

Story and details regarding the magic barrel



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Bernard Malamud 1914-1986 American novelist and short story writer. The following entry provides criticism on Malamud's works from 1975 through 1999.

See also Bernard Malamud Criticism (Volume 1), and Volumes 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 27. INTRODUCTION Malamud is considered one of the most prominent figures in Jewish-American literature. His stories and novels, in which reality and fantasy are frequently interlaced, have been called parables, myths, and allegories and often illustrate the importance of moral obligation. Although he draws upon his Jewish heritage to address the themes of sin, suffering, and redemption, Malamud emphasizes human contact and compassion over orthodox religious dogma.

Malamud's characters, while often awkward and isolated from society, evoke both pity and humor through their attempts at survival and salvation.

Biographical Information Malamud was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 26, 1914 to Russian Jewish immigrants. His parents, whom he described as gentle, honest, kindly people, were not highly educated and knew very little about literature or the arts. Malamud recalled, " There were no books that I remember in the house, no records, music, pictures on the wall. " Malamud attended high school in Brooklyn and received his bachelor's degree from the City College of New York in 1936. After graduation, he worked in a factory and as a clerk at the Census Bureau in Washington, D.

C. Although he wrote in his spare time, Malamud did not begin writing seriously until the advent of World War II and the subsequent horrors of the Holocaust. At that time, he questioned his religious identity and started

reading about Jewish tradition and history. He explained, “ I was concerned with what Jews stood for, with their getting down to the bare bones of things.

I was concerned with their ethnicity—how Jews felt they had to live in order to go on living. ” In 1949 he began teaching at Oregon State University; he left this post in 1961 to teach creative writing at Bennington College in Vermont. He remained there until shortly before his death in 1986. Major Works Malamud’s first novel, *The Natural* (1952), is one of his most symbolic works.

While the novel ostensibly traces the life of Roy Hobbs, an American baseball player, the work has underlying mythic elements and explores such themes as initiation and isolation. For instance, some reviewers cite evidence of the Arthurian legend of the Holy Grail; others apply T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* myth in their analyses.

The Natural also anticipates what would become Malamud’s predominant narrative focus: a suffering protagonist struggling to reconcile moral dilemmas, to act according to what is right, and to accept the complexities and hardships of existence. Malamud’s second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), portrays the life of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant who owns a grocery store in Brooklyn. Although he is struggling to survive financially, Bober hires a cynical anti-Semitic youth, Frank Alpine, after learning that the man is homeless and on the verge of starvation. Through this contact Frank learns to find grace and dignity in his own identity.

Described as a naturalistic fable, this novel affirms the redemptive value of maintaining faith in the goodness of the human soul. Malamud’s first

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collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel* (1958), received the National Book Award in 1959. As in *The Assistant*, most of the stories in this collection depict the search for hope and meaning within the grim entrapment of poor urban settings and were influenced by Yiddish folktales and Hasidic traditions. Many of Malamud's best-known short stories, including "The Last Mohican," "Angel Levine," and "Idiots First," were republished in *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* in 1983. *A New Life* (1961), one of Malamud's most realistic novels, is based in part on Malamud's teaching career at Oregon State University. This work focuses on an ex-alcoholic Jew from New York City who, in order to escape his reputation as a drunkard, becomes a professor at an agricultural and technical college in the Pacific Northwest.

Interweaving the protagonist's quest for significance and self-respect with a satiric mockery of academia, Malamud explores the destructive nature of idealism, how love can lead to deception, and the pain of loneliness. *The Fixer* (1966), is considered one of Malamud's most powerful works. The winner of both the Pulitzer Prize for literature and the National Book Award, the narrative is derived from the historical account of Mendel Beiliss, a Russian Jew who was accused of murdering a Christian child. Drawing upon Eastern European Jewish mysticism, *The Fixer* turns this terrifying story of torture and humiliation into a parable of human triumph. With *The Tenants* (1971), Malamud returned to a New York City setting, where the theme of self-exploration is developed through the contrast between two writers, one Jewish and the other black, struggling to survive in an urban ghetto.

