

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Neurology and the Neurologist in Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*

Matthew S. Robbins, MD<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Neurology, Montefiore Headache Center, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY

#### ABSTRACT

The author Saul Bellow was well known for the memorable characters in his widely acclaimed novels, which were often based on identifiable figures in his life. His final novel *Ravelstein* chronicled the relationship between a narrator named Chick and his close friend, Abe Ravelstein. Ravelstein and Chick were widely believed to be based on Bellow's friend, the philosopher Allan Bloom, and Bellow himself. The novel took an introspective turn after the death of Ravelstein, where Chick describes his illness that started with ciguatera intoxication from red snapper in Saint Martin, followed by his hospitalization in Boston where he developed a severe encephalopathy. He sees the neurologist Dr. Bakst as a quirky hero who figured prominently in his recovery. The text provides a unique, first person account of acute neurological illness from the voice of one of the great novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### INTRODUCTION

Saul Bellow (1915-2005) was an acclaimed Canadian born, Chicago raised author who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize in literature (Gussow & McGrath, 2005). His novels were well known for their larger-than-life protagonists, who undertook poignant and comical navigations of blue and white-collar environments, and perpetually struggled for meaning.

*Ravelstein* was Saul Bellow's final novel, first published in 2000 (Saul Bellow, 2015). The subject of the text, Abe Ravelstein, was widely believed to be based on Saul Bellow's good friend, the philosopher Allan Bloom. The novel was written in the first person through a narrator named Chick, a novelist who was assumed to be Bellow himself. The plot chronicles the longstanding friendship between Chick and Ravelstein, a wealthy literary academic who like Bloom (Max, 2000) was afflicted with Guillain Barre syndrome and AIDS, with the focus on Ravelstein's final years.

The relevant text comes towards the end of the novel after Ravelstein himself dies, presumably from complications related to AIDS. Prior to embarking on a new teaching position in Boston, Chick and his wife Rosamund take a vacation to the island of Saint Martin in the Caribbean to overcome "an overload of depression" after Ravelstein's death.

#### CASE DESCRIPTION

At this point in the novel Chick describes himself as elderly and has atrial fibrillation. Within days of their arrival on Saint Martin, Chick and Rosamund dine at a local restaurant where Chick eats the dish recommended by the waiter, red snapper served cold with mayonnaise. Chick noted his fish was partially raw. Shortly thereafter he complains of severe fatigue and on the following day a severe aversion to food and drink. He then describes numbness in the feet, irritability, and periods where he

was repeating himself. These symptoms seemed to continue on for days and he was ultimately convinced to see a physician who misdiagnosed him with dengue fever and prescribed a “quinine mixture.” That very night he fainted in the bathroom, and an ambulance was called. However, Chick refused it, skeptical of “colonial medicine.”

Given Chick’s deteriorating health, he and Rosamund flew back immediately to their home in Boston. However, upon their first night of arriving back home an ambulance was called, took them to the emergency department of a Boston hospital, and he was immediately placed on oxygen via face mask. He was admitted to a cardiac intensive care unit where he was diagnosed with heart failure, and was then transferred to a pulmonary intensive care unit. He was intubated and later told he had bilateral pneumonia. He describes being “heavily dosed with Verset [sic].” During this period he describes that “all appearances (the external world) were cancelled...my head was full of delusions, hallucinations, cockeyed causes and effects.” However, he remembered being turned by staff and chest physiotherapy. After extubation he describes a delusion where he believed he was in New Hampshire at his family home, climbed over the bedrail, and fell on his back. He was on anticoagulation, and afterwards was sent for a CT scan and placed in a vest restraint. He describes further vivid delusions and hallucinations.

Ultimately he improved and was transferred out of intensive care to “the floor.” At this time he describes an evaluation by the neurology resident, followed the same night by Dr. Bakst, the chief neurologist. He recalls a series of bedside evaluations, including “sticking pins into my face” and clock drawing. Dr. Bakst diagnoses Chick with ciguatera toxin poisoning after consulting with an Australian expert, though some of his colleagues were apparently not in agreement. Dr. Bakst is described as a well-respected doctor, attentive to his patients and available even at odd hours. Chick was quizzed with various cognitive tasks and was under the impression that the exercises in clock drawing, calculation, and memory were an effort to accelerate his overall recovery. He considered Dr. Bakst a “crack diagnostician,” but because his diagnosis was questioned by colleagues, “he sent me to every corner of the hospital for CAT SCANS, MRIs and dozens of other esoteric examinations...I was able, but only up to a point, to separate his professional concerns from his other motives.” Later in the hospital course Dr. Bakst adopted a more abrupt style to demand more accurate answers to his questions, and Chick states “it is possible that Dr. Bakst saved me. I believe I owe my life to him and of course to Rosamund.”

## **DISCUSSION**

The plot of Chick’s medical illness appeared to be largely autobiographical, as Bellow himself recounted parts of his own story in a first person account (Saul Bellow, 1997) that later became incorporated verbatim into the text of *Ravelstein*. He wrote that his hospitalization was at Boston University Medical Center, and at the time he was 79 years old (Saul Bellow & Taylor, 2010).

