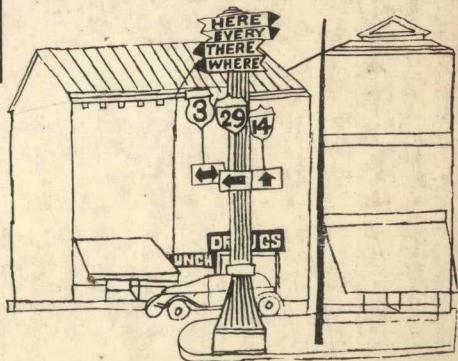




# SAUL BELLOW

WINNER OF THE 1976 NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

## MR SAMMLER'S PLANET



**Penguin Books**  
**Mr Sammler's Planet**

Saul Bellow was born in Canada in 1915 and grew up in Chicago. He attended Chicago, Northwestern and Wisconsin Universities and has a B.Sc. in anthropology. He has been a visiting lecturer at Princeton and New York Universities and associate professor at the University of Minnesota, and has also lived in Paris and travelled extensively in Europe. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1948 and has received a grant from the Ford Foundation; he is a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and was elected the third Neil Gunn Fellow by the Scottish Arts Council in 1976. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, the first American to win the prize since John Steinbeck in 1962. The Royal Swedish Academy, which makes the award, singled out for special praise, *Seize the Day*, as one of the classic works of our time.

In addition to stories and reviews contributed to many leading American magazines and quarterlies, Saul Bellow has also published *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1948), *Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories* (1951), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), which, like *Herzog* (1964), won the National Book Award, *Seize the Day* (1957), *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), *The Last Analysis* (1966), *Mosby's Memoirs* (1969), *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1969), *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) and *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976). (Many of these have been published in Penguins.)





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## I

Shortly after dawn, or what would have been dawn in a normal sky, Mr Artur Sammler with his bushy eye took in the books and papers of his West Side bedroom and suspected strongly that they were the wrong books, the wrong papers. In a way it did not matter much to a man of seventy-plus, and at leisure. You had to be a crank to insist on being right. Being right was largely a matter of explanations. Intellectual man had become an explaining creature. Fathers to children, wives to husbands, lecturers to listeners, experts to laymen, colleagues to colleagues, doctors to patients, man to his own soul, explained. The roots of this, the causes of the other, the source of events, the history, the structure, the reasons why. For the most part, in one ear out the other. The soul wanted what it wanted. It had its own natural knowledge. It sat unhappily on superstructures of explanation, poor bird, not knowing which way to fly.

The eye closed briefly. A Dutch drudgery, it occurred to Sammler, pumping and pumping to keep a few acres of dry ground. The invading sea being a metaphor for the multiplication of facts and sensations. The earth being an earth of ideas.

He thought, since he had no job to wake up to, that he might give sleep a second chance to resolve certain difficulties imaginatively for him, and pulled up the disconnected electric blanket with its internal sinews and lumps. The satin binding was nice to the finger-tips. He was still drowsy, but not really inclined to sleep. Time to be conscious.

He sat and plugged in the electric coil. Water had been prepared at bedtime. He liked to watch the changes of the ashen wires. They came to life with fury, throwing tiny sparks and sinking into red rigidity under the Pyrex laboratory flask. Deeper. Blenching. He had only one good eye. The left

distinguished only light and shade. But the good eye was dark-bright, full of observation through the overhanging hairs of the brow as in some breeds of dog. For his height he had a small face. The combination made him conspicuous.

