



## Ravelstein

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*Ravelstein*, like its title character, is a puzzling work. At once a mass of fact and observations on history, philosophy, and the world-at-large, the book appears to be composed of a series of discontinuous scenes and repetitious pronouncements affirming the genius of Abe Ravelstein, professor, best-selling author, and would-be celebrity. Yet when the narrator, Chick, reveals that as Ravelstein's friend and admirer he has been selected by the professor to write his memoirs, the scheme of the novel's structure becomes clear, the apparent disjointedness a mark of the narrator's admiration and puzzlement. *Ravelstein* is thus a tribute to a great man and a cautionary tale illustrating his weaknesses.

Though *Ravelstein* is a worldly success, a big man with big appetites, almost a kind of cult leader among young intellectuals, he is, as his name implies, a “complicated” fellow whose real sympathies lie “knotted” and “tangled” amid the blandishments of the physical world. Seduced by success and fame into pursuing an extravagant lifestyle, Ravelstein enjoys all the pleasures of the modern world while pontificating to Chick in a tone of hardened cynicism.

Chick is amused, even impressed by the breadth and seeming wisdom of Ravelstein's knowledge, from the political origins of twentieth century Germany to the courtship rituals of native South American headhunters. Ravelstein's opinions permeate Chick's life, and Abe Ravelstein himself is the last of a long line of fast-talking hustlers and con men who fill Bellow's books, characters such as Einhorn in *The Adventures of Augie March* and Tamkin in *Seize the Day*.

Though there is a bit of the charlatan in Abe Ravelstein, he is not spiritually bankrupt. While he gently mocks what he considers Chick's conventional idealism and his capacity for hope, he insists that Chick write his biography, thus revealing his own yearning for immortality, for the human need to be remembered. Throughout this final novel, Abe Ravelstein, this “raveled” human being who is both “complicated” and at “loose ends,” admits to Chick that he is a confirmed nihilist. Ravelstein dies of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), and Chick himself survives a near-fatal illness near the end of the book. Chick realizes that his friend's hard-core reliance on pleasure and materialism actually disguised his basic human empathy. When he tells Chick, for instance, that the Jewish people are living witnesses to the absence of redemption, Ravelstein is confronting the great question that all of Bellow's heroes face: How does a human being come to terms with the allurements of the physical world and still preserve a spiritual integrity?

## Sources for Further Study

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