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Chapter 6

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, SAUL BELLOW, AND THE PURSUIT OF THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

Keywords: Bellow, doubling, Fitzgerald, GAN, Great American Novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*, *The Great Gatsby*

MFS: Diana, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Saul Bellow, it seems to me, are fundamentally engaged in an effort to create the Great American Novel (GAN). Perhaps, you could give our readers some perspective of what that means and how these writers sought to accomplish this.

DS: Your question touches upon our theme of doubling, which, among other things, entails comparing or contrasting the familiar with the strange and, in our case, looking at the commonalities and differences in pairs of writers. When Scott Fitzgerald was writing fiction, novelists with ambition were consciously trying to "tell the American story", that is, seeking to write the "Great American Novel". As Lawrence Buell has suggested, the literary term was applied critically in 1868 by John W. De Forest who imagined a work that illuminated "the American soul" by revealing "the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" that encompassed both the geographical and cultural dimensions of our national identity (Buell, 2014, p. 24). It gained traction in the years following the Civil War. Henry James, Buell pointed out, was the first to apply the "GAN" acronym.

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) was, according to De Forest, the first serious contender for the designation of Great American Novel. Over the years this appellation has been applied to, among others, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and James's *The Bostonians* (1886). I would certainly include Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925). Then, of course, there's Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930-1936), Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie*

March (1953). More recently we might include Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Wallace's, *Infinite Jest* (1996), DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) and, if we're generous, his entire trilogy, which also includes *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000). These are some of the principle works of fiction in contention for the designation Great American Novel (most citations in Kimmage, 2014).

Today, the very concept of the Great American Novel seems to many people divisive, associated with those "Great White Men", Protestants or otherwise, whose works populate what we used to refer to as the Western canon (Sheets, 2010). This classification, suggest some critics, generally excludes multicultural writers from diverse socio-economic strata around the globe. Nevertheless, I insist as a novelist and literary critic that it's essential to make evaluative assessments about the literary merits of fiction, independent of the claims of ethnic or cultural identity and removed from the censorious moral judgments we impose in our pursuit of "social justice".

Martin Amis makes the case that the quest for the designation Great American Novel ends with Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, an idea that we will explore later (Amis, 2002b).

Pairing Fitzgerald and Bellow is intriguing because both wrote what could be considered the Great American Novel, although their styles of writing and subject matter were worlds apart. Nevertheless, what they had in common was a desire to create fiction that explored the American psyche at a particular moment in our cultural history in order to write that big novel that would present who we are and what we are becoming.

As a historian by training and a literary critic by practice, I believe that when we're trying to understand writers and their fiction, it's important to understand the social and cultural context in which these works were created. Fitzgerald (1896-1940) matured during the "Roaring Twenties". He was just a few years older than Ernest Hemingway. That generation of writers, following Henry James (1843-1916), looked to Europe for cultural validation. By the time Saul Bellow (1915-2005) published his first novel in 1944, shortly before the conclusion of World War II, America was a superpower. With economic and military might came cultural ascendancy, although many Americans weren't consciously aware of our "hegemonic" stature until the end of the war. The relative cultural isolation from Europe during the war nurtured the development of distinctly American cultural traditions evident in art, music, literature, and yes, fashion, all undergirded, of course, by our growing industrial and technological supremacy.

By the 1950s our cultural confidence became manifest. Of course, this ascendance had roots at least as far back as World War I. But by the 1950s there could be no doubt of America's economic, social, and cultural dominance. In art, Jackson Pollock, the foremost pioneer in abstract expressionism, was celebrated as the premier avant-garde artist in New York City, if not the world. In California, a distinctive style of modernism was emerging that shaped American sensibilities (Kaplan, 2011).

We also began to showcase our American composers, conductors, and musicians such as Aaron Copland (classical), Leonard Bernstein (classical, jazz, and musical theater), and George Gershwin (classical, jazz, big band influences, and musical theater). Jazz, a distinctly American musical genre, had its foundations in the African-American communities in the late 19th and early 20th century and became a national phenomenon by the 1920s. Some of the

jazz giants were Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and my personal favorite, Thelonious Monk. The American musical gained influence during the 1920s. By the 1940s and particularly the 1950s, Broadway musical theater was recognized throughout much of the world. American dance, pioneered with Martha Graham in the 1920s, came to the forefront after World War II. Indeed, American fashion, isolated from French haute couture during the war, came of age with ready-to-wear clothing that embodied a casual American elegance that gained acceptance globally.

