



A New Life

Bernard Malamud, Jonathan Lethem (Introduction)

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In *A New Life*, Bernard Malamud--generally thought of as a distinctly New York writer--took on the American myth of the West as a place of personal reinvention.

When Sy Levin, a high school teacher beset by alcohol and bad decisions, leaves the city for the Pacific Northwest to start over, it's no surprise that he conjures a vision of the extraordinary new life awaiting him there: "He imagined the pioneers in covered wagons entering this valley for the first time. Although he had lived little in nature Levin had always loved it, and the sense of having done the right thing in leaving New York was renewed in him." Soon after his arrival at Cascadia College, however, Levin realizes he has been taken in by a mirage. The failures pile up anew, and Levin, fired from his post, finds himself back where he started and little the wiser for it.

A New Life--as Jonathan Lethem's introduction makes clear--is Malamud at his best: with his belief in luck and new beginnings Sy Levin embodies the thwarted yearning for transcendence that is at the heart of all Malamud's work.

A New Life Details

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Mircalla64 says

una nuova visione della solita vecchia vita

Seymour Levin è un uomo in fuga dal proprio passato che spera di rifarsi una vita all'altro capo del paese, chiamato per la prima volta all'insegnamento universitario si reca nell'unico college che gli ha risposto, in un minuscolo paese tra le montagne, la letteratura non è l'insegnamento principale in quel luogo e a questa prima delusione se ne sommeranno altre, finchè la sua vita non verrà rivoluzionata e riscritta dagli eventi che gli sono sfuggiti di mano...

Seymour Levin, Lev per la sua amante, (view spoiler), è uno sfigato senza spina dorsale che si appella alla morale per spiegare la sua rigidità e la tigna che gli alberga nel cuore alla vista di tutte quelle donne che non sono la sua...in pochi mesi dopo il suo arrivo, da spaesato e mite insegnante della costa est si trasforma in pericoloso sovvertitore dell'ordine precostituito, in piena era McCarthy praticamente un comunista, solo per aver avuto qualche idea non esattamente allineata al gregge del campus, ma la cosa che maggiormente lo rende debole è il suo affidarsi agli eventi che gli capitano come se non si potesse farne a meno, il suo pensarsi al di sopra degli altri, il cercarne la compagnia e l'approvazione come se gli fossero dovute entrambe, e infine il giudizio che così facilmente elargisce anche non richiesto sul conto di chi gli sta vicino...personalmente ho trovato irritante il modo in cui lui si è fatto (view spoiler) come se lui non esistesse al di fuori dei ruoli che a mano a mano gli vengono affidati...

la lettura è piacevole, il romanzo è meno cupo di Il Commesso e questo ne fa una lettura molto più goduriosa, come anche la velocità con cui si prevede quel che il povero Lev si infliggerà una volta discesa la china che ha imboccato dopo pochi mesi di permanenza in un luogo tossico per qualsiasi mente liberale, democratica e amante delle lettere...

Rich says

Bernard Malamud was an English professor at Oregon State University in the 1950's and early 1960's. *A New Life* is a novel about an English professor who moves from New York to a small college town in the 1950's. Even though fictitious place names are used, the novel clearly takes place in Corvallis at OSU. I imagine this book is semi-autobiographical, but I have no idea how much of Malamud is in this character. For someone like me who just moved from the east coast to Corvallis, this book is pure gold. I loved the descriptions of the area and I learned more about why Corvallis and OSU are how they are today. Is this a great book? Nope. But it is well written, engrossing and about a time, not unlike today, when associations and freedoms are under review. Overall, I loved it but it might not be for you.

Michael says

Bernard Malamud is one of my favorite authors, and while this easily was not my favorite of his books, it was very well written. At times funny, at times sad, and typically moral, the book was very entertaining. Malamud does an excellent job of taking the reader inside a troubled English department, and seeing how the book was written in 1961 and takes place in the early 50s, it looks like nothing much has changed.

Ffiamma says

meraviglioso- un malamud in stato di grazia.
uno dei libri migliori che abbia letto quest'anno.

