

Resensie: Intieme beeld van Saul Bellow deur sy seun Greg

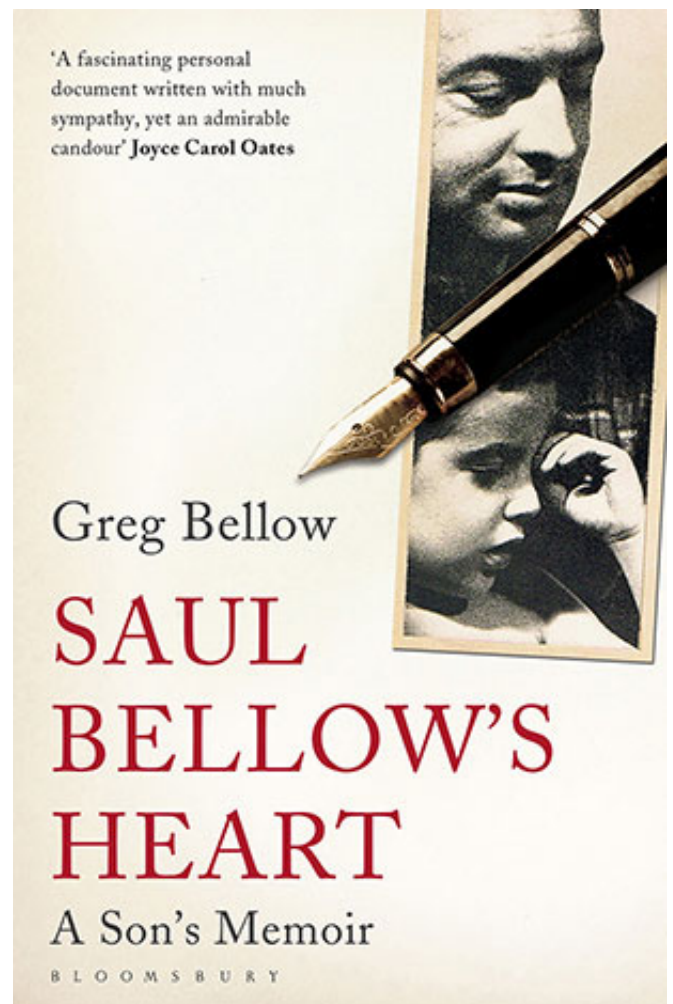
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Saul Bellow (1915-2005) het in 1976 die Nobel-prys vir letterkunde ontvang. Oor hom en sy werk is al baie geskryf. Eers onlangs het daar welkome nuwe perspektief gekom toe Bellow se oudste kind sy herinneringe en 'n ontleding van sy pa se werk gepubliseer het. Ek verwys na Greg Bellow (gebore in 1944) se *Saul Bellow's Heart: A son's memoir* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 240p; Amazon Kindle \$16.39). Voortaan verwys ek na Saul as Bellow en na sy seun as Greg.



Bellow het veral vanweë twee romans bekendheid verwerf: *Herzog* (1964) en *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). Soos so dikwels gebeur, bv in die geval van Albert Camus (SêNet 10 Feb), kon Bellow na hierdie uitsonderlike verering nie naasteby weer dieselfde literêre hoogtes bereik nie. "The idealistic 'young Saul' became the pessimistic 'old Saul' ... the optimism and hope I loved and admired in 'young Saul' were buried under anger, bitterness, intolerance, and preoccupations with evil and with his death, which lasted for the rest of his life" (Kindle 1693).

Greg het ná sy aftrede al sy pa se boeke herlees en veral probeer om die outeur se gees te verstaan. Op grond van eerstehandse kennis dui Greg aan hoe biografiese besonderhede neerslag in Bellow se fiksie

gevind het. Vir Greg was dit geen maklike taak om oor sy pa, van wie hy soms vervreemd was, te skryf nie; ook nie oor sy eie en aangetroude familie, van wie baie nog lewe nie. Sy taak is verder bemoelijk deurdat hy geen toegang tot die Saul Bellow-argiewe kon kry nie. Die skryfwerk aan die boek het vyf moeisame jare in beslag geneem. “My ‘Pop’ deserves as full and as honest a written portrait as I can render” (108). “After rereading his soul-searching novels ... I find a man trying to understand his inability to live in harmony with others and with himself” (2646).

