BERNARD MALAMUD

Sheldon J. Hershinow

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Chronology

1914	Bernard Malamud is born in Brooklyn, New York, to Bertha and Max Malamud.
1928-32	Attends Erasmus Hall High School.
1932-36	Attends City College of New York; receives bachelor's degree in 1936.
1937-38	Attends Columbia University.
1940	Works as clerk in Bureau of Census, Washington, D.C.
1940-48	Teaches evening classes at Erasmus Hall High School.
1941	Begins writing short stories.
1942	Receives master's degree from Columbia University.
1943	Publishes first stories: "Benefit Performance" in *Threshold* and "The Place Is Different Now" in *American Preface.*
1945	Marries Ann de Chiara; lives in Greenwich Village.
1947	A son, Paul, is born.
1948-49	Teaches evening classes at Harlem Evening High School.
1949-61	Teaches at Oregon State College, Corvallis, Oregon.
1950	Stories appear in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Partisan Review*, *Commentary.*

1952	*The Natural* is published. A daughter, Janna, is born.
1956-57	Malamud receives a *Partisan Review* fellowship in fiction; lives in Rome and travels in Europe.
1957	*The Assistant* is published.
1958	*The Magic Barrel* is published. Malamud receives the Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters for *The Assistant*.
1959	Receives the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel*; receives a Ford Foundation Fellowship in humanities and the arts.
1961	*A New Life* is published. Joins the faculty of Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont.
1963	*Idiots First* is published. Travels in England and Italy.
1964	Becomes a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.
1965	Travels in the Soviet Union, France, and Spain.
1966-68	*The Fixer* is published. Becomes visiting lecturer at Harvard University.
1967	Wins the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for *The Fixer*. Becomes a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
1968	Visits Israel in March.
1969	*Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* is published.
1971	*The Tenants* is published.
1973	*Rembrandt's Hat* is published.
1979	*Dubin's Lives* is published.

Contents

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The Writer as Moral Activist

It seems to me that the writer's most important task, no matter what the current theory of man, or his prevailing mood, is to recapture his image as human being as each of us in his secret heart knows it to be, and as history and literature have from the beginning revealed it.

"Address from the Fiction Winner,"
National Book Award, 1959[1]

In the quarter-century since the publication of his first novel, Bernard Malamud has achieved the stature of a major American author. He has won two National Book Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Reviews of his books abound, and a large body of criticism testifies to the stimulating effect his writing has had upon the literary community. One critic heralded Malamud as a writer who (along with Saul Bellow) has "brought a new note into the American novel," one of personal affirmation of the individual in conflict with impersonal social forces, showing that "American fiction is still capable of sudden growth, development and expansion in directions scarcely predictable."[2] His six novels and four collections of short stories have gained for Malamud a popular and critical following unstinting in its praise and respect.

Although the subjects and settings of Malamud's works vary widely, one characteristic remains consistent throughout: his moral earnestness. In a 1958 interview, Malamud complained that American fiction "is loaded with sickness, homosexuality, fragmented man. . . . It should be filled with love and beauty and hope. We are underselling man."[3] In subsequent inter-

views, Malamud has consistently emphasized that he bases all of his writing on a belief in the nobility of the human spirit and that only readers who respect human beings can respect his fiction.

Malamud's commitment to a renewal of faith in humanity is applauded by enthusiastic readers and critics around the world who praise his ability to come close to the center of human feeling. In so "foreign" a place as Japan, at least five of Malamud's books have been translated and are well known among university students and professors. As the novelist Philip Roth said, "What it is to be human, to be humane, is his subject: connection, indebtedness, responsibility, these are his moral concerns."[4]

Although Malamud's stated purpose puts unusual emphasis on the writer's role as a moralist, one ought not forget that his vehicle of expression is fiction. He has emphasized that "artists cannot be ministers. As soon as they attempt it, they destroy their artistry. To me writing must be true; it must have emotional depth; it must be imaginative. It must enflame, destroy, change the reader."[5] In his works, Malamud's moral purpose combines with a complex form of irony that one critic has called "sly" because it often seems to undercut his moral vision at the same time that it affirms it. This infuses Malamud's fiction with an elusive quality that has for a generation both intrigued and frustrated commentators on his work.

