

BookTalk

SO THIS IS LOVE

By Leon Aron

Ravelstein

By Saul Bellow

Viking, 224 pages, \$24.95

This memoir of novelist Saul Bellow's friend, the brilliant philosopher and historian of ideas Allan Bloom (of *Closing of the American Mind* fame), is about many things, but mostly—and most memorably—about love. It is love of an almost forgotten variety, that of the Platonic ideal, which is but a subspecies of what we now call, blandly, friendship.

As every man knows, the risks, vulnerabilities, fears, jealousies, and occasional heartbreak inherent in close male friendship—all on display here, delicately and beautifully—often make relations with the opposite sex seem shallow, predictable, and crude by comparison. To the novel's protagonist, Ravelstein, a leading authority on Plato (as was Bloom, author of the classic translation of Plato's *Republic*), "passionate love" was of "perennial interest"; he saw this ecumenical version of love as "possibly the highest blessing of mankind," something that "binds societies together." Ravelstein is unbendingly honest: He means what he says and attempts to live what he teaches. Hence, his relations with his students and, especially, with the narrator, Chick (Bellow), are as intense and spicy as erotic love.

Enlivened by this tension yet unclouded and untaxed by the sexual component, Saul Bellow's tale has plenty of space and energy for another nearly extinct subject of modern literature: that

of the unhurried and brotherly frank conversation of two enormously wise, witty, and learned men. *Ravelstein's* tone is Chopinian; the miraculously sustained mix of intellect and intimacy.

The breathtaking expanse of Ravelstein's interests, the voraciousness of his intellectual appetite, and his quicksilver, at times manic, temperament, so perfectly captured by Bellow, combine to produce a torrent of enormously enjoy-

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able verbal escapades, explorations, revelations, and subversions. Often within the same paragraph, the "raw fun" of scabrous jokes, Catskill humor, and gossip (when Ravelstein did it, he claimed it was no longer gossip but "social history") coexists with the *Iliad*, Shakespeare, Diderot, Rousseau, Keynes, Machiavelli, or Thucydides. Cascading, out pour Lloyd George and Hitler, Roosevelt and Churchill (whom Ravelstein "loved"), de Gaulle (for whom he had "great respect"), Bobby Kennedy, Lincoln, and Caesar ("the greatest man who ever lived within the bounds of time").

These latter-day dialogues, with Chick a Plato to Ravelstein's Socrates, endow *Ravelstein* with inimitable texture, luxuriantly and intricately marbled like a top-of-the-line steak. (A bon

vivant, lover of beautiful things, of illegal Havana cigars and Rossini, Francophile and gourmand, although a chaotic eater, Ravelstein would not have scoffed at the metaphor.) The existential and the "intellectual" are as inseparable in the story as they were in Ravelstein and Chick. The life of the mind is as full of risk and danger and excitement as any physical endeavor.

The richness of the tale is underscored by the precise austerity of the language. Toward the end of their careers, after decades of relentless cleansing, chiseling, and stripping down to the essentials, many great writers bring forth texts like translucent liquid gold captured in Baltic amber. Bellow follows suit. The clarity, grace, delicacy, economy, and weight achieved in *Ravelstein* are unique even by the standards of this Nobel laureate's *oeuvre*.

Among many other things, *Ravelstein* is an epitaph, a passing tribute to the generation of American Jewish intellectuals who should properly be called Russian American or East European American. The beautiful Russian samovar that belonged to Chick's mother was a monument to grandparents and uncles died in pogroms, and cousins, nephews, and nieces tormented and consumed by the Holocaust in Vilno, Kovno, Kiev, Warsaw, Vienna, or Bucharest.

To these there-but-for-the-grace-of-God men, anti-Semitism was immediate and deadly, and anti-Semites—whether past or present, whether in France or Rumania—personal enemies to the bitter end. Chick and Ravelstein return again and again to Céline—a brilliant



French writer and notorious and vicious Jew hater.

Whether advisors to Presidents, columnists, or public intellectuals, these men's consuming interest in what Ravelstein called "Great Politics" was fueled by an understanding, in their blood, that making the world safe for democracy meant, first and foremost, de-clawing the beast of anti-Semitism, one of the deadliest products of tyrannies—Left and Right—and of the vulgar passions they whip up and parasitize on.

