



Seize the Day

Saul Bellow , Cynthia Ozick (Introduction)

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Deftly interweaving humor and pathos, Saul Bellow evokes in the climactic events of one day the full drama of one man's search to affirm his own worth and humanity.

Seize the Day Details

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From Reader Review Seize the Day for online ebook

Perry says

Oh, Good Grief!

"There comes a time when you look into the mirror and you realize that what you see is all that you will ever be. And then you accept it. Or you kill yourself. Or you stop looking in mirrors."

? Tennessee Williams

Bellow's fourth novel, published in 1956, follows sad sack Tommy Wilhelm (real name, Wilky Adler), who is in his mid-40s, lives in a Manhattan residential hotel with his retired dad, separated from his kids and a frigid wife who will not grant him a divorce, unemployed after careering from one spectacularly pitiful failure to another (actor, husband, father, salesman, jackleg). We pick up the "action" with his latest failing venture, working for an obvious con man selling commodities.

Mostly, we have "the Day" on which Whining Wilhelm bitches incessantly about a legion of antagonists, from his wife, to his ungrateful former bosses, con men who have juked him, and his dad who sees his son as wholly inept and thus won't give him more money or moral support to live his dream. When no son-complaining, there's plenty of dad-denigrating-son.

Wilhelm cannot make a career, reach the American dream or even create yet another personal myth of his life well lived. He is miserable, so on this day, while he seems to be striving for dignity and inner peace, he chooses to attend a funeral for a distant acquaintance, at which he cries uncontrollably. Tears not so much about death as his failure to make a life worth living.

I gotta tell ya: though it's a short novel, I got to the end and yelled:

WTF? Life is hard enough without heaping a fictional pile of crap atop it.

Dagio_maya says

"Qualsiasi cosa tu sia scopri sempre di essere il tipo sbagliato"

Tommy Wilhelm alloggia in un grande hotel di New York assieme al padre, il professor Adler.

Tommy rievoca una vita costellata da errori che ancora chiedono che il conto sia regolato.

Tra padre e figlio un rapporto complicato: più il figlio si dimostra un perdente più il padre rifiuta non solo ogni aiuto economico ma anche ogni comprensione ed agisce col preciso intento di tenere le distanze per salvaguardare se stesso.

Una New York che spicca nel suo lato più malsano: inquinamento, traffico e malvivenza.

Il centro di tutto il denaro: motore di una società malata.

Il racconto procede così senza evoluzione, dunque, senza speranza lasciando il lettore in attesa di un finale liberatorio e trovando, invece, solo la punta di un iceberg ormai già affondato.

Il mio primo incontro con Bellow mi lascia tiepida ma non mi arrendo.

[illegible]

This novella about the morning hours in the life of a man which is falling apart is authentic New York narrative AND somber urban fable.

Solistas says

"Κ?θε φορ? που ερχ?ταν μια στιγμ? ηρεμ?ας, ?που απλ? η κο?ραση τον ?κανε ν? σταματ?ει τον αγ?να, ?νιωθε αυτ? το μυστηρι?δες β?ρος, πως μεγ?λωναν ? μαζε?ονταν μ?σα του ακατον?μαστα πρ?γματα που ?πρεπε ?λη του τη ζω? ν? τα κουβαλ?ει. Αυτ?ς θα πρ?πει ν? ?ναι ο προορισμ?ς του ανθρ?που [...] Σ'αυτ?ν τον Ου?λκυ ? Τ?μυ Ου?λχελμ, 44 χρ?νων, πατ?ρα δ?ο γιων, που προς το παρ?ν ζο?σε στο ξενοδοχε?ο Γκλורי?να, ε?χαν αναθ?σει ν? κουβαλ?ει ?να φορτ?ο που ?ταν ο

εαυτ?ς του, ο χαρακτηριστικ?ς εαυτ?ς του. Αλλ?, ?σως κ ν?ναι αυτ? υπερβολ?ς του υποκειμ?νου T.O. Που ε?ναι ?να ε?δος ονειροπ?λου ζ?ου. Που χρει?ζεται να πιστε?ει ?τι μπορε? να μ?θει γιατ? υπ?ρχει. Αν κ ποτε δεν προσπ?θηκε στα σοβαρά να το μ?θει".

?τι χρει?ζεται να ξ?ρει κανε?ς για τον ?ρωα του Μπ?λλου περι?χεται στο αποπ?νω απ?σπασμα. Το φιν?λε του ?δραξε τη Μ?ρα, κ?ποιος το μιμε?ται αυτ? τη στιγμ?. Στο παρ?ν. Τ?ρα.

