



SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

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Bernard Malamud

Bernard Malamud was a writer known for his short stories and novels. He received his Scholastic Art & Writing Award in 1932 at the age of 18 for this essay.

Life—From Behind a Counter

By BERNARD MALAMUD

Oftentimes, in deep sincerity, a friend will say to me, “I’ll bet you see a great many queer things and people while working as a clerk in your father’s store.”

“Mmm—yes!” (I will consider)—“But (I will think), you don’t know the half of it.”

Only recently have I begun to appreciate fully the strange sights that I have seen and the queer things that I have heard in my four years as a grocery clerk in my father’s store. Only recently have I become familiar with something which I knew existed, something that I read about in books and papers...laughable...sometimes tragic...hard...don’t laugh—it is life!

“There is nothing new under the sun,” say some people, and then they proceed to become very much bored with the world. If only they could see, and hear, their fellow human beings day after day, they might be able, in time, to enrich the world with new and beautiful ideas. Perhaps they might even be able to answer the eternal question, Why?—why Wordsworth loved the flowers and the meadows; why Ham-let in, emotional anguish, cried, “Vengeance!”; why Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise; why Beethoven cre-ated such passionate music, why people cry—and many other Why’s.

By observing those with whom I have come in contact, I have learned to answer a few of these Why’s.

Through the old Swedish lady from the Home, who speaks in slow, tremulous tones, and says, “De drooble iss ven you get ouldt, you ken’t eat so much,” and the thin, pinched, little girl from across the street, who smiles and asks, “My mother says will you let her have a bottle of milk and a loaf of bread, and she’ll pay you tomorrow?”, I have become familiar with what people are thinking about, and have found to my own amazement that many can be satisfied with so little, while others are never happy. I have heard questions of wise men answered by children. I have



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seen the veneer scraped off life, exposing its plain, dull surface. Somehow, I have become less selfish, and more satisfied with my lot.

I bless the day my education in what I call “common people’s thought and philosophy” started. While walking past my father’s store on my way home from grammar school, I chanced to look into the window and noticed a sign, “Boy Wanted.” This mystified me. I entered and inquired of him why he wished to hire a boy. He explained that he wanted someone to assist the clerk for a few hours every day so that he could go upstairs and take a nap for an hour or so. He said that the long hours tired him, and he wanted to sleep a little during the afternoon. All this seemed funny to me. I couldn’t imagine this playground for my idle moments, and this means of satisfying an abnormal craving for round chocolate crackers, as a place where a man grew tired. Therefore, having reached that magnificent age, the year “one” of my teens, and feeling fully capable and qualified, I asked for the job. My father hesitated at first. He had an idea that his son, by some wicked trick of fate, might come to like this work, and decide to continue it, thus forgetting college. However, I argued that my salary could be put away for my college education. This sounded like a good idea to him and he consented. Then it was that I started to learn things!

My first awakening—and with it knowledge that other persons than teachers in school could cause me to blush—came early one Saturday evening. A tall woman entered, richly dressed in furs. To my question of “Yes, please?” which was my father’s idea of opening a conversation, she asked for some cheese. I saw her looking at the cheese which was still on the slicing machine, and, knowing that it was a popular brand that sold well, I took it for granted that that was what she wanted. Then I started to cut until I had the required amount. The lady watched me as I weighed and wrapped it. After that she looked me over and asked slowly and nonchalantly, “Is that for me, young man?” I said that it was. “Well,” she said, as calm as ever, “I want Swiss cheese—with the holes.” I attempted to argue, saying that she gave me the impression that she wanted the cheese that I had just sliced. At first she looked at me through sleepy eyes. Then, gradually, they opened wide and flashed fire. She gasped deeply and then let me have it. She gave me a tongue-lashing that drove the blood swiftly to my face. She heaved, rocked, tossed, and creaked—like a ship on the high seas. In vain did I try to protest, to explain—nothing doing! My father refused to come to my aid. He stayed where he was and attended to another customer. Finally, with a very well enunciated “Stupid!”, she strode haughtily out of the store, as I sighed in deep relief. A little later my father took me aside and said, “My son, now you have learned the business man’s first law. The customer is always right.”



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I learned the first law of business that night, but somehow I felt that I had learned something else.

During the ensuing months I saw a man publicly “bawled out” by his wife in the store, tasted every food that I could lay my hands on, and learned how to add swiftly. I also learned how to say “What else?” (che altro), “Nothing else” (mentre altro), and “Thank you” (grazie), in Italian, from a watchman in the coalyards, and a cuss word in Swedish from the milkman. I listened to the Scotch truck-driver’s tale of “Paul on the Road to Damascus.” The clerk taught me how to whistle through my teeth. I discovered that poor people can’t always pay their bills and that babies drink Grade A milk. Later, I learned how to save paper bags by using wrapping paper (which was cheaper) and twine. After a few lessons I could hold a broom correctly. Next, I found that it was possible to cut butter in the back of the store and keep an eye on kids near the loose crackers. After a while I found a method which made stutterers talk faster, and I could decipher baby talk. In short, I was acquiring a first-hand knowledge of what every good grocery clerk knows.

