Bernard Malamud’s novel The Fixer (1966), winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, focuses on the abuse of the legal system in Russia during the reign of Nicholas II. Malamud’s poignant novel, involving Yakov Bok—a Jew falsely accused of murder, is about the role of anti-semitism in the corruption of the judicial system. The work is based on a historical case, that of Mendel Beiliss, a Jew falsely accused of ritual murder in 1913 in Kiev. Ritual murder is a false charge concocted by anti-semites that has been employed since 1144 as an excuse to kill or imprison Jews. A ritual murder would involve the murder of a Christian by a Jew for sacrificial and religious purposes—draining the blood of the victim to bake Passover matzos. Although the blood accusation has no basis in reality, Jews have been punished severely for the alleged crime for a long time, and people believe the lies simply because of anti-semitism and ignorance. As Malamud demonstrates in the novel, the false accusations derive partly from political purposes. Nicholas II and the Black Hundreds hope to make a scapegoat out of Bok to maintain their political authority, claiming that they must remain in power in order to suppress the supposed threat to the masses that the Jews pose. Malamud concentrates much of the novel in a Russian prison, manifesting how Bok, through the suffering and enduring of his ordeal, attains a moral growth.
innocence, he is no match for a corrupt and prejudicial legal system intent upon prosecuting an innocent man in order to preserve the tsar’s power and reinforce traditional antisemitic beliefs that prove to be an integral fabric of the contemporary society. Although the unscrupulous and bigoted legal system causes the title character great harm, the abuses that he endures result in his moral growth.

Yakov Bok, a fixer (i.e., carpenter and painter), is falsely accused of committing a ritual murder—a killing of a Christian by a Jew in order to drain and then use the blood of the victim to make Passover matzos. (The misguided belief in the practice of ritual murder originated in Norwich, England in 1144, evolving and proliferating because of ignorance about, and prejudice and hatred toward, Jews). Although the story of Yakov Bok is fictional, it is based on a true story involving Mendel Beiliss, who also was confronted by, and was eventually acquitted of, a false charge of ritual murder in 1913 in Kiev. Along with the Alfred Dreyfus legal affair in France, the Beiliss case exists as the most notorious antisemitic trial in modern world history. Like Beiliss, Bok must confront false accusations based on malicious prejudice and on superstition, and he must battle a corrupt legal system controlled by antisemitic prosecutors and influenced by Jew-hating witnesses and law officers.

As The Fixer begins, Bok, because of desperate financial circumstances, reluctantly agrees to work for a prominent member of the Black Hundreds, a notorious antisemitic Russian organization that greatly influenced the Nazis in Germany. Hiding his Jewish heritage because he fears the vicious, prevalent antisemitism and because he lives illegally in a district forbidden to Jews, Bok becomes the supervisor in a brickyard where the employees steal rampantly and where a roguish boy, Zhenia Golov, routinely trespasses. Bok earns the enmity of his employees by watching them vigilantly, thus preventing their thefts. For example, the foreman Proshko, embittered by his inability to steal, spies on Bok, searching his apartment and observing him chase Golov away from the brickyard. When Golov is brutally murdered, Bok becomes a suspect, particularly after the police, with Proshko’s help, discover some matzos in his room that a lost and injured Hasidic Jew who stayed with the fixer overnight has left behind. The “evidence” brought against Bok by the Prosecuting Attorney Grubeshov includes the following facts: a Hasidic Jew stayed at his apartment, blood is found on Bok’s oldest shirt (which he has employed as a rag to treat the Hasid’s wound), Proshko once witnessed the fixer chasing

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2 Captain Alfred Dreyfus was wrongly accused of providing military secrets to the German government. He was court martialed and convicted in 1894 yet subsequently acquitted in 1906.