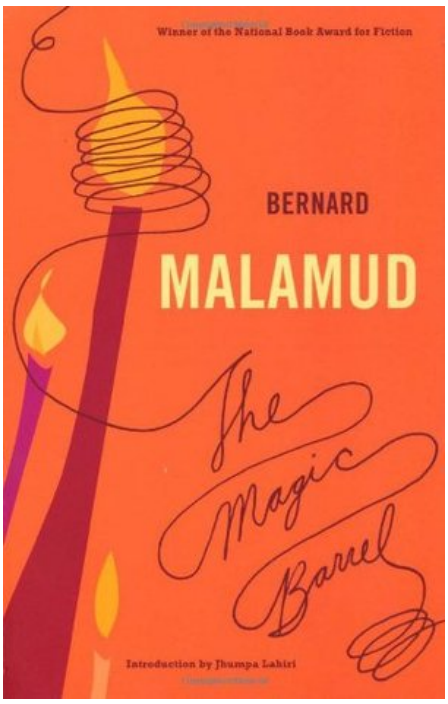

The Magic Barrel

Bernard Malamud , Jhumpa Lahiri (Introduction)

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Winner of the National Book Award for Fiction

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 Fidelman, roams amid the ruins of old Europe in search of his artistic patrimony); they tell of egg candlers 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.

The Magic Barrel Details

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Author	:	Bernard Malamud , Jhumpa Lahiri (Introduction)
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From Reader Review The Magic Barrel for online ebook

David says

Malamud writes with perfect emotional tone in these stories. I didn't care so much for "The Tenant," but I loved these stories. These stories just have this quiet subtlety which lets the emotion ring through in such a natural seeming way. It really is marvelous, absolutely perfect. Haunting, beautiful, human. I could read them again and again.

Andrew says

I pulled this off of a list of books that Donald Barthelme recommended to his students. What Barthelme learned from Malamud is clear, and I would say that it's some of Barthelme's finer qualities. Every one of Malamud's stories hits the ground running. In a few sentences he makes fully formed characters with desires, motives and conflicts. I sympathized within a page of knowing them. Many of the stories tend towards heartbreaking, but there is such an agility to the writing, and so many small surprises that only sometimes does that heartbreak seem too heavy. There is an underlying optimism that is closely connected to the heartbreak (be it correlation or causation).

The personal and historical context of Malamud seems to play a big role in this collection as well. As a Jewish writer working not long after World War II, Malamud (and the rest of the world) obviously had some big issues to wrestle with. The only point I want to make about that is that he deals with this on a small scale, putting a lot of weight behind fairly minor, everyday exchanges. I think there's a lot of charm to that approach.

Greta says

> The first seven years *****
> A shoemaker wants a better life for his daughter. And he doesn't think that reading more books can give her that.
>
> The mourners ****
> If you don't care about the people in your life, don't be surprised people don't care much about you.
>
> The girl of my dreams ***
> A self-loathing, aspiring writer starts a correspondence with a mysterious lady writer.
>
> Angel Levine ***
> God sends a black jewish angel to a despairing, suffering man. The Book of Job in Harlem, NYC.
>
> Behold the Key ****

To behold or not to behold, that's the question in this story of house-hunting in Rome, Italy.

Take Pity ****
A man wants to help a poor, embittered widow who suffered her whole life, but she refuses to accept his help for herself and for her children. The man feels powerless and frustrated ; he didn't expect offering help to a friend could be this tough.

The prison ***
A man's life can be his prison. If you can't help yourself, you can't help others.

The lady of the lake ****
A young man denies he's a Jew to win the love and approval of a beautiful Italian girl.

A summer's reading ***
A lazy dropout plans to read books to educate himself, and gains the respect from his family and neighbors.

The bill ***
A janitor doesn't pay his debt to the owners of a local store. This has consequences.

The last Mohican **
A man who travels to Italy to study the painter Giotto, is being harassed by a poor, jewish refugee.

The loan **
A man asks an old friend for a loan. Lend your money and lose your ~~friend~~ wife.

The magic barrel ****
An aspiring rabbi asks the help of a marriage broker to find a wife. A match made in heaven or in hell ?