Seen here greedily swallowing news and gossip from Downing Street and the Kremlin (fed around the clock by former students and admirers from both America and Europe), Ravelstein personifies this fierce engagement with the world, which to him, unlike a vast majority of Americans, was both familiar and dangerous, a minefield of horrible memories. They were fervent American patriots, these men, who saw America, for all its faults, as heaven and miracle, and a cosmic force for the good. As Ravelstein says of Chick, "I see the Jew, the child of immigrants, taking the American premises seriously." The Ravelsteins will be sorely missed in an America that bumbles along, history's most unwilling and inept master of the world, grumbling incessantly about the burden.

One wonders if Chick's knowledge of Russian literature extended beyond Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, and Dostoevsky, all of whom enter his conversations

with Ravelstein. ("You are always inclined toward the Russians, Chick, when you try to explain what you're really up to," Ravelstein tells his buddy.) He must have known Pasternak, Mandel'shtam, and Brodsky—Russia's best poets of the past century, Jews all, killed or tormented by the regime.

Did he also know Pushkin, Russia's Dante and Shakespeare? Specifically, "Na kholmakh Gruzii" ("On the hills of Georgia"), a short—only two stanzas—masterpiece? The "dark of night" is lying on the hills of Georgia. The poet hears the Aragva River flowing next to him. The poet is sad, but his sadness is not "tormented or troubled." It is "luminous" because it is filled with the unnamed "thee," a friend or a lover. The poet's heart goes on "aching and loving" because it "cannot but love."

Such was the condition of Ravelstein's heart as well. He went on loving—ideas, his students, Rossini at full blast on his super-expensive woofers, Chick, silk ties, gold watches, espresso—but, in the end, love failed to conquer all. The devotion of his many friends was powerless to save the book's enormously appealing and, toward the end, quite heroic protagonist, who dies of AIDS. Yet love (his young wife's) saves Chick, who falls gravely ill shortly after Ravelstein's death.

It is a tie, in the end, between love and death. The inimitable luminous sadness of this book will be with the reader forever.

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THE OWL OF MINERVA AND THE NBC PEACOCK

By Paul A. Cantor

Shows About Nothing: Nihilism and Popular Culture from 'The Exorcist' to 'Seinfeld'

By Thomas S. Hibbs
Spence, 192 pages, \$22

Popular culture has become an equal opportunity target of criticism for the increasing number of academics

who write about it. Left-wing critics view movies and television as the tool of corporate America, and condemn them both for creating a consumerist ethos that keeps the products moving off the shelves and for defusing potentially explosive impulses in the general population that might otherwise be channeled into revolutionary activity. Right-wing critics view popular culture as undermining the very American regime left-wing critics think it props up. According to the Right, Hollywood offers up a disorienting menu of alternate lifestyles to the American people, subverting their traditional morality and religion in daily orgies of sex and violence.

Thomas Hibbs is a right-wing critic of popular culture. As his subtitle indicates, he regards popular culture as nihilistic, seducing Americans into a vision of life "beyond good and evil," in Nietzsche's famous phrase. His title refers to TV's most popular situation comedy in the 1990s, "Seinfeld," the self-proclaimed "show about nothing." Plumbing its existential depths, Hibbs even has a section headed "Seinfeld's Dark God." But despite his conservative view of popular culture, Hibbs manages to rise above the partisan heat and smoke of the debate and actually shed light on the subject. Unlike Marxist critics, Hibbs writes about popular culture in terms the ordinary populace can understand. His clear, spare prose is a welcome relief from the turgid, jargon-laden writing one generally finds in left-wing treatises on popular culture.

By the same token, unlike most right-wing critics, Hibbs actually knows something about the subject. He will never be caught in the embarrassing position of William Bennett, who in 1990 criticized "The Simpsons" and then had to admit that he had never seen the show. By contrast, Hibbs discusses episodes of "Seinfeld" even I have not seen, and I watch the show in reruns more or less daily. Still, Hibbs' breadth of knowledge leaves us with a lingering question: If contemporary popular culture is as bad as he says it is, why is he wasting all that time keeping up with the misadventures of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer?

The real value of Hibbs' book lies in