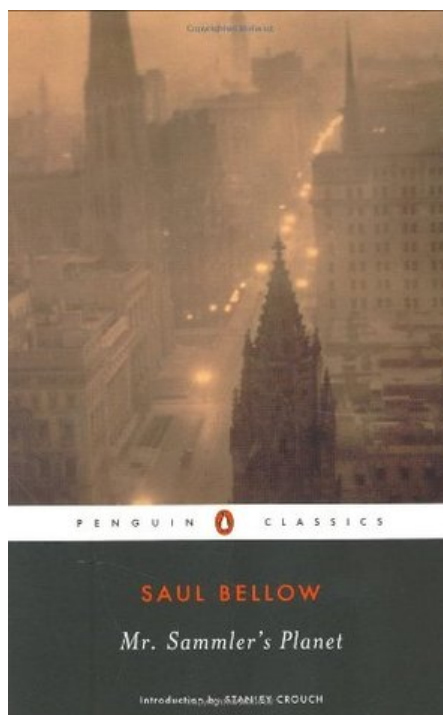




Mr. Sammler's Planet

Saul Bellow , Stanley Crouch (Introduction)

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“An enduring testament and prophecy.” –*Chicago Sun-Times*

Mr. Artur Sammler, Holocaust survivor, intellectual, and occasional lecturer at Columbia University in 1960s New York City, is a “registrar of madness,” a refined and civilized being caught among people crazy with the promises of the future (moon landings, endless possibilities). His Cyclopean gaze reflects on the degradations of city life while looking deep into the sufferings of the human soul. “Sorry for all and sore at heart,” he observes how greater luxury and leisure have only led to more human suffering. To Mr. Sammler—who by the end of this ferociously unsentimental novel has found the compassionate consciousness necessary to bridge the gap between himself and his fellow beings—a good life is one in which a person does what is “required of him.” To know and to meet the “terms of the contract” was as true a life as one could live. At its heart, this novel is quintessential Bellow: moral, urbane, sublimely humane.

This Penguin Classics edition features an introduction by Stanley Crouch.

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From Reader Review Mr. Sammler's Planet for online ebook

Vessey says

"In those days I learned that nothing is more frightening than a hero who has lived to tell his story, to tell what all those who fell at his side will never be able to tell."

Carlos Ruiz Zafon, *The Shadow of the Wind*

When I think of Mr. Sammler, do I see a hero or a villain or a victim or all at once? Does he see the world clearly or is he drowning? Is he realist or pessimist? Is he a man of yesterday, of today or of tomorrow? And does it really matter? When we start to realize that the world of today is only a fraction of a bigger reality that sweeps all that is good and leaves us only with memories of what it was and, what is even worse, of what *might have been*, do we remember to look back with a clear consciousness or do we persist in our determination to settle a score, to drive away the demons, to pretend that we are more or less than what we are? Mr. Sammler doesn't live in the world of today, but does he belong to *any* world? Does he belong to *himself*? It is in our power to remember and to forget, it is in our power to hope and to let go, but it is not in our power to belong. With our ability to remember and to hope and to learn and to be afraid we belong to all ages and times and to none.

"And mankind had never lived without its possessing demons and had to have them back! Oh, what a wretched, itching, bleeding, needing, idiot, genius of a creature we were dealing with here! And how queerly it was playing with all the strange properties of existence, with all varieties of possibility, with antics of all types, with the soul of the world, with death. Humankind could not endure futurelessness."

We are all nomads. We roam through time's realms, restless and ever searching for more, but is there always more? Does the human spirit have its limits? And when it reaches those limits, is this a sign of contentment or resignation, loss of faith maybe? Mr. Sammler, like most of us, keeps the wheel turning, but has given up on the journey.

"But for himself, at his time of life and because he had come back from the other world, there were no rapid connections. His own first growth of affections had been consumed. His onetime human, onetime precious, life had been burnt away. More green growth rising from the burnt black would simply be natural persistency, the Life Force working, trying to start again."

But does his mundane, day to day life strip him of grandeur or does it keep it in its place, unmovable, inexorable, very much like the cold within his tortured soul?

A few may comprehend that it is the strength to do one's duty daily and promptly that makes saints and heroes.

