A CENTURY OF SAUL BELLOW AND BERNARD MALAMUD: A RETROSPECTIVE OF THEIR SHORTER FICTIONAL MASTERPIECES

Course Description:

As we celebrate the 100th birthdays of these two icons of American Jewish fiction, we will examine a representative selection of their shorter works written over a span covering the last half of the 20th Century. While a profusion of recent scholarship on Bellow and Malamud has been published and will be referenced throughout this course, our literary reading list will be quite straightforward. The two respective volumes of Malamud and Bellow contain each man's finest shorter works, from which I have chosen their most representative pieces. Given the signature styles of each author as displayed here—Malamud's short fables posing as stories and Bellow's more expansive and intellectually challenging longer stories/novellas, each week we will read several Malamud stories and one Bellow piece—together amounting to more or less than 100 pages of text per week. The final week will be the exception, as we read one of Malamud's most luminous novels, The Assistant.

As we accumulate and discuss these signature works of literature, a number of patterns will emerge so as to recognize each man's distinctive style, but more importantly to understand how they each represent different strains of Jewish life and thought in 20th Century American literature and life. Taken beyond the Jewish context, we will see how profoundly influential they have become in the canon of American literature—particularly humanistic discourse—as opposed to more trendy post-modern literary and societal influences that have distanced mankind from the center of his own existence.

Each week, in addition to close examination of the readings, we will address related issues of substance: We will examine the course of each man's life, their kinship with one another as well with other notable writers and thinkers of their era; We will assess their larger intellectual, historical, and literary concerns from both a Jewish and a universal perspective. In the process, we will honor their enduring legacies at a time where these "old masters" are often forgotten by subsequent generations. Bellow and Malamud would each be 100 years old in 2015 and we, along with a good number of wise men and women, will bring them back to life and relevance through our mutual efforts in this course.

More specifically, our ongoing discussions of Malamud and Bellow will stretch beyond the literary pieces into such inquiries as:

Bellow and Malamud coming of age in Chicago and New York, respectively, during the Great Depression, each steeped in a wholly Jewish immigrant environment.
Malamud's difficult path to literary prominence—from New York through Italy and Oregon and back to the East Coast

Bellow's intellectual fellow travelers from his younger days: Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld, Phillip Rahv, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, the Partisan Review crowd.

Bellow's rise to prominence—The Adventures of Augie March as the first great American novel of the post- World War II generation.

Bellow and the University of Chicago—The Committee on Social Thought

Malamud's distinctive fabulist style in Stories, The Natural, The Assistant

Malamud as heir to Isaac B. Singer, Isaac Babel, Gogol, even Hawthorne and Chekhov

Bellow in his prime—the iconic novels and the Nobel Prize: Seize the Day, Henderson the Rain King, Herzog, Humboldt's Gift.

Bellow's increasing social conservatism--friendship with Allan Bloom, incident at San Francisco State during the late 60s (chronicled in Mr. Sammler's Planet). Co-opting of his authentic politics of humanism, misconstrued as reactionary.

Malamud as the private man and as the meticulous revisionist—art for art's sake.


Bellow's sense of place: Chicago as character. Malamud's isolated and suffering Jews in a mythical landscape that happens to locate in NYC but could be anywhere.

Phillip Roth: The natural heir to both Bellow and Malamud. Roth’s observations.

Bellow's towering stature among the greats of American and modern literature: with Faulkner and Twain, James Joyce and Dostoevsky. “It All Adds Up”.


Malamud sample quotes: “Life is a tragedy, filled with joy.” “All men are Jews, except the don't know it.” “Those who write about life reflect about life. You see in others who you really are.”

Bellow quotes: The unexamined life is worth living... but only after a thorough examination.” “Accept the mixture of things.” “(Herzog's and Tommy's) Reality Instructors.” “Everybody needs memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.”
**Required Reading:**

Saul Bellow “Collected Stories” (Penguin Classics) introduction by James Wood


Bernard Malamud: The Assistant

**Reading Calendar:**

**Week One:**


**Week Two:**

Malamud: “The First Seven Years”, “The Mourners”, “Angel Levine”.

Bellow: “By the St. Lawrence”, “A Silver Dish”.

**Week Three:**

Malamud: “A Summer’s Reading”, “Take Pity”, “The Last Mohican”.

Bellow: “Looking for Mr. Green”.

**Week Four:**


Bellow: “Mosby’s Memoirs”.

**Week Five:**

Malamud: “Black is My Favorite Color”, “The German Refugee”, “Man in a Drawer”.

Bellow: “The Bellarosa Connection”.

**Week Six:**


Bellow: “Him with His Foot in His Mouth”.
Week Seven:

Malamud: “Rembrant’s Hat”, “The Model”.

Bellow: “The Old System”, “Leaving the Yellow House”.

Week Eight:

Malamud: The Assistant

Bellow: “Something to Remember Me By.” “Seize the Day” video clips (featuring Robin Williams as Tommy Wilhelm and Jerry Stiller as Dr. Tamkin).

Phillip Roth: Handouts (on Bellow and Malamud).

For Further Reading:

Saul Bellow: Letters (ed. By Benjamin Taylor)

James Atlas: Bellow: A Biography

Phillip Davis: Bernard Malamud: A Writer’s Life

Zachary Leader: The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune 1915-1964 (release date May, 2015)

Library of America’s Bernard Malamud Collections (3 volumes)