Nicola says

2 1/2 stars

My first Saul Bellow and not really to my taste. It's not badly written, I can see why he is a respected author, but, no, just not my bag. It reminded me a little bit of *Death of a Salesman* in its depressing tone as Tommy Wilhem is another American Man driven on by the demons of social and financial success and the pressures of family expectations. It was all very moving but I don't really enjoy bleak stories like this - I 'enjoyed' *Death of a Salesman* but after studying it in school I was so put off reading anything more by Miller that it was about 20 years before I read/listened to *The Crucible* and that only after I was assured by someone whose judgement I trust that it was nothing like *Death of a Salesman*.

Tommy Wilhem, our 'hero' has had some financial success in his life but it's not really enough. He has left his wife and is being led around with promises of a divorce while disgorging money hand over fist. Then he encounters work problems and leaves his old job so he is now unemployed and nearly completely broke. His father refuses to help him and he decides that his only option is to try to earn a living on the financial markets under the tutelage of a rather dubious new friend. It's probably not going to end well but there you have the hopeful optimism of the desperate.

After reading this I wondered if the reason that I preferred British books over American ones as a general rule was the predilection for some American writers to focus on the social drive for money in this way. Of course the pursuit of money and status is pretty universal but it occurred to me that American male writers do produce a lot of these grey grimy books for whatever reasons.

I'm probably just over thinking it. But I think I'll shelve my plans for reading *The Plot Against America* for now. I'm just not a fan of really depressing books. (Runs off to read: Thomas Hardy, Émile Zola & Edith Wharton)

Jimmy says

There is a strikingly pathetic point in Saul Bellow's novella *Seize the Day*, when the protagonist Wilhelm (let's call him Tommy, his Hollywood alias) Adler laments how the latter half of his existence will be occupied by analyzing the failures that occurred in the first half. In the depths of his dour fatalism he opines, "A person can become tired of looking himself over and trying to fix himself up. You can spend the entire second half of your life recovering from the mistakes of your first half." This quote is taken from a conversation that Wilhelm has with his father, as he reaches to persuade him that his current failures are seemingly incurable, and that he needs his financial help. What he neglects to do, above all else, is take this point in his life to regroup and assess the reasons for his past failures.

In the earlier novels of Bellow, this is a fairly typical outburst; someone is dying to be understood so badly that a screaming tirade suddenly inundates the conversation the two characters are having. There is an almost evolutionary progression to the various protagonists of Bellow's novels. We see Joseph, of *Dangling Man* striving to become a responsible man and join the army, desiring to mature and contribute something to his country. Augie March jumps from opportunity to opportunity in pursuit of his idea of the American Dream. Even Moses Herzog, in his late age – somewhat older than Wilhelm – continues to probe for the adequate amount of existential meaning required in order to enjoy life. Young and old alike, these men are troubled by their own selfish desires, which they occasionally confuse with what it takes to be a man in mid-century America.

At forty, Wilhelm is still shockingly naïve and idealistic. After dropping out of Penn State, he was swindled by the opportunism of a talent agent by the name of Maurice Venice. After accidentally catching his picture in the school paper, Venice convinces Tommy that his looks will carry him all the way to Hollywood and further. Like many other young people at the time, Tommy discovers that, not only has his artistic hopefulness led him nowhere, it has delayed his attention to his adult obligations to the world. To exacerbate things, he marries and has two children.

In the wake of artistic failure, many of us resign to careers or futures that will promise stability and some semblance of pride. The sobering reality of failure reunites us with the humbling, meek reassurance that comes with merely being capable of staying afloat in the world. Tommy briefly indulges in this act of quotidian redemption. He finds employment as a traveling salesman, and for awhile he manages to break even in life, again failing to realize that his life is no longer merely about just him.

Enter Dr. Adler, Tommy's father, a well-respected physician whose mantra of restraint and forethought put Tommy's impetuous desire to become a Hollywood star, to shame. *Seize the Day* takes place within the span of one day in New York, but its title is also taken from a speech given to Tommy by a deceitful charlatan named Dr. Tamkin. Tamkin is reminiscent of a Wilhelm Reich, albeit more of a caricature of an intellectual snake-oil salesman. He persuades Tommy to work the market with him, investing in lard prices. Of course, Tamkin's character is footing a smaller portion of the investment, and eventually he makes himself scarce at a crucial moment in Tommy's life. Almost instantly down and out, Tommy begs for his father's assistance. He is completely cut off from aid, rendered helpless and destitute, yet responsible for the livelihood of his family. The solution is more or less simple, and not outside of his reach, but his obstinacy drives him to the point of a breakdown, and he comes to see, in another man's casket, his own future and the consequences of his fatal case of arrested development.

