The great novel of the American dream, of "the universal eligibility to be noble," Saul Bellow's third novel charts the picaresque journey of Augie March. Awarded the National Book Award in 1953, *The Adventures of Augie March* remains one of the classics of American literature. An impulsively active, irresistibly charming and resolutely free-spirited man, Augie March leaves his family of poor Jewish immigrants behind and sets off in search of reality, fulfilment, and most importantly, love. During his exultant quest, he latches on to a series of dubious schemes: from stealing books and smuggling immigrants to training a temperamental eagle to hunt lizards -- and strong-minded women -- from the fiery, eagle-owning Thea Fenchel, to the sneaky and alluring Stella. As Augie travels from the depths of poverty to the peaks of worldly success, he stands as an irresistible, poignant incarnation of the American idea of freedom.

As mentioned above, *The Adventures of Augie March* is a picaresque novel: "I ... wrote catch-as-catch-can, picaresque." However, an overall analysis of the whole novel displays critical deviations from the mainstream genre out of the traditional picaresque style. As it turns out, the differences qualify *The Adventures of Augie March* as a variation on picaresque form rather than a modern imitation of the traditional genre. Augie's quest is not for his next meal or fortune, but for identity and freedom, self-hood, what he calls "a good enough fate" (45). Consequently, the series of adventures through which he is
forced to move are not designed to display varied levels of society in which members can be satirized for their follies and vices, but rather to examine the structure of modern American society to determine what possibility exists for the individual to retain a strong sense of self and the freedom to function and at the same time to be a responsible part of the society he lives in. Therefore, although satire is used and the tone of the book is comic, the controlling purpose of the novel is not to satirize the society, but to explore the possibility of existence within it. Although the structure is episodic, the hero’s moving through a series of more or less unrelated adventures, the adventures move toward a culmination rather than exist only for themselves, and there are more thematic links between them as well as a greater number of reappearing characters than in the traditional picaresque.

Keith Opdahl is of the view that the book is really a Bildungsroman, because Augie “turns inward and discovers himself -- and gains substance as a character.” A Bildungsroman is a novel which details a young man’s ascent into maturity, usually in an autobiographical format. In contrast to the picaresque novel, the Bildungsroman is structured around the development of the protagonist. The novel takes its protagonist from the Chicago of the Depression, through Mexico, to post-war Europe, and from a boyhood “larkiness” to a more mature inward search for truth. During his travels, Augie meets a great many people, each trying to influence or
"adopt" him, and from each of whom he manages to escape in his quest for identity, or what he considers to be a distinctive fate. Whether Augie actually matures is a subject of much debate, though Bellow clearly intended Augie's development to be the focal point of the novel: the book even opens with the assertion that "a man's character is his fate"(3).

Grandma Lausch, the old woman who dominates his household; Einhorn, "the first superior man"(60) he meets; Mrs. Renling, who wants to adopt him; Thea Fenchel, with whom he falls in love; and Stella, whom he finally marries, all exert their influence upon his course. Parallel to his adventures runs the success-story of his brother Simon, who falls into all the traps Augie tries to avoid. While Dangling Man has the protagonist recording things as they happen and in The Victim also things are recorded as they happen, in The Adventures of Augie March the story is told in retrospect by the protagonist. In general it seems that Augie changes less as an immediate result of his adventures than through reflecting upon them afterwards.

The story opens with Augie living with his simple-minded mother, subsisting in the shadow of a father who has abandoned the impoverished family, a Machiavellian-style grandmother, the very spectre of anti-Semitism, and an "idiot" brother. This atmosphere, rife with the potential for trauma, quickly becomes the starting point for the
exploration of Augie's self-discovery -- particularly with respect to women and love. Augie expresses only occasional moments of real bitterness as he attempts to locate his identity amid the flux of the material world. As mentioned above, Augie encounters a colourful array of personalities, and a preponderance of individuals who become interested in exerting influence over him. As a consequence of his encounters with this wide array of characters, the quick succession of episodic events, the variety of occupations that he experiments with, and his numerous confrontations with realists, Augie repeatedly cycles through optimism, disaster, and recovery throughout the novel. His rambling exploration of social, historical, psychological, and mythical landscapes expresses a variety of tones ranging from romanticism and naturalism to satire and humanism. From Depression-Era Chicago to post-war Europe, Augie relentlessly travels the globe in search of what he hopes will be a better fate.

