

***Ravelstein: Defining Portraits
and Other Things***

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Ravelstein: Defining Portraits and Other Things

By Richard Salzberg

Ravelstein

By Saul Bellow

233 pages. Viking

\$24.95

It is probably as safe as anything to say that Saul Bellow is a National Treasure.

Even among those who have never read his work, if only for his enduring name-recognition and a possible awareness of his 1976 Nobel Prize for literature, Bellow's general acceptance as such an icon is a relatively safe bet.

It is safer still to declare that his latest book *Ravelstein* is an important American novel.

As entertaining and thoughtfully provocative as anything anyone is ever likely to read, the answer to the inevitable "Why so?" is a bit more difficult to state.

The essential plot is simple: Chick, reasonably successful author and the canny narrator, has agreed to provide a biographical memoir of his longtime friend and colleague Abe Ravelstein, a colorful and charismatic professor who teaches at an urban Midwestern university.

Ravelstein would frequently say to me, "There's something in the way you tell anecdotes that gets to me, Chick. But you need a real subject. I'd like you to write me up, after I'm gone. . . ."

Later. . .

"It depends, doesn't it, on who beats whom to the barn?"

". . . . You know perfectly well that I'm about to die."

Of course I knew it.

"You could do a really fine memoir. It's not just a request," he added. "I'm laying this on you as an obligation. Do it in your after-supper-remembrance manner, when you've had a few glasses of wine and you're laid back and making remarks. I love listening when you are freewheeling about Edmund Wilson or John Berryman or Whittaker Chambers when you were hired at "Time" in the morning and fired by him before lunch. I've often thought how well you deal with a story when you're laid back."

At Chick's urging, Ravelstein had recently published the essence of the theories and lectures which had made him both academic legend and scourge, and he had suddenly become very, very rich.

That Ravelstein's most serious ideas, put into his book, should have made him a millionaire certainly was funny. It took the genius of capitalism to make a commodity out of thoughts, opinions, teachings. Bear in mind that Ravelstein was a teacher.

As the charismatic legend. . .

If they were lucky, if they were bright and willing, Ravelstein would give them the greatest gift they could hope to receive and lead them through Plato, introduce them to the esoteric secrets of Maimonides, teach them the correct interpretation of Machiavelli, acquaint them with the higher humanity of Shakespeare – up to and beyond Nietzsche. It wasn't an academic program that he offered – it was more freewheeling than that.

As a scourge of the properly envious. . .

The letters always made me think of the controversies he was involved in – the powerful unforgiving enemies he had made in the academic world. He didn't care a damn about any of them.

The book opens in Paris at the exclusive Hotel Crillon, with Ravelstein in a penthouse on the seventh floor and Chick and his young wife Rosamund on the floor below, and (in the first of a stream of delightful incongruities) Michael Jackson and his vast entourage taking up the entire floor below them.

Now tonight's dinner had been laid on for me. It was Ravelstein's way of thanking his friend Chick for the support he had given him in the writing of his bestseller. The idea of the entire project, he said, was mine from the first. It would never have been done if I hadn't urged him to do it. This was always and handsomely acknowledged by Abe – "It was Chick who put me up to it."

During the course of the engagingly multifaceted story, Ravelstein dies. With Chick's frank observations serving as a sort of literary lost-wax process, we are left with a moving portrait of the remarkable Ravelstein.

Ravelstein with his bald powerful head, was at ease with large statements, big issues, and famous men, with decades, eras, centuries. He was, however, just as familiar with entertainers like Mel Brooks as with the classics and could go from Thucydides' huge tragedy to Moses as played by Brooks.

Then. . .

Inevitably Ravelstein was seen by the young men he was training as the intellectual counterpart to Jordan. The man who introduced them to the powers and subtleties of Thucydides and analyzed the role of Alcibiades in the Sicilian campaign as no one else could – a man who expounded the "Gorgias" to his seminar, literally in sight of the steel mills and ash heaps and street filth of Gary, its ore boats coming and going across the water – could also hang in the air, levitating just like Jordan. A man of idiosyncrasies and kinks, of gobbling greed for penny candies or illegal Havana cigars, was himself a Homeric prodigy.

And later. . .

Ravelstein didn't answer. He declined to be intimidated – but he wasn't yet strong enough to fight back. On the whole he cared little for doctors. Doctors were the allies of the death-dreading

bourgeoisie. He was not about to change his habits for any doctor, not even for Schley, whom he respected. As Rosamund understood when she went to buy the cigarettes, Abe would do what he had always done. He'd never play the valetudinarian.

