

(9) Jewish American Authors

Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth

Jewish Immigrants

- Refugees from Pogroms
- immigration from Europe to the United States increased dramatically during and after the Second World War
- despite restrictions imposed by a conservative political administration, many of the immigrants were Jewish
- Jews were chased out of their homes in Europe by pogroms, the first wave at the turn of the twentieth century
- most Jews came from **Eastern Europe**, for anti-Communist sentiments made refugees from this area welcome
- immigrants were welcome if they were refugees from Communism but often unwelcome if they were Jewish
- Jewish American Ghettos
- Jewish immigrants joined the already established communities that retained their allegiance to the old culture
- Jews brought with themselves both Hebrew, the language of the Bible, and Yiddish, the language of everyday
- Jews inclined to socialist ideologies because of their sympathies with the poor and suffering, like themselves
- Jewish refugees from war brought their own special freight of haunting memories of the war and **Holocaust**
- the shocking news of Holocaust were not easily accepted in America, it did not feel the WWII on its territory
- the facts of Holocaust created in the Jewish community in America acute feelings of guilt for having survived

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991)

- Yiddish Writer
- immigrated to the United States from Poland (1935), became a journalist writing in Yiddish for a Jewish paper
- wrote in **Yiddish** and then edited his writings for their American versions, referred to them as second originals
- deals with Polish Jews, their traditional faith and folkways, their daily village life, their mysticism and sexuality
- appreciated for his remarkable blending of irony, wit and wisdom, flavoured with the occult and the grotesque
- received the Nobel Prize (1978), praised especially for his autobiographical book *In My Father's Court* (1966)
- Pogrom Novel
- Satan in Goray*** (1935)
- his first major work, appeared first in Yiddish and twenty years later in English, about the aftermath of a Polish pogrom in the seventeenth century, when the survivors turned to a messianic sect with erotic and mystic beliefs
- Polish Jews Novel
- The Family Muskata*** (1950)
- his first work in English, a naturalistic portrayal of the decline of a Jewish family in Warsaw before the WWII
- Family Chronicles
- The Magician of Lublin*** (1960), ***The Manor*** (1967), ***The Estate*** (1969)
- novels set in Poland, family chronicles employing a large cast of characters and extending over generations
- record the changes in and eventual break ups of large Jewish families affected by secularism and assimilation
- Short Stories
- Gimpel the Fool*** (1957), ***The Spinoza of Market Street*** (1961), ***A Crown of Feathers*** (1973)
- collections of short stories about the ghetto life of Polish Jews, the last mentioned won a National Book Award
- American Masterpiece
- Enemies: A Love Story*** (1972)
- his first novel to be set in the United States, creates a kind of post-Holocaust trilogy with the following novels
- the author did not experience Holocaust first-hand but he lived with refugees from this ordeal for many years
- in each of the three novels the Jewish characters try to exorcise the millions of ghosts created by the genocide
- the novels are marked by a comic absurdism of tone, carnivalesque nihilism of spirit and mad mordant humour
- the above deals with a refugee shuttling between his mistress, his American wife and his European wife, whom he thought dead, careering between the challenges of his American present and the ordeals of his European past
- the protagonist encounters postwar culture as a mildly deranged survivor who is trapped in wartime memories, he suspects trauma and disruption everywhere, he cannot reconcile the Holocaust with his American experience
- the novel ends up with the mistress committing suicide and the husband setting up a home with both his wives
- Europe Return
- The Penitent*** (1983)
- the novel follows a reverse journey in which the protagonist leaves 'the Golden Land' of America for Europe
- Forgiving Gesture
- Meshugah***¹ (1994)
- the narrator of the novel marries in a muted gesture of forgiveness a woman who collaborated with the Nazis
- the title of the novel reflects the feeling expressed by one character that 'the whole world is an insane asylum'

Bernard Malamud (1914–1986)

- Writing Style
- born in New York to Russian immigrants, received college education, taught at a land-grant college in Oregon
- his language is much influenced by Hebrew and Yiddish, his English came to be called **Ameridish** or Yinglish²

¹ The title is a Yiddish word for 'crazy, senseless, insane'.

² For instance in Leo Rosten's playful linguistics book *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968).

