Hilariously Hapless Heroes

George Saunders offers fine satiric tales about crochety relatives, dead-end jobs and lost dreams

The characters in *Pastoralia* try desperately to clamber up out of their pits. In Winky, Ned Yankey goes to a local Hyatt to hear a self-help guru named Tom Rodger telling the paying guests how to get other people to stop eating in your earwax. Yankey adopts the speaker's recommended mantra—"Now is the time for me to win"—but can't muster the appalling selflessness to act on these words and kick his deranged sister out of his house.

A character in *The Falls* daydreams about the greatness that has somehow eluded him: "His childhood dreams had been so bright, he had hoped for so much, it couldn't be true that he was a nobody, although, on the other hand, what kind of somebody spends the years best of his life sweating at a photocopyer?"

That concluding question typifies the sort of humor that Saunders consistently wrings out of his characters' constrained existences. These losers are too self-aware to pity, and the world they perceive is unsettlingly familiar. Think TV can't get any more moronic? Check out what Saunders' people watch: *How My Child Died Violently, or The Worst That Could Happen*, "a half-hour of computer simulations of tragedies that have never actually happened but theoretically could." Ever felt that your job is the equivalent of a theme-park exhibit? *Pastoralia* will not refute such subversive notions, but it makes them tolerably, screamingly funny.—By Paul Gray

FROM OUR STAFF

From 1855 till his death in 1976, Richard J. Daley was mayor of Chicago. In *American Pharaoh*, Time senior writer Adam Cohen and former *Time* correspondent Elizabeth Taylor draw on newly uncovered material and more than a hundred interviews with Daley contemporaries to reassess this last of the big-city bosses, one of the most powerful men in 20th-century U.S. politics.

**PASTORALIA POCT:** Losers too self-aware to pity

**THEATER**

**Good Luck**

Arthur Miller's first play gets its first U.S. revival

His latest play is running successfully on Broadway. A string of first-rate revivals has in recent years, tarnished a glowing reputation. There's even a new opera based on one of his tragedies that has a shot at entering the modern repertory. Among his theatrical generation, Arthur Miller, at 84, remains a living, vital force on our stages.

A small but worthwhile part of his good fortune is the first-ever U.S. revival of his first professionally produced play, called, with ironic aptness, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*. Now running in a smart, wonderfully acted production at the Ivy Substage in Culver City, Calif., the play opened on Broadway in 1944 and closed after four nights. At the time, Miller thought it was victimized by the cult of the well-made play, and he may be right. For *Luck* is a sometimes comic melodrama that finds a little messily with tragedy—particularly in that Miller specialty, father-son relationships.

Its title character, David Brees (played by the electrifying Paul Guttreda), is a small-town garage mechanic, who effortlessly rises to prosperity and marital contentment and can't understand what he has done to deserve his happy fate—especially as he watches his father meddlesomely destroy his brother's baseball dreams. David must tempt the gods' benevolence. The dramaturgy here is crude, but the subsidiary roles are divertingly drawn. Dan Field's good direction planes down the rough spots, and you leave admiring the vigor of a compelling young talent on his way to becoming a major one.—By Richard Schickel