

The Great American Augie

Saul Bellow won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, but the great novel that set him on the course for the prize had been published 23 years earlier, in 1953. The peripatetic hero of *The Adventures of Augie March* spoke in an idiom entirely new to American literature—an astonishing mix of the high-flown and the low-down. Christopher Hitchens explains why, after almost half a century, Augie remains vibrant and irresistible.

by Christopher Hitchens

Augie March stands on the Chicago lakeshore at dawn on a New Year's Day in the 1930s:

I drank coffee and looked out into the brilliant first morning of the year. There was a Greek church in the next street of which the onion dome stood in the snow polished and purified blue, cross and crown together, the united powers of earth and heaven, snow in all the clefts, a snow like the sand of sugar. I passed over the church too and rested only on the great profound blue. The days have not changed, though the times have. The sailors who first saw America, that sweet sight, where the belly of the ocean had brought them, didn't see more beautiful color than this.

Nick Carraway stands on the Long Island shoreline at the close of *The Great Gatsby*:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh green breast of the new world. . . . The trees that had made way for Gatsby's house had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a

transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent . . . face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

One man is reflecting at day's end and one at day's beginning. Both have just been put through it by flawed and wretched humanity. Nick Carraway has been to several funerals, and Augie March has had a close shave while helping a girl who isn't his girlfriend survive an illegal abortion. Both draw strength from the idea of America. Nick derives consolation, but Augie, it might be truer to say, finds inspiration. Reflecting on Jay Gatsby's futile quest—his “dream”—Nick decides that Gatsby “did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” Augie doesn't take much stock in dreams, and he is about to venture onto those very fields.

I do not set up as a member of the jury in the Great American Novel contest, if only because I'd prefer to see the white whale evade capture a while longer. It's more interesting that way. However, we do belong to a ranking species, and there's no denying that



La Salle Street in downtown Chicago as the young Saul Bellow would have seen it in 1925.

the contest is a real one. The advantage *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Saul Bellow's third novel, has over *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which, coincidentally, was F. Scott Fitzgerald's third novel too, derives from its scope, its optimism, and, I would venture, its principles. Or rather, its principle, which Augie states clearly in the opening pages and never loses sight of:

What did Danton lose his head for, or why was there a Napoleon, if it wasn't to make a nobility of us all? And this universal eligibility to be noble, taught everywhere, was what gave Simon airs of honor.

"The universal eligibility to be noble" (eligibility connotes being elected as well as being chosen) is as potent a statement of the American dream as has ever been uttered. Simon is Augie's older brother, and Simon doesn't "make it." But that's not the point. Augie doesn't exactly make it either. Well, it's an ideal not a promise. Augie decides to match himself against the continent, seeking no one's permission and deferring to no

idea of limitation. His making, like his omnivorous education, will be his own.

In the pages of Bellow's novel, for the first time in American literature, an immigrant would act and think like a rightful discoverer, or a pioneer. The paradox of the American immigrant experience had hitherto been exactly that so many immigrants came to the New World not in order to spread their wings but to adapt, to conform, to fit in. When we are first introduced to Augie March, he is in cramped conditions, in a poor Jewish family semi-stifled by its own warmth and replete with dread of the wider world. Our hero doesn't know any better—and yet he does know. "I am an American, Chicago born," he proclaims in the very first line of the novel. It's important to understand what that assertion meant when it was made, both to Bellow himself and to the audiences for whom he wrote.

Barely a half-century before *The Adventures of Augie March* was published, Henry James had returned to New York from Europe and found its new character unset-

ting in the extreme. In *The American Scene*, published in 1907, he registered the revulsion he imagined “any sensitive citizen” might feel, after visiting Ellis Island, at having “to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism, with the inconceivable alien.” On the Lower East Side, James discerned the “hard glitter of Israel.” In east-side cafés, he found himself in “torture-rooms of the living idiom.” And he asked himself: “Who can ever tell, moreover, in any conditions and in presence of any apparent anomaly, what the genius of Israel may, or may not, really be ‘up to?’” The Master was by no means alone in expressing sentiments and sensitivities of this kind. With *The Adventures of Augie March*, and its bold initial annexation of the brave name of “American,” his descendants got the answer to the question about what that genius was “up to.”