His conspicuousness was on his mind; it worried him. For several days, Mr Sammler returning on the customary bus late afternoons from the Forty-second Street Library had been watching a pickpocket at work. The man got on at Columbus Circle. The job, the crime, was done by Seventy-second Street. Mr Sammler if he had not been a tall straphanger would not with his one good eye have seen these things happening. But now he wondered whether he had not drawn too close, whether he had also been seen seeing. He wore smoked glasses, at all times protecting his vision, but he couldn't be taken for a blind man. He didn't have the white cane, only a furled umbrella, British-style. Moreover, he didn't have the look of blindness. The pickpocket himself wore dark shades. He was a powerful Negro in a camel's-hair coat, dressed with extraordinary elegance, as if by Mr Fish of the West End, or Turnbull and Asser of Jermyn Street (Mr Sammler knew his London.) The Negro's perfect circles of gentian violet banded with lovely gold turned towards Sammler, but the face showed the effrontery of a big animal. Sammler was not timid, but he had had as much trouble in life as he wanted. A good deal of this, waiting for assimilation, would never be accommodated. He suspected the criminal was aware that a tall old white man (passing as blind?) had observed, had seen the minutest details of his crimes. Staring down. As if watching open-heart surgery. And though he dissembled, deciding not to turn aside when the thief looked at him, his elderly, his compact, civilized face coloured strongly, the short hairs bristled, the lips and gums were stinging. He felt a constriction, a clutch of sickness at the base of the skull where the nerves, muscles, blood vessels were tightly interlaced. The breath of wartime Poland passing over the damaged tissues — that nerve-spaghetti, as he thought of it.

Buses were bearable, subways were killing. Must he give up the bus? He had not minded his own business as a man of seventy in New York should do. It was always Mr Sammler's

problem that he didn't know his proper age, didn't appreciate his situation, unprotected here by position, by privileges of remoteness made possible by an income of fifty thousand dollars in New York – club membership, taxis, doormen, guarded approaches. For him it was the buses, or the grinding subway, lunch at the automat. No cause for grave complaint, but his years as an 'Englishman', two decades in London as correspondent for Warsaw papers and journals, had left him with attitudes not especially useful to a refugee in Manhattan. He had developed expressions suited to an Oxford common room; he had the face of a British Museum reader. Sammler as a school-boy in Cracow before World War I fell in love with England. Most of that nonsense had been knocked out of him. He had reconsidered the whole question of Anglophilia, thinking sceptically about Salvador de Madariaga, Mario Praz, André Maurois and Colonel Bramble. He knew the phenomenon. Still, confronted by the elegant brute in the bus he had seen picking a purse – the purse still hung open – he adopted an English tone. A dry, a neat, a prim face declared that one had not crossed anyone's boundary; one was satisfied with one's own business. But under the high armpits Mr Sammler was intensely hot, wet; hanging on his strap, sealed in by bodies, receiving their weight and laying his own on them as the fat tyres took the giant curve at Seventy-second Street with a growl of flabby power.

He didn't in fact appear to know his age, or at what point of life he stood. You could see that in his way of walking. On the streets, he was tense, quick, erratically light and reckless, the elderly hair stirring on the back of his head. Crossing, he lifted the rolled umbrella high and pointed to show cars, buses, speeding trucks, and cabs bearing down on him the way he intended to go. They might run him over, but he could not help his style of striding blind.

With the pickpocket we were in an adjoining region of recklessness. He knew the man was working the Riverside bus. He had seen him picking purses, and he had reported it to the police. The police were not greatly interested in the report. It had made Sammler feel like a fool to go immediately to a phone-booth on Riverside Drive. Of course the phone was



smashed. Most outdoor telephones were smashed, crippled. They were urinals, also. New York was getting worse than Naples or Salonika. It was like an Asian, an African town, from this standpoint. The opulent sections of the city were not immune. You opened a jewelled door into degradation, from hypercivilized Byzantine luxury straight into the state of nature, the barbarous world of colour erupting from beneath. It might well be barbarous on either side of the jewelled door. Sexually, for example. The thing evidently, as Mr Sammler was beginning to grasp, consisted in obtaining the privileges, and the free ways of barbarism, under the protection of civilized order, property rights, refined technological organization, and so on. Yes, that must be it.