Augie March is a Jewish-American boy growing up fatherless and poor in Depression-era Chicago. He seeks a "special distinction"(346), although his circumstances seem to position him for a uniquely disappointing life: his family consists of a simple-minded mother, a brother and "grandmother" who prove to be Machiavellian in their intentions, and an "idiot" youngest brother, Georgie. In the absence of the father, Grandma Lausch offers Augie and his brother, Simon, lessons in how to survive and succeed. She teaches
them first and foremost that respect is superior to love. After some time, Grandma Lausch suggests that the family place Georgie into a home for the impaired. The shock of losing Georgie, an embodiment of pure love, destabilizes the very foundation of the household. Grandma Lausch loses her tyrannical sway over the family, and, in an ironic twist, Simon contacts Grandma Lausch’s real sons, who arrange to have her placed in an institution.

As a high school student, Augie works for Einhorn, a wealthy man and a cripple with an excellent mind. He becomes something of a father-figure to Augie, and Augie eventually becomes more of a son to Einhorn than his real offspring, Arthur, who aspires to be a poet. In the Great Crash, Einhorn loses all of his property, but adapts to the loss with the vigorous spirit that characterized the times. Meanwhile, Augie successfully graduates from high school. As a graduation gift, Einhorn takes him to a brothel.

Augie takes courses at the city college, and eventually lands a sporting-goods sales job in the wealthy suburb of Evanston. He moves to the town, and a family called the Renlings take him under their wing. Mrs. Renling treats Augie like her own son, paying for his riding lessons and courses at Northwestern. She takes him along on a summer holiday, where he falls in love with the slender and pure Esther Fenchel. Esther, however, rejects him, even as her far more passionate older sister, Thea, professes her love. Thea leaves behind
a note for Augie telling him that he will see her again one day, and that she truly does love him. Shortly afterwards, Augie and Mrs. Renling return to Evanston.

In Evanston, the Renlings make a formal offer of adoption; if he accepts, Augie will become "Augie Renling" and one day inherit all of their money. Augie refuses, infuriating Mrs. Renling, and returns to Chicago. He takes a miserable job selling paint, but before long he runs into Joe Gorman, who offers him a job transporting illegal immigrants into the country. Augie only agrees to help Joe drive the car out East, but on the way a police officer recognizes the car and arrests Joe, leaving Augie stranded. He evades the police, and returns to Chicago by jumping freight trains and hitchhiking.

Upon his return, Augie discovers that everything has changed. The house has been sold, along with all of the furniture inside. His mother, now fully blind, tells him that Grandma Lausch died while he was away. Mournful, Augie goes to see Einhorn, from whom he learns that Simon borrowed money to put into a betting pool. He needed to become a rich man in order to marry his girlfriend. In the end, however, Cissy Flexner married their wealthier cousin, Five Properties. Crazed and violent, Simon spent a night in jail, and has now gone into hiding. When Simon reemerges from his shameful, self-imposed exile, Augie finds him fatter and less healthy-looking. Simon declares that he
plans to marry into the wealthy Magnus family, and soon thereafter weds Charlotte Magnus.

Meanwhile, Augie runs into his Mexican friend Padilla, now a student of math and physics at the University of Chicago. Padilla gives Augie a job stealing books, and he settles into a room at a student house near the university, befriending a girl named Mimi Villars. Mimi becomes pregnant with her boyfriend Frazer’s child, and Augie is the one who takes her to get an abortion. However, when the rumor about the abortion reaches the Magnus family, it destroys Augie’s chances with Lucy, Charlotte’s prettier younger cousin. Simon, enraged, states that he wants nothing more to do with his brother, and Augie is struck by the injustice of his situation. When Mimi recovers from her abortion and the infection caused by a previous surgery, she sets Augie up with a job as a union organizer. She also breaks off her relationship with Frazer and begins to date Einhorn’s son, Arthur.

