

Discussion questions

1. Augie March jumps from job to job, trying to find “a way to be in the world.” How much of your identity is defined by your own work? What are other ways people establish identity and meaning in their lives?

2. British novelist Martin Amis believes that *The Adventures of Augie March* is the “Great American Novel” because of its “fantastic inclusiveness, its pluralism, its qualmless promiscuity. . . . Everything is in here, the crushed and the exalted and all the notches in between . . .” Do you agree?

3. In Chapter 10, Augie reflects on the difference between daily life and what he calls “triumphant life,” which can only be touched at rare moments. Do you agree with his assessment? Why is this one of the book’s major issues?

4. How might Augie have fared in a small town in the Midwest, rather than Chicago? What identity might he have had?

Additional reading

James Atlas. *Bellow: A Biography*, 2000.

Saul Bellow. *Seize the Day*, 1956.

Herzog, 1964.

Mr. Sammler’s Planet, 1970.

Humboldt’s Gift, 1975.

The Dean’s December, 1982.

Him with His Foot in His Mouth, 1984.

Ravelstein, 2000.

Soul of a People: Writing America’s Story is a major documentary television program about the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers’ Project produced by Spark Media, a Washington, D.C.-based production and outreach company specializing in issues of social change. *Soul of a People* is being broadcast on the Smithsonian Channel HD (<http://www.smithsonianchannel.com>).

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SOUL OF A PEOPLE

Writing America’s Story

The Adventures of Augie March

by Saul Bellow

Discussion guide by David Long

Saul Bellow and the Federal Writers’ Project

Saul Bellow joined the Writers’ Project at age 22, a crucial point in his growth as a writer. The son of Russian émigrés on the Near West Side of Chicago, Bellow had just graduated from Northwestern University and was wrestling with the question of how he could become a writer in Chicago. The Writers’ Project was his first paid writing job. He started as a filing clerk and was promoted to writing mini-biographies of Midwestern authors. Bellow’s FWP essay on Sherwood Anderson was unsparing, describing Anderson’s style as out of fashion, despite respecting Anderson’s portrayal of the Midwest as “acute and full of truth.” The Project offered Bellow a vantage point for surveying the wide sweep of Chicago life, one that would inform *The Adventures of Augie March*.

—David A. Taylor, co-writer and co-producer, *Soul of a People: Writing America’s Story*



From the beginning, Augie March comes at us talking:

I am an American, Chicago-born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent.

He's brash, undaunted, upbeat, on-the-make. Bellow's two prior novels, *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947), had been more conventional works, but Augie March was a breakthrough, a surge of creative energy. "I kicked over the traces, wrote catch-as-catch-can... I took my chance," Bellow told the *New York Times Book Review* the week the novel appeared.

It was 1953. America was settling into the fabled calm of the Eisenhower years, but on the literary front, a new generation of novelists was asserting itself, writers of frank, muscular, post-war books—Norman Mailer, James Jones, and William Styron among them. *Augie March* was Bellow's announcement that he belonged in this ambitious pack. The novel was a critical and commercial success, and appeared briefly on the best-seller list. The following year, 1954, it won the National Book Award.

Almost as famous as the novel's first sentence is its second (on loan from Greek philosopher Heraclitus): "But a man's character is his fate..." Choices are made (or not made); consequences follow. Choices, one after another—often orderly, but sometimes not—make up the plot of a novel. Augie's story, set against Depression-era Chicago, is less tidy than most: a laundry list of opportunities seized, loves fallen into, side trips indulged in, lessons learned. At its center is Augie's quest to cobble together an identity for himself, a way to be in the world.

In a lengthy appreciation of the book in *The Atlantic*, British novelist Martin Amis writes:

If the novels of another great Chicagoan, Theodore Dreiser, sometimes feel like a long succession of job interviews, then Augie March often resembles a surrealist catalog of apprenticeships. During the course of the novel Augie becomes (in order) a handbill distributor, a paper boy, a dime-store packer, a news vendor, a Christmas extra in a toy department, a flower deliverer, a butler, a shoe salesman, a saddle-shop floorwalker, a hawkler of rubberized paint, a dog washer, a book swiper, a coal-yard helper, a housing surveyor, a union organizer, an animal trainer, a gambler, a literary researcher, a salesman of business machines, a sailor, and middleman for a war profiteer. As late as a third of the way into the novel Augie is still poring over magazines in search of vocational hints.

In short, Augie is trying on identities. Toward the end, he reflects that his brother Simon is the only member of the family "who had managed to stay out of an institution." In truth, Simon (Augie's opposite throughout) has been snared by family and the Capitalist Dream. It's Augie who manages to make his way without the consolations and limitations of the organization. His story is a portrait of determination and survival during the Depression.

The novel's quirky, flamboyant voice—street-smart and head-smart, both—is Augie's voice, a direct product of his character. With Augie, we're in the presence of someone in desperately high spirits. Where a writer like Hemingway builds his work word by exact word, Bellow proceeds pell-mell, saturating the reader with story, unafraid of uttering the odd combination of words if it works, if it tweaks us into seeing or feeling.

He's especially sharp at describing his cast (Bellow's novels are notoriously fraught with characters), or giving the texture of a moment. Happy Kellerman's wife is "a thin blond rattle of a woman." Here is Mimi Villars breaking up with a boyfriend:

"You'll never live to hear me beg for anything," were Mimi's last words to Frazer, and when she slammed phone and hook together with cruelty it was as a musician might shut the piano after he had finished storming chords of the mightiest difficulty without a single flinch or error.

Augie traveling in Italy:

When I came out of the station the mountain stars were barking.

Son of Russian-born Jews, Bellow was born in Quebec, and had run off to live in New York City at 17, but it was Chicago—in all its clamorous diversity, its American-ness—that became the center of his literary universe. Jewishness is not a direct subject in *Augie March*, but the Jewish-immigrant experience is nonetheless embedded in the novel. It demonstrates, Philip Roth says, "the same sort of assertive gusto that the musical sons of immigrant Jews—Irving Berlin, Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Leonard Bernstein—brought to America's radios, theatres, and concert halls by staking their claim to America (as subject, as inspiration, as audience)."

Bellow had confided his doubts to Roth, the insecurity he'd once felt that the literary establishment would consider someone of his background unfit to document the American experience. The *Adventures of Augie March* was his answer. For the next generation, the grandchildren of immigrants, Bellow's work was a guide and encouragement, Roth says.

In 1976, Bellow became the third Midwesterner to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Swedish Academy praised Bellow for creating stories about "a man who keeps on trying to find a foothold during his wanderings in our tottering world, one who can never relinquish his faith that the value of a life depends on its dignity, not on its success, and that the truth must triumph at last, simply because it demands everything except—triumphs. That is the way of thinking in which Saul Bellow's 'anti-heroes' have their foundation and acquire their lasting stature."

About the author:

Saul Bellow was born in Lachine, Quebec, in 1915, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, and moved with them to Chicago at the age of nine. He studied sociology and anthropology at Northwestern University, graduating in 1937. Bellow followed the exuberance of *Augie March* with the brief, sorrow-filled *Seize the Day* (1956), then a string of major novels beginning with *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). During much of his writing life, Bellow has taught—at New York University, Bard, Princeton, the University of Minnesota, the University of Chicago, and most recently, Boston University. In the 1980s and 90s, Bellow produced a series of shorter works. In 2000, at the age of 84, he published the novel, *Ravelstein*, a fictional treatment of his long friendship with scholar Allan Bloom. Reviewer Jonathan Yardley (*The Washington Post*) calls Saul Bellow "our greatest living novelist."