- his writings are parables, fables full of historical specificity and personal detail but also placeless and timeless
- preoccupied with a painful progress from immaturity to maturity, becoming a hero entering into lives of others
- tends to introduce characters as travelling in quest of a new life, equipped with some distinct personal abilities
- the characters have no faith in anything until they experience an involuntary involvement in the lives of others
- the coming of age is signalled by the acceptance or refusal of one's responsibilities in service to other people
- the process of maturing is accompanied by inevitable **suffering**, it is up to the characters if they make it count

The Natural (1952)

Baseball
Novel

- his first novel, introduces the author's preoccupation with suffering as a means bringing people to happiness
- the story deals with baseball as a realm of American heroism and myth and with the role of success in sports
- the talented protagonist is threatened by a killer seeking to become famous by killing the best baseball players

The Assistant (1957)

Conversion
Novel

- concerned with an Italian American, Frank Alpine, who becomes an assistant to a Brooklyn Jewish shopkeeper after robbing his barely surviving grocery and trying to make up for the damage by working for the poor owner
- the assistant gets close with the owner's daughter, takes over the shop after his death and converts to Judaism

The Magic Barrel (1958), ***Idiots First*** (1963)

Short
Stories

- collections of short stories, both named for their title stories, the first mentioned won the National Book Award
- 'The Magic Barrel' focuses on the unlikely relationship of an unmarried rabbinic student and the suffering daughter of a colourful marriage broker, who are brought together by their mutual need for love and salvation

A New Life (1961)

Semi-auto-
biography

- a semi-autobiographical novel on a Jewish professor of English who goes to teach in an Oregon 'cow college'

The Fixer (1967)

Master-
piece

- based on actual events of 1913, realistically describes a Russian Jew who is falsely accused of and imprisoned for ritual murder, turns into magical realism as it follows his escape from prison and the assassination of the czar
- the title refers to the Jew's occupation as a handyman; the book won the Pulitzer and the National Book Prize

Pictures of Fidelman (1969)

Short
Stories

- a collection of short stories telling the story of a middle-aged Bronx resident who goes to Italy to be an artist
- his third collection seeks to make free of his formerly often oblique allegories set in dreamlike urban ghettos

Dubin's Lives (1974)

Later
Novels

- a novel focusing on a middle-aged biographer and his own as well as his subjects' marriages and love affairs

God's Grace (1982)

Dystopia

- his last book, a pseudo-Biblical tale about a Jewish man who is the sole survivor of a nuclear war, succeeds in converting the surviving apes and has a female ape deliver a half-ape half-Jew who plants a new civilization

Saul Bellow (1915–2005)

Writing
Styles

- his parents emigrated from Russia first to Canada, then to the United States, he grew up in a Jewish household
- seeks to be a historian of **civilization** as well as **consciousness**, that is to find a balance between the novel of information, with its occupation with externals, things, process and documentation, and the novel of sensibility
- his first two novels gravitate towards the condition of nightmare, then he adopts an extrovert picaresque form
- his late novels tend to be darker in tenor and tone, but still insist on the integrity of knowledge of what is what
- his latest works often present Jewish intellectuals whose interior monologues range from the sublime to the absurd, but whose exterior world is peopled by incorrigible realists who act as a corrective to their speculations
- received the Nobel Prize (1976), the Pulitzer Prize (1976) for *Humboldt's Gift* and three National Book Awards

Dangling Man (1944)

Novels

- his first novel, on a man caught between the life around and within him as he waits for induction into the army

The Victim (1947)

Jew &
Gentile

- a novel about the agonizing relationship between a Jew and Gentile, who despite their radical differences seem to be 'dependent for the food of spiritual life' upon each other and who become each other's victim of the title

The Adventures of Augie March (1953)

Picaresque
Masterpiece

- the title protagonist is a larger-than-life mythic hero pursuing his search for identity through several countries
- attempts to define the right relationship between the self and the society in dramatizing two extremes, an elder brother who is a social success at the expense of brutalizing himself and a younger who is a helpless pure spirit
- the protagonist chooses to manoeuvre between the fixities of the social world and the inertia of the isolated self, to find his freedom in movement, expressing the hope that civilization and consciousness can be squared

- Failure Novella ***Seize the Day*** (1956)
- an exceptional novella, unique in its treatment of a failure in a society where the only success is success only
- Picaresque Novel ***Henderson the Rain King*** (1959)
- continues the picaresque approach in the tale following an eccentric American millionaire on a quest in Africa
- Introspective Masterpiece ***Herzog*** (1964)
- the novel returns to a more introspective and meditative form in presenting the narrator, Moses Herzog, as a person of divided mind, caught between the isolated ambit of consciousness and the teeming surfaces of society
 - the protagonist feels driven out of the world by the ‘Reality-Instructors’ who would shape him in his own image, his second wife, his mistress and his brother, but also realizes the destructiveness of lonely consciousness
 - dangles between pride and humility, assertion and mockery, declaration of power and confession of impotence
 - remains convinced of the possibility of resolution, ends up with a sense of peace and promise outside language
- Holocaust Survivor ***Mr Sammler’s Planet*** (1970)
- the novel regards the possibility of the collapse of civilization, features as the protagonist a Holocaust survivor
- Pulitzer Winner ***Humboldt’s Gift*** (1975)
- present a story of personal and social crisis through the relationship of an ambitious writer and a visionary poet
- Social Orders ***The Dean’s December*** (1982)
- places the autobiographical central character between two social orders, the decaying Communism of Eastern Europe and the anarchic capitalism of the United States, both as equally repellent and violating the human spirit
 - records the the decline of Western society into barbarism and the inability of the individual to prevent the fall
- Later Novels ***More Die of Heartbreak*** (1987), ***A Theft*** (1989), ***The Actual*** (1997)
- the novels develop character rather than action and continue exploring the conflicts of the ideal and the actual
- Old Men’s Friendship ***Ravelstein*** (2000)
- his last novel presents a fictional version of the life of teacher and philosopher Allan Bloom, aka Ravelstein
 - follows the friendship of two university professors and the complications that animate their intimate and intellectuals attachments in the face of impending death of Ravelstein who asks his friend to write his memoir

