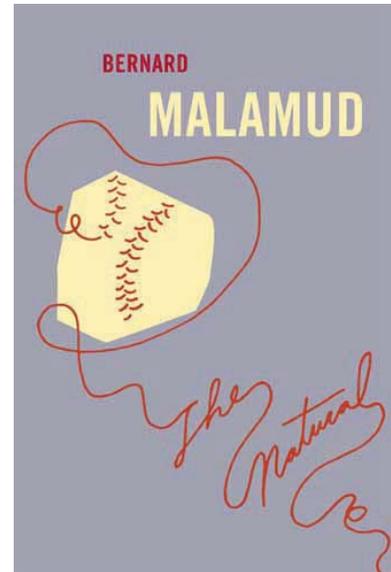




# Reading Group Gold

## The Natural

by Bernard Malamud



ISBN: 0-374-50200-5 | 248 pages

### To the Teacher

*The Natural*, Bernard Malamud’s first novel, depicts the rise and fall of a heroic baseball player in post-WWII America—a mythic persona with majestic gifts and massive appetites and abilities whose fictional feats come from the annals of baseball history. It is an exciting yet tragic tale of achievement and ambition, victory and loss, fame and anonymity, desire and deception, love and hate, strength and weakness, and other such grand themes—all of them set amid the familiar fields of the national pastime.

Sharp, unsettling, provocative, and brilliantly written, *The Natural* is often identified—even today, some fifty years after it originally appeared—as the finest baseball novel ever published. Malamud tells the story of Roy Hobbs, the “natural” of the title, who is both our hero and anti-hero. We marvel at this sportsman’s physical and athletic accomplishments even as his egotistical or thuggish deeds off the field (or, sometimes, on it) make him difficult if not impossible to sympathize with. But right or wrong, Hobbs himself is the story here—the one player without whom there would be no game. So the narrative arc of the book closely follows his career in professional baseball; rarely (if at all) do we read a scene from which Hobbs is absent.

In an introductory encounter of random, decidedly modern violence, the young phenom Hobbs is shot—during an indiscreet rendezvous en route to his major-league audition—by a lunatic mistress. He is nearly killed; his life is put on hold for over fifteen years. Next we find Hobbs, age 35, signing on with the last-place-and-going-nowhere New York Knights. Suddenly he’s a rookie in the major leagues, although at an age when most ballplayers retire. Many people just don’t know what to make of Hobbs, but he hits anything the opposition can throw at him, and at one point knocks the cover off the ball—literally. He turns the team around; for the first time in ages, the Knights have a shot at the pennant. Hobbs becomes a hero—instantly and universally—a living legend, a hero, a baseball icon. But with his reign at the top Hobbs also finds a king’s ransom in difficulties—crooked gamblers, a corrupt owner, jealous teammates, nosy journalists, a miserable slump, fierce fans, and a spellbinding woman of dangerous beauty and seductive command. Can Hobbs actually become “the best who ever played the game”? Will he exhibit the skill and the luck that it takes? Does he even have a chance?

It’s only a game, some might say. However, a key point made by *The Natural* is that, where baseball is concerned, it is more than a game. All sports involve a contest, an array of talents, a battle of some kind, but baseball—as Malamud’s novel makes plain from page one—is richly symbolic of the American character. Indeed, the sport has long been seen by many as a kind of mirror of the national psyche. Baseball is the game about which most Americans tend to have the fondest memories; much of our collective national daydream, going back over a hundred years, is about playing this sport or watching it being played. The game’s rules, rituals, memories, and associations capture America’s imagination in childhood just as they command America’s attention in adulthood. So in Malamud’s artful novel about baseball we find a well-told tale of the modern American experience. As John Cheever, writing in his journal in the 1960s, once noted: “I think that the task of an American writer is not to describe the misgivings of a



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woman taken in adultery as she looks out of a window at the rain but to describe four hundred people under the lights reaching for a foul ball.” *The Natural* was the first work of literature to do precisely this, and is today considered a masterpiece.

Finally, it is worth noting that *The Natural* was the basis for a popular 1984 motion picture (with the same title) starring Robert Redford. Teachers are advised that this film is quite different from Malamud’s novel in its plot, tone, and character details.

## Praise

“An unusually fine novel . . . Malamud’s interests go far beyond baseball. What he has done is to contrive a sustained and elaborate allegory in which the ‘natural’ player, who operates with ease and the greatest skill without having been taught, is equated with the natural man who, left alone by, say, politicians and advertising agencies, might achieve real fulfillment . . . Malamud has made a brilliant and unusual book.” —*The New York Times*

“What gives the novel its liveliness is Malamud’s inspired mixture of everyday American vernacular (it’s reminiscent of Ring Lardner) with suggestions of the magical and the mythic. He tucked a lot into that mixture, [including] a sense of mystery—the kind that charms you and you don’t need explained. And he makes it all seem easy. The novel is in the pink—it’s fresh.” —Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*

“A preposterously readable story about life.”—*Time*

“[Malamud is] one of our greatest prose writers—and one of our keenest and most disturbing moralists.” —*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“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.” —Alfred Kazin

## Preparing to Read

This Teacher’s Guide is divided primarily into two sections, which appear below. The first, “Reading and Understanding the Novel,” will help students with reading comprehension, conceptual appreciation, interpreting the narrative, grasping the book’s contexts, and related matters. “Questions and Exercises for the Class,” the second section, will enable students to think more broadly, creatively, or comparatively about *The Natural*—both as a group and individually.