A difficulty facing any commentator of Malamud's fiction is that of giving artistic judgments about a moralistic writer. In general, critics devote a great deal of attention to the ideas in Malamud's fiction. However, Malamud is not a probing thinker, and too great an emphasis on his morality and affirmation of human potential can cause one to misjudge his artistic achievement. Yet Malamud deliberately asks to be treated as a moralist; he fully recognizes that good fic-

tion is serious, that it can influence people in profound ways. Thus, critics must separate the moral and aesthetic elements in Malamud's fiction; they have an obligation to comment on its overall effect, as well as to analyze its aesthetic success. In accord with this view, the plan of this monograph is to reserve for a concluding chapter evaluation of Malamud's moral perspective.

Malamud only rarely grants interviews. In a recent session (conducted, according to his wishes, by mail),[6] Malamud stated that he dislikes explaining his work because by describing his intent he may, in a sense, betray it. He fears that people may substitute what he says about his writing for their own imaginative reading of it. He does not like to reveal the sources of his stories, and he emphasizes that thoughtful readers should not confuse the writer's life with his fiction or even devote much effort to relating the two. There is, in fact, a marked contrast between the sobriety of Malamud's private life and the exuberant imagination and zest for life characteristic of his fiction.

Perhaps because of Malamud's desire for privacy, no book-length biography of him has ever been written, and very little information about his life has been included in works of criticism. The following biographical sketch is drawn from a brief entry in the *Current Biography Yearbook* and from scattered biographical information that appears in a handful of interviews.[7]

Bernard Malamud was born in Brooklyn in 1914 to Bertha Fidelman Malamud and Max Malamud. His parents were Jewish immigrants from Russia who eked out a meager living from a small grocery store in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Despite their poverty and lack of formal education, they encouraged their son's desire for education and his ambition to become a

writer. His mother, who came from a theatrical family, died at forty-four, when he was only fifteen. Malamud's experiences in Brooklyn, his close ties with his parents, and his observation of his neighbors contribute to the rich texture and vitality of many of his memorable stories and characters.

From 1928 to 1932, Malamud attended Erasmus Hall High School. He graduated from New York City College in 1936 and received his master's degree from Columbia University in 1942. He wanted to teach English in the New York City schools but found teaching positions scarce in the late days of the Great Depression. Thus, he accepted a federal appointment with the Bureau of Census in Washington, D.C. While there, Malamud had short pieces published in the *Washington Post.*

Returning to New York City and to Erasmus Hall High School, Malamud taught evening classes to free his days for writing. He and Ann de Chiara married in 1945 and had a son, Paul, two years later. During this time his stories were published in *Threshold* and *American Preface.* In 1948 and 1949 he taught evening classes at Harlem High School. Stories such as "Black Is My Favorite Color" and "Angel Levine" express, the former in a realistic and the latter in a fantastic vein, Malamud's life in Brooklyn and his involvement in the lives of blacks, Jews, and other ethnic groups.

In 1949 he accepted a position in the English Department at Oregon State College, Corvallis, where he remained until 1961. As a writer teaching without the customary doctoral degree at a rather tradition-bound institution, and as an artist at a technical and agricultural school, Malamud's position was a difficult one. He taught, for the most part, courses in freshman composition and an occasional introductory literature course or short-story class. He earned promotion to

assistant professor in 1954 and to associate professor in 1959.

Malamud is a writer who works well alone—away from centers of literary fads and trends—and so his years at Oregon State were productive ones. In addition to writing stories that appeared in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Partisan Review*, *Discovery*, *Commentary*, *The American Mercury*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker*, Malamud published three significant volumes of fiction before leaving Oregon.

His first novel, *The Natural* (1952), brought Malamud to the attention of the literary community as a promising young writer. In 1956, Malamud received the *Partisan Review* fiction fellowship, which enabled him to live in Rome and travel in Europe. The influence of his experiences in Italy can be seen in such stories as "The Maid's Shoes," "The Lady of the Lake," "The Last Mohican," and "Behold the Key." In an interview, Malamud explained that his experience in Italy was greatly enhanced by his wife's Italian background. She had been to Italy and could speak fluent Italian. Through her relatives and acquaintances Malamud quickly became immersed in Italian life.

Malamud's second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), became a critical and popular success almost overnight, and Malamud soon received recognition as a major writer, winning the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Daroff Fiction Award of the Jewish Book Council of America. *The Magic Barrel* (1958), Malamud's first collection of short stories, was similarly hailed as the work of a major writer. For *The Magic Barrel*, Malamud won the National Book Award in 1959.