Soos die boektitel aandui, gaan dit veral om Bellow se innerlike lewe. Hier volg ‘n voorbeeld van hoe Greg sy pa ontleed. “Along with fortune came fame. Initially refusing to become what he called a ‘ribbon cutter,’ someone who presides over public cultural events, Saul gained a reputation for being publicity shy. But the public eye also appealed. He enjoyed readings, any opportunity to joust with reporters, to respond to critics, and to make known his views on cultural and social issues” (1471). “Saul’s public persona had taken on a mythical quality, drawing people who were interested because he was famous, and feeding his already substantial self-centeredness” (1479).

Greg is ‘n psigoterapeut, in die besonder ‘n “child therapist; Saul commented that I had turned the misery of my childhood into a career” (1303). Sielkundige kennis en insig maak Greg uitnemend geskik vir hierdie projek, want Bellow was bekend daarvoor dat hy veral goed vaar wanneer hy oor die innerlike gewaarwording van sy karakters geskryf het: “the centrality of what my father called the ‘inner life’” (660). “The real action occurs inside human beings” (2655). Bellow het hierdie idee van die sielkundige Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) oorgeneem; Reich se “emphasis on emotion as an unadulterated expression of what is essentially human” (1132).

‘n Oorheersende kenmerk van Bellow se lewe is sy vyf huwelike, naamlik met Anita Goshkin (1937-1956), Alexandra (Sasha) Tschacbasov (1956-1959), Susan Glassman (1961-1964), Alexandra Tulcea (1974-1985) en Janis Freedman (1989-2005). Greg ken al Bellow se eggenotes redelik goed en sy ma, Anita (oorlede in 1985), uiteraard baie goed. “Sasha and I had grown close. Susan was pleasant to me, and Alexandra acted as another grandmother to Juliet,” Greg se dogter (2245). Oor Greg se verhouding met Janis skryf ek hieronder.

Greg toon aan waar en hoe hierdie vroue in Bellow se fiksie aan die orde gestel word, bv as die “protective love of women” wat hy ervaar het (591). “He knew that the softness he sought from women was central to his happiness” (598). “Saul married women who possessed some measure of the hardness that I see as necessary to be able to take care of him” (605). “Perhaps an explanation for Saul’s failed marriages lies in the excessively romanticized notions of love” (1967). “An inability to give and take love freely. I believe that to have been Saul’s greatest personal flaw” (2287).

Dit blyk dat Bellow soms sy romans gebruik/misbruik het om houe teen vorige eggenotes in te kry. “His published works gave him the last word” (2074). Erger, Bellow is nie vry te pleit van die moontlikheid dat hy geskei en getrou het om stof vir sy fiksie te versamel nie, of om in die regte stemming vir skeppende werk te kom nie. Byvoorbeeld, *Herzog* word beskryf as “a book filled with the misery of his second failed marriage” (2067). Skryfwerk was immers vir Bellow die belangrikste faktor in sy lewe: “Writing was his *raison d’être*” (97).

“He was, after all, a man who lived for a singular creative purpose” (2673). “*Writer* is the one-word descriptor on Saul Bellow’s gravestone, a final testament to a life where everything and everyone was subordinated to art” (2646). Bellow “chose a life of singular literary purpose and a lifelong pattern of selfish conduct that he could neither deny nor completely bury” (2190). Bellow se persoonlikheid word uiteraard ook duidelik in sy karakters weerspieël, bv “his narrators usually ignore the advice [of well-meaning friends] and follow their own misguided instincts” (1233).

Bellow het hom soggens afgesonder vir skryfwerk. “I understood that writing is hard work whether the

results are poems or novels. I remember seeing Saul, winter and summer, emerge from his study with his shirt soaked through with sweat" (1500). In sy aanvaardingstoepspraak vir die Nobel-prys het Bellow met verwysing na Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) gesê "art is an 'attempt to render the highest justice to the visible universe'" (1666).

Bellow se ouers het uit Litoue via Rusland na Kanada verhuis, waar Bellow in Montreal by geboorte die naam Solomon gekry het, maar Saul genoem is. Sy ouer broers was Abraham, Morrie en Sam. "Vanity was something the men in the Bellow family shared, as they thought themselves handsomer and smarter than everyone else. This perceived superiority was often their self-entitled rationale for bending or breaking rules that displeased them. While Sam tempered his feelings of entitlement, Abraham, Morrie, and Saul ignored social convention and viewed people who held contrary opinions with barely veiled contempt" (404). "The boost to Saul's vanity" word beskou as een van die motiverings vir Bellow se reeks huwelike (611).

