

Big ideas and wandering fools: Saul Bellow (1915-2005)

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Many years ago a friend of mine, in an unconsciously Saul Bellow moment, described one of his professors as follows: “Harry goes on and on about whether existence precedes essence or whether essence precedes existence, and before you know it you’re way off in the North 40 and don’t know whether to crap or wind your watch.” My friend had grown up in small-town Indiana, while [Bellow](#) [1] had grown up in urban Chicago. But they were both American originals. Why? Because for them vulgarity and intellect were not opposites but part of the same magnificent weave.

Philip Roth has [said](#) [2] that Bellow and William Faulkner formed “the backbone of 20th-century American literature,” calling them “the Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain” of the 20th century.” That is right. They did so only partly because they were writers of vivid imagination and linguistic ingenuity. Talent is important. It is not everything. They were the makers of the American literary universe mainly because they rarely forgot that the novel must be about the essential things.

Both won [Nobel prizes](#) [3]. In his [acceptance speech](#) [4] Faulkner said that the novel must be about love and honour and courage and compassion or it will be a lesser thing. Faulkner was a self-educated alcoholic, a relentless American eccentric who knew and wrote about only one thing: the American south in the aftermath of its having become an occupied land following the civil war. What do people do when pressured by history? Faulkner wrote novel after novel to find out if love and honour (or even sanity) had a chance under such bitter travails.

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Bellow too was profoundly interested in history: in being Jewish, in the [great depression](#) [5], in cold-war America with its dizzying mixture of prosperity, anxiety and bewilderment. He [began](#) [6] as a Trotskyite and even journeyed to Mexico to meet the old man on the day, as it happened, before he was murdered. Later Bellow was accused of being a former radical who became famous and rich and who championed dead white male writers (a club to which he now belongs) at the expense of the new radical movements such as feminism and multiculturalism.

Those [charges](#) [7] never took account of what was always true of Bellow: yes, he was interested in how history, as [James Joyce](#) [7] once said, is a sort of nightmare from which it is hard to

awaken; but no, he never surrendered the idea that real people with proper names can find their own truths – peculiar and noble – within it.

All his novels are about that quest. All of them empty out a Niagara Falls of words. All of them believe, in a sense, in the “talking cure [8]”. Nearly all of them combine pimps, con men, little league gangsters and humiliating wives, ex-wives and mistresses with analytical and sometimes tortured ruminations on myth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nietzsche – hell, you name it.

One of his characters, a nearly crazy intellectual named Herzog [9], even writes letters to the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* (among many others, including Dwight Eisenhower). This is the same guy who plans to kill his ex-wife and her lover in Chicago until he spies on them and sees that they give a loving bath to his young daughter June. This is Saul Bellow: guns and revenge and metaphysics and philosophy and lowlifes. Bellow blessedly never thought they contradicted one another.

A world without guarantees

Ideas for him were about action, and action was about ideas. Originally a Russian Jew from Montreal [10], he came of age during the depression in Chicago where the banker and butcher alike were reading Shakespeare and talking about ideas because, as he said later, they had little faith in material success. How could you back then? He freely admitted that as a novelist he was formed in the cauldron of urban life, with its terrific literacy and intellectuality. He never ran with bulls in Pamplona, as did Hemingway, or sought concord with talented ex-cons, as did Norman Mailer. He mainly just hung out in Chicago.

All his novels are rooted in the intersection of big ideas and wandering fools. These embodiments of vivid folly have now famous names: Henderson, Herzog, Citrine, Tommy Wilhelm and others. Some of them have inordinate faith in Big Ideas, such as Henderson, a gargantuan man who believes in the iron rule of doing as you're done by; a choleric giant who likes to strike back; a rich pig farmer taking violin lessons; a man of leviathan folly who flees to Africa (Africa!) for the final answers only to discover (by identifying with a lion cub!) that the final answer involves accepting that there aren't any final answers.

Bellow wrote little that did not echo across a literary empire that he unashamedly cherished. Henderson is a Conradian figure – a sort of Marlowe and Kurtz – who seeks salvation in the primitive and pure of an allegedly exotic continent. Herzog is a cross between Hamlet and Othello: an Othello who cannot pull the trigger on his estranged wife and a Hamlet who cannot get his vengeance.

Some of them have Falstaffian appetites, and they tend to be picaresque, often starting in or coming back to Chicago, but along the way visiting Madrid and Corpus Christi, Texas, among other locales. One of them – Tommy Wilhelm in Seize the Day [11] – is a more honest and good-hearted version of Parolles in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. He is bereft of everything, hounded by his ex-wife (Bellow was married five times), shamed by his father, talked out of the rest of his money by a conman (Dr Tamkin) who tells him not to “marry suffering” and, for God's sake, to take a chance for once.

Tommy wants to believe that Tamkin is honest. He is not. Tamkin absconds with the funds, and the “lard futures” fall on the Chicago commodities market. Parolles, disgraced as a cowardly soldier, becomes a professional fool in order to survive. Wilhelm ends up in a chapel weeping, trying to find some sort of meaning by linking up with the universality of disintegration and corpses.

Many of Bellow's other protagonists do better. If Parolles ends up a professional fool, Bellow's main characters end up being what they always were – personal fools – but finding a kind of serenity and liberation in acknowledging this fact. The recognition that we are all of us humiliated beasts seems sometimes to be the start of wisdom. But in Bellow there are no guarantees.

His characters are frankly masculine in their sexuality and in their quests. Bellow disappointed the true believers of left-wing mass movements. Yet he also horrified the neo-conservatives who wanted to claim him when, in his late novel *Ravelstein* [12], he portrayed the sybaritic homosexuality of his great friend – the famed academic conservative Allan Bloom [13] – in all its garish materialism.

As Hamlet said we defy augury, so does Saul Bellow defy category. Bellow once said that all of us are obliged to make difficult judgments about what it all means. It was, he said, both the price and the privilege of freedom. As Ian McEwan [14] recently suggested in a radio interview, in the first world we are both terribly rich and terribly worried.

Bellow would have agreed. He was fascinated with our not-knowing. We cannot “know” a world that is overmediated – wildly overcooked with images and mottos and self-help and a million other steamy ideas – as we “know” physics or chemistry. He believed in the individual's quest for integrity and love, guided by the great writers but not overwhelmed by them, learning from the swindlers but not driven to despair by them. The melody of his words, the lavish messiness of his characters and their settings, the obsession with ideas and their consequences or lack thereof – these are the features of Bellow's World. There is none other quite like it. Many yet unborn will enter it, laugh, and be harrowed.

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