

# Against the Grain

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Manuscript 8453

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## Booklover – Liquidation

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One piece of historical truth inspired **George Saunders** to ask the question: “How do we live and love when we know that everything we love must end?” in his novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*. The newspapers of the day reported that **President Lincoln** repeatedly visited the crypt of his recently deceased son **Willie** to hold the body and grieve. From this sensational and fantastic report, **Saunders** weaves a story using both historical fact from this time and voices from fictional dead characters. His structure of the story is unique and the reader is left with a wild interpretation of what happens in the bardo. It is quite a read and set the tone for my next **Nobel** choice, **Imre Kertész’s** *Liquidation*. The author was a random selection from the list of **Nobel** Literature Laureates because the novel’s title was delightfully intriguing.

Sidebar — back to random since a systematic approach produced the very dark story for my previous column. And yet death, relationships, and horror are elements in **Kertész’s** *Liquidation*, too. Maybe **Saunders’** question is everywhere to be asked.

**Imre Kertész** won the **2002 Nobel Prize in Literature** “for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history.” He was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1929 of Jewish parents. World War II broke out, and he was just 14 years old when he found himself among the many Hungarian Jews sent to Auschwitz and then later to Buchenwald. He had the good fortune to be liberated in 1945 and made the decision to return to Budapest, graduate from school and pursue a career in journalism. **Kertész** discovered a much greater appreciation for his work once he moved to Germany and was living there when he became the first Hungarian to win the Literature Nobel.

*Liquidation* is not the first book about a search for a book that I have read from **Nobel Laureates**. Yet this story is part detective, part introspective, part love story all entangled in the manuscript of a play entitled “Liquidation — a Comedy in Three Acts” discovered by the main character **Kingbitter** upon the death by suicide of his friend, **Bee**. **Kingbitter** successfully retrieves the bulk of his friend’s papers but the “One” critical manuscript that would “decipher the code name Auschwitz” is not among those he retrieves. The scenes and characters in the play deliver not only insights into the post-Holocaust political and personal struggles of the characters in the book but also foretells **Bee’s** course of action. Early in the story **Kingbitter** is perusing the play and he reads a scene that nine years later plays out exactly as **Bee** has written it. The publishing house where he and his colleagues, **Kürti**, **Obláth**, and **Sarah** (the other characters in the book and thus the play) — work is “to be liquidated.”

“**Kürti**: The state is always the same. The only reason it financed literature up till now was in order to liquidate it. Giving state support to literature is the state’s sneaky way for the state liquidation of literature.”

The ultimate fate of this “One” critical manuscript was incineration by a trusted friend, the last wish of **Bee**.

I leave you with two excerpts from this story within a story, one from a scene that does not make the final manuscript of the play, and the other a musing of **Kingbitter** about a book he has read.

The scene: **Bee** and **Kingbitter** are seated at “a table tucked away at the back of a café.” **Bee** is speaking about suicide to **Kingbitter**.

“**Bee**: Dying is easy  
 Life is one enormous concentration camp  
 that God has established here on Earth for mankind  
 and that man has refined yet further  
 as an annihilation camp for his own kith

Taking one’s own life amounts to  
 outwitting those who stand on guard  
 escaping deserting those who are left behind  
 laughing up one’s sleeve  
 In this big Lager of life  
 the neither-in-nor-out neither-forward-nor-back  
 in this wretched world of lives held  
 in suspended animation where we grow decrepit  
 without time moving any further forward...

this is where I learned that to rebel is  
 TO STAY ALIVE

The great insubordination is  
 for us to live our lives to the end  
 and equally the big humiliation  
 that we owe ourselves  
 The sole method of suicide that is worthy  
 of respect is to live  
 to commit suicide amounts  
 to continuing life  
 starting anew every day  
 living anew every day  
 dying anew every day  
 I don’t know how I should continue.”

**Kingbitter’s** musing:

“The fact is that in my nineteenth or twentieth year — it was the early sixties by then — a book came into my hands. I think I mentioned this book earlier, though I shall not identify either title or author here, because names and the perceptions that accrete to them have a different significance for everyone in every era. I knew about the existence of this book only from other books, in the way that an astronomer infers the existence of an unknown celestial body from the motion of other planets; yet in those days, the era of undiscoverable reasons, it was not possible to get hold of it for some undiscoverable reason. I happened to be grinding through university at the time; though I did not have much money, I staked it all on the venture, mobilizing antiquarian booksellers, denying myself meals in order to acquire an old edition. I then read the bulky volume in less than three days, sitting on a bench in the public garden of a city square, as spring was in the air outside while a constant, depressing gloom reigned within my sublet room. I recall to this day the adventures of the imagination that I lived through at the time while I read in the book that the Ninth Symphony had been withdrawn. I felt privileged, like someone who had become privy to a secret reserved for few.... Still, I don’t think it was that book which carried me into my fateful career. I finished reading it; then, like all the others, it gradually died down within me under the dense, soft layers of my subsequent reading matter. Masses of books, good and bad, of all sorts of genres are dormant within me. Sentences, words, paragraphs, and lines of poetry that, like restless subtenants, unexpectedly spring to life and wander solitarily about or at other times launch into a loud chattering that I am unable to quell.”

And this is why I am a booklover.... 🐉