Judy says

Having now read the first three of Bernard Malamud's eight novels, I am less than halfway to knowing him as a novelist. Already I have developed a strong affinity for him. He is drawn to creating stories of how men acquire wisdom through suffering, also a major concern of my father's, and you could say I was raised within a Christian interpretation of that theme. Malamud's was a Jewish viewpoint but I have been surrounded by Jewish people all of my life. It all adds up to feeling comfortable with Malamud.

Not that his protagonists are ever comfortable. They suffer, they have a lack of luck in life and a tendency to dither about most things. S Levin, a thirty year old teacher from New York City with a past soiled by excessive drinking, has been hired as an instructor at a small private college in the Northwest.

Levin sees the new job as a chance to start over and make something of his life. Though he has given up alcohol, he still harbors the traits that drove him to drink. Before long he has made enemies on campus and fallen into a relationship with the wife of his immediate superior.

The sense of impending doom begins in Chapter One and continues up to Levin's decisions and actions in the final chapter. Since the reader does not know the outcome of those decisions and actions, I felt he was most likely still doomed. Malamud's particular genius is to keep the reader hoping for Levin's success despite every wrong move he makes. Exquisitely torturous, as any good novel should be, but so close to the human condition where now and then a guy gets a break.

I have read a good share of campus novels, of which *A New Life* is one. A college or university setting provides a good microcosm and I suspect Malamud had read some campus novels himself because he covers the major tropes of professional conflict, intellectual competition, town vs gown, and the insularity that leads to immorality amongst the professors, students, and locals.

He covers a broader array of life than he did in *The Natural* or *The Assistant*. That may be because of the woods and fields surrounding his fictional Oregon town and the range of issues both personal and political that Levin confronts. Though he writes with a less precise focus than the troubles of a ball player or a struggling small shopkeeper in a big city, *A New Life* is an expansion into bigger questions of what make a whole life successful.

Jinny Chung says

"He was disappointed at how lonely he still was after almost three months in Easchester. Was the past, he asked himself, taking over in a new land? Had the new self failed? He had had invitations here and there, but

as Pauline and others had told him, it was tough to be a bachelor in this town. Without a family you were almost always left out. Even Bucket had never invited him to his house. Levin wanted friendship and got friendliness; he wanted steak and they offered spam. Each day his past weighed more. He was, after all, thirty, and time moved on relentless roller When, for God's sake, came love, marriage, children?"

I'd known about this novel for a very long time, and owned it for a brief while before it was announced as Jeff Garlin's pick for his winter book club. I didn't want Garlin to be my reason to read it, but alas, it was.

Garlin or no Garlin, I was meant to read this book.

Forget the introduction by Jonathan Lethem for the latest edition in paperback. Skip it. He has the gall to compare this book to others similarly about post-war suburbia, and I'm not happy about it. Malamud's talents are so beyond anything Richard Yates could have prayed for -- just read and let Levin's neuroses flood yours.

Malamud's prose doesn't seem like much at first. But stick to it -- watch out for those unnecessary, vague descriptions of his secondary characters. You'll recognize them because they're all around you in your everyday life, and Malamud is so on-the-money with his judgments that you won't even realize it's happening.

I might add that this is the third book in a row I've read with a pivotal, revealing scene that is reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*. Too reminiscent. Coincidence?

I might read this again, right now.

Tony says

A NEW LIFE. (1961). Bernard Malamud. ****.

This is another re-read of one of Malamud's novels; the first time was when it first came out. We get to meet Seymour Levin. Seymour has just relocated to a college town in Oregon where he has somehow snagged a teaching position. This is his first experience of living out of New York City. Other than a short stint at a high school, this is his first teaching job, and one that he is glad to get since he doesn't have an advanced degree. He hoped to be teaching literature courses, but gets assigned to classes on composition and grammar. Being a go-ahead guy, he believes that he can make a difference at what he now realizes is a "cow college," i.e., a state-funded ag school. There really isn't a liberal arts program in place. The material for this novel obviously comes from his real-life experience as an instructor at Oregon State in Corvallis, rather than at the University of Oregon. All of that aside, however, he still finds himself stepping into the usual intrigues and back-stabbing of a university environment. Seymour has lots of good ideas, but gaining support from his co-instructors is tricky; they all want to keep their jobs and their current comfort levels. Being a relatively young man with time on his hands, Seymour begins to develop relationships with the few women present at the university. These are the few staff women, but mostly the wives of the other instructors. It turns out that he has an active libido and is thrown into a compliant pool of potential sex partners. His sexual escapades begin to focus on the wife of one of his co-workers. Starting out slowly, the relationship builds into a life-changing experience. There is humor here, but there is also a deep investigation into Seymour's identity. This is another fine novel from a highly respected author. Recommended.

