HISTORY, MYTH AND SECULARISM ACROSS THE “BORDERLANDS”:
THE WORK OF MICHAEL CHABON

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Bill and Rosie Johnson
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Seth Johnson
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Reading Michael Chabon

Chabon is an important author because he represents two shifts in American literature. He offers a different perspective than his predecessors on what it means to be Jewish in America. In addition, Chabon is one of the most public faces of a movement to reclaim space for maligned genres in the literary canon. Most importantly, he remains a powerful and compelling voice in contemporary American literature. Though critics are not always enamored with his forays into genre writing, they almost always concede that Chabon is a talented writer who is unafraid of taking literary chances. His body of work shows him to be willing to risk his well-earned reputation as a leading voice in contemporary American letters by attempting genre novels, comic books, and children’s literature instead of continuing to return to an old but successful formula. Unsatisfied critics generally wish for more from Chabon, not less. And, as this dissertation will show, even in those novels that do not seem to live up to the potential set by his finest works, such as *Mysteries, Kavalier & Clay*, and the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Chabon still manages to create stories that are both readable and thought provoking.

However, at his best, Chabon intelligently and with uncommon nuance engages his readers in topics of critical social and cultural importance. *Mysteries* is an astonishingly honest examination of human sexuality, frankly depicting both the physical and emotional love shared by Art Bechstein and his friend and lover Arthur Lecomte.
The novel is all the more remarkable for its being published in 1989, a time when homosexuality was very much a taboo subject and the extent of the AIDS epidemic just being realized. *Kavalier & Clay* is a blockbuster of a novel that illuminates the ways in which the events of the Holocaust reached out beyond Europe, across the Atlantic, and continued to haunt even those who escaped. This novel also demonstrates that hope can be found in folktales, superheroes, and tales of the fantastic that have handed down over the generations and repurposed. And in the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Chabon seeks to better understand the psychological effects of Diaspora on those who are about to be evicted from their homes, the fear and uncertainty. Yet he also shows that hope and redemption can exist through faith in the Messiah. All this he accomplishes in a hard-boiled detective novel, and is seen through the eyes of a down-and-out, cynical detective.

Over the course of six novels, two novellas, two collections of short stories, and two volumes of essays, Michael Chabon has cultivated a literary reputation as a gifted writer of “literary” fiction as well as a champion of genre fiction. His first two novels, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1989) and *Wonder Boys* (1995), are novels about the internal machinations of characters trying to find their place in the world, and fit firmly into the category of a “literary” novel. *Mysteries* is a coming-of-age and a coming-out story about a young man discovering his bi-sexuality during his first tumultuous summer after college. *Wonder Boys* follows a formerly successful writer and creative writing teacher, suffering from writer’s block, on a drug-hazed weekend in which his life falls apart.

My objective for this study is simple: to engage in the first extended academic study of the work of Michael Chabon. What this dissertation proposes to do is to look at each of Chabon’s novels in succession in order to gain a sense of his evolution as a novelist. Because of the nature of this study I am not attempting to read each novel through the exact same theoretical lens of, for instance, Masculinity studies, as many contemporary Chabon scholars do. Instead, I will trace several themes that continue to recur and develop throughout his body of work, such as male sexuality, generational divides, modern Jewishness in America, and the lingering affects of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

Chabon was born in Washington, D. C. in 1963 and raised in Columbia, Maryland, until the age of eleven when his parents divorced, after which he split time with his mother in Columbia and his father in Pittsburgh, a city that would become the setting for his first two novels. In 1969, prior to their divorce, Chabon’s parents moved into an experimental, planned, interracial community in Columbia. In a 2012 interview
with Andrew O’Hehir, Chabon recalls, “during the 10 or 11 years my family lived there [the Columbia community] tried and to a fair degree succeeded to be a very racially integrated, economically integrated, place where all were welcome.”

Chabon’s love of reading and writing began at an early age, and his affection for genre fiction and comic books was immediately apparent. Chabon’s grandfather helped keep a steady flow of comic books coming to the young Chabon. Working in as a printer at a press that produced comic books, he brought free issues home with him for his grandson.

