

The Adventures of Augie March by Saul Bellow
Reflective Paper
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October 3, 2023

Wikipedia has one of the best summaries of the plot of *The adventures of Augie March* that I could find. The book, it says

describes Augie March's growth from childhood to a fairly stable maturity. Augie, with his brother Simon and the mentally abnormal George have no father and are brought up by their mother, who is losing her eyesight, and a tyrannical, grandmother-like boarder, in very humble circumstances in the rough parts of Chicago. Augie drifts from one situation to another in a free-wheeling manner — jobs, women, homes, education and lifestyle.

In the broadest of overviews, I would say this book is about growing up in middle America during and after the Great Depression. It is also about a Jewish boy growing up in America, but the Jewish theme is so diluted that it is almost to the point of invisibility. Maybe that is precisely the point. The Jewish story is simply absorbed in the larger American story.

The opening six words have become somewhat iconic in American Jewish literature – “I am an American, Chicago born”. So what does this tell us? First, that this is not an immigrant story and second that it is not a New York/ East Coast story. This is the story of a boy of some vague ethnic background born and raised in the heartland of the country in the 1930's and 40's. But we must note that the heartland of America here is not the heartland of the “American Dream”. It is a heartland of dislocation and struggle, of physically, mentally and economically challenged people trying to wrestle out a living for themselves and their families as best they can. There are successes to be sure, think Mr Einhorn. But even the successful do not quite fulfill the American ideal. Life is a struggle.

The story is that of a Chicago boy and his family and in the course of the book all of Chicago seems gathered into the book, maybe even all of America, and even much of human history as well. In other words, for Bellow, Chicago is the world writ small. Through the course of the narrative, various people are compared to Peter the Great, Pasiphaë, Alcibiades, Cincinnatus, Sardanapalus, and Cesar Romero among others. Chicago becomes, as one reviewer notes, the world. [“Finding Augie March, *Published in the print edition of the October 6, 2003*]

Given this sweep of the human experience, it is no surprise that after the first six words, the narrative gets complicated, at time inscrutable. Take for example his description of Augie's yearning for reciprocal love from his crush Esther Fenchel. *"That if she would have, approve, kiss, use her hands on me, allow me the clay dust of the court from her legs, the mild sweat, her intimate dirt and sweat, deliver me from suffering falsehood--show that there wasn't anything false, injurious, or empty-hearted that couldn't be corrected!"* Hard to get less romantic than that!

I take my premise for this essay from a quote from Martin Amis, who wrote in 1995, "*The Adventures of Augie March* is the Great American Novel. Search no further. All the trails went cold forty-two years ago. The quest did what quests very rarely do; it ended" [p. xiii]. This essay raises the question as to whether Amis is correct that "*Adventures*" is a, if not the, Great American Novel" and if so what does that even mean? But maybe before answering that question we have to answer an even deeper question, namely, what is, an American novel anyway and, to go a step further, what precisely is, at the end of the day, American about this novel, beyond its geographical placement?

The answer lies, I think, in what we think this book is about. My first conclusion drawn from the title was that this was a sort of American *Bildungsroman*, that is, the story of how a young Augie March, born in near-poverty to an immigrant family, grows into a successful adult person. But this neat trajectory never really happens. At the end I was not so sure that the mature Augie was all that different from the person at the beginning of the book only older and maybe a bit wiser. Rather, I have come to the conclusion that the operative word in the title is "*Adventures*". One thing we can for sure say about Augie is that he has had any number of jobs and associated experiences, adventures if you will. He served, after all, as a dog groomer, worked as a paint salesman, sold shoes, was a boxing coach, clerked in a bookstore, stole books on demand, became a union organizer, and enlisted as a Merchant Marine in WWII. He even gets some traveling in, to exotic places like Mexico (where he is a bird trainer) and Detroit. His father-figure, if I can call him that, is one old, lame and experienced polymath -- Einhorn -- who among other things warns him to stay out of prison. What all this amounts to, I think, is that Augie gets to see the "real" America from a multiplicity of viewpoints. And the American he sees is the everyday, working, barely-getting-along American of the common classes. It is the exact polar opposite of that other contender for the great American novel, *The Great Gatsby*. The conclusion could be that the true American story is not about the superrich Gatsby, but about the struggling working class. Maybe that is precisely the point.

The closest I could find to his thesis is when Augie ruminates:

"Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can't use he often can't see. But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn't correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on there being something better than what people

call reality, that better something needn't try to exceed what, in its actuality, since we know it so little, may be very surprising. If a happy state of things, surprising; if miserable or tragic, no worse than what we invent". {p.412]

Or maybe the thesis is:

"Then a huge invention, which is the invention maybe of the world itself, and of nature, becomes the actual world – with cities, factories public buildings, railroads, armies, dams, prisons and movies -- -- ... becomes the actuality. That's the struggle of humanity, to recruit others to your version of what's real. Then even the flowers and the moss on the stones become the moss and the flowers of a version." [p.437] Or maybe: "I said when I started to make the record that I would be plain and heed the knocks as they came. And that a man's character was his fate. Well, then it is obvious that this fate, or what he settles for, is also his character. And since I never have had a any place of rest, it should follow that I have trouble being still..... [p. 561]"

In other words, life happens and we just have to make the best of it. That's what American is all about. Maybe that is precisely the point.

The saga ends with a married Augie in Europe, nursing a stalled car and pursuing some sort of career somewhere in France. He ruminates on his situation.

"What's so laughable, that a Jacqueline, for instance, as hard used as that by rough forces, will still refuse to lead a disappointed life? Or is the laugh at nature – including eternity – that it thinks it can win over us and the power of hope?"

He ends by referring to Columbus, of all people. "Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."

So in the end this is not an enlightenment European *Bildungsroman*. It is an American adventure of living life along America's various edges with all its struggles and sometime successes that entails. It is in the end, a chain of adventures. That's life. We in America have before us all sorts of possibilities in life. And maybe that is precisely the point.

QUESTIONS

1. Is this a candidate for The Great American Novel? Is it a Candidate for The Great American Jewish Novel? Why or why not?
2. At the end of the day, do you agree that Bellow has managed to capture the essence of the American experience for most people? Put another way, is Chicago more American than NYC?
3. There is a long interlude (chapters 14-21, roughly) in which Augie is in Mexico with his then crush Thea training an eagle that turns out to be a disappointment. Is this story a metaphor or parable for Augie himself? For America?
4. In the book, ordinary people are often compared to great historical figures: for example, Grandma Lausch is like a pharaoh, William Einhorn is Croesus or the Sun King at Versailles. Thea Fenchel is like Queen Elizabeth and Helen of Troy, Simon is Napoleon. What is the point of these characterizations made by Augie? What do such identifications tell us about the people in Augie's life, about the historical figures, about Augie?
5. What do you see as the final message or lesson of this novel? What does it tell us?