Jill says

A beautifully written book. About people who relentlessly run toward their unhappiness. Or maybe not. But probably.

The characters are so compelling and real. And hopefully hopeless - perhaps hopelessly hopeful. I just know they will stay with me for years. At which point I will read this book again.

Siti says

L'ULTIMO DEI PIONIERI

A New life apparve negli USA nel 1961, arrivò in Italia grazie ad Einaudi già nel 1963. Minimum fax lo ripropose giustamente nel 2007: doverosi i ringraziamenti!

È un'opera interessantissima per una serie di motivi se non vi bastassero un incipit meraviglioso, una prosa carezzevole e lenta, un protagonista magnetico e di conseguenza l'essere travolti dall'insieme perché Malamud riesce con pochissimi elementi e fin da subito a catturare tutta l'attenzione del lettore offrendo uno spaccato esistenziale degno di quelli dei più celebri protagonisti della letteratura. Eppure, paradossalmente, questa è solo la storia di Seymour Levin, un fallito momentaneamente galvanizzato e redento dall'accettazione della sua candidatura quale assistente presso un piccolo college nel remoto West. Cosa lo spinge ad abbandonare le luci di New York? Cosa lo attende nella terra dei pionieri? Riuscirà ad ambientarsi? Migliorerà? Crescerà? Si realizzerà? E se sì a quale prezzo? E se no, perché? Assistiamo ad una redenzione? Ad un'iniziazione? Ad un rinnovamento? Tutte queste domande vengono sapientemente stimolate dalle grandi doti del narratore che si diverte a sorprenderci riservando alla sua creatura uno scatto memorabile, in tutti i sensi.

La narrazione è abbellita dalla descrizioni degli stupendi scenari paesaggistici dell'Oregon che contribuiscono a sopperire alle prime discrepanze che il nostro caro Sy registra, suo malgrado, rispetto alla prima e superficiale impressione suscitatagli dal cordiale e favoloso ambiente del Cascadia college. Eachester, la cittadina nella quale vive, non è altro che il condensato del maccartismo più ostinato; l'ambiente universitario è mediocre e conservatore, contribuisce dignitosamente a mantenere basso il livello intellettuale: al bando barbe (pericolosamente marxiste), scapoli e cervelli. Espressioni incisive aiutano a inquadrare la situazione: "Hanno passato tanti di quegli anni al camposanto da farmi dubitare che torneranno in vita". Chi ha segnato i tempi con atteggiamenti indipendenti e comportamenti "rivoluzionari" nel brutto momento in cui "l'America era nel senso migliore di una brutta parola, antiamericana", è ancora ricordato come il peggio dei dissidenti. L'anno accademico accompagna il succedersi lento delle stagioni e dopo tre mesi dall'arrivo, Sy paga il pegno "indipendenza" con la solitudine. Quando l'ambiente smette di sussurrare e alludere lo fagocita, offrendogli un'ennesima agognata svolta alla propria esistenza, gli promette un futuro pianificabile salvo poi vomitarlo come un cibo mal digerito. Le paure che spesso lo bloccano, lentamente svaniscono, egli si fa più ardito e per non tradire questo nuovo io si avvia verso la svolta "vera" della sua vita senza volerlo davvero. La sua esistenza si sarà dunque nuovamente involuta ed evoluta lasciandolo incapace di affermarsi.

Malinconicamente lo consegno ai prossimi lettori ancora irritata dalla gradevolissima vena comica con la quale questo eccellente narratore lo congeda dalla nostra attenzione. Imperdibile!