One night, while Augie is making love to a woman in his room, a knock sounds on the door. He recognizes the voice immediately as Thea Fenchel’s, and answers the door. The two are reunited, and fall in love. Augie agrees to go with her to Mexico, where she plans to obtain an official divorce from her husband and train bald eagles to hunt for lizards. Augie begins to understand that Thea has a very extreme personality -- fiery, yet honest -- but loves her anyway. They travel to Mexico, settle in her family’s house, and slowly set about training the
young eagle they have adopted. Ultimately, however, the eagle proves to be a coward; he is afraid of hunting. Augie, feeling sorry for the creature, keeps trying to train him; but after falling on a rocky slope and seriously injuring himself, abandons the endeavor. Thea tearfully sends the eagle away to a zoo and nurses Augie back to health while beginning a collection of snakes.

Augie finds Thea’s hunting obsessions disturbing, so one night when a beautiful woman named Stella begs Augie to help her escape to Mexico City, he infuriates Thea by agreeing to take her halfway. Augie insists that he only wants to help the girl, but he ends up sleeping with Stella. Stella kisses him in the morning and thanks him, suggesting that he visit her someday. Augie returns to Thea, ready to lie, but she has already intuited what has happened. She ends the relationship then and there, and leaves that very morning.

Augie, in mourning, returns to Chicago to find that Simon has become a wealthy man. They agree to forget their past troubles, and Augie learns that his older brother has fallen in love with Renee, his mistress. Augie then takes a job as a research assistant for a stingy millionaire named Robey, who is attempting to write a book on the history of human happiness. Augie also begins to teach at a local school. His break-up with Thea inspires him to become more introspective about what it is that he wants, and he confides in his
friend Clem Tambow that there are "axial lines" in life that one must be able to live by. He reveals his dream of starting up a school, living with his mother and Georgie, marrying a good woman, and raising a family of his own. In other words, his vision is all about love. Clem, however, responds that Augie really wants to be "king."

The war begins, and Augie enlists. When he goes to New York to begin training, he decides to visit Stella. They fall in love and decide to marry. Through Stella, Augie befriends a man named Mintouchian, a divorce lawyer in New York, who provides him with worldly advice about adultery and love. Mintouchian himself is having an affair with Stella's friend.

Two days after the wedding, Augie ships out and begins spending all his time listening to tales and collecting stories. When his ship is torpedoed and sinks, Augie manages to survive along with one other man, Basteshaw, a fellow Chicagoan and the ship's carpenter. Basteshaw reveals himself to be a mad genius who seeks to unlock the secrets of creating life. Basteshaw decides that they ought to float their way to the Canary Islands, where he can continue his mad experiments in peace, and he ties Augie up when he attempts to signal a passing ship for help. During the night, Augie frees himself and debates whether or not to throw Basteshaw overboard. In the end, however, he decides to let him live. Finally, a British tanker comes by and rescues them. Augie's suspicions about Basteshaw's madness are
confirmed when he learns that they are nowhere near the Canary Islands.

After his rescue Augie returns to New York, and he and Stella move to Europe. In Paris, Stella finds work at an international film company. While Augie finishes his autobiography and manages Mintouchian’s black-market dealings in Europe, Simon and Charlotte come for a visit. Augie asks Simon what happened to Renee, and learns that Renee had falsely claimed to be pregnant in an attempt to sue Simon for his money. In the end, the lawsuit disappeared, along with Renee, and Simon thinks that she is most likely married by now.

Augie senses Simon’s disappointment about Charlotte’s inability to bear children. Augie himself suppresses his own disappointment in his marriage to Stella, his rootless life, and his inability to secure a real profession. He travels to Brugge with his housemaid Jacqueline, a ridiculous woman. When Jacqueline tells him her dreams of travelling to Mexico, Augie finds that he cannot help but laugh. The novel ends on this note of laughter, as Augie claims to be like Christopher Columbus: a man who has truly discovered what it is to be American.