Philip Roth (b. 1933)

- Writing Subjects
- his writing concentrates on Jewish middle-class life and the painful entanglements of **sexual** and **familial** love
 - his early novels follow protagonists who attempt to escape from the narrative of the Jewish family and culture, who look longing at the ‘goyim’ and their world, free from the orthodox restrictions of traditional Jewish law
 - his later novels explore the mirage of identity and the use of writing to reflect **selfhood** as well as **nationhood**
 - the Zuckerman novels in particular concentrate not simply on personal identity but on the identity of America
 - his writing gazes at the image of an American like himself in order to discover what lies beneath the surface, shows his characters inclining towards the idea that selfhood is a fiction, a product of the dreaming imagination
 - his most recent work is increasingly concerned with mortality and with the failure of the ageing body and mind
- Novella & Short Stories ***Goodbye, Columbus***³ (1959)
- his first book, besides the title novella contains also five short stories, including ‘The Conversion of the Jews’, ‘Defender of the Faith’ or ‘Eli, the Fanatic’, all about later generation Jews leaving the ghettos of their parents
 - the title story is set in Newark, New Jersey, which is his favourite setting, and deals with an intelligent Jewish graduate working in a low paying position in a library and his love affair with an assimilated wealthy Jewish girl
- Novels ***Letting Go*** (1962)
- his first novel, about the psychologically crippling effects of being raised constrained to the family nest, or trap
- Masturbation Fantasy ***Portnoy’s Complaint*** (1969)
- an audacious satirical portrait of a Jewish man experiencing a clash of his ethical impulses and sexual longings
 - the novel is constituted by a manic monologue of the narrator, Alexander Portnoy, to his helpless psychiatrist
 - Portnoy is drowning in his own subjectivity as determined by other people, his family, community and culture, he tries to find relief in obsessive masturbation and masturbatory monologue only to deepen his own entrapment
- Becoming a Breast ***The Breast*** (1972)
- a minor novella whose protagonist turns into a breast and struggles between the rational and the bodily desires
- First Zuckerman **The First Zuckerman Trilogy: *The Ghost Writer*** (1979), ***Zuckerman Unbound*** (1981), ***The Anatomy Lesson*** (1983)

³ The title refers to the city of Columbus, the site of the Ohio State University, where the girl’s brother becomes a successful athlete.

- the three books were reprinted together with the novella *The Prague Orgy*⁴ (1985) as *Zuckerman Bound* (1985)
- follow the life and career of an aspiring young writer, Nathan Zuckerman, very much resembling Roth himself

Philip
Roth***Operation Shylock: A Confession*** (1993)

- features a narrator called Philip Roth who travels to Israel to attend the trial of a war criminal and at the same time pursues his impersonator who appropriated his identity and used his celebrity to spread anti-Semitic ideas

The Second
ZuckermanThe Second Zuckerman Trilogy: ***American Pastoral*** (1997), ***I Married a Communist*** (1998), ***The Human Stain*** (2000)

- the first book tries to tell the story of a man whom Zuckerman sees as an archetypal American but tells the story of his nation, attempts to be 'a realistic chronicle' but ends up with the pastoral myth invented for America
- suggests that the pastoral reflects the longing for freedom, a pure subjective space that is claimed for America
- follows the story of a middle-class couple whose daughter becomes a terrorist; won the Pulitzer Prize (1998)
- the second book shows the rise and fall of a Communist man who is brought down by his family and society
- the last book has Zuckerman tell the story of a light-skinned black man who passed all his life as a white Jew

Alternative
History***The Plot Against America*** (2004)

- the novel develops a counterhistorical story of the rise fascism and anti-Semitism in America during the WWII

Ageing
& Dying***Everyman*** (2006)

- the novel examines illness and death, taking its title from the fifteenth century English morality play on death

Exit Ghost (2007)

- the novel revisits Zuckerman who awakes to life's possibilities after more than a decade in self-imposed exile

The Humbling (2007)

- the novel follows an ageing actor who realizes he has lost his talent for acting and finds himself unable to work

⁴ The novella follows Zuckerman on his journey to Prague in the 1970s in search of the lost manuscript of a martyred Jewish writer.