Ciguatera is the most common marine poisoning in the Caribbean Sea and is often associated with snapper, (Isbister & Kiernan, 2005) the offending fish Chick consumed. Though he remarked on the undercooked nature and poor taste of the snapper, contaminated fish do not typically appear, smell or taste differently than uncontaminated fish and remain stable with cooking (Isbister & Kiernan, 2005). The toxicity is typically gastrointestinal and neurological, with most neurological symptoms confined to the peripheral nervous system. These may include myalgias, paresthesias, weakness, and cold allodynia (Isbister & Kiernan, 2005). Central nervous system symptoms such as hallucinations, dyscoordination, depression, and nightmares are more likely to occur in association with ciguatera intoxication from fish in the Indian Ocean, where contamination with even higher toxin levels may be present (Lewis, 2001). It is therefore plausible to hypothesize that Chick’s encephalopathy with hallucinations may not have

been specific to his ciguatera intoxication, but perhaps instead attributed to toxic-metabolic causes, such as severe multilobar pneumonia and volume depletion compounded by heart failure.

Bellow elevates the neurologist Dr. Bakst in his portion of his novel as an expert diagnostician, and despite seemingly no specific treatment offered he credits him heavily with his recovery. Confidence in an underlying diagnosis and his pursuit to rule out other neurological causes as questioned by his colleagues seemed to resonate with Bellow. Chick also seemed to embrace the cognitive aspects of recovery as much as the physical aspects, as emphasized by his recounting of the repeated efforts by Dr. Bakst for Chick to improve his responses to cognitive tasks.

Bellow has had physicians figure prominently into his novels previously. In his novella *Seize the Day*, (Saul Bellow, 1957) the father of the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm, Dr. Adler, was a well-regarded physician on the Upper West Side of Manhattan who was frustrated and disappointed with the professional and personal failures of his son. His lack of empathy was a touchstone for the text, as Tommy resented his father for behaving towards him “as he had formerly done toward his patients... Couldn’t he see – couldn’t he feel?” *Seize the Day* was studied in the “Medicine and Literature” elective at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, where Dr. Burr highlights that Dr. Adler is “a physician who can diagnose a heart attack but not the heart sickness of his own son.” (S. Bellow, 2003)

It is likely that Bellow appreciated the humanity in medicine, praising Dr. Bakst and devaluing Dr. Adler. Ironically, in a letter to his friend Eugene Kennedy while in Saint Martin before he fell ill, he wrote of his appreciation for Oliver Sacks: (Saul Bellow & Taylor, 2010) “I recommend his book *Awakenings*, and the Parkinsonian case-histories in it... his account of festination and catatonia went straight to that waiting throbbing target, my heart. The blue of the Caribbean I see from this open door is my form of El Dopa. *Festination!* I had a bad case of it.”

The relatively equal time given in *Ravelstein* by Bellow to describing both his own dramatic medical events as well as his appreciation of the treating physician is unique. This balanced description may be in part due to his transformation of autobiographical events into a fictional novel, an approach which has been undertaken previously (Iniesta, 2010) but without such an emphasis on the quirks and intrigue of the physician. This particular emphasis makes the more clinical vignette that much more compelling, in contrast to more traditional case reports in the medical literature which focus on the clinical and scientific detail but not the humanity of the patient and physician experience.

Though the ciguatera intoxication was severe, the subsequent encephalopathy seemed to have a more profound effect on Bellow. He maintained a degree of insight and awareness during the peak of his illness, and using *Ravelstein* as a vehicle was able to describe the events in vivid detail, an uncommon perspective for the fluctuating hospital-acquired encephalopathies neurologists encounter so commonly. Perhaps a strong cognitive reserve from high intellect, level of education, and continued literary activity well into his later years provided an unusual level of retained memory and insight into his encephalopathy. “Bellow’s cause was actuality, the whole mess of it. His ideal was wakefulness.” (Wieseltier, 2010)

**Corresponding Author:** Matthew S Robbins, MD ([marobbin@montefiore.org](mailto:marobbin@montefiore.org))

**Author Contributions:** Dr. Robbins conceived and designed the study, acquired, analyzed and interpreted the data, drafted, revised and gave final approval to the manuscript.

**Disclosures:** Dr. Robbins serves on the editorial board for *Headache*, and is a section editor for *Current Pain and Headache Reports*. He has received book royalties from Wiley. He has served as a site principal investigator for a clinical trial by eNeura.

**Keywords:** history of neurology, toxicology, delirium, ciguatera, Saul Bellow

## REFERENCES

- Bellow, S. (1957). *Seize the day*. London,: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Bellow, S. (1997, April 20, 1997). At The Mercy of Strangers. *Chicago Tribune*.
- Bellow, S. (2003). Seize the Day [excerpt]. *Acad Med*, 78(7), 720; discussion 721.
- Bellow, S. (2015). *Ravelstein*. New York City: Penguin Books.
- Bellow, S., & Taylor, B. (2010). *Saul Bellow: letters*. New York: Viking.
- Gussow, M., & McGrath, C. (2005, April 6, 2005). Saul Bellow, Who Breathed Life Into American Novel, Dies at 89. *New York Times*.
- Iniesta, I. (2010). [Neurology and literature]. *Neurologia*, 25(8), 507-514.
- Isbister, G. K., & Kiernan, M. C. (2005). Neurotoxic marine poisoning. *Lancet Neurol*, 4(4), 219-228. doi:10.1016/S1474-4422(05)70041-7
- Lewis, R. J. (2001). The changing face of ciguatera. *Toxicon*, 39(1), 97-106.
- Max, D. T. (2000, April 16, 2000). With Friends Like Saul Bellow. *New York Times Magazine*.
- Wieseltier, L. (2010, November 18, 2010). Saul Bellow's Quest for the Vernacular Sublime. *New York Times*.