In *Seize the Day*, Bellow's talent lies, not only in the believability of his dialogue, but the effortless pace at which the story unfolds, revealing such a complex set of lives and personal histories all in the span of a little over a hundred pages. Even Dr. Adler's insufferable, septuagenarian German friend, Dr. Perls is fleshed out with the characteristic repugnance of old money. After Bellow establishes the tone of Tommy's character, he offers him an opportunity to rant and speak his mind, only to be profoundly confronted by the ostensible immaturity and selfishness of his decisions. This is a novelistic quality somewhat unique to Bellow; that ability to shape a character, presumably based on the shortcomings of his own post-Depression struggles as a young man, and then challenge that character with the well-reasoned senescence of their elders.

Astraea says

Shall the meek inherit the earth?

AC says

This is Bellow.

Not the early, picaresque Bellow of *Augie* (1953) – which I do not much like – writing a clunky, poorly edited, Americanized, Depression-Era Bildungsroman..., with the so-unBellow-like voice of sentences made in endless *largo*... but the Bellow that has found his voice, for better and even, sometimes, for worse.... A Bellow that is modern, urban, postwar, a scratchingly desperate New York Manhattan Bellow..., not the yuppified, gentrified, Ed Kochified Manhattan of *Annie Hall*, but the Manhattan of 1956... when New York first was Rome..., Saul Steinberg's view of America..., Tamkin's view of the Hudson... the center... the omphalos... of the early, still innocent Imperium, and yet already reeking of the dirty, worn out, aging, clogged streets... the Upper West Side... tenements and apartment houses built in the 1890s..., a New York when the Empire State Building was still the tallest building in the world... no gleaming Midtown... full of decaying and dying immigrants from the collapse of Europe, Austro-Hungarians (Wilhelm Adler), rouged and wrinkled, hanging at the Automat..., and likewise full of those NEW teeming immigrants from Puerto Rico, from... of the dirty, sooty, heat rising from the subway gratings in those filthy islands in the middle of B'way... where the pigeons shit and croon and poke for crumbs amidst the litter and the dog crap..., while the old men in their dirty brown hats and baggy brown pants, the color of ochre... and black suspenders, toothless, kvetching, watching, nodding... feeding the pigeons, watching the Puerto Ricans and taxis and buses and smoke rising in those clear blue skies... the currents flowing of millions of every race, of every genius, of everyman... of every... a New York of Adlers and Rappaports and Tamkins and Rubins and...puckered old ladies and street beggars and... the New York of a time and place of my memories... authentic.... a Bellow controlled... the sprawling world of *Augie* condensed into a mere 100 pages and change... perfected, disciplined, sad...

The action takes place partially in the *Gloriana*, across the street from... really a shadow and knock-off, a foil for the old *Ansonia*..., and in a small, brown, smokey, crowded little brokerage house, almost a bucket-shop, brilliantly and accurately captured in the film (Robin Williams is Tommy Wilhelm), which my grandfather used to take me to when I was a very, very little child and which, as I remember it, was on 79th street, on the southeast corner of B'way, right underneath what was for years the old Guys 'n Dolls Billiard Hall, which was one flight up... though my memory could be wrong...

... in other words..., authentic.

And Wilhelm...? He is in a state of collapse... in crisis... but here's the thing, and what I think most people miss, and miss (revealingly) because most people who read literature nowadays in America are relentlessly, immovably, uncomprehendingly, genetically middle-class, unthreatened by catastrophe, held up, even when slumming, by a massive, personal safety net of parents in Westchester, of trusts, of bonds, of... but no, not Wilhelm – Tommy is in REAL crisis... his mother is dead, his father is loveless and will not help, his sister is alienated, his wife is a shit and squeezing him and bleeding him... and – and here's thing – he has no money. He lost his job – not through his own fault – but because has too much damned pride (and deservedly so... for Wilhelm is, indeed, a Prince among men...) to go begging for half his salary back... just because the son-in-law moved in... and schtooped his way into Wilhelm's rightful slot... that is, Tommy Wilhelm... Wilkie Adler..., that Prince..., has no goddamned money and is on the point of collapse...

And none of it REALLY is his fault.

Sure... he has faults... he's naïve, idealistic, a bit stubborn... worse, he thinks he deserves better, deserves pity even.. but so what... so would anyone... and he certainly doesn't deserve THIS... THIS dreck (!) – when every two-bit charlatan, dishonest, unfeeling faker seems to manage what poor Wilhelm – a prince..., feeling in uncommon depths... honest to a fault... can't seem to manage – namely – a measly 15 grand a year.... and in fact..., he'll settle for less... much less! screw the money... at least have some pity... some mercy..., no...!? Is THAT too much to ask...!