I asked once a person many years ago "Why do you always criticize me when I'm doing bad, but never praise me when I'm doing good?" I was told "Why should I praise you for something that is merely the way

it *should* be?" I have always thought that if something is important enough to be chastised about it, when it's not going right, then it is important enough to be given an encouragement when it is. Because doing the right thing, keeping it together, being strong and reliable isn't something that happens on its own. It is a choice we make. A choice that deserves others' support and our own faith. My friend Jeffrey told me about his family "We aren't big with praise, but not hard with condemnations either" I think that's valid for Mr. Sammler as well. He spares you the desert, but also spares you the broccoli. And maybe this is the reason for his status among those who care for him:

Mr. Sammler had a symbolic character. He, personally, was a symbol. His friends and family had made him a judge and a priest.

Some may see him as devoid of passion, of colour, of life, but amongst all the fear and frustration there is a glimmer of hope that sticks with him. Because when there is fear, there is also hope. If we are afraid, then we have something to lose. If we have something to lose, then we have something to hold on to. But is he as gentle with himself? He remembers clearly the man he was when he relished taking a human life, but what does he feel toward this man? It is not anger that leads him anymore, it is not a bloodlust, it is not even a desperation. Maybe not even hope. Despite the fact that he still has some of it, generally he is really beaten down. He has lost his will to live. Many would say that this makes him the ultimate pessimist. I would say that it makes him, in a way, the ultimate optimist. Because just like true saints and heroes are not just those who do miraculous and extraordinary deeds, but those who adhere to their duties stalwartly, the true optimist is not only the one who believes and hopes against all odds, but the one who has lost his happiness, his passion, his spark, his will to live, but goes on living anyway. Because he has to, because it is *his* life. The one who thinks about and cares about things and people despite having lost his faith in them, because they are his, because they are a part of him in very much the same way he is part of them. A man who doesn't want to be part of the world, who doesn't believe in it and its future, yet, he will not abandon it and he will not stop caring for it. In *Grey's Anatomy* Meredith Grey's therapist told her...Well, I cannot provide an exact quote, but the gist was basically this: "*The goal of your sessions isn't happiness. Life is scary, terrible things happen. It is hard to be happy. What you need to make sure of is that you won't **die** because of them*" Meredith herself said "*If at the end of the day you are still able to stand on your feet, this is a reason enough to celebrate*" This might be a too gloomy outlook, but I see a lot of sense in it and a lot of courage. I think everyone should hope for more than mere surviving and sanity, but I also think that we need to remember that happiness isn't granted. It is there for us to look for it and hopefully find it. If we think that it should be there in order for us to go on, we may never find it. I will end this review with something I read in an interview a while ago. Life is not about avoiding suffering. It's about creating meaning.

Read count: 1

Stephen P says

a man finds himself buried amongst bodies during world war two. he escapes and wanders back into life. he as the narrator may still be buried, or tries to live life but as a man who remains buried in that pile of bodies. bellows does a masterful job in portraying the narrator attempting to now live in a world that no longer has a god by conforming to his outdated customs, which have passed and been replaced by a new set foreign to him. despite style and pace this is a searing novel of survival as our narrator grasps for hope somewhere so he can continue to survive.

Io? says

Libro stralunato, inquieto, a tratti lento l e n t o l e n t o ,un secondodopocorreareottadicollo verso il porto, verso la nave dei folli attraccata al molo che ci aspetta

Si, lo sguardo sognante e spaesato e fiducioso di Sammler mi piace, è nelle mie corde, uomo sempre in bilico, uomo inquieto, mai immobile, mai domo.

Szplug says

As the sun set upon the sixties there was a great belief in progress, an enthusiasm for the future and the potential of a humanity in the process of throwing off the chains of oppression and moral rigidity, of embracing individuality and the paramountcy of the self, encapsulated in the technological miracle of the imminent moon landing. Yet even as this hope was spreading like a fever, crime, familial dissolution, and urban decay were settling upon the United States, an unwelcome layer of grime clinging to a nation charging down a playing field overhung with the apocalyptic threat of nuclear war. Certain Americans - like the titular Mr. Sammler, an elderly jewish survivor of the death camps of World War II and denizen of a crumbling New York City - could only view this faith in progress with a jaundiced and cynical eye; as the capitulation to the sensual, personal and emotional of the morals, virtues and sense of community that had enabled the country to attain its present wonders and marvels.

