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Malamud's Secrets

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Novels and Stories of the 1940s & 50s
by Bernard Malamud, edited by Philip Davis
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Novels and Stories of the 1960s
by Bernard Malamud, edited by Philip Davis
Library of America, 916 pp., $35.00

1.

Bernard Malamud gave many answers to the question asked by an Italian thief of a Jewish grocer in *The Assistant* (1957): "What I like to know is what is a Jew anyway?" In lectures titled "Imaginative Writing and the Jewish Experience" or "Hunting for Jewishness," or in his acceptance speech for B'nai B'rith's Jewish Heritage Award, his answers were straightforward and uplifting: Jews, through their sufferings, "know that…the rewards of life…are centered about the development of a spirituality that raises man to his highest being." A Jew was inherently a *mensch*. "How can a man be a Jew if he isn't a man?" asks one of his characters. To be a Jew is to be fully human: "Every man is a Jew though he may not know it."

Malamud's critics take for granted that Jewishness was his subject matter. They either admire his vivid tales of immigrant shopkeepers and their wayward native-born children or they lament his portraits of Jews who insist on suffering. Philip Roth may have been the only reader who deduced that Malamud's Jewishness was not what it seemed, that it was driven by motives he never talked about.

In Roth's *The Ghost Writer* (1979) the young Nathan Zuckerman, like the young Roth who visited Malamud in Vermont, makes a pilgrimage to the Berkshires to meet the great novelist E.I. Lonoff. Zuckerman explains that he hopes to learn Lonoff's "secret," "the clues to his puzzle." Lonoff is an artist-genius who has cultivated the remote, dignified manner of Henry James—in every way like the Malamud who wrote of himself, "One has his gift—the donnée," and who answered only to the WASPish "Bern," not the Jewish "Bernie." Lonoff, Zuckerman says, is "the Jew who got away," away not only from the pogroms of Russia, but also from the ethnic ferments of New York and the wildness of his Jewish antithesis, Felix

Abravanel, Roth's fictional amalgam of Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer. Lonoff escaped all this, Zuckerman observes, yet "still all you write about are Jews." "Proving what?" is Lonoff's deflecting reply, to which Zuckerman says cautiously, "That…is what I'd like to ask you."

Jill Krementz

Bernard Malamud, Bennington, Vermont, 1971

Malamud hid the clues to his puzzle with one hand while displaying them with the other. The Library of America's edition of his novels and stories—two volumes recently published, a third in preparation—makes it clear that his half-concealed secret was an inward drama of ambition, guilt, and expiation in which his Jewishness had private meanings very different from the pieties he provided for B'nai B'rith.

Malamud wrote in sculpted sentences, compressing Yiddish diction into a demotic modernist prose-poetry: "Broke in him something.… Broke what breaks." "The rabbi's trousers were a week from ragged." "Don't you understand what it means human?" His paragraphs moved with concentrated efficiency toward unexpected endings. "I am an inventor," he said. "I am an imaginative writer. Some of my writing is creation from the word go"—unlike what he called the "autobiographical" writings of Roth, Bellow, and Mailer.

He seems to have meant what he said, but the best of his fictions, from his novel about a midwestern baseball star, *The Natural* (1952), to the polymorphous fantasies of *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969) and his fantastic animal tales, "The Jewbird" and "Talking Horse," insisted on telling truths about himself.

2.

Malamud's parents, after fleeing pogroms in the Ukraine, met and married in Brooklyn, where Bernard was born in 1914. His father was a grocer whose shops were always failing. At thirteen Malamud came home to find his mother on the floor, having tried to kill herself by drinking disinfectant; she died in a mental hospital a few years later. Malamud's younger brother was twice hospitalized with schizophrenia. Many years later, Malamud told a friend that he kept his obsessive-seeming lists of chores, royalties, and everything else "to keep myself from going crazy."

His storytelling impulse began early.

> I could on occasion be a good little liar who sometimes found it a burden to tell the

truth. Once my father called me a "bluffer," enraging me because I had meant to tell him a simple story, not one that had elaborated itself into a lie.

At Erasmus Hall High School and City College—two great incubators of Jewish writers in the 1930s—his teachers encouraged his talent. His father had bought him a twenty-volume children's encyclopedia when he recovered from a nearly fatal pneumonia, but he now discouraged his impractical ambitions as a writer. A few months after graduating from college Malamud failed the exam to become a permanent substitute teacher because he deliberately oversimplified his writing style—the first of many instances when he took pains to defeat himself.

