

READING BELLOW IN CHICAGO

JOE TREASURE

Last month Donald Trump and I happened to be in Chicago at the same time. He was there for the Republican primary. I wasn't. Nevertheless, I was briefly tempted to spend the day queuing for his rally. Instead I took pictures of early twentieth century skyscrapers partly obscured by the blackened girders of the elevated train-lines. When I was tired of walking I wandered into a bookshop and bought a copy of *Ravelstein*, Saul Bellow's thirteenth and final novel.

I was surprised that neither of the assistants I spoke to (bright young women working their way through college) had heard of Bellow, a great Chicago writer, winner of a Pulitzer for *Humboldt's Gift* and National Book Awards for *Hertzog* and two other novels. I reminded myself that Bellow's Nobel Prize for Literature was 40-year-old news and that we were surrounded by thousands of books, many of them by authors still living.

I suspect that Bellow would have been disappointed but not surprised. The importance of Great Books and their role in civilization is a theme that gets much chewed over in *Ravelstein*. It's no secret that this is a thinly disguised memoir and that Abe Ravelstein is based on Bellow's friend and colleague Allan Bloom. A professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, Bloom achieved unexpected fame in 1987 with



The Closing of the American Mind, in which he railed against the cultural relativism that, in his view, had undermined American higher education since the late 1960s.

