

Bernard Malamud - 1914-1986

Bernard Malamud (April 26, 1914 – March 18, 1986) was an American novelist and short story writer. Along with Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, and Philip Roth, he was one of the best known American Jewish authors of the 20th century.

Biography

Bernard Malamud was born in 1914 in Brooklyn, New York, the son of Bertha (née Fidelman) and Max Malamud, Russian Jewish immigrants. Malamud entered adolescence at the start of the Great Depression. From 1928 to 1932, Bernard attended Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn. During his youth, he saw many films and enjoyed relating their plots to his school friends. He was especially fond of Charlie Chaplin's comedies. Malamud worked for a year at \$4.50 a day (equivalent to \$84 in 2019) as a teacher-in-training, before attending college on a government loan. He received his B.A. degree from City College of New York in 1936. In 1942, he obtained a master's degree from Columbia University, writing a thesis on Thomas Hardy. He was excused from military service in World War II because he was the sole support of his widower father. He first worked for the Bureau of the Census in Washington D.C., then taught English in New York, mostly high school night classes for adults.

Starting in 1949, Malamud taught freshman composition at Oregon State University (then Oregon State College, or OSC), an experience fictionalized in his 1961 novel *A New Life*. Because he lacked the Ph.D., he was not allowed to teach literature courses. While at OSC, he devoted three days out of every week to his writing, and gradually emerged as a major American author. In 1961, he left OSC to teach creative writing at Bennington College, a position he held until retirement. In 1967, he was made a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In 1945, Malamud married Cornell graduate Ann De Chiara, an Haitian-American Roman Catholic, despite the opposition of their respective parents. Ann and Bernard had two children, Paul and Janna, author of a memoir about her father, *My Father Is A Book*.

Raised Jewish, Malamud was in adulthood an agnostic humanist.

Writing career

Malamud wrote slowly and carefully; he was not especially prolific. He is the author of eight novels and four collections of short stories. The posthumously published *Complete Stories* contains 55 short stories.

He completed his first novel, *The Light Sleeper*, in 1948, but later burned the manuscript. His first published novel was *The Natural* (1952), which has become one of his best remembered and most symbolic works. The story traces the life of Roy Hobbs, an unknown middle-aged baseball player who achieves legendary status with his stellar talent. This novel was made into a 1984 movie starring Robert Redford.

Malamud's second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), set in New York and drawing on Malamud's own childhood, is an account of the life of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant who owns a grocery store in Brooklyn. Although he is struggling financially, Bober takes in a drifter of dubious character. This novel was quickly followed by *The Magic Barrel*, his first published collection of short stories (1958). It won Malamud the first of two National Book Awards that he received in his lifetime. Malamud was renowned for his short stories, often oblique allegories set in a dreamlike urban ghetto of immigrant Jews.

In 1967, his novel *The Fixer*, about anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire, won both the National Book Award for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and was also made into a film. His other novels include *Dubin's Lives*, a powerful evocation of middle age which uses biography to recreate the narrative richness of its protagonists' lives, and *The Tenants*, perhaps a meta-narrative on Malamud's own writing and creative struggles,

which, set in New York City, deals with racial issues and the emergence of black/African American literature in the American 1970s landscape.

Themes

In his writing, Malamud depicts an honest picture of the despair and difficulties of the immigrants to America, and their hope of reaching their dreams despite their poverty.

Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Malamud was well aware of the social problems of his day: rootlessness, infidelity, abuse, divorce, and more. But he also depicted love as redemptive and sacrifice as uplifting. In his writings, success often depends on cooperation between antagonists.

Posthumous tribute

Saul Bellow, quoting Anthony Burgess: "Well, we were here, first-generation Americans, our language was English and a language is a spiritual mansion from which no one can evict us. Malamud in his novels and stories discovered a sort of communicative genius in the impoverished, harsh jargon of immigrant New York. He was a myth maker, a fabulist, a writer of exquisite parables. The English novelist Anthony Burgess said of him that he 'never forgets that he is an American Jew, and he is at his best when posing the situation of a Jew in urban American society.' 'A remarkably consistent writer,' he goes on, 'who has never produced a mediocre novel He is devoid of either conventional piety or sentimentality ... always profoundly convincing.' Let me add on my own behalf that the accent of hard-won and individual emotional truth is always heard in Malamud's words. He is a rich original of the first rank." [Saul Bellow's eulogy to Malamud, 1986]

PEN/Malamud Award

Given annually since 1988 to honor Malamud's memory, the PEN/Malamud Award recognizes excellence in the art of the short story. The award is funded in part by Malamud's \$10,000 bequest to the PEN American Center. The fund continues to grow thanks to the generosity of many members of PEN and other friends, and with the proceeds from annual readings. Past winners of the award include John Updike (1988), Saul Bellow (1989), Eudora Welty (1992), Joyce Carol Oates (1996), Alice Munro (1997), Sherman Alexie (2001), Ursula K. Le Guin (2002), and Tobias Wolff (2006).

Additional reading about Malamud:

- Smith, Janna Malamud. *My Father Is a Book: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud*. (2006)
 - Davis, Philip. *Bernard Malamud: A Writer's Life*. (2007)
- Excerpts from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, article on Malamud*