The primary focus of *The Adventures of Augie March* is on the battle of determinism and independence and free choice, the hero’s struggle with the deterministic inheritance carried to extremes. The
hero is a modern picaro in quest of "a better fate." Robert R. Dutton compares Augie to the American folk hero: he comes from a poor family; he does not know the identity of his father; he refuses to be trapped by fine clothing, social position, or wealth; he admits that he gives his affections too easily (13) and that he has no grudge-bearing power (19). Bellow has endowed his narrator with the entire list of requisites to a folk hero of our time and culture. In Augie March, Bellow creates a character who is the antithesis of Joseph or Leventhal. Whereas Joseph and Asa are introspective, Augie is external; where they are enclosed, confined, Augie is adventurous, outward.

Augie's life story does not follow a clear cut pattern of life-journey. The hero, who is also the narrator, advances through a series of adventures which are relevant to a general life experience. Still, it is possible to discern a few stages in the hero's development of personality: his inner and outer conflict and revelation. At the beginning of the novel, Augie is presented as an individual without any tangible contours, a man without direction, a single purpose of life or any high ambitions. In search of a better fate and his human essence Augie engages into many kinds of activities which are varied in character: he works as a stock boy in a department store, sells trivia in a railway station, steals and sells textbooks, begins a university education, becomes a coal salesman, enters the underworld, takes care of dogs
for the social elite, falls in love twice, becomes a union organizer, trains an eagle to catch giant lizards in Mexico, joins the Merchant Marine, finally he marries and settles in Paris, where he participates in some form of shady international business. The young hero is as he says, "varietistic." Augie claims that the jobs he has ever undertaken "were supposed to lead to something better"(28), to a better fate. However, in the beginning, his understanding of "a better fate" is very vague and obscure. In the opening lines of Chapter six, Augie exclaims: "What did I, out of all this, want for myself? I couldn't have told you ... I was circling yet ... I know I longed very much, but I didn't understand for what" (84).

Augie does not lack the attractiveness of personality, either: he is affectionate, sensitive and unlike Henderson, is able to enjoy life with its colours and odours, to see the good in all people, take them for what they are. The hero takes to everything that arouses his enthusiasm. However, his fight with deterministic inheritance tends to become an obsession. Augie shuns all kinds of influence if that makes a threat to his free unique self (as he is convinced) and means "becoming part of somebody's world," "justification of other people's existence"(151). In this way, Augie offers resistance to his tenant's Grandma Lausch's efforts to make him a respectable white-collar citizen, refuses his employer's and benefactress Mrs. Renling's idea to adopt him even if it meant "inheriting dough" (151), his brother's
Simon’s urging him into marrying a millionaire. At this point of his life Augie does not have a unique self -- in fact, he is a faceless hero. Augie does not even know where he belongs as he is a friend to people of all kinds: grinds and criminals alike. His problem is that in search of “something better” he leads an uninvolved existence, does not get deeply involved in any experience for long. Augie is an objective observer of life unable to affirm his ideals in life situations that he has to face. Scattering those ideals, Augie fails to find something durable in the family, from his friends, outside the law, within the university, or on the road. In Bellow’s worldview, it is exactly human involvement, the coalescence of selflessness and selfhood which create human nobility. The hero confuses his having no commitments -- no money, profession or duties -- with freedom. It is through involvement that a person can realize his human potential, create his selfhood, define his "self." Evidently Bellow is saying that with or without enthusiasm, some work is to be done, some direction and function assumed. The critic Dutton is right when he points out that "there is no identity, no integrity, no better fate, no creation, of children or anything else, without a social commitment."6

After Augie’s beloved Thea decides to leave him, the hero has a certain revelation. He realizes that all his life he has had an inferiority complex, was "feeble and poor, some silly creature, laughing and harmless." Therefore, "to come out differently" (401), to conceal his
weakness, to mislead others, Augie played their games. In other words, he has never been himself. The hero makes an attempt at self-examination:

