



## Congratulations by the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness by George Saunders

Reviewed By Brian W. Flynn

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## Book Review

GEORGE SAUNDERS. *Congratulations, By the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness*. New York NY: Random House, 2014. 64 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-8129-9627-2. \$14.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by BRIAN W. FLYNN

George Saunders is best known as a writer of short stories, essays, and children's books. *Congratulations, By the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness* is a significant departure from his usual publications. The departure is notable in both form and content.

A MacArthur Genius Grant fellow, Saunders teaches creative writing at Syracuse University. His 2013 convocation address there went viral and has been replicated in this book. His writing style is both witty and provocative. His message is simple and wise. Saunders's perspective is also noteworthy. At 56, he reflects on a life history not yet experienced by his original audience. More than a decade his senior, I too have come to believe there are cumulative experiences worthy of reflection and sharing with (perhaps inflicting on) those younger.

His challenge and message is deceptively simple. One grasps the profundity of his thesis only after looking at one's own life through that lens. Saunders suggests that young people ask their elders: "Looking back, what do you most regret?" After a series of witty potential responses he states that for him, and many

others, the greatest regrets are failures of kindness. He suggests that a valuable driving motivation in life might simply be "Try to be kinder." Saunders then explores why we are not kinder and ways that we might become kinder, and challenges traditional definitions of success.

For me, the most valuable and intimidating element of reading this book was the realization that, like Saunders, failures of kindness are indeed the regrets that are my most powerful. When I was an adolescent I was unkind to others. I attribute this to my own sense of vulnerability and insecurity. I remember times when I spoke hurtful and unkind words to those I loved out of my own sense of frustration and impotence. These are not the parts of ourselves or our lives about which we want to be reminded. Yet they are important as we find ways to be more kind and important as we repair and sustain relationships.

The format of Saunders's book also deserves mention. It is a small book, measuring 5 inches by 7 inches, and is only 50 pages long. Half of those pages contain no text but are filled with symbolic drawings. There is elegance in the book's ability to provoke such thought and reflection in such a succinct format. I am the author of three books of similar style, and I must confess a bias toward books that combine images and text. There is a worthy discipline in trying to say important things in the most simple and clear way. There is

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power in supplementing the written word with images. There is value in a format that is easily held in the hand and welcomes easy and repeated reexamination. There is something wonderful about a small and easily accessed printed book. In this case, the form reinforces the simple clarity of the message.

I have enjoyed rereading Saunders's book, and I continue to imagine its utility beyond the single casual reader. It could easily and creatively be used as a tool in psychotherapy, providing parental guidance, prompting family discussion, in couples and family counseling, and in initial and continuing education of health care providers.