Samuel Johnson learned that it was good to be honest from his mother; a thick volume elaborating on the subject didn’t teach him anything new. I learned that it was good to be honest from my parents, but experience with dishonest people and the knowledge of the consequences of their dishonesty taught me more than a thousand books.

One evening I decided to step outside for the latest paper. I cast off my apron and walked into the street. As I was entering the candy and stationery store, two young men, with one of whom I was acquainted, passed me. I said, “Hello!” and he smiled back. I entered the store, paid for my paper, and then, suddenly, something in me cried for a chocolate soda. I drew a ten-cent piece from my pocket and proceeded to indulge. When I re-entered our store, the place was in an uproar. The clerk pathetically gazed first at his two turned-out, empty pockets, then at the empty cash register. My father was speaking hurriedly into the telephone. He was pale and nervous. He had just been held up and was ‘phoning police headquarters.

In a few minutes three detectives and an officer arrived and proceeded to question everyone in sight. They asked me only a few questions, but I was happy because I was important enough to be questioned. My father said that two young fellows had entered the store at a time when it was empty of customers, and asked for some pickles. He bent over to get them (they were in a barrel beneath the counter). When he rose he was looking into the nozzle of a cold, blue automatic. The clerk and he were forced into the back of the store and locked in after their pockets had been



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emptied. The robbers then helped themselves to the contents of the register and disappeared. After that my father and the clerk had succeeded in breaking down the door and calling the police.

I was profoundly impressed by the series of events that night. They certainly had been thrilling! And I had missed being among those held up by five minutes!

However, “tempus fugit.” The hold-up and the robbers were forgotten. In their place came the stock crash and then the gloomy depression. My father had other things to worry about now, for he had just discovered that during hard times people actually subsist on less.

One day, about a month after the first news of the crash, the door opened and in were pushed two boys hand-cuffed to detectives. They had just been caught in the act of holding up a butcher. The detective “figured” that they were the ones who had held up my father. When I saw them, I almost sank to the floor. They were the boys whom I greeted on the night of the robbery. My father was roused from his afternoon sleep to identify them. He did—thus they were charged with an additional crime.

A few days before the trial an attractive looking, middle-aged couple entered and asked to have a few words with my father. They were the parents of the younger of the two boys and had come to ask him to be lenient. They said that their son had fallen into bad company and had thus started on his career of robbery. They asked my father to drop the charge against him, since it was his first offense. They said that the butcher had dropped the charge and if my father would do the same, their son would be paroled to them. I guess my father thought of my younger brother and me—anyway, he dropped the charge. The boy was paroled and went to work. About a year later he came into the store and blushing introduced himself. He showed my father his bank book. He said that he was work-ing hard and would soon be married. He thanked my father for giving him a chance and said that now he realized what happiness was. Thus I learned a lesson from someone else’s experience—just another bit of life.

Nothing exciting ever happens now. The depression is still going strong...I helped the colored porter write a love letter to his “girl friend”...Meyer the bread man’s daughter died from infantile paralysis—on her birthday, too. It felt so funny to see his red, swollen eyes. Bottled milk came down 50 per cent...People use only sliced bread now, they seem to have forgotten how to use a bread knife...People come and go...Mrs Smith has diabetes - she eats only bacon and cream cheese - no sugar...Mr. Thompson is unemployed...His wife still dresses lavishly...Mrs. Mur-



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phy's eldest son was arrested...Her young-est is a policeman...That "fresh kid" Vincent was run over . . .

On New Year's Day, an old man, shabbily dressed, entered and hobbled up to the counter. I was alone. The clerk quit to work with his brother. They have a provision route. My father was sleeping. The old man seemed staunch even though he was bent and his eyes watered.

"Kin you help an old man out?"

I reached for a few pennies and handed them to him without even a word. I was beginning to become used to them. He took the money and then looked at me in silence.

"I suppose you get many of my kind in here nowadays, young fellow?"

"Times are hard," I said.

He lowered his eyes. "Yes, times are bad. Well, Happy New Year, young fellow." He shuffled out.

After that the meat salesman came in to pay me a social call. He likes to talk religion with me. I like to watch and listen to him as he pares an apple with his long pen knife and discusses Jesus Christ with "der Schule boy." He looked out and saw the beggar go into the store across the street.

"I bet," he said, taking a bite of the apple and pointing his pen knife towards the window at the figure of the beggar, "vat you see in vun day, und vat you hear in vun day from dese people—you can write a leetle book about."

I nodded—only I thought, "I could write a big book."

Life! from behind a counter.