Die Bellows het hulle in 1924 in Chicago gevestig. In 1933 het Bellow begin om aan die University of Chicago te studeer. Anders as sy ouers, wat sterk anti-kommunisties was, het Bellow van jongs af aangetrokke tot linkse politieke idees gevoel, bv "Trotskyite idealism" (728). Dit is ook hoe hy sy eerste vrou en mede-student, Anita Goshkin, wie se voorouers uit die Krim-skiereiland gekom het, ontmoet het. Albei het hulle van formele Joodse religieuse praktyke gedistansieer. As student het Bellow die boeke van Balzac en Tolstoy gelees, "sentence by sentence to see if he could improve on them" (445). "He was tutored only by the great writers" (2130). Bellow het homself beskou as "self-taught as a writer" (693).

Bellow het die graad BA aan Northwestern University in Evanston behaal, met Engels en antropologie as hoofvakke. In 1937 het hy met Anita getrou. Sy literêre deurbraak het gekom "by abandoning a fictional style designed to please academics in favor of a naturally flowing prose style" (773). Greg, "could not appreciate his books as literature" (1052). Maar hy noem tog Bellow se "observational capacities" en sy "magnificent descriptive capacities" (1964). Elders verwys Greg na Bellow se "lofty prose" (2670).

Een van Bellow se kenmerke was sy neiging om kort-kort van woning te verander. In die 15 jaar wat hy met sy eerste vrou saamgewoon het, het hulle agtereenvolgend 22 blyplekke gehad. Greg noem dit 'n "gypsy life" (530, 1254, 2614). Daar was ook 'n ander verskynsel: "It did not take long for Saul to develop a taste for sex outside of marriage ... Saul ... adopted a belief that fidelity was a bourgeois ideology" (577). Greg verwys na "Saul's chronic philandering" (714). Bellow het homself 'n "serial monogamist" genoem. (605).

"Our father was always easily angered, prone to argument, acutely sensitive, and palpably vulnerable to criticism" (73). Bellow se pa, Abraham, "hated his softness and vulnerability" (518). "Abraham ... formed a critical judgment of his youngest as an overgrown crybaby who had failed to absorb the lesson life taught him: the necessity for emotional toughness" (1046). Greg beskryf sy pa as "in many ways a kid who never grew up" (905). "Saul's inner life had been affected by all the heartache he poured into the ... novels that he produced" (1341). "Despite his lifelong inability to manage the effects of tender human feeling, it was at the core of my father's being" (1566). "Emphasizing the literary lion overlooks the very human man and masks the essential soft side of Saul" (2676).

Bellow het in 1961 met sy derde vrou getrou. Na 'n hele aantal tydelike doseerposte in Engels en skryfwerk aan verskeie universiteite is hy in 1962 deur die University of Chicago permanent in die Committee on Social Thought aangestel. Dit is 'n interdisciplinêre doktorsale studieprogram. Daar het Bellow die "intellectual companionship" terdeë geniet, bv van die "crusty Edward Shils" (1910-1995), 'n bekende sosioloog (1454). Bellow het hom egter teen Shils se suiwer rasionaliteit verset en sy geestelike onafhanklikheid sover moontlik probeer handhaaf.

Greg is Bellow se oudste kind en die enigste wat hy by sy eerste vrou gehad het. By sy tweede vrou was

Adam sy enigste kind en Daniel by sy derde vrou. By sy vierde vrou, die enigste nie-Jodin met wie Bellow getrou het, 'n Romeense wiskundige, het hy geen kinders verwek nie. Toe hy 74 was, het Bellow in 1989 die vyfde keer getrou, met een van sy oud-studente en later sy sekretaresse, wat meer as veertig jaar jonger as hy was. By Janis, toe sy 40 was, het Bellow in 1999, toe hy 84 was en na 10 huweliksjaare, 'n dogter, Naomi Rose (Rosie), gehad. Dit kan 'n oorstootdrie in beseringstyd genoem word. "Her birth caused a stir inside and outside of the family" (2395).

Bellow was en Greg is maar eenaardig. Albei het soms sielkundige terapie ondergaan; bv Bellow omdat sy huwelike misluk het en Greg omdat hy weens sy pa se mislukkings gevrees het dat hy nooit 'n suksesvolle huwelik kon hê nie. Toe die hoogs bejaarde Bellow nie die huwelik van Greg se dogter bygewoon het nie, Greg "did not speak with Saul for eighteen months" (2463). Bellow se prokureur, Walter Pozen, het volgens Greg verkeerdelik beweer dat Bellow se verstand tot die einde helder gebly het, moontlik om te voorkom dat die geldigheid van sy testament betwis word. "I eventually considered Walter's gracious assertion of mental clarity to be a preemptive attempt to mythologize Saul Bellow, the famous author, at the expense of my father, the man" (2565). Blykbaar het Greg tog 'n goeie huwelikslewe met JoAnn. Hulle het in 1970 getrou en het twee kinders, Juliet en Andrew. Dit is begryplik dat pa en seun nie altyd goed oor die weg gekom het nie. Greg was as jong man reeds vasbeslote om finansieel en emosioneel so onafhanklik moontlik van Bellow te wees.

