

INTRODUCTION



Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

Saul Bellow began as an existential Realist from Chicago, developed into a Modernist and became the most awarded American novelist after Hemingway and Faulkner. Unlike them, Bellow is an urban Jewish intellectual. He is the most explicitly intellectual American novelist since Melville and the most informed by European culture since Henry James and T. S. Eliot. The 20th-century novelists most widely educated in other cultures are Cather, Hemingway, and Bellow. Admired for his eloquent prose, Bellow is a Realist like James in dramatizing moral and psychological situations, unlike James in being more interested in ideas than in perfection of form: “The development of realism in the nineteenth century is still the major event of modern literature,” he said. Bellow is the only writer to win the National Book Award for fiction three times. He won all the major awards including the Nobel Prize in 1976.

Bellow’s first novel *Dangling Man* (1944) is the most forthrightly Existentialist novel in American literature. *The Victim* (1947) is a complex exploration of victimization transcending ethnicity and far more sophisticated than later politically correct “victim lit.” *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) contrasts with his somber first two novels in being upbeat and optimistic, a sprawling picaresque celebration of the possibilities of life in America. The novella *Seize the Day* (1956), often compared to *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, is perhaps the most characteristic work of Bellow’s overall. Most critics see it as his masterpiece. However, *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), another upbeat picaresque novel, is a greater work: It is the last major Modernist novel; it contains multiple coinciding allegories; it relates Henderson to Hemingway, T. S. Eliot and Willa Cather; it is the funniest work by Bellow; and it is the novel likely to be most enjoyed by the common reader—entertaining as well as a literary masterwork. *Herzog* (1964) is about a Jewish intellectual like Bellow especially admired by Jewish intellectuals. *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) is a brilliant novel about an old Jewish intellectual who survived the Holocaust and World War II and is reborn into America, where his experience of the 1960s counterculture becomes a general critique of Postmodernism with implicit parallels to the rise of Nazism.

BIOGRAPHY

Solomon Bellows was named after a wise king. He was born in Canada to Jewish immigrants from the great city of St. Petersburg, Russia. They escaped the Czar just 4 years before the Communist revolution of 1917. He grew up in a Jewish ghetto in Montreal. From his parents he inherited a deep sense of loss: “They had been prosperous cosmopolitans in Saint Petersburg. My mother could never stop talking about

the family dacha, her privileged life, and how all that was now gone. She was working in the kitchen. Cooking, washing, mending... There had been servants in Russia... But you could always transpose from your humiliating condition with the help of a sort of embittered irony.”

At age 9, he moved with his family to Chicago, where his father Abraham worked as a bakery man, coal truck driver, onion importer, and bootlegger during Prohibition. His father wanted him to become a doctor, while his deeply religious mother wanted him to become a rabbi or a violinist. He felt her orthodoxy as “suffocating,” but he learned to play the violin. His mother died when he was 17, leaving him in a male household with his father and his brother Maurice.

EDUCATION

Bellow learned Hebrew at age 4, then Yiddish, French, and English. “I had begun at an early age to read widely, and I was quickly carried away from the ancient religion.” In particular he read the Bible, Shakespeare and the great Russian novelists of the 19th century. He went to high school on the west side of Chicago, where he became friends with another writer, Isaac Rosenfeld, later the model for King Dahfu in *Henderson the Rain King*. After attending the University of Chicago, he transferred to Northwestern. Intending to study literature, he encountered anti-Jewish attitudes in the English department and so majored instead in anthropology and sociology, graduating with honors in 1937. Then he went on to begin work for an advanced degree in anthropology at the liberal University of Wisconsin in Madison, later a hotbed of far left radicalism. He soon withdrew and returned to Chicago.

“It was at the university that I began to work through the modern ideologies, Capitalist as well as Marxist, and the psychologies, the social and historical theories, as well as the philosophies (logical positivism, naturalism, existentialism, etc.)” He learned more about mythologies than any American novelist since Melville. “A writer is a reader moved to emulation”; “I like Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald” he said. “I have a special interest in Joyce; I have a special interest in Lawrence”; “Modern literature was dominated by a tone of elegy from the twenties to the fifties, the atmosphere of Eliot in ‘The Waste Land’ and that of Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.”

GREAT DEPRESSION

Solomon changed his name to Saul Bellow in 1936, a shift away from ethnicity into the melting pot. He did not want to be called a “Jewish writer.” During the Great Depression of the 1930s, he led a bohemian life and worked in the Writer’s Project in the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration. The Writer’s Project also included Richard Wright and Nelson Algren and was dominated by radicals and Communists who taunted Bellow for not being politically correct. The hardcore Reds were Stalinists, whereas to Bellow, “Readiness to answer all questions is the infallible sign of stupidity.” Yet he was interested enough in the rebel Trotsky to travel all the way to Mexico City to meet him. The day before the scheduled appointment, Trotsky was assassinated by an agent of Stalin with an icepick to the brain. Bellow distrusted political activists: “Invariably the most dangerous people seek the power.”