Mr Sammler ground his coffee in a square box, cranking counter-clockwise between long knees. To commonplace actions he brought a special pedantic awkwardness. In Poland, France, England, students, young gentlemen of his time, had been unacquainted with kitchens. Now he did things that cooks and maids had once done. He did them with a certain priestly stiffness. Acknowledgement of social descent. Historical ruin. Transformation of society. It was beyond personal humbling. He had gotten over those ideas during the war in Poland – utterly gotten over all that, especially the idiotic pain of losing class privileges. As well as he could with one eye, he darned his own socks, sewed his buttons, scrubbed his own sink, winter-treated his woollens in the spring with a spray can. Of course there were ladies, his daughter, Shula, his niece (by marriage), Margotte Arkin, in whose apartment he lived. They did for him, when they thought of it. Sometimes they did a great deal, but not dependably, routinely. The routines he did himself. It was conceivably even part of his youthfulness – youthfulness sustained with certain tremors. Sammler knew these tremors. It was amusing – Sammler noted in old women wearing textured tights, in old sexual men, this quiver of vivacity with which they obeyed the sovereign youth-style. The powers are the powers – overlords, kings, gods. And of course no one knew when to quit. No one made sober decent terms with death.

The grounds in the little drawer of the mill he held above the

flask. The red coil went deeper, whiter, white. The kinks had tantrums. Beads of water flashed up. Individually, the pioneers gracefully went to the surface. Then they all seethed together. He poured in the grounds. In his cup, a lump of sugar, a dusty spoonful of Pream. In the night table he kept a bag of onion rolls from Zabar's. They were in plastic, a transparent uterine bag fastened with a white plastic clip. The night table, copper-lined, formerly a humidor, kept things fresh. It had belonged to Margotte's husband, Ussher Arkin. Arkin, killed three years ago in a plane crash, a good man, was missed, was regretted, mourned by Sammler. When he was invited by the widow to occupy a bedroom in the large apartment on West Ninetieth Street, Sammler asked to have Arkin's humidor in his room. Sentimental herself, Margotte said, 'Of course, Uncle. What a nice thought. You did love Ussher.' Margotte was German, romantic. Sammler was something else. He was not even her uncle. She was the niece of his wife, who had died in Poland in 1940. His late wife. The widow's late aunt. Wherever you looked, or tried to look, there were the late. It took some getting used to.

Grapefruit juice he drank from a can with two triangular punctures kept on the window sill. The curtain parted as he reached and he looked out. Brownstones, balustrades, bay windows, wrought-iron. Like stamps in an album – the dun rose of buildings cancelled by the heavy black of grilles, of corrugated rainspouts. How very heavy human life was here, in forms of bourgeois solidity. Attempted permanence was sad. We were now flying to the moon. Did one have a right to private expectations, being like those bubbles in the flask? But then also people exaggerated the tragic accents of their condition. They stressed too hard the disintegrated assurances; what formerly was believed, trusted, was now bitterly circled in black irony. The rejected bourgeois black of stability thus translated. That too was improper, incorrect. People justifying idleness, silliness, shallowness, distemper, lust – turning former respectability inside out.

Such was Sammler's eastward view, a soft asphalt belly rising, in which lay steaming sewer navels. Spalled side-walks with

clusters of ash cans. Brownstones. The yellow brick of elevator buildings like his own. Little copses of television antennas. Whiplike, graceful thrilling metal dendrites drawing images from the air, bringing brotherhood, communion to immured apartment people. Westward the Hudson came between Sammler and the great Spry industries of New Jersey. These flashed their electric message through intervening night. SPRY. But then he was half blind.

