

Reaching for the American Dream: The Pulitzer Prizes and America  
By Evan Hughes

Joseph Pulitzer, originally named József, was born to relative prosperity in a sunny, hot town in the southern part of Hungary. When he came to the United States at 17 at the beckoning of military recruiters, he was misled about what he would find there. He fell down the social ladder upon arrival, like the taxi driver you meet who turns out to have an engineering degree from back home in South Asia. Before long, Pulitzer was sleeping in boxcars. And then he found his way, by luck and industry, and caught a foothold in the boisterous and scrappy field of newspaper journalism. And upward he went. In time Pulitzer became the publisher of the *New York World*, which famously battled it out with William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* to draw readers with lurid tales of murder, betrayal, corruption, and privilege—and thus capture the top advertising dollar.

Could there be a more American story? A story more apt to tickle the imagination of a writer of fiction?

The most lasting legacy of Pulitzer's crowded life, of course, was the set of annual prizes, recognizing merit in journalism and letters, created by virtue of a provision in his will. The prizes in journalism are probably the most famous, a crowning achievement for newsrooms, where staffers gather round on the appointed afternoon in April and await the announcement together, ready to burst into applause. But the awards for "letters" were set out right there in Pulitzer's will, too—four of them, just as many as he called for in journalism.

The award for fiction is given for "distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life." There is an irony here in the fact that József Pulitzer was Hungarian. But he didn't stay that way. He became, first de facto and then officially, a citizen of the U.S.A. He yearned to be here; started from the bottom; called on all his inner resources; assimilated, in halting but unmistakable steps; showed audacity and business acumen, perhaps greed; and finally, famously, he showed generosity. We can only surmise that he felt about his own life path something similar to what Barack Obama feels about his: "In no other country on earth," Obama has said, "is my story even possible."

And so the Pulitzer Prize, one hundred years old now, goes to a work of fiction that does something more than show authorial talent. It goes, most often, to a book that

captures something of the spirit of the nation. A hint of its oddities and beauties. A glimmer of the possibilities and improbabilities so evident in the life of Pulitzer himself.

Following from that slim and gentle directive in the Pulitzer guidelines—“preferably dealing with American life”—a theme emerges. Not in every instance, of course; the writer’s imagination ranges too widely for that. But it is clear that the prize tends to celebrate qualities so easily found in the biography of Pulitzer himself. It is *a literature of striving*.

Aspiration takes many forms in these works of fiction, but it tends to hew closely to the kind that drive the American project, the American dream. It is, especially, the aspiration to secure a better life, a better place in society. Most often that manifests itself literally, in a striving to earn a better living and to give one’s children a greater opportunity to rise further. But part of that project is usually a kind of assimilation, whether literally for immigrants or more figuratively for those who are migrants between the classes or into different spheres: the literary world, the public schools of New Jersey, the academy, the music business.

For Von Humboldt Fleisher and his nemesis and friend, Charlie Citrine, in Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975), aspiration takes a dual form: they are striving for artistic success, as they themselves define it, and they are striving, too, to make a buck at it. These dreams, of course, do not go hand in hand and can in fact come into conflict.

Humboldt’s temporary fame derives from one extraordinary book he published in the 1930s, a volume of poetry, and Charlie recognizes its brilliance, not to mention the dazzling virtuosity of Humboldt’s monologues about everything he’s read and all he’s seen in the American zeitgeist. Charlie worshiped at Humboldt’s feet when he was a young upstart in New York City, playing catch-up on the great books and debates rippling through Greenwich Village.

But then, in some sense at least, the tables turned. Charlie has become famous now. And rich. He has written a play that secured a healthy Broadway run and he has authored a presidential biography (both works winners of the Pulitzer, as it happens). Hollywood has come calling. “I even made a pile of money,” Citrine, the narrator, tells us. “Ah, money, the money! Humboldt held the money against me.”

Indeed. From the first moment that Charlie found that rare precious metal—wealth by way of art—his friend and mentor Humboldt, having become unstable, would shout to anyone and everyone that Charlie was an undeserving fraud. Charlie would usually go

easy on Humboldt in return, perhaps in part because, poignantly, he felt that Humboldt might have a point. With the Broadway run, Charlie says, “I had the attention of the public for nearly a year, and I taught it nothing.”

Plot is not the focus in *Humboldt's Gift*, but as is familiar in the work of Bellow, the action is antic, restless, a little absurd—fired with a midcentury American energy. Bellow, one of our great stylists, writes with verve and insouciance. Through a run-in with a gangster called Rinaldo Cantabile (speaking of absurdity, note the names in this novel) and through the proceedings of his divorce, Charlie finds himself, improbably, digging back into the life of Humboldt, who has died by now, in a state of destitution.