Within the context of their confrontations about artistic standards, Malamud also explored how race informs cultural identity, the purpose of literature, and the conflict between art and life. Malamud further addressed the nature of literature and the role of the artist in *Dubin's Lives* (1979). In this work the protagonist, William Dubin, attempts to create a sense of worth for himself, both as a man and as a writer. A biographer who escapes into his work to avoid the reality of his life, Dubin bumbles through comically disastrous attempts at love and passion in an effort to find self-fulfillment.

Malamud's next novel, *God's Grace* (1982), differs from his earlier works in scope and presentation of subject matter. Set in the near future immediately after a nuclear disaster that leaves only one human being alive, *God's Grace* explores the darkness of human morality, the nature of God, and the vanity and destruction associated with contemporary life. Critical Reception Malamud's place as a major American novelist is secure by the accounts of most critics, though most place him with Phillip Roth and Saul Bellow as a Jewish-American novelist. Largely considered one of the foremost writers of moral fiction, Malamud is also considered a writer in the tradition of Anton Chekhov and Fyodor Dostoyevski.

Despite the preponderance of Jewish characters and subject matter in Malamud's works, critics argue that his stories extend far beyond Jewish literature. Malamud, Bernard (Vol. 27) - Introduction Bernard Malamud 1914- American novelist and short story writer. Malamud ranks as one of the most significant contributors to contemporary American literature. His fictional world, most often urban and Jewish, is formed around the struggle for survival of characters who face the particular hardships of modern existence.

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Their survival depends upon their ability to combat life's inevitable suffering by breaking through the barriers of personal isolation and finding human contact, compassion, and faith in the goodness of others.

The typical Malamudian hero stumbles through this process in a tragic yet comic way, invoking both pity and humor. Although Malamud is a prolific writer and the recipient of many prestigious literary awards, he is perhaps best known for his novel *The Fixer* (1967), which was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. *The Natural* (1952), Malamud's first novel, is perhaps his most symbolic. On the surface, the novel explores the life of an American baseball player; yet, as with all of Malamud's works, there are various interpretations of the deeper levels of meaning. For instance, some critics cite evidence of the Arthurian legend of the Holy Grail, while others apply T.

S. Eliot's "wasteland" myth in their analysis. In many ways it foreshadows predominant future concerns: a suffering protagonist struggling to reconcile moral dilemmas, to act according to what is right and good, and to come to grips with his existence. These themes recur in Malamud's second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), in the portrayal of the life of Frank Alpine, a cynical anti-semitic youth who goes to work for a Jewish grocer. Through this contact Frank learns to find grace and dignity in his own identity.

Described as a fable, as are many of Malamud's stories, this novel affirms the redemptive value of maintaining faith in the inherent goodness of the human soul. Malamud's first collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel* (1958), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Like *The Assistant*, most of the

stories in this collection depict the search for dignity and meaning within the grim entrapment of poor urban settings. They often resemble the Yiddish folk tale in their humor and their use of character-types drawn from Hasidic traditions. Many of Malamud's short stories have been reprinted recently in *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* (1983), a collection which includes two new stories.

Based in part on Malamud's teaching career at Oregon State University, *A New Life* (1961) superimposes the hero's quest for significance and understanding on a satiric mockery of academia. Malamud's next novel, *The Fixer*, is one of his most powerful works. Derived from the historical account of Mendel Beiliss, a Russian Jew who was accused of murdering a Christian child, and also drawing on East European Jewish mysticism, *The Fixer* turns this terrifying story of torture and humiliation into a parable of human triumph. *The Tenants* (1971) returns to an urban setting, where the theme of self-exploration is developed through the contrast between two writers, one Jewish and the other black, struggling to survive in a New York City ghetto. Within the context of their confrontations, Malamud also explores the conflict between art and life.

