

# BOOKS

## Best Sellers

### Fiction

1. **Clear and Present Danger**  
*Tom Clancy*
2. **Pillars of the Earth**  
*Ken Follett*
3. **California Gold**  
*John Jakes*
4. **Jimmy Stewart and His Poems**  
*Jimmy Stewart*
5. **Oldest Living Confederate**  
**Widow Tells All**  
*Allan Gurganus*
6. **The Lost Years**  
*J. M. Dillard*
7. **The Minotaur**  
*Stephen Coonts*
8. **The Joy Luck Club**  
*Amy Tan*

### Nonfiction

1. **All I Really Need to Know I**  
**Learned in Kindergarten**  
*Robert Fulghum*
2. **Roseanne**  
*Roseanne Barr*
3. **I Was On Fire When I Lay Down**  
**On It**  
*Robert Fulghum*
4. **Among Schoolchildren**  
*Tracy Kidder*
5. **It's Always Something**  
*Gilda Radner*
6. **A Brief History of Time**  
*Stephen W. Hawking*
7. **I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to**  
**Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise**  
*Erma Bombeck*
8. **Confessions of an S.O.B.**  
*Al Neuharth*

— *New York Times*

The books we review are provided courtesy of the Bull's Head Bookshop, located in the Student Stores



# Laureate explores cultural decay

## The Bellarosa Connection

by Saul Bellow

Penguin Books  
 \$6.95  
 ●●●●●

ED BONAHOUE

books

use of memory.

Near the beginning of World War II, Harry Fonstein escaped the Nazi pogroms in Poland and somehow reached Rome. While working as an interpreter for Mussolini's son-in-law, he was arrested and held for deportation by the SS. His Italian jailer freed him unexpectedly, however, and connected him with secret transportation to America. Their code word was "Billy Rose," or *Bellarosa*.

This much is given at the outset of *The Bellarosa Connection*, a brief yet substantial examination of cultural memory and American values. The short book, Saul Bellow's second novella since *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), exemplifies in miniature the writing style that has helped Bellow become one of the finest contemporary American novelists. Bellow received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1976.

Harry Fonstein did make it to America, eventually marrying and becoming a highly successful inventor and businessman. However, the story of Fonstein's liberation and immigration takes place before *The Bellarosa Connection* begins. The present action of the novella lies with a nameless narrator, who is himself the child of immigrant Russian Jews and the founder of the Mnemosyne Institute, a successful business for training "executives, politicians and members of the defense establishment" in the correct and efficient

"Memory is life" is the thought that preoccupies this anonymous character as he recalls all his past dealings with the Fonsteins. In the narrator's memories and meditations, Bellow has found a way to layer history on top of the present, allowing the narrator (and the reader) to recognize and reflect on important differences between two distinct worlds: the older world of traditional European values, and the contemporary world of the American upper-middle class, in which traditional values seem to be subject to erosion and decay.

Fonstein is part of the older world. He is a serious-minded Middle European refugee who, despite his financial success in America, maintains links with his past. "Fonstein, for all his Jermyn Street boots and Italianate suits, was still the man who had buried his mother in Venice" during their flight from Poland. The narrator, on the other hand, serves as the epitome of "American puerility... nothing in his head but froth." The narrator has largely lost touch with his heritage, marrying a Protestant woman "who knew everything there was to know about 18th-century furniture."

The contrasting values of these two abstract worlds collide most obviously in Bellow's characterization of Billy Rose, the famous Jewish Broadway producer whose secret organization smuggled Fonstein out of Europe.

Rose, as Bellow constructs him, "was as spattered as a Jackson Pollock painting, and among the main trickles was his Jewishness... The God of his fathers still mattered."

Despite his heritage, however, Rose is supremely American, a fast-talking entrepreneur of glitz. His most revealing trait is that he has no desire to meet the persons he liberated, and actually tries to avoid them.

When Fonstein's wife, Sorella, manages to force a meeting between herself and Rose, Rose attempts to explain why he refuses to meet Fonstein himself. "I have to keep down the number of relationships and contacts. What I did for you, take it and welcome, but spare me the relationship." To the degree that Fonstein retains and Rose discards their shared heritage, the two characters exist as polar opposites. Rose says, "Remember, forget — what's the difference to me? . . . this is one of a trillion incidents in a life like mine. Why should I recollect it?"