Now I had started, and this terrible investigation had to go on. If this was how I was, it was certainly not how I appeared but must be my secret. So if I wanted to please, it was in order to mislead or show everyone, wasn’t it, now? And this must be because I had an idea everyone was my better and had something I didn’t have. But what did people seem to me anyhow, something fantastic? I didn't want to be what they made of me but wanted to please them. Kindly explain! An independent fate, and love too – what a confusion! (401)

In this passage Augie has an insight into his problem. When this realization dawns on him, he makes up his mind to quit his pilgrimage. His biggest wish becomes to find the "axial lines" of life, which is the preoccupation of Bellow’s heroes. Augie’s great hope, he says, "is based upon getting to be still, so that the axial lines can be found. When striving stops, the truth comes as a gift – bounty, harmony, love, and so forth" (514). The "axial lines" could be discovered in the stability of a person’s life, his ability "to arrest the moment," get the most from every experience, foster harmony with himself. 7

Augie learns many truths about himself from other people. Likewise, his friend Clem Tambow tries to prove to Augie that he has "a
nobility syndrome" (434) and therefore, he cannot adjust to the reality situation. The hero, as he later finds out, is in search of Man with a capital letter. He discovers that man longs to be more than he is. But life is all there is, it depends on him how he will learn "to arrest the moment," "seize the day," pull himself together to find his niche in life, which would help him fulfil his human potential, as "a man's character is his fate" (3). Saul Bellow's philosophy of life is marked by his affirmation of the worthiness of human existence, a firm belief in man, his reason and inner strength to be his own redeemer.

Augie March is born into the world around 1915, the year of Bellow's own birth, into a Jewish family in a Polish neighbourhood of Chicago. Augie's father makes no appearance, and his absence is barely commented on. His mother, a sad and shadowy figure, is nearly blind. He has two brothers, one of them mentally handicapped. The family subsists, somewhat fraudulently, on welfare and on the contributions of a Russian-born boarder, Grandma Lausch -- no relation of theirs-- a woman with cultural pretensions. Young Augie fetches books for her from the library.

It is Grandma Lausch who in effect brings up the March boys. Grandma Lausch teaches Augie and Simon that respect should take precedence over love. Simon takes this advice to heart, since he himself has suffered from the pursuit of love. Ultimately, Simon chooses Charlotte Magnus, a woman he comes to admire for the
quality of her mind. Augie, on the other hand, chooses love, and repeatedly claims that he is going along with everything - including Simon's Machiavellian intentions - out of a desire to find true love. He views Mama and Georgie as symbols of perfect love, and places the transformative power of love at the centre of his own accidental birth. He also expresses to his friend, Clem Tambow, his dream of opening a foster-academy with his birth and adoptive families -- a dream that is, ultimately, about the desire for enduring love.

In the end, the question of whether it is Simon or Augie who has chosen the better path to happiness remains unclear. Both men fail to attain true happiness, as they continue to long for things that are missing. This indicates that perhaps a balance between love and respect is preferable to a focus on one or the other. When her fondest hope is disappointed -- that one of them will turn out to be a genius whose career she can then manage -- she sets her sights on turning them into good clerks. She is dismayed when they grow up "common and rude" (58).

Like most boys in the neighbourhood, Augie commits petty crimes. But his first organized heist leaves him so miserable that he drops out of the gang. Looking back on this childhood from the perspective of his mid-thirties, when he commits his story to paper, Augie wonders what effect it had on him to grow up not in "shepherd-Sicily" but in the midst of "deep city vexation" (84). He need not have worried. The strongest
parts of the book of his life grow out of an intense reliving of his childhood, a childhood rich in spectacle and social experience, of a kind that few American children today enjoy.

As a young man in the Depression years, Augie continues to flirt with crime. From an expert he learns the art of stealing books, which he then sells to students at the University of Chicago. But his heart remains pure, more or less. Like many students, he is able to rationalize the theft of books as a benign variety of larceny.