In literature, the American novel began asserting its transnational ascendancy in the 20th century. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) celebrated the glamorous lives of the rich and famous during the "Roaring Twenties". Published that same year, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* inverted the American dream of "rags to riches" in order to present a tale of a young man's efforts to overcome adversity and achieve success and the catastrophe that ensued. If Dreiser's story was filled with soot and grime and the desperate struggle of those less privileged, Fitzgerald's novel showcased American excess, the desire, by means fair or foul, to be wealthy and successful or, failing that, to be associated with the lavishly well-heeled, whose riches and possessions conferred celebrity. The "Gatsby" lifestyle was jazzy and decadent, shallow and implicitly corrosive to its core. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* evoked America's conflicting mentalities on the eve of the Great Depression.

When Bellow received a Guggenheim Fellowship after World War II, he went to live in Paris where he began writing *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), his most celebrated novel, with an eye to besting Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*. Bellow was a Russian Jew whose parents immigrated to the province of Quebec where he was born. Later, the family moved to Chicago, which, of course, became the setting for *The Adventures of Augie March*. But as a Russian/Jewish/Québécois/Chicagoan, Bellow's ferocious intellect, coupled with his cosmopolitan disposition, created a distinctive voice that was, according to Irving Howe, "the first major new style in American prose fiction since those of Hemingway and Faulkner" (citing Howe in Ahokas, 1997, p. 31).

James Wood's assessment, years later, was far more emphatic than Howe's, suggesting that Bellow was nothing less than "the greatest of American prose stylists in the 20th century" (citing Wood, Leader, 2015).

Bellow's mélange of high and low, European intellectual disposition fused with American immigrant muscle, and Yiddish and American idioms mingling with classical references is a distinctive American fictional style, as this opening line from *The Adventures of Augie March* demonstrates.

> 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. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles. (Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, Penguin Books, 1996, New York, p. 3)

MFS: Let's discuss the significance of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* with respect to the authors' efforts to craft the Great American Novel. How have critics accessed these writers and their fiction?

DS: Fitzgerald was part of the American expatriate community in Paris following World War I, as discussed in my essay on Hemingway and Faulkner, which appears in this collection of essays. Midwestern but educated at Princeton University, one of the most esteemed of the Ivy League schools, Fitzgerald was drawn to the world of privilege. His goal, as he noted in 1923 to his editor Maxwell Perkins, was to write "something new—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned" (Mizener, 1960).

How he chose to characterize the era with its flappers and bootleggers, its glittering excess saturated in decadence, its sensuous jazz melodies and its pervasive influence of money—legal or illicit—tells us a great deal about the East Coast lifestyle exemplified in the wealthy enclave of Long Island's Gold Coast ensconced along the North Shore. Fitzgerald, Roger L. Pearson suggests, never expressly acknowledged the dissolute specter of Gatsby's American dream. For Pearson, Gatsby represents the "arch-high priest . . . and chief practitioner of the hedonism" characteristic of the "Jazz Age", someone who "has come to espouse the gospel of the corrupted American dream" (Pearson, 1970, pp. 639-640). For Gatsby's world, Pearson argues, "is a spiritual wasteland—materialistic and mortal, and by its very nature doomed to ashes" (Pearson, 1970, p. 641). "As a prophet of the American dream", he adds, "Gatsby fails—miserably—a victim of his own warped idealism and false set of values" (Pearson, 1970, p. 645). The American dream in Fitzgerald's rendering, Pearson concludes, "is, in reality, a nightmare" wrought with unhappiness and disappointment to all those who pursue its hedonism and materialistic excess (Pearson, 1970, p. 645).

Nevertheless, when we think of the Great American novel today, we're likely to include *The Great Gatsb*y as one of the principal contenders. Indeed, as the Modern Library editorial board noted in its selection of the best 20th century English-language fiction in 1998, it was designated as the best American novel of the 20th century, second only to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). T. S. Eliot, in writing to Fitzgerald, characterized *The Great Gatsby* astutely as "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James" (Irwin, 2014, p. 159).