Andrew Field says

This was a fascinating departure for Malamud, or at least for me, who was used to his stories about Brooklyn Jews in the first half of the 20th century. (There is a short introduction by Jonathan Lethem comparing "A New Life" to early Roth and Richard Yates.) This novel takes place in the Northwest of the US, and is a campus novel about an instructor of composition in an English department. There is virtually no mention of Levin's Jewishness until the end, though this in and of itself was a pretty interesting and significant moment (no spoilers). Anyways, I loved this novel, although it was slow to start. Much of the first half is taken with Levin's capers as a schlemiel (car problems, tuna casserole falling into his lap, stepping in cow pie). But once the love story begins, the novel becomes deeper and richer and there are moments with very strong and beautiful (and often tongue-in-cheek) writing about falling in love, as well as great writing about nature (though also often satirizing Levin's Romantic tendencies). I was also thinking about how amazing Malamud is in terms of exploring fraught situations - how wise he is emotionally when it comes to describing psychology and relationships without getting bogged down in too much sentimentality. Somehow both ironic and clearheaded. When it comes to describing conflict, I'm all thumbs. But when I think about Malamud describing the psychological states of his characters, I am startled by his imagination, by his (if this is the right word) empathy. It reminds me of Dostoevsky's amazing and intuitive leaps into Raskolnikov's consciousness, from the murder to the end. Both novelists just know their characters so well.

In general, "A New Life" was funny, but it was also very, very dark. I guess that kind of jives with my own worldview. I'm trying to read everything by Malamud, who is one of my favorite novelists, so next up I'm going to reread "The Fixer" (I can't get my hands right now on "Pictures of Fidelman").

Chrissie says

I like this novel, so I must give it three stars.

First and foremost, I like the author's lines. Secondly, I like the reality of life the author captures. Thirdly, I like the depiction of the moral dilemma all of us face in a crunch, when we must make a choice. Do we restrict our alternatives to only those which are morally right or do we choose to live our life fully, chasing after dreams and desires that we think will bring us fulfillment and happiness?

Often one need not consciously choose. Often two choices overlap, but sometimes our dreams are contrary to society's and our own moral code. What choice do we make then? Do we even stop to think? Do we just follow an impulse? Do we attempt to persuade ourselves that what we want to do isn't morally wrong? We might search for a substitute, a second alternative that is almost as good. These are choices we are all making, often oblivious to the choices made by those around us. Our choices are thwarted by others' decisions and nothing ends up as planned. Good intentions only go so far.

This is a story about a thirty-year-old man, Seymour Levin, who is trying to change his life. He is trying very hard to improve himself, but he is not perfect. You could say life gets in his / your way no matter how strong his / your will and intentions are. I didn't find it hard to empathize with Seymour; yet no one could possibly see him as a hero. The auxiliary characters are not heroes either, but that is the point. Malamud captures ordinary people!

The year is 1950. Think the Cold War and McCarthyism. TVs, yeah, they are new. People are talking about flying saucers. A cocktail before dinner was the norm. This is the 50s and we see those times in all the details of the story. The book was published in 1961. Seymour is from New York. He is hired as an instructor at a college out in the Pacific Northwest. The state and the college are fictional, but Malamud successfully draws both the place and academic life in a small college town out West. He captures marvelously the differences between life in the East and life out West. He captures both the antagonism between the two as well as the attractions of each.

The author (1914-1986), born and raised in Brooklyn, went on to get his B.A. at City College of New York in 1936 and in 1942 a master's degree at Columbia University. In 1949, he taught freshman composition at Oregon State University, that is to say out in the Pacific Northwest. The academic life he speaks of, both in the East and the West, are based on his own experiences. This shows. The book focuses upon the value of a liberal arts education and the relative value of composition and grammar versus creative writing. For me the author's views on this subject became a bit of a rant. In any case a bit too long and drawn out, even if I agree with what he is saying. The novel has autobiographical content.

This book does not focus on Jewish issues, as many of the author's other books do. The central protagonist may be named Seymour Levin, but no reference is made to a Jewish background.

I think I was less engaged in this book because it has the same message found in the author's *The Assistant*, which I have already read. That I gave four stars. You get more of the quintessential Malamud in *The Assistant* than in *A New Life*. My next book by the author will be *The Fixer*, for which Malamud received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Then I will follow up with the biography *My Father Is a Book* written by Malamud's daughter. I like this author and I must find out more.

The narration by Marc Vietor was very good, so four stars for the narration.