For all his dynamism and lack of restraint, Humboldt has led a tragic life, and Charlie is swept up in the melancholy of it, moved in a way he can't entirely explain. Humboldt strived for something and did not achieve it; perhaps it is as simple as that. “He was so disappointed,” Charlie concludes. “All a man of that sort really asks for is a chance to work his heart out at some high work.” Charlie finally wonders if the aspiration could ever have been realized: “There's the most extraordinary unheard-of poetry buried in America, not none of the conventional means known to culture can even begin to extract it.” But Bellow's own novel is the kind that gives the lie to that pessimistic remark.

The story of Seymour “Swede” Levov is also a tragic one, a fall from on high. And like *Humboldt's Gift*, Philip Roth's Pulitzer-winning *American Pastoral* (1997) is a tale told at a remove. Our narrator is not “the Swede”—as he was worshipfully known in his youth in Newark, New Jersey—but Nathan Zuckerman, a writer who knows the Swede just a little, mainly from early on in life, as a towering young god with enviable looks and athleticism. (There is a parallel here, too, to the American classic *The Great Gatsby*, in which it is Nick Carraway who tells us the story of the seemingly blessed Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan.)

The Swede comes from the same world that Zuckerman does—the heavily Jewish Weequahic section of Newark in the time of the Second World War—but his “Viking mask” of blond hair and blue eyes and his heroism in sports give him an untouchable, exotic air. The Swede in his youth is “the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews.”

The Swede's father, portrayed with toughness and love by Roth, is the very model of the striving immigrant son. Lou Levov was reared in the slums and undereducated and worked himself to the bone building a business, always *doing it the right way* on behalf of his family, his children. Eventually he earned great wealth manufacturing ladies'

gloves. The Swede will go on to join the business and move his family to a bucolic town outside the city, to live the dream of “the American pastoral.”

Many decades after sharing the streets of Weequahic with the Swede as they grew up, and just after the Swede has died, Zuckerman learns the truth about what “the household Apollo” suffered in adulthood. All the blessings and the realized aspirations that the Swede represents were destroyed, essentially, in one moment. One of the Swede’s children, a daughter named Merry, not only turned on him but turned, in fact, on the whole idea of the American pastoral. She was a child of the 1960s, and in the quaint New Jersey town where the Levovs live, in the general store that doubles as the post office, Merry planted a bomb. According to his brother, the Swede never got over it.

Here we have the other side of aspiration, and Roth charts it with care and gravity, knowing all that is at stake in the national resonance of such a story. Zuckerman and Roth together delve back deep into the Swede’s life, reimagining it, circling back through the plot that has already been revealed in its outlines, early in the book. The workings of the glove factory owned by the Swede’s father are lovingly described, in great detail, such that we feel the man’s exile when Newark changes, when the Jews flee along with the rest of the white middle class, when he too flees, bringing the business with him. And then, through the scrim of stoicism and mystery in the Swede’s character, and despite Zuckerman’s remove from his subject, we feel the full weight of the tragedy that befell him, the unmaking of the Swede’s American hopes.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* appeared just two years after *American Pastoral*, in 1999, but you would hardly know it. The Pulitzer win for Lahiri, coming in 2000, was an appropriate way to announce a new century in American literature—a break from the past on the face of it, but with an underlying continuity.

Roth and Bellow belong to an aging breed of novelists, nearly all of them white and male, who did a great deal to shape the twentieth century canon but have since been steadily passing from the scene: Roth has now retired. Bellow has died, along with John Cheever, William Styron, Norman Mailer, and John Updike.

Lahiri, meanwhile, was born in London to Bengali parents and was in her early thirties when she published this collection, which is peopled largely by immigrants. She is, in a way, an avatar of a new American lit—less white and male, more representative of the country as it really is.

We should not forget, however, that *American Pastoral* was something of an immigrant story, too, charting the aspirations and disappointments of the assimilating Weequahic Jews as much as it did the fate of Zuckerman and the Swede in particular. Humboldt's father, too, "plunged into America" as a Jewish Hungarian immigrant, making a fortune before losing it all in the brutal 1920s, leaving Humboldt himself without any safety net.

Lahiri is interested in some of the same thematic material. Her characters are mostly Indian or Indian-American and their place in the world is transitional and disorienting. They harbor a wide range of rather typical human longings but some of their aspirations are classically American and just as liable to be found in Bellow or Roth.

In her story "The Third and Final Continent," the narrator, a quiet young man, leaves India in the 1960s to live three or four to a room among Bengali immigrants in London, then moves to a deeply foreign America, where he takes a small room as a boarder in the house of a 103-year-old woman. He gradually learns his new country's odd ways and worries about his recent arranged marriage. How will he help his wife adjust to the States when he hardly knows her or the country itself? What is worth holding onto from the old country? The predicament, ironically, is a rewind of the clock back to the *parents* of the Swede or Zuckerman or Humboldt—a reminder that someone in your town is always just embarking on a long path that your own family likely once climbed. Soon the narrator and his wife will be sending their son to Harvard, their aspirations having carried the family far, and they tell him, from time to time, of distant family lore about dad living on corn flakes in the house of an ancient woman.