At twenty-seven he met Ann deChiara, the lapsed-Catholic daughter of educated, artistic Italian immigrants, and began an almost four-year courtship. He warned her against marrying him: "Though I love you and shall love you more, most of my strength will be devoted to realizing myself as an artist." Finally, their letters suggest, she pressured him into getting married—in the secular setting of the Ethical Culture Society—while letting him think the decision was his. His father stopped speaking to him when he married a gentile, relenting only when a son was born two years later.

After Malamud married, most Jews in his fiction were gentle, sexless, and self-sacrificing, most Italians criminal, sensual, or crazy. When he wrote about acts and feelings that he despised in himself, he attributed them to an Italian, apparently unaware of his own face behind the mask.

With his wife's help—she typed two hundred application letters—Malamud, now with a Columbia M.A., got a teaching job at Oregon State College in 1949. There he burned his first attempt at a novel and began writing *The Natural*, his first published book, which appeared when he was thirty-eight. Before this, he had written stories mostly about Jewish grocers, waiters, actors: unpropitious subjects for a writer aiming at greatness.[1] *The Natural* has no Jews at all. "Bern needed a success and wanted a theme which would be successful," recalled his lifelong editor, Robert Giroux, and "baseball was the great American sport."

Roy Hobbs, "the natural," is a portrait of the artist in baseball uniform. Hobbs breaks decorum by announcing to the crowd at the stadium, "I will do my best—the best I am able—to be the greatest there ever was in the game." Malamud's daughter often heard him tell the bathroom mirror, "Someday I'm going to win." He wanted greatness both as a popular writer and as a maker of high art, so he shaped Roy Hobbs's story as a grail legend, lifted, he said, from Jessie L. Weston's *Ritual and Romance*, with coach "Pop" Fisher as the fisher king. This was the same winning strategy used by the greatest winner of all, T.S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*.

Like many artists who imagine themselves servants of the muse, devoting their lives to their vocation, Malamud was tenaciously ambitious, ready to sacrifice anyone and anything to his

art, but mortified when he debased his art for the sake of popular success. *The Natural* conceals a rueful allegory of its own creation: a book written for sales and success ends with its hero disgracing himself by selling out, as in the Black Sox scandal of 1919. In the closing lines, a boy asks Hobbs, "Say it ain't true, Roy," and the disgraced knight "lifted his hands to his face and wept many bitter tears."

The inner crisis provoked in Malamud by writing *The Natural* reshaped his career. A few months after the book appeared, he wrote a story, "Riding Pants," which he never published; it was printed in a posthumous collection edited by Giroux, *The People and Uncollected Stories* (1989). It contains most of the clues that Nathan Zuckerman was looking for.

Herm (i.e., Bern), son of an angry widowed butcher, hates the blood and feathers of the butcher shop and refuses to help his father. He only wants to ride horses, and manages to buy a pair of riding pants. His father locks up the riding pants, but Herm retrieves them. Malamud doesn't explain that Girlie, the horse Herm learns to ride, "the roan they told him he wasn't ready for," is Pegasus, winged horse of the muses, just as he doesn't explain in another story that someone named Ginzburg is the Angel of Death.

One day Herm wakes to find his riding pants missing again, and watches crying "as his father chopped the tightly rolled pants as if they were a bologna." Intent on killing his father's cat in revenge, Herm almost gets himself locked in the freezer. The next morning the butcher, scrimping on paper to save money, wraps up some liver that leaks blood on a customer's mink coat. As the gentile woman denounces him, the father sinks into quiet despair. Herm thinks about "all the places he could go where there were horses," but then puts on his father's bloody apron and ties the strings behind him. "They covered where the riding pants had been, but he felt as though he still had them on."

The point of the story is that *The Natural* betrayed not only Malamud's art but also his father, and that he must now expiate his betrayal by descending from the gentiles' Parnassus to his Jewish father's grocery—though secretly and invisibly preserving his artist's sensibility. Malamud now began work on *The Assistant*, in which he transformed the story of "Riding Pants" into something suitable for public consumption. Morris Bober, the passive, gentle grocer apparently modeled on the outer life of Malamud's father, takes the place of the violent, furious butcher who threatened Malamud's inner life, and the repentant Italian criminal Frank Alpine takes the role of Herm. The father who chops up something bologna-shaped that belongs to his son is angry about something more primal than art. Sex in Malamud's fiction is always either illicit or betraying; Frank Alpine loves but rapes the grocer's daughter; married couples go to bed only when one partner is in love with someone else.

Like *The Natural*, *The Assistant* is an allegory of its own creation. Frank Alpine and the violent Ward Minogue rob Bober in his grocery. Both are masked. Later a secretly repentant Frank insists on working for Bober for little or no pay, and is awed and transformed by the

grocer's gentleness. After Bober dies, Frank gets himself circumcised and becomes a Jew—ending the novel that Malamud wrote to appease his father's spirit by adopting his Jewishness.