The setting for the next period of Malamud's life was Bennington College in Vermont, where he joined

the faculty of the Language and Literature Division in 1961, the year in which *A New Life* was published. This novel, started at the writer's colony of Yaddo, New York, in August 1958, is about a New Yorker who goes West to begin a new spiritual life. It is the story of a Jewish teacher in a non-Jewish milieu, satirically reflecting Malamud's Oregon experiences and the impact of the rural West upon his city-conditioned vision.

In 1963 Malamud's short stories appeared in periodicals as diverse as *Commentary* and *Playboy*. "Naked Nude," one of the Italian stories featuring Arthur Fidelman as protagonist, was awarded *Playboy*'s annual fiction prize. This and some of his other previously published stories were collected in *Idiots First* (1963). In 1964 he became a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters Book Award Committee.

During the several years after leaving Oregon, Malamud also traveled extensively in France, Spain, and the Soviet Union; the latter became the setting of his fourth novel, *The Fixer* (1966). For *The Fixer*, Malamud received both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for literature. The following year, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer made a film version of *The Fixer*, which many reviewers thought lacked the power of Malamud's novel.

Dividing his time, in recent years, between his native New York City and Bennington College, Vermont, Malamud has continued to write finely honed, moving fiction. His four most recent books, while expanding his earlier thematic and artistic concerns, show an increasing diversity of subjects, techniques, and settings that strengthen his standing as a major living American writer.

Malamud's first novel, *The Natural*, is a mythic

treatment of an imaginary baseball hero whose career traces an arc from country bumpkin to the heights of glory and back to obscurity because of a nearly fatal moral weakness. Although it received mixed reviews at the time, a retrospective look shows that many of the early commentators did not fully understand or appreciate *The Natural*'s innovative blending of humor, fantasy, romance, and myth.

With *The Assistant* and *The Magic Barrel*, Malamud developed a distinctive subject and style that allowed a flowering of his extraordinary talent. *The Assistant* goes back to Malamud's Brooklyn childhood for its setting and characters. The protagonist, like Malamud's father, is an impoverished Jewish storekeeper, "a good man" who finds in the spirit of Judaism a soul-saving compassion for humanity. Some of the stories in *The Magic Barrel* (and in *Idiots First*) are set in Italy, but most, like *The Assistant*, return to Brooklyn and the gray lives of impoverished Jewish immigrants.

That many of Malamud's characters are Jews seems fitting. As he explained, "I know them. But more important, I write about them because the Jews are absolutely the very stuff of drama."[8] Out of the rhythms and tonalities of Yiddish-speaking American life in New York City, he creates a fictional world that is at once unique and universal.

Knowing that Malamud is a writer with a powerful moral vision, is of Jewish background, and frequently writes about Jewish characters, one might assume that he is a religious writer—one primarily concerned with a Jewish framework of life. Such a conclusion would miss the mark. Malamud is a secular Jew whose Jewishness is an ethnic identity and moral perspective far more than it is a religious persuasion. What infuse his writing are the aspirations, struggles, and indignities of an ethnic and cultural subgroup—

the Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. Jewish theology and ritual per se are not the focus. According to Malamud's own testimony, he did not actually learn of Judaism (that is, Jewish religious thought) until he read about it as an adult. In fact, Malamud is sometimes criticized by Jewish publications for failing to include specifically Jewish religious content in his works.

Malamud's Jews struggle in a pitiful existence. Unlike Jews in the works of Sholom Aleichem, Mendele Modher Sforim, and other traditional Yiddish writers with whom he is often compared, Malamud's characters are not practicing Jews, nor are they nourished by a strong sense of community—they suffer in lonely isolation. Yet, they possess instinctive dignity and inbred humanitarianism. They express themselves in a Yiddishized English that may lack elegance but somehow conveys a strong sense of identity. In effect, then, Malamud's characters reflect the experience of East-European Jews as an oppressed people who somehow managed to survive centuries of humiliation and persecution without losing their humanity. Malamud uses Jewishness as an ethical symbol. In his works the Jew becomes a metaphor for the good man striving to withstand the dehumanizing pressures of the modern world. His characters hold their ethical stances out of a sense of humanity, and this humanity is only indirectly linked to their religious heritage.

By 1958, then, the subject of Malamud's most characteristic fiction had become clear: Jews, representative of mankind, living in poverty and undergoing existential anguish. Most often they were portrayed via a unique fusion of ground-gripping realism and high-flying fantasy, all seasoned by a tough, biting comic irony of the kind often associated

with Jewish comedians such as Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, or Woody Allen.