In "Mrs. Sen's," an Indian-American woman of about 30 agrees to babysit for a young American boy at her home. She is homesick, sometimes distraught, ever in search the fresh fish she could always find at home in India. She doesn't drive well and is too afraid to improve. She is not confident she can navigate the road she's traveling. Like Roth, Lahiri carefully explores the contours not only of aspiration but of disappointment.

Lahiri's palette is colorful but her tonal register is subdued, often melancholy. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, published in 2007, Junot Díaz's style is more reminiscent of Bellow's showman's bounce. It's a brash novel, unlike anything that preceded it, yet it is, in retrospect, an easy thread to incorporate in the tapestry of U.S. fiction.

*Oscar Wao* is written in a kind of "Spanglish," common in some form in the world of Dominican immigrants that Díaz is writing about but rarely rendered in print, never mind with such panache. Díaz is sending special signals to a certain community—in much the

way that Roth and Bellow could count on wry smiles among their Jewish contemporaries and Lahiri can speak on intimate terms with migrants from India—but meanwhile the message is easily legible to us all, even if we don't understand some of the lingo.

It is hard to say who is the most memorable character in the family at the center of the novel, a family that traverses the gap, unsteadily and even tragically, between the Dominican Republic and urban New Jersey. Is it Oscar, our eponymous and doomed protagonist, a hopelessly rotund adolescent looking for love, lost in infatuation, found only when tapping his fertile imagination to concoct his stories? Or is it his runaway sister, Lola, desperate to escape the grasp of another richly imagined dynamo, their beauty-queen mother, touched by violence, a survivor who loves them with a fierce determination?

It's also hard to see how a story with so much pain—some of it physical and indelible—and so much loss can be brought to life in bright colors and go down so easily. Perhaps it has something to do with the dark but seductive comedy, reminiscent of Bellow and Roth, and perhaps it has to do with the deep resonance of family life, in all its insanity. Perhaps, too, Díaz works his offbeat magic by tapping into the eccentric dreams of his characters—for the deeper a novel travels into the particularities of a character's aspirations, the more universally felt, somehow, the story becomes.

Jennifer Egan's characters in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) are, on the whole, much further removed from the immigrant experience. They are, in many cases, the product of relatively privileged backgrounds, even if they're struggling a bit at the moment; their parents or grandparents have usually "made it" already—sometimes they personally have made it. They are the American generations that come *after*—after economic hardship and assimilation, after postwar prosperity, after Vietnam. They are a little lost.

Every novel plays with time, elongating some scenes and leaving out whole hours or years, but typically this takes place on the sly—the writer's task is to cross this artistic obstacle beneath the reader's attention. But Egan bends time in plain view and makes sure we see it. Time is the very subject of the book. It is the goon squad that beats us all up, that cares not a bit about our hopes for the future.

Egan moves from decade to decade, often with disorienting speed, but this is a novel about the post-'60s world. Now the sexual revolution has happened, fevered and violent politics have mellowed into bourgeois bohemianism and celebrity worship. Anything is

possible; little is necessary. The American aspirations and energy are still there, but it's hard to know what to do with them.

Sasha, a young woman in New York City, is addicted to petty theft, for reasons she can't explain to her therapist. Jules assaults a starlet during a pointless celebrity interview and makes a kind of joke of it, despite landing behind bars. Dolly needs that star for her absurd plan to resuscitate her career. Sasha's boss at the record company, Bennie Salazar, carelessly gets married, has children, commits infidelity.

If anyone is at the center of this experimental ensemble piece—somewhere between a story collection and a novel—it is probably Bennie. We see him when he's gotten rich and moved to a tony suburb where, in the wake of 9/11, he's made to feel he doesn't belong, which may be just why he's there. We see him feeling washed-up and impotent and trying to hit on his employee. And we see him many years earlier, just being awakened by rock 'n' roll. And always we see the concentric circles around him, the ripples he spreads through the lives of others.

Here again, as in Roth and Díaz, we are seeing what happens when aspirations get bent or smothered, but here again, Egan writes with feeling and a high style. Time may be merciless, but Egan still tap-dances across it, allowing us to see how we live with fresh eyes. It is very much a book of its time, and very much an American novel.

After one hundred years of the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, the choices are just as unpredictable and subject to debate, as they should be. József Pulitzer could never have guessed what kind of novels would receive his blessing in the 21st century. One can only imagine that he would read, say, Junot Diaz and Jennifer Egan with a deep confusion, for they come from a time so foreign to his. But what an introduction to our times they would be. And if we exercise the imagination a little harder, we can envision Pulitzer smiling over their work, recognizing his own feelings and hopes, recognizing his own unlikely story.

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