational value of records, archives have a broader significance as "society's collective memory," in the words of Kenneth E. Foote, a scholar of geography and landscape history.¹⁰ Foote writes: "For archivists, the idea of archives as memory is more than a metaphor. The documents and artifacts they collect are important resources for extending the spatial and temporal range of human communication."¹¹ In "CivilWarLand," however, this transmission process has gone askew. The theme park's hokey attractions are said to be based on documentation—"actual Gettysburg photos"—but the results are far from authentic or convincing.¹² Moreover, the records the

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid., 14-15.

⁹ Ibid., 5. Saunders apparently relates deeply to the world of recordkeeping. In an interview in the *Missouri Review*, he cast his own admission to the Syracuse University Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing in a records-related light, saying he felt as if his admission had been a "clerical error." With an undergraduate degree from the Colorado School of Mines and work experience as an engineer, he did not have the typical writer's education. In the same interview, he mentions the kind of paperwork he had to do in a former job: "running my little photocopier ... writing Environmental Health and Safety Assessment Plans." Saunders now teaches at Syracuse University. J. J. Wylie, "An Interview with George Saunders," *Missouri Review* 24.2 (2001: 55, 67), <www.missourireview.org/content/dynamic/view_text.php?text_id=819> (accessed April 29, 2009).

¹⁰ Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 378-393, rpt. in *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, ed. Randall C. Jimerson (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000), 29.

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² Saunders, *CivilWarLand*, 7.

park relies on are not always correct; if they were, the narrator would be out of a job, because one of his main responsibilities is reviewing the “Verisimilitude Irregularities List.”¹³ This is the kind of problem he has to deal with: “Mr. Grayson, Staff Ornithologist, has recently recalculated and estimates that to accurately approximate the 1865 bird population we’ll need to eliminate a couple hundred orioles or so.”¹⁴ Records become archives become memory. “CivilWarLand” asks, If Employee Retrospectives record our lives today, what kind of history are we creating for tomorrow? How will we be remembered?

Records are not the only source of information in “CivilWarLand.” People are sources of history, too—but this is the narrator’s little secret. The population of the theme park includes the ghosts of the McKinnons, the family who lived there during the Civil War. The narrator is able to interact with them and uses their conversations to develop special attractions for the park, helping his own career in the process: “That’s basically how I finally moved up from Verisimilitude Inspector to Special Assistant, by lifting ideas from the McKinnons. The Mrs. likes me because after she taught me a few obscure 1800s ballads and I parlayed them into Individual Achievement Awards, I bought her a Rubik’s Cube. To her, colored plastic is like something from Venus.”¹⁵ The ghost of Mr. McKinnon is less cooperative: “It’s too bad I can’t make an inroad because he was at Antietam and could be a gold mine of war info.”¹⁶ The narrator’s interactions with the McKinnons serve as a reminder that something was lost in the transition from oral to written culture. As historian and archivist James M. O’Toole has noted, “writing broke down the human links that were at the heart of the information storage and transfer process in the oral world.”¹⁷ And it is human

¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ James M. O’Toole, “On the Idea of Permanence,” *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 10-25, rpt. in *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, ed. Randall C. Jimerson (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000), 479.

links that Saunders's unlikely heroes, in "CivilWarLand," "The 400-Pound CEO," and other stories, are trying desperately to maintain.

"Everything in the world is holy and unholy at the same time," Saunders said in a *New York Times Magazine* interview.¹⁸ He was responding to a question about talking Doritos, which had appeared in his newest collection of short stories, *In Persuasion Nation*, but the same could be said of his depiction of records in "CivilWarLand." Is communicating with ghosts a historian's dream or a nightmare? The story takes an even darker turn when the narrator discovers the truth about the McKinnon family: "In front of Information Hoedown I see the McKinnons cavorting. I get closer and see that they're not cavorting at all, they've inadvertently wandered too close to their actual death site and are being compelled to act out again and again the last minutes of their lives."¹⁹ We learn that Mr. McKinnon, his mental health damaged by his wartime service—the experience at Antietam that the narrator hoped to access—murdered his own family and then took his own life. As Foote, the geographer, has written, our society often wants to commemorate violent but meaningful events (such as wars), while erasing the memory of events that are violent but apparently meaningless (such as murders): "A society's need to remember is balanced against its desire to forget.... If the violence fails to exemplify an enduring value, there is greater likelihood of the site, artifacts, and documentary record being effaced, either actively or passively."²⁰ In "CivilWarLand," the theme park seems to have inadvertently preserved the ghosts of the McKinnons by recreating a setting that will not allow them to rest in peace. Instead of creating a collective memorial, such as the Gettysburg battlefield, the CivilWarLand site has preserved the memory of one family's individual, horrific tragedy.

In "CivilWarLand," "The 400-Pound CEO," and "Pastoralia," the comically heroic characters persist in displaying their emotions, personality, individuality, and humanity,

¹⁸ Deborah Solomon, "The Stuff of Fiction: Questions for George Saunders," *The New York Times Magazine* (April 9, 2006), 17.

¹⁹ Saunders, *CivilWarLand*, 24.

²⁰ Foote, "To Remember and Forget," 37.

qualities that come into conflict with the stories' settings, in which business transactions dominate. Another story, "Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz" (also in *CivilWarLand*), tells of a virtual-reality game operator in desperate financial straits who finds himself selling the memories of an elderly woman as educational software. Even more directly than "CivilWarLand," it is a story about documentation, memory, and the value of individual human experience. Saunders's characters seem to take part in the postmodern critique of archives, as expressed (to give one example) by the historian Carolyn Steedman, who laments that "The archive is not potentially made up of everything, as is human memory."²¹ Postmodernism, by questioning the power of archival institutions and broadening the definition of "the archive," has challenged longstanding recordkeeping practices—a challenge to which archivists have only recently begun to respond.²² Saunders's work suggests another kind of response, in fiction. While his characters struggle to transcend the records that make their lives small, his stories themselves document the emotions and experiences that would go unrecorded if not preserved in the archives of fiction.

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²¹ Quoted in Francis X. Blouin, "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," *Archival Issues* 24.2 (1999): 105.

²² Archival historian Tom Nesmith cites a number of articles about archives and postmodernism in footnote 2 of his article "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 25.