

Bernard Malamud

Born in Brooklyn in 1914, Bernard Malamud has won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book award with *The Fixer* and is the author of *The Assistant*, *The Natural*, *The Tenants*, and *The Magic Barrel*.



The Fixer

Yakov Bok is an ordinary man accused of "ritual murder" and persecuted by agents of a remote and all-powerful state. But, when he is at last pushed too far, he triumphs over almost incredible brutality and degradation and becomes a moral giant.

"A literary miracle"—*Newsweek*
"Yakov Bok is one of the most fully rendered characters in modern fiction."—*Saturday Review*

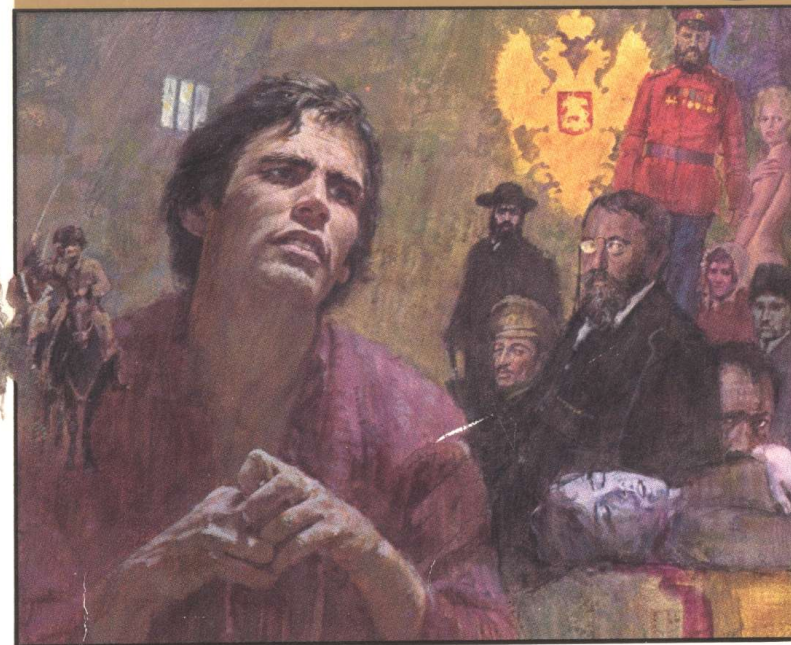
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The Fixer

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Bernard Malamud

The Fixer

THE TWO-MILLION-COPY BESTSELLER
By the Pulitzer Prize
and National Book Award Winner

For Paul



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"Irrational streams of blood are staining earth . . ."

YEATS

"O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln—slayn also
With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,
For it is but a litel while ago—
Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable,
..."

CHAUCER

I

From the small crossed window of his room above the stable in the brickyard, Yakov Bok saw people in their long overcoats running somewhere early that morning, everybody in the same direction. Vey iz mir, he thought uneasily, something bad has happened. The Russians, coming from streets around the cemetery, were hurrying, singly or in groups, in the spring snow in the direction of the caves in the ravine, some running in the middle of the slushy cobblestone streets. Yakov hastily hid the small tin can in which he saved silver rubles, then rushed down to the yard to find out what the excitement was about. He asked Proshko, the foreman, loitering near the smoky brickkilns, but Proshko spat and said nothing. Outside the yard a black-shawled, bony-faced peasant, thickly dressed, told him the dead body of a child had been found nearby. "Where?" Yakov asked. "How old a child?" but she said she didn't know and hurried away. The next day the *Kievlyanin* reported that in a damp

cave in a ravine not more than a verst and a half from the brickworks, the body of a murdered Russian boy, Zhenia Golov, twelve years old, had been found by two older boys, both fifteen, Kazimir Selivanov and Ivan Shestinsky. Zhenia, dead more than a week, was covered with stab wounds, his body bled white. After the funeral in the cemetery close by the brick factory, Richter, one of the drivers, brought in a handful of leaflets accusing the Jews of the murder. They had been printed, Yakov saw when he examined one, by the Black Hundreds organizations. Their emblem, the Imperial double-headed eagle, was imprinted on the cover, and under it: SAVE RUSSIA FROM THE JEWS. In his room that night, Yakov, in fascination, read that the boy had been bled to death for religious purposes so that the Jews could collect his blood and deliver it to the synagogue for the making of Passover matzos. Though this was ridiculous he was frightened. He got up, sat down, and got up again. He went to the window, then returned hastily and continued to read the newspaper. He was worried because the brick factory where he worked was in the Lukianovsky District, one in which Jews were forbidden to live. He had been living there for months under an assumed name and without a residence certificate. And he was frightened of the pogrom threatened in the newspaper. His own father had been killed in an incident not more than a year after Yakov's birth—something less than a pogrom, and less than useless: two drunken soldiers shot the first three Jews in their path, his father had been the second. But the son had lived through a pogrom when he was a school-boy, a three-day Cossack raid. On the third morning when the houses were still smoldering and he was led, with a half dozen other children, out of a cellar where they had been hiding he saw a black-bearded Jew with a white sausage stuffed into his mouth, lying in the road on a pile of bloody feathers, a peasant's pig devouring his arm.