Richard Yates, an American novelist of the latter half of the 20th century, whose writing has been likened to Fitzgerald's, characterized *The Great Gatsby* as "a stunning illumination of the world" that demonstrated on the part of its author "not only a miracle of talent" but also "a triumph of technique" (blurb citation in Fitzgerald, 2013).

Fitzgerald's descriptive passages are often compelling. Consider, for example, his characterization featured below of the fictitious East and West Egg, authorial stand-ins for the wealthy communities of Great Neck and Sands Point on the North Shore of Long Island.

> It was a matter of chance that I should have rented a house in one of the strangest communities in North America. It was on that slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York—and where there are, among other natural curiosities, two unusual formations of land. Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. (Fitzgerald, 1953, pp. 4-5)

Let's examine one more passage. It's an interior monologue by Nick Carraway, the narrator, who is a graduate of Yale and a veteran of World War I. He is an observant bystander who surveys the opulent mansion, grounds, and comings and goings of the glitterati at Jay Gatsby's East Egg estate.

> There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. At high tide in the afternoon I watched his guests diving from the tower of his raft, or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach while his two motor-boats slit the waters of the Sound, drawing aquaplanes over cataracts of foam. (Fitzgerald, 1953, p. 39)

Many literary experts today favor Saul Bellow over Scott Fitzgerald as the greatest American literary stylist of the 20th century (with Faulkner also vying for that coveted designation). Bellow's prose is more muscular, more intricate, more evocative of a range of American characters, places, and events than Fitzgerald's and demonstrates his heightened mastery of language and narrative.

Consider this passage in *The Adventures of Augie March* about a nursing home in order to compare how Bellow's writing contrasts with Fitzgerald's.

> We came up the walk, between the slow, thought-brewing, beat-up old heads, liver-spotting, of choked old blood salts and wastes, hard and bone-bare domes, or swollen, the elevens of sinews up on collarless necks crazy with the assaults of Kansas heats and Wyoming freezes . . . white hair and rashy, vessel-busted hands holding canes, fans, newspapers in all languages and alphabets, faces gone in the under-surface flues and in the eyes, of these people sitting in the sunshine and leaf-burning outside or in the mealy moldiness and gravy acids of the house. (cited in Amis, 2002b, p. 453)

Novelist Philip Roth, protégé of Saul Bellow, acknowledged his outsized legacy: "The backbone of 20th-century American literature has been provided by two novelists: William Faulkner and Saul Bellow. Together they are the Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain of the 20th century" (cited in "Saul Bellow: Obituary", 2005).

Let's return to English literary critic James Wood, who teaches at Harvard, and consider a passage from his eulogy of Bellow.

> I judged all modern prose by his. Unfair, certainly, because he made even the fleet-footed—the Updikes, the DeLillos, the Roths—seem like monopodes. Yet what else could I do? . . . We hear about Bellow's mixing of high and low registers, his Melvillean cadences jostling the jivey Yiddish rhythms, the great teeming democracy of the big novels, the crooks and frauds and intellectuals who loudly people the brilliant sensorium of the fiction. . . . John Cheever, in his journals, lamented that, alongside Bellow's fiction, his stories seemed like mere suburban splinters. Ian McEwan wisely suggested last week that British writers and critics may have been attracted to Bellow precisely because he keep alive a Dickensian amplitude now lacking in the English novel. . . . But nobody mentions the beauty of his writing, its music, its high lyricism, its firm but luxurious pleasure in language itself. (James Wood, 2005, p. 15)

Malcolm Bradbury established what is reputed to be the best creative writing program in Britain at the University of East Anglia while serving there as Professor of American Studies.

He minced no words in praising Saul Bellow as "America's greatest living novelist" (Bradbury, 2000). While Bradbury characterized Bellow's fiction as having "started out in the climate of 30s naturalism", in the years since, he suggested, it "has boomed and expanded and grown extravagant to keep pace with the amazing strangeness of modern America itself" (Bradbury, 2000).