There are also good influences on Augie, among them the Einhorns, who employ him to do "unspecified work of a mixed character" (65). The fatherly William Einhorn presents Augie with a slightly spoiled set of the Harvard Classics, which he keeps in a crate under his bed and dips into. Later he will act as a research assistant to a well-to-do amateur scholar. Thus, although he never goes to college, by one means or another his adventures in reading continue. And the reading he does is serious, even by University of Chicago standards: Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Weber, Tocqueville, Ranke, Burckhardt, to say nothing of the Greeks and Romans and the Church Fathers.

Augie’s elder brother Simon is a larger-than-life man of appetite. Simon pinpoints Augie’s reading as the chief obstacle to his plan that Augie should marry a rich girl, go to law school at night, and become his partner in the coal business. In obedience to Simon, Augie for a while lives a double life, working in the coalyard by day, then
dressing up and venturing forth to hobnob with the wealthy. During his
time under Simon's wing, Augie has a chance to taste the good life,
and in particular the silky warmth of expensive hotels. "I didn't want to
be just borne down by the grandeur of it," he writes:

But in this modern power of luxury, with its battalions of
service workers and engineers, it's the things themselves, the
products that are distinguished, and the individual man isn't
nearly equal to their great sum. Finally they [the
appurtenances of the hotel] are what becomes great -- the
multitude of baths with never-failing hot water, the enormous
air-conditioning units and the elaborate machinery. No
opposing greatness is allowed, and the disturbing person is
the one who won't serve by using or denies by not wishing to
enjoy. (238)

Augie is clear-sighted enough to see that whoever denies the
power of the great American hotel simply marginalizes himself, no
matter how many authorities from the Harvard Classics he can cite in
his support. As Coetzee observes, "The Adventures of Augie March
is not the summing-up of a life but a mid-term report. By the end of the
report Augie is still not sure whether he is for or against the hotel, for or
against the American dream"\textsuperscript{8}. "But then how does anybody form a
decision to be against and persist against? When does he choose and
when is he chosen instead?" (238). A drifter does not choose his fate,
he drifts into it. Augie is in danger of being a drifter: a personable young man whose lifestyle rich women are all too eager to subsidize. However, whatever perils befall him Augie emerges safe and sound.

By conviction Augie is a philosophical idealist, even a radical idealist, to whom the world is a complex of interlocking ideas-of-the-world, millions of them, as many as there are human minds. We try to advance our own idea, each of us, by recruiting other people to play a role in it. Augie’s guiding rule, developed over the course of half a lifetime, is to resist being recruited into other people’s ideas. As for his own world model, this embodies a principle of simplification. The modern world, in his view, overburdens us with its bad infinity:

... there’s too much of everything of this kind, that’s come home to me, too much history and culture to keep track of, too many details, too much news, too much example, too much influence, too many guys who tell you to be as they are, and all this hugeness, abundance, turbulence, Niagara Falls torrent. Which who is supposed to interpret? Me? (455)

What form does simplifying, as a response to the challenge of his times, take in his own life? First, "become what I am" (485); second, buy some land, get married, settle down, teach school, do home carpentry, and learn to fix the car.

Throughout the novel, Augie encounters Machiavellian-style
individuals who strategically exercise their energy, wit, and influence, and look to the material world for an understanding of their own. The original title for the book, in fact, was *Life among the Machiavellians*. From early childhood, Augie lives under the aegis of Grandma Lausch, and as he grows older his brother Simon becomes a Machiavellian figure in his own right. Additionally, the characters of Einhorn, Mrs. Renling, Joe Gorman, Thea Fenchel, Mintouchian, and Basteshaw all seek to influence Augie in some way. Augie subsequently proves to be highly susceptible to human influences. At the same time, however, because -- as Einhorn points out -- Augie is naturally driven by "opposition," Augie rejects each of these Machiavellian influences and clings instead to the idea of love, hoping to reach what he feels sure will be a special fate. In other words, there is something "pure" about Augie as a character. It may be his spirit of idealism, or it may be his transcendental faith in love, which finds so little encouragement in his world.
REFERENCES


4. On three occasions he describes himself as "larky," and elsewhere uses the image: "... the lark, who doesn't need to spit or clear his throat, goes up" (303).


