

## Saul Bellow and Governor Thompson

Three weeks ago, on August 14, former Illinois Gov. James R. Thompson died at the age of 84. He had been the longest-serving governor of the state, from 1977 to 1991, and as I recall made a bid for the presidency in a primary campaign that never got off the ground. When Gov. J.B. Pritzker, Illinois's current executive, had his coronavirus briefing on Aug. 19, he began with a brief eulogy of his predecessor and called him "a titan of Illinois politics." At the end of his remarks, he asked for a moment of silence.

I could not bring myself to enter into the reverential moment the governor was asking for. A Chicago Democrat, I never voted for Thompson, a Republican, and indeed I heartily disliked him. I have grounds for thinking that Saul Bellow, who died in 2005, would have had a similar reaction.

*More Die of Heartbreak*, one of his last novels, was published in 1987 and is set in an unidentified Midwestern city that is obviously a carbon copy of Chicago. I wrote a book review of the novel after it was published, and I won't repeat the impressions I offered back then. (The review appeared in the *Chicago Reader* and can be found elsewhere on this website.) What I want to do now is to look at a few elements of the novel and consider them in the context of everything that readers of Bellow have learned—from biographies and his published correspondence--since the book was published. In particular, I want to consider the role of "Gov. Stewart," the name of the fictitious governor in the novel who is obviously drawn from the life of Gov. Thompson and who still occupied the governor's mansion in Springfield, Il., when *More Die of Heartbreak* was published.

Thompson was a Northwestern University law professor when he was appointed by Richard Nixon as U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Illinois. He litigated corruption cases against top figures in the Cook County Democratic machine and also sent former governor Otto Kerner to prison for influence peddling. But his taste for celebrity reached an apogee when he conducted televised hearings after Cathleen Crowell Webb recanted claims that she had been raped by Gary Dotson. And that is the part of his legal career that makes its way into Bellow's novel.

### The Facts of the Case

In July 1977, Cathleen Crowell Webb, then 16, ended her working day at a restaurant in a shopping mall in Homewood, Il., a suburb south of Chicago. She claimed that while crossing the mall parking lot, she was accosted by three men who forced her into the back seat of a car. One of them, she said, raped her. She further claimed that the crude words scratched on her abdomen were produced by the rapist, whom she identified as Gary Dotson, a high school dropout and a product of the south-suburban Chicago working class. Persuaded of her account, and perhaps overly eager to bring in a conviction, law enforcement brought charges and sent Dotson to prison.

But the case took a surprising turn eight years later, in the spring of 1985. Now married, a mother of three, and a church-going Christian in the wholesome state of New Hampshire, Webb recanted her claim. There was no kidnapping in the Homewood parking lot. Nor was there any rape. She herself had scratched the crude letters on her stomach that later drew so much attention during the Thompson hearing. The forensic evidence of rape presented at the trial actually derived from sexual relations with a boyfriend. Fearful of becoming pregnant, Webb contrived the rape story as a cover. Or so she now said, in 1985. The courts and prosecutors, presumably unwilling to admit the possibility of error, doubted the truthfulness of her fresh description and kept Dotson in prison. But as publicity built over the the spring, Gov. Thompson scheduled hearings before the Prisoner Review Board in Chicago for the first weekend in May. His ostensible goal was to “investigate” the story, though whether a sitting governor should even attend, much less schedule and supervise, a parole board hearing was in doubt. The procedure involved titillating testimony and pictorial evidence projected on a screen that was carried into the homes of millions. In the hearings, Thompson asks detailed questions of forensic experts and of a man who had had an affair with Webb at the time she originally claimed to have been raped. Questions that many people would find embarrassing to ask, answer, or even to listen to were freely bruited about at the hearing. Intimate articles of women’s wear were examined, and blood and various types of seminal stains were discussed at length. Images of panties were displayed by a projector and enlarged for the edification of reporters and others in attendance and for those watching on TV—for the hearings were broadcast, probably all over the country, and possible outside the U.S. as well. Years later, examining the affair, instructors at Northwestern University Law School called the production an “international media spectacle.”

Still, the Review Board rejected Dotson’s appeal: Members doubted the veracity of Webb’s new version of the story. But years later, legal experts began poking gaping holes in the prosecution’s case. It was not until 1989, after spending more than a decade in prison, that fresh evidence cleared Dotson of a crime that was never committed. He was to be one of the first beneficiaries of DNA testing, which proved conclusively that he was innocent of all charges. Webb’s claim in 1985 that she had invented the story was the truth after all. She herself died of breast cancer in 2008 at the age of 46.

