

THE BARD OF CHICAGO



SAUL BELLOW

By Jessica Teisch

PHOTO: BENNA KAMLANI



THERE ARE FEW MORE COMPELLING FIRST LINES than those which open Saul Bellow's breakthrough novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). "I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent." Bellow, who died this past April, exerted

profound influence on postwar American literature. Viewed as the 20th century's Melville, Hawthorne, or Twain and as influential as Hemingway and Faulkner, Bellow captured life on the American streets and the dynamic energies of Jewish immigrants.

The Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Bellow in 1976 for his "human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture." Bellow's characters asked what it meant, as expressed in *Herzog* (1964), "to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes." In more than two dozen works, Bellow chronicled encounters with modern life. His supersized antiheroes, from Augie March to Moses E. Herzog, Arthur Sammler, and Charlie Citrine—all dreamers and intellectuals who navigated among fast-talking conmen and gangsters—grappled with major personal, spiritual, and social questions. Bellow, in turn, found meaning in their dreams, disillusionments, and often futile drives for wealth and power. A deep intellectual himself, Bellow also poked dark fun at his characters' intellect and philosophies with trademark wit and humanity. The narrator of *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) pinpointed the dilemma of the age: "Oh so much mental thread being wound on the most trivial of spools."

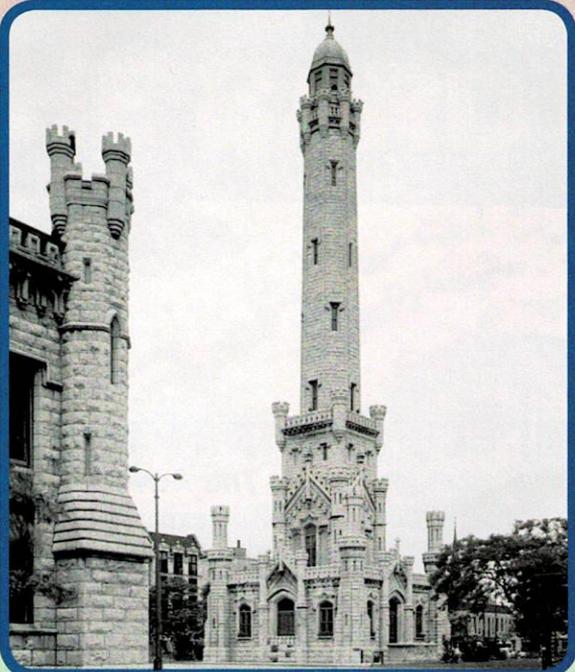
Bellow's characters, more commanding than his plots, reflected his style. He was, noted critic James Wood, "the greatest of American prose stylists in the

20th century." Uniting high and low culture, lyricism and sensuality, and "Yiddish, American, English, and Hebrew," his was "a prose for all seasons" (*The Guardian*, 4/9/05). Bellow attributed his style (and his characters' own sense of mortality) to works and authors he read throughout life: the Old Testament, Shakespeare, 19th-century Russian novelists, European existentialists, Herman Melville, Theodore Dreiser, Henry James, John Cheever, William Faulkner, and Ralph Ellison (a close friend), among others. The Pulitzer-Prize winning *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) begins, "He was a wonderful talker, a hectic nonstop monologist and improvisator, a champion detractor. To be loused up by Humboldt was really a kind of privilege. It was like being the subject of a two-nosed portrait by Picasso, or an eviscerated chicken by Soutine." To be "loused up" by Bellow's prose was just as singular an honor.

In his fiction, Bellow admitted that, "I improvised from the events of my own life" (*The New Yorker*, 4/25/05). He was born Solomon Bellows in

Where to Start

THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH (1953), an odyssey through Depression-era Chicago, introduced an exuberant new voice into American postwar fiction. Many consider **HERZOG** (1964), about a man on the brink of insanity, Bellow's masterpiece. And **HUMBOLDT'S GIFT** (1975) reflects on the absurdity of American urban life from the point of the view of the artist.



Bellow's Chicago

CHICAGO EMERGES LARGER THAN LIFE in Bellow's fiction. *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) describes a nighttime scene as "panting, the big urban engines going, tenements blazing in Oakwood with great shawls of flame, the sirens weirdly yelping ... mad-dog, gashing-knife weather ..." Bellow's novels touch every part of the city, from Madison Street's McVickers Theater (where Augie carries a maimed Einhorn to the balcony) to the dilapidated Division Street Russian Baths (where Charlie Citrine meets Rinaldo Cantabile in *Humboldt's Gift*). Bellow also added local personalities; mobster Gus Alex inspired the fictional gangster Vito Langobardi in *Humboldt's Gift*. Many of Bellow's friends (and foes) had literary walk-ons.