Malamud is a writer you should not miss. However, if you are looking for a book filled with admirable characters and clear, decisive or happy endings, look elsewhere. If you want a book to mirror the way life really is, then this is a book you will probably like, particularly if academia draws you.

Cosimo says

The time is out of joint

“Ma dica, lei cosa vuole dalla vita?”. “Ordine, valore, soddisfazione, amore”. “L'amore all'ultimo posto?”. “L'amore in ogni momento”.

Una Nuova Vita ha per tema il dissidio e il conflitto in diverse forme, interiore ed esteriore: responsabilità-libertà, infelicità-solitudine, adattamento-opposizione, isolamento-integrazione. Fu pubblicato nel 1961, lo stesso anno del capolavoro di Yates e di *Lasciarsi andare* di Roth, con i quali condivide diverse caratteristiche, come scrive Lethem in prefazione. Romanzo tradizionale e di tono autobiografico, narra di un eroe silenzioso e ribelle che approda in un'università umanistica che in realtà è una scuola di agraria, viene scelto da una donna del piccolo college come un oggetto-proiezione, come martire della passione; è intelligente e valoroso ma perdente, destinato a fallire, un intruso, nel mondo accademico provinciale e western, nei boschi dell'Oregon. Un semplice inadatto. La comicità picaresca evolve in tragico dramma dei sentimenti e delle aspirazioni, in sconfitta del desiderio, dentro flussi joyciani e in presenza di un doppio

spettrale e beffardo (il beckettiano e amletico Duffy), con tanti antagonisti che vengono rifiutati a favore della protagonista femminile, Pauline, tenera, lunatica, imprevedibile (il pedagogico e sterile marito Gilley, l'austero e eretico Fabrikant). La nuova vita di Seymour Levin è sincera e appassionata, ma non assomiglia per niente al suo sogno solitario, ne è una surreale e illogica simulazione. Questo romanzo è un campus novel, è stato accostato a *Pnin* di Nabokov. Parla di una fuga dalla città, dalla civiltà, da un passato tormentato (alcolismo e tragedie familiari, padre ladro e madre suicida) verso l'Ovest, la natura, la autentica verità, la libertà. Descrive l'esilio esistenziale di un insegnante di lettere alla ricerca di una campagna felice, di un cielo arcadico, mentre trova solo pioggia e problemi, nemici e condanne e fallimenti, l'impossibilità di adattarsi a un ambiente conservatore e moralista, ritratto con sarcasmo e empatia. Malamud evidenzia l'elemento fantastico nel reale, contrappone a ciò che è nel reale effettivo, il suo avversario alternativo, il possibile; trascrive il mondo in una parola intima e simbolica, inscrivendo nella storia collettiva il debole e fragile io di un uomo normale e eccezionale, per quanto inquieto e insoddisfatto, sempre alla ricerca di un riscatto e di una redenzione. Forse Levin non trova una rinascita, ma si accontenta di avere uno scopo, una buona occasione da non sprecare che nasce dall'errore e dalla ambiguità di un amore adulterio, una prospettiva di senso e di principio rinnovata nella dedizione all'altro (qui, all'innamorata Pauline) al di là del caos e dell'incomprensione. Levin ha diversi sé, è Lev, Sy, Sam, è un *luftmensch*, uomo d'aria (che trascura la vita reale per il pensiero, per il letterario), un ebreo molto buono, un uomo che conosce la solitudine, forse non più ingannato né intrappolato: uno *schlemiel*, uno sfortunato e sgraziato antieroe che trema tra promesse e ripensamenti e nel finale trova sorprendentemente un nuovo inizio.

“Le fulgide bandiere della solitudine si spiegarono e garriscono al vento. La conosceva in ogni forma e dimensione, ricordava quella di città, dura, tenera, nera, azzurra, di cemento; e quella di campagna, boscosa e fronzuta. Era vissuto in buie stanzette di anonimi caseggiati in grigie strade tra edifici di pietra che affollavano il cielo; la solitudine lo pedinava sotto forma di facce sconosciute. In campagna essa dimorava non lontano, sotto vasti cieli a ombrello. In città, compressa; spaziosa in campagna. Spazio più quello che senti, uguale qualcosa più di quello che senti; magnifico, se si è felici, altrimenti Dio ti aiuti. Dio ti aiuti Levin. Si struggeva dalla voglia di dividere con lei il fardello della propria incompiutezza, la frode di essere umano; agognava un passato che era ormai ricordo conservato sotto rimpianto. Il suo male aveva un proposito, ingegnoso ma poco felice: quello di costringere lui, Levin, a espellerlo, ma non ci sarebbe mai riuscito”.