Sexual potency and virile radicalism - the energy of the uprising - trumps rational erudition and dusty mores with the younger generation, a point driven home to Mr. Sammler in a visceral manner by the tumescent exposed prick of a brazen black street burglar - a silent warning to the witness of his boldness (and, perhaps, to the white majority of a new-found black confidence in post-Civil Rights America) - and the students at a lecture given by Mr. Sammler at Columbia University in which he is shouted down with scornful declarations of being a withered fossil with juiceless testicles. Against the meandering, selfish and licentious peregrinations of his daughter, great-nephew and great-niece, Mr. Sammler holds in great esteem his sick nephew Elya, a patron in every sense of the word, a man who believes in fidelity to family, doing one's duty and sacrificing one's own pleasures and desires if it advances the welfare of one's kin; and doing it all with an innate kindness and generosity that Mr. Sammler finds lacking even in himself. His hardened and at times ungenerous nature was forged in the desperate realities of wartime Europe - that of late sixties America by a surfeit of material prosperity and looming armageddon. In the face of abundance or apocalypse, who will deign to sacrifice?

Bellow is a meaty writer, dense and probing and philosophical, and his mature works reflect a growing conservatism and doubt. Mr. Sammler is formed from the same skeptical material, one that cannot concede the future's potentiality when wandering through New York neighborhoods that are concrete wastelands. Yet within the coruscating chaos of the younger generation he can only hope there lies the seeds of a recovery of the familial adhesion and sense of duty that forms the core of a strong society. A lesser known piece from Bellow, still a challenging read but well worth it.

Sandra says

Non sono un'assidua ascoltatrice di programmi televisivi. Anzi la televisione la guardo pochissimo. Qualche sera fa, era molto tardi, mi è capitato casualmente di vedere la sigla di un telefilm che si intitola "survivors",

che, mi è sembrato di capire da poche scene che ho guardato prima che il sonno mi vincesses, racconta di un gruppo di persone che sono sopravvissute a un virus che ha decimato la popolazione mondiale. Ebbene, guardando la sigla di questo telefilm ho pensato a Bellow. C'erano tante persone che camminavano seguendo invisibili percorsi e aspirando a raggiungere mete indeterminate, le cui strade si intersecavano, si incontravano; si scontravano gli uni con gli altri ed apparentemente ognuno aveva una meta finale da raggiungere. Quelle immagini mi hanno fatto pensare all'umanità come viene vista dal monocolo Mister Sammler: "la maggioranza se ne andava in giro come sotto l'effetto di un incantesimo, sonnambuli, circoscritti, nella morsa di secondarie attività nevrotiche".

Artur Sammler mi ha ricordato la figura dell'inetto europeo inventato da Svevo e Joyce: è un anziano intellettuale ebreo di origini polacche, vissuto fino a 40 anni a Londra a stretto contatto con eminenti esponenti della cultura britannica, che vive a New York, una città che fa pensare a Sodoma e Gomorra, dal 1947 e trascorre il suo tempo a guardare con attenzione, attraverso il suo unico occhio vedente, il paese che lo ospita, gli Stati Uniti della fine degli anni '60, popolati da giovani regrediti a un livello quasi di barbarie (definiti come "le scimmie negli alberi intente a defecare nelle loro mani, per poi bersagliare tra le urla i sottostanti esploratori"), un paese dove "bisogna riuscire ad addestrarsi per affrontare a viso aperto gli effetti della contemporaneità". Le sue vicende, animate dal contorno di personaggi a dir poco bizzarri, vicende peraltro grottesche e narrate sempre con un sorriso di sottofondo, sono occasione per riflettere sulla crisi lacerante di un'intera civiltà, invasa dalla follia.

Mister Sammler è un sopravvissuto: egli ha attraversato gli orrori dell'olocausto ed ha fatto ritorno dalla morte, si è ricongiunto alla vita. "Un'esperienza di questo genere deforma": deforma l'anima e la mente che, nei suoi percorsi di continui monologhi con sé stessa, tende ad estraniarsi dalle angustie e dalla problematicità della vita, allo scopo di alleviare il dolore con il quale si è costretti a convivere ogni minuto della propria esistenza.

