The next book in the 2021 Alternative Reading List is A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life. The book, by George Saunders (or Professor George Saunders of Syracuse University’s creative writing program, as we should call him) was published by Random House in 2021.

This book was selected for the Alternative Reading List by Professor Ian Gallacher. Professor Gallacher, the developer of the Legal Writer’s Toolkit and the compiler of the Alternative Reading List, has taught at Syracuse University since 2004. For sixteen years he was the director of the law school’s Legal Communication and Research program. Before moving from practice into teaching, Professor Gallacher was a partner at the litigation firm of Goodell, DeVries in Baltimore where he practiced in the areas of corporate defense and complex civil litigation. Professor Gallacher was born and raised in Scotland, and has a B.A. (hons.) in music from the University of Leeds, an M.F.A. in orchestral conducting from Carnegie-Mellon University, and a J.D. from Washington College of Law, The American University.

Introduction

As with Alexander Hamilton, a previous book in the 2021 Alternative Reading List, there are no focus questions for this book. Unlike Hamilton, though, that’s because the author - George Saunders - provides extensive questions of his own and any additional questions would be, at best, duplicative and, at worst, distracting.

The book consists of seven short stories by four Nineteenth Century Russian writers - Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Gogol - and extensive comments, observations, and “thoughts” by the author. This might not seem at first to be promising material for someone about to come to law school. You are not, after all, coming to study Russian literature, or how to write or read short stories, but rather are coming to engage in the rigorous and detailed study of United States law in the twenty-first century. At first glance, this book seems to have nothing relevant to say about the reason you’re coming to the College of Law.
But look again. The book’s subtitle suggests why it might be worth your time and attention as you get ready to study law. Could you use a master class on writing, reading, and life? Almost certainly, yes. And few, if any, books are better at delivering deep, practical, insights on these crucial areas as this book.

If engaging in the books on the Alternative Reading List has taught you anything, it’s that we all can use help in reading better. This is not a criticism of your reading skills, it’s merely an acknowledgement that we can always be more engaged when we read, can always learn more from every part of what we’re reading, and can use the knowledge we gain to be better informed, to be better at communicating information, and to be better people. This book gives us some tools to help us improve our reading skills and to learn how to think more carefully and consciously about everything we’re reading. And you’ll find the lessons you learn can be applied right away: if you engage in the commentary to the first story (unlike the others in the book, offered throughout the story rather than at the end), you’ll find that you read each subsequent passage more deeply and with more involvement than you had before. You’ll learn that you’re in the hands of a master teacher and you’ll relax as you concentrate ever harder.

Writing, of course, is something you’ll study in law school. And while you won’t be learning to write short stories, that’s only a minor detail. You’ll discover that legal writing and short story writing have a great deal in common: both have very little time to make their points and the writers of both must cope with almost poetic concision of language and gesture, must both engage their readers right away and hold their attention throughout, and have no time to linger or diverge from their primary purpose. I would argue that legal writers have it even worse than short story writers because we have to deal with genre requirements that include source citations in the main body of our text, rather than in footnotes, and our readers have expectations that information will be delivered in a particular way and we push against those expectations at our peril. George Saunders would probably respond that at least legal writers don’t have to contend with a story whose principal plot twist involves a man’s nose leaving his face and parading itself about town, as happens in Gogol’s “The Nose.” If you haven’t read it, and you thought Russian Nineteenth Century short stories must be dull, prepare to be surprised.

As to a master class on life, well; who couldn’t benefit from one of those? And learning the lessons about life that these Russians can teach us will help you to think about ways in which you can use what you know about life to help inform your readers when you become legal writers. It’s easy to forget, as law students, that our work exists in the real world, not in a hypothetical world of precedent, regulations, and legal abstractions. Our clients are people and corporations that behave and act in ways that are not always perfect but that are always real. The more we understand that, and can communicate it with others, the better we are as lawyers. And while these aren’t things we can spend much time talking about in law school, they’re
important things for us to learn and think more about. A book like this helps us explore these things and gives us tools and a vocabulary to allow us to continue that exploration with other writing when we have the chance.

As always, you should practice your active reading skills as you read this book. The author gives you plenty of material to help you with the active reading of the short stories that are his subject, but you should ask questions of the author as well. Why has he chosen the voice in which he writes to you? What effect does that voice have on you? Would that voice be something you could use in formal legal writing? If not, are there nonetheless ways in which you can learn from the author’s use of voice? Are the author’s interpretations of the stories, to the extent he offers any, consistent with your interpretations? To the extent they’re not, what accounts for the difference? Who’s right? And so on. There are an unlimited number of questions you can, and should, ask of any piece of writing you’re reading.

Conclusion

You might be a devotee of Russian literature, you might have never read a word by any Russian author, or you might be somewhere in-between. What’s certain though, is that unless you’re fortunate enough to have studied in Professor Saunders’ class on Russian short stories at Syracuse University, you’ll never have read these stories as carefully or in the company of such a wise and considerate teacher. And no, I don’t think it will be possible for you to audit Professor Saunders’ class while you’re a student here, so this is likely the only chance you’ll get to learn the lessons on offer. It’s a wonderful opportunity, and I hope you avail yourself of it.