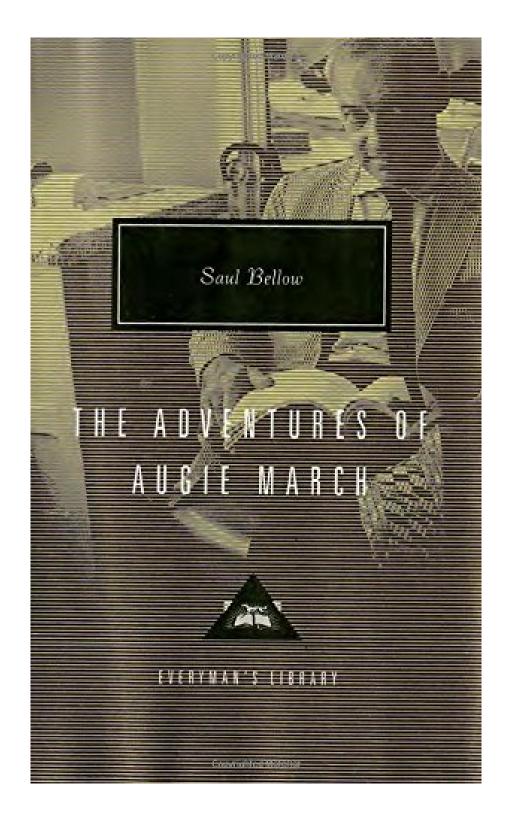


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Review

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Much of The Adventures of Augie March takes place during the Great Depression, but far from being a chronicle of deprivation, the first of Saul Bellow's string of masterpieces testifies to the explosive richness of life when it is lived at high risk and in tumultuous social circumstances.

In a brawling Chicago of crooks, con artists, second-story men, extravagant dreamers, snappy dressers, and cold-eyed pragmatists, Augie March undergoes his sentimental education—an education that, though imbued with reality, will take him into realms progressively stranger, more marvelous, more filled with indecipherable meaning. The Adventures of Augie March is the product of an elegant and skeptical mind on which nothing is lost, and of an appetite for the look and feel of things that is both enormous and passionate. The result of these varying felicities is a novel that is immediate, strikingly unpredictable, authentic, and convincing.

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Most helpful customer reviews

135 of 148 people found the following review helpful.

Impressive and yet- Saul and Augie, can't we get on with it?

By A Customer

For what has been widely described as both a picaresque and coming-of-age novel, Augie March is neither a quick read nor an easy one. Okay, there's no rule that requires novels in these categories to be either. But still and all, one somehow feels uneasy, given the various changes in locale and steady aging of the protagonist, that Bellow (or Augie) so steadfastly refuses to get on with it already.

Much of the novel is rendered in a convoluted narrative style-Augie's voice-that may be termed ornate. Or off-putting. Or ornately off-putting. Intended to echo, presumably, the Yiddish, German and Russian speech patterns Augie grows up hearing in Chicago during the twenties and thirties, this narrative device may in fact do that; but its syntactical wanderings soon begin to remind one, whatever their authenticity, of the criticism once leveled at Henry Luce's beloved Timestyle: "Backward ran the sentences until reeled the mind." Lexicon also figures in the curious mix, as words are combined in unexpected ways-sometimes cleverly (and with a kind of mini-revelation effect: you mean you can say that?) but just as often, apparently, randomly-just for the heck of it. Augie likes to talk (write), and what comes out, comes out:

"Many repeated pressures with the same effect as one strong blow, that was [Einhorn's] method, he said, and it was his special pride that he knew how to use the means contributed by the age to connive as ably as anyone else; when in a not so advanced time he'd have been mummy-handled in a hut or somebody might have had to help him be a beggar in front of a church, the next thing to a memento mori or, more awful, a reminder of what difficulties there were before you could even become dead."

[...]

"On the final day she watched the trunk wag down the front stairs, on the back of the mover, with an amazing, terrible look of presidency, and supervised everything, every last box, in this fashion, gruesomely and violently white so that her mouth's corner hairs were minutely apparent, but in rigid-backed aristocracy, full face to the important transfer to something better from this (now that she turned from it) disgracefully shabby flat of a deserted woman and her sons whom she had preserved while a temporary guest."

[...]

"Quiet, quiet afternoon in the back-room study, with an oil cloth on the library table, invisible cars snoring and trembling toward the park, the sun shining into the yard outside the window barred against housebreakers, billiard balls kissing and bounding on the felt and sponge rubber, and the undertaker's back door still and stiller, cats sitting on the paths in the Lutheran gardens over the alley that were swept and garnished and scarcely ever trod by the chin-tied Danish deaconesses who'd come out on the cradle-ribbed and always fresh-painted porches of their home."

There is much to be enjoyed and admired in all this-but at a pace, of course, that can only be determinedly leisurely, as sentences and paragraphs (often enough the same thing) demand re-reading for full appreciation. And while one is doing the necessary appreciating, a small voice in some northwest anterior lobe of the reader's brainpan is becoming more insistent all the while: yes-yes, but where is this getting us?

An interesting cast of characters is presented; the novel's locations are admirably painted in; the years move along, from the twenties through the Crash, the Depression and the war; and yet the principal development one cannot help but wait for-Augie's, as these are his adventures, after all-simply does not, well, develop. The hero is a listener, a passive-aggressive; he has considerable native intelligence and a hungry mind, but no real resolve to put either to work for his own benefit or that of others. Ideas, ideologies, approaches to life and love and various behavior patterns are introduced to Augie; he picks and chooses, learns and doesn't

learn, sort of grows and doesn't grow. In the end, working in post-war Europe as a middle-level black marketeer, the hero is in fact little changed from the Chicago street urchin of two decades before. And little concerned by this fact. Which leads one to wonder: should anyone else be?