In other words, this is not really Shakespearean tragedy... it is Greek tragedy...with a modernist, yiddish twist.

There is, says Freud, such a thing as a REAL neurosis – that is, a neurosis that is a response NOT to the contents of the repressed, but to REAL circumstances... circumstances that press on you so bad that you can scream, you can't breathe, and you don't fucking deserve this... and yet... you got it... and the character and personality threaten to disintegrate... death while standing, death while walking, death while talking... death while watching yourself dying a death on the installment plan... and it is this... this REAL breakdown of the TRULY neurotic Tommy Wilhelm which is the subject of this lovely little book.

In other words, Wilhelm, I think, is a little bit of a modern Job

Sorry for the long rambling comments – I usually avoid writing long reviews, as you all know. But it has to be said.

George K. says

Η μεγάλη αυτή νουβέλα αποτελεί την πρότη μου επαφή με το έργο του Νομπέλστα συγγραφέα Σολ Μπλόου. Στην βιβλιοθήκη μου έχω κμποσα βιβλία του, αγοράσμένα για απ' παλαιοβιβλιοπωλέα, αλλά επ'λεξά να τον γνωρίσω με το συγκεκριμένο βιβλιαράκι, που τσμπήσα με τρ'α ευρ' πριν λίγες μέρες. Ήταν ένα απ' τα σπ'νια βιβλία που ψάχνα με σχετικ' μαν'α για αρκετ' καιρ', γιατί κ'τι μ'σα μου λέγε 'τι πρόκειται για ένα ενδιαφέρον και ιδιαίτερο βιβλίο. Και δεν πέρα ξω.

Η λη ιστορία διαδραματίζεται κατά την διάρκεια μιας ημέρας και αφορά έναν αφέλ', επιπ'λαιο και εν γ'νει αποτυχημένο σαρανταπεντ'ρη, τον Τ'μι Β'λχελμ, ο οποίος έχει χωρ'σει απ' την γυναίκα του (ήντας υποχρεωμένος να πληρ'νει διατροφή και τα έξοδα των παιδιών), δεν έχει και τις καλύτερες σχέσεις με τον επιτυχημένο πατέρα του, εν' μ'λινς πρόσφατα χάσε και μια αξιοπρεπ' δουλειά. Τ'ρα είναι νεργός, χάζει στο ξενοδοχείο που διαμ'νει, εν' "παίξε" τα τελευταία του δολάρια στο χρηματιστήριο, εμπιστευμένος έναν ψευτογιατρία απάτε'να. Κατ' την διάρκεια της ημέρας αυτές -μιας απ' τις χειρότερες που είχε την ατυχία να ζ'σει-, θα κ'νει μια αναδρομή στο παρελθόν, θα ανατρ'ξει στις αποτυχίες και τις ελ'χιστες επιτυχίες του, και θα μπλεχτεί στον φα'λο κύκλο της αυτολήψησης και της μιζ'ρίας.

Μην περιμ'νετε καμιά πλοκή, τ'ποτα εξ'ρσεις ή εκπλ'ξεις, η ιστορία είναι γεμ'τη διαλόγους, σκ'ψεις του πρωταγωνιστή, και λίγες περιγραφές των διαφόρων σκηνικών. Σκοπ'ς του συγγραφέα ήταν να αναδε'ξει με σχετικ' ντόνο τρ'πο πως ένας νδρας μπορεί να φτ'σει σε αδι'ξοδο, πως

μπορε? να εγκλωβιστε? σ?ναν κ?σμο δ?χως ν?ημα και γεμ?το μιζ?ρια, χ?ρη στις αποτυχημ?νες επιλογ?ς του, την ατυχ?α και ?σως την αδιαφορ?α των κοντιν?ν του ανθρ?πων. Κατ? την γν?μη μου ε?ναι ?να αρκετ? ενδιαφ?ρον και σημαντικ? βιβλ?ο, που θ?γει ορισμ?να σοβαρ? ζητ?ματα. Ο Μπ?λοου κατ?φερε να με κ?νει να ενδιαφερθ? για τον κεντρικ? πρωταγωνιστ? και να συμπ?σχω ως ?να βαθμ? με τα προβλ?ματα του. Η γραφ? μου φ?νηκε πολ? καλ?, ευκολοδι?βαστη και συν?μα οξυδερκ?ς και με β?θος. Χα?ρομαι που γν?ρισα ?ναν ακ?μα σημαντικ? συγγραφ?α.

????? ??? ?? ??????????

Manab says

[illegible]

Jeffrey says

The novel almost begins with Wilhelm talking to Rubin, the man running the newstand at the hotel where Wilhelm lives. Rubin shares Wilhelm's taste for nice clothes, a small but revealing desire for beautiful but useless things ("It didn't seem necessary--he was behind the counter most of the time--but he dressed very well").

