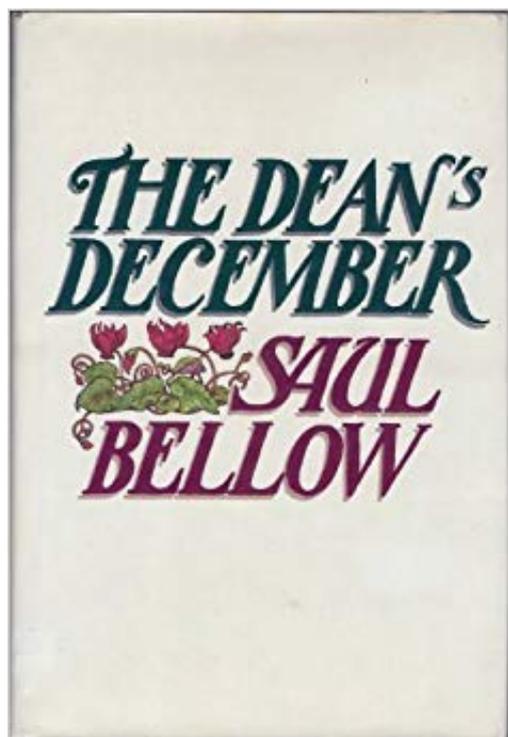


The Dean's December *by* Saul Bellow



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ISBN: 0060148497

ISBN13: 978-0060148492

Author: Saul Bellow

Book title: The Dean's December

Pages: 312

Publisher: Harper & Row; 1st edition (December 1, 1981)

Language: English

Category: United States

Size PDF version: 1726 kb

Size ePUB version: 1292 kb

Size FB2 version: 1491 kb

Other formats: lit doc docx txt

During a trip to Eastern Europe to visit his dying mother-in-law, Dean Corde, an administrator at a Chicago university, find dehumanizing bureaucracy abroad and trouble and controversy at home



Reviews of the *The Dean's December* *by* Saul Bellow

Punind

A brilliant and sensitive man, suffers the slings and arrows of life, and keeps his composure while shepherding his wife through a devastating event. That's how I would sum up, *The Dean's December*, by Saul Bellow. I've been a fan of Bellow since reading *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in a college American Literature course. I've also read *Seize the Day*, and his first novel, *The Victim*. For anyone unfamiliar with Bellow's work, or who has not read much 'literary' fiction, I would recommend starting Bellow with any one of these last three.

The Dean's December is a more complicated read, long on meditative ruminations and short on action, with much of that related in conversations or letters, after the fact. That, however, takes

nothing away from this novel. Some writers are sketchy and vague on description, letting the reader fill in the blanks. Some writers provide snapshots, some x-rays, to help us understand the minds of their characters. Bellow does the literary equivalent of a cat scan, thousands of slices, a life examined from 3,000 different angles. The reader feels there, appended to Corde, Dean of an Ivy League Chicago college, as he deals with his wife, who is dealing with her mother's death, in a repressive Soviet Bloc country (Romania). And if that wasn't enough, while on his breaks from that, he sits in a poorly-heated room, in a broken down house, dealing long distance with a literary brouhaha he'd brought on himself, over a magazine article he'd written about a young man pushed through a window by a black drug dealer in Chicago. The final complication is provided by an old friend from Corde's youth, now a word-renowned journalist and interviewer who covers foreign and domestic leaders and pontificates on Sunday afternoon news shows. Spangler provides a little diversion for Corde, but soon after publishes a 'hit piece' on him, taking him to task.

Through it all Corde put's his wife's health and feelings first.

Bellow gives us a wonderful story of a moral man and a relationship and some thoughtful insights to what things, in life, are truly important.

DarK-LiGht

The Dean's December is a surprisingly old-fashioned story of East and West. Corde, the protagonist, is caught between the horrors of living for just a while in Communist Romania and his feelings for home-town Chicago. Most surprising is his point of view as he observes rather than condemns conditions in this tale of two cities. While The Dean's December has been called one of Bellow's most depressing works, I found it strangely optimistic. There's a wonderful scene at the end as the couple stares at the heavens at the Palomar observatory. What could be more positive than that!

Kanrad

Even more than 20 some years after reading it, some of the images remained so vivid for me (the cyclamen as symbol for the soul - go read it to see!) that I still yearn for cyclamen in winter and think of his words. This year, I gave a copy of this book and a cyclamen plant as a Christmas gift to a dear friend, with an explanatory note.

Ok - not a literary review, but Bellow's writing gets under one's defenses into one's psyche on that deep a level. We feel the grey chill in eastern Europe, the lines on the faces, in particular, those of the main character's. A very visceral book.

Chilele

Not the best but a good book by a Lit Nobel winner.

Barit

Fascinating insight of a dark time in the Eastern European history- communist dictatorship seen first hand by an american

GAMER

The characters are hard to follow and they don't mesh. Bellow does to a good job describing Romania during the communist regime, though.

Bort

If you have not read anything by Saul Bellow, don't start with this book. It is pedantic and involves characters about whom it is difficult to care very much.

A nightmare of two cities. Bucharest and Chicago are the two hellholes that share our attention in Saul Bellow's novel of 1982. One is the centre of an oppressive police state, the other is troubled by crime, corruption, race conflict, lawyers, the income gap.

We see the world with Albert Corde, a journalist and college dean. His wife is a Rumanian scientist. The couple is visiting Rumania because her mother is dying. It happens to be Christmas time. Corde is not the average Bellow protagonist, being of Huguenot and Irish descent.

In Chicago, Corde has gotten himself involved in a media brawl over crime and punishment. While

hanging out uncomfortably in a cold Bucharest apartment, Corde thinks through his problems at home.

He may have acted unwisely by writing articles on a pending murder trial. Without clear reasons, Corde has taken the side of the prosecution. The case is strictly speaking none of Corde's business, even considering that the victim was a student at his school, but now he has put his foot in it. The accused are two black people, and defense has blown things up to political meaning. From this one case, Corde's articles had branched out to other race related stories, involving other crimes, but also other social subjects like run down slum areas and political corruption. He makes enemies all over the spectrum. He offends his sources.

Now he is considering a cooperation with a scientific genius who wants him to popularize his environment related findings. His wife encourages him. He is skeptical. Shall he harness himself to a tale that he can't evaluate, that may be nonsense and expose him as a fool?

Though the novel doesn't entirely lack Bellow's usual dry humor in many details of speech or description, the plot is as unfunny as the author ever was. In that sense too, it is an unusual Bellow novel. It is also one of his best.

The attention to the two locations is divided roughly by half. The chapters dealing with communist reality are as depressing as expected, but I will not make many words about them here. No need to kick a corpse. It wasn't a corpse yet in 1982.

Apart from the big cities with their ugliness, a dominant theme is 'family'. The dean and his wife have a curious relationship. They barely have a shared language. She is a stranger in more than one sense. Her mother and other relatives are exotic and distant, despite best intentions. (Since this couple is obviously based on Bellow and one of his wives, it is interesting to compare this Mrs. Corde to the Rumanian ex-wife in Ravelstein!)

The dean has a sister, who is the widow of an obnoxious man and the mother of an obnoxious son. Now she gets married again, to a dubious character.

The dean doesn't understand himself very well, so how can I? He is a verbose man, who can't express himself clearly, invented by a virtuoso of words, whose ideas are often obscure to me, but who impresses me often with his elaborate constructions. This is one of his best.

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