



Novels 1956–1964: Seize the Day / Henderson the Rain King / Herzog

Saul Bellow , James Wood (Editor)

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Passionate, insightful, often funny, and exhibiting a linguistic richness few writers have equaled, the novels of Saul Bellow are among the defining achievements of postwar American literature. The *Library of America* volume *Novels 1956–1964* opens with *Seize the Day*, a tightly wrought novella that, unfolding over the course of a single devastating day, explores the desperate predicament of the failed actor and salesman Tommy Wilhelm. The austere psychological portraiture of *Seize the Day* is followed by an altogether different book, *Henderson the Rain King*, the ebullient tale of the irresistible eccentric Eugene Henderson, best characterized by his primal mantra “I want! I want!” Beneath the novel’s comic surface lies an affecting parable of one man’s quest to know himself and come to terms with morality; like Don Quixote, Henderson is, as Bellow later described him, “an absurd seeker of high qualities.”

Henderson’s irrepressible vitality is matched by that of Moses Herzog, the eponymous hero of Bellow’s best-selling 1964 novel. His wife having abandoned him for his best friend, Herzog is on the verge of mental collapse and has embarked on a furious letter-writing campaign as an outlet for his all-consuming rage. Bellow’s bravura performance in *Herzog* launched a new phase of his career, as literary acclaim was now joined by a receptive mass audience in America.

Novels 1956–1964: Seize the Day / Henderson the Rain King / Herzog Details

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Zoë says

Can I compare a book to a sandwich? That's the only way I can currently think about this story, some ill-tasting bread with a palatable filling. Henderson, the main character, is about as egotistical and megalomaniacal as they come and I waited and waited, hear Henderson's "I want, I want...", so long for his development and redemption. When it began, and deepened with King Dafu, I was enchanted [(King Dafu put me in mind of "Sophie's World" and conversations with philosophers) the filling, finally], but I was saddened when it was cut short by the unrelated, tidy, comical ending: Henderson in corderoy, with a Persian-speaking child asleep on his lap, the stewardess feeding the lion cub in baggage, while Henderson in fast-rewind seemed to come to some understanding about his past. I stuck it out, not entirely unhappy. Perhaps I missed something vital, elemental, essential.

Karen says

I only read Henderson the Rain King. While it grew on me, it hasn't inspired me to read more Bellow in the near future. The title character, Eugene Henderson, is quite self-involved. He's not mean-spirited and is actually rather largehearted towards others (altho petty to certain individuals), but he sees everything thru the lens of its impact on him and is rather an egomaniac in his sense of self. I enjoyed the description of the small African villages he visited and the people he encountered there (even while wondering how much of their depiction was based on fact).

R. says

Seize the Day: *****

Henderson the Rain King: *****

Herzog: *****

Dave says

5 for Herzog. 4 for the other two.

Larry says

I have such mixed feelings about Bellow. I find him a moving stylist and compelling writer, even though there are many features of his novels I find difficult. Most of his protagonists are troubled egotists. It may be

about my own intellectual insecurities, but I am uncomfortable with the way he parades his considerable learning in ways that sometimes interfere (for me at least) with his novels. I should not expect any different, perhaps, but the mostly cavalier attitudes towards women his male protagonists display is disturbing and his stereotypes about Africa and Africans in Henderson, The Rain King, made me squirm at times.

Arukiyomi says

Wow. Little books (127 pages in my edition from the 50s) can certainly pack some punch and this is one of the hardest hitting. It s not an uplifting read by any means but, having read it, I m surprised it was removed from the 2008 revised edition of the 1001 list.[return][return]It centres around a man named Wilhelm and a day in his life. I use the word centres purposefully. It s more of...[return][return]More of what?! Head over to Arukiyomi and read the rest of the review...

Ali says

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Penn says

just really depressing. I only read Seize the Day. I have this edition and am planning to read the other novels at a later date.

Waleed says

- Seize the Day - 2/5
 - Henderson the Rain King - 3/5
 - Herzog - 5/5
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