The protagonist of Dubin's *Lives* (1979), as with Harry Bernard Malamud 1914- © Thomas Victor 1983 Lesser and Willie Spearmint in *The Tenants*, attempts to create a sense of worth for himself, both as a man and as a writer. A biographer who escapes into his work to avoid the reality of his life, William Dubin bumbles through comically disastrous attempts at love and passion in an effort to find self-fulfillment. *God's Grace* (1982) differs from Malamud's earlier works in its scope and presentation of subject matter. Set <https://assignbuster.com/story-and-details-regarding-the-magic-barrel/>

in the near future immediately after a nuclear disaster which leaves only one human being alive, *God's Grace* explores the darkness of human morality, the nature of God, and the vanity and destruction which has become an integral part of the human race.

Critical reception to this work varies immensely: some critics feel that the contrast between the serious moral fable and the humor of a situation, in which the protagonist alternately converses with God and a group of apes, provides a uniquely intriguing narrative. Others, however, feel the structure of the novel does not support the seriousness and ambition of its themes. But in common with his other works, *God's Grace* expresses Malamud's intensely humanistic concerns, along with the humor and insight that have made him a leading American author. See also CLC, Vols. 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 18; Contemporary Authors, Vols.

5-8, rev. ed. ; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 2; and Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1980.) Winner of the National Book Award for Fiction Introduction by Jhumpa Lahiri Bernard Malamud's first book of short stories, *The Magic Barrel*, has been recognized as a classic from the time it was published in 1959. The stories are set in New York and in Italy (where Malamud's alter ego, the struggling New York Jewish Painter Arthur Fidelity, roams amid the ruins of old Europe in search of his artistic patrimony); they tell of egg cinders and shoemakers, matchmakers, and rabbis, in a voice that blends vigorous urban realism, Yiddish idiom, and a dash of artistic magic.

The Magic Barrel is a book about New York and about the immigrant experience, and it is high point in the modern American short story. Few books of any kind have managed to depict struggle and frustration and heartbreak with such delight, or such artistry.

————— Praise “ In the short story, Malamud achieved an almost psalmlike compression. He has been called the Jewish Hawthorne, but he might just as well be thought a Jewish Chopin, a prose composer of preludes and noctures. “-Mark Shechner, Partisan Review “ There are thirteen stories in The Magic Barrel and every one of them is a small, highly individualized work of art. This is the kind of book that calls for not admiration but gratitude.

“-Richard Sullivan, The Chicago Tribune “ Is he an American Master? Of course. He not only wrote in the American language, he augmented it with fresh plasticity, he shaped our English into startling new configurations. ” - Cynthia Ozick God’s Grace (1982), Bernard Malamud’s last novel, is a modern-day dystopian fantasy, set in a time after a thermonuclear war prompts a second flood-a radical departure from Malamud’s previous fiction. The novel’s protagonist is paleologist Calvin Cohn, who had been attending to his work at the bottom of the ocean when the Devastation struck, and who alone survived. This rabbi’s son? a “ marginal error”? finds himself shipwrecked with an experimental chimpanzee capable of speech, to whom he gives the name Buz. Soon other creatures appear on their island-baboons, chimps, five apes, and a lone gorilla.

Cohn works hard to make it possible for God to love His creation again, and his hopes increase as he encounters the unknown and the unforeseen in this

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strange new world. With God's Grace, Malamud took a great risk, and it paid off. The novel's fresh and pervasive humor, narrative ingenuity, and tragic sense of the human condition make it one of Malamud's most extraordinary books. The Magic Barrel" Bernard Malamud The following entry presents criticism on Malamud's short story " The Magic Barrel," which was first published in 1954 and later revised and included in *The Magic Barrel* (1958).

See also *Bernard Malamud Criticism* (Volume 1), and

Volumes 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 18, 27. INTRODUCTION The title story of Malamud's prizewinning first short story collection, " The Magic Barrel" is one of his most frequently discussed works of short fiction. Described by Sanford Pinsker as " quintessential Malamud—in form, content, and perhaps most of all, in moral vision," the story combines elements of realism and fantasy in an urban, Jewish setting and centers on the protagonist's struggle to break through the barriers of personal isolation. While Malamud's handling of such themes as love, community, redemption, and Jewish identity has been widely praised, he is also noted for his creative use of ambiguity. Consequently, " The Magic Barrel" has generated a wide array of interpretations.