In the bus he had been seeing well enough. He saw a crime committed. He reported it to the cops. They were not greatly shaken. He might then have stayed away from that particular bus, but instead he tried hard to repeat the experience. He went to Columbus Circle and hung about until he saw his man again. Four fascinating times he had watched the thing done, the crime, the first afternoon staring down at the masculine hand that came from behind lifting the clasp and tipping the pocket-book lightly to make it fall open. Sammler saw a polished Negro forefinger without haste, with no criminal tremor, turning aside a plastic folder with Social Security or credit cards, emery sticks, a lipstick capsule, coral paper tissues, nipping open the catch of a change purse – and there lay the green of money. Still at the same rate, the fingers took out the dollars. Then with the touch of a doctor on a patient's belly the Negro moved back the slope leather, turned the glided scallop catch. Sammler, feeling his head small, shrunk with strain, the teeth tensed, still was looking at the patent-leather bag riding, picked, on the woman's hip, finding that he was irritated with her. That she felt nothing. What an idiot! Going around with some kind of stupid mould in her skull. Zero instincts, no grasp of New York. While the man turned from her, broad-shouldered in the camel's-hair coat. The dark glasses, the original design by Christian Dior, a powerful throat banded by a tab collar and a cherry silk necktie spouting out. Under the African nose, a cropped moustache. Ever so slightly inclining towards him, Sammler believed he could smell French perfume from the breast of the camel's-hair coat. Had the man noticed him then? Had he perhaps followed him home? Of this Sammler was not sure.

He didn't give a damn for the glamour, the style, the art of

criminals. They were no social heroes to him. He had had some talks on this very matter with one of his younger relations, Angela Gruner, the daughter of Dr Arnold Gruner in New Rochelle, who had brought him over to the States in 1947, digging him out of the DP camp in Salzburg. Because Arnold (Elya) Gruner had Old World family feelings. And studying the lists of refugees in the Yiddish papers, he had found the names Artur and Shula Sammler. Angela, who was in Sammler's neighbourhood several times a week because her psychiatrist was just around the corner, often stopped in for a visit. She was one of those handsome, passionate, rich girls who were always an important social and human category. A bad education. In literature, mostly French. At Sarah Lawrence College. And Mr Sammler had to try hard to remember the Balzac he had read in Cracow in 1913. *Vautrin* the escaped criminal. From the hulks. *Trompe-la-mort*. No, he didn't have much use for the romance of the outlaw. Angela sent money to defence funds for black murderers and rapists. That was her business of course.

However, Mr Sammler had to admit that once he had seen the pickpocket at work he wanted very much to see the thing again. He didn't know why. It was a powerful event, and illicitly – that is, against his own stable principles – he craved a repetition. One detail of old readings he recalled without effort – the moment in *Crime and Punishment* at which Raskolnikov brought down the axe on the bare head of the old woman, her thin grey-streaked grease-smearred hair, the rat's-tail braid fastened by a broken horn comb on her neck. That is to say that horror, crime, murder, did vivify all the phenomena, the most ordinary details of experience. In evil as in art there was illumination. It was, of course, like the tale by Charles Lamb, burning down a house to roast a pig. Was a general conflagration necessary? All you needed was a controlled fire in the right place. Still, to ask everyone to refrain from setting fires until the thing could be done in the right place, in a higher manner, was possibly too much. And while Sammler, getting off the bus, intended to phone the police, he nevertheless received from the crime the benefit of an enlarged vision. The air was brighter – late afternoon, daylight-saving time. The world, Riverside

Drive, was wickedly lighted up. Wicked because the clear light made all objects so explicit, and this explicitness taunted Mr Minutely-Observant Artur Sammler. All metaphysicians please note. Here is how it is. You will never see more clearly. And what do you make of it? This phone booth has a metal floor; smooth-hinged the folding green doors, but the floor is smarting with dry urine, the plastic telephone instrument is smashed, and a stump is hanging at the end of the cord.

Not in three blocks did he find a phone he could safely put a dime into, and so he went home. In his lobby the building management had set up a television screen so that the doorman could watch for criminals. But the doorman was always off somewhere. The buzzing rectangle of electronic radiance was vacant. Underfoot was the respectable carpet, brown as gravy. The inner gate of the elevator, supple brass diamonds folding, grimy and gleaming. Sammler went into the apartment and sat on the sofa in the foyer, which Margotte had covered with large squares of Woolworth bandannas, tied at the corners and pinned to the old cushions. He dialled the police and said, 'I want to report a crime.'

'What kind of crime?'

