



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Feb. 6, 2024

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Literary Arts Series Spotlights Novelist Saul Bellow

USPS honors acclaimed chronicler of immigrant experience with new stamp

CHICAGO — Author Saul Bellow was honored today with a new stamp, the 34th in the Postal Service’s Literary Arts series.

Bellow considered himself a historian of American identity, populating his books with dreamers and intellectuals searching for meaning in a materialistic, sometimes disorienting world. The subtle analysis of modern culture and immigrant experience woven through Bellow’s writings combined fierce social criticism with a comic gusto that drew in readers.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest authors of the 20th century, Bellow was the recipient of a record three National Book Awards, a Nobel Prize and a Pulitzer Prize.

The stamp features a portrait of the author with a Chicago street scene in the background. He wears a fedora, white turtleneck and dark jacket. Behind him are skyscrapers, with the “L” train running between the buildings. The title “Saul Bellow” is in dark purple letters in the upper-right corner, with “Three Ounce” and “USA” appearing vertically along the left side.

Ethel Kessler, an art director for USPS, designed the stamp, with original art by illustrator Joe Ciardiello based on photographs from 1982. To keep the writer’s image as the focal point, the artist painted much of the background in neutral colors using a pale-yellow wash and some brownish-grays and a bit of purple.

The words “THREE OUNCE” on this stamp indicate its usage value, meaning that it may be used on a mail piece weighing three ounces. Like a Forever® stamp, it will always be valid for the rate printed on it.

Background

Born Solomon Bellows* in Lachine, Quebec, Canada, in 1915, he moved with his family to Chicago in 1925, becoming part of the city’s vibrant immigrant Jewish community. An avid writer since childhood, Bellow graduated from Northwestern University in 1937 with degrees in anthropology and sociology and moved to Wisconsin to study further. However, he soon dropped out of college to focus on writing.

His first writing job was in Chicago with the Works Progress Administration, where he was assigned to write biographies of Midwestern authors. Bellow began an unfinished novel in 1939, then in 1941,

published his first short story, “Two Morning Monologues,” in *Partisan Review*. Two years later, he became a U.S. citizen.

Bellow considered his first two novels, “Dangling Man” (1944) and “The Victim” (1947), as his apprentice work. His third novel, “The Adventures of Augie March” (1953), reached a wider audience and garnered a National Book Award. Set in Chicago, the story follows the progress of a poor Jewish youth as he tries to make sense of the modern world. Unlike the more controlled and conventionally literary style of his first two novels, “Augie March” is written in a freewheeling comic vernacular, mixing high and low culture, that is exemplified in the book’s famous opening line: “I am an American, Chicago born — Chicago, that somber city — and go at things as I have taught myself, freestyle, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent.”

Bellow would be associated with this style, which many regarded as groundbreaking, throughout his career. He would also be associated with Jewish identity, but although many of his characters were Jewish, he did not like being referred to as a “Jewish writer.” With his subtle analysis of modern culture and the immigrant experience, he considered himself a historian of the American identity. Many of his main characters were based on friends and family and indeed on himself and events in his own life. His novels feature bookish intellectuals and dreamers in search of meaning in a materialistic, sometimes disorienting world, which Bellow renders with comic gusto as well as fierce criticism.

Bellow is the only author to date who has received the National Book Awards three times — for “The Adventures of Augie March,” “Herzog” (1964) and “Mr. Sammler’s Planet” (1970). “Herzog” tells the story of the breakdown and recovery of a middle-age college professor. In “Mr. Sammler’s Planet,” a cultured Holocaust survivor struggles to preserve Old World values in an America he finds barbaric and threatening.

More novels and other acclaimed writings were to come. In 1975, he penned the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Humboldt’s Gift” (1975), which offers a study of the relationship between art and power, spirit and matter, in modern America. He followed with the novels “The Dean’s December” (1982) and “More Die of Heartbreak” (1987), novellas like “A Theft” (1989), “The Bellarosa Connection” (1989) and “The Actual” (1997); and short story collections, plays and nonfiction books.

In 1976, Bellow was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature “for the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work.” The National Medal of Arts, the highest award given to artists by the U.S. government, was bestowed on him in 1988. In 1990, the National Book Foundation awarded him the Lifetime Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

Later in his career, Bellow combined writing with teaching at various universities, including the University of Chicago, where he worked for more than 30 years; the University of Minnesota; Princeton University; Bard College; New York University and Boston University. His final novel, “Ravelstein” (2000), written in his 80s, is the story of the relationship between a Bellow-like narrator and a larger-than-life university professor.

Saul Bellow died on April 5, 2005, in Brookline, MA. In his honor, PEN America, a literary organization championing free speech, presented a biennial prize, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award, to an American author whose career achievements put them in the highest rank of American fiction writing. The final award was presented in 2018.

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*An earlier version of this news release listed the novelist's birthname as "Bellow."