No one has been a stronger advocate of Bellow than Martin Amis, one of Britain's greatest living novelists. He regards Saul Bellow as his literary forefather and considers him unequivocally as "the greatest American author ever, in my view" (Amis & Birnbaum, 2003).

In Amis's essay "The American Eagle" he makes a strong, if not compelling argument, for why *The Adventures of Augie March*, alone of all the American novels, deserves the acclaimed designation as the "Great American Novel". The pursuit of what he terms "that mythical beast, that holy grail, that earthly Eden" in the minds of many Europeans smacks of American arrogance bordering on absurdity since no one "ever worried about the Great French Novel or the Great Russian Novel". Nevertheless, even if it be a "mythical beast", that is, "a pig with wings", nevertheless, he suggests, Saul Bellow achieved the august miracle in 1953 when he published *The Adventures of Augie March* and "brought the animal home" (Amis, 2002b, pp. 447-448).

American novelist Norman Mailer, writing years earlier, begged to differ: "No [American] writer succeeded in doing the single great work which would clarify a nation's vision of itself". He acknowledged in his essay "The Argument Reinvigorated", published in 1966 in his book *Cannibals and Christians*, that "Dreiser came as close as any, and he never got close at all, for he could not capture the moment, and no country in history had lived perhaps so much for the moment as America" (Mailer cited in Sheets, 2008). Nevertheless, he succeeded, Mailer acknowledged, in obtaining that panoramic perspective that conveys the breath of America. However, Dreiser, the child of an immigrant father and a Mennonite mother, never had close social or economic ties to America's most privileged individuals, which, Mailer suggested, in turn prevented him from portraying effectively the motivations and behavior driving the consciousness and behavior of America's elite.

Regardless of whether we side with Amis or Mailer, we must agree that the quest to create the Great American Novel has been elusive. Bellow's advantage, resembling Dreiser's, was that he was the son of an immigrant father—and in Bellow's case also an immigrant mother—and grew up under economically challenging circumstances, which expanded the breath of his social and cultural understanding. However, his intellectual association with the elite University of Chicago gave him a broader cultural perspective than Dreiser, as well as ready access to the intellectual and social underpinnings of privilege, which enhanced the breadth and depth of his fiction.

Bellow also had another advantage over Dreiser. As a Jew he was an "insider/outsider" (Biale, Galchinsky, & Heschel, 1998). As with many Jews who were the children of immigrants, Bellow assimilated into American culture and became very successful and well connected, thereby gaining "insider" stature. Nevertheless, as a Jew he was cognizant of the prejudice and discrimination against Jews, which were prevalent in the 1950s. Consequently, he retained "outsider" stature. This "insider/outside" perspective shaped and enriched his fiction and his cultural worldview.

For Amis, *The Adventures of Augie March* is "about the formation of an identity, of a soul—that of a parentless and penniless boy growing up in pre- and post-Depression Chicago" that captures the teeming, bustling, cacophony that frames our American story

(Amis, 2002b, p. 448). Indeed, what could be more American, I would argue, than this *Bildungsroman*? Here is a coming-of-age story in which the identity and actions of Augie March, a self-made individual determined to succeed in his efforts to overcome 20th century neo-Dickensonian adversity, could be creatively interpreted as the human embodiment of both triumphant American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny.

If Dreiser's novels, Amis argues, "sometimes feel like a long succession of job interviews, then *Augie March* often resembles a surrealist catologue of apprenticeships" that frame the protagonist's development in his American journey toward "Full Consciousness" (Amis, 2002b, p. 451).

The power of Bellow's prose can be breathtaking. Let's consider his description of a dime store in *The Adventures of Augie March*.