Critics observed that Chicago denoted to Bellow what London and Dublin had for Dickens and Joyce, respectively. For Bellow, the city's immigrants, vulgar capitalism, and individual "do-overs" embodied America's cherished ideals: individuality, opportunity, and freedom. Bellow's city also symbolized the century's "awesome transformations, its savagery, its new machines, the great battles of its thought systems ... the mixed blessings of the American way," wrote Ian McEwan (*New York Times*, 4/7/05). Although Chicago coursed deeply through his blood, Bellow expressed ambivalence about its prevailing influence. "I think wherever one has lived for a long time," Bellow said, "there's been a kind of exchange between the environment and one's soul. ... It isn't necessarily love. It's just a powerful attachment" (*Voice of America*, 4/6/05).

Bellow falls within an impressive tradition of Chicago authors: Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, H.L. Mencken, and James T. Farrell. Yet Bellow discounted the power of location, "I can't really see that I am so utterly place-dependent. I've never taken much stock in the notion that London, Paris, St. Petersburg ... have made the literature of their respective countries" (*The New Yorker*, 4/25/05). ■

1915 in Lachine, Quebec, a working-class immigrant town on the outskirts of Montreal. Bookish by nature, he studied Yiddish and Hebrew. At age eight, he was hospitalized for pneumonia and peritonitis—during this illness, he turned to literature. In 1924, the Bellows left Canada for Chicago's tenements near Humboldt Park. Bellow grew up surrounded by colorful ethnic associations, lodges, and tales of gangsters, all of which found their way into his fiction. In 1934, Bellow entered the University of Chicago, but transferred and later received honors in anthropology and sociology from Northwestern in 1937. He started postgraduate work at the University of Wisconsin, but returned to Chicago in 1938 and married Anita Goshkin. Over the next few years he taught, worked on the WPA Federal Writers' Project, and published short stories. In a literary climate focused on French existentialism and Hemingway's adventure stories, Bellow—the Jewish urban intellectual, the antithesis of machismo—rejected Hemingway's model and for a while turned to Trotsky, Nietzsche, and Freud. A brief stint in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II inspired his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), a Kafkaesque story based on Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864).

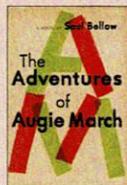
A Guggenheim Fellowship brought Bellow to Paris in 1948, where he worked on novel about two men sharing a Chicago hospital room. Postwar Europe, however, left him deeply depressed, and he gravitated toward the exuberance of what would become *Augie March*. Bellow returned to New York in 1950. He taught at New York University, published short stories, and worked on *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). In between, he left his first wife and married Sondra Tschabasov, whom he divorced in 1960; he married Susan Glassman a year later. He returned to Chicago in 1963 as professor at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, and published *Herzog* in 1964. The successful *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), marriage to his fourth wife, Alexandra Ionescu Tulcea (1974), and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) followed. In 1976, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and spent the next decades teaching and writing.

In 1993, after nearly 30 years of Chicago life (and a fifth marriage to Janis Freedman, three sons, and one daughter) Bellow left Chicago to teach at Boston University. He died at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts on April 5, 2005.

MAJOR WORKS

The Adventures of Augie March (1953)

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR FICTION



Bellow started this modern picaresque novel in Paris in 1948, where he'd been suffering from depression while working on his "hospital" novel. The inspiration came from a childhood friend named Chucky, a "wild talker who was always announcing cheerfully that he had a super scheme." As Bellow wrote this "speculative biography," his gloom lifted (*New York Times*, 4/6/05). The novel

marked a new style for the author—a blend of exuberance and nostalgia reminiscent of Twain's work.

THE STORY: In Depression-era Chicago, lifelong dreamer Augie March, born into a poor immigrant Jewish family, restlessly searches for meaning in life. He flees to Mexico and finds job after job, misadventure after misadventure, in his quest for success. As he experiences the ups-and-downs of fortune, the high-spirited Augie never gives up—no matter how many schemers, risk-takers, would-be tycoons, or women get in his way.

"If *The Adventures of Augie March* is great it is great because of its comprehensive, non-naturalistic survey of the modern world, its wisely inconclusive presentation of its problems; because its author dares to let go; because the style of its telling makes the sequence of events seem real even when one knows they couldn't be; because the novel is intelligently and ambitiously conceived as a whole ..."