Susan Fetterer says

I quenched my thirst for great storytelling while trapped in airports and belted in seats on two planes today. No interruptions -- a rarity -- so I hunkered down and finished the first in a series of National Book Award winning collections of short stories for my book club.
I've wanted to read Bernard Malamud for years and finally did it. He's a brilliant writer and I learned much reading and re-reading his exquisitely rendered sentences. He made it look effortless. Those who write know how painful and difficult is is to construct a meaningful sentence.
Each story in the collection reflects the time in which it was written---socially, politically, and economically, capturing pain, angst, ennui, disappointment in unfulfilled hopes and dreams. Not intending to infer that the stories are depressing (and how he accomplished that I cannot imagine), I do think he gathers slice of life episodes stylistically and succinctly, graphically and visually, simply and genuinely. His characters come alive.

Melki says

Superb, beautifully crafted stories of marriage brokers, lovelorn shoemakers, angels and innocents abroad.

Nearest to my heart was *A Summer's Reading*, in which a high school dropout gets no respect til one day he tells a neighbor that he will read 100 books in one summer. Suddenly, others are smiling and gazing kindly at him. As the summer passes, he reads nothing, and his own self confidence begins to falter. The story ends with this wonderful paragraph:

One evening in the fall, George ran out of his house to the library, where he hadn't been in years. There were books all over the place, wherever he looked, and though he was struggling to control an inward trembling, he easily counted off a hundred, then sat down at a table to read.

Maria says

Riconoscersi nella tragedia, poi decidere da che parte stare. Meglio: che persona diventare. Ma diffondere idee moraleggianti, diceva Malamud, è proprio quello che non si deve fare: «Lo scrittore non deve predicare, ma scrivere al meglio delle proprie abilità con l'obiettivo finale di nobilitare l'uomo e combattere le forze di disumanizzazione della nostra società». L'uomo, secondo Malamud, è una creatura misteriosa. Che senso ha, si chiedeva, scrivere un romanzo che non prova a spiegare l'uomo? Che senso ha, scrivere, senza cercare se stessi?

https://treracconti.it/bernard-malamud/

Zanna says

I count myself among the blessed for I have visited New York City. I stayed in a YMCA building and shared a bunk with a petite, taciturn Spanish girl whose cropped pale hair and brown skin put a spell on me that mixed itself into the city's spell of joy and sorrow, the spell that made me want to sing and burst into tears because the soul I had never believed in knew it had come home. So inside and behind and underneath Malamud's stories I feel my New York, even when they travel.

And inside and behind and underneath all of these stories is also the Holocaust. While this is occasionally called upon to invoke solidarity, its spectre only brings pain. In 'The Loan' a baker is begged by her husband to let him help a friend 'or what is money for?'. Forced by poverty to constantly check his spending, she breaks down and repeats her own litany of suffering as a refugee: it divides rather than fostering fellowship. Malamud is an author who plays those shimmeringly vivid adverbs and images like aces at just the right moment and here he gives us burnt loaves: 'blackened bricks - charred corpses'. A waste without redemption.

The baker is not the only woman whose situation Malamud paints with compassion. He draws attention to men who treat women as chattel, who scapegoat them, objectify them, ignore their advice. Though none of

the tales have women protagonists, almost all of them have women as agents: resisting, speaking, controlling their own stories, and often directing mens' fates.

I become less and less sure what 'magical realism' is meant to capture. Malamud's stories deal with pinched urban lives, struggles to make ends more-or-less meet, or carefully planned respites disrupted by unexpected demands on hard-earned, limited savings; they are grounded in the mundane material, a banality that characters try to escape from into writing, study, art, fantasised romance. The escape never succeeds as planned, but sometimes there is an intrusion of unreality, an escape unlooked for, a modest little god apologetically climbing down from the machinery, bringing a cobbled together miracle.

In my favourite story, 'The Angel Levine', the divine literally enters to intervene in the life of a man whose misfortunes are piled high on him. Surprised by the presence of a black man in his flat, he is further astonished to find that he is a Jew, and incredulous that he is the angel he prayed for. Unable to believe, he dismisses him. The protagonist must confront his own racism, venturing twice into Harlem as instructed, seeing Levine carousing, drunk, yet beloved of god and holy. When asked why god sent a black angel to him, Levine only says 'it was my turn to go'. His miracle is finally effortless - it is not he who must work for it, but the doubter, the reader, and Malamud.

