CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Hurricane Man

Reviewed by Michael O'Donnell

SAUL BELLOW: Letters.

Edited by Benjamin Taylor. Viking. 571 pp. $35

In a little essay about Mozart that Saul Bellow wrote toward the end of his life, he expressed admiration for the prodigious composer's facility with melody and harmony, and marveled at the way the music "is given so readily, easily, gratuitously. For it is not a product of effort. What it makes us see is that there are things which must be done easily. Easily or not at all—that is the truth about art." If we needed reminding that Bellow—who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, and every other major literary award besides—warrants mention in the same breath as Mozart, we now have it in his collected letters. This volume, well edited and ably introduced by novelist and essayist Benjamin Taylor, who spent years collecting its contents, is at once an autobiographical portrait and a work of literature unto itself.

Bellow (1915–2005) was one of the brilliant English-prose stylists of the 20th century, rivaled perhaps only by James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov. (The former he admired, the latter he scorned as "one of the great wrong-way rubbers of all time.") He was born in Canada, but when he was nine his family moved to Chicago, where the tasseled dons of Hyde Park strolled past pool halls and loan sharks. Capturing this juxtaposition of things high and low became his unique literary mission. Breathing in the sooty air of the American city, Bellow exhaled hurricanes. He was never anything but a writer, except perhaps a scoundrel; his correspondents were mistresses, wives, editors, lawyers collecting alimony, fans, combatants, and fellow novelists, to whom he was uncommonly generous.

Early in the collection, Bellow provides a sort of mission statement: "A novel, like a letter, should be loose, cover much ground, run swiftly, take risk of mortality and decay." He was responding to a criticism of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), the autobiographical novel that was his breakout masterpiece. He later cringed at its busyness, and it is true that his mature works, especially *Herzog* (1964) and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), are more disciplined and refined. But alone among his novels, *Augie March* displays Bellow's full, flexed musculature: He is like a prizefighter who swings in all directions and somehow lands punches

every time. Beginning with that brassy, counterfactual declaration of independence in the book's opening sentence—"I am an American, Chicago born"—the energy and vitality of Bellow's prose is astonishing. Chicago is the city of broad shoulders, but also the place of giant strides, and after a few pages of *Augie March,* you are sure Bellow could tilt his hat, gather his papers, and walk the Magnificent Mile in just three or four.

The letters display the same extraordinary facility with language that characterizes Bellow's fiction. In 1949, he complained of the kind of mail that had been arriving: "Junk, madness, haughtiness, injury. Enough to provoke a man to abjure all intimacy and withdraw to a tent as far as possible from sea-level, whence life came, and live on snow and hawkshit." After gall bladder surgery, he observed, "The only prominent scar goes through my navel. Out of some sheer primitive magical conviction, I felt the navel to be inviolable." Bellow frequently paused in letters to paint characters in his Dickensian way. Here he is on a university colleague:

> He's the archetype of the learned idiot. He's a Harvard Ph.D., conservative to the flap of his long underwear, collects pornographic poetry, has a pistol range in his basement, knows how to mend a dog sled in driving snow and is an Admiral Peary *manqué,* is president of the burial society of Minneapolis, and takes vitamin B1 all summer long on the belief that mosquitoes will not bite a man whose perspiration is saturated with it.

A running theme is Bellow's complaint to friends that he did *not* find writing easy: He may have blared *Così Fan Tutte* from the speakers as the words came, but he was no Mozart. The perplexed reader spends the entire volume evaluating this claim. Bellow was forever apologizing for being an irregular correspondent, and, according to his biographer, James Atlas, he tossed out pages of outstanding fiction because they weren't perfect. He disciplined himself to spend each morning writing, and finishing a book exhausted him. It humanizes Bellow to see him strain. On the other hand, the letters show that casual brilliance seems to have poured out of his pen. Imagine being a young Philip Roth and receiving these words in 1969: "I knew when I hit Chicago (was it 12 years ago?) and read your stories that you were the real thing. When I was a little kid, there were still blacksmiths around, and I've never forgotten the ring of a real hammer on a real anvil." Whether or not Bellow found making art easy, he certainly made it look easy.

Atlas's definitive 2000 biography, *Bellow,* is excellent but harsh, and Bellow will redeem himself for some readers here, in his own words. The letters bear full witness to his rakish nature: A serial philanderer, he married five times, and usually divorced badly. His expression in the cover photo of the collected letters seems to say, "Darling, be reasonable. It's not as though I actually told you I love you." But the letters also reveal his poignant longing for acceptance from his streetwise father and brothers, his tenderness toward his children, and a fierce love of his friends. It's hard to stay angry with someone who composes lines like this: "My sister's husband has had a stroke again, and this time is partly paralyzed. He lies in the hospital, all the sweetness of his character showing in the new softness of his face. Forgiving everyone."

His letters to and about other writers are among the most fascinating in the collection. He upbraided William Faulkner for seeking to rehabilitate the Hitler sympathizer Ezra Pound. He maintained a workaday chumminess with Ralph Ellison, with whom he once shared lodgings. Evelyn Waugh he denounced as a snob, and Graham Greene as an anti-Semite. George Orwell gets some of the highest praise: "You hardly realize how deep Orwell goes because he is so clear about what he's doing."

Bellow famously wrote people from his own life directly into his fiction, sometimes infuriating them. He was an observer, not an imaginer, and the letters show that the price of his fiction was not borne easily by those around him. In one of the most remarkable letters in the collection, he defends this practice as the artist's prerogative. Bellow placated his childhood friend David Peltz, who protested the appearance of a scene from his

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own life in *Humboldt's Gift,* by saying, "I should think it would touch you that I was moved to put a hand on your shoulder and wanted to remember you as I took off for the moon. . . . You are welcome to all my facts. You know them, I give them to you. If you have the strength to pick them up, take them with my blessing. Touch them with your imagination and I will kiss your hands." *If you have the strength*—that's a big "if," coming from a muscleman.

The entries toward the volume's end are the most affecting. In his later years, Bellow was called upon to deliver many eulogies as his old comrades gave way, one by one. "It wears out your heart," he wrote after his lifelong friend Oscar Tarcov died. As he grew physically frail, he tried to reassure his correspondents: "I do go out of doors and rinse my brains in God's icy air without knowing whether the tears in my eyes come from the cold wind or gratitude to my Creator." At the same time he stepped in as a paternal figure after the English novelist Martin Amis's father, Kingsley, died. Martin Amis has written movingly about his connection to Bellow; now we see Bellow's equally poignant side of this improbable literary relationship as he "willingly take[s] up the slack as a sort of adoptive father."

In 1981, Bellow sent his close friend John Cheever, who was dying, a letter full of admiration:

> You were engaged, as a writer should be, in transforming yourself. When I read your collected stories I was moved to see the transformation taking place on the printed page. There's nothing that counts really except this transforming action of the soul. I loved you for this. I loved you anyway, but for this especially.

The same might be said of Bellow himself. Brittle and brilliant as crystal—as prone to slice those who handled him as to dazzle those who gazed on from afar—Bellow attains that rare stature in which all that really matters is what is on the printed page. We no longer have him, but we will always have that.

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