H. C. WEBSTER, SATURDAY REVIEW, 9/19/53.

"It is, in my opinion, a rich, various, fascinating, and important book, and from now on any discussion of fiction in America in our time will have to take account of it."

R. P. WARREN, NEW REPUBLIC, 11/2/53.

"But if it ends without Augie's either finding or transcending himself, it leaves him with the conviction that both achievements are possible, and that they may be simply different names for the same thing."

ROBERT GORHAM DAVIS, NY TIMES, 9/20/53.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Martin Amis called Bellow's achievement "The Great American Novel."

Henderson the Rain King (1959)



Bellow explained that *Henderson*, despite its African setting, centered on America's search for identity and its anthropological idiosyncrasies. Written in a more restrained style than *Augie March*, it parodied colonialist ethnography, racial ideologies, the stoic Hemingway hero, and literary modernism. In creating an introspective, egocentric, and wealthy protagonist ("As much a disease as he is a man," said Philip Roth, with which Bellow agreed) the author, to some critics' chagrin, temporarily left behind urban settings and Jewish themes (*The New Yorker*, 4/25/05).

THE STORY: Middle-aged Eugene Henderson, a discontented millionaire with unbridled passion for life, embarks on a spiritual search for life's truth in Africa. Once there, he embraces the lessons of a lioness and gains emotional strength from an African tribe, to whom he becomes a god-like figure. After confronting death and returning home, can he embrace his spiritual rebirth?

"Whatever questions are evoked, whatever answers are provided, whatever puzzles are solved or unsolved, you will be seized and hypnotized by this strangely compelling tragi-

comic saga of a vastly human person driven to the very site of man's origins to seek out the wisdom of man's life and the nature of his destiny." HERMAN KOGAN, CHICAGO SUNDAY TRIBUNE, 2/22/59.

"[T]his is still an exceptional novel. There is an energy and earnestness to Mr. Bellow's writing that can make a reader grateful for what he has intended as for what he sometimes achieves." MELVIN MADDOCKS, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, 2/26/59.

"Brilliantly funny, all new, a second enormous emancipation, a book that wants to be serious and unserious at the same time (and is), a book that invites an academic reading while ridiculing such a reading and sending it up, a stunt of a book, but a sincere stunt—a screwball book, but not without great screwball authority." PHILIP ROTH, NEW YORKER, 10/09/00.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Bellow's beloved novel reveals the forces that inspire one man to find meaning in life.

Herzog (1964)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR FICTION



The tragicomic, meditative *Herzog* "was just a brainstorm," said Bellow. "One day I found myself writing letters—all over the place. Then it occurred to me that it was a very good idea for writing a book about the mental condition of the country and of its educated class" (*New York Times*, 4/6/05). Critics considered *Herzog* Bellow's "biggest" book; it remained on *The New York Times* best-seller list for a year.

THE STORY: As the marriage of Jewish intellectual Moses E. Herzog fails, the cuckolded man suffers a spiritual crisis. He leaves home and embarks on a spiritual quest by writing dozens of letters to God, Nietzsche, Heidegger, his former wife, and everyone else. After reassessing his life through letters, he seeks peace with himself. In time, "he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word."

"It is a masterpiece. ... It is full of Jewish wit, humor, pathos, intellectual and moral passion, hipness about European social thought and foreign literatures. ... *Herzog* is a great book because it has great characters." JULIAN MOYNAHAN, NY TIMES, 9/20/64.

"[Bellow] has become a master of something that is rarely discussed in criticism because it is hard to do more than point toward it: the art of timing, which concerns the massing, centering and disposition of the characters and creates a sense of delight in the sheer motion of the narrative."

IRVING HOWE, NEW REPUBLIC, 9/19/64.

"In *Herzog*, Mr. Bellow brought to perfection the art of fictional digression. When the hero goes to visit his lover, the lovely Ramona, he waits on the bed while she goes off to change into what Martin Amis would call her 'brothel wear.' In those moments Herzog reflects on the way the entire world presses in on him, and Mr. Bellow seems to set out a kind of manifesto, a ringing checklist of the challenges the novelist

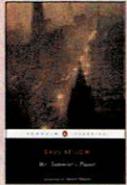
must confront, or the reality he must contain or describe.”

IAN MCEWAN, NY TIMES, 4/7/05.

THE BOTTOM LINE: This is the classic portrait of a modern-day hero (often compared to Joyce's *Ulysses*) who grapples with existence—and redemption.

Mr. Sammler's Planet (1970)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR FICTION



This novel continued Bellow's ongoing discussions with Rousseau, Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud and expressed his disenchantment with the liberal establishment. Most critics found it misogynist, racist, and against 1960s youth culture. Despite the novel's great humanity, this reputation persisted in the face of Bellow's growing acclaim.