Michael Battaglia says

A few decades ago if you wanted to make a list titled "Famous American Jewish Writers", the first three names probably would have been, in whatever order you wanted, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud. Fast forward to the present day and while those first two names are still as much of a household name as people familiar with literary figures might have in their houses, Malamud's name seems to have fallen out of collective memory to some extent . . . I certainly don't see him talked about that often anymore. It doesn't seem that his style of writing has fallen out of favor or he's been negatively reevaluated, sadly he may be a victim of the slow erosion of time. While Roth is still with us and Bellow only died in 2005, Malamud unfortunately passed away over thirty years ago. His last novel was published in 1982 and the last publication I see with his name on it is a complete stories collection put out in 1997.

Its not that he's totally forgotten . . . my wife says she read "The Natural" in college and liked it, so he's still on someone's radar but considering how much attention gets paid to his contemporaries even today it's a shame he's not as well known as he once was. Maybe he'll get used in a car commercial some day. that always seems to make things popular.

This one is his third novel and apparently a departure from the work he had done previously. Unlike the more New York and generally city based novels that he had done earlier, here he not only takes a step toward the autobiographical but also a geographical shift, taking his protagonist, former high school and now college professor Sy Levin out to the Pacific Northwest for a fresh start after things didn't work out so well for him on the East Coast. Fortunately for Sy, he's arrived years before coffee shops and bearded musicians in lumberjack outfits became the norm . . . unfortunately for him, he's a floppy liberal fish in a pond so still that ripples are treated as caused by gale force winds.

Malamud apparently taught at Oregon State for several years and its those experiences that color Sy's perception of what he's about to walk into. Driving west with dreams of inspiring his kids with the marvels of literature he finds out that even when you're desperate for a job research is key as the college that hires him is more of a science and technology place and the only great book that anyone really cares about is the local grammar text. But Sy's on a mission, a very clumsy, ill-fated and futile mission.

As this was my first Malamud novel, a couple of the differences that make this one stand out from his work beyond the setting weren't anything I really noticed . . . for one its longer than most of his other novels. Its also funnier, with Malamud playing up Sy's awkwardness at dealing with both students, colleagues and potential romantic interests in such a way that it would make Ricky Gervais clap his hands in squirmy delight. With the social skills of someone raised by standoffish hermits and a knack for doing the opposite of whatever "Dear Abby" would tell you in a given situation he manages to alienate almost everyone he comes into contact with.

But even as Sy fumbles his way through the course of the school year, Malamud manages to make him endearing in a sense. His intentions are good (unless you don't care about literature in which case he's your worst nightmare as a college professor) when it comes to teaching, his biggest problem is not knowing when to quit and having a bit of a tin ear for the environment around him . . . when almost no one is on the same page as you, doubling down isn't quite the best strategy. But Malamud balances that out with Sy's enjoyment of his new surroundings (the nature descriptions are extraordinary) and baby steps toward a sort of freedom from the life he used to lead, including learning how to drive a car.

The novel essentially divides itself into two poles, then, the question of whether Sy will indeed be able to find a new life out here, and a novel about what its like to work in academics, with all the infighting and alliances and compromises and absurdities that come along with working with a bunch of people who keep telling skeptical students about how books will change their lives while presenting evidence that all it will do is get you a job teaching people about books. One of the first "academics are a nutty world" books I ever read was John Barth's "Giles Goat Boy" and that's kind of colored my perception of novels about that subject ever since . . . Malamud doesn't go to Barth's lengths at making a college campus its own literal world and while that makes the characters and situations more human it also has a tendency to let all the other professors blur together or get boiled down to their basic traits (i.e. The One With Lots of Kids, the One Always Working on His Thesis, The Woman). For readers who aren't too into Sy's struggles to introduce more literary courses into the curriculum (at times he comes across like that friend who keeps insisting that all the best movies and bands are the ones no one's ever heard of), they may find little respite in his personal choices, which are times comes across as the equivalent of a drunk guy continually running with scissors glued to his hand, with all the subsequent results you'd expect.