La conclusione cui Mr. Sammler – Bellow porta il lettore è che la vera saggezza non sta nel chiudersi nella "turris eburnea" dello spirito al riparo dal mondo, è nel comprendere che morte e vita sono inscindibilmente connesse, che la morte è iscritta nella vita, è implicita al destino umano.

Brent Legault says

At first it was the all the lists that did me in, that *weighed* on me like work undone. Lists of words, on every other page it seemed, clogging the capillaries of my eyes.

Enlightenment, universal education, universal suffrage, the rights of the majority acknowledged by all governments, the rights of women, the rights of children, the rights of criminals, the unity of the different races affirmed, Social Security, public health, the dignity of the person, the right to justice-- the struggles of three revolutionary centuries being won while the feudal bonds of Church and Family weakened and the privileges of aristocracy (without any duties) spread wide, democratized, especially the libidinous privileges, the right to be uninhibited, spontaneous, urinating, defecating, belching, coupling in all positions, tripling, quadrupling, polymorphous, noble in being natural, primitive, combining the leisure and luxurious inventiveness of Versailles with the hibiscus-covered erotic ease of Samoa.

pgs. 25-26

That sentence, only one sentence, is mirrored throughout the early chapters, making *Mr. Sammler's Planet* more manifesto than novel. And then comes the interminable chapter V. I'm no doctor but I'm confident in saying that that chapter, that damned chapter V, nearly gave me an aneurysm.

Oh, Sammler is smart and many of his observations are pure and perfect. But then, many of them are foolish

and old-timey, too. And the toll this book takes isn't worth it, I don't think. Not if you're susceptible to stroke.

Evandro says

Eis uma obra-prima. Um livro para ler ainda muitas vezes. Dentre as tantas, tantas coisas que eu teria a dizer, uma das mais marcantes é ver um homem que escapou do holocausto (que escapou do holocausto!) considerar-se moralmente inferior a um outro, que viveu uma vida mais ou menos normal num país de primeiro mundo. E convencer-nos disso! De que julgar uma vida humana quanto a seus méritos soteriológicos é uma tarefa muito mais complexa do que pode parecer em certos casos. Não importa o quanto se sofre, mas o como se sofre. Não importa o quanto se é corajoso, mas o quanto se é humilde. E franco consigo mesmo.

Tyler says

Mr. Sammler's Planet is a stop-action photograph of a century rushing by on full blast. Not just any century; this is the twentieth, the time when traditional society went by the boards. The author aims his lens within New York City, so we might expect a pretty interesting still. That's just what we see.

Taken in 1969, this snapshot shows a world turned over in a generation. We see madness and eccentricities, and it's not clear what they mean. The book documents this change, but even more so it attempts to figure it out. Happily for me, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is a book of ideas.

In thinking over the ferment, the protagonist, Artur Sammler, works in the medium provided by New York City's jarring juxtapositions, and Sammler's own family provides examples. Mr. Sammler is transfixed by the new type persons, a cosmopolitan, go-anywhere-do-anything species. Smart and sharp, this emerging tribe hangs ten on the *avant garde*, always there and gone before you've even had time to sip your morning coffee. The only missing ingredient is good sense. Shopping, schlepping daughters vie with obsessed, nutcase sons to amaze their fathers and the proper, London-bred Sammler. But it's not just these kids: Everyone seems caught up in the theatrical improvisation that now defines personality.

Mr. Sammler puzzles out the century's changes, and his musings give the book its call. He finds flawed the incessant urge to "explain"; it's more important to "distinguish." He thinks today's histrionic madness is rooted in an individualism that in turn might not be rooted in any truth. He sees that this individualism is itself rooted in the loss of personal power brought on by the century's complexities.

Trying to change society or fit in is a doomed project in this century: A moon motif (as in "fly to the moon") represents the unprecedented need of modern people to tear away from the rest of humanity. But this striving need Mr. Sammler begins to doubt. He wonders whether personal standards are best contrived internally and individually, or whether a freely chosen Kantian devotion to some external duty might better serve the new world. Modern society has hit the perfect existential crisis.

