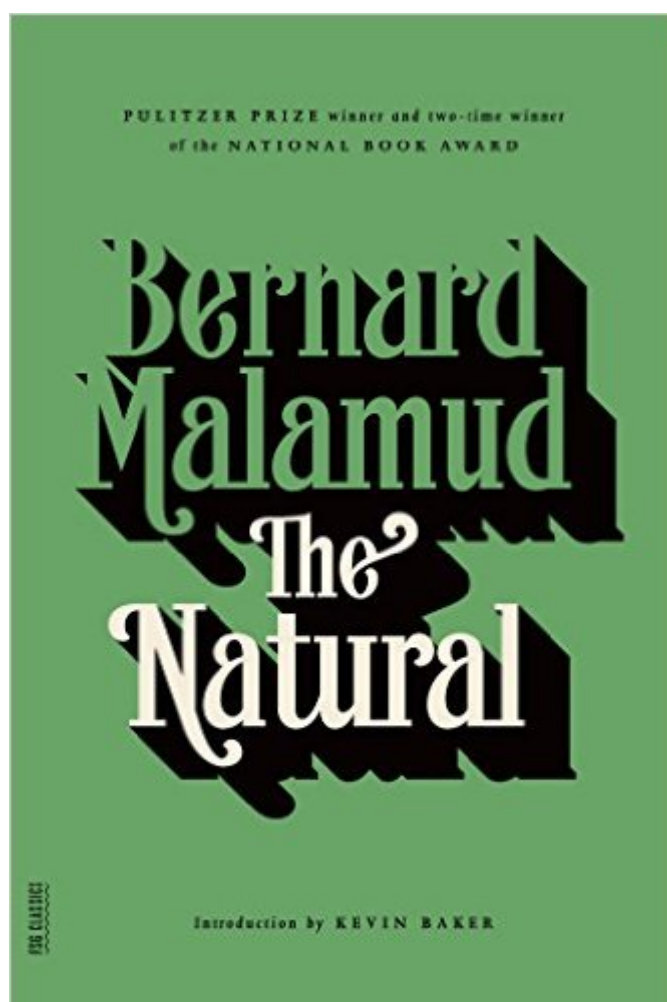


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The Natural



Synopsis

The classical novel (and basis for the acclaimed film) now in a new edition Introduction by Kevin Baker The Natural, Bernard Malamud's first novel, published in 1952, is also the first—and some would say still the best—novel ever written about baseball. In it Malamud, usually appreciated for his unerring portrayals of postwar Jewish life, took on very different material—the story of a superbly gifted "natural" at play in the fields of the old daylight baseball era—and invested it with the hardscrabble poetry, at once grand and altogether believable, that runs through all his best work. Four decades later, Alfred Kazin's comment still holds true: "Malamud has done something which—now that he has done it!—looks as if we have been waiting for it all our lives. He has really raised the whole passion and craziness and fanaticism of baseball as a popular spectacle to its ordained place in mythology."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In his 1952 novel, Bernard Malamud comments on the role of the hero in the modern world. In order to do so, he parallels Roy, the baseball natural and protagonist, with Percival the Arthurian knight. Roy is on a quest to join the game of baseball at the beginning of the novel. His first failure comes when he answers Harriet Bird's question wrong. When asked what he wants to become as a ballplayer, Roy can think of nothing more than personal gain. By inserting this in his book Malamud implies that many stars are in the game only for themselves. This refers to Percival asking the Fisher King the wrong question and being turned away. After a lapse of about fifteen years, Roy

tries again to make it big in the pros. He joins a team called the New York Knights, an obvious relation to Arthurian legend, with the team coach Pop Fisher. Pop not only serves as a parent figure for Roy but he also resembles the Fisher King in the tale of Percival. Roy, who started out as a pitcher and is now a slugger, a reference to Babe Ruth, has made his own bat and dubbed it "Wonderboy". Roy's hitting is unbelievable while using this bat and he quickly becomes the league slugger. Percival, much like Roy, created his own lance with which to do battle. As Roy continues to increase in popularity, he is confronted with a wish from a dying lad at a hospital. His father asks Roy to hit a home run for his son because that is the only way his son will survive. Roy accepts this challenge and does in fact knock one out of the park for the boy and in doing so saving him. This alludes to Babe Ruth hitting a home run for the same reason. Malamud inserts this into his novel to show that even though most ballplayers are playing for personal gain, some also try to give back to the supporters.

Like most Americans born after 1970, I was introduced to "The Natural" as a movie first. I saw it in the theater on a Sunday afternoon when I was 10 years old and was just plain mesmerized. Who wouldn't love that ending? Roy Hobbs, against all odds, hits that home run off the light tower, rounds the bases in a cascade of fireworks, wins back the love of his childhood girlfriend and the son he never knew he had, and strikes back against all those evil people who tried to ruin him. Plus, Randy Newman's score. To a 10 year-old boy, you could not improve on "The Natural" the movie. A few weeks later I was at an older cousin's apartment in Brooklyn Heights and saw that he had an old paperback copy of "The Natural" the novel. The paperback had a different cover back then - an unraveled baseball with an eye peering out through the seams. Pretty creepy! I "borrowed" the book (to this day, I've never given it back -- sorry, Cousin Stevie). Then, I read it. Man, that ending. Good grief! That wasn't how the movie ended! At age 10, this was most definitely the most depressing thing I'd ever read (bear in mind that my school curriculum steered us well clear of "Old Yeller"). So here I am now, almost 40. The movie version of "The Natural" fit America in the 1980s - saccharine, improbable, false. The book, which came out in the early '50s, was written for a more somber post-war America only just starting to fall in love with fast cars and jet planes. But, while "The Natural" fit the national mood quite well back in 1952, it fits the national mood now equally well.

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