"I ask you, Mr. Ravelstein, to give up your cigarettes until your lungs are stronger."

Along with the compelling portrait of Abe Ravelstein (and the subtle but absorbing self-portrait which evolves from it), we can relish classic Bellow peripheral character essays.

. . . . the weather dry, cold, clear, and high, I met an acquaintance named Battle. He was a prof, an Englishman who strode about the freezing streets in an old thin topcoat. A man in his sixties, he was big, ruddy, fleshy, his huge chilled face as thick as sweet red pepper. His hair was dense and long, and he sometimes reminded me of the Quaker on the oatmeal box. He had energy enough to keep two men warm. Only his raised shoulders acknowledged that the temperature was well below freezing – the shoulders up, and the hands thrust down into his coat pockets – all but the thumbs. His feet were set close together. He was not what we used to call "a sport" but he always wore classy shoes.

Caring, tight, high-minded, off-beat, and just plain intellectually fun, *Ravelstein* is also much more. The book resonates with Bellow's seasoned, unabashed street-smart intellectualism, readily transcending any constraints of the politically correct. (Bellow seems to have neither the time nor the instinct for that.) The smart reader is allowed to glimpse, and then grasp and savor a great writer's generous world of real freedom.

Tom Wolfe recently reminded us that even in the midst of the most ambitious creative technology the novel remains the most innovative and free-formed of all media. *Ravelstein* consistently provides illuminating evidence of that. Boldly and brilliantly free-associative in chronology and narrative format, although there are designer-spaced delineations in the printing, there are no numbered chapters.

I have at any rate, with Rosamund's help, kept my promise to Ravelstein. He died six years ago, just as the High Holidays were beginning. When I said Kaddish for my parents, I had him in mind, too. And during the memorial service – Yizkor – I began even to give some thought to the memoir I had promised to write and wondered how I would go about it – how to deal with his freaks, quiddities, oddities, his eating, drinking, shaving, dressing, and playfully savaging his students. But that isn't much more than his natural history.

The honest, almost mystical power of Bellow's straightforward commentary commands and entertains; and, as well, *Ravelstein* reiterates that at the foundation of good writing there is always the love of words.

Clemenceau in answering "saw that he must needs concede a good deal." "Must needs" was an expression that now had vanished, I told Rosamund.

Or . . .

Today, for instance, he spoke of Lloyd George's "pungency."

"Pungency is good," I said.

*“In the matter of language the Brits had it all over us. Especially when their strength began to bleed away and language became one of their important resources.” (Ravelstein said.)
“Like Hamlet’s whore who must unpack her heart with words.”*

While *Ravelstein* reminds us of the rare pleasure derived from the expert expression of the wordsmith’s craft – the great rush of good words that flow together in swift, stellar combinations, astounding and enthralling the reader like an arena spectator – the story is essentially about the curious, elusive bond termed “friendship.”

When he was sick, we saw each other daily and we also had long telephone conversations as close friends should. We were close friends – what else needs to be added? In my desk drawers I find folders containing pages and pages about Ravelstein. But these data only seem to go into the subject. There are no acceptable modern terms for the discussion of friendship or other higher forms of interdependence.

And. . .

I didn’t invite him to go into particulars. Since he and I were close friends, it was up to me to do my own thinking about Nikki’s place in his life. I believed that I was alert enough to understand. Though maybe I wasn’t. Ravelstein often made me doubt my abilities.

Beyond friendship, and Life and Death, what else might *Ravelstein* be about? Early on, the book is about Paris.

Paris today was Paris as it should be. The kings who had laid out Versailles directed the architects to build the magnificent public spaces of the capital. These, today, were Ravelstein’s setting. He was the grandee in the new order of things, carrying his credit cards and checks, willing to spend his dollars – if there had been a better hotel than the Crillon, Abe would have gone there.

Beyond France, it is also an intellectual Chicago tough guy’s travelogue.

“I’m not suggesting a working holiday,” said Rosamund. “I suppose you’ve been in the Caribbean.”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t like it?”

“It’s one huge tropical slum. . . . But I go mostly to Puerto Rico. Big gambling joints, a huge smelly lagoon, dark and muddy – unhappy welfare-looking native crowds. Then the Europeans arriving in charter flights. And what they carry home with them is the feeling that the Americans have made a mess of things and that Castro deserves the support of independent intelligent Scandinavians and Dutchmen.”

And *Ravelstein* is also a sharp History lesson, framed by the early 90s. . . .