Saul Bellow was born—and named Solomon—in 1915, across the border in Lachine, Quebec. (Lachine itself was named by a Columbus-minded French military officer who was sent to look for China and declared he’d found it.) Bellow’s parents smuggled him across the Great Lakes as an infant, and he did not discover that he was an illegal immigrant until he signed up for the U.S. armed forces in World War II. The authorities sent him back to Canada and compelled him to reapply—kept him hanging about, in other words. Among other things, *Augie March* is a farewell to the age of Bellow’s own uncertainty, an adieu to the self of his two earlier novels, *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947).

Though affirmatively, almost defiantly American, *The Adventures of Augie March* is by no means a paean to assimilation and amnesia. As a youth, Bellow composed and performed a standup spoof of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in Yiddish, and he has always been acutely aware of his Russian roots. (He helped Irving Howe and *Partisan Review* with the first translations of his future fellow-Nobelist Isaac Bashevis

Singer.) One triumph of *Augie March* is that it takes *Yiddishkeit* out of the torture rooms and out of the ghetto and helps make it an indissoluble and inseparable element in the great American tongue. Those of us who inherit Lenny Bruce, Walter Matthau, Woody Allen, and Philip Roth as part of our vernacular birthright take for granted this linguistic faculty and facility. But it was not a birthright in 1953.

Only in the preceding year, for one thing, had Bellow’s peers and cothinkers and kibitzers got around to producing the famous *Partisan Review* symposium “Our Country and Our Culture.” In those pages, the veterans of the cultural combat of the 1930s—most but not all of them Jewish—had asked whether the time had perhaps come to rewrite their project of permanent opposition. There were demurrals and reservations, but, on the whole, the formerly “alienated” began to speak as lawfully adopted sons and daughters of the United States. The exceptions, those who distrusted what they saw as a coming age of conformism, included Irving Howe and the poet Delmore Schwartz. But when *Augie March* astonished the critics by showing that an egghead novel could be a literary and a commercial success, Schwartz was won over.

His review of *Augie* opened with the simple declaration that “Saul Bellow’s new novel is a new kind of book.” He compared it favorably with the grandest efforts of Mark Twain and John Dos Passos. And he was struck at once by the essential matter of the book, the language and the style: “*Augie March* rises from the streets of the modern city to encounter the reality of experience with an attitude of satirical acceptance, ironic affirmation, the comic transcendence of affirmation and rejection.” Indeed, Schwartz made the immigrant vengeance on the old guard quite explicit: “For the first time in fiction America’s social mobility has been transformed into a spiritual energy which is not

>CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS is the author of *No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family* (1999), and a columnist for *Vanity Fair* and *the Nation*. Copyright © 2001 by Christopher Hitchens.

doomed to flight, renunciation, exile, denunciation, the agonised hyper-intelligence of Henry James, or the hysterical cheering of Walter Whitman.”

Schwartz, who would be the inspiration for the protagonist of Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), admired Augie the character for the very quality that some reviewers distrusted: his unreadiness to be committed, or, as Augie puts it, “recruited.” Among the hostile reviewers was Norman Podhoretz (my own touchstone for critical deafness and ineptitude), who, as recently as last year, revisited the squabble and—incredibly—echoed Henry James's anti-Jewishness in accusing Bellow of “twisting and torturing the language”!

This context helps to explain why *Augie March* still constitutes a template for modern American literature. Just as, when new, it formed and altered the attitudes of Jews and Anglo-Saxons—Bellow's audiences, to whom I alluded earlier—so it still waits for readers and critics and helps them to take their own measure of America.

This pilot-light phenomenon can be seen in comments by the father-and-son novelists Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis. In 1987, Martin wrote that “for all its marvels, *Augie March*, like *Henderson the Rain King*, often resembles a lecture on destiny fed through a thesaurus of low-life patois.” In 1995, he began an essay as follows: “*The Adventures of Augie March* is the Great American Novel. Search no further. All the trails went cold 42 years ago. The quest did what quests very rarely do; it ended.” Kingsley Amis greeted the original publication by telling the readers of the *Spectator* of Bellow's “gaiety and good humour, his fizzing dialogue, his vitality.” But two decades later, his mood had changed: “Bellow is a Ukrainian-Canadian, I believe. It is painful to watch him trying to pick his way between the unidiomatic on the



In the late 1930s, the natty Mr. Bellow looked as ready as young Augie March to take on the world.

one hand and the affected on the other.” After 20 years, Amis père had sunk into the belief that everyone in America was “either a Jew or a hick.”