Greg het deurgaans sosialisme aangehang. In die jare sestig het daar tydens bv die burgerregtebeweging tussen vader en seun verwydering oor politieke sake ingetree. Bellow het meer konserwatief geword. Die vernietiging van die sosiale orde, soos weerspieël in bv die verval van New York City, het hom laat besef dat ongebreidelde vryheid gevaarlik is. Bellow het bewus geword van die "fragile state of the entire human endeavor ... Saul worried that the future of civilized society was at risk ... Angry objections to inequalities expressed by my generation, by women, and by blacks now in political power posed a threat to the twenty-five hundred years of Western culture Saul had studied and to which he had devoted his life. In the late 1970s and '80s, Saul began to criticize the growing tide of political correctness in society and began to take conservative positions on matters of race and gender" (1761). "Saul took an increasingly negative view of the militancy among blacks in Chicago ... Saul became increasingly cautious and troubled by the urban decay that was destroying the Chicago he fondly remembered" (1782).

"Saul had little sympathy with feminist ideas, the increasing presence of women in academia, or prominent women writers" (1816). Aan Candace Falk het Bellow gesê: "The only thing you women's liberationists will have to show for your movement in ten years will be sagging breasts!" Candace left the class insulted and cestfallen" (1824). "Dissatisfied with the intellectual quality of the work by women and black applicants, he fought against their grants. And Saul offended everyone when he publicly asked: 'Who was the Tolstoy of the Zulus?'" (1802).

"My father was now siding with the thinkers he had once challenged, promulgating a set of answers and solutions to problems, both social and personal, that I found distinctly patriarchal, authoritarian, and hierarchical" (1858). "More than anything else, I attribute the changes to disillusionment and disappointment – disillusionment that the Marxist ideas in which he had placed so much faith had become a rationale for murderous totalitarian dictatorships, and disappointment in the failure of art to transform the world into a less materialistic place" (1697).

Bellow het in sy latere lewe sy Joodse wortels herontdek, veral na aanleiding van die Arabier-Israeli-oorlog in 1967. Hy het gevrees dat 'n tweede Holocaust kon plaasvind. Maar steeds "my father found little solace in organized religion" (1716). Hy het vaagweg gehoop dat sy siel dalk onsterflik kon wees. "The once rebellious and irreligious son now found favor in the wisdom of the older generation and in the Jewish roots from which he had distanced himself during my formative years" (1796).

Teen die einde van sy lewe "Saul saw the Marxist beliefs that had fueled his philandering, bohemianism,

and permissive parenting as shameful errors” (2053). Daar was by hom ook “revised versions of family life that omitted his painful relationship with his father.” Bellow “came to speak about Grandpa with a fondness that surprised me” (2057). “No aspect of Saul’s past conduct became more shameful to him than having distanced himself from his Jewish roots for over thirty years out of Marxist conviction, as a part of his literary apprenticeship he considered necessary, and because religious observance so little moved him” (2089).

Nadat hy die vyfde keer getrou het, was Bellow se jong bruid Janis aanvanklik die toonbeeld van onderdanige sorgsaamheid. Na mate Bellow al hoe ouer en weerloser geword het, het Janis haar posisie toenemend versterk om haar sin te kry. “Soon Saul was represented by a new literary agent, a new lawyer, and new financial advisers. In the end Janis was installed as Saul’s literary executor, a new will was drafted ... and the inheritance Adam, Dan, and I were told to expect was, at a minimum, halved. We were excluded from any posthumous financial benefit from Saul’s literary estate” (2374).

Greg opper besware oor wat oor hom in James Atlas se Saul Bellow-biografie (2000) geskryf is. Janis het gesorg dat Bellow se gemagtigde biograaf, Zachary Leader, toegang tot die Saul Bellow-argiewe kry, maar nie Greg nie. Greg moes toe vir sy boek noodgedwonge grootliks op sy geheue staatmaak. Maar Greg het aan ons ‘n intieme beeld van sy pa gegee wat geen biograaf hom kan nadoen nie.