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Collected Stories

By Saul Bellow.

Viking, \$30.

Saul Bellow is perhaps the most active octogenarian in all of American letters. In the past few years, the 86-year-old Nobel laureate has published four books, sustained a fifth marriage—and even fathered a baby girl. Last year, he also ignited fresh controversy, first for outing his old friend the late classicist Allan Bloom in the autobiographical novel *Ravelstein*, and next as the subject of an unpleasant biography by James Atlas.

Such vitality—as well as the autobiographical impulse—is abundant in Bellow's latest offering, *Collected Stories*. The writer has culled 13 stories and novellas from previously published collections, and they are stocked with familiar Bellovian characters: worldly, learned, willful—and above all, isolated—men. Their concerns, however, seem darker and weightier than ever.

The plangent "By the St. Lawrence," which opens the collection, describes an aging and hunchbacked historian and the trip he makes to his boyhood hometown. The character recalls various family members and long-forgotten events, until the recollection of one particular traumatic afternoon helps to clarify the cause of his deformity. In the novella "The Bellarosa Connection," a man tries to track down his cousin and wife, only to discover they've recently died. And in "Something to Remember Me By," an elderly father remembers two events from his distant youth—the death of his mother and a deeply shameful sexual episode—that initiated him into the world of experience.

Occasionally, Bellow's culturally conservative narrators and their outmoded sense of sexual politics make parts of these stories feel dated. But the force of the writing, the accuracy and striking originality of Bellow's observations, and the range of his learning and inquiry easily offset these flaws. These *Collected Stories* feel deeply mature and wise, the valuable record of a lifetime's work. For a generation unfamiliar with earlier classics such as *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Herzog*, they are a good place to begin.

—Paul Zakrzewski

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