Bober's answer to Frank's question, "What is a Jew anyway," is that "a Jew must believe in the Law," hurt no one, and "suffer for the Law." When Frank asks, "What do you suffer for," Bober answers calmly: "I suffer for you." As critics noticed from the start, Malamud portrayed his father as a Jewish Ukrainian Christ. He was annoyed when friends told him *The Assistant* was his Christian book, but in fact it half withdraws from the Jewishness it embraces. Like chapter 23 of Luke, it tells the story of a self-sacrificing victim who suffers together with a repentant and an unrepentant thief. Art was the product of imagination; Jewishness was secondary. "Imagination makes authority," says a writer in Malamud's story, "Man in the Drawer." "When I write about Jews comes out stories, so I write about Jews. Is not important that I am half-Jew."

Malamud's most complex allegory about Jewishness, his father, and his art was "The Silver Crown," a story he wrote in 1972. The father of a rational, secular science teacher is dying of cancer; the teacher, in despair, visits a shabby rabbi who claims to heal the sick by making a silver crown—it costs $986—and saying blessings over it. The teacher, disgusted by this mystical mumbo-jumbo but desperate to save his father, demands to see the crown before paying the enormous price. The rabbi shows him a mirror with a vision of a shining crown. The teacher is convinced it is all a trick, but pays anyway. His father gets no better; the rabbi decamps; the teacher later sees him in a new hat and caftan. Outraged, he demands his money back, but the rabbi says, "Think of your father who loves you." The teacher answers, "He hates me, the son-of-a-bitch, I hope he croaks." The rabbi cries, "Murderer," and the father dies an hour later.

Jewishness, in "The Silver Crown," embodies two kinds of fiction: it is both the rabbi's manipulative swindle and the luminous vision in the mirror. The Jewishness that Malamud had taken up in guilty service to a dying father granted him artistic vision: "When I write about Jews comes out stories." But he also disdained this vision, and his disdain was murderous.

3.

Malamud's third novel, *A New Life* (1961), tells the comic and romantic story of S. Levin, a New Yorker who (like Malamud) takes a teaching job at a state college in the Pacific Northwest. After many comic indignities that end in his getting fired, Levin leaves town with his lover, the wife of a despised colleague. The book quietly insists that although Levin happens to be a Jew, the book is not about Jewishness. He is identified as a Jew only once, when his pro-Semitic lover explains that her husband had hired him because she had picked his application out of the pile: his photo reminded her of a Jewish boy who had been kind

when she was unhappy. Many people dislike Levin; no one dislikes him because he is Jewish.

An unspoken theme of *A New Life* is that Jewishness doesn't matter. Malamud's next novel, *The Fixer* (1966), made amends for this slight by telling the harrowing story of a man persecuted for years solely for his Jewishness. Yakov Bok, in prerevolutionary Kiev, is made foreman of a brickyard by an anti-Semitic nobleman who is unaware he has hired a Jew. Soon Bok is arrested for the ritual murder of a Christian boy, a false charge—the "blood libel"—that no one believes but that serves tsarist imperialism. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, but for all its indignation and horror, it is the shallowest of Malamud's books.

Printed in the same Library of America volume as *A New Life*, it proves to be the same story, with the tone transformed from the gentle comedy of the earlier book into the righteous anger of *J'Accuse*. In both books a young Jew, having made a mess of his life, goes to another city to start over, enduring troubles on the way. Each squeamishly refuses a woman's offer of sex, Levin repelled by an injured breast, Bok by menstrual blood. Each lucks into a job but performs it with moral fervor, Levin working to expose a student plagiarist, Bok keeping a watchful eye on thieving workmen. Each suffers for his generosity, Levin for trying to improve the curriculum, Bok for his kindness to an old Jew that leads to his own arrest. Both are told that the one man who shares their convictions has killed himself. Both are disgraced and politicized. In the penultimate sentence someone waves; in the final sentence someone shouts:

> As they drove by he [Levin's lover's husband] tore a rectangle of paper from the back of the camera and waved it aloft.
>
> "Got your picture!"
>
> One or two waved at Yakov. Some shouted his name.

What mattered was artistic form; content was interchangeable.