"As Wilhelm approached, Rubin did not see him; he was looking out dreamily at the Hotel Ansonia, which was visible from his corner, several blocks away. The Ansonia, the neighborhood's great landmark, was built by Stanford White. It looks like a baroque palace from Prague or Munich enlarged a hundred times, with towers, domes, huge swells and bubbles of metal gone green from exposure, iron fretwork and festoons. Black television antennae are densely planted on its round sumits. Under the changes of weather it may look like marble or like sea water, black as slate in the fog, white as tufa in sunlight. This morning it looked like the image of itself reflected in deep water, white and cumulous above, with cavernous distortions underneath. Together, the two men gazed at it."

The Ansonia is like a distant heavenly palace, or at least a visible representation of someplace different, better, more beautiful. The two men stand, looking at a necessarily distorted image of it, and are together as they do so. Later, as they briefly discuss Wilhelm's investments, Rubin loses interest and looks elsewhere.

Wilhelm's father, the hard, angry, greedy, materially successful Dr. Adler, appears throughout the short novel to criticize Wilhelm for being something of a failure. He is obsessed and resentful about his own impending death. We last see him in the bowels of the hotel building, in the dark and hot massage room. It's as if he's in hell. The concern for money and physical life have left him deformed and damned.

At first I disliked the ending of the novel; I thought it was an easy and slightly dishonest way to invest the ending with an emotional impact or meaning it hadn't earned. But, the more I thought about, the more powerful and even understated it seemed. So, in short, I think this is a very good short novel, and would recommend it to anyone.

Erik F. says

Astonishingly powerful novella structured around a day in the life of an actor *manqué* as he deals with a shrewish ex-wife, an untrustworthy "psychiatrist" who entangles him in the stock market, an icy father who (understandably) has grown tired of helping his middle-aged son out of financial binds, and with assorted feelings of acedia, alienation, and desperation. In a brief number of pages, Bellow builds a very convincing miniature panorama of a single man adrift in an urban and emotional wasteland, with the protagonist's increasing distress becoming uncomfortably palpable as the day wears down. The book is not a total downer, though: there is snappy humor throughout, along with a sense of zestful wonder at the privilege of simply being alive (hey, don't roll your eyes!). The true knockout comes at the end: a conclusion that is as stirring and cathartic as any other that comes to mind at the moment.

Peter says

I'm on a bit of a novella reading binge at the moment, in preparation for a class I'm teaching next fall. And if this temporary obsession brings me to more books like *SEIZE THE DAY*, maybe it will become a lasting obsession.

Reading Saul Bellow is dangerous business for a writer because unless you are one of about five living authors I can think of, your sentences will never be as beautiful as Saul Bellow's. In fact it might be best just to say that out loud before sitting down to write. As in "I am going to sit down to write now, and my sentences will never be as beautiful as Saul Bellow's." Then, at peace with that truth, you can begin to type.

I'm tempted to use an example here of one of the half-paragraph stunners that Bellow traffics in. Instead I'll list three one-sentence paragraphs that left me breathless.

"He breathed in the sugar of the pure morning.
He heard the long phrases of the birds,
No enemy wanted his life."

A little context might help explain why those lines hit with such force. So much of this book is in the churning consciousness of Tommy Wilhelm, and in his his Socratic dialogues with one of my favorite literary charlatans, Dr. Tamkin. Wilhelm worries. He worries about his worries. He seeks the smallest trace of affirmation from his fellow man. All the while he seems to revel in the misery he causes himself. Then he notices something about the world around him. "Light as a locust, a helicopter bringing in mail from Newark Airport to La Guardia sprang over the city in a long leap." Or: "In full tumult the great afternoon current raced for Columbus Circle, where the mouth of midtown stood open and the skyscrapers gave back the yellow fire of the sun." The world outside seems like a place of overwhelming beauty and overwhelming motion. Somewhere Wilhelm can no longer find his place.

We follow him as he journeys through a remarkably small part of this world, attempting to gain control of the present, but never quite able to touch it. It's a book that comes in great waves of talk, feeling, and the raw unconscious. An effective way to capture a true unraveling. A short potent dose of novella.