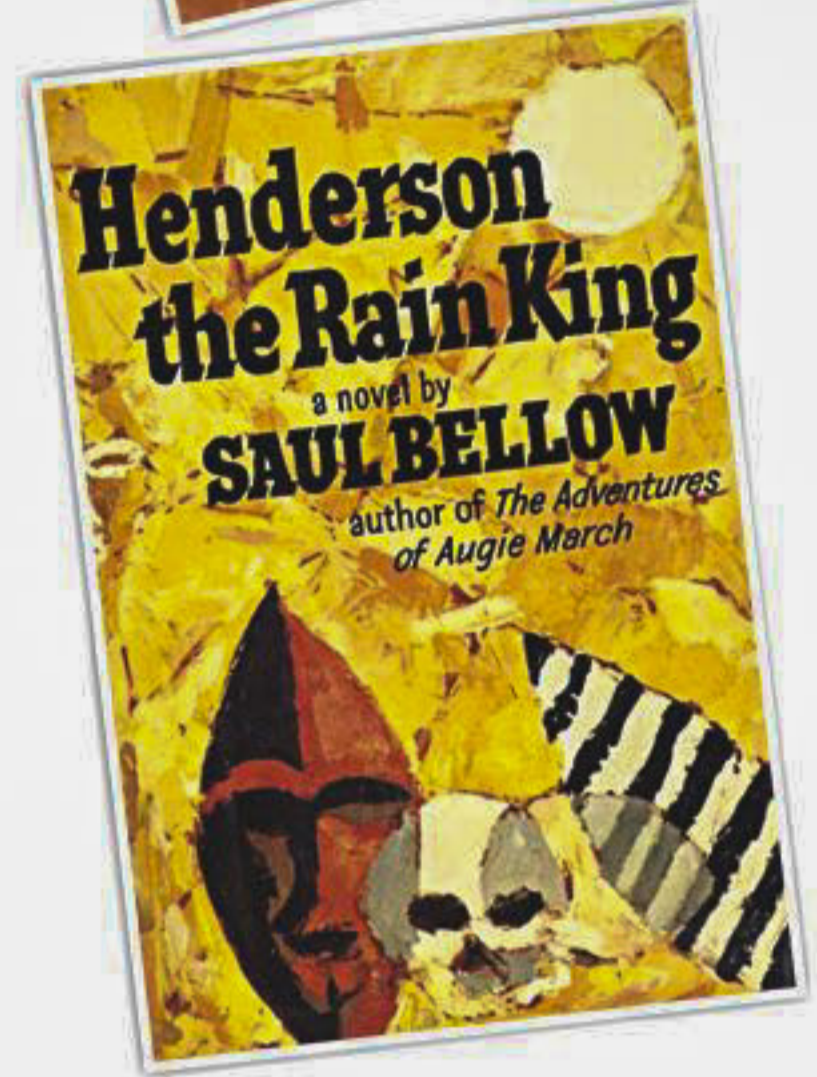
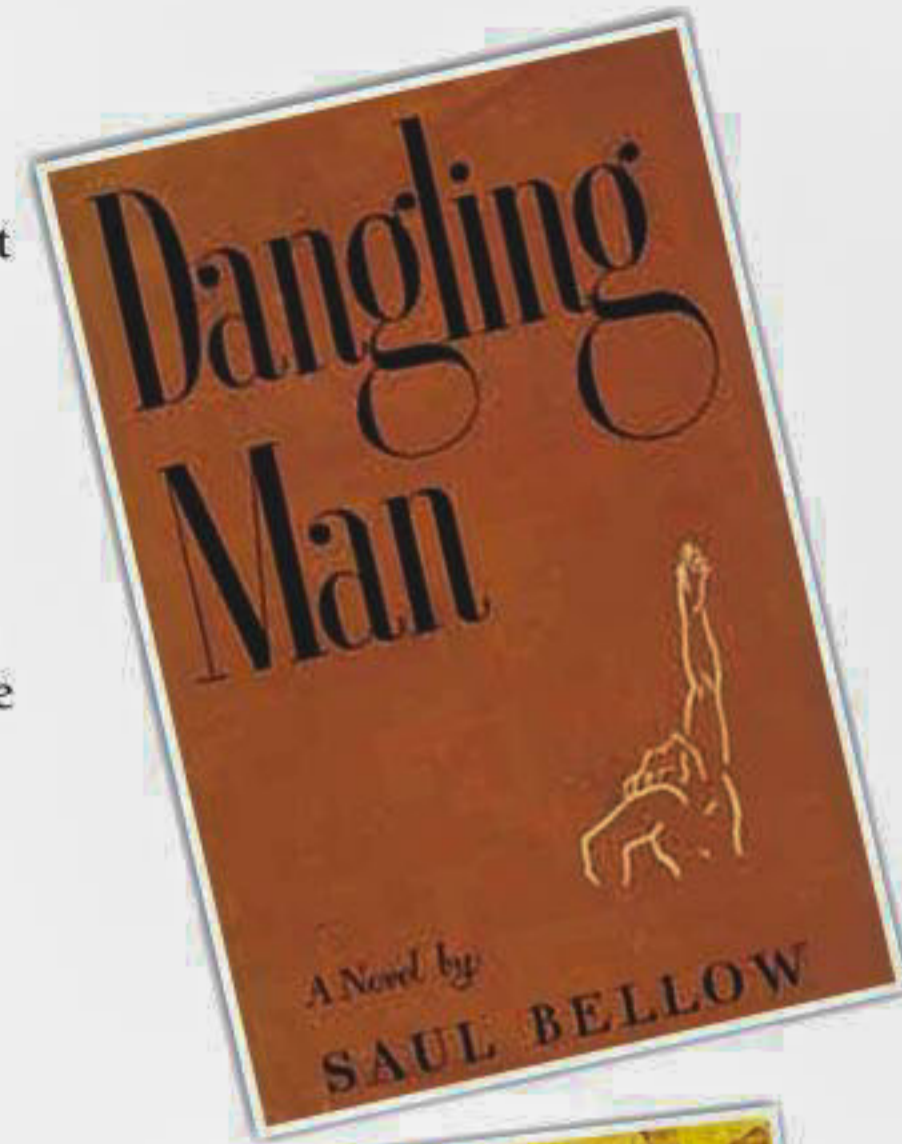
Bellow himself was inclined to take

a conservative line on culture. He was once driven to complain of the "thought-police campaign" to which he had been subjected in response to a casual observation deemed politically incorrect. Bloom's was a simpler case.

A student and devotee of Leo Strauss, the *éminence grise* behind the neo-conservative movement, Bloom made it his business to add a pseudo-intellectual veneer to the cultural prejudices of the American Right.

Bellow clearly admired Bloom, and the Bellow-like narrator of *Ravelstein* often speaks of his subject with something close to adulation, but I found myself increasingly aware of the book's brilliant satirical edge. Praised for his scholarship, Ravelstein comes alive on the page as a meddler and a gossip whose self-esteem depends on being at the centre of a circle of well-placed ex-students: "He not only trained them, he formed them, he distributed them into groups and subgroups and placed them in sexual categories." More significantly, Ravelstein's attachment to the Western canon is fatally undermined by his obsessive awareness, as a Jewish American, of the savagery that was unleashed during his lifetime in the heart of civilized Europe.

If Bloom was the high priest of post-60s cultural conservatism, Trump, with his whining about the oppression of political correctness, represents its most debased form. Had I queued for his rally, I would have been disappointed. Trump cancelled, leaving supporters and protestors to fight it out. I was better off with Bellow.



