Bernard Malamud

1. from: <http://www.enotes.com/authors/bernard-malamud>

**Introduction**

Bernard Malamud is the Chekhov of the urban Jewish milieu. Like the elegant short stories of the great Russian author, Malamud’s writings were deeply rooted in social concerns. He was raised in Brooklyn, New York, and the experiences of hard-working immigrants were particularly important to him. Linguistically, Malamud depicted this world using a mélange of English and Yiddish, giving his stories a unique and powerful rhythm. The language further served as a commentary on the cultural mosaic that was (and still is) New York. Within this often-bleak landscape, Malamud saw glimmers of hope and possibility. In doing so, he managed to created honest depictions of the Jewish immigrant experience with lyrical touches that suggested the potential the future might hold.

**Essential Facts**

1. Although Malamud is not particularly known for sports writing or anything resembling Americana, one of his most loved works is the baseball story *The Natural*.
2. Malamud earned a Pulitzer Prize in 1967 for his book *The Fixer*. It was turned into an Oscar-nominated film starring Alan Bates the following year.
3. Like many writers, Malamud began his career writing short stories, which were later published in collections. He put out dozens of shorts throughout his career and won an O. Henry Award in the late 1960s.
4. As a professor, Malamud taught at Oregon State University and Bennington College.
5. For the past twenty years, the PEN/Malamud Award has recognized achievement in short-form writing. Notable recipients include celebrated novelist John Updike and the prolific Joyce Carol Oates.



**2. From :** http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bernard\_Malamud

**Bernard Malamud** (April 26, 1914 – March 18, 1986) was an [American](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/United_States) writer, allegorist, and a well-known [Jewish](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Jewish)-American author. He has received international acclaim for his novels and short stories. His stories prominently reflect important themes from the spiritual tradition of [Judaism](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Judaism). Malamud's stories are uplifting without being naive about the challenges of modern, urban life. They demonstrate characters confronting those challenges by relying on the values, such as [love](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Love) and [forgiveness](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Forgiveness) which derive from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

## Biography

Bernard Malamud was born April 26, 1914, in Brooklyn, New York to [Russian](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Russia) [Jewish](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Jewish) immigrants, Max and Bertha (Fidelman) Malamud. His brother, Eugene, was born in 1917. Bernard attended high school in Brooklyn and during those years he often visited the movie houses and after would describe the plots to his schoolhood friends. He was especially fond of [Charlie Chaplin](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Charlie_Chaplin)'s comedies. From 1928 to 1932 he attended Erasmus Hall High School in [Brooklyn](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Brooklyn), receiving his Bachelor's degree from City College of [New York](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/New_York) in 1936. He worked for a year at $4.50 a day as a teacher-in-training, before attending college on a government loan. Malamud later earned his Master's degree from [Columbia University](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Columbia_University) in 1942. Malamud aspired to teach English, however, the scarcity of work in pre-[World War II](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/World_War_II) New York led him to find work in[Washington, D.C.](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Washington%2C_D.C.), with the Bureau of the Census. In 1949 he began teaching at Oregon State University, an experience that he would later fictionalize in his novel *A New Life* (1961). He left this post in 1961 to teach creative writing at Bennington College in Vermont.

### Marriage

In 1942 Malamud met Ann De Chiara (November 1, 1917 – March 20, 2007), an Italian-American Roman Catholic, who was then working at an advertising firm. They married on November 6, 1945, over the opposition of both Malamud and De Chiara's parents. They had two children: Paul (b. 1947) and Janna (b. 1952).

Ann Malamud, a 1939 [Cornell University](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cornell_University) graduate, typed 100 application letters for a college teaching job for her husband. She also typed and reviewed his manuscripts.

Janna Malamud Smith relates her memories of her father in her memoir, *My Father is a Book*.

## Writing career

Malamud began actively writing short stories in 1941 and in 1943 he published his first stories, "Benefit Performance" in *Threshold* and "The Place Is Different Now" in *American Preface*.

In 1948, at the age of 34, he had completed his first novel but he eventually burned it. In the early 1950s, many stories began appearing in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Partisan Review*, and *Commentary*.