The writing style bears Bellow's distinctive stamp. If we could see his prose, it would have clean lines; if we could eat it, it would taste crunchy. This style nailed my attention, and it accounts in good part for the high rating I give the book. Mr. Sammler's planet is still very much our planet, and the ideas found in the book are relevant to our lives today.

and 'whole'. He himself was a fragment, Mr. Sammler understood. And lucky to be that."

"Individualism is of no interest whatever if it does not extend truth."

"Democracy was propagandistic in its style. Conversation was often nothing but the repetition of liberal principles."

"They sought originality. They were obviously derivative. And of what--of Paiutes, of Fidel Castro? No, of Hollywood extras... better, thought Sammler, to accept the inevitability of imitation and then to imitate good things... make peace therefore with intermediacy and representation. But choose higher representations. Otherwise the individual must be the failure he now sees and knows himself to be."

And yet I found this book dull, dull, dull as can be, thanks to layers of 'realist' fluff, which hid all that cultural criticism and farce: every individual so finely delineated, even if they appeared only for three pages; every object described in 'loving' detail, even if it was totally inconsequential; every idea 'properly' embedded in a character's conscience. Without that, the novel would have been about 150 pages, and I would have loved it.

Or would I? Because I also don't understand the obeisance to Bellow's writing. It seems to be little more than a second-half-of-the-20th-century period style to me. Fragments. Stream of consciousness kind of. Unwillingness to either embrace or shun free indirect, but why?

So, I am defeated. Prove to me that I should try Herzog for the third time, or that I should bother to try Augie March. I don't want to give in, but I'm on the edge.

Vit Babenco says

Mr. Sammler's Planet is one of the most powerful and prophetic novels by **Saul Bellow**.

“Now so many highbrows have discovered that madness is higher knowledge... Power and money of course do drive people crazy. So why shouldn't people also gain power and wealth through being crazy? They should go together.”

The listless hedonistic society is *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and it is inhabited with crazies, perverts and rogues.

"A glorious planet. But wasn't everything being done to make it intolerable to abide here, an unconscious collaboration of all souls spreading madness and poison? To flush us out? Not so much Faustian aspiration, thought Mr. Sammler, as a scorched- earth strategy. Ravage all, and what does death get? Defile, and then flee to the bliss of oblivion."

Mr. Sammler survived the holocaust but now he is threatened to perish at the hands of soulless society along with the culture and humanism.

There is already enough of indifference and violence in this world but the world keeps crying for more...

zahra says

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Ram says

Just finished reading "Mr. Sammler's Planet" by Saul Bellow. It is a beautiful story of a holocaust survivor, who relives his horrors in the holocaust of his daily life in New York in his late age. Saul draws beautiful parallels between the old and the new, but it was a difficult book to get into. Once past the 100 pages, the book turned out to be quite stunning. A quintessential book from a Nobel prize winner.

Frederick says

I just finished this yesterday. So, with a very short perspective on this, I present my review:
 With the scent of urine now back in full force in the Great Metropolis (it having begun to fade during the Dinkins administration, virtually disappearing during Giuliani's tenure, and beginning to waft back into every pair of Gothamite nostrils during Bloomberg's illegal third term) Saul Bellow's 1970 hate-letter to New York (written as only a Second City denizen could write it) seems, at times, prophetic. But Bill de Blasio hasn't had to deal with a city as unhinged as Lindsay-era New York. It is an almost unbelievably selfish city in this book, and, having spent my early childhood in precisely the neighborhood the titular character inhabits, and having watched what happened to it on the news when I was nine, ten and eleven - the precise time of this novel - I have to say the social climate is accurately described.
 New York was an extremely violent place in the late sixties. No one in 1970 would have believed that thirty-five, forty, or forty-four years later it would have one of the lowest crime rates of any major city on earth. THAT was not the planet of Mr. Sammler. Not the Disneyfied place of today. But I stress, there's bile in the old place yet, and Bellow captures something that has never gone away.
 But what makes MR. SAMMLER'S PLANET worth reading is its rueful humor. Bellow is almost always funny; a major advantage in a deep writer. The ruefulness is particularly suited to this story. Briefly, this novel is about a sepugenarian who, having survived, not thirty years earlier, an atrocity at the hands of the NAZIS, finds himself surrounded by impulsive brats in their mid-twenties. He is a Lear who met and escaped human monsters while still relatively young and now, in his old age, he is at the mercy of incurious, egotistical Americans. This must be pointed out. The author whose greatest novel started with the words, "I am an American, Chicago born," wrote a novel twenty years later about a man who finds the United States a hopelessly foreign country. This does not mean this was Bellow's verdict on America. In fact, a close reading shows Sammler does not ultimately feel alienated by America as such. But Bellow is pointing to a fatal flaw in the American character. Sammler is a survivor of epic dimension, living with the willfully silly children of the victors of an existential war.
 It will help explain the title if I point out that Sammler, before the war, studied, read, met and conversed with H.G. Wells, the idealist science-fiction pioneer who wrote WAR OF THE WORLDS.
 Bellow's influences are wide, but what I've concluded is that his true models are the nineteenth-century Russians. Occasionally, his philosophy eludes me, but his ability to describe ridiculous situations is unrivaled. It grounds him and, therefore, elevates the reader. He shows us the planet.