The Wedding Ring

KHASHRUZZAMAN CHOUDHURY

Translated from the Bengali: Ziauddin M Choudhury

Sonargaon Hotel had not started then in Dhaka. The Shabbagh Hotel was turned into Institute of Post Graduate Medicine. The elite wedding parties were then held at the new Inter-Continental Hotel. The others used the Ladies Club or Community centres for weddings.

We had gathered at the Inter-Continental for our friend Munir's wedding. The dinner was over, but the food was not that good. The traditional wedding food, Biryani, Chicken Roast, Lassi, or desserts somehow did not fit the very western environment of Inter-Continental Hotel.

Wedding feast over we were all awaiting for *shahnazar*, that auspicious moment when the bride and groom exchange glances in a mirror held under a canopy, and rings. The formalities of looking at each other were over, and now was the time for exchanging rings. A rather serious woman from the bride's side asked Munir to put the ring on the bride's finger while a friend from the groom's side jocularly said, "Yes, brother do it. Once you do it you are hooked forever, no escape from this." Everyone



laughed. The woman, who was kind of a Master of Ceremonies, again asked Munir to put the ring on the bride.

Munir had the ring in his hands, but he made no movement to slip it on to

the bride's finger. I do not know if others noticed it, but to me he appeared kind of inert, and his hand was shaking, but he finally did put the ring on the bride's finger.

The wedding ceremony was over, and we hastened to leave the hotel. It was well into the night, and it was quite risky to travel in the middle of the night in post liberation Bangladesh. There were people with all kinds of arms prowling all over the town. There was no telling what could happen on the roads, even though we had informed police about our event and route. The wedding was attended by a good number of top government officials, and we were pretty sure police security would be at hand. But we did not take any chance and had left for home as soon as the ceremony was over.

On our way back I accompanied Munir, the groom. My wife Rima left for my in-law's house with our son. In Munir's car his younger sister sat in the back along with Munir and his new bride. I sat in the front. The car was headed toward Gulshan second circle, with several other cars of the bridal convoy following it. I could hear the bride's unending whimpering at the back. It is wise to keep silent on such occasions. My friends had done the same at my wedding in the bridal car.

"Don't run away when we reach home," Munir said to me. "I have to talk to you."

"If you say so," I replied. "But should you not be talking to your wife instead of me?" I added.

"I have to have a conversation with you," Munir said. I nodded in agreement.

It was past midnight by the time the other formalities ended in Munir's house. Munir grabbed me as I was about to leave and took me to the lawn. Munir was a heavy smoker. He lit a cigarette and then asked me, "Did you notice my hand was shaking when I was putting the ring on my wife?" I nodded.

He looked at his wristwatch and said, "It is pretty late now. I will call you tomorrow, and tell you what actually happened."

I wondered about it all night. I knew all about Munir; I could not blame him if his hand shook while putting on the ring on his wife. What else could have happened? My mind went back to what I knew.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

GIVE ME A BOWL OF RICE, YOU BASTARD

RAFIQ AZAD

Translated from the Bengali: SM Shahrukh

Hunger engulfs me: In my belly, the feeling
Spreads all over my body - every moment - all devouring hunger
Like drought sets fire to the grain field of chaitra -
Same with incendiary hunger, the body burns.
Have no demands if I get to eat twice a day
People ask for a lot, everyone does:

Houses, cars, bundles of cash - some hanker for fame;
My demand is but little: the stomach burns to the fringes-
I want rice - an unabashed asking for it - steaming or not,
Rice cooked from fine grains or the red course variety
Distributed at the ration shops, I have no preference
Just want an earthenware bowl full of rice:
I will let go of all demands if I get my two square meals of rice daily!
Have no irrational greed, have no sexual urge -
Didn't want the beautiful woman with her sari worn under the navel,
Let whoever wants take her, give her to whoever suits your whim -
Know it well: I have no need for them.

If you cannot fulfil this little demand of mine,
Your kingdom will face total destruction;
The hungry doesn't care about good or bad, law and order -
Will eat anything that falls on the way, indiscriminately;
If by some chance I find you
You will become a dish to the wolfish hunger.
If the hunger sweeps all and sundry
It will only invite horrifying consequences.

The viewer and the vision are consumed in succession
Finally we will eat in this order: trees, rivers, villages, footpaths
The flow of dirty water in the sewers, pedestrians,
Women with copious behinds, the food minister with his flagged car-
Nothing is insignificant in the ravenous path of my hunger.
Give me rice, you bastard, or I'll eat your map.

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