'A pickpocket.'

'Just a minute, I'll connect you.'

There was a long buzz. A voice toneless with indifference or fatigue said, 'Yes.'

Mr Sammler in his foreign Polish Oxonian English tried to be as compressed, direct, and factual as possible. To save time. To avoid complicated interrogation, needless detail.

'I wish to report a pickpocket on the Riverside bus.'

'O.K.'

'Sir?'

'O.K. I said O.K., report.'

'A Negro, about six feet tall, about two hundred pounds, about thirty-five years old, very good-looking, very well dressed.'

'O.K.'

'I thought I should call in.'

'O.K.'

'Are you going to do anything?'

'We're supposed to, aren't we? What's your name?'

'Artur Sammler.'

'All right, Art. Where do you live?'

'Dear sir, I will tell you, but I am asking what you intend to do about this man.'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Arrest him.'

'We have to catch him first.'

'You should put a man on the bus.'

'We haven't got a man to put on the bus. There are lots of buses, Art, and not enough men. Lots of conventions, banquets, and so on we have to cover, Art. V.I.P.s and Brass. There are lots of ladies shopping at Lord and Taylor, Bonwit's, and Saks's, leaving purses on chairs while they go to feel the goods.'

'I understand. You don't have the personnel, and there are priorities, political pressures. But I could point out the man.'

'Some other time.'

'You don't want him pointed out?'

'Sure, but we have a waiting list.'

'I have to get on your list?'

'That's right, Abe.'

'Artur.'

'Arthur.'

Tensely sitting forward in bright lamplight, Artur Sammler like a motorcyclist who has been struck in the forehead by a pebble from the road, trivially stung, smiled with long lips. America! (he was speaking to himself). Advertised throughout the universe as *the* most desirable, most exemplary of all nations.

'Let me make sure I understand you, officer - mister detective. This man is going to rob more people, but you aren't going to do anything about it. Is that right?'

It was right - confirmed by silence, though no ordinary silence. Mr Sammler said, 'Good-bye, sir.'

After this, when Sammler should have shunned the bus, he rode it oftener than ever. The thief had a regular route, and he dressed for the ride, for his work. Always gorgeously garbed. Mr Sammler was struck once, but not astonished, to see that he

wore a single gold earring. This was too much to keep to himself, and for the first time he then mentioned to Margotte, his niece and landlady, to Shula, his daughter, that this handsome, this striking, arrogant pickpocket, this African prince or great black beast was seeking whom he might devour between Columbus Circle and Verdi Square.

To Margotte it was fascinating. Anything fascinating she was prepared to discuss all day, from every point of view with full German pedantry. Who was this black? What were his origins, his class or racial attitudes, his psychological views, his true emotions, his aesthetic, his political ideas? Was he a revolutionary? Would he be for black guerrilla warfare? Unless Sammler had private thoughts to occupy him, he couldn't sit through these talks with Margotte. She was sweet but on the theoretical side very tedious, and when she settled down to an earnest theme, one was lost. This was why he ground his own coffee, boiled water in his flask, kept onion rolls in the humidor, even urinated in the washbasin (rising on his toes to a meditation on the inherent melancholy of animal nature, continually in travail, according to Aristotle). Because mornings could disappear while Margotte in her goodness speculated. He had learned his lesson one week when she wished to analyse Hannah Arendt's phrase *The Banality of Evil*, and kept him in the living-room, sitting on a sofa (made of foam rubber, laid on plywood supported by two-inch sections of pipe, backed by trapezoids of cushion all covered in dark-grey denim). He couldn't bring himself to say what he thought. For one thing, she seldom stopped to listen. For another, he doubted that he could make himself clear. Moreover, most of her family had been destroyed by the Nazis like his own, though she herself had gotten out in 1937. Not he. The war had caught him, with Shula and his late wife, in Poland. They had gone there to liquidate his father-in-law's estate. Lawyers should have attended to this, but it was important to Antonina to supervise it in person. She was killed in 1940, and her father's optical-instrument factory (a small one) was dismantled and sent to Austria. No post-war indemnity was paid. Margotte received payment from the West German government for her family's property in Frankfurt. Arkin

hadn't left her much; she needed this German money. You didn't argue with people in such circumstances. Of course he had circumstances of his own, as she recognized. He had actually gone through it, lost his wife, lost an eye. Still, on the theoretical side, they could discuss the question. Purely as a question. Uncle Artur, sitting, knees high in the sling chair, his pale-tufted eyes shaded by tinted glasses, the forked veins coming down from the swells of his forehead and the big mouth determined to be silent.