WORLD WAR II

Bellow became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1941, he joined the merchant marine and during his service in 1943 he found time to write his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), the journal of a young man from Chicago “dangling” while waiting to be drafted into the war. The Existentialism in the novel shows the influence upon him of prevailing intellectual trends in Europe that continued throughout his life. In particular, the novel resembles both Kafka and *Nausea* (1938) by Sartre. Bellow finished his second novel after the war, *The Victim* (1947), a moral analysis of victimization, psychological allegory in a meticulous style. “I accepted a Flaubertian standard.” The story dramatizes an intense conflict between a Jew and his “double,” a Gentile, influenced by Dostoevsky’s *The Eternal Husband*.

POSTWAR CAREER

He taught at the University of Minnesota for two years, then went to Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship, where he began writing his long picaresque comedy *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), manic upbeat Existentialism about an optimistic poor boy from Chicago seizing the opportunities of life in America. This novel integrates Bellow's vision with traditional American literature, a work in the transcendent spirit of Walt Whitman that counters Postmodernist trends of disillusionment and alienation. *Augie March* surprised critics and pleased readers, establishing Bellow as a major novelist. In the late 1950s he taught creative writing at the University of Puerto Rico.

CHICAGO

Bellow lived in New York City for 10 years, the setting of *Seize the Day* (1956). "New York makes one think of the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world. The end wouldn't come as a surprise here. Many people already bank on it." Then he returned to Chicago and identified himself with that city, which he considered more representative of America than New York. He became a professor at the University of Chicago with the Committee on Social Thought and he taught there for over 30 years, with his friend the conservative philosopher Allen Bloom. He lived in the tough Hyde Park neighborhood in the center of the city, tolerating the high crime rate because as a writer he wanted to be in the midst of the action: "No realistic, sane person goes around Chicago without protection."

For an intellectual, Bellow was a tough guy. Of all his characters the one he said is most like him is Eugene Henderson, who is also modeled on Ernest Hemingway. Unlike Hemingway, however, Bellow did not go to Africa, he only imagined it, believing as an urban intellectual, "We live among ideas more than we live in nature." *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) is his attempt to atone with Nature, an economical synthesis of anthropology, comparative mythology, Existentialism, Jungian individuation, pantheist spirituality, Transcendentalism, and Modernist aesthetics. This novel is his supreme intellectual and literary achievement. Furthermore, *Henderson* is one of only about ten American novels so complex as to contain multiple coinciding allegories—Henderson as Man, America, and himself.

Surprisingly, Bellow's breakthrough to the bestseller list came with *Herzog* (1964), his most cerebral novel, about a Jewish professor writing letters he never sends. "*Herzog* appealed to Jewish readers," he said, "to those who have been divorced, to those who talk to themselves, to college graduates." His most political novel is *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), an ironic version of the popular myth of the European immigrant seeking freedom in America. As an old Uncle Sam, he inverts the cultural myth of the young American Adam in the New World Garden. As an archetypal wise old man who escaped execution by the Nazi fascists in Europe, he sees the student protesters of the 1960s as their counterparts in America, rabid totalitarians who later imposed Political Correctness. *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) is another intellectual novel, about a self-destructive poet based on Delmore Schwartz, a friend of Bellow's and a rival genius. Europeans liked this novel so well that it led to his Nobel Prize the following year.

NOBEL PRIZE (1976)

Bellow was honored for his "mixture of rich picaresque novel and subtle analysis of our culture, of entertaining adventure, drastic and tragic episodes in quick succession interspersed with philosophic conversation, all developed by a commentator with a witty tongue and penetrating insight into the outer and inner complications that drive us to act, or prevent us from acting, and that can be called the dilemma of our age." Europeans liked Bellow for his intelligence and his integration of Europe, its culture and thought into his novels. He visited Europe often, sometimes twice a year. "American readers sometimes object to a kind of foreignness in my books. I mention Old World writers, I have highbrow airs, and appear to put on the dog. I readily concede that here and there I am probably hard to read, and I am likely to become harder as the illiteracy of the public increases."

THE LION

He wrote and married during the Feminist Period of female chauvinism: "I guess nothing restrains people from demanding ideal conditions." He married 5 times, saying, "You spend the entire second half

of your life recovering from the mistakes of the first half.” His view of primal relations between the sexes is expressed in *Henderson*, where the social structure of the Wariri tribe is partially modeled on a pride of lions: The male is king, but only so long as he can satisfy his harem of powerful women, who sooner or later will kill him and replace him with a more potent male.