Chabon earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Pittsburgh and his MFA at the University of California, Irvine, where he studied under the author MacDonald Harris. During the interim summer, inspired by Philip Roth’s *Goodbye Columbus* (1959) and F. Scott Fitzgerald, he began writing what was to become *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* in the basement of his mother’s house. He recounts the effect that reading *The Great Gatsby* had had on his young, ambitious mind, “The Great Gatsby did what every necessary piece of fiction does as you pass through that fruitful phase of your writing life: it made me want to do something just like it” (*Maps* 139).

In 1993, Chabon married the lawyer-turned-novelist Ayelet Waldman, with whom he has four children. Chabon met Waldman on a blind date and proposed three weeks later. Waldman began her writing career with a series of detective novels collectively called the “Mommy-Track Mysteries.” They feature a former lawyer who is now a stay-at-home mom who solves murders in her spare time. She has since moved on to writing
both non-fiction, such as her memoir *Bad Mother* (2009), and literary fiction, such as *Daughter’s Keeper* (2003) and *Red Hook Road* (2010).

At a joint lecture at the Ohio Theatre in Cleveland, on September 17, 2013, Chabon and Waldman spoke about their collaboration as writers. He has said that she is the first reader of his work and that she has a tremendous influence on his work during the development of his novels. Waldman remarked upon her own surprise with how seriously he took her comments early on. She recalled having said that she did not like a character’s name and was amazed to see it changed by the next draft. She took that as a sign to be brutally honest regarding his works-in-progress. For his part, Chabon plays a similar role in Waldman’s writing process.

Over the course of his writing career, Chabon has become a major, and vocal, proponent of the value of genre fictions. Though each of his first three novels is “literary” fiction, each narrative indulges in some aspects of genre fictions. The protagonist of *Mysteries*, Art Bechstein, is the son of a high-ranking member of the mafia, and Chabon includes elements of typical of crime stories. Grady Tripp, the blocked writer of *Wonder Boys*, grows fascinated by the life and stories of August Van Zorn, a writer of Lovecraftian horror fiction. And *Kavalier & Clay* is a novel about two early comic book creators, in which Chabon celebrates the birth of the superhero.

Following *Kavalier & Clay*, Chabon shifts from writing about genres to writing in the tradition of various types of fiction. In 2002 Chabon published a young adult fantasy novel, *Summerland*, that combines elements of J.R.R. Tolkien, Norse and Native American mythology, and American tall-tales. This was followed by two mystery
novellas, the Sherlock Holmes, classical mystery *The Final Solution*, and the hard-boiled detective novel, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*. Finally, Chabon wrote an adventure story, *Gentlemen of the Road* (2007), which was published serially in the *New York Times Magazine*.

Chabon’s penchant for blurring the lines between genres was evident as a boy. In *Reading Michael Chabon* (2010), Helene Meyers notes that Chabon “wrote his first short story as a preteen; titled ‘The Revenge of Nemo,’ it chronicled the meeting of Sherlock Holmes and Captain Nemo, with Dr. Watson as the voice of the piece” (2). From his very first attempt at fiction writing, Chabon instinctively wrote along what he would later call “the Borderlands,” in his essay collection *Maps & Legends* (2008). “The Revenge of Nemo” combines the science fiction and detective genres, but tellingly, Chabon maintains the Holmesian convention of viewing the action from Watson’s perspective. It is clear that his early love for genre fiction and writers laid the groundwork his later arguments extolling the virtues of genre, and questioning the legitimacy of any distinction between “literature” and “genre.”

Both the terms “literary” fiction and “genre” fiction are admittedly slippery, but due to the importance they play in Chabon’s writing, both fiction and nonfiction, I will propose workable definitions of each. “Genre” fiction is typically defined as plot-driven storytelling, in which stories are grouped together through their use of common narrative conventions. For instance, mystery fictions, as defined in the *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, are linked as “fictional narratives with plots revolving
around puzzling or frightening situations that create and even exploit a sense of uncertainty, suspense, or fear in the reader or audience” (278).