Michael Finocchiaro says

If there was ever a character as neurotic as Alexander Portnoy - it was Wilhelm Adler. Following him around for a day in this short but great novella, I laughed and cried. At times, well most of the time, he is pathetic but as in nearly all of Bellow's protagonists, there is a diehard optimism that keeps him going towards self-realization. This book is a breath of fresh air and will bring you a smile. Carpe diem!

s.penkevich says

'Nature only knows one thing, and that's the present. Present, present, eternal present, like a big, huge, giant wave – colossal, bright and beautiful, full of life and death, climbing into the sky, standing in the seas. You must go along with the actual, the Here-and-Now, the glory -'

Following the success of his lengthy, 1953 National Book Award Winning novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, Nobel laureate Saul Bellow returned in 1956 with the very slender *Seize the Day*. Called '*the most Russian novella written in America*' by critic James Wood ¹, one of *Seize*'s greatest successes is the enormous accumulation of ideas, social, spiritual and psychological commentary, and pure literary vitamins packed into this snack of a novel that rivals the depth of novels three to four times it's length, not to mention the enrapturing prose that pulls this story along. Much like the Russian literary giants of whom Bellow

highly regarded, *Seize* is intensely psychological as Bellow takes a page from Wilhelm Reich (whose first name is also that of *Seize*'s protagonist) with regards to character analysis and social commentary. This novel is ripe for classroom discussion and analysis, with carefully crafted metaphors and motifs that seem effortlessly blended into the narrative, similar to the way Dr. Tamkin builds his character mask through '*hints, made dully as asides, grew by repetition into sensational claims.*' Bursting with insight and frosted in delicious prose, Bellow breaks down the socio-economic conditions of the 50's, and their implications of the common man through an ostensive examination of Wilhelm Reich's psychoanalytic theories.

Much like Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses*, *Seize the Day* follows a Jewish protagonist, through the course of one day while simultaneously painting the larger portrait of the character's life history. However, *Seize the Day* stands on its own taking the reader through an entirely different approach and resolution as a psychoanalysis of Tommy Wilhelm (formerly Wilhelm 'Wilky' Adler before adopting his stage name²). A bit of background on Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian psychoanalyst and contemporary of Sigmund Freud, is extremely beneficial towards understanding Bellow's novel, as Reich's theories and practices constitute the framework for the novel.

Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957)

In short, Reich's psychoanalysis - beyond the standard Freudian constructs of figurative castration, Oedipal complex, etc. centered on a belief that '*neurosis is rooted in physical, sexual, and socio-economic conditions, and in particular in a lack of what he called "orgastic potency"*'. The 'orgastic potency' refers to a theory that an orgasm is a healthy release of libido and creative powers fueled through love, which can become blocked by social conditions and other outside forces, thus creating an 'orgastic impotency' which directly causes neurosis and health disorders (Reich believed Freud's jaw cancer was unrelated to his tobacco use and was instead attributed to Freud 'biting down' of his [Freud's] problems). This was the primary focus for character analysis, and led to his practice of Vegetotherapy. Vegetotherapy was a form of psychotherapy consisting of the patient removing their 'body armor' – both figuratively and literally as the patient would conduct the therapy nude, and simulate extreme stress and emotions with the aim of responding to them and releasing all the built up emotional blockage (to achieve an emotional orgasm) ³.

Following the ideas of Reich, Bellow probes the 'neurosis' of Wilhelm by setting him in financial ruin (socio-economic conditions), an estranged marriage brought on by his love affairs and belief that his wife is attempting to choke him off (castration), and at odds with his father (Oedipal complex – the more awkward aspects of this complex are only lightly touched upon, as when Wilhelm reflects upon his mother's death he feels a '*great pull at the very center of his soul,*' yet '*never identified what struck within him*'). Wilhelm looks back on his past as a laundry list of failures, but shows hope for recovery by always believing that he can get a new start. This 'new start', in this case putting the last of his money into commodities with Dr. Tamkin on Tamkin's 'can't fail' get-rich-quick promises, seem less and less possible now that he is graying and in his 40s, and Bellow does not hesitate from depicting Wilhelm in a rather unflattering light as a slob, sloucher, pill-popper in denial, and rather whiney. Wilhelm does look at his past as a series of events *leading* him to his sad state, yet he does in part own up to his mistakes and does not shy away from accepting that it was his choices that brought him to those events. This ownership of his faults may be the only glimmer of potential recovery that Wilhelm displays from the start.

