

Nobel Prize in Literature 1976



Saul Bellow

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1976 was awarded to Saul Bellow "*for the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work*".

When **Saul Bellow** published his first book, the time had come for a change of climate and generation in American narrative art. The so-called hard-boiled style, with its virile air and choppy prose, had now slackened into an everyday routine, which was pounded out automatically; its rigid paucity of words left not only much unsaid, but also most of it unfelt, unexperienced. Bellow's first work, *Dangling Man* (1944), was one of the signs portending that something else was at hand.

In Bellow's case, emancipation from the previous ideal style took place in two stages. In the first, he reached back to the kind of perception that had found its already classic guides in Maupassant, Henry James, and Flaubert, perhaps, most of all. The masters he followed expressed themselves as restrainedly as those he turned his back on. But the emphasis was elsewhere. What gave a story its interest was not the dramatic, sometimes violent action, but the light it shed over the protagonist's inner self. With that outlook the

novel's heroes and heroines could be regarded, seen through and exposed, but not glorified. The anti-hero of the present was already on the way, and Bellow became one of those who took care of him.

Dangling Man, the man without a foothold, was thus a significant watchword to Bellow's writing, and has, to no small extent, remained so. He pursued the line in his next novel, *The Victim* (1947) and, years later, with mature mastery in *Seize the Day* (1956). With its exemplary command of subject and form, this last novel has received the accolade as one of the classic works of our time.

But with the third story in this stylistically coherent suite, it is as if Bellow had turned back in order at last to complete something which he himself had already passed. With his second stage, the decisive step, he had already left this school behind him, whose disciplined form and enclosed structure gave no play to the resources of exuberant ideas, flashing irony, hilarious comedy and burning compassion, which he also knew he possessed, and whose scope he must try out. The result was something quite new; Bellow's own 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 with the reader - that too very entertaining - 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.

First in the new phase came *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). The very wording of the title points straight to the picaresque, and the connection is perhaps most strongly in evidence in this novel. But here Bellow had found his style, and the tone recurs in the following series of novels that form the bulk of his work: *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), *Herzog* (1964), *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970), and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). The structure is apparently loose-jointed, but for this very reason gives the author ample opportunity for descriptions of different societies; they have a rare vigour and stringency, and a swarm of colourful, clearly-defined characters against a background of carefully observed and depicted settings, whether it is the magnificent façades of Manhattan in front

of the backyards of the slums and semi-slums, Chicago's impenetrable jungle of unscrupulous businessmen intimately intertwined with efficient criminal gangs, or the more literal jungle in the depths of Africa, where the novel, *Henderson the Rain King*, the writer's most imaginative expedition takes place. In a nutshell, they are all stories on the move, and, like the first book, are about a man with no foothold. But (and it is important to add this) a man who keeps on trying to find a foothold during his wanderings in our tottering world, one who can never relinquish his faith that the value of life depends on its dignity, not on its success, and that the truth must triumph at last, simply because it demands everything except - triumphs. That is the way of thinking in which Saul Bellow's "anti-heroes" have their foundation and acquire their lasting stature.

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