Five months ago, on a mild Friday in early November, before the first snow had snowed on the shtetl, Yakov's father-in-law, a skinny worried man in clothes about to fall apart, who looked as though he had been assembled out of sticks and whipped air, drove up with his skeletal horse and rickety wagon. They sat in the thin cold house—gone to seed two months after Raisl, the faithless wife, had fled—and drank a last glass of tea together. Shmuel, long since sixty, with tousled gray beard, rheumy eyes, and deeply creased forehead—dug into his caftan pocket for half a yellow sugar lump and offered it to Yakov who shook his head. The peddler—he was his daughter's dowry, had had nothing to give so he gave favors, service if possible—sucked tea through sugar but his son-in-law drank his unsweetened. It tasted bitter and he blamed existence. The old man from time to time commented on life without accusing anyone, or asked harmless questions, but Yakov was silent or short with answers.

After he had sipped through half his glass of tea, Shmuel, sighing, said, "Nobody has to be a prophet to know you're blaming me for my daughter Raisl." He spoke in sadness, wearing a hard hat he had found in a barrel in a neighboring town. When he sweated it stuck to his head, but being a religious man he didn't mind. Otherwise he had on a patched and padded caftan from which his skinny hands hung out. And very roomy shoes, not boots, which he ran in, and around in.

"Who said anything? You're blaming yourself for having brought up a whore."

Shmuel, without a word, pulled out a soiled blue handkerchief and wept.

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Coat_of_Arms_of_the_Russian_Federation.svg (SVG file, nominally 480 x 582 pixels, file

the eyes of your lover and blinded him for life, a man whom you have since become reconciled with?"

"Is he the one who reported me?" she asked, enraged.

"Reported you?"

"Told you these filthy lies?"

"Boris Alexandrovitch, as your superior in rank, I forbid these questions," Grubeshov said, irritated. "If you have anything of that nature to ask, please do so in my office tomorrow morning, though I personally don't see how such irrelevancies can matter. They do not change the weight of the significant evidence. We must absolutely get on now. It's Sunday and we all have obligations to our families."

"What is the 'significant evidence' you refer to?"

"The evidence we have been engaged in collecting, including the evidence of history."

"History is not law."

"We will see about that."

"I must insist on a reply from Marfa Golov."

"I have no more to say than I've already said," Marfa answered haughtily. "He used to beat me up and I defended myself. My legs and back were black and blue for months where he beat me, and once he smashed me in the eye so hard it ran pus for three weeks."

"Is it true that he also beat your son, once so severely that the boy lost consciousness?"

"I forbid you to answer," Grubeshov shouted.

"Don't be a fool," Colonel Bodyansky said to Bibikov.

"The Jew killed my child," Marfa cried out. "Somebody ought to scratch his eyes." She ran to the window and called out of the open vent to the gravestones in the cemetery, "Zhenia, my baby, come home! Come home to your mother!"

She wept heartbrokenly.

She's insane, thought Yakov. So is her hat with the cherries.

"See how he glares at me like a starving wolf from the forest," Marfa, turning to the fixer, shouted. "Make him stop!"

There was a stir among the officials. Two of the gendarmes pinned the prisoner by his arms.

Marfa, glaring at him, attempted then to remove her hat. Her eyelids fluttered, and moaning she sank to the floor. The hat rolled off her head, but before fainting she gazed loosely around to see where it was. Father Anastasy and Colonel Bodyansky bent to assist her.

When Marfa recovered only the police and gendarmes were in the room with her and the prisoner. Bibikov, to Yakov's misery, had left first, and he saw him, through the window, walk down the muddy road and get into a carriage alone. The dead boy's mother asked for her hat, blew on it, and put it carefully away in a sideboard drawer.

She covered her head with a coarse black shawl.