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## Reading and Understanding the Novel

1. Explain why *The Natural* is divided into two sections (“Pre-Game” and “Batter Up!”). What sets the two sections apart, and what has occurred between them?
2. What do we learn about Roy Hobbs in the book’s opening pages? What is he carrying in his bassoon case? What do we learn about Hobbs’ past—his boyhood and background—over the course of the narrative? And what aspects of Hobbs remain mysterious throughout the book?
3. Why does Hobbs reject the locker-room lecture and accompanying hypnotism of Doc Knobb, the pop-psych guru who “pacifies” the New York Knights? How do the other Knights regard Doc Knobb? (p. 66)
4. When Hobbs replaces Bump Baily as the premier hitter for the Knights—if not in the entire league—some of his teammates start wondering (and, behind his back, talking) about “whether [Hobbs is] for the team or for himself.” (p. 85) Which is it, in your view? Is Hobbs ultimately playing for the Knights or himself? Or does his allegiance change over the course of the book? Defend your answers by citing key passages from throughout the text.
5. Some time after Bump’s accidental death while chasing a fly ball in the outfield, Memo tells Hobbs that Bump “made you think you had been waiting for a thing to happen for a long time and then he made it happen.” (p. 112) Could the same be said of Hobbs himself? If so, who might say it? And where else in the book do we see ballplayers rendered in a majestic, larger-than-life, or deity-like manner?
6. When Memo and Hobbs take a long night’s drive out to Long Island in his new Mercedes-Benz, Hobbs is at one point certain that they have hit a boy or his dog. He wants to turn back and investigate. Memo, who is driving, refuses. But later Hobbs thinks differently, as we read: “It did not appear that there ever was any kid in those woods, except in his mind.” (p. 123) Is this boy-and-his-dog image merely a figment of Hobbs’ imagination? Or is it real? Explain.
7. What link(s) do you recognize in Hobbs’ disastrous hitting slump and his decision to visit Lola, the fortune teller in Jersey City? What does Lola predict for Hobbs? Is she accurate? Also, what other baseball-oriented superstitions are depicted in *The Natural*? How do such rites and practices get started? Why do they remain popular?
8. On his first and only date with Iris, Hobbs tells her a secret. What is it? What does Iris mean when she says, shortly thereafter, that people have “two lives” to live? (p. 152) Identify the “two lives” at the core of this narrative. Finally, why does Hobbs eventually dismiss his affection for Iris? Do you think his dismissal is fair, given Hobbs’ own age and background? Explain.
9. When Hobbs eventually regains his hitting ability, winning games for the Knights anew and reviving their chances in the pennant race, we gain various insights into what Hobbs the slugger thinks and feels. We read, for example: “Sometimes as he watched the ball soar, it seemed to him all circles, and he was mystified at his devotion to hacking at it, for he had never really liked the sight of a circle. They got you nowhere but back to the place where you were to begin with.” (p. 163) Looking at our protagonist in a more personal or philosophical way, explain why Hobbs dislikes circles. Also, who or what causes him to start hitting again in the first place? (And if possible, explain how and why this happens.)
10. What is a “Rube Goldberg contraption”? (p. 170)



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## Reading and Understanding the Novel

11. Just before the big game to decide the pennant, Hobbs, while still in the hospital, consents to the Judge's crooked proposition—he agrees to “sell out.” Explain how Hobbs arrives at this decision. Who is he thinking of when he does so? What are his motives? Who, or what, is Hobbs ultimately selling out for? What are his reasons?
12. Early in the big game, while running out to his position in left field, Hobbs thinks of his relationship with Pop. We read: “It seemed to Roy he had known the old man all his life long.” (p. 216) Reflect on the relationship that exists between Roy Hobbs and his manager. What does each man need or want from the other? And what does each give—or not give—to the other?
13. Later in the big game, the Pirates must send out a relief pitcher to finish off Hobbs. We read of this reliever: “Few in the stands had heard of him, but before his long trek to the mound was finished his life was common knowledge.” (p. 226) What is implied by this exaggeration, especially the “common knowledge” claim? Point out specific descriptions or remarks from other parts of *The Natural* in which a man's talents for baseball and his very existence are blurred, deliberately confused, intentionally switched, and so on. What commentary might author Bernard Malamud be making here about the relationship existing between baseball and life itself?
14. Immediately after Hobbs' climactic strikeout, we read: “Bump's form glowed red on the wall.” (p. 227) Why does Hobbs see this particular apparition at this particular moment?
15. What does Hobbs do with Wonderboy after the big game? And where does he do this? Explain his actions.