Augie March, “the by-blow of a travelling man,” informs us early on that the expression “various jobs” is the Rosetta Stone of his life. But the awareness of eligibility is in him, and he'll fight his corner for it and never be a hick. “What I guess about you,” says one of his pals, guessing correctly, “is that you have a nobility syndrome. You can't adjust to the reality situation. . . . You want to accept. But how do you know what you're accepting? You have to be nuts to take it come one come all. . . . You should accept the data of experience.” To which Augie replies, more confidently perhaps than he

feels, “It can never be right to offer to die, and if that’s what the data of experience tell you, then you must get along without them.”

Even while he is still stranded at home in Chicago, knowing somehow that there must be more to life and America, Augie invests his banal surroundings with a halo of the numinous and the heroic. For a start, he transfigures the cliché of the Jewish mother:

[Mama] occupied a place, I suppose, among women conquered by a superior force of love, like those women whom Zeus got the better of in animal form and who next had to take cover from his furious wife. Not that I can see my big, gentle, dilapidated, scrubbing and lugging mother as a fugitive of immense beauty from such classy wrath.

And then there is old William Einhorn, the lamed and misshapen local organizer and fixer and memoirist, whom Augie (“I’m not kidding when I enter Einhorn in this eminent list”) ranks with Caesar, Machiavelli, Ulysses, and Croesus. It’s Einhorn who so memorably lectures Augie after he has a narrow squeak with a two-bit, no-account piece of larceny that could have turned nasty:

That was what you let yourself in for. Yes, that’s right, Augie, a dead cop or two. You know what cop-killers get, from the station onward—their faces beaten off, their hands smashed, and worse; and that would be your start in life. . . . But wait. All of a sudden I catch on to something about you. You’ve got *opposition* in you. You don’t slide through everything. You just make it look so.

Einhorn then takes the role of Augie’s missing father—and releases in his listener a spurt of love that he’s too wised-up to acknowledge at the time:

Don’t be a sap, Augie, and fall into the first trap life digs for you. Young fellows brought up in bad luck, like you, are natural to keep the jails filled—the reformatories, all the institutions. What the state orders bread and beans long in advance

for. It knows there’s an element that can be depended on to come behind bars and eat it. . . . It’s practically determined. And if you’re going to let it be determined for you too, you’re a sucker. Just what’s predicted. Those sad and tragic things are waiting to take you in—the clinks and clinics and soup lines know who’s the natural to be beat up and squashed, made old, pooped, farted away, no-purposed away. If it should happen to you, who’d be surprised? You’re a setup for it.

Then he adds, “But I think I’d be surprised.”

Before Einhorn is through with his homily, he adds one more thing. “I’m not a lowlife when I think, and *really* think,” says the poolroom king and genius swindler. “In the end you can’t save your soul and life by thought. But if you *think*, the least of the consolation prizes is the world.”

I judge this a hinge moment in a novel that sometimes has difficulty with its dramatic unities. Einhorn summons the shades of the prison house for the growing boy and evokes for us the omnipresence of violence, injustice, and stupidity. He senses the lower depths of the underclass, while we sense in him what we feel in reading Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*: the unrealized potential of a great man who might have been. He, too, has felt the eligibility. And he has an untrained instinct for the examined life. Whatever he’s speaking—and it’s demotic American English, all right—it’s not lowlife patois.

So when Augie breaks free and sets out, he is no *Candide* or *Copperfield*. And the novel is no Horatio Alger tale. Many of Augie’s ground-down relatives *do* end up in institutions. Bellow’s Chicago is not vastly different from Upton Sinclair’s in *The Jungle*. Even in the peace and prosperity of the 1950s, Bellow was able to recall the bitterness of want and exploitation, the reek of the hoboes met on stolen train rides, the sharpness of class warfare, the acuteness of ethnic differences among poor whites in the days before all such individuals were absurdly classified together as “Caucasian.” (One of Simon’s coal-yard drivers has a dread of running over a kid in a “Bohunk” neighbor-

hood—exactly the sort of confrontation nightmare that is now reserved for Chicago’s black South Side.)