Carloesse says

Il pianeta di Mr. Sammler naturalmente è la terra, luogo che rischia di diventare sempre più inospitale, per cui secondo alcuni (come per il Dr. Govinda Lal che segue le orme di H.G. Wells) presto potrebbe essere abbandonato per la luna.

Il pianeta di Mr. Sammler è l'America, e in particolare lo è New York dopo essere scampato miracolosamente ad Aushwitz e alla barbarie nazista e poi a quella dell'antisemitismo nella Polonia già liberata. Ma anche in questo nuovo pianeta i segni della decadenza della civiltà si fanno sempre più evidenti. E' un mondo che sta perdendo senso, un mondo destinato alla rovina, che Sammler cerca faticosamente di interpretare, senza volerlo per questo giudicare.

Il pianeta di Mr. Sammler è la sua famiglia ebraico-newyorkese: quella del ricco nipote Elya medico e affarista forse con frequentazioni mafiose, ma ora moribondo in ospedale. Fu lui ad accogliere (e ancora di fatto mantiene) il vecchio zio intellettuale e la sua stramba figlia Shula in fuga dall'Europa devastata. Ed è quella dei figli di Elya, viziosi, edonisti e sbalestrati, ma che considerano il vecchio zio come la voce della saggezza e confidano a lui e solo a lui (come fosse una specie di giudice-sacerdote di famiglia) i propri segreti e debolezze, per altri indicibili.

Elya sta morendo, la nuova America sta morendo, l'intero pianeta sta morendo, ma zio Sammler è già stato a contatto con la morte, è sopravvissuto e si sente predestinato a sopravvivere ancora (o meglio, "a durare", un po' più degli altri) anche "a tutto questo caos e alle sue abbruttite buffonate".

Perché noi tutti abbiamo un contratto con Dio, anche se pochi rispettano le sue condizioni. Che noi tutti conosciamo nel profondo del nostro cuore, se vogliamo riconoscerci ancora come esseri umani, appartenenti a questo pianeta.

Rileggerlo, dopo molti anni, ne è valsa la pena.

Jon says

This book vastly lowered my estimation of Saul Bellow, which was based primarily on the quality of the novella, *Seize the Day*. Like *Seize the Day*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* certainly has compelling moments and ideas that testify to Bellow's deep imagination. Yet, the novel also reveals Bellow's immense limitations due to his profoundly anti-modern views, which are racist and politically retrograde. What is most troubling about the novel is the racism, as well as the sexism, which characterizes black Americans as animalistic criminals, Africa as a land of savagery, women as whores and lunatics, and others who are not like Holocaust survivor-refugee Artur Sammler in similarly caricatured terms. The racism is so rampant it cannot be written off as a rhetorical device or simply a product of its era, whatever that would mean. Even more shocking is this racism occurs in a novel that deals with the Nazi Holocaust, unquestionably one of the most horrific forms of modern racism.