Plot and Major Characters " The Magic Barrel" focuses on the interaction of two main characters: a young, unmarried rabbinical student named Leo Finkle and Pinye Salzman, a vulgar, yet colorful, marriage broker who smells distinctly of fish. At the story's outset, an acquaintance advises Finkle that it will be much easier for him to find a congregation after graduation if he is married. Having spent his life studying, Finkle has little experience in the area of romance and reluctantly decides to engage the services of Salzman. The marriage broker shows Finkle numerous pictures of potential brides from <https://assignbuster.com/story-and-details-regarding-the-magic-barrel/>

his “ magic barrel” and comments on their qualities, particularly their ages, educational backgrounds, family connections, and the size of their dowries. Finkle, however, seems uninterested in Salzman’s usual selling points and constructs flimsy excuses for rejecting many of the candidates.

Salzman eventually convinces Finkle to meet a woman named Lily Hirschorn. During his traumatic encounter with Hirschorn, Finkle recognizes that his life has been emotionally empty and that he has lacked the passion to love either God or other humans. Finkle’s discovery of a picture of Salzman’s daughter, Stella, prompts him to act on his new self-knowledge. Distinctive from the women in the previous photographs, Stella appears to be someone who has lived and suffered deeply. Salzman refers to her as a fallen woman, stating that “ she should burn in hell,” and argues that the presence of her picture among the others was a mistake and that she is not the woman for Finkle. Finkle, however, remains strongly attracted to Stella and envisions an opportunity to “ convert “ The Magic Barrel” Bernard Malamud her to goodness, himself to God.

The story’s concluding tableau is highly ambiguous. It depicts Finkle running toward Stella, who is standing under a lamppost dressed in a white dress and red shoes, while Salzman stands next to a wall around the corner, chanting the kaddish, a prayer for the dead. Major Themes Like many of Malamud’s short stories, “ The Magic Barrel” is essentially a love story that incorporates themes of suffering and self-discovery. Finkle’s search for a wife leads to his realization of his essentially dispassionate nature, and his love for Stella stems in part from his recognition of her suffering as a mark of having truly lived.

The story also suggests the presence of the miraculous in everyday life. In the final tableau, for instance, violins and candles are said to be floating in the sky, and events in the story often suggest that Salzman possesses supernatural abilities. Such images and suggestions contrast with the story's surface of realistic detail and also further the theme of the rational versus the irrational. Finkle, for example, begins the story as a representative of reason but eventually falls in love with and seeks out Stella despite Salzman's logical arguments against such a match. Other events in the story focus on the theme of Jewish identity.

Some critics argue that Finkle's relationship to Salzman strengthens his connections to the Jewish community, while others posit that his attraction to Stella signifies a break with Jewish values. Critical Reception Critical reaction to "The Magic Barrel" has centered on the imagery of the story's concluding tableau and the ambiguity engendered by Salzman's prayers for the dead. As Lionel Trilling has remarked: "Much of the curious power and charm of 'The Magic Barrel' is surely to be accounted for by the extraordinary visual intensity of a single paragraph, the last but one, which describes the rendezvous of Leo Finkle and Stella Salzman. Nothing the story's ambiguity, critics argue that Salzman's prayers either signify Finkle's abandonment of the Jewish faith or celebrate the death of his old self and the beginning of his new life—one which will be enriched by the lessons that he has learned from Salzman. Commentators have addressed issues concerning the archetypal nature of the characters as well.

Salzman, for example, has been linked to such mythical figures as Pan and the Trickster, while Stella has been described as a symbol of eroticism.

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Scholars have remarked favorably on Malamud's mixture of folk and realistic treatments of his subject matter and have proposed links between "The Magic Barrel" and the paintings of Marc Chagall. Commenting on the story's conclusion, Mark Goldman has remarked that the "last scene, like many of Malamud's sudden, summary endings, is a consciously ironic parable and not an escape from tragedy. All the complex meaning is fixed, flashed back upon the story itself in a kind of Joycean epiphany that runs counter to the neatly packaged endings of the naturalistic tale. "