Of all the odd jobs that Augie takes (and these include being a butler as well as a shoe salesman, a paint seller as well as a literary looker-upper), the three that are best-described involve, obliquely or directly, his oppositionism. As a dog groomer for the upper classes, Augie feels a sense of wasteful absurdity in the work he must perform. As a contract book-thief, he increases his knowledge of the classics and also his acquaintance with Marxist intellectuals. As a union organizer for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), he is brushed by the grandeur of the American labor movement, which briefly did unite all trades and ethnicities in a collective demand for justice. This episode of mobilization and jacquerie calls on all of Bellow’s power of taxonomy and onomatopoeia:

There were Greek and Negro chambermaids from all the hotels, porters, doormen, checkroom attendants, waitresses. . . . All kinds were coming. The humanity of the under-galleries of pipes, storage, and coal made an appearance, maintenance men, short-order grovelers. . . . And then old snowbirds and white hound-looking faces, guys with Wobbly cards from an earlier time, old Bohunk women with letters explaining what was wanted, and all varieties of assaulted kissers, infirmity, drunkenness, dazedness, innocence, limping, crawling, insanity, prejudice, and from downright leprosy the whole way again to the most vigorous straight-backed beauty. So if this collection of people had nothing in common with what would have brought up the back of a Xerxes’ army or a Constantine’s, new things have been formed; but what struck me in them was a feeling of antiquity and thick crust.

Later, when adrift in Mexico, Augie meets the very incarnation of opposition, Leon Trotsky:

I was excited by this famous figure, and I believe what it was about him that stirred me up was the instant impression he

gave—no matter about the old heap he rode in or the peculiarity of his retinue—of navigation by the great stars, of the highest considerations, of being fit to speak the most important human words and universal terms. When you are as reduced to a different kind of navigation from this high starry kind as I was and are only sculling on the shallow bay, crawling from one clam-rake to the next, it’s stirring to have a glimpse of deep-water greatness.

In an early draft of the novel, Augie signs up to work for the exiled heretic. (Bellow himself had been to Mexico to try to see Trotsky, but he arrived the day after the old man’s assassination.)

Opposition, however, is only one of Augie’s internal compasses. Another, operating both more and less predictably, is sex. He prefers earthy and honest expressions for this preoccupation, mentioning at one point a girl whose virtue was that she “made no bones” about what they were together for. Occasionally, he can be rhapsodic (the paramour of Guillaume the dog trainer is “a great work of ripple-assed luxury with an immense mozzarella bust”). And he can also be tender. There are few sweeter girls in fiction than Sophie Geratis, the staunch little Greek union militant. (“She had a set of hard-worked hands and she lived with her beauty on rough terms. I couldn’t for even a minute pretend that I didn’t go for her.”) But he doesn’t feel the thunderbolt until he meets Thea Fenchel.

Thea has an eagle named Caligula, and she wants Augie to help her “man” the eagle and train it to smash full-grown iguanas—in Mexico. He falls in with the plan because he’s fallen completely for the woman. And he falls so completely for the woman because—this is his weakness—she is so utterly sold on him. The magnificence of the bird he can appreciate; the project of making it into a trained hunter gives him a chill. And the lordly avian Caligula turns out to be, of all things (and in Thea’s contemptuous word), “chicken.” The bird will not obey. Once she sees that Augie doesn’t mind this—indeed, secretly approves of it—Thea’s respect for Augie is gone.

Not all reviewers admire this long and necessary section of the novel, and many have puzzled over the significance of the bird. (Is the eagle symbolically *American*? Not if it's called Caligula—and not if it's chicken.) But I think the eagle is essential in showing how Augie is compelled to admire anything, but especially something so noble, that will not permit itself to be domesticated. He pays a high price. He suffers appalling torment at the loss of Thea, and lovesickness and sexual jealousy have seldom been more brutally depicted. But the wrenching experience does get him back to Chicago, “that somber city,” to take stock and begin again.

Poverty, love, and war, they say, are the essential elements in the shaping of a man—and of a bildungsroman. So when war deposes the depression as the great disciplinarian of the lower orders, Augie signs up right away for the navy, thinking the while, “What use was war without also love?” (That may be the most masculine sentence ever penned.) He lucks out with Stella Chesney. His brief and near-terminal combat experience gives him his best opportunity yet to release the “*animal ridens* . . . the laughing creature” within himself. A man of “various jobs” is never going to be more at home than in the lower deck of a ship, and he makes comedy out of the confidences of his messmates. Here again, Bellow’s ear is unerring:

“You think I maybe have an inferiority complex, do you think?” one of them asked me. I passed out advice in moderate amounts; nobody is perfect. I advocated love, especially.