#### The Novel: *More Die of Heartbreak*

Bellow borrowed this material for a critical scene in his novel. The story centers on the friendship between Kenneth Trachtenberg and Benn Crader, his uncle and a world-renowned botanist teaching and conducting research at an unnamed university. Kenneth and Uncle Benn are attending the hearings because they plan to confront a relative who is expected to be in attendance: There is a serious legal dispute that needs to be settled. Gov. Stewart, the stand-in for Thompson, is described by the narrator, Kenneth, as “a loosely massive man. In his slackness there were highly organized tensions, and I would have said that he was a dangerous person, a mean person.” That much certainly seems to be true of Thompson, who was as big as a football player and a rough opponent in court. “He made use of his size,” Kenneth notes in the hearing. “A big man, his face corpulent, he bore down hard on the evidence, his questions were exact.

And yet he was soft in the face, too. . . a hint that perhaps the corruption was not all on the side of the defendants.”

After the hearings had ended, Uncle Benn remarks to Kenneth, “I hadn’t realized it was going to be so ferocious, all this obscenity.” “Well,” Kenneth responds, “it’s all these high-placed persons, the guys on the top of the ladder, putting in their far share for the erotic recreations of the country.”

As it turns out, Bellow had personal grounds for disliking Gov. Thompson. The latter prosecuted his older brother Samuel Bellows, sent him to jail for sixty days, and levied a heavy fine. The older Bellow was charged with receiving kickbacks from pharmacies that enjoyed business from the nursing homes that he helped manage. This was in 1976, the year that Bellow received the Nobel Prize for literature. Bellow offered a cryptic remark about this years later in an interview that he granted to the Romanian writer Norman Manea. The conversation took place in 1999 but wasn’t published until 2007, when the quarterly *Salmagundi* gave it a remarkable eighty pages. Manea introduces the subject of Samuel Bellows’s prison term and says that Bellow played a role in his release. Bellow denies this, adding that “I can’t go into the details of this, but it really wasn’t his fault; it was somebody else in the family for whom he was covering. He was not guilty himself, he just accepted the charge.”

Bellow treats the matter humorously in a letter to his friend John Auerbach dated Oct. 17, 1980. He was to receive an award he evidently considered unimportant from the Illinois Arts Council, and he tried to dodge the burden of traveling to Danville, a small town south of Chicago, to accept it. It was to have been given by no less an authority than Gov. Thompson. “For this reason alone the occasion began to seem worthwhile, enjoyable, splendid,” Bellow wrote. “I would whisper something outrageous to the Governor as he pinned on the medal.” Bellow adds another anecdote: He and the governor found themselves sharing a box seat for a performance at Lyric Opera in Chicago. Thompson, Bellow claims, ducked out quickly after the first act to avoid any contact.

But in *More Die of Heartbreak*, his treatment of the Gary Dotson hearing was deadly serious. I was enrolled in the spring of 1985 in a seminar at the University of Chicago that Bellow taught with his friend Allan Bloom. As I recall, we met for ninety minutes at 2 p.m., after our two instructors had lunched on campus. They entered the room that afternoon and started the class by asking us in a somewhat incredulous tone if any of us had watched the Thompson hearings over the weekend. I had not myself, and Bellow went on to describe in his measured style what he thought of them. He noted that Thompson had no standing on a parole hearing—governors never attend them—and that it may not strictly speaking have been a parole hearing at all. It was rather a sort of jerry-built procedure that was meant to mimic the appearance of such a hearing, with perhaps other members of the parole board in attendance to lend legitimacy to the business.

In the novel, Bellow makes it clear that his reaction goes beyond mere disgust at the spectacle he saw on TV—he identifies the hearings as evidence “of the disintegration of human functions.” A few pages earlier, he writes that “Crime, Punishment, Authority were satirized at

the hearing. Plus punishment. Plus Truth.” Even Cathleen Crowell Webb, renamed Danae Cusper, is complicit in this charade, according to Bellow. After undergoing a religious conversion, she was returning to the Christian fold, “rebuilding her Christian chastity and publicly reconstituting her virginity.” It seems that Bellow agreed with the prosecutors and the governor that Webb’s new testimony should be rejected. But “public interests” of Webb and the governor oddly corresponded nonetheless.

Unlike the hearings that were actually conducted, Sickle, the stand-in for Gary Dotson, is released from prison. “The governor had to reckon carefully with the religious sentiments of the public,” Kenneth ruminates, “taking account that her penitence at bearing false witness could not be dismissed. The public like penitence.” So at the end, “Sickle would be free. Enjoy the freedom of the city, like anybody else, like you, like me.” This is the central change Bellow makes in the story—the appeal is rebuffed, which seems to intensify the scale of Thompson’s action. I should add that introducing the subject of the governor and Gary Dotson is far from arbitrary or a pet topic. The material fits in well with the theme of sexual madness that Bellow felt was overtaking the western world.

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