The financial ruin of Wilhelm is a major focus of the novel, and should be addressed before proceeding into a discussion of the metaphorical vegetotherapy that Bellow conducts upon his protagonist. Reich was an outspoken Marxist and many of these anti-capitalistic beliefs take shape through both Tamkin and Wilhelm. '*A man like you,*' Tamkin addresses Wilhelm in one of his many speeches, '*humble for life, who wants to feel and live, has trouble – not wanting to exchange an ounce of soul for a pound of social power – he'll never*

make it without help in a world like this.' Both men see money as a vicious tool for keeping others down. It is the driving force of New York, according to them, and the world, and is always used as a weapon. Wilhelm feels castrated by his wife's refusal to grant him a divorce and by her still living off his money, which she demands in increasing quantities. Wilhelm believes his own suffering is inflated due to the downward spiral of poverty and having others always riding on his back dragging him down. *'A rich man may be free on an income of a million net. A poor man may be free because nobody cares what he does. But a fellow in my position has to sweat it out until he drops dead.'* He views the whole system as utterly threatening and damning. It is even discussed as a method for enslavement and cruelty throughout history in one of the many instances of evoking the Jewish plight and consciousness (It is clear why Roth cites Bellow as an important influence. Bellow manages to weave a religious motif through biblical imagery and brief touches on the Jewish culture that occasionally give a parable-like vibe to the novel).

'People come to the market to kill,' says Tamkin, *'They say, 'I'm going to make a killing.' It's not accidental. Only they haven't got the genuine courage to kill, and they erect a symbol of it.'* Money is seen as an extension of the animalistic urges in man, seeing money as a force of destruction that blocks the creative forces of love. These animal instincts, an important aspect of Reich's psychoanalysis, are described by Tamkin when he discusses that a man whom 'marries sorrow' will figuratively 'howl' from his window at night to express his pain of the world. Wilhelm briefly thinks upon his grandfather calling him by his Yiddish name, Velvel, a name meaning *wolf*, in another excellent example of Bellow tying the Jewish consciousness into this piece.

Wilhelm's vegeotherapy is essentially the entire days events. Every waking moment is either the pains of an old wound or a new stressor that builds and builds on him. The systematically recalls all his failures, all his fears, and dwells on all his faults as the day progresses until he is balled up in a knot of anxiety. Then, one by one, he sheds his bodily armor, casting off everyone he knows in a fit of emotional outpouring and indignant anger. Bellow plays with his water motif in a very interesting way here. Throughout the book are frequent allusions to water, many of them directed at Wilhelm's apparent aversion to it (he uses an electric razor that doesn't require him wetting his face, he doesn't wash his hands, etc.). Wilhelm is often described as drowning in his problems. Tamkin is ridiculed by Dr. Adler for having a supposed invention of a underwater suit that would allow people to be protected underwater in case of nuclear attack, which makes for a wonderful metaphor for Wilhelm's seeking shelter in Tamkin's stock-market schemes to saving him from drowning in his financial woes. Despite the fears of water, Wilhelm's orgasm is a flood of tears, and violent output of water as the curtain falls upon the novel.

This watery orgasm poses an interesting analysis on the novel. Perhaps it is what we fear most, that which is the hardest, that we should actually take stock in. In other words, taking the easy way out to avoid the hard way is what causes problems. Wilhelm always ran to the next-big-thing, off to Hollywood or to the bed of a new woman, which brought him to his knees in life. Tamkin offered an easy way out, but should he really be trusted. Bellow creates an incredible trickster figure in Tamkin, ironically having him be a psychologist in a novel focusing on psychoanalysis. Tamkin is often described as speaking 'hypnotically', and Wilhelm often wonders if this is some sort of spell he is under from the flow of his words.

'Bringing people into the Here-and-Now. The real universe. That's the present moment. The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real – the here-and-now. Seize the day.'

The short, punctuated pattern of speech creates a trancelike rhythm. He is like the snake in Eden tempting with an apple of knowledge promising better things. Bellow keeps the temptation sweeter by having Tamkin also express truth and Bellow's ultimate message and moral – to love one another. The truth is tangled with

the lies and deceit, just like real life where we must sort through all the messages we receive and decode the thread we should follow to salvation, personal success and stability, and which glimmering threads really lead us to damnation and ruin.

For such a thin book, Bellow fills it chock full of literary glory. *Seize the Day* is like a quick left jab, but when it catches you on the chin you realize it is like a full forced right hook of a fist from any lesser writer. There is simply so much occurring on various levels in this novel and it is truly astonishing. Bellow leaves the reader with an empowering look at life, to seize the moments when they come and make the best of them, and to take ownership of our failures because '*you can spend the entire second half of your life recovering from the mistakes of the first half.*' Seize the day, and seize this book.

3.75/5

'all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and sisters. He was imperfect and disfigured himself, but what difference did that make if he was united with them by this blaze of love?'