I interpret these stories as critiques of prejudice subtley inflected by complex histories of loss, upheaval and privation, meetings where commonalities and divisions are hidden or misunderstood. The icing on this wholesome cake is the euphoric, mystical spirituality that occasionally surges up from wounded, jaded, rational hearts, and makes folk run wild in the street after the ghost of a dream.

Stephanie says

I'm not entirely sure what to make of this, all because of the ending - it made me question what I thought I 'knew' about the story. I tagged this "magical-realism" because there is something... not quite mundane about the story, though I'm not entirely sure what it is.

It is the story of Joe Finkle, who is finishing up his rabbinical studies. On the advice of an acquaintance, he decides to find a wife, which would help him find a congregation to serve when his studies are over. To this end, as he has been more studious than social for the past six years, he enlists the help of Pinye Salzman, a Jewish matchmaker. Salzman is much a matchmaker as a salesman, and he draws the proposed matches from his "magic barrel" where you are never quite sure who you will find in it, and who they are on paper and in Salzman's descriptions may not be exactly who they are in reality. Finkle has a hard time deciding whether or not to trust in Salzman's suggestions, and this story follows his up and down opinions about not only Salzman, but also about the choices Salzman offers him. Through it all, Finkle will also discover more about himself, will voice for the first time things he did not know he knew about himself, and find himself pulled in a very unexpected direction.
I read a pdf copy of this provided by my professor.

Krok Zero says

This book made me long for the warm swaddle of classroom discussion. Not that there's anything manifestly "difficult" about Bernard Malamud's writing; he writes in clear, straightforward prose about the most

fundamental and universal ideas and emotions. But he is the kind of writer who writes toward themes, and whose seemingly simple stories are packed with layers of meaning and symbolism. This is particularly evident in the endings of his stories, which are often pointedly enigmatic, strange, abrupt, puzzling and haunting. They would be perfect for the classroom setting, where teacher-led discussions can spend big chunks of time teasing out meaning from the text, volleying interpretations and possibilities. In high school and college I got fairly good at this game of find-the-subtext literary whack-a-mole, but in recent years my skills have atrophied, I can't swing that mallet quickly or accurately enough. If reading fiction critically is a *menage a trois* of narrative, aesthetics, and thematics, then I have more or less mastered the first two and too often ignore the third. On some level this is probably fine — we have to be selective about what we process in the art we absorb, or else we would go insane trying (and failing) to understand everything. But I do miss those academic acts of collaborative detection, especially because I didn't really appreciate them when I had access to them. You don't know what you got till it's gone, and so forth.

If I had read Malamud's National Book Award–winning collection *The Magic Barrel* in such an atmosphere, we probably would have talked about how several of these stories, written in the 1950s, contain grief-stricken echoes of the Holocaust, his Jewish characters victims of a kind of identity-based PTSD. We may also have discussed how Malamud is less interested in the reality of Jewish life than in the metaphorical potential of Jewish identity: avatars of human suffering who struggle daily with the pain of living in an unjust world. We might have theorized about the strange mix of empathy and cruelty with which Malamud treats his characters and has them treat each other. We probably would have spitballed some thoughts about why a full three of these thirteen stories by a Jewish American author are set in Italy, of all places, and why he populates those stories with educated young men instead of the impoverished old-world geezers of his New York tales. And we would circle back to the big "why" questions of those endings, questions I am woefully unprepared to answer. Like a Malamud protagonist — just imagine me as an elderly Jewish shopkeeper or baker — I'll just have to move forward in spite of my ignorance and confusion, stumbling toward some kind of acceptance, even if it turns out to be a false kind.

R. says

I picked up a copy of this book a few years ago, on a whim, at Goodwill. It was an old library copy, so old that the publisher was Farrar Straus and Cudahy Inc. At the time I'd never heard of Malamud before, but the cover (designed by Milton Glaser) was striking with its colorful and clunky illustrations of flowers (yellow), chalices (orange), keys (green), stars (again with the yellow) and chairs (again with the green) set against a pink background. And for fifty cents? Why not, I said. What's fifty cents now, I asked then, but maybe insurance against boredom in the future, maybe? And so it was. And I like the story embedded in the very book itself: the due date card with names of patrons past. In pencil on the title page was the *exact* date the book officially entered the city collection: Aug. 6 1958. Checkouts were modest, around two to three a year, except for 1971, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1981 and 1982 - years the book sat undisturbed (sitting shelfa)...but don't listen to me, just treat yourself. You'll see. They're good. I mean, as Jhumpa Lahiri writes in her introduction (this I read online, found on the Internet), "Now that I have read them, I cannot believe there was ever a time I had not."