Bellow was named after a king, identified himself with Henderson the Rain King and modeled King Dahfu on his best friend Isaac Rosenfeld. Henderson saves his soul by becoming a lion and transcending his need to be a king, by learning how to love a woman—his wife Lily. On the contrary Bellow once said, “Respect is better than love.” And: “All a writer has to do is to say he’s a writer. It’s an aphrodisiac.” And: “Fidelity is for phonographs.” He once said that as a boy he thought “I would never make a lion, I knew that; but I might pick up a small gain here and there in the attempt.” Bellow the modern intellectual, distrusting women in a Feminist age, had a primitive relation to the opposite sex, whereas the earthy Hemingway was an egalitarian who remained in love with his first wife, got seduced by a friend of his wife into a bad second marriage, then made a worse mistake by marrying a competitive Feminist. He remained married to his fourth wife Mary for the rest of his life.

Bellow played racquetball with the writer Joseph Epstein, who observed that “after each divorce, with its emotional bruises and financial penalties, Bellow, like a man hit by a bus, got up, shook himself off, and got back on the curb, where he awaited the next bus, the Heartbreak Avenue Express.... Bellow was always playing with fire in drawing withering portraits of friends, acquaintances, ex-friends, and especially ex-wives.... Such misfortune as he encountered he brought on himself with what he at one point terms ‘my numerous and preposterous marriages.’ One of the things his letters do reveal is that Bellow made serious efforts to remain a decent father, though the job couldn’t have been made easier by the rage in which he left ex-wives. Bellow’s distress at his failure in fatherhood feels real enough, and supplies some of the few genuinely poignant elements in these letters.” *The New Criterion* 29.4 (December 2010)

CONTROVERSY

Bellow continued teaching into old age, at Yale, Princeton, NYU, Bard College, University of Chicago, and University of Minnesota. In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* he provoked criticism by depicting a large black pickpocket who exposes himself in public to intimidate Sammler. Political correctness required writers to idealize black characters after black critics condemned William Styron for his portrayal of the slave rebel leader Nat Turner in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). Now they tried to intimidate Bellow, who stood his ground. He provoked the politically correct again when he remarked in response to multicultural relativism, “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?”

During the Vietnam War, Norman Mailer joined a massive protest at the Pentagon that he celebrated in *The Armies of the Night* (1968). Bellow was invited to join a gathering in disagreement with Mailer and did so with gusto. He detested “the untreated sewage odors of a century of revolutionary rhetoric” and said “I seem to have asked in my books, How can one resist the controls of this vast society without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion? I have asked, Are there other, more good-natured forms of resistance and free choice?” Up to the challenge, he moved from Chicago in 1993 to teach at liberal Boston University, where he became controversial for his outspoken criticism of Feminism, campus activism, faculty prejudice and Postmodernism. As liberals always do, they accused him of “McCarthyism” (opposing treason). He replied, “History is the history of cruelty, not love as soft men think.” In 2007 some admirers of Bellow tried to name a street after him in his Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, but that was prevented by a local alderman who called him a racist.

POSTMODERNISM

Bellow continued the counterattack on Postmodernism carried on by T. S. Eliot, more bluntly: “The fact that there are so many weak, poor and boring stories and novels written and published in America has been ascribed by our rebels to the horrible squareness of our institutions, the idiocy of power, the debasement of sexual instincts, and the failure of writers to be alienated enough. The poems and novels of these same rebellious spirits, and their theoretical statements, are grimy and gritty and very boring too, besides being nonsensical, and it is evident by now that polymorphous sexuality and vehement declarations of alienation

are not going to produce great works of art either.” Postmodern liberals snubbed him. Even after his Nobel Prize the *New Yorker* continued to reject his submissions.

DEATH

Like Henderson he grew more self-critical: “I have begun in old age to understand just how...stingy we are with others... I now see that I have helped myself to the best cuts at life’s banquet.” At the age of 84 he had a heart defibrillator installed and could not walk more than a block, suffering from shortness of breath and pain in his legs, yet he fathered a daughter with his fifth wife (age 40), his fourth child. Bellow died at the age of 89 and is buried in a Jewish cemetery in Vermont. “God comes and goes in man’s soul,” he said. “And men come and go in each other’s souls. Sometimes they come and go in each other’s beds, too.” Bellow did not ask “Where will you spend eternity?...but rather, ‘With what, in this modern democracy, will you meet the demands of your soul?’”

Michael Hollister (2013)