The Fixer differs from Malamud's previous novels in several ways. It is his only work based upon an actual historical incident, the Mendel Beiliss case, an infamous example of cruelty and injustice revealed in the degrading persecution of a Jewish handyman. And unlike Malamud's other novels, the setting is tsarist Russia rather than America. Most of the themes that Malamud had introduced into his earlier works are here refined and reworked into a powerful, controlled, and effective statement of human possibilities and limitations.

Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition is a compilation of all the stories about Arthur Fidelman, a failed American painter in Italy. It develops a concern apparent in some of Malamud's earliest stories: the tension between life and art. The most broadly comic of Malamud's works, *Pictures of Fidelman* is also the most experimental. Malamud has explained that he had conceived the idea for the collection soon after writing "The Last Mohican" in Rome in 1957. At that time he had worked out an outline of other Fidelman stories, planning to have the adventures develop one theme in the form of a picaresque novel. The collection does, in fact, have a development of character and theme close to that of a novel.

The stories in *Pictures of Fidelman* drew critical attention to another aspect of Malamud's art: his brilliant adaptation of Yiddish folk materials. Many critics recognized in the protagonist, Arthur Fidelman, a contemporary version of the traditional Yiddish folk figure, the schlemiel—a comic bumbler whose bad luck is exceeded only by the goodness of his heart. After publication of these stories, critics increasingly began to comment on Malamud's use of the

schlemiel and other Jewish folk characters in his earlier works, especially in *The Assistant*, *The Magic Barrel*, *The Fixer*, and *Idiots First*. Malamud's use of Yiddish folklore has brought him the label of "Jewish writer," a classification he rejects.

The Tenants draws upon Malamud's earlier experience as a teacher in Harlem and his lifelong concern with ethnic groups, especially Jews and blacks. In an empty and crumbling tenement of the inner city, two men—a black and a Jew, both writers—meet, and their confrontation as rivals becomes a paradigm for human relations in our time. Here Malamud once again writes of the sordid wasteland of back alleys in a modern city, but he incorporates more elements of fantasy than appeared in any of his novels since *The Natural*. The symbolic confrontation of Jew and black takes place in a surrealistic atmosphere that blends realism and fantasy so thoroughly that the reader cannot always determine with certainty where reality ends and dream begins. In *The Tenants*, Malamud fulfills another of his stated artistic goals: to recreate in his fiction the sense of uncertainty that is part of life. For Malamud, ambiguity and surprise play a vital role in both the drama of life and the richness of art.

His fourth collection of short stories, *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973), reflects Malamud's fascination with the tension between life and art, now transferred from Italy to Malamud's native New York. These stories confirm what some critics have long claimed: that Malamud is a master storyteller, one of the finest writers of our day, in the genre of the short story as well as the novel.

Dubin's Lives (1979) is a long and ambitious novel about love, marriage, and aging. It has received very mixed reviews. This novel reveals a surprising new side of Malamud. Centering on a middle-aged biographer, a transplanted New Yorker, who struggles to grow old

gracefully, the story takes place in rural upstate New York. Drawing on twenty-years of rural living, first in Oregon and then in Vermont, Malamud sensitively evokes the beauty of the New England landscape. Usually associated with blighted cityscapes, Malamud here demonstrates his continuing ability to expand the range of his art.

Despite the diversity of techniques, subjects, and settings in his fiction, Malamud creates a unified moral vision based upon the values of humanism, which have been central to Western civilization since the ancient Greeks. As a writer, Malamud starts by assuming certain shared values—the primacy of human aspiration, the power of love, the transcendent potential of meaningful suffering and self-sacrifice, the beauty of the human spirit. This humanistic vision, perhaps because of Malamud's early family life among Jewish immigrants, was especially influenced by the central literary and religious book of the Judeo-Christian tradition, The Old Testament, particularly the "Book of Job."

Despite his extensive use of Jewish characters and settings, Malamud is very much an American writer who works within an American literary tradition. Many critics agree that American literature has been heavily influenced by the romance. Hawthorne, for example, was convinced that romance (or the romance-novel) was the predestined form of American fiction. In his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* he says that the problem confronting the American author is to find "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." In other words, Hawthorne conceived of the field of action as a state of mind rather than a place—the borderland of the