Come Musica says

Con "Il commesso" non avevo potuto gustare appieno la potenza narrativa di Malamud: ero stata sopraffatta

dall'infinita tristezza del romanzo.
Qui, ne "Il barile magico", ho avuto la possibilità di gustarlo appieno.
Undici racconti, in cui ogni parola non è scritta a caso. Scorci di vita, resi sublimi dall'abilità di Malamud. E anche se sono tristi, è l'alternarsi dei racconti che la smorza e fa emergere la bravura di questo scrittore.

Rob says

The Positioning of the Holocaust in Bernard Malamud's *The Magic Barrel*: "*O Crime Orribile*"

What Malamud taps into with this book - a book that is intricate story-by-story as well as a whole - is the Holocaust's subtly quiet psychological stamp on a Jew, its lingering rather than obtrusive quality, the perpetual but also hushed and distanced positioning of it in the Jewish mind, even just after the war. On the surface, *The Magic Barrel* is most notably about Jews and their jobs. Almost all Malamud stories begin with a character name followed by his occupation. And when the occupation begins with "ex"—"Rosen, an ex-coffee salesman" (85) for example - there is a certain shame and embarrassment embedded in those two letters, the weight of a job - as written by Malamud - made to seem the utmost thing in life. The book is in many ways about Jews trying to make life bearable. What sits behind this surface is that giant, however, that "late large war" (176), and it is interesting that when Fidelman, a character in "The Last Mohican," says to an actual refugee, "'Why don't you try to get yourself a job somewhere?'" (164), and is responded with, "'A job, he says,'" (164), the reader is made to notice the defense mechanism of work as a way to quell that large looming atrocity that had just happened. A job is, most obviously, a way to live. But the characters in *The Magic Barrel* are imprisoned by their jobs - even when in some cases financially secure - to the point where it becomes a conscious effort, a suffering sought out, an objective to cloud what exactly but that large war? The jobs and their manifest suffering actually are defense mechanisms against that utmost horror: genocide, which happened to these characters, in many cases personally, only years before. Malamud's positioning of the Holocaust - how he literally places it and its manifestations into these stories, his distancing of it when it is mentioned - actually represents the Jewish psyche following the devastating event. It lingers on the edges, in the background, is written secondary, and pops up randomly as a surprise or turn of events as would be the case in detective fiction. One can easily read this collection of stories thinking very little about the Holocaust, but it is the Holocaust that actually makes these stories.

One can go story by story to track this. In the opening, "The First Seven Years," a young shoemaker's assistant, Sobel, falls in love with the shoemaker's daughter, and when he overhears the shoemaker trying to arrange her to be with another man, Sobel "had torn his hat and coat from the hook and rushed out into the snow" (7). At the end of the story, Malamud tersely writes, "How strange and sad that a refugee, a grown man, bald and old with his miseries, who had by the skin of his teeth escaped Hitler's incinerators, should fall in love, when he had got to America, with a girl less than half his age" (15). It is amazing to read this in its positioning in the story, its late and marginal appearance, to read that devilish name as an aside, the Holocaust almost as this simple, inevitable thing that happened in the man's past. Isn't that the story? Isn't the story about Sobel in the Holocaust? Shouldn't that be the story we read? But it's not. The story Malamud tells is about two men that work together as shoemakers. Yet, the Holocaust lingers, and the story proves to be more powerful and moving for Malamud's very distancing of it. It then makes perfect sense for Sobel to fall in love with a girl half his age, because even though the Holocaust has been defended against psychologically through his work as a shoemaker and in his reading of literature (he is "prone to tears over the sad books he read[s]" [7]), the mental effect has proven to stunt Sobel's growth as a man. The power of this sentiment works because of Malamud's terse and off-the-cuff way of presenting it.

