

Like 35

Tweet 17

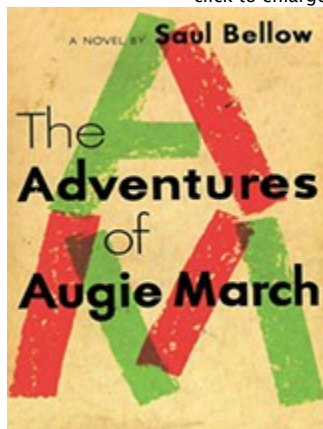
0

Share

## Martin Amis confronts Saul Bellow's Chicago

### The British novelist discusses the 'loud, brilliant, and mean' city of his literary hero

By J.C. Gabel

[The Arts archives »](#)[click to enlarge](#)

When Martin Amis visited Chicago in the 80s it wasn't to promote his latest novel—it was to spend time with his literary hero Saul Bellow.

So it should come as no surprise that, upon hearing the Chicago Public Library had chosen *The Adventures of Augie March* as the fall selection for its One Book, One Chicago program, Amis would come to town to laud "the master." ("I mainly did this event in Chicago for Janis Bellow," he later told me, referring to Bellow's fifth wife and literary executor. "We've remained close.") Amis considers Bellow not just the greatest American writer of the 20th century, but the greatest American writer, period.

Outside the Park Hyatt hotel, where Amis is staying, Bill Young, the literary event curator and quintessential author escort, waits in his black SUV. Amis, dressed in leather boots, a leather jacket, and dark brown fedora—more Indiana Jones than Bogart—slides into the passenger seat and, without missing a beat, lights a cigarette.

Amis recently moved from his native England to Cobble Hill in Brooklyn with his second wife, American writer Isabel Fonseca, and their two daughters, Fernanda and Clio. "The British papers have made up all sorts of rubbish about me, and my family's reasons for moving to the States," he tells me. "They're all fucking lies."

Still, Amis seems reserved. He's congenial, soft-spoken, polite, accommodating—nothing like the swashbuckling caustic wit I've taken away over the years after reading his books, articles, and critical essays.

As a primer for tonight's discussion Amis is rereading his mid-90s *Atlantic Monthly* article about *Augie March*, which is included in his essay collection *The War Against Cliché*. "*The Adventures of Augie March* is the Great American Novel," he wrote. "Search no further. All trails went cold years ago. The quest did what quests very rarely do: it ended."

Amis is quick to settle into the back room of the Harold Washington Library. He asks only for water and a chair so he can sit and review his past writings on Bellow. Several minutes later, John Barron, publisher of the *Sun-Times* and moderator of the evening's discussion, walks into the library's concrete-bunker green room. Barron, who at one point was the *Sun-Times's* literary editor, chats with Amis about his paper's recent Pulitzer Prize for local reporting. "When a paper wins a prize like that you want to win it for local reporting—that's what all city newspapers strive to do."

Amis apologetically excuses himself and heads out to the street to sneak a smoke.

"There are two salient points about how we came to win the Pulitzer that no one really knows," Barron tells me. "The first is the assignments themselves: We had [reporters Frank] Main and [Mark] Konkol embed with a police unit in a specific part of town. Night after night—no murders were committed. It was almost like Main and Konkol were their good luck charms. Unfortunately—and eventually—someone was murdered.

"The second story involves the night the application was due—it also happened to be the night of the big blizzard. One of our staffers literally flagged down the last FedEx driver pulling into the drop station before they shut down due to the weather. We had to make sure our package was postmarked that day."

"Sorry," says Amis, walking back into the room. "We were feeding the reindeers."

It turned out Amis hadn't been to Chicago when he first read *The Adventures of Augie March*. Bellow's prose did the work for him. The city, of course, has reinvented itself several times since Bellow first wrote about Augie's love-hate relationship with the city.

"Make no mistake—Chicago is a demonic presence in *Augie March*," Amis says not long after taking the stage in front of the library's near-capacity crowd. "There are both angels and demons. . . . Saul always loved Chicago. He could sum it up: loud, brilliant, and mean. Chicago is also, as many writers have pointed out, the quintessential American city. It has an American DNA to it."

Bellow kept a low profile when he lived here, especially after he became famous in 1964 with the publication of *Herzog*. He'd grown up in Humboldt Park and loved exploring the city's rough-and-tumble immigrant neighborhoods, observing its residents struggle to get by. Bellow knew Chicago was a better representation of true America than New York.

Amis has a deep admiration for the journey of Bellow's wandering fools. "People always ask me whether Bellow was my literary father," he says. "I would often say 'I've already got one of those'—referring to his famous father, Sir Kingsley Amis—"but in many respects Bellow was my second literary father figure."

In fact, when Amis was writing his "breakthrough novel" *Money*, it was as if he were in competition with both his father and Bellow. But by the mid-80s, Amis surpassed his father in fame. Bellow, on the other hand, remained the untouchable master.

"I'll admit to this," Amis says. "There is a scintilla of hatred, a tiny atom of resentment, knowing that Bellow, unlike many other writers, wrote better than I."

Tags: The Arts, Saul Bellow, Martin Amis, American writers, Brooklyn, Isabel Fonseca, Harold Washington Library, John Barron, Chicago Sun-Times, The Adventures of Augie March



Martin Amis confronts Saul Bellow's Chicago <http://t.co/RsDJ52yo>

Nov 19, 2011 - reply - retweet - .i

