

HERTOG 2021 WINTER SEMINAR

SAUL BELLOW'S *RAVELSTEIN*

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Saul Bellow's final novel *Ravelstein* (2000) is a portrait of Allan Bloom, a teacher and philosopher best known for his critique of education, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). For many years, Bellow and Bloom were both faculty at the University of Chicago, where they co-taught classes on politics and literature. But *Ravelstein* is as much a novel of ideas as a memoir. As with Boswell to Johnson, or Plato to Socrates, the heftiest themes of human experience – politics, philosophy, religion, love, friendship, and death – are woven into this rich story of an outstanding thinker and teacher.

This seminar will meet online weekly on **Wednesdays** from **6 to 8 PM ET**.

Course Materials:

- Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (Penguin Books, 2001)
- Course Reader

Discussion Papers: Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1-2 pages, single-spaced). See below for your assignment. **Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET.** They should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to briefly present their ideas during the seminar.

Resources:

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

Relevant pages include [Leo Strauss](#) and [Allan Bloom](#).

Wednesday, December 30, 2020

6 – 8 PM ET

Session I: Meet Abe Ravelstein

Readings:

- Bellow, *Ravelstein*, pp. 1–77

Recommended Listening: [Rossini, *The Italian Girl in Algiers*](#)

Questions:

1. Why does the book open with Chick's "extended footnote"?
2. Where do we meet Ravelstein?
3. What "line" does Chick take in writing Abe's biography?
4. What is the relationship between a character's physical appearance and mental state? **(Respondents: Jake Dow, Devin Humphreys, & Michael Weiner)**

Wednesday, January 6, 2021

6 – 8 PM ET

Session II: Chick's Personal Metaphysics

Readings:

- Bellow, *Ravelstein*, pp. 78–121

Questions:

1. Why is Chick drawn back to the anti-Semitic episode in Keynes's memoir? **(Respondent: Nick Burns)**
2. What is Chick's "private metaphysics"? What other metaphysical systems are at work in the novel? **(Respondent: Hannah Rowan)**
3. What forms of intimacy are at work in the novel? **(Respondent: Rachel Wagner)**
4. How does Abe's Socratic concept of *eros* relate to his friendship with Chick? To Chick's marriage with Vela?

Wednesday, January 13, 2021

6 – 8 PM ET

Session III: Athens & Jerusalem

Readings:

- Bellow, *Ravelstein*, pp. 122–82

Questions:

1. What is the nature of celebrity in *Ravelstein*? **(Respondent: Edward Tranter)**
2. What do you make of the character of Rakhmiel Kogon? How did you respond to Chick's description of him, and to Abe's gossip about him? **(Respondent: Dominic Pino)**

3. What does Chick think will happen after death? What does Abe think?
4. How does Abe's relationship to Judaism change over the course of the novel?
(Respondent: Kelsi Cox)

Wednesday, January 20, 2021

6 – 8 PM ET

Session IV: Rosamund

Readings:

- Bellow, *Ravelstein*, pp. 183–233

Recommended Listening: [Handel, Solomon](#)

Questions:

1. How does the style of the narrative relate to our personal methods of recollection?
2. How does Chick's food poisoning relate to Abe's death? **(Respondent: Bradley Morrelli)**
3. Contrast two scientists—Vela and Dr. Bakst. **(Respondent: Sofía Wernick)**
4. What does Rosamund demonstrate about the differences between theoretical and practical knowledge? **(Respondent: Nestor Aranibar Campero)**
5. How does Saul Bellow convey personality through his verbal "sketches"?

Wednesday, January 27, 2021

6 – 8 PM ET

Session V: The Teaching of Allan Bloom

Guest Speaker: John Podhoretz, editor, *Commentary* magazine

Readings:

- Allan Bloom, "Our Listless Universities." *National Review*, December 10, 1982
- John Podhoretz, "An Open Letter to Allan Bloom," *National Review*, October 9, 1987

Questions:

1. What does Bloom mean by "nihilism"? How does it come about?
2. What has happened to the humanities?

3. Does Bloom's description of college life resonate today? (**Respondents: Shane Better, Nathalie Smallidge, & Kenneth Kalczuk**)
4. Does the real Bloom sound like Ravelstein?
5. According to Podhoretz, how does Bloom misunderstand America and Generation X?