

**Paean to A Master:
The Library of America's
Saul Bellow Novels 1944–1953**

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Paeon to A Master

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Saul Bellow

Novels 1944–1953

James Wood, Editor

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One can not say much more about Saul Bellow than did Dr. Gloria L. Cronin of Brigham Young University: “Saul Bellow’s status in the post-WW II period of American literature can only be compared to that of Hemingway or Faulkner in the earlier part of the century,” and “Bellow has commanded serious critical attention for more than 45 years.” The clear inference is that, even beyond the status borne of his Nobel and Pulitzer prizes, Bellow is a national treasure; and as importantly, he is simply among the greatest of storytellers. As the venerable master is now “pushing 90,” as one of his characters might say, how timely and gratifying that the nonprofit Library of America (www.loa.org) has published *Novels 1944–1953* on the sixtieth anniversary of the appearance of *Dangling Man*, Bellow’s very first publication.

Along with that earliest work, this collection offers in one manageable volume Bellow’s next two novels, *The Victim* (1947), and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), said to be his “most exuberant and nostalgic book.” At some point among the countless essays and interviews that have followed his career, Bellow is said to have described *Dangling Man* as his M.A. and *The Victim* his Ph.D. However it was the rollicking *Augie March*, written in Paris and recalling the Depression-era Chicago of his youth, that earned Bellow a National Book Award in 1954 and marked the beginning of the hopeless critical pursuit to capture an essential Bellow.

With a rhythmic, visionary mastery of the picaresque (as well as the burlesque), with an unfailing ear for dialogue and the sundry vernacular of exotic contemporary worlds, Bellow has for 60 years demonstrated a seemingly supernatural ability to make comprehensive – and enjoyable – the most obscure of important human concepts, illustrated and fleshed by unforgettable moments and scenarios. Delightful literary threads abound: Is the Montreal-born Bellow the American Tolstoy, or maybe Dostoevsky, or perhaps Chicago’s Joyce, maybe a *yiddische* Twain, a hard-scrabble Henry James, or maybe even the assimilated second coming of Isaac Bashevis Singer? But of course, like any complete original, the artist Bellow can only be himself.

The three novels presented here emphatically mark the beginning. Interestingly, all were quite successful, and each could be said to represent “coming-of-age” works, however Bellowian. (Yes, the author has earned his own dedicated adjective.) With its early themes of the isolated individual and existentialism, *Dangling Man* introduces the first post-war Bellow protagonist (even before World War II was over). The main character here is Joseph, a young intellectual and aspiring writer adjusting to the gritty life of the material plane of his day as he waits to be

drafted. With his use of a diary format – rather bold for the times and certainly for a first novel – Bellow characteristically applies the services of a first-person narrator, and so began the inevitable but superfluous occasional confusion that Bellow the author is Bellow the character.

Novels 1944–1953 also offers the chance to examine (and appreciate) *The Victim*. Generally overlooked in the recent past, this story is startlingly prescient in its perceptions, and its treatment of urban America’s reaction to the apocalyptic dimensions of World War II, as seen through the experience one 1940s summer of a conflicted individualist, Asa Leventhal, whose ideals collide with family and co-workers, not to mention the realities of the new world, with all of this leavened with Bellow’s authorial occupation with the literary influences of his European predecessors.

A happy antidote to the darker considerations of *The Victim* is the boisterous and more familiar *The Adventures of Augie March*. Written in Paris in the early 1950s, this colorful “adventure chronicle” offers the introduction of the city of Chicago as one of Bellow’s ongoing characters in what has also been described as a comedy. *Augie March* remains one of Bellow’s most popular books, perhaps due to the free-wheeling exuberance of the narrative and characters and the often surreal aspects of its cinematic flow. Combined with the author’s always compelling vision and formidable storytelling skills, its inclusion here is a pleasure. If the first two novels informed of Bellow’s promise, *Augie March* confirmed and defined it – a glorious promise wonderfully kept.

Now a venerable figure of American letters, Saul Bellow will ever be the poor kid who became the pure street maestro, one who always had the instincts of a fighter and survivor even when within the most rarified of institutions. Bellow really should be read – and what a joy that *Novels 1944–1953* provides the opportunity to so easily revisit these early gems while the grand old man is still with us.

– *Finis* –

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