The main racist depiction in the novel is obviously the "Negro" pickpocket, who Sammler not only observes on a bus stealing from other bus passengers, but who follows Sammler out of the bus to his apartment building apparently to threaten him. In the next scene, the Negro pickpocket corners him in the apartment lobby and exposes himself. In doing this, the "black man ... no more spoke than a puma would." Bellow's narrator goes into absurd detail describing the man's "organ," a description that characterizes him as an animal: "It was displayed to Sammler with great oval testicles, a large tan-and-purple uncircumcised thing- a tube, a snake; metallic hairs bristled at the thick base and the tip curled beyond the supporting, demonstrating

hand, suggesting the fleshy mobility of an elephant's trunk" Throughout the narrative, the scene is returned to in Sammler's conversations with other characters, as a sort of obsessive focal point of the novel.

As shocking and absurd as the scene is, it is one of many racist caricatures. Later, Sammler reflects on modernity: "How could the ignorant nonspecialist be strong with strength adequate to confront these technical miracles which made him a sort of uncomprehending Congo savage." The racist provocations continue elsewhere: "From the black side, strong currents were sweeping over everyone. Child, black, redskin – the unspoiled Seminole against the horrible Whiteman. Millions of civilized people wanted oceanic, boundless, primitive, neckfree nobility, experienced a strange release of galloping impulses, and acquired the peculiar aim of sexual niggerhood for everyone." An Indian doctor is called "Asiatic" and is described in typical Orientalist fashion.

Additionally, the narrative's plot is weak, and its two redeeming aspects are underdeveloped. The plot is weakened by characters' tendency to speak and think by explicating philosophies, which ultimately are incoherent and unexpressive of a point of view other than lamenting what they perceive to be the decline of Old European standards. One interesting aspect of the novel, its thematization of planet Earth as a home for humanity, is never integrated fully into the plot. The other interesting part of the novel is its underlying vision of a connected humanity, precipitated in part by a moon/earth theme, is simply and explicitly derivative of Tolstoy. This too remains underdeveloped.

When the narrative takes up the story of the "Negro" pickpocket again in its conclusion, it does so to amplify the caricature of him as an animal. Sammler spots him violently threatening one of Sammler's friends on the street, as a response to the friend's attempt to photograph him in the act of stealing. The pickpocket has pinned the man, and the narrator says: "Considering the Negro's strength – his crouching, squeezing, intense animal pressing-power, the terrific swelling of the neck and the tightness of the buttocks as he rose on his toes. In straining alligator shoes! In fawn-colored trousers!"

A critic sympathetic to Bellow could say that these racist caricatures are rhetorical provocations and an element of his broader thematization of reason and instinct in the novel. Yet, the fact remains that the novel categorically associates racial blackness with base instinct, and in no way does the novel deflate the caricature.

Finally, the silence of most readers on the novel's racism is perplexing. Here and there a few commenters on Goodreads and Amazon have identified this racism and criticized it. On Wikipedia the novel is described as controversial for its racism, but by and large, the fact that the novel is thoroughly racist has not been a primary topic of conversation. I have lost interest in Bellow completely after reading this racist and poorly conceived novel.

Michael Finocchiaro says

In another amazing and moving tour de force, Bellow explores themes of mortality and morality through a 48h period with his Shaoh survivor Mr Sammler. All the characters are carefully drawn from Sammler's perspective and the action of the novel forms a perfect circle. The philosophical ruminations are treasures as are the descriptions of Manhattan. And naturally, the descriptions of Lodz, etc are terrifying. The main thrust of the story - and an overriding theme in Bellow's works - is the strength of human character to cross seemingly impossible hurdles just for the desire to live and breath (and be in New York or Chicago one could be lead the think). I rank this up there with Augie March, Herzog, and Seize the Day as masterpieces of American literature. Another must.

Richard Derus says

BkC6) Fun, fun, fun to read. Not the story, mind, but the storytelling!

Have to take issue with myself here. This isn't quite as fluffy as this one-liner makes it sound.

Rating: 3.75* of five

The Book Report: Mr. Artur Sammler survived the Holocaust, but isn't sure he'll survive 1960s New York. Once without food and without dignity and without hope, he looks on bemused as people with everything material the planet can supply wallow in misery and spiritual angst. Sammler, an observer by nature, doesn't know how to get past his own limitations of spirit to reach out to men or up to god to make connections that could guide his fellow beings out of desperation or himself out of stasis.