After a harrowing experience in an open boat when his ship is torpedoed (“They found one reason after another to detain me at the hospital,” Augie laconically phrases it), he hopes at war’s end for a safe and tranquil harbor. But the truth is harsher: “Brother! You never are through, you just think you are!” For a very brief while, he imagines being a sort of Catcher in the Rye, running a foster home where his broken-up family could also take shelter. But

life isn’t through with him yet, and he has to live up to the great sentence on the novel’s opening page: “Everybody knows there is no fineness or accuracy of suppression; if you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining.” To hold down his own curiosity would be to betray his profoundest instinct. And thus we find him sardonically installed at a table in a European café at the novel’s close, working as a middleman for an Armenian entrepreneur and declaring “I was an American, Chicago born, and all these other events and notions.” (Bellow, incidentally, boasts that he wrote not one word of *Augie March* in Chicago; he took himself off to Positano, Rome, Paris, and London. There is nothing provincial about his Americanism.)

If we reflect along with Augie, we look back at a host of brilliantly realized minor characters in the novel, warranting comparison with Dickens and with that remarkable boy on the Mississippi who also had *The Adventures of* in his title. Perhaps one shouldn’t play favorites among the minor characters, but Guillaume, the fancy dog trainer who relies too much on the hypodermic when dealing with recalcitrant pooches (“Thees jag-off is goin’ to get it”), will always be mine.

The two key words that encapsulate the ambitions of Bellow’s novel are *democratic* and *cosmopolitan*. Not entirely by coincidence, these are the two great stand-or-fall hopes of America. The two qualities that carry Augie through are his capacity for love and his capacity for irony. These, together with reason, are the great stand-or-fall hopes of humanity. The 17th-century English metaphysical poets used the evocative word *America* as their term for the new and the hopeful; they even addressed lovers by that name. Augie March concludes, more cannily, by seeing the unfunny side of the funny side:

Or is the laugh at nature—including eternity—that it thinks it can win over us and the power of hope? Nah, nah! I think. It never will. But that probably is the joke, on one or the other, and laughing is an enigma that includes both. Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of



An older Saul Bellow, with railroad tracks extending to a distant skyscrapered Chicago.

Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America.

Not much in Bellow's preceding work prepared readers for *The Adventures of Augie March*. It's not necessary to believe, as I do, that the novel is the summit of his career (he has published 19 books to date), but let's call *Augie* his gold standard.

At elevated points in the subsequent novels, we think, "Yes, that's a passage worthy of *Augie March*." We feel the heritage in the acuteness and, sometimes, the faint, fascinated disgust of intimate physical observation. (In *Herzog* [1964], for example, a rabbi is "short-bearded, his nose violently pitted with black.") It's there in the restless mining of great texts for contemporary examples, or for what Bellow himself would perhaps scorn to call "relevance." (Again, Moses Herzog dashes off aggressive, inquisitive letters to thinkers such as Martin Heidegger.) It's there also, to stay with *Herzog* a moment longer, in the fascination

with fathers or with paternal surrogates on the Einhorn scale. It's in the strong dose of nostalgia, to employ the word accurately for once, informing characters' recollection of details from home. It's there when illness, decrepitude, moral crisis, and mental crisis too assert themselves. (How often I find myself recalling the line from *Humboldt's Gift* about "the mental rabble of the wisened-up world.")

Wanderlust, a theme fundamental to *The Adventures of Augie March*, is recurrent in the later novels. The instinct for travel is registered strongly in *Humboldt's Gift*, *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), *The Dean's December* (1982), and most recently in *Ravelstein* (2000). But this wanderlust is no mere touristic instinct. For Bellow, a certain internationalism is an essential component of education and formation. What's the point of having all these roots if they're all that you know? And, by way of corollary, what's so great about being a cosmopolitan if you don't know where you came from?

The Bellow novels that came before *The Adventures of Augie March* aspired to it, and the novels that came after drew their confidence and breadth and lift from *Augie*. *Augie* taught his heirs to spread their wings and take a chance—to risk the world. □