The most heartbreaking use of this device comes in the story “The Lady of the Lake.” This story is about a man originally named Henry Levin, who battling with the toxic shame of being a Jew changes it perfectly to Henry Freeman. He falls in love with a woman, the lady of the lake, who seems to be an heiress to an Italian fortune. The story goes at length to show Freeman’s determination to conceal his Judaism and his rationalization of doing such a thing; “As for the wedding itself…it would probably have to be in a church, but he would go along with that to hasten things…not so much the denial of being Jewish - what had it brought him but headaches, inferiorities, unhappy memories?” (126); even here, that large elephant - the Holocaust - is unearthed quietly in his point of view musings (“unhappy memories”). By the time Freeman courts this heiress, Isabella, and we believe his ruse to have worked, we learn that in her interrogative questions to him throughout about his potential Judaism, she did not want to prove against it, but actually wanted him to be Jewish. “‘Because I hoped you were,’” (132) she says. Malamud then writes, “when she revealed her breasts - he could have wept at their beauty… - to his horror he discerned tattooed on the soft and tender flesh a bluish line of distorted numbers. ‘Buchenwald,’ Isabella said. ‘When I was a little girl. The Fascists sent us there. The Nazis did it.’” (132). She then tells him that she cannot marry him because he is not Jewish. And Freeman, stunned by the suddenness of it - the power of those few words - is, like the reader, made to understand that he will never be able to prove that he, too, is Jewish. It is already too late. The story ends here with Isabella leaving, and the tragic image of Freeman, formerly Levin, hugging a “moonlit stone” (133). Malamud again distances the Holocaust for most of the story and then tosses it in there in its final moments. Right when we are trying to grasp exactly what huge idea has just been presented, the next story has already begun.

More instances where Malamud positions the Holocaust on the edges of the story, rather than as its main thrust, are in lines as simple as Freeman contemplating Isabella earlier on in “The Lady of the Lake,” thinking, “Maybe she had once had some sort of unhappy experience with a Jew? Unlikely, but possible, they were now everywhere” (115). The implication of that last line is the Holocaust’s displacement of Jews all over the world. Freeman only sees it as Jews being everywhere now, the immediate fact of it, but the Holocaust - the displacement’s cause - is not really on the forefront of his mind, just like Malamud’s positioning and phrasing of it in the story. There is Fidelman in “The Last Mohican” searching for the refugee, Susskind, who he despises and believes stole his manuscript, stumbling upon a grave site, one reading, “My beloved father/betrayed by the damned Fascists/murdered at Auschwitz by the barbarous Nazis/*O Crime Orribile*” (176). These words with a heavy history to them skip past and pop up randomly on Malamud’s pages (Fidelman even moves on after seeing this grave, looking elsewhere for Susskind), but as Malamud knows as craftsman, these words with such powerful semantics attached to them will ring thunderously for just being there, however brief, on the very edges, where he places them. By the final famous story, “The Magic Barrel,” the matchmaker Salzman begins a Holocaust narrative to the young apprentice rabbi, Leo, saying only, “‘For us, our love is our life, not for the ladies. In the ghetto they - ” (207), and he is cut off, the young Jew saying, “‘I know, I know…’” (207). By the final story the expression of the Holocaust gets cut off. Leo, of a younger generation may be ignorant, snide, unsympathetic. Or, more likely, he has already heard the story too many times before, and is ready to leave those thoughts - the utter grandeur of the event - somewhere deep inside, nearly inaccessible, where it can only come out on the edges, in the distance, in unavoidable instances - exactly where Malamud places them in his masterful stories.

Myles says

(4.3/5.0) Intensely readable with old fashioned roots, Bernard Malamud is like the depressed Jewish grandfather I barely remember having.

Seth Fiegerman says

People don't write short stories with such simplicity and clarity anymore. Like parables from the bible, for a generation of Jewish men and women still reeling from the horrors of the holocaust and trying to make the best of immigrant life in America, or brief jaunts abroad. The characters, ordinary folks who tend grocery stores, clean buildings, fix shoes, always seem to run up against a single opponent, who may also be well meaning, and serves as the guard between them and their simple dreams. To stay in an apartment or find a new one. To find a wife and/or love. To pay for a tombstone or support a store. To write in peace. These are not grand dreams, which is precisely what makes these stories so heartbreaking and poignant to read, even 60 years later.

Judy says

I am not particularly a fan of short stories. I like novels because they go on long enough for me to sink into the story, the characters, the ideas. When I read a whole book of short stories, I feel I am getting interrupted too often and become annoyed. But Bernard Malamud, whose first two novels have been impressive and made me a fan, won the National Book Award for this collection in 1959, making it "required reading" on my list for that year. Sometimes My Big Fat Reading Project feels like a college syllabus; in fact it is a self-created one, making it a reading college with one student where the professors are all authors so I don't mind.