Yet when Malamud lets the personal and political intersect the book gets more interesting. An affair with a colleague's wife gives the book some emotional urgency, while his attempts to uncover why the person who previously held his job was fired require him to dig further into his coworkers beyond what their favorite book is, with a struggle for a new departmental head thrown in for good measure. Despite everyone seeming

to wear tweed jackets the arguments are intense, a number of exchanges between Sy and his supervisor Dr Gilly practically crackle as the emotional stakes rise beyond the question of whether everyone is diagramming sentences properly, Sy's self-righteousness hitting hard against his boss' smug smiling confidence. Its a book that gathers steam as it goes along, as you almost painstakingly watch a man construct his own wicker man cage, spread gasoline around it and willingly step inside before lighting a match. So if you can stick around until the narrative propulsion kicks in, and stomach Sy's obnoxiousness (though I feel that if Roth handled the same material it would have resulted in a main character much more abrasive and spikier observations . . . as much as I like Roth I'm not totally against the more naturalistic approach here) you get to see if someone can ruin his own life the same way a chemical spill ruins a landscape, or if he can rise like a phoenix from the proverbial ashes. Malamud even makes the ending work . . . while you can interpret it as a happy ending, its less an ending than a chance at a start to a story, with all the risks that entails. He lets it unfold with a ease that doesn't feel contrived, succeeding not because he refuses to be entirely downbeat but because, to me, it asks the right question, bringing these people to the point where they're finally grown up enough to ask, not "Do you want to start a new life?" but "Did you learn anything from the last one?" Which is the point, for some of us, where we're ready to start figuring it out.

Maria Beltrami says

Probabilmente andrò in controtendenza, ma questo libro, così celebrato e scritto anche molto bene, mi ha annoiato. Nel preciso momento in cui Pauline versa addosso a Levin una cucchiaiata di pasticcio di tonno e patate bollente si sa già come andranno le cose, e questo avviene in una delle prime pagine. Dirò di più, nel preciso momento in cui il marito di Pauline insiste perché Levin passi la prima notte di soggiorno nella città universitaria dove si è appena trasferito, sotto il suo stesso tetto, è perfettamente chiaro che tipo di persona è ed è possibile prevedere che cosa succederà, fino agli ultimi, squallidi dettagli. Il protagonista è di una goffaggine caricaturale, che però, a differenza di quella esibita da altri personaggi della letteratura americana di origine ebraica, non fa ridere per niente, fa anzi vergognare, per lui e per noi che, leggendo di lui, ci sentiamo dei guardoni.

Gli altri personaggi, non sono personaggi: troppo monodimensionali e incapaci di uscire dal loro ruolo, creando un po' di interesse.

Niente a che vedere con Roth, e nemmeno con Yates di Revolutionary Road, al quale questo libro è stato spesso paragonato.

Simona says

Ormai è ufficiale. Sono perdutamente innamorata di Malamud, un autore che ho scoperto con "Il commesso", ma qui trova conferma il suo grande talento.

Accostato a "Revolutionary road" per la brutale sincerità e un pizzico di ironia, "Una nuova vita" sorprende per l'amarezza e la tenerezza di Levin e della sua nuova condizione.

La nuova vita che Levin si appresta a vivere non è come l'aveva immaginata. Il nostro protagonista vive una situazione alienante, estraneo a se stesso e a ciò che vuole, in una città americana diversa dal solito dove "a volte mi pare di fare una cosa completamente inutile, insegnando a scrivere a gente che non sa cosa scrivere".

Il titolo dell'opera potrebbe nascondere una sottile ironia dettata da alcune circostanze che lo attraversano come l'essere scapolo in un paese in cui sono tutti sposati o portare la barba, considerata simbolo di sciatteria.

"Una nuova vita" potrebbe essere il viaggio di chi aspira a un cambiamento, ma è soprattutto il viaggio di un uomo che "sa dove è il meglio, ma fa di tutto per meritarsi il peggio".
