

Topic Page: [Bellow, Saul](#)

Definition: **Bellow, Saul** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

US novelist, b. Canada. His novels, usually set in Chicago, are concerned with the conflict between private and public, and the sense of alienation in 20th-century urban life. His debut novel was *The Dangling Man* (1944). Bellow won National Book awards for *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), *Herzog* (1964), and *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970). He won a Pulitzer Prize for *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). Other works include the novella *Seize the Day* (1956), *The Dean's December* (1982) and *Something to Remember Me By* (1993). He was awarded the 1976 Nobel Prize in literature.

Summary Article: **Bellow, Saul**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

Saul Bellow (1915–2005) was an acclaimed Canadian-born, American Jewish writer, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. Perpetually interested in the essential question, “How should a good man live?”, his answer was in probing the individual's relationship to his mostly urban American environment. The human condition for modern man meant city life, almost always Chicago, or New York. As he put it in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), “in raw Chicago you could examine the human spirit under industrialism.” The American city was composed of opposites in tension: privilege and pleasure and pain; rationality and madness.

Bellow's first novels were written carefully, with caution, as an outsider trying to find acceptance. In *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), his breakthrough novel, Chicago was the setting for his deepest emotions. Chicago stood for a typical mixture of heavy manufacturer, raw immigrants, the brutal scene of capitalist struggles, the sense or the pride of what it meant to be an American as the immigrants became Americans. As a child of Eastern European parents, he was drawn to the streets, as he told interviewer Pierre Domergues in *Profilis Americains* (1984): “In street society you were as American as anybody else. But by the time I was an adolescent I grasped the idea of becoming an American.”

In novel after novel, from *Herzog* (1964), through *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), to *The Dean's December* (1982), Bellow conjured up memorable characters and plots, in cities in a process of disintegration, in which he somehow saw a link and a conflict between the inner city and the innermost being, what he called dumb intuition. In the first lines of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Bellow announces that “I am an American-Chicago born,” affirming proudly, even arrogantly, that he was an American and felt most comfortable in the belly of the beast, “raw Chicago.” Occasionally he described Chicago, and New York, as inhuman, but of course they were no more inhuman, or human, than any other big American city. But it was there, and then, that he broke out as a major American novelist. For in *Augie* he invented a new American language, a language that was part Lower East Side and part Jamesian highbrow, his to do with as he wished, daring, with liberty-taking sentences. As he put it in *It All Adds Up* (1994), “To be American was neither a territorial nor a linguistic phenomenon but a concept—a set of ideas, really.”

Daring to attack the spiritual exhaustion of the current serious literature, his aggression, in critic Vivian Gornick's words expressed in *Harper's* magazine in 2008, “lay in the daring of the prose—the unexpected vocabulary, the liberty-taking sentences, the mongrel nature of his highbrow-lowbrow narration—in service ultimately to what felt like a piece of rescued wisdom about the meaning (that is,

the origins) of a disappointed life.”

Attentive to his Jewish past, Bellow has always been concerned that the individual in urban America must seek community while preserving the identity of self. Bellow faced a paradox. Concerned with man and woman in a problematic society, trying to find a unifying synthesis, he suggested, in his Jewish character Moses Herzog's words, that “the dream of man's heart, however much we may distrust and resent it, is that life may complete itself in significant pattern.”

Bellow insists through his writing that reading and thinking are still fundamental and essential. Like Moses Herzog he is interested in society, duty, power, and religious values. Above all, in an American world in which ambiguity is a constant, his sympathy and humanity, his sensitivity to the resonance of twoness, his apprehension of the mystery inherent in the human race were a mirror of his integrity and a picture of his values. To paraphrase Herzog, Bellow tried to live and to write in an inspired condition, to be free, to love another, and to consummate existence.

Bellow won three National Book Awards, the only writer ever to do that, and the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century, often placed in the company of Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. He rejected impending doom, he dismissed hardboiled fiction, he used ironic vision, for he had, as he put it in “Distractions of a Fiction Writer” (1957), “a firm sense of a common world, a coherent community, and a genuine purpose in life,” very American values. Flying the banner of hope, quoting Herzog, he wrote, “To live in an inspired condition, to know truth, to be free, to love another, to consummate existence” were the core of his life.

Bellow had a moral conscience along with a comic spirit and a rootedness in Chicago and New York. As Cynthia Ozick aptly summarized, in *Fame and Folly* (1996), “Bellow's sentence is irrefragably American, a wise-guy (or wisdom-guy) contrivance soaked in learning and pathos and irony and inquisitiveness and know-how—and exactly balanced between the con artist's lingo and God's machinery of existence. Ring the Liberty Bell. This child of immigrants has reinvented the American Scene.”





Saul Bellow's certificate of arrival into the United States from Canada at the port of Detroit, Michigan, January 31, 1941, via the Detroit and Canada Tunnel. National Archives and Records Administration.

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