# The Adventures of Augie March Short Guide

## The Adventures of Augie March by Saul Bellow

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# Characters

The Adventures of Augie March is a triumph of characters. Dozens of memorable figures people this sprawling tale. Augie himself is, of course, the lead. Larky, curious, experimental, free, he is the ideal protagonist for such a long picaresque novel. He touches all sides. Because he is open to all kinds of experience, he communicates a picture of modern America as wide and diverse almost as life itself.

But he is also interesting in his own right. Despite his apparent passivity, Augie holds hard to certain deep beliefs. He is on the side of life and people; he will never give up.

Augie's beliefs come under constant attack. He encounters a series of "reality-instructors," people who want to make him share their fate. These are wonderful characters in their own right-attractive, domineering, vital-but they also function as a threat against Augie's freedom and self-development.

Grandma Lausch, the dominant force during Augie's boyhood, is a grande dame; William Einhorn, the dominant figure during his adolescence, is a Caesar, a Napoleon; Thea Fenchel, his lover during young manhood, is an unpredictable and sympathetic femme fatale. These characters are so threatening to Augie's development precisely because they are so forceful and attractive. Finally, Simon March, Augie's brother, is the most compelling and dangerous of the "reality-instructors."

Present throughout the novel, he is Augie's "secret sharer." Opting for money and power and security, Simon pays for them with his life.

In this rich novel, even the secondary and tertiary characters are memorable: Dingbat, that parody of the American Dream; Kreindl, who cannot resist "a pair of proud tsitskies"; Mimi Villars, who "can see the point of love"; the wild Cossack who consoles Augie after his terrible disappointments by telling him, "Wait, you haven't seen anything yet." The cast seems almost endless.

Even Leon Trotsky has a walk-on role.

# Social Concerns

"I am an American, Chicago born."

The famous opening words indicate that The Adventures of Augie March is a novel deeply rooted in a particular social context. Moving from the 1920s to the 1940s, it touches on the Great Depression, the stark contrast between rich and poor, the struggle over unionization, and the Second World War.

Nevertheless, it belongs to an American novelistic tradition of individualism and muted social commentary. In fact, much of the tension in the novel develops from the struggle of the protagonist to resist social regimentation, to remain "in opposition."

# Techniques

The Adventures of Augie March is a picaresque narrative. Augie himself is a "picaro" or "rogue." Typical of the genre, the subject of The Adventures of Augie March becomes the adventures of a freedom-loving rascal who lives by his wits and changes little through the long course of his escapades. Like other picaresque narratives, The Adventures of Augie March is realistic in manner and episodic in structure. After his first two tightly organized novels, Bellow lets himself go.

Bellow also lets himself go in his writing style. The prose is original, exuberant, passionate, unrestrained: "In the cage we rose and dropped, rubbing elbows with bigshots and operators, commissioners, grabbers, heelers, tipsters, hoodlums, wolves, fixers, plaintiffs, flatfeet, men in Western hats and women in lizard shoes and fur coats, hothouse and arctic drafts mixed up, brute things and airs of sex, evidence of heavy feeding and systematic shaving, of calculations, grief, not-caring, and hopes of tremendous millions in concrete to be poured or whole Mississippis of bootleg whisky and beer." Language is striving to convey all of multifaceted reality.

# Themes

The novel dramatizes the struggle of the individual with society, with "reality-instructors" and, ultimately, with himself. Augie March wants "a fate that is good enough"; he wants to touch all sides and not become a specialist. Yet how can the individual resist the enormous pressures of twentieth-century America, especially when it offers attractive temptations to conform? Augie encounters a series of powerful "reality-instructors," people who "are always trying to fit him into their schemes." These tempters include "Grandma" Lausch, William Einhorn, his friends, his lover, and his brother.

By their own lights, they mean well by Augie; all they ask is that he give up his individuality and freedom. Indeed, at times, Augie is forced to question the value of his precious self. Thea Fenchel, his lover, accuses him of being unable to communicate intimately with another: "Isn't there one person in the whole world to whom you could? Do you tell anybody? Yes, I guess love would come in a queer form. You think the queerness is your excuse. But perhaps love would be strange and foreign to you no matter which way it happened, and maybe you just don't want it." Augie makes no reply. The novel itself offers no easy answers to the question of individualism in modern America but, rather, rigorously explores the theme.

Augie March makes his most famous thematic statement near the end of the novel. He talks about "the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy." The axial lines suggest a state of Being, and he wants to have his existence on them — "Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony!" It is a stirring transcendental statement that is immediately undercut by his crazy project of a school in the country with Stella. Augie seems closer to the mixed experience of the novel when he realizes that life is a state of Becoming, a movement between idealism and the daily facts, between "the pointy, star-furnished air" and "oatmeal and laundry tickets and all the rest."

D. H. Lawrence claimed that all fictions ultimately present the struggle between Life and Death. Although such a contrast may seem too abstract for a novel of such dense particularity as The Adventures of Augie March, the struggle between Augie and brother Simon, the most extended and important struggle in the book, may point to that ultimate theme. Simon conforms; Augie flees.

Simon seeks power and money, Augie freedom and life. Simon is a pathetic figure at the end, locked into a loveless marriage, morally and spiritually dead.

In the final scene, caught in the barren wastes of Nature, surrounded by intimations of Death, the resilient and indomitable Augie can still laugh and sing.

# Literary Precedents

The Adventures of Augie March resembles The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) and The Catcher in the Rye (1951) in several respects, especially in its dramatization of a footloose and innocent rascal in conflict with his world.

But the two earlier novels are tighter in structure and narrower in scope than Bellow's picaresque narrative. The more relevant predecessor is probably the episodic Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Still, Augie exhibits an intelligence, erudition, and contemplativeness that make him a unique "picaro."

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