

# “Herzog” by Saul Bellow []

In questo romanzo, il protagonista è un antieroe immerso in una crisi esistenziale che cerca di capire il senso di una realtà che sfugge alla sua comprensione e che lo porta ad abbandonarsi ad un affascinante rapimento intellettuale.

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The celebrated Canadian-American novelist Saul Bellow (1915-2005) wrote about the experiences of Jewish immigrants in America, and the ideals and challenges of the modern age. Published in 1964, Herzog immediately [topped](#) the bestseller lists. The novel recounts five days in the life of protagonist Moses E. Herzog, a cultural history professor [in the grip of](#) an existential crisis.

## LETTERS

At forty-seven, Herzog believes he has failed as a writer, as an academic and as a father. In a manic state, he travels from New York to the beachside tourist destination Martha's Vineyard to visit friends, on to Chicago and finally out to a country house in the Berkshires, Massachusetts. Here, he tries [to come to terms with](#) his feelings in a series of letters. “He had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun. [...] Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead.” “Gli pareva d’essere stregato, e scriveva lettere alla gente più impensata. [...] Nascosto in mezzo alla campagna, scriveva a più non posso, freneticamente, ai giornali, agli uomini pubblici, ad amici e parent e finì per scrivere pure ai morti, prima ai suoi morti e poi anche ai morti famosi.”

## FRIGHTENED MAN

Funny, angry, tragic and filled with disappointments, the letters are never sent, but contribute instead to Herzog's intellectual [turmoil](#). Back in New

York, his girlfriend, Ramona, tries to help Herzog face the realities of life. But she realises that his escape to the country may be an attempt to escape from her: “Well, were you running away?” she said. ‘Why should I? You’re a marvelous woman, Ramona.’ ‘In that case you’re being very odd, Moses.’ ‘Well, I suppose I am one of the odder beasts.’ ‘But I know better than to be proud and demanding. Life has taught me to be humble.’ Moses shut his eyes and raised his brows. Here we go...” «Allora, stavi scappando?» disse lei. «E perché mai? Tu sei una donna meravigliosa, Ramona.» «Se è così, ti comporti proprio in modo stranissimo, Moses.» «Be’, penso di essere uno degli animali più strani, effettivamente.» «Ma io lo so, comunque, che è meglio non essere esigenti e orgogliosi. La vita m’ha insegnato ad essere umile.» Moses chiuse gli occhi e sollevò le sopracciglia. Ci siamo.”

## THE FUTURE

While Herzog ponders the past, Ramona suggests that he concentrate on the future. Can he make a return to his studies? Can he be a good father to his children, Marco and June? Can he avoid conflict with his ex-wife, who has recently left him for his close friend? “You should be thinking about your future,” said Ramona. ‘What are you planning to do next year?’ ‘I can pick up a job of some sort.’ ‘Where?’ ‘I can’t decide whether to be near my son Marco, in the east, or go back to Chicago to keep an eye on June.’ ‘Listen, Moses, it’s no disgrace to be practical. Is it a point of honor or something, not to think clearly? You want to win by sacrificing yourself? It doesn’t work, as you ought to know by now. Chicago would be a mistake. You’d only suffer.’ ‘Perhaps, and suffering is another bad habit.’ “«Dovresti pensare al tuo futuro» disse Ramona. «Che cosa intendi fare l’anno venturo?» «Posso trovarmi un lavoro.» «Dove?» «Non riesco a decidere se star vicino a mio figlio Marco nell’Est, o tornare a Chicago per badare un po’ a June.» «Senti, Moses, non fa male un po’ di senso pratico. Che cos’è, un punto d’onore, rifiutarsi di pensare con un po’ di chiarezza? Vuoi vincere sacrificandoti? Non funziona, lo dovresti già sapere. Chicago sarebbe uno sbaglio. Soffriresti e niente altro.» «Forse, e soffrire è un’altra brutta abitudine.»”

## SURVIVOR

Indeed, Herzog feels he was born to suffer — but he is a survivor. After a disastrous visit to Chicago, he returns to the house in the Berkshires. Here, talking to his brother Will, Herzog seems calmer, more [purposeful](#). He rejects the idea of a 'rest' in a psychiatric hospital. The future, [though uncertain](#), no longer seems frightening. "Odd situation I've gotten into, Will – isn't it?" said Moses. 'For me. For us – the Herzogs, I mean. It seems a strange point to arrive at after all the other points. In this lovely green hole ... You're worried about me, I see.' Will, troubled but controlled, one of the most deeply familiar and longest-loved of human faces, looked at him in a way that could not be mistaken. 'Of course I'm worried [...]' 'Well you mustn't be distressed about me. I'm in a peculiar state, but not in a bad one.'" "«Sì» disse Will. «Potresti.» Parlava con garbo al fratello. «In che curiosa situazione mi sono messo, eh Will — eh?» disse Moses. «Per me. Per noi — gli Herzog, voglio dire. Sembra un punto strano a cui arrivare dopo tutti quegli altri punti. In questa bella tana verde... Tu sei preoccupato per me, vedo.» Will, tormentato ma controllato, uno dei visi più profondamente familiari e più a lungo amati, lo guardò in un modo tale da non lasciare dubbi. «Certo che sono preoccupato [...]'» «Be', non t'angustiare per me. Sono in uno stato particolare, ma non è brutto.»"

## STORY OF IDEAS

Herzog is a story of ideas, the meeting of intellectual power with emotional courage and life force. The novel [sealed](#) Bellow's reputation as a writer for the age. The only author to win the National Book Award for Fiction three times, he was [awarded](#) the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976.

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# Glossary

- **to come to terms with** = fare i conti con
- **turmoil** = agitazione
- **ponders** = riflettere
- **avoid** = evitare
- **awarded** = assegnare, conferire
- **topped** = raggiungere il primo posto
- **in the grip of** = in preda a
- **purposeful** = determinato
- **though uncertain** = sebbene incerto
- **sealed** = confermare