

Herzog, by Saul Bellow

A Reader's Recommendation

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Moses Herzog has written to you.

Amidst the barrage of missives expelled from his volcanic solitude, he is now communicating with you.

Herzog, published by Saul Bellow in 1964, is not a light book to be picked at over time. It is not a mistress to whom you offer sporadic attention and emotional detachment. No, reading this feels like marriage should be: intense, unforgettable, perpetual... a drama to which all else acts as canvas. As Moses Herzog is haunted by the infidelity of his ex-wife and best friend, you are not permitted such indiscretions. Opening the cover of this book reaches deep into the mind of an intellect, and you are forced to commit and endure.

This is the story of a man engulfed by the activity of a psyche lacking release. His academic career has been punctured, and betrayal dictates his activity and consumes him with reflection. He lives with effort, suffering in a neurotic self-affliction tinged with a dandy eccentricity. The bulk of the early book follows Herzog aboard a train - the physical motion providing an ideal mirror for his own internal voyage, and movement forward a fitting acknowledgement of the direction of time. He's at the mercy of the constant tension between freedom, and obligation. Ahead lies the subject matter of his academic contribution: Romanticism. Yet this possibility is constrained by what lies behind him, and the inherited Jewish tradition. Each chronology vies for his attention, they are the two wanton boys that control his action and dictate his pleasure.

"You have to fight for your life, that's the condition with which you hold it"

As response, he liberates his inner thought - pen ever frantic - by tenaciously writing letters. Starting, but never fulfilling.

Bellow crafts masterly prose, demonstrating a gift for the English language like few others. His Nobel Prize (1976) was awarded

"for the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work"

and both of these facets are majestically evident here.

The accomplished - yet complex - narrative structure blends objective description with a radical subjectivism, as all true stories of crack-up must. This fast-paced monologue creates a discovery of character, where the only genuine location is Herzog's mind and any modicum of impartial observation is sacrificed for the prickles of the protagonist. In Isaiah Berlin's classic distinction between the hedgehog and the fox, Herzog is probably the former; and an example of human understanding one can expect from an author who began his career writing biography. Here, the words are personal and mirror Bellow's own failures at matrimony to create a divine autobiographical fiction that encompasses fact and fiction, life and art:

'Yes, I was stupid - a blockhead. But that was one of the problems I was working on, you see, that people can be free now but the freedom doesn't have any content. It's like howling emptiness. Madeleine shared my interests, I thought - she's a studious person.'...

I do seem to be a broken-down monarch of some kind, he was thinking, like my old man, the princely immigrant and ineffectual bootlegger.

Also, Bellow makes a pertinent point by questioning the true worth of scholarship: Herzog trawls through a chronology of Western thought to explain his two failed marriages, asking questions of everyone but in a conversation with himself. We meet Comte, Dewey, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Rousseau and Whitehead and hear about evolutionary biology, genetics, psychoanalysis, sociology and statistics; all aboard a whirl of Philosophy. Almost universally ideas are seen as liberation, yet here (refreshingly), they're portrayed as constraints. He reels off letters to the intelligentsia, whilst trapped within the

confines of the abstract. When Herzog finally finds meaning, the futility of his search becomes clear. The lesson is not that there's reason in madness, rather madness in Reason.

The discovery of character and the role of academia are the twin boulders amidst the rubbles of Herzog's thoughts.

Survival! he noted. *Till we figure out what's what. Till the chance comes to exert a positive influence.* (Personal responsibility for history, a trait of Western culture, rooted in the Testaments, Old and New, the idea of the continual improvement of human life on this earth. What else explained Herzog's ridiculous intensity?)

Bellow uses letters as the guiding factor in his tale - they are the outlets of Herzog's thoughts, and a prodding that leads toward plot. Herzog is a fool for nostalgia, and the act of writing about past events leads crisply into his recollections. A letter exists somewhere between conversation and thought. They can serve as a channel for real emotion, since they detach us from personal confrontation. And, writing is a creative process so the very act of putting pen to paper will clarify our thoughts, and spur activity. Most letters sent benefit the sender more than the recipient.

But Herzog's letters aren't sent: they exist only as thoughts, captured in ink, but private and secret. The entire process of communication is disrupted when letters are kept hidden - we have released energy, but no one has received it. There exists an export, with no corresponding import. So without acknowledgment there's no exchange at all: everything you've tried to expel remains fervently encapsulated within you, and disintegration follows.

New York could not hold him now. He had to go to Chicago to see his daughter, confront Madeleine and Gersbach. The decision was not reached; it simply arrived. He went home and changed from the new clothes in which he had been diverting himself, into an old seersucker suit. Luckily, he had not unpacked when he came back from the Vineyard. He checked the valise quickly and left the apartment. Characteristically, he was determined to act without clearly knowing what to do, and even recognising that he had no power over his impulses. He hoped that on the plane, in the clearer atmosphere, he would understand why he was flying.

Herzog is innovative, yet representative. It is an excellent step into the peaks of American fiction, showing a master at the height of his powers, yet distinctive enough to last with you wherever that leads. This is Saul Bellow's bellowing soul, crossing genres and enriched with uniqueness. An almost personal biography that acts as a natural complement to the obituaries poured forth in the wake of the authors passing. What better way to mark the felling of a literary oak, than basking in the warmth of his sapling: pay your respects to the great mans work, by introducing yourself to Herzog.

Such an accomplished interlude at the boundary of sanity takes from you as much as it gives. Be strong though! I urge you to read this book, and succumb to the world of Moses Herzog. One is made to delve so deeply around and inside the mind you will find yourself gasping for breath. There is no greater treatise on the frustrations of thought.