“Literary” fiction is more nebulous in its definition. Generally speaking it is character-driven fiction that focuses inward, including examinations of the self, family dynamics and universal dilemmas. Relatedly, “literary” fiction is often seen as “good literature” and “serious” as distinguishing factors from “genre” fictions. I will discuss this more at length below, but suffice it to say for now that Chabon takes issue with these definitions, particularly the contention that “serious” literature is exclusively the province of “literary” fiction. It is this distinction between literary and genre fictions that underscores much of Chabon’s work and sensibilities.

Throughout his literary career, Chabon explores Judaism in contemporary America. *Kavalier & Clay* is both Chabon’s first overt examination of genre fiction and it also marks a shift from Chabon writing subtly about Jewishness, into writing specifically about Jews and Jewish themes. In “Chabon 3.0” (2012), D.G. Myers argues, that with this novel Chabon “reinvented himself as a Jewish novelist” (85). In many respects, Chabon is picking up the mantle of American-Jewish writers who came before him, and he is most often compared to Philip Roth. For instance, in his review of the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union* for the *Jerusalem Report*, Harvey Blume writes, “Michael Chabon is a prolific, funny, lavishly gifted novelist and short-story writer who just can't seem to stop writing about Jews. The same, of course, might be said of the greatest living Jewish writer yet to receive a Nobel Prize—Philip Roth” (38).
His novels, however, represent a new generation of American Jews, a generation inclined to view itself as a more integrated part of American culture than as a minority. Chabon’s first two novels rarely tackle issues of Jewishness in America directly. In fact, the protagonist of *Wonder Boys*, Grady Tripp, is not Jewish, although he has married into a diverse Jewish family with three, adopted Korean children and a sister-in-law who converted from Roman Catholicism. Yet even in these early works, we can see inklings of Chabon’s take on Jewishness in modern America.

As I will flesh out in chapters one and two, Chabon looks at American culture, and American Jewish culture, largely through a multicultural lens. *Mysteries* begins with a party filled with young men and women of varying ethnicities, religions, and places of origin. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Art Bechstein’s, Jewishness is referred to sparingly. It most often comes into play in his relationship with his father. Likewise, in *Wonder Boys*, the Jewishness of Grady’s in-laws only plays a significant role in the novel at a Passover Seder, which Grady attends. In each case, Chabon shows a reverence for Jewish tradition. For instance, the Seder in *Wonder Boys* is the emotional center of the novel, and the event that begins Grady’s attempts to find order in his chaotic life. However, Chabon also stresses that for many contemporary Jews, their religious or cultural differences do not amount to vast social disparities with non-Jews.

Many of his predecessors in American Jewish literature like Roth, Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, and Isaac Bashevis Singer, to name a few, depict characters whose Jewishness not only sets them apart culturally, but also can lead to social stigmatization, segregation or outright violence. Significantly, these authors either lived through the
Holocaust and World War II, or in its wake, when anti-Semitism was much more widespread and publically accepted. In his essay, “Postethnic Experience in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction” (2002), Derek Rubin argues that contemporary American Jewish writers—those of Chabon’s generation particularly—having lived an essentially post-immigrant experience, are more acculturated than those who have come before. He points to Irving Howe’s doubts about “whether the experience of a younger generation of Jewish writers, fully acculturated and well-integrated into middle-class urban life, would be a rich enough source to for them to make a distinctive contribution—as Jews—to American literature” (508).

Yet Rubin argues that these young Jewish authors provide a unique outlook on American culture as a whole, as well as the ever-evolving American Jewish culture, that their predecessors could not. Chabon grew up in a different social milieu than the aforementioned American-Jewish writers who came before him, one in which Jews have been more integrated into generic “whiteness,” than the previous generations. In the case, “whiteness” refers to all Americans of European descent, regardless of religion, ethnicity or ancestral home. Particularly in his early work, the Jewishness of his characters reflects their “whiteness” because it rarely plays an explicit role in their daily interactions with others.