As it turned out, the stories in The Magic Barrel were amazing. I was fully engaged from the first page and finished the collection feeling satisfied by each story. Because they were not related except for their variations on the theme of Jewish life in America, instead of a buffet I felt I was having a series of complete meals created by a versatile chef.

I was raised in a Lutheran family though I gravitated to Jewish kids as I was growing up. While I can't say having those friends make me any kind of expert on what it means to be Jewish, I suppose I developed an affinity for Jews and escaped the peril of seeing a Jewish person as part of a generality or stereotype.

I say this because great writing about an aspect of life, such as religious or national or racial origins, also dispels stereotypes and enriches the understanding of a reader who is not a member of that religion, nation or race. I think what Malamud does that is so powerful is give the reader the experience of being Jewish through the individual consciousnesses of his characters and thereby overcomes the sense of otherness which prejudice and oppression drape over such individuals. He performs his own magic.

Francesca says

Antologia di racconti di Bernard Malamud, che, nonostante la forma breve, mostrano i temi principali e cari all’autore.
Alcuni davvero interessanti avrei voluto vederli sviluppati di più.

The_poor_mouth says

One of the greatest collections of fiction ever written. Malamud was a late bloomer: these stories of longing for a better life, his constant theme, were composed in Oregon, as he looked back on his life as a New Yorker, one who'd been to Italy, burned his early novels in a flaming barrel, grown up in a store that sold small goods for small profit.

His stories operate in a logical atmosphere created by his prose. Essentially 19th century in character, men and women are easily sketched by their stations and professions (the shoemaker, the egg candler, the rabbinical student) and yet for what is easily known of them nothing else can be. Human beings are mysterious to others and themselves. Their lives and hopes are never insignificant, but precious. Some readers call these stories bleak for their unsentimental rendering of poverty and spiritual hunger, but Malamud works in these elements as does a painter in oils.

But more important than any thematic concerns is his language. This is a book to read aloud, or hunt down friends and force them to listen to you intone. No matter how late his start, or how many manuscripts he burned, this man was born to write.

Michi says

The Magic Barrel is a short story full of contradictions. Jewish culture, tradition, myths and symbols appear first and are perhaps the most obvious elements in the story (the comical elements are Jewish as well: Salzman’s colloquial speech is influenced by Yiddish). Yet, the story can also be read as a psychological postmodern text, featuring a Salzman, who is not a biblical angel and heavenly matchmaker but the alter ego of a very troubled young man. The realism that dominates most of the text is disrupted with bizarre and grotesque images like flying loaves of bread, and violins and candles revolving in the sky. Traditional matchmaking is contrasted with passionate love, and the rabbinical student Leo Finkle came to God because he did not love Him.

In the end Finkle suspects that Salzman “had planned it all to happen this way”, that the matchmaker manipulated him and pulled the strings in the background to bring Finkle and Stella together. There is, however, no further evidence of this in the story. Whether Salzman is a benevolent angel or a shrewd manipulator remains in the dark. Why was the photo in the envelope? Angels usually know what they are doing and do not make mistakes, but they are not expected to be manipulators either. Salzman finally “chants prayers for the dead” as Stella and Finkle meet. There is a Jewish prayer for the dead – the Kaddish, which also includes a petition for resurrection of the dead. Salzman’s chanting (which seems to be the strangest element of the story) could therefore be explained as a chanting for the living rather than the dead. In other words, he might be chanting for the metaphorical resurrection of his daughter. After all Stella, who is earlier in the story described as a shameless sinner and appears to be a prostitute, now has a possible future with Finkle. Stella who was dead to her father and “should burn in hell” shall now be resurrected and become Salzman’s “baby” again. Salzman leans against the wall (Wailing Wall?) around the corner as he chants. Whether he is a real character or an imagined one, a human being, an angel, or Finkle’s alter ego, he has come to the end of his road. His task was to save Stella and Finkle, all that is left to do in the end is to pray.

Was Malamud really an outdated moralist who believed in a universal stable self? Perhaps he was unaware of some of the possible readings of his work. There seems to be a great deal of existentialist influence reflected in this story: the individual struggles to find meaning amidst the tragedy and confusion of the world. Rationality must be rejected in order to find personal purpose. As Jean Paul Sartre put it: “Man is condemned to be free”, and therefore also morally responsible for everything he/she does. Finkle seems to follow this doctrine, as he abandons social custom in favor of passion and love. The entire story seems to follow this doctrine as reason is abandoned, traditional views questioned, but moral responsibility stressed. Sin and innocence, typical themes in American literature, appear here in a new light.