> that tin-tough, creaking, jazzy bazaar of hardware, glassware, chocolate, chickenfeed, jewelry, drygoods, oilcloth . . . and even being the Atlases of it, under the floor, hearing how the floor bore up under the ambling weight of hundreds, with the fanning, breathing movie organ next door and the rumble descending from the trolleys on Chicago Avenue—the bloody-rinded Saturday gloom of wind-borne ash, and blackened forms of five-story buildings rising up to a blind Northern dimness from the Christmas blaze of shops. (cited by Amis, 2002b, p. 453)

The Adventures of Augie March is, for Amis, the Great American Novel "because of its fantastic inclusiveness, its pluralism, its qualmless promiscuity" (Amis, 2002b, p. 469). Within the novel "the highest and the lowest mingle and hobnob in the vast democracy of Bellow's prose" (Amis, 2002b, p. 469). The novel is about hustle and muscle, petty crime and thievery, framed by economic hardship interwoven with diamond-studded dreams: "Everything is in here, the crushed and the exalted and all the notches in between" (Amis, 2002b, p. 469).

Let's, however, acknowledge the validity in Mailer's argument that Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is a primary contender—for him the principal contender that, by inference, Mailer himself hoped to best—for the accolade of having written the "Great American Novel". Both Dreiser and Bellow, of course, have as a primary setting the American heartland. Nevertheless, it's important to recognize the divergent outcomes of these stories. If the protagonist Clyde in *An American Tragedy* has ambition and aspires to the American dream of ascending from rags to riches to "have it all", he, nevertheless, is doomed to a tragic downfall. As novelist and literary critic J. M. Coetzee suggests, all it takes is for Clyde to make "one or two careless slips" before inexorably ending "up in the electric chair". By contrast, as Coetzee emphasizes, Augie March "emerges safe and sound", escaping from "whatever perils befall him" (Coetzee, 2004).

MFS: Who, then, would you characterize as having influenced Saul Bellow?

DS: First, let's acknowledge that the sheer magnitude of Bellow's literary accomplishments is impressive: laureate of the Nobel Prize (1976), recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), and winner of the National Book Award for fiction three times, the only author to have done so (*The Adventures of Augie March*, 1953; *Herzog*, 1964; and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, 1970). In addition, he was the recipient of the National Medal of Arts (1988) and the National Book Foundation's Distinguished Contribution to American Letters (1990).

In some sense the greatest influence on Saul Bellow might be characterized as the city of Chicago. It became his greatest source material, its streets and byways, its physical prowess, its infamy and its glory. Bellow's intellect was shaped by his voracious appetite for reading and by the University of Chicago where he was initially a student and later a member of the illustrious Committee on Social Thought for more than 30 years, having served as its chairman from 1970-1976.

Bellow grew up in the immigrant neighborhoods of Humboldt Park and the Ukrainian Village, communities then teaming with vitality, vulgarity, and strife (Borrelli, 2015). As an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, he worked for Mortimer Adler on the editorial staff tasked with creating the Syntopicon, an index of philosophical ideas associated with the publication series *Great Books of the Western World*. He finished his undergraduate education at Northwestern University, located on the outskirts of Chicago. But the University of Chicago remained his spiritual *alma mater* and his intellectual fountainhead. For more than twenty years after matriculating there as a student, he lived in the university neighborhood of Hyde Park. Several of his key novels feature Chicago.

The Adventures of Augie March is about the scrappiness of the American immigrant experience, a coming-of-age story that embodies the American story, drawing upon the author's formative years in Chicago. In *Herzog* the "Windy City" is used as a contextual backdrop in presenting us with the story of a struggling academic who is awash in a midlife crisis after having divorced his second wife. Chicago is showcased prominently in *Humboldt's Gift*, a novel about the failed life of Humboldt, a poet, in contrast with the successful writer Citrine, his friend and protégé. This story draws upon Bellow's friendship with Delmore Schwartz. Finally, *Ravelstein*, published when Bloom was in his 80s, richly illuminates his friendship with his University of Chicago colleague Allan Bloom. I might also add that Bellow was a strong supporter and friend of African-American novelist Ralph Ellison.

MFS: Saul Bellow wrote about "mental instability" and its relationship to genius, as did several other psychoanalytically oriented writers such as Silvano Arieti. Fitzgerald, on the other hand, seemed to live with mental instability given that his wife had to be institutionalized quite often. Writing about it and living it: Why are these topics so germane?