*The Natural*, Malamud's first novel, was published in 1952. The novel is one of his best remembered and most symbolic works. The story traces the life of Roy Hobbs, an unknown middle-aged baseball player who reaches legendary status with his stellar talent. Malamud’s fiction touches lightly upon mythic elements and explores themes as initiation and isolation. *The Natural* also focuses upon a recurring writing technique that marked much of Malumud’s works.

Malamud’s second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), set in New York and drawing on Malamud's own childhood, is an account of the life of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant who owns a grocery store in Brooklyn. Although he is struggling financially, Bober takes in a drifter of dubious character.

Most of the short stories in Malamud’s first collection, *The Magic Barrel* (1958), depict the search for hope and meaning within the bleak enclosures of poor urban settings. The title story focuses on the unlikely relationship of Leo Finkle, an unmarried rabbinical student, and Pinye Salzman, a colorful marriage broker. Finkle has spent most of his life with his nose buried in books and thus isn’t well-educated in life itself. However, Finkle has a greater interest—the art of romance. He engages the services of Salzman, who shows Finkle a number of potential brides from his “magic barrel” but with each picture Finkle grows more disinterested. After Salzman convinces him to meet Lily Hirschorn, Finkle realizes his life is truly empty and lacking the passion to love [God](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/God) or humanity. When Finkle discovers a picture of Salzman’s daughter and sees her suffering, he sets out on a new mission to save her. Other well-known stories included in the collection are: *The Last Mohican*, *Angel Levine*, *Idiots First*, and *The Mourners*, a story which focuses on Kessler, the defiant old man in need of 'social security' and Gruber, the belligerent landlord who doesn't want Kessler in the tenement anymore.

He is most renowned for his short stories, oblique allegories often set in a dreamlike urban [ghetto](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ghetto) of immigrant [Jews](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Jew). His prose, like his settings, is an artful pastiche of Yiddish-English locutions, punctuated by sudden lyricism. On Malamud's death, [Philip Roth](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Philip_Roth) wrote: "A man of stern morality, [Malamud was driven by] a need to consider long and seriously every last demand of an overtaxed, overtaxing [conscience](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Conscience%22%20%5Co%20%22Conscience)torturously exacerbated by the pathos of human need unabated."

*The Fixer*, won the National Book Award in 1966 and the [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pulitzer_Prize_for_Fiction). Malamud's novel *The Natural* was made into a movie starring Robert Redford (described by the film writer David Thomson as "poor baseball and worse Malamud"). Among his other novels were Dubin's Lives, a powerful evocation of middle age which uses biography to recreate the narrative richness of its protagonists' lives, and The Tenants, an arguably meta-narrative on Malamud's own writing and creative struggles, which, set in [New York](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/New_York), deals with racial issues and the emergence of black/[African American literature](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/African_American_literature) in the American 1970s landscape. Malamud taught at Oregon State University from 1949-1961.

## Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, and Personal Issues

Writing in the last third of the twentieth century, Malamud was aware of the social problems that are prevalent in modern urban society: rootlessness, infidelity, abuse, divorce, and more, but he believes in love as redemptive and sacrifice as uplifting. Often, success depends on cooperation between antagonists. In *The Mourners*, for example, landlord and tenant learn from each other's anguish. In *The Magic Barrel*, the matchmaker worries about his "fallen" daughter, while the daughter and the rabbinic student are drawn together by their need for love and salvation.

If Malamud's readers are sometimes disappointed by ambiguous or unhappy endings, they are often reassured about the existence of decency in a corrupt world. Malamud's guarded optimism reflects several influences. He cites American authors, [Nathaniel Hawthorne](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Nathaniel_Hawthorne) and [Henry James](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Henry_James), as guides to moral and spiritual struggles. Like them, Malamud holds individuals responsible for their behavior. He also admires Russian writers, [Fyodor Dostoevsky](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Fyodor_Dostoevsky) and [Anton Chekhov](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Anton_Chekhov), for their vibrant portrayal of the self versus society. Although he does not mention other Jewish writers as influences, he concedes "a common fund of Jewish experience and possibly an interest in the ethical approach."

## Quotations

"Where there's no fight for it there's no freedom. What is it Spinoza says? If the state acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature it's the lesser evil to destroy it."

"All men are Jews, though few men know it."

"Without heroes we would all be plain people and wouldn't know how far we can go."

"Life is a tragedy full of joy."

"I write...to explain life to myself and to keep me related to men."