Significantly, Bellow portrays this avoidance of contact, this inability or hesitancy to let oneself be touched by others, as a trait acquired by Americans, "some kind of change in the descendants of immigrants in this country." He takes several opportunities to associate both Rose and the narrator with things American, including George Washington's Farewell Address and 20th century pop culture. Bellow does not inquire what it is about life in these United States that causes one to forget the past, and for some readers, the avoidance of this question may be a shortcoming.

Instead, he dwells on the changes time works on geography and painfully observes the American metamorphosis of values, noting that holy days sacred to previous generations have become hollow intentions: "that's what the Passover phenomenon is now — it never comes to pass." Bellow points out that America has no holy cities, but engenders a different sort of shrine, "New York for money, Washington for power or

Las Vegas attracting people by the millions."

Although the narrator and almost all of *Bellarosa's* characters are Jewish, Bellow's discussion of cultural memory is fundamentally relevant to all readers, especially those of immigrant stock. The book also seems to ask if reconciliation is possible. Are the traditional values of immigrants always subject to American moral decay? "The Jews could survive everything Europe threw at them. I mean the lucky remnant. But now comes the next test — America. Can they hold their ground, or will the U.S.A. be too much for them?"

Restated, Bellow seems to ask if ethnic traditions and values can survive in American society without being significantly diluted. In this light, Fonstein assumes some kind of heroic status as a figure who maintains his cultural identity, who "could assimilate now *without* converting. You didn't have to choose between Jehovah and Jesus."

Readers new to Bellow may occasionally experience frustration with the Nobel laureate's prose. The *Bellarosa* narrator, following in a tradition of intellectual protagonists, take an extremely analytical view of human feelings and relationships; at times the emotional content of the work is buried under a mountain of analysis.

Further, the meandering narrator refuses to reveal past events chronologically; instead, he alternately jumps ahead, giving us hints of what is to come, and lags back in the past, filling in details omitted earlier. Using language that is rich in references to history and literature, ranging from Shakespeare quotations to modern slang, Bellow gives a sense not only of where American literature has been, but also of where it momentarily rests, a combination entirely appropriate for his new work.

# Cape Cod trio struggles through tourist season

## Summer People

by Marge Piercy

Summit Books  
 \$19.95  
 ●●●

Mashed in a triangle of love, secrets and unconditional belonging, Willie, Susan and Dinah are the exciting main characters in Marge Piercy's action-packed new novel *Summer People*. Through a delightful weaving of the annual summer visitors with the lives of these three unique individuals, Piercy creates a down-to-earth story spiked with just a bit of fantasy.

The story explores the once-controversial relationship among Susan, Willie and Dinah, artists living together in a small Cape Cod beach community. The three go through everything together: love, heartbreak, loss, jealousy, change and the summer people.

The three characters receive the seasonal migration of summer visitors to their town with three very different attitudes. Dinah resents their presence, and she feels that they intrude on her otherwise constant world. Susan can't wait for summer to come, so she can once again mingle and mix with the high-class, high-rolling vacationers. Willie is somewhere in the middle. He makes money from renovating their summer homes, but he could do without the people themselves.

The plot of the novel revolves around the trio's interactions with the summer tourists and the changes each experiences after the vacationers leave.

As she flips back and forth between the subject of each chapter, Piercy gives the reader a concentrated glimpse into the mind and life of Willie, Susan and Dinah. Chapters are told from one of the three's point of views, offering a frequent change in perspective and narrative.

The only drawback is the never-ending descriptions. After Piercy elaborates on some-

thing for an entire page, the reader finds himself looking back, trying to remember just what it was she was describing. Take, for example, this quote: "Susan and Willie and Dinah were like family, like aunts or uncles who could fix what went wrong here, who knew what to do when you had friends looking for a summer rental or a baby-sitter or an au pair girl, when you required the roof repaired or the pump fixed" (Now exactly *who* did exactly *what*???)

Although *Summer People* fits the form of a 400-page Harlequin Romance, it is an interesting book. Piercy is successful in capturing the struggles of real people as they strive to reach personal satisfaction, happiness and meaning in life.

— Susanne George

## What the Ratings Mean

- — lame
- — just O.K.
- — workable
- — quite good
- — excellent

