

Arts & Entertainment



Photo courtesy Harper & Row

Brilliant mind of author Saul Bellow overcomes wordiness of latest novel

By David Wood

The Dean's December/Saul Bellow/Harper & Row

Saul Bellow won a Nobel Prize in 1976 for his earnest world view, not for his style. His realities aren't the work of incisive vision so much as they're born from sheer bulk of reflection. To win his arguments, Bellow doesn't wheedle; he browbeats. He has little use for subtlety.

So when *The Dean's December*, Bellow's latest novel of hope and fear, ends inside the Mount Palomar observa-

tory, the symbolism is obvious to any reader of the 312 pages of demanding, unadorned prose.

Like space itself, the observatory is huge, empty and cold. One looks through the eye of the telescope, through atmospheric distortion, to study the stuff of cosmic existence. The mind of Dean Albert Corde, the latest in a long line of brooding ponderers found in Bellow's books, similarly uses telescopic vision in his quest for universal constants.

Except for the last chapter, set at Palomar in mid-January, the other chapters of *The Dean's December* are

set in either Chicago or Bucharest. It's not a tale of two cities, however. East and West are the same wolf in different clothing.

The book is based largely on a trip Bellow and his wife made to Bucharest a few years ago to visit the wife's dying mother. The 66-year-old novelist's fourth wife is a Romanian-born mathematician at Northwestern University. Dean Corde's wife, Minna, is a Romanian-born astronomer.

Bellow's mouthpiece

But *The Dean's December* isn't about the throes of marriage, as were *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog* or *Humboldt's Gift*. Rather, the latest novel is more along the lines of his controversial *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, a mouthpiece for Bellow's harsh nihilism.

"At home, in the West, it's different," Corde says in regard to the governmental maintenance of society. "America is never going to take an open position on the pain level. A tender liberal has to find soft ways to institutionalize harshness and smooth it over compatibly with progress."

"So that with us when people are merciless, when they kill, we explain that it's because they're disadvantaged, or have lead poisoning, or come from a backward section of the country, or need psychological treatment."

Corde opines with typical hopelessness. "I don't think you can be managerial and noble at the same time." "Derelict civilization," "crisis," "catastrophe" and "apocalypse" are words he often uses.

The dean not only has a telescopic mentality, he also has the power of total recall. While meeting problems in the communist city, he suffers massive flashbacks to problems with the meritocracy at his university. Corde is dean of the journalism school and left problems hanging when he flew out of Chicago.

Moral dilemmas

A list of Corde's moral dilemmas is as long and dense with earth tones as is a list of the characters who are passengers with him on the short-haul train to death. As the dean observes, "Destruction and resurrection are alternate beats of life, but speed makes them seem continuous."

Acts of violence upon human spirit — banal scenes Corde remembers in bleak detail — goad his restless, hyperactive social conscience. The brunt of *The Dean's December* is about the struggle to attain an appropriate attitude.

"He tried to outline creatively the right way to apprehend public questions," Bellow writes of the dean, or of himself. "Everything moved him, came back to him amplified, disproportionate, moved him too much, reached him too loudly, was accompanied by overtones of anger."

Bellow is best at showing philosophic stances into living and breathing bodily sensation. Empathizing with the sanguid old soothsayer, Corde, can be difficult, and the hard prose can make the book easy to put down. But despite the book's verbosity, Bellow's keen eye and brilliant mind shine throughout.

Though the reader may miss a few of the novelist's tenuous vines, the seething jungle Bellow beholds, the primality of existence, comes through loud and clear.

Renaissance Fair presented by UPC

The Arts Committee of the University Program Council is sponsoring "Renaissance Fair — A Week of Classical Events," a series of performances and demonstrations in public areas in and around the Nebraska Union this week.

Mime Dorman Nelson performed in the union's Main Lounge Monday afternoon.

The schedule of events for today through Thursday is as follows:

Today, a fencing demonstration will be from noon to 2 p.m. At 1:30 p.m., an archery demonstration will begin in the Main Lounge. Classical singer Steve Nazarens will appear in the South Crib from 2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Wednesday, there will be a glass-staining demonstration in the Main Lounge at 1:30 p.m. Classical guitarist John Gardner will perform in the South Crib from 2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Mozart on Fifth will perform in the Nebraska Union from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. Thursday, and at the East Union at 4:30 p.m. Also that afternoon, harpist Margaret Nelson will perform in the South Crib at 3 p.m. The Lincoln Folk Dancers will perform in the Main Lounge at 7 p.m. Thursday.

All events are free to the public.

Cityscape



"My mother always told me I should work in a zoo," Kim Meyer said. "I was always dragging animals home."

Meyer, 28, has been an attendant at the Ager Memorial Zoo for eight and a half years. She still brings animals home, but she's learned some hard lessons from the animals at the zoo.

"Baby animals are always cute but they grow up and wild animals don't make good pets," Meyer said.

Meyer said she has developed a good working relationship with the animals over the years, but she realizes people never can develop a true friendship with wild animals.

The actions of some zoo visitors upset Meyer.

"People will tap on the glass, wave their arms, flash mirrors and then complain that the animals are asleep," she said. "I wish more people would come to learn rather than to be entertained."

Meyer said she loves her job at the zoo. But as for her mother:

"Now that I am working at the zoo, she wants me to be a CPA."

By Pat Kovanda