Finkle changes during the story – there is a clear development of his character. This change, I think, is reflected in the change of seasons. Spring brings hope, whereas in winter (in the beginning of the story) Finkle is in despair – and in fact, “a cold fish”, which brings me to my final point, the fish symbolism in this story. Well, there certainly is something fishy – everything is not as it seems. The fish symbol is definitely also a reference to the Jewish bible (being able to get married by burning fish liver to repel the jealous demon), which is one of the keys to the biblical angelic matchmaker view of Salzman (Salz – salt – the sea – fish). But the fish was also an early Christian symbol, and long before that an important pagan symbol, associated with no other than the Great Mother Goddess herself. In ancient Greek the word “Delphos” meant both fish and womb – derived from the Oracle of Delphi where a fish goddess was worshipped. Finally, the search for the right partner (irrationally following the heart rather than traditional selection criteria of matchmakers) can be seen as an attempt to catch the “uncatchable” fish.

This really is one of the strangest stories I have ever read. Considering the all the elements (including biographical information!), the weird mix of realism and fantasy and the way the binary oppositions seem to be almost (but not quiet) turned upside down – it really ought to be confusing and inaccessible. And yet, I find it strangely intriguing and satisfying. I simply do not understand why.

Bruno says

I personaggi che Bernard Malamud ci presenta nella sua prima raccolta di racconti non possono essere propriamente definiti degli eroi, eppure sono tutti in qualche modo dei combattenti, impegnati in una lotta costante con la vita.
C'è il vecchio Kessler, che si batte per non essere sfrattato; Tommy, un ragazzo pieno di sogni che vorrebbe sfuggire al tedio e alla miseria del proprio quartiere; Carl Schneider, che corre da una parte all'altra di Roma alla ricerca di un appartamento per sé e la sua famiglia; Henry Levin, che fa di tutto per conquistare la bella ragazza dell'isola del Dongo.

Ne *Il barile magico* Finkle descrive Stella dicendo che "*gli dava un’impressione di giovinezza – fiori di primavera – ma anche di vecchiaia: un senso d’essere stata consunta fino all’osso, sciupata;*".
Non riuscirei a descrivere meglio l'umanità mostrataci da Malamud, un'umanità spezzata dalla vita, ma che non si arrende e spera ancora, come Henry Freeman, "*in ciò che non aveva, ciò che pochi al mondo ottenevano e a cui molti non osavano pensare: nell’amore, cioè, nell’avventura, nella libertà.*"

I racconti preferiti:
- La ragazza dei miei sogni
- Ecco la chiave
- La dama del lago

- L'ultimo moicano
- Il barile magico

Teresa Proença says

Treze histórias sobre gente pobre e humilde - na sua maioria judeus - que lutam pela sobrevivência, ou por um pouco de felicidade. Histórias tristes de gente a quem a vida não sorri, contadas de uma forma terna e comovente.

. Um homem que, tal como a figura bíblica de Jacob, trabalha durante anos, a troco de muito pouco, por amor à filha do seu patrão...;
. Um velhinho que sofre uma ordem de despejo do seu senhorio...;
. A surpresa (desagradável) de um escritor que se enamora de uma mulher pelo que ela escreve...;
. A recompensa de um homem a quem desabam em cima todos os males do mundo...;
. A luta de um estrangeiro em Roma para encontrar uma casa para a sua família...;
. Quando o amor, (ou apenas a generosidade?) leva a ultrapassar limites...;
. Uma menina que roubava chocolates...;
. Como uma pequena mentira pode impedir a felicidade...;
. As penas de um jovem que (não) lê...;
. O preço a pagar por quem compra fiado...;
. Um vagabundo que precisa de um fato...;
. O reencontro entre dois velhos amigos...;
. Um jovem que procura um casamenteiro mas a quem não agrada as pretendentes disponíveis, acabando a apaixonar-se pela que não devia.

"Bernard Malamud escreveu quatro ou cinco dos melhores contos da literatura americana que eu alguma vez li [e alguma vez lerei]" Philip Roth

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