3

Grubeshov, in his bowler and wet rain cape, hovered over Father Anastasy with a large black umbrella as the wet-lipped priest, standing on a low flat rock, his voice rising and falling sometimes out of context with what he was saying, nasally recited the blood guilt of the Jewish Nation.

The group of officials and police had abandoned the carriages and motorcar at the bottom of an inclined street paved with rocks, lined on one side by a row of blackened shanties from which people stared at them out of windows and doorways, but no one came out to watch. A flock of pigeons rose in the street and two small white dogs, barking shrilly, darted into the houses as the crowd of officials approached. On foot they climbed first up the steps of a terraced hill from which the winding Dnieper was visible in the distance, then descended

into a muddy ravine, and along it to the bottom of an almost perpendicular rocky hill with some caves in its face, in one of which the body of Zhenia Golov had been found. This cave, minutely described in the newspapers Yakov had read on the day of the discovery of the boy's body, one of those cut into the hill by religious hermits centuries ago, was about fifteen feet up its face. To get up into it one climbed the rough steps that had been hewn into the rocky hill. On top of it was a sparse birchwood grove with thin-trunked white trees full of chirping swallows, and beyond that lay a flat section of the outskirts of the city consisting of scattered houses and empty lots, about two versts from Nikolai Maximovitch's brick factory.

"There is from here an almost straight road from the brick factory where Zhenia was presumed to be killed," Grubeshov said.

"But, permit me, Vladislav Grigorievitch, to draw your attention to the fact that the road from Marfa Golov's house is just as straight and a little shorter," said Bibikov.

"In any case," the Prosecuting Attorney answered, "the most important evidence will be the testimony of the experts."

The priest, a long-haired, large-nosed man whose breath smelled of garlic, was standing under Grubeshov's umbrella before a loose semicircle of listeners but the Prosecuting Attorney had Yakov brought up close, the officials giving way as he was pushed forward, his chains rattling, by his guards. Bibikov, standing in the rear, looked on, impassively smoking. It was still drizzling and the fixer had lost his cap, unsettling him further, more than he thought possible in his present condition. It's only a cap, not my life; but the thought was a terrible one, because it was the first time he had admitted to himself he was afraid for his life. Fearing he was about to hear some secret fact that would absolutely condemn him once it was known, he stood inch-deep in the mud, breathing thickly, listening transfixed.

"My dear children," said the priest to the Russians,

wringing his dry hands, "if the bowels of the earth were to open to reveal the population of human dead since the beginning of the world, you would be astonished to see how many innocent Christian children among them have been tortured to death by Christ-hating Jews. Throughout the ages, as described in their holy books and various commentaries, the voice of Semitic blood directs them to desecrations, unspeakable horrors—for example, the Talmud, which likens blood to water and milk, and preaches hatred of gentiles, who are characterized as being not human, no more than animals. 'Thou shalt not kill' does not apply to us, for do not they also write in their books: 'Murder the good among gentiles'? This, perfidy, too, is prescribed in their Kabbala, the book of Jewish magic and alchemy, wherein the name of Satan is invoked; hence there have been multitudes of slaughtered innocent children whose tears have not moved their murderers to mercy."

His eyes darted over the faces of the officials but no one moved.

"The ritual murder is meant to re-enact the crucifixion of our dear Lord. The murder of Christian children and the distribution of their blood among Jews are a token of their eternal enmity against Christendom, for in murdering the innocent Christian child, they repeat the martyrdom of Christ. Zhenia Golov, in the loss of his own warm blood, symbolizes to us our Lord's loss of his precious lifeblood, drop by cruel drop, as he hung in pain on the wooden cross to which the anti-Christ had nailed him. It is said that the murder of the gentile—any gentile—hastens the coming of their long-awaited Messiah, Elijah, for whom they eternally leave the door open but who has never, during all the ages since his first coming, bothered to accept the invitation to enter and sit in the empty chair. Since the destruction of their Temple in Jerusalem by the Legions of Titus there has been no sacrificial altar for animals in their synagogues, and it has come about, therefore, that the killing of gentiles, in particular innocent children, is accepted as a fitting substitute. Even their philosopher Maimonides,

whose writings were suppressed in our country in 1844, orders Jews to murder Christian children. Did I not tell you they think of us as animals?