¹ Besides often raving about Bellow (see sub), in Wood's *How Fiction Works*, he speaks at length about a tiny paragraph and opens a sea of meaning from a small aside thrown in by Bellow. As the passage from Wood inspired me to read the novel, I'd like to include it here in full:

Another example of the novelist writing over his character occurs (briefly) in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*. Tommy Wilhelm, the out-of-work salesman down on his luck, neither much of an aesthete nor an intellectual, is anxiously watching the board at a Manhattan commodity exchange. Next to him, an old hand named Mr. Rappaport is smoking a cigar. "A long perfect ash formed on the end of the cigar, the white ghost of the leaf with all its veins and its fainter pungency. It was ignored, in its beauty, by the old man. For it was beautiful. Wilhelm he ignored as well."

It is a gorgeous, musical phrase, and characteristic of both Bellow and modern fictional narrative. The fiction slows down to draw our attention to a potentially neglected surface or texture—an example of a "descriptive pause," familiar to us when a novel halts its action and the author says, in effect, "Now I am going to tell you about the town of N., which was nestled in the Carpathian foothills," or "Jerome's house was a large dark castle, set in fifty thousand acres of rich grazing land." But at the same time it is a detail apparently seen not by the author—or not only by the author—but by a character. And this is what Bellow wobbles on; he admits an anxiety endemic to modern narrative, and which modern narrative tends to elide. The ash is noticed, and then Bellow comments: "It was ignored, in its beauty, by the old man. For it was beautiful. Wilhelm he ignored as well."

Seize the Day is written in a very close third-person narration, a free indirect style that sees most of the action from Tommy's viewpoint. Bellow seems here to imply that Tommy notices the ash, because it was beautiful, and that Tommy, also ignored by the old man, is also in some way beautiful. But the fact that Bellow tells us this is surely a concession to our implied objection: How and why would Tommy notice this ash, and notice it so well, in these fine words? To which Bellow replies, anxiously, in effect: "Well, you might have thought Tommy incapable of such finery, but he really did notice this fact of beauty; and that is because he is somewhat beautiful himself."

a. Wood's considered Bellow to be '*one, to my mind the greatest of American prose stylists in the 20th century - and thus one of the greatest in American fiction*'. Wood also insisted that the novel be included in Bellow's own syllabus for his [Bellow's] literature course at Boston University so the students could '*get a sense of the stature of the man who was their professor. Bellow modestly absented himself for that particular class, so that the students could freely concentrate on the writing.*' (Excerpt from Wood's article *The High-Minded Joker*, a reflection on the life of Saul Bellow published by The Guardian, on April 8, 2005, three days after Bellow's death.)

² The adoption of his stage name plays beautifully into Bellow's depiction of the Oedipal complex, as well as exposing the dualities inherent in his protagonist with regards to his 'body armor' and true self. '*He had cast off his father's name, and with it his father's opinion of him. It was, and he knew it was, his bid for liberty. Adler being in his mind the title of his species, Tommy the freedom of the person. But Wilky was his inescapable self.*' This also allows for the naming of Dr. Tamkin to represent a surrogate father for Tommy Wilhelm, a false, faulty father for a false faulty self. The use of names in the novel is textbook Lit101 analysis and used to it's full potential.

³ Reich was declared schizophrenic by Sandor Rado, thought to be bipolar by his own daughter and was a staunch believer that Earth was secretly at war with UFOs. Despite his apparent open insanity, Reich's 'orgone accumulators' – a device built to achieve the emotional orgasm of vegeotherapy, was popularly used by many big-name people, such as Sean Connery, J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac.

'Everyone on this side of the grave is the same distance from death'

Tara says

It's been about a week since I finished this book, and have picked up two new books in the meantime, so my first thoughts are a bit hazy and lost to other curiosities. However, the thing about the book that has stuck with me - and will no doubt lead me to re-reading it in later years - is its examination of American ideals and the internal grapplings of a human soul. How wonderfully fresh and true this story remains today, over 50 years after it was written! Tommy, the novel's protagonist, must come to terms with his life and his culture: corporatism and nepotism, financial loss, capitalist economics, morality, marriage, psychology, identity development, family dynamics. Tommy ruminates (and yes, sometimes fusses) over these subjects as he completes the daily routine. The interesting part is how, inside of Tommy, all these disparate subjects emerge as not so distinct after all, but entwined, his childhood feeding into his financial woes and so on.

And there are no easy answers to any of Tommy's questions; Bellow muddies the waters a bit so that no character is a saint or a villian. In fact, I'm not sure, even after reading the novel, if Tamkin really was 'crazy' or a 'joke' and if the father is mean or level-headed. That's for the reader to struggle with, I suppose.

On two side notes, someone mentioned in their review that Tommy is a loser, but I'm not sure I would agree. We've all probably been a little bit like Tommy at some point or another. At least, I can say personally, that I've worried myself into a hole, made mistakes, and wondered if I were doing the right thing. Secondly, I'd like to add that Bellow's writing is quite beautiful with moments of transcendence here and there.