DS: Let's consider your question with respect to Fitzgerald's last completed novel, *Tender Is the Night*, which was initially serialized by *Scribner's Magazine* into four issues in 1934 before publication as a book that same year. The story draws heavily upon the experience of Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald's wife, who developed schizophrenia. Dick Driver, the protagonist, is a psychoanalyst who marries his patient Nicole. They move to Europe; their marriage falls apart; they have affairs. Dick succumbs to alcoholism and Nicole to mental illness. This is a painful story of dissipated dreams, professional disappointment, and the loss of love and intimacy.

Fitzgerald regarded *Tender Is the Night* as his best novel. It is ranked 28th in the 1998 Modern Library list of the best 100 English-language novels published in the 20th century. It was not initially well received. Nevertheless, Hemingway, who was not always charitable about his erstwhile literary competitors, acknowledged to Maxwell Perkins, who served as editor to both Hemingway and Fitzgerald, that upon reflection "*Tender Is the Night* gets better

and better" (Cowley, 1951). Indeed, if a book improves with time or upon rereading, that's generally the mark of a good, if not great novel.

These days the luster of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night* for many sophisticated readers seems diminished. The novels, after all, are grounded in realism. By the literary standards of today's densely laden postmodern tomes that are cleverly constructed, but rarely provide meaningful stories about our world, Fitzgerald's stories are judged to be dully earnest. Many of his phrases and sentences that once seemed breathtakingly original now might be characterized as clichés. By 21st century assessments, Fitzgerald's fiction may be regarded as too realistic, too simple in its story construction, and too focused on character development at the expense of layered stories saturated in postmodern irony. In an age where imagined meta-universes trump the known world and literary depictions of consciousness bear little relation to accurate cognitive science, contemporary critics might dismiss Fitzgerald's fiction as banal realism.

Even for those of us drawn to realism against the faddist trends of today, there's still the awareness that Bellow's novels, when compared with Fitzgerald's, are richer, more complex and nuanced. His stories are drenched in the themes of identity and consciousness, which piques our interest. His narratives are intellectually intriguing and his characters come from all walks of life, giving us a much broader, more nuanced representation of America than Fitzgerald's stories. Even when we're strong advocates for Fitzgerald, there's the painful acknowledgment that Bellow's writing soars in passage after passage, while we have to hunt harder in Fitzgerald's fiction for prose that confounds our expectations and excites our imagination.

Finally, there's the perception, tinged by political correctness, that the experiences that framed Fitzgerald's life and influenced his fiction are, by today's standards, illustrations of "white privilege", the irrelevant goings on of people with too much money and time on their hands who are neurotic, awash in moral decay and decadence, and, therefore, not emotionally compelling or relevant.

I think this assessment is harsh and unwarranted. Literature is about discovery and opening our eyes to the world, not simply reading what makes us feel comfortable. While Saul Bellow may, in fact, be the technical virtuoso, if you want to understand the glittering, decadent Jazz Age that preceding the 1929 stock market crash and economic depression, forerunners to our 2008 debacle, if you will, Fitzgerald is your writer. It's as if Scott and Zelda were the male and female counterparts of Icarus. Filled with hubris, convinced they were god-like and, therefore, infallible, they flew too close to the sun. Their wax wings melted, they fell into turbulent waters, and all we're left with are these glistening literary fables of dreams that crumble to dust, the very stuff of tragedy.

As for Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift,* it too can be read as a fable, a calamitous story about a poet's quest for greatness in an American society driven by fame and greed. It's beautifully crafted and intellectually compelling, an existential meditation about the consequential loss of human soul and what this implies about an America awash in materialism. Bellow's protagonist and alter ego is Charlie Citrine, the writer perpetually on the make who has mastered the art of success. The life of failed poet Von Humboldt Fleisher, modeled after the poet Delmore Schwartz, unravels before our eyes. After his demise Citrine creates a play and movie about his mentor and friend, feasting, as it were, on Fleisher's dead flesh.

This novel won the Pulitzer Prize. It was the last work of fiction Bellow wrote before receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature.

MFS: Fitzgerald is said to have coined the term the "Jazz Age" and described it thus: "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire". What would Saul Bellow say?

DS: Yes, it's a lovely line, drenched with nostalgia and taken from Fitzgerald's essay *Echoes of the Jazz Age* (1931), which is about the 1920s.