"In the recorded past," said Father Anastasy in his nasally musical voice, "the Jew has had many uses for Christian blood. He has used it for purposes of sorcery and witches' rituals, and for love potions and well poisoning, fabricating a deadly venom that spread the plague from one country to another, a mixture of Christian blood from a murdered victim, their own Jewish urine, the heads of poisonous snakes, and even the stolen mutilated host—the bleeding body of Christ himself. It is written that all Jews require some Christian blood for the prolongation of their lives else they die young. And in those days they considered our blood to be—this too is recorded—the most effective therapeutic for the cure of their diseases. They used it, according to their old medical books, to heal their women in childbirth, stop hemorrhages, cure the blindness of infants, and to alleviate the wounds of circumcision."

One of the Kiev police officials, Captain Korimzin, a man in a damp coat and muddy boots, secretly made the sign of the cross. Yakov felt faint. The priest, staring at him intently for a minute, went on, and although he spoke calmly his gestures were agitated. The Russians continued to listen with grave interest.

"There are those among us, my children, who will argue that these are superstitious tales of a past age, yet the truth of much I have revealed to you—I do not say it is all true—must be inferred from the very frequency of the accusations against the Jews. None can forever conceal the truth. If the bellman is dead the wind will toll the bell. Perhaps in this age of science we can no longer accept every statement of accusation made against this unfortunate people; however we must ask ourselves how much truth remains despite our reluctance to believe. I do not say that all Jews are guilty of these crimes and that pogroms should therefore be instituted against them, but that there are certain sects among them, in particular the Hasidim and their leaders, the tzadikim,

who commit in secret crimes such as I have described to you, which the gentile world, despite its frequent experience with them, seems to forget until, lo! another poor child disappears and is found dead in this fashion: his hands tied behind his back, and his body punctured by a sharp weapon in several places, the number of wounds according to magic numbers: 3, 7, 9, 13, in the manner of such crimes of former times. We know that their Passover, though they ascribe it to other uses, is also a celebration of the crucifixion. We know that is the time they kidnap gentiles for their religious ceremonies. Here in our Holy City, during the Polovostian raids in the year 1100, the monk Eustratios was abducted from the Pechera Monastery and sold to the Jews of Kherson, who crucified him during Passover. Since they no longer dare such open crimes they celebrate the occasion by eating matzos and unleavened cakes at the Seder service. But even this act conceals a crime because the matzos and cakes contain the blood of our martyrs, though of course the tzadikim deny this. Thus through our blood in their Passover food they again consume the agonized body of the living Christ. I give you my word, my dear children, that this is the reason why Zhenia Golov, this innocent child who wished to enter the priesthood, was destroyed!"

The priest wiped one eye, then the other, with a white handkerchief. Two of the guards standing nearest the fixer edged away from him.

But then Yakov cried out, "It's all a fairy tale, every bit of it. Who could ever believe such a thing? Not me!" His voice quavered and his face was bloodless.

"Those who can understand will believe," said the priest.

"Be respectful if you know what's good for you," Grubeshov said heatedly in an undertone. "Listen and learn!"

"How can it be so if the opposite is true," the fixer shouted, his throat thick. "It's all right to theorize with a fact or two but I don't recognize the truth in what's been said. If you please, your reverence, everybody

knows the Bible forbids us to eat blood. That's all over the book, in the laws and everything. I've forgotten most of what I knew about the sacred books, but I've lived among the people and know their customs. Many an egg my own wife would throw out to the goat if it had the smallest spot of blood on the yolk. 'Raisl,' I said, 'take it easy. We can't afford to live like kings,' but there was no getting the egg back on the table, either by hook or by crook, once she took it off, even admitting anyone wanted to, which I never did—you get used to the customs. What she did was final, your reverence. I never said, 'Bring back the bloody egg,' and she would have thrown it at me if I had. She also soaked for hours the little meat or chicken we ate, to wash out every fleck of blood, and then sprinkled it with salt so as to be sure she had drained out every last drop. The rinsings with water were endless. That's the truth of it, I swear. I swear I'm innocent of this crime you say I did, not you personally, your reverence, but some of the officials here. I'm not a Hasid and I'm not a tzadik. I'm a fixer by trade, it's a poorer trade than most, and formerly for a short time I was a soldier in the Imperial Army. In fact, to tell the whole truth, I'm not a religious man, I'm a freethinker. At first my wife and I quarreled about this but I said a man's religion is his own business, and that's all there is to it, if you'll pardon me for saying so, your reverence. Anyway, I never touched that boy or any boy in my life. I was a boy myself once and it's a time I find hard to forget. I'm affectionate to children and I would have been a happy man if my wife had given birth to a child. It's not in my nature to do anything such as has been described, and if anyone thinks so it's mistaken identity for sure."