In 1974, Philip Roth wrote in these pages about *The Fixer*:

> I know of no serious authors who have chronicled physical brutality and fleshly mortification in such detail and at such length, and who likewise have taken a single defenseless innocent and constructed almost an entire book out of the relentless violations suffered by that character at the hands of cruel and perverse captors, other than Malamud, the Marquis de Sade, and the pseudonymous author of *The Story of O*.[2]

Janna Malamud Smith, in her shrewdly engaging memoir, *My Father Is a Book* (2006), quotes a notebook Malamud kept at twenty-three:

Is morality one of the results of men[']s tendency towards masochism and sadism:

A) A man fails repeatedly in life

B) Unconsciously he tends to punish himself for his failures

C) One form of doing so is to…blame the failure on himself because …he did or did not do something he should or should not have done.

D) Soon he is blaming himself …for not propitiating these external forces which by now have become a morality.

Malamud's lifelong theme was his impulse to propitiate the external forces embodied in his father and his father's Jewishness. As he grew older, he increasingly took on the role of agent of those forces, exerting their control on his students and children.

Among students and friends, he defended the fathers whose cruelties he exposed in his fiction. Philip Davis, in his admiring but clear-sighted biography, *Bernard Malamud: A Writer's Life* (2007), reports that Malamud got into an argument with an undergraduate class about his story "My Son, the Murderer," in which a father harasses his depressed son. Malamud insisted that the father's motives were pure and the son's culpably resistant; he knew this because he had written it. The students insisted that the story said the opposite of what he intended. Afterward, Malamud was silent for a long time before saying, "They're right."

"What sadism he had," his daughter reports, "would lead him to humiliate others occasionally." When she brought home a boyfriend, her father conducted "a show trial" proving the young man's ignorance of spelling and pronunciation. In Malamud's fiction, fathers are always humiliating daughters and their lovers, and are humiliated in turn by their daughters' uncontrollable sex lives. In "The Magic Barrel" the matchmaker's daughter is "wild, without shame"; in "God's Wrath" the sexton's daughter turns prostitute. The night before her wedding Malamud told his daughter, "I wish you were marrying someone Jewish."

His best students loved him. He told others they would never be writers and pointedly ignored them when they wept. He ordered a student to tie his shoe, to teach her "humility." A friend at Bennington rebuked him for hurting colleagues' feelings and reputations for purposes he called "humane." What others saw as cruelty, Malamud saw as service to art and truth. He told a friend, "I am one of those strange creatures, a *good* man."

4.

The third Library of America volume of Malamud's work will contain his last three novels—all mixed successes—and his later stories, each more compressed, deft, and

unsettling than the last. *The Tenants* (1971) is another of his fictions about art. The tenants are a Jewish novelist and a black would-be writer, the last two residents in a building that its owner hopes to demolish. The black writer, who describes life in the raw, stands in for "autobiographical" novelists like Bellow or Mailer; the Jewish writer hears (or thinks he hears) him repeating Hemingway's taunt to the literati: "How do you like it now, gentlemen?" For the Jewish writer, "Art is the glory and only a schmuck thinks otherwise." Both are too demoralized to finish their books, and the crumbling building they refuse to leave is a literary culture soon to be demolished by commercialism.

Dubin's Lives (1979), about a biographer with Malamud's marriage and ambition, is an extended display of personal humiliation, the hidden goal of which is aesthetic glory. William Dubin, like Malamud, and like Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*, has an affair with a student less than half his age. In the novel as in life, the young woman decisively humiliates the older writer on their secret trip to Venice. In the novel she dislikes the smell of Venice and asks Dubin why he brought her there; he says he "thought it might rouse up a bit of magic and blow it around." Malamud's deepest wish in his later years seems to have been for humiliations he could transmute into art. (The same wish drives his late stories "In Retirement" and "The Model," about old men who take pains to get themselves humiliated by young women.) Revering Thomas Mann, Malamud brought his young student to Venice so that she could play elusive Dionysiac Tadzio to his doomed Apollonian von Aschenbach.

Malamud's last completed novel, *God's Grace* (1982), is another of his fantasias on fathers, sons, Jewishness, and murder, a variation on the themes of "The Silver Crown." A scientist, Calvin Cohn, sole human survivor of nuclear apocalypse, teaches language to the apes, one of whom he adopts as a son. The son prefers the Christian name Gottlob to the Hebrew name Buz (from Genesis 22, the firstborn of Uz) but the novel uses his Hebrew name when, reversing and inverting the story of Abraham and Isaac, he makes a sacrifice of his father.

Malamud insisted to the end that his books were inventive, not autobiographical, even the novel he began writing at fifty-seven about William Dubin, aged fifty-seven. Three years before he died at seventy-one in 1985, Malamud suffered a stroke during surgery. When he woke, a nurse asked his name. "William," he said. His age? "Fifty-seven."

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1 He collected his stories in *The Magic Barrel* (1958), *Idiots First* (1963), and *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973). ↩

2 "Imagining Jews," *The New York Review*, October 3, 1974. ↩