## Questions and Exercises for the Class

1. Consider these remarks from Kevin Baker's Introduction to *The Natural*: “Hobbs is one of the most thoroughly unsympathetic heroes in the history of American literature . . . One can feel little real pity for any character who has so assiduously shaped his own doom.” (p. xii) Would you agree? Can, or should, we pity Roy Hobbs? Also, earlier in his Introduction, Baker writes: “It is hard to find a truly likable character in the book.” (p. ix) Do you agree with this assertion? Explain why or why not.
2. Elsewhere Baker notes that baseball “has always been an American simulacrum.” (p. ix) What is a “simulacrum”? Define and discuss this term—both generally and in terms of *The Natural* specifically.
3. Malamud's novel takes a sensitive and evocative approach to language in general and vernacular in particular. What did reading this book teach you about American jargon of the mid-20th century—particularly baseball slang? Define the following baseball terms and phrases: bingle, fungo, pepper (re: practice), southpaw, pill, stuff (re: pitching), shagging flies, and, as used eponymously throughout, natural. What other ballpark-bred words can you name?
4. Hobbs is drawn to three women over the course of the novel: Harriet Bird, Memo Paris, and Iris Lemon. Describe them. What does Hobbs find appealing about each of them? What, if anything, do these women have in common? Why is each attracted to him? What, in turn, does Hobbs see in them—that is, individually and collectively?
5. How are the fans depicted in this novel? Look especially at those scenes where their dress, manner, habits, and general behavior are depicted. (pp. 70, 86-7, 206, and elsewhere) And how does Hobbs regard the fans? Compare Hobbs' dealings with, say, Mike Barney to those he has with Otto Zipp. Finally, where does the word fan come from? What exactly does it mean to be a fan of something?



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## Questions and Exercises for the Class

6. Dreams play an important role in *The Natural*; we find many different dream descriptions throughout the book. Select a few of these passages, then discuss how each dream enhances, echoes, or otherwise enriches the book's larger narrative.
7. Compare and contrast how this novel depicts the urban and the rural, the experience of the city and that of the country. Which environment is seen more favorably, romantically, nostalgically? Which is seen more critically, harshly, complexly? Refer to certain scenes or images to underscore your views.
8. As a class, explore the novel's portrayal of the elusive yet all-consuming power of ambition. We are often reminded that Hobbs is obsessed with rewriting professional baseball's record book, with "doing what I came here to do," with being "the best who ever played the game"—but why is Hobbs so driven? Why does his quest for greatness come off as aloof, greedy, cruel, or worse?
9. Why does Hobbs eat so much? Discuss and try to explain his appetite.
10. Daydreams about trains appear at many points in the novel, usually as the recurring reveries Hobbs keeps having. Even on the last page, the following locomotive imagery strikes Hobbs at the low conclusion of the narrative: "He felt the insides of him beginning to take off (chug chug choo choo . . .). Pretty soon they were in fast flight." (p.231) Identify other train-based visions had by Hobbs. What do they signify or suggest to him? Explain this train metaphor—and what it means to Hobbs personally.
11. *The Natural* not only offers a detailed rendering of the world of baseball; it also illustrates the business aspect of professional sports. How is the relationship between pro sports and business characterized in these pages? What about the relationship between pro sports and gambling? Do you think that either of these relationships would be characterized differently if Malamud were composing his novel today? Explain your views.
12. Some critics have pointed out that *The Natural* reads like a modern-day morality play. (The morality play is a highly allegorical form of drama, created in medieval Europe, in which characters personifying good or evil struggle over possession of a person's soul.) Write a one-act morality play on a contemporary topic of your own devising, either by yourself or in collaboration with other students. Picking up on Malamud's example, try to frame issues of right and wrong, good and bad, and so forth within a current setting, popular arena, or familiar situation.
13. Discuss Malamud's novel as a work of magical realism. Are there any key scenes, events, or actions in *The Natural* that must be deemed magical or supernatural? If so, identify them.
14. The character of Roy Hobbs—as well as, more broadly, *The Natural* itself—can rightly be seen as a fictionalized composite of baseball history in the first half of the 20th century—the lore, legends, and giants of the game, all refashioned or rolled into a single creation. Write a short story or long poem in which, like Malamud, you create a composite work based upon a historically fertile or legendary subject of your choosing. Upon completion, read your work aloud to your classmates.
15. Returning to Baker's Introduction, we find Hobbs likened to Willy Loman, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's epochal *Death of a Salesman*. (p. xii) Write a brief essay comparing (or contrasting) Roy Hobbs to another literary hero (or villain) of your choosing.



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## About the Author

Bernard Malamud (1914-86) wrote eight novels, including *The Fixer*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. *The Magic Barrel*, a collection of stories, also won the National Book Award. Malamud was born in Brooklyn and for many years taught at Bennington College in Vermont.

Scott Pitcock wrote this Teacher's Guide. He lives in New York City and works in book publishing.