Are we not vastly more concerned over the fate of Tom Jones, or Holden Caufield, or (closer to home here) Duddy Kravitz-or just about any other coming-of-age/picaresque hero you can think of ? Yes, we are. Augie March's dilemma-what exactly he wants to do with his life-has taken up a dense 557 pages and remained unresolved. This has been called "existential." Fine. No one says that life offers everyone a workable "resolution." But that may be why novels aren't written about everyone. Whatever name one assigns Augie's condition, in any case, the fact remains that all his adventuring leaves him in a state of self-inflicted inconclusiveness-and leaves us muttering okay, okay-get on with it!

57 of 63 people found the following review helpful.

Nobody Makes It Through Life Alive

By Bob Newman

When I was a kid, some of my classmates already knew what they wanted to be. They marched in a straight line towards the goal. I, however, never knew what I wanted to do. I liked studying, but had no vision of a future. I drifted along and climbed into whatever boats came within reach. Augie March is a young Chicagoan from a broken home, who drifts with the tides as well, in the period 1927-1947. He winds up smuggling illegal immigrants, stealing books, travelling to Mexico, trying to train an eagle to catch iguanas, and playing poker. After a few good, bad and indifferent experiences with women, he joins the Merchant Marine during World War II, gets married to a would-be actress, and survives a ship torpedoing. When we leave Augie, he's making illegal business deals in Europe. Has he ever made a really conscious decision? It's not clear. Bellow's novel is full of humor, philosophy, and insights on life. For example, on page 305 --"But I had the idea also that you don't take so wide a stand that it makes a human life impossible, nor try to bring together irreconciliables that destroy you, but try out what of human you can live with first."

THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH is an almost endless literary parade of portraits, of weird and wonderful characters from many walks of life. It's like a pilgrimage back in time to another America, another age---perhaps more innocent in some respects, but not so smooth, not so well-rounded, a thrusting, struggling America where raw money power arbited so much. Even though the book could have been cut down a bit here and there because 617 pages is overlong, Bellow's novel will remain a classic of American and world fiction for two reasons. First, because human nature scarcely changes. So many of the people surrounding Augie March are universal characters, found everywhere and everywhen. Their motives are not simple, their behavior sometimes inexplicable, but always within the realm of the word "human". They strive, they succeed, they fail, they cop out, and they never remain the same. They transform as they live. Life reshapes them. The second reason that I think this book will remain a classic-and the reason why I'm giving it five stars on Amazon---is the language. Hemingway and Fitzgerald wrote clearly and simply. Perhaps we can say that Hawthorne and Melville's prose was very ornate, stylistic. Faulkner...well, yes, Faulkner. But Bellow's prose reminded me of nothing so much as a Persian carpet---colorful, ornate, and full of useless little frills that lead nowhere, do not relate to much, and yet add such richness to the text. Some examples that I liked (but the novel is chock full of them) p.156 "For there was his stability in the green leather seat, plus his unshaking, high-placed knees beside the jade onion of the gear knob, his hands trimmed with sandy hairs on the wheel, the hypersmoothness of the motor that made you feel deceived in the speedometer that stood at eighty."

p.205 on the ancient Greeks "But still they are the admiration of the rest of the mud-sprung, famine-knifed, street-pounding, war-rattled, difficult, painstaking, kicked in the belly, grief and cartilage mankind, the multitude, some under a coal-sucking Vesuvius of chaos smoke, some inside a heaving Calcutta midnight, who very well know where they are."

p.227 `Well, now, who can really expect the daily facts to go, toil or prisons to go, oatmeal and laundry tickets and all the rest, and insist that all moments be raised to the greatest importance, demand that everyone breathe the pointy, star-furnished air at its highest difficulty, abolish all brick, vault-like rooms, all dreariness, and live like prophets or gods?"

Wow! If you like writing like this, if you want a rich feast of language, Bellow is your man and this is your novel.

91 of 108 people found the following review helpful.

A literary masterpiece

By Wordsworth

This novel is unquestionably one of the great masterpieces of our time.

Saul Bellow paints portraits of characters like Rembrandt. He has a brilliant technique for divulging not only the physical nuances of his characters but also gets deep into the essence of their souls.

He has an astute grasp of motivation and spins a complex tale with an ease that astounds. Even the most unusual twists of fate seem natural and authentic.

Augie is a man "in search of a worthwhile fate." After struggling at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a penniless youth in Chicago, he ultimately discovers that alignment with the "axial lines" of his existence is the secret to human fulfillment.

While his brother is engrossed in chasing after financial enrichment and social esteem, Augie learns through his own striving that such pursuit is "merely clownery hiding tragedy."

Augie is a man dogged in his pursuit of the American dream who has an epiphany that the riches that life has to offer lie in the secrets at the heart's core. If, as Sartre says, life is the search for meaning, then Augie is the inspired champion of this great human quest.

The true test of a great book is that you wish it would never end. Fortunately, Saul Bellow is as prolific as he is brilliant and there is much more to explore.

Bellow is worthy of the characterization of one of America's best living novelists: he is a treasure. His wisdom staggers the imagination.

Don't let this novel pass you by!

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