THE STORY: In the 1960s, the misogynous Mr. Sammler—an elderly Polish Jew, Holocaust survivor, and deep intellectual—finds himself at odds on the New York streets. Everywhere he turns he sees black pickpockets, student revolutionaries, hippies, and moral decay—in sum, a “registrar of madness.” But with the first lunar landing in the near future and visions of utopia, Sammler acknowledges the “terms of the contract” between fellow humans and approaches empathy.

“... Bellow has succeeded in doing something he never quite managed before—or at least not quite so successfully. He has created a character who embodies his ideas, who serves, in fact, as his spokesman, yet remains convincing in his own right. Sammler is more than the sum of Bellow's parts. Where Augie March, Henderson and Herzog were brilliant, Sammler is brilliantly human.” ANATOLE BRODYARD, NY TIMES, 2/1/70.

“[Bellow has] set forth on a stubborn, uncertain quest for the cup of wisdom. ... Bellow is a man of high intelligence so that his generalized commentary is intrinsically absorbing ...”

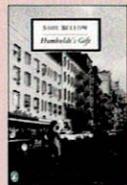
IRVING HOWE, HARPERS, 2/70.

“[It] lives less powerfully as a novel than as an angry meditation on modern libertarianism. ... Since its negative side is not proven by the plot or characters, this failure to be persuasively positive confirms the book as a sermon designed for the already converted.” C. T. SAMUELS, NEW REPUBLIC, 2/7/70.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Bellow offers an unsentimental, bitter look at one man's struggle—a harsh critique of modern American life.

Humboldt's Gift (1975)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION



After *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, this novel reinvigorated Bellow's comic spirit. Through its first-person narrator, Charlie Citrine, who represents the ludicrousness of American urban life, Bellow reflected on the perils of the modern world to the artist and failures of Western humanism

Bellow's Nobel Prize Speech

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Bellow urged modern writers to find their center again, and to write their novels as if “a sort of latter-day lean-to, a novel in which the spirit takes shelter” from a dehumanizing culture.

“... **WHAT IS AT THE CENTER NOW?** At the moment, neither art nor science but mankind determining, in confusion and obscurity, whether it will endure or go under. ... At such a time it is essential to lighten ourselves, to dump encumbrances, including the encumbrances of education and all organized platitudes, to make judgments of our own, to perform acts of our own. [Joseph] Conrad was right to appeal to that part of our being which is a gift. We must hunt for that under the wreckage of many systems. The failure of those systems may bring a blessed and necessary release from formulations, from an over-defined and misleading consciousness. With increasing frequency I dismiss as merely respectable opinions I have long held—or thought I held—and try to discern what I have really lived by, and what others live by. ... Our very vices, our mutilations, show how rich we are in thought and culture. ... At the center humankind struggles with collective powers for its freedom, the individual struggles with dehumanization for the possession of his soul. If writers do not come again into the center it will not be because the center is pre-empted. It is not. They are free to enter. If they so wish. ... What Conrad said was true, art attempts to find in the universe, in matter as well as in the facts of life, what is fundamental, enduring, essential.”

- December 12, 1976

and rationalism. The novel, in its depiction of the title character, revisited Bellow's friendship with the poet Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966).

THE STORY: Charlie Citrine, a rich and successful Chicago writer, is convinced that he's a failure at heart. When his mentor, the visionary poet Von Humboldt Fleisher, dies a failure, Charlie's at an all-time low. He's embroiled in bitter divorce proceedings, obsessed with low-life pursuits, and trying to save a flagging career. Charlie is saved by a comedy about cannibalism that he and Humboldt penned years before, giving Charlie a new lease on his life and a revival of his artistic soul.

“The novel would have been vastly improved by ruthless cutting; as it stands it is chiefly memorable for its many comic moments, superb descriptive snapshots of Chicago and brilliant mimicry of lawyers, businessmen and crooks. And that, it must be said, is a lot to be grateful for.”

DAVID LODGE, TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, 10/10/75.

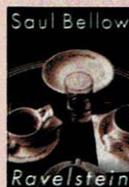
“[It] is a very funny novel—a kind of [*The Confessions of Felix Krull* by Thomas Mann] in reverse, with society as the confidence man; a fierce energetic comedy about postwar Jewish intellectuals trying to come to terms with American

popular culture. ... **Everybody who is anybody, including a few grumpy friends of mine, has a walk-on part and a pratfall in *Humboldt's Gift*.**" JOHN LEONARD, NY TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 9/7/75.