This is not to say that for Chabon’s characters Judaism is insignificant. However, the impact of their Jewish heritage, families, and upbringing has the greatest effect on their personal growth and character. It does not greatly affect how the world at large sees and treats them. It is significant to note that when Chabon does begin to tackle issues of
anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, Diaspora, and Jewish faith, he looks backwards or to an alternate, invented history, rather than writing novels set in contemporary America. As a result of the shift in American cultural dynamics toward multiculturalism, along with the dwindling of overt anti-Semitism in America, Chabon likely did not encounter the kinds of open prejudice experienced by generations before him. In this light, it is unsurprising that Chabon would feel the need to invent a world where Jewish expulsion was imminent, in order to examine Diaspora, as in the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union*.

Interestingly, despite his overall affinity for a pluralistic view of America and a higher degree of Jewish integration, Chabon also shows an affection for the shtetl and places where Jews are a majority of the population. This is particularly evident in the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, and *Kavalier & Clay*. In his lecture at the Ohio Theatre, Chabon remarked that the trip he and Waldman took to Prague had a powerful affect on his thinking about Jewishness and inspired *Kavalier & Clay*. He noted that it is a city that is, in many ways, defined by its Jewish heritage, from the synagogues to the famous Golem, whose body is still said to be lying in a synagogue attic, waiting to be reanimated. Yet, he adds that it is conspicuous for its lack of Jewish citizens.

Since the publication of his first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, Chabon has largely enjoyed much critical praise. In fact, most critics saw Chabon as a promising new voice in American literature. Writing in the *New York Times*, Alice McDermott states that *Mysteries* showcases “the voice of a young writer with tremendous skill as he discovers, joyously, just what his words can do” (7). The *Washington Post*’s Carolyn Banks raves, “It’s almost as if there’s going to be a great literary bash. The guys who will be on the
guest list are a cinch: Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield…And now, from the *Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, Art Bechstein” (X5).

As with *Mysteries*, *Wonder Boys* was largely praised by critics who also noted that the novel, for Chabon, was a step forward thematically and artistically. In the *New York Times*, Robert Ward’s review is a rather typical of the critical response to the novel. He writes that *Wonder Boys* “is the ultimate writing-program novel.” He quickly adds, “If that sounds insulting, I don't mean it to be…Michael Chabon knows that the pettiness and escapism of the WordFest weekend can tell us a lot about his characters' lives -- and about the creative life, about life in general.”

The Pulitzer Prize winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* remains Chabon’s best-received and most popular novel. Writing in the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin lauds the novel for “its success in reaching for big settings…big creative leaps…and big historical relevance without strain” (10). And she praises Chabon as “the wizard who conjured” the fascinating duo and creators of comic book superhero, the Escapist, Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay (10). In her review in *Newsweek* Susannah Meadows concedes, “The novel often winds up with an unfortunate, pulpy lack of subtlety;” however she says that ultimately, “the themes are masterfully explored, leaving the book's sense of humor intact and characters so highly developed they could walk off the page” (69). And, in the *Washington Post*, Michael Dirda adds, “Michael Chabon has written a long, lovely novel about the American Dream and about comic books (the two, it turns out, may be much the same thing). It's absolutely gosh-wow, super-colossal--smart, funny, and a continual pleasure to read” (X15).
With *Summerland* (2002) Chabon begins his various genre writing experiments and the reviews become more mixed. Critics continue to praise him for his abilities as a prose stylist, as well as laud him for his noble attempts at branching out from his comfort zone, though they often concede that these works do not quite equal the literary successes of his first three novels. For instance, the *Christian Science Monitor*’s Yvonne Zipp writes of *Summerland*, “Chabon tries for an epic with an all-American swagger and a mythology as big as the Wild West. It's wildly inventive, but the core premise that baseball is a metaphor for life is ground as well-trodden as home plate,” adding, “*Summerland* is more of a solid double than a home run, but it's hard not to root for someone who's so willing to swing for the fences” (16).