Bellow, who matured during the Depression, never had those temptations. He was too busy struggling to overcome his challenging economic circumstances. Decadence, all that glitter, was not Bellow's weakness. He was a serial adulterer, something else entirely.

MFS: Fitzgerald wrote *Tender is the Night* about a psychiatrist in Paris (possibly reflecting on his own terrors with his wife) while Bellow seemed to steep himself in politics and demonstration. Are these somehow coping mechanisms for these two authors?

DS: The two writers inhabited seemingly separate worlds. That's why our theme of doubling is so intriguing. Fitzgerald, borrowing from his experiences with Zelda, imagines the decadent unraveling of a couple's life during the Jazz Age in his novel *Tender is the Night.*

Bellow's life was entirely different. He was an immigrant child in a hard scrabble milieu. As with his alter ego, Augie March, he was always on the make. He was also fiercely intelligent, someone with a pervasive worldview shaped by the demanding standards of the University of Chicago. His success and his intellect, I would argue, predisposed him to conservatism with its implicit standards of excellence. We might debate as to whether his conservative values formed in the post-World War era are today's conservative values, but certainly Bellow, like his friend and colleague Allan Bloom, was distressed by the decline of excellence and the rise of multicultural relativism, which sacrifices truth and beauty for what purports to be social justice.

MFS: Fitzgerald died not knowing his impact on literature. On the other hand Bellow taught on and off for about 30 years at the University of Chicago and seemed to work alongside of Allan Bloom, who strongly influenced him. Is Fitzgerald's tragedy something that befalls some writers? Or, following Bellow, does a writer make his destiny?

DS: All writers who aspire to a kind of literary immortality create not knowing what lies in store. The best of us write for truth and beauty, not for elusive fame or celebrity.

Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's life was painful. The pursuit of the glitter and glamor we today associate with celebrity has inherent risks. Fitzgerald died relatively early. He is best remembered for his portrayal of the decadent Jazz Age. Could he have written other stories that captured the American story as society moved on? It is hard to tell. His wife Zelda was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1930. Her illness and his alcoholism shaped the remainder of their lives. Desperate for money to support their dissipated lifestyle and Zelda's treatment, Fitzgerald worked as a scriptwriter in Hollywood. He died in 1940, but his novels, as well as

the outlook and values that shaped them, remained essentially anchored in the Roaring Twenties. But before we weep bitter tears for him, it's important to remind ourselves that *The Great Gatsby* is 2nd on the Modern Library list and *Tender is the Night* is number 28th. No small feat for any writer.

Bellow lived a long and productive live. He had the emotional satisfaction of several literary successes over the course of his life. As the sole recipient of three National Book Awards for fiction, as well as a Pulitzer and a Nobel, he "had it all". His fiction still retains its luster. I prefer his novels to his short stories since those big, sprawling narratives are his forte, rather than the finite perfection of a moment in time demanded by a perfectly crafted short story.

Today, of course, fiction continues, but in terms of its intellectual content, its style, its connection with the world, it is derivative and irrelevant. Film and TV scripts have replaced novels and short stories, although they, too, are imperiled. What we're left with at the moment is the episodic "now", personified by the Internet, gaming, tweeting, and the like. This moment-by-moment existence is devoid of consciousness and undermines all meaningful narratives, which require a story arc that includes past, present, and the impending future. Absent a history, a culture, an understanding of who we were and what we are becoming, fiction dies. What remains is tabloid celebrity and variations of Facebook. Don't expect to find the contemporary equivalent of a Fitzgerald or Bellow. We are living in a new orality in which the written word has been subjugated to visual and aural stimulus. Text has become an ancillary function that sustains this oral and visual world. Our ability to read and imagine complex novels, our willingness to retreat to a solitary place to imagine another kind of consciousness embodied in literature is *kaput*.

MFS: Fitzgerald had his time in Paris with Hemingway and others. How are writers affected by interacting or socializing with others?

DS: Humans are social creatures. Writers obtain their material and its authenticity by interacting with the world. Unless we're sociopaths, we crave intimacy and community. The best writers are competitive; they don't necessarily need to interact with their peers. They can read them. As Hemingway noted and, as I discuss in my essay about him in this collection, writing is inherently a solitary enterprise.

Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald were immersed in a social whirl. While that gave Fitzgerald "material", their dissipated lifestyle ultimately constrained his novelistic output and shortened his life.

Bellow was an entirely different writer. Both he and Allan Bloom, as John Podhoretz noted, "inhaled books and ideas the way the rest of us breathe air" (Podhoretz, 2005, p. 9). Journalist and literary critic Christopher Hitchens concurred, emphasizing Bellow's "ferocious assimilation of learning" and his endeavor through some of his most engaging characters "to overcome not just ghetto conditions but also ghetto psychoses" (Hitchens, 2007).

MFS: Some of Fitzgerald's lesser known works, such as his short story "The Strange Case of Benjamin Button" have been resurrected and made into movies, and some of Fitzgerald's short stories remain required reading in many first-year undergraduate classes. What is it about Fitzgerald and his topics that seem to still evoke a response in readers?

DS: His subject matter and his style of literary realism attract readers.

MFS: In the same vein, some lesser known works of Bellow's need to be recognized: *Henderson the Rain King*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and *Ravelstein*. Which of these works would you suggest and why? Which books written by Bellow and Fitzgerald would you recommend be taken to the proverbial desert isle to be read?

DS: I would bring to the desert isle Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. As for Bellow, four of his novels would come in tow. Let's explore which ones and why.

Bellow's three best works of fiction are, I contend, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), *Herzog* (1964), and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). If *The Adventures of Augie March* marks his dawn as a mature writer, all three were written during this productively long mid-life period. Each deserves to be read and savored and each has autobiographical elements embedded in them. Perhaps you feel *Humboldt's Gift* is more intellectual, less emotionally driven. Perhaps that's why you designate it as a "lesser work". Rest assured it isn't. It won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and helped ensure that Bellow would win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Ravelstein deserves to be read. The novel offers a fictional rendering of Bloom's Jewish-American friend and colleague, University of Chicago academic Allan Bloom. Published in 2000 when Bellow was 85, it is a remarkable achievement. As is characteristic in later life, Bellow looks back in time for his source material, drawing upon his memory of Allan Bloom while simultaneously anticipating the specter of death. *Ravelstein* is one of a few late-life literary efforts by a fiction writer that is justly celebrated by critics.

For American literary writer, journalist, and critic Ron Rosenbaum, *Ravelstein* is Bellow's masterpiece: "It's a rapturous celebration of the life of the mind, as well as a meditation on the glory of sensual life" and "the tenebrous permeable boundary we all eventually pass over, the one between life and death" (Rosenbaum, 2007). For him it was "absolutely, irresistibly seductive, both sensually and intellectually" and, he admits, the only Bellow novel "I really love" (Rosenbaum, 2007).

Canadian literary theorist John Sutherland is unstinting in his praise of *Ravelstein*: "The novel explores, in its attractively rambling way, two dauntingly large and touchy themes: death and American Jewishness". He adds that Bellow, Canadian-born, "is not quite American". On the other hand, Allan Bloom, represented by Abe Ravelstein, is. The result is, Sutherland suggests, that "Abe Ravelstein is the American mind and Bellow its finest living (thank God) voice. We should all have such friends" (Sutherland cited in Moss, 2000).

As I've noted before, a number of Britain's finest critics and notable writers love Bellow, which is probably due to his European intellectual sensibilities, his demanding prose, and his Dickensian excess. So let me quote from two of them.

Martin Amis noted that *Ravelstein* is “a masterpiece with no analogues. The world has never heard this prose before: prose of such tremulous and crystallized beauty” (Amis, 2002a, p. 326).

I’ll conclude with Malcolm Bradbury. “Just when we didn’t expect it”, he enthused, “there now wonderfully comes a large new novel from the master”. He marveled at the narrative themes: “Our world is a world of ideas, pervaded by minds, thoughts, notions, beyond which lies what we seek with such difficulty: wholeness, silence and love”. This novel, Bradbury emphasized, is restorative: “Via print, Ravelstein survives; and Bellow survives. So does fiction itself” (citing Bradbury, Moss, 2000).

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