

Jewish Writers

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In 1970, when I was living in Glasgow, a close friend suggested I read Saul Bellow's [Mr. Sammler's Planet](#). I went right out and bought it. But to my chagrin I just could not get through it. I agree that Bellow is a more accomplished writer than say Philip Roth, whose [Portnoy's Complaint](#) came out a year before and was a scandalous success, far more overtly "Jewish" than anything Bellow has written. The judges who decide on the Nobel Prize for literature were right to give it to Bellow before Roth. However, the fact that they gave it this year to a completely insignificant Swedish poet, [Tomas Tranströmer](#), over someone of Roth's reputation and oeuvre, just shows how insignificant or silly the literary judges of the Swedish Academy are.

Bellow has never been a practicing Jew in any significant way. Has just published two pieces in The New York Review of Books about being a Jewish writer. This is an issue that has been forced on him by others trying to categorize him. He grew up as the son of Yiddish-speaking Russian immigrants. As he began to write he became conscious of how American WASP writers regarded him as an interloper. But this didn't faze him. "If WASPs wanted to think of me as a Jewish poacher on their precious cultural estates, then let them." He found comfort in Karl Shapiro's [In Defense of Ignorance](#). Shapiro writes, "The European Jew was always a visitor. . . But in America everybody is a visitor. In the United States the Jewish writer is free to create his own consciousness."

But what IS a Jewish writer? What indeed is a Jewish painter? Chagall was, but Rothko not? It is as intractable a question as "who is a Jew". Yet it is fodder for academic courses and symposia and endless, pointless, fruitless self-justificatory debate, usually funded by non-practicing Jews as eager as religious evangelicals to assert their own particular brand of Jewish commitment.

Bellow quotes Shmuel Agnon, who thought you had to live in Israel to write in an authentic Jewish voice. But an Israeli like [Haim Sabato](#) writes as a religious Jew of Syrian origin. David Grossman and Amos Oz write as secular Israelis of European Ashkenazi provenance. There are good Arab writers in Hebrew. Israeli culture is not necessarily Jewish. I suspect Bellow and Grossman have more in common with each other than they both have with Sabato or Agnon. Israel has, at least in the arts, replaced "Jew" with something different and broader.

Bellow says that what defines a Jewish writer is "otherness", as when he talks about challenging the nihilism that led to the moral collapse of Europe. "One's language is a spiritual location; it houses your soul. If you were born in America all essential communications, your deepest communications with yourself, will be in English—in American English." So does that make him Jewish?

In truth, it is like being Jewish altogether. No one interpretation of being Jewish covers all cases. We live in a new, freer, more mobile and more fluid world that makes definition difficult and even sometimes undesirable. It includes categories and degrees in which those more involved are forever castigating those less so. It is just like those ghastly attempts to define Orthodox, Chareidi , or a Torah Jew. There will always be those who stand apart. You cannot define who is a Jewish writer. All you can ask is to what degree Jewish culture and values influence a person or his or her writing.

Assume someone discovered that Wagner had a Jewish grandmother on his maternal side. Would that make him a Jewish composer? Was Marx a Jewish thinker? Some academics will argue he is and that Freud could only have been a Jew. What stuff and nonsense. Tell that to Jung. What of all the other alienated, creative minds of nineteenth century Middle Europe? Do they qualify as Jewish?

We are concerned with labels because most people need labels. Our whole education system is predicated on them. But labels are dangerous, usually dishonest, incomplete handles that allow for and encourage discrimination, categorization, and indeed alienation.

Any practicing Jew knows the language of his soul is Torah. Any non-practicing but deeply committed Jew knows it is the practical reinforcement of actions or ideas that strengthens or weakens his sense of belonging. For some, like Bellow, it is enough to feel different. No one can take self-definition away from anyone. But one has the right and should challenge. If that was good enough for him, so be it. I just do not want people to try telling me how to define Jewish writing. It is like asking what identity a Nabokov had when he switched from Russian to English.

You can be a writer who happens to be a Jew, but that does not make you a Jewish writer. Bellow is a great American writer who avoids overtly Jewish issues. He says he is indeed a Jewish writer, but as he also says, to try to put one of the two first is as clumsy as the question, "Whom do you love better, your Papa or your Momma?" I suggest it is silly to label him a Jewish writer altogether. At most he is a Jew who writes.