LINCOLN IN THE BARDO by George Saunders

*Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God... For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* 1 Corinthians 15: 50-52

This is the Christian notion of resurrection, vividly imagined in some of the religious paintings of Stanley Spencer, notably *The Resurrection, Cookham* (1927), an enormous work now in the collection of The Tate Gallery expressing the hope of an eternal life in the domestic setting of Cookham Churchyard. This Booker Prize winning novel, set in Oak Hill Cemetery, Georgetown, Washington, sees the possibility of life beyond death from a different perspective, that of Tibetan Buddhism.

‘The Bardo’ is a state of consciousness. This might include waking life, dreams, meditation and, significantly in the context of the novel, the period between death and rebirth. Tibetan Buddhists believe that after death the spirit will either enter nirvana or go through a period of half-life of uncertain duration before eventually, and possibly after suffering frightening periods of hallucination, being born again in a new body.

Imagine the White House in February 1862. President Lincoln hosts a costly reception there possibly to celebrate the first significant Union victory of the Civil War at Fort Donelson, which surrendered on February 16th. In an upper room Lincoln’s much loved son Willie, aged 11 (the Lincoln of the title) is severely ill with typhoid fever. Willie dies on the 20th. His body is taken to a building at the local cemetery. The President, wracked by grief and possibly by the burden of responsibility (the victory at Donelson being a bloody one, with nearly a thousand dead and many more wounded), twice visits him at night. Also present, unseen, are the spirits of the dead lying in the same cemetery who commune with Willie and with each other, speaking of their present and past lives.

Most significant among the living dead are Hans Vollman, a printer, whose head has been crushed by a beam from his printing machine before he’s had the chance to consummate his marriage to a much younger woman and Roger Bevins III who, as we discover late in the book, is a gay man who has committed suicide when his lover prefers another. Sexual longing and sexual disappointment are it seems as much an obsession with the dead as with the living. It is principally through the eyes of Vollman and Bevins that we view the grief of the President in all its intensity. Interspersed with the observations of the dead are extracts from contemporary written accounts of the period which provide context to the events commented upon.

Those looking for plot will be disappointed. Things happen, disconnected events in the lives of the spirits in the cemetery as they recall them, but there’s no narrative. The cumulative effect though, and the more you read it the more you become conscious of it, is of a vision of humanity in all its ugliness and its beauty, its hope and its despair. This is a hugely ambitious, complex, puzzling, but ultimately fascinating work that like Spencer’s resurrection paintings sees the world not through the lives of individuals but as a collective experience – the universal experience of death and what if anything follows.