He had turned to the officials. They had listened courteously, even the two Black Hundreds representatives, though the shorter of them could not hide the distaste he felt for the fixer. The other now walked away. One man in a round cloth cap smiled sweetly at Yakov, then gazed impassively into the far distance where the golden cupolas of a cathedral rose above the trees.

"You'd be better off confessing," Grubeshov said, "instead of raising this useless stink." He asked the priest's pardon for his language.

"Confessing what, your honor, if as I told you I didn't do it? I can confess to you some things but I can't confess this crime. You'll have to excuse me there—I didn't do it. Why would I do such a thing anyway? You're mistaken, your honor. Somebody has made a serious mistake."

But no one would admit it and a heavy sadness settled on him.

"Confessing how it was done," Grubeshov replied. "How you enticed the boy into the stable with sweets, and then two or three of you pounced on him, gagged his mouth, tied him hand and foot, and dragged him up the stairs to your habitat. There you prayed over him with those black hats and robes on, undressed the frightened child, and began to stab him in certain places, twelve stabs first, then another making thirteen wounds—thirteen each in the region of the heart, on the neck, from which most of the blood is drawn, and on the face—according to your cabalistic books. You tormented and terrified him, enjoying the full shuddering terror of the child victim and his piteous pleas for mercy, in the meanwhile collecting his dripping lifeblood into bottles until you bled him white. The five or six litres of warm blood you put into a black satchel, and this, if I understand the custom, was delivered by a hunchback Jew to the synagogue in time for making the matzos and afikomen. And when poor Zhenia Golov's heart was drained of blood and he lay on the floor lifeless, you and the tzadik Jew with the white stockings picked him up and carried him here in the dead of night and left his corpse in the cave. Then you both ate bread and salt so that his ghost would not haunt you and hurried away before the sun rose. Fearing the discovery of the bloodstains on your floor, you later sent one of your Jews to burn down Nikolai Maximovitch's stable. That is what you ought to confess."

The fixer, moaning, wrung his hands and beat them

against his chest. He looked for Bibikov but the Investigating Magistrate and his assistant had disappeared.

"Take him up to the cave," Grubeshov ordered the guards.

Shutting his umbrella, he quickly preceded them, scampering up the steps, and entered the cave.

The leg chains were too short for Yakov to climb the steep steps, so he was seized under the arms by two of the gendarmes and dragged and pushed up, the other guards following directly behind. Then one guard went into the cave and the others shoved the fixer in through the narrow stone opening.

Inside the dank cave, smelling of death, in the dim light of a semicircle of dripping candles fastened on the wall, Grubeshov produced Yakov's tool sack.

"Aren't these your tools, Yakov Bok? They were found in your habitat in the stable by the driver Richter."

Yakov identified them in the candlelight.

"Yes, your honor, I've had them for years."

"Look at this rusty knife and these awls cleansed of blood with this rag, and now deny these instruments were used by you and your gang of Jews to perforate and bleed the body of a sweet and innocent Christian child!"

The fixer forced himself to look. He gazed at the gleaming point of the awl, and beyond it, into the depths of the cave which he now saw clearly, everyone present, among them Marfa Golov, her head wrapped in a black shawl, her wet eyes reflecting the candle lights, wailing on her knees at the bier of her Zhenia, disinterred from his grave for the occasion, lying naked in death, the wounds of his gray shrunken pitiful body visible in the light of two long thickly dripping white candles burning at his large head and small feet.

Yakov hastily counted the wounds on the child's bloated face, and cried out, "Fourteen!"

But the Prosecuting Attorney replied these were two magic groups of seven, and Father Anastasy, the stink of garlic rising from his head, fell on his knees and with a quiet moan began to pray.

V

The days were passing and the Russian officials were waiting impatiently for his menstrual period to begin. Grubeshov and the army general often consulted the calendar. If it didn't start soon they threatened to pump blood out of his penis with a machine they had for that purpose. The machine was a pump made of iron with a red indicator to show how much blood was being drained out. The danger of it was that it didn't always work right and sometimes sucked every drop of blood out of the body. It was used exclusively on Jews; only their penises fitted it.

In the morning the guards came into the cell and awakened him roughly. He was searched carefully and ordered to dress. Yakov was manacled and chained, then marched up two flights of stairs—he had hoped to Bibikov's office but it was to the Prosecuting Attorney's across the hall. In the anteroom, on a bench against the wall in the rear two men in threadbare suits looked up furtively at the prisoner, then lowered their eyes. They are spies, he thought. Grubeshov's office was a large high-ceilinged room with a long ikon of a crucified blue-haloed Christ on the wall behind the prosecutor's