"The book was so wild and wooly, so full of fun and contradictions. It was the great novel uncorseted and ripped up at the seams. My favorite fiction writers at the time (Austen, Eliot, James) were mostly English, feminine or effete, and here was this loud, masculine, American, cigar-chomping book." ALLEGRA GOODMAN, SLATE.COM, 4/8/05.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A parable about a hypermasculine man unleashing his soulful spirit in a hypercapitalist culture.

Ravelstein (2000)



In his 13th novel, Bellow penned a semi-autobiographical homage to his late friend, the University of Chicago's Allan Bloom. Author of the controversial but celebrated *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Bloom had condemned the sorry state of American higher education and "the state of our souls." In *Ravelstein*, Bellow masqueraded as Chick, and Bloom, who repeatedly urged Bellow to write a memoir, as Abe Ravelstein. The novel allowed Bellow to work out the origins of his Jewish voice, humor, and immigrant heritage.

THE STORY: Abe Ravelstein, a prominent professor and closet homosexual at a Midwestern university, succumbs to his close friend Chick's suggestion that he write a book

about his beliefs about humankind. The commercial success of this volume encourages Ravelstein to suggest that Chick write a memoir in turn. Through this process, Ravelstein and Chick discuss their first-generation Jewish-American philosophy, history, love, memory, and mortality as Ravelstein dies of AIDS.

"Esoterically, it is, like most of Bellow's books, about the male heterosexual ego—its brittleness, its bottomless capacity for resentment, its inexhaustible neediness—and there is nothing particularly amiable about it. ... It is ingenious ... if the book is taken as a work of self-disclosure."

LOUIS MENAND, NY REVIEW OF BOOKS, 5/25/00.

"This so-called novel is more a meditation on contrasting temperaments, contrasting principles, and death than it is a normal narrative." PHOEBE-LOU ADAMS, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, 5/00.

"Now here he comes, at the age of 84, writing in his gold-standard prose as an antidote to mindlessness, in a lively, lovely, haunting novel that caresses Allan Bloom's life via the thinly disguised eponymous figure Abe Ravelstein. ... Above all, *Ravelstein* is a great novel of that much-maligned item, American male friendship—and in particular, its Jewish version." JONATHAN WILSON, NY TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 4/23/00.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Told by a first-generation Jewish American, a story full of jokes, witty intellect, and intellectual passion. ■

Selected Other Works

DANGLING MAN (1944)

As Joseph, a would-be writer and intellectual in Chicago, waits to be drafted into the army, he deals with alienation and existential freedom. Edmund Wilson called this novel, "One of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation to have grown up during the Depression and the war."

THE VICTIM (1947)

Asa Leventhal, a Jew living in the postwar World War II world, descends into paranoia and feelings of victimization when he's accused of ruining one man's life. V.S. Pritchett called it the "best novel to come out of America—or England—for a generation." Other critics read the novel as Bellow's psychological treatment of the Holocaust, Nuremberg trials, and anti-Semitism.

SEIZE THE DAY (1956)

Set in New York's West Side, this

moving work, full of Yiddish humor, captures a failed actor and salesman's quest to achieve success and affirm his humanity.

TO JERUSALEM AND BACK: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT (1976)

Bellow wrote this neoconservative account of his trip to Israel.

THE DEAN'S DECEMBER (1982)

The novel juxtaposes two cities, Bucharest under the Iron Curtain and near-anarchist Chicago, through the eyes of the dean of a Chicago college.

MORE DIE OF HEARTBREAK (1987)

Russian history expert Kenneth Trachtenberg narrates the life of his uncle, a distinguished botanist who's driven by his libido. The story suggests that the pursuit of happiness leads to an acceptance of unhappiness.

A THEFT (1989)

This novella, his first to feature a female protagonist, focuses on her reexamination of the power of love after an emerald ring is stolen.

THE BELLAROSA CONNECTION (1989)

This novella explores Jewish identity in American culture from the perspective of a wealthy narrator, who reminisces about his life in Greenwich Village in the 1940s.

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER ME BY (1992)

As a 17-year-old boy's mother dies in 1930s immigrant Chicago, the boy has his first experience with a hooker.

ALL ADDS UP: FROM THE DIM PAST TO THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE (1994)

This collection contains more than 30 nonfiction pieces about Chicago, literature, intellectualism, and Bellow's personal life.

THE ACTUAL (1997)

When a businessman returns to Chicago from the Far East, he encounters his first love.

COLLECTED STORIES (2001)

Bellow personally selected 13 short stories for this collection. ■