All those great designs of statesmanship – going back through Machiavelli via Severus or Caracalla. And it was essential to fit up-to-the-minute decisions in the Gulf War – made by

obviously limited pols like Baker and Bush into a true-as-possible picture of the forces at work – into the political history of this civilization.

Ah, yes – and here let all readers beware: Both Chick and Ravelstein are Jews, and we are not allowed to forget that.

. . . he was a teacher, you see. That was his vocation – he taught. We are a people of teachers. For millennia, Jews have taught and been taught. Without teaching, Jewry was an impossibility.

As Ravelstein dealt with his mortal illness. . .

If he had to choose between Athens and Jerusalem, among us the two main sources of higher life, he chose Athens, while full of respect for Jerusalem. But in his last days it was the Jews he wanted to talk about, not the Greeks.

When I commented on this change he was annoyed with me. “Why not talk about them?” he said. “In the South they still talk about the War Between the States much more than a century ago but in our own time millions were destroyed, most of them no different from you. From us. We mustn’t turn our backs on them.”

How ever could there be an honest book about Ravelstein and Bellow (er – that is, “Chick”) – without addressing the basics of Jew-hatred, or, more politely insidious: “the Jewish Question”? *Ravelstein* is necessarily as informed and defined by “the Jew thing,” as unavoidably as have been the lives of the main characters themselves. (“Anti-Semitism” is, after all, a meaningless term, overused in polite society for a century or more, even by some of the very best Jew-haters. Like the old vaudevillian coughed from his perch in the old folks’ home: “Has anybody met a Semite he didn’t like?”)

Maintaining the apartment were the two ladies – the Polish woman Wadja, who did the real cleaning on Tuesdays, and black Mrs. Ruby Tyson (far too old for real work), who let herself in on Fridays. . . . To Wadja, Ravelstein was just another loud Jew – her savage imagination had pictured the money he controlled, and he was rowdy, incomprehensible.

In France. . .

Ravelstein didn’t count on recovering his deposit, though he was highly connected in French academic circles. . . . He knew perfectly well that there was no legal way to recover his earnest money. “Especially in this instance, because the tenant is a Jew, and there’s a Gobineau in the landlord’s family tree. Those Gobineaus were famous Jew-haters. And I’m no mere Jew but, even worse, an American one – all the more dangerous to civilization as they see it. . . .”

With health and wealth, Ravelstein could almost laugh about the obvious. . .

It amused Ravelstein to say, “She wasn’t going to let any kike behave so badly at her table.”

But, movingly, facing his impending death made him more seriously concerned. . .

Ravelstein went on for quite a while in this way. He said that the Jews had been used to give the entire species a measure of human viciousness. “You tell people that a great new era will begin if you abolish the ruling class or the bourgeoisie, if you rationalize the means of production, if you use euthanasia on the incurables. To minds so prepared you then propose that the Jews be destroyed. And they make a substantial start. They kill more than half of the European Jews – and you and I, Chick, belong to the remainder.” These are not Ravelstein’s actual words. I am paraphrasing. What he said was that we, as Jews, now knew what was possible.

Finally, and perhaps more than anything else, *Ravelstein* is about Love. Beyond the wonderfully sparingly defined love between Chick and Ravelstein, and between Ravelstein and Nikki and a surprising number of artfully described partners throughout the book, there is the love story between Chick and Rosamund, both heroic (when she saves Chick’s life). . .

Was love credited among these women with saving lives? If they were answering the questions of a pollster they’d have denied it. As Ravelstein had famously said, American nihilism was nihilism without the abyss. Love should by rights – or by modern lights – be seen today as a discredited passion, but the nurses in intensive care on the front line of death were more open to pure feelings than those who worked in the quieter corridors. And Rosamund, this slender, dark-haired, straight-nosed beauty was paradoxically recognized as a natural.

And romantic (while on a momentous vacation in Saint Martin). . .

She wears her brown hair down to the shoulders. It’s like a limitless asset. Her long eyes turn out to be blue, not the brown her dark hair would lead you to expect. The music she sang as she sailed my body through the water was from Handel’s “Solomon.” We had heard it in Budapest a few months earlier. “Live forever,” she sang. “Happy-happy Solomon.” This chorus sung by her single voice had the rustling sea water under it.

In short. . .

There was no subject raised which she didn’t immediately understand. Ravelstein would have been well pleased with her. Of course he’d never had my advantage, the access to her that I had. And after the crisis Rosamund said she never doubted that I would survive. And I seemed to believe that I wouldn’t die because I had things to do. Ravelstein expected me to make good on my promise to write the memoir he had commissioned. To keep my word I’d have to live.

In short, *Ravelstein* is full of life. Enjoy it.

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