But this is a novel. A National Book Award-winning novel. So, he does. It is a gorgeous piece of writing.

My Review: This was less catharsis than exegesis for me. Sammler's idea of a Good Life, as opposed to the Americans he sees around himself living The Good Life, is knowing the terms of the contract...what's expected of me, now that I'm here? what is it that makes a life worthy, therefore worth living?...presupposes that there is an inherent moral compass and that it's oriented the same way for all people, that is along the Judeo-Christian axis.

Hmmm.

Well, go with it, I instruct myself, because it's the author's thesis, not yours. So I did, and I found the resolution to Sammler's crisis very moving.

But, if I'm honest, it still irks me that there is a monopolar world of the spirit, and there is nothing at all outside of it allowed in. Still...it's some wonderful writing!

AC says

Sammler is an important book. Stylistically, it is rich, inventive, original, flawed (of course it is 'flawed', it is Bellow...!), full of heart, great lava flows of mood and motion.... Intellectually, it is original, often brilliant, insightful, reactionary, sad, tragic, revolutionary, hopeful.. it is Bellow... a novelist of ideas, as I tried to describe it in my review of Herzog.

But more importantly, Sammler is important because it is Bellow coming into his own. Augie is not Bellow. It was written by somebody else... Somebody in Iowa, maybe. Herzog is Bellow, but uncertain, very flawed (indeed), still immature... but it is New York, urban, late 20th century Bellow in embryo... Seize the Day is a flawless little gem..., but it is just an 'exercise', a novella, a conscious attempt by a writer to learn to write, to REALLY write, after all the pretensions of Augie and the missed opportunities of Herzog.... Sammler, by contrast, is Bellow in full Bloom!

Almost...

It is a wonderful and exuberant book – a book in which absurdity and tragedy is transmuted into... what? Acceptance...? Certainly not into melodrama... and not into comedy... it is, after all..., Bellow.

SurferRosa says

Ennesimo miracolo letterario di Saul Bellow, che riesce a scrivere un bellissimo romanzo con personaggi credibili, trama funzionalmente dosata, dotato di un impianto filosofico con profondità da fondale oceanico che viene a dispiegarsi in perfetta armonia con gli altri elementi costitutivi.

Mr. Sammler, ebreo polacco, prima snob frequentatore dei salotti bene della Londra anteguerra, poi sopravvissuto all'Olocausto facendosi strada nudo fra nudi cadaveri, trascinandosi fuori dalla fossa comune dove invece rimane sua moglie, vive ormai ultrasettantenne nella New York di fine anni '60.

Mr. Sammler che non ama le spiegazioni, incline al soliloquio, riflette sulla civiltà moderna che osserva col suo unico occhio buono e qui vediamo il Bellow grande cantore della follia della metropoli, di tutta la sua nevrosi, del malessere che ne attanaglia gli abitanti - la lucidità, la cura del dettaglio con cui l'autore dipinge questa realtà provocano impressioni acute, vivide, universali -, con laceranti interrogativi su individualismo e società di massa. E' qui il cardine su cui ruota il romanzo: "è negli ultimi due secoli che la maggioranza della gente nei paesi civilizzati ha rivendicato il privilegio di essere degli individui", dice Sammler; e, si domanda poi, quali frutti sono stati raccolti? Soprattutto dolore, sofferenza, nuove nevrosi, probabilmente perchè la società in cui questo individualismo ha vissuto il suo sviluppo in realtà lo nega, spingendo sulla rappresentazione di sé, sulla teatralità, sull'essere interessanti quando invece (fosse anche solo a livello inconscio) percepiamo la nostra inadeguatezza ad essere umani, a dovere essere umani.

E' il rapporto del sé con la comunità la vera ossessione di Sammler, lui che di fatto è ritornato dalla tomba, esperienza che lo ha reso "deforme": è l'esperienza della morte, la morte di cui non possiamo sapere nulla perchè siamo vivi, dice a un certo punto, la morte che in noi vivi provoca i sentimenti dolorosi del lutto che altro non sono che un'espressione dell'amore, cioè di un sentimento che appartiene alla vita; ne abbiamo tuttavia la consapevolezza, come afferma Sammler nel finale con quel ripetuto "noi conosciamo".