'The idea being,' said Margotte, 'that here is no great spirit of evil. Those people were too insignificant, Uncle. They were just ordinary lower-class people, administrators, small bureaucrats, or *Lumpenproletariat*. A mass society does not produce great criminals. It's because of the division of labour all over society which broke up the whole idea of general responsibility. Piece-work did it. It's like instead of a forest with enormous trees, you have to think of small plants with shallow roots. Modern civilization doesn't create great individual phenomena any more.'

The late Arkin, generally affectionate and indulgent, knew how to make Margotte shut up. He was a tall, splendid, half-bald, moustached man with a good subtle brain in his head. Political theory had been his field. He taught at Hunter College – taught women. Charming, idiotic, nonsensical girls, he used to say. Now and then, a powerful female intelligence, but very angry, very complaining, too much sex-ideology, poor things. It was when he was on his way to Cincinnati to lecture at some Hebrew college that his plane crashed. Sammler noticed how his widow tended now to impersonate him. She had become the political theorist. She spoke in his name, as presumably he would have done, and there was no one to protect his ideas. The common fate also of Socrates and Jesus. Up to a point, Arkin had enjoyed Margotte's tormenting conversation, it must be admitted. Her nonsense pleased him, and under the moustache he would grin to himself, long arms reaching to the ends of the trapezoidal cushions, and his stockinged feet set upon each other (he took off his shoes the instant he sat down). But after she had gone on a while, he would say, 'Enough, enough of this



**Weimar schmaltz. Cut it, Margotte!** That big virile interruption would never be heard again in this cockeyed living-room.

Margotte was short, round, full. Her legs in black net stockings, especially the underthighs, were attractively heavy. Seated, she put out one foot like a dancer, instep curved forward. She set her strong little fist on her haunch. Arkin once said to Uncle Sammler that she was a first-class device as long as someone aimed her in the right direction. She was a good soul, he told him, but the energetic goodness could be tremendously misapplied. Sammler saw this for himself. She couldn't wash a tomato without getting her sleeves wet. The place was burglarized because she raised the window to admire a sunset and forgot to lock it. The burglars entered the dining-room from the rooftop just below. The sentimental value of her locket, chains, rings, heirlooms was not appreciated by the insurance company. The windows were now nailed shut and draped. Meals were eaten by candlelight. Just enough glow to see the framed reproductions from the Museum of Modern Art, and across the table, Margotte serving, spattering the tablecloth; her lovely grin, dark and tender, with clean, imperfect small teeth, and eyes dark blue and devoid of wickedness. A bothersome creature, willing, cheerful, purposeful, maladroït. The cups and tableware were greasy. She forgot to flush the toilet. But all that one could easily live with. It was her earnestness that gave the trouble - considering everything under the sun with such German wrong-headedness. As though to be Jewish weren't trouble enough, the poor woman was German too.

'So. And what is your opinion, dear Uncle Sammler?' At last she asked. 'I know you have thought a bit about this. You experienced so much. And you and Ussher had such conversations about that crazy old fellow - King Rumkowski. The man from Lodz. . . . What do you think?'

Uncle Sammler had compact cheeks, his colour was good for a man in his seventies, and he was not greatly wrinkled. There were, however, on the left side, the blind side, thin long lines like the lines in a cracked glass or within a cake of ice.

To answer was not useful. It would produce more discussion, more explanation. Nevertheless, he was addressed by another