*The Final Solution* (2004) received similarly mixed reviews. The *New York Times*’ Deborah Friedell writes that the novel “delicately fuses the Golden Age detective story with a modern narration that's concerned with questions about life and experience beyond whodunit” (57). However, Melvin Jules Bukiet, of the *Washington Post*, writes, “although the language is often luscious enough to lap up, it leaves a bad taste because Chabon uses a background of genocide for what is essentially a young adult novel or a mystery story” (T07).

*Gentlemen of the Road* (2008) fared much the same way. The *Boston Globe*’s Steve Almond writes, “The most striking aspect of the novel is its rococo style, which reads something like Kipling on steroids,” and adds, “Chabon has a boundless imagination, and takes obvious glee in portraying the mayhem wrought by his characters.” Sean Gibson notes, “it’s always refreshing to watch Chabon take on
something new, and avoid taking himself too seriously in the process.” However, in the *Village Voice*, Alexander Nazaryan argues, “Chabon's heavy-handed Hebrew pride might be excusable in an otherwise brisk narrative, but this slim volume packs considerable flab.”

The one exception to this trend is the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007), which saw largely glowing reviews. For instance, the *New York Times*’ Michiko Kakutani writes, “Mr. Chabon has so thoroughly conjured the fictional world of Sitka [Alaska] -- its history, culture, geography, its incestuous and byzantine political and sectarian divisions -- that the reader comes to take its existence for granted” (E6). The *Washington Post’s* Elizabeth McCracken adds that Chabon “conjure[s] up the music, smells, architecture, fashions -- the soul, in other words -- of worlds utterly imaginary, and yet palpably lost, and make us nostalgic for them” (BW03). Writing for the *Jerusalem Post*, John Freeman praises the novel as “a rich, terrifically funny and sad novel about the pain of exile, personal and spiritual” (28). He adds, “In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, however the degradation of crime—the losses it gouges into an already grieving society—becomes a nagging reminder of humanity's failure to live with God” (28).

Despite what might appear to be rather broad critical approach taken here, there are two key concepts that are critical to understanding the work of Michael Chabon: the idea of modern American Jews as “insider/outsiders” and his conception of “the borderlands.” Each of these ideas continually arise in Chabon’s novels, most notably, and most often, the latter. For that reason, it is worth spending a little time discussing these two topics before examining Chabon’s work in depth.
1.2 American Jews as Insider/Outsider

The concept of the American Jew as both cultural insider and outsider is most clearly articulated in the wonderful book edited by David Biale et al, *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (1998), wherein he and his co-authors contend that Jews have come to occupy a unique social space in American culture in which they are both members of the general “white” majority and also an ethnic minority. For many Jews, this means enjoying many of the advantages of being white in America, yet still being considered fundamentally different than their largely Christian counterparts. Similarly, while being considered “off-white”, as Karen Brodkin puts it in *How Jews Became White Folks* (1998), Jews are excluded from many conceptions of minority because Jews enjoy a privileged whiteness that other American ethnic minorities do not.

In his essay “Jewish Identity in a Free Society,” Harold Rosenberg identifies Jews in America as “twice identified,” both as American and Jew (262). He suggests that there is a “modern impulse to be one who is one-hundred-percent-something” and that American Jews’ hyphenated status causes a sense of anxiety within American culture at large (262). Many Jews, remembering their minority status in Europe, and the generations-long battle against oppression, refuse to embrace complete assimilation. Biale notes that even in the most tolerant of countries “Jews often remained a self-conscious minority, indeed the quintessential minority against whom the status of minority rights was usually defined” (17). Because of this history, there was an understandable trepidation amongst many Jews, leery, perhaps, of the sincerity of their welcome into the white majority.
Many scholars have remarked upon the plasticity of race in American history as it relates to European immigrant groups. At various times the Irish, Italians and Eastern Europeans were all considered racially different, but were eventually “whitened.” While Jews were eventually assimilated into the every-broadening “white” race, Brodkin argues that unlike other European (white) racial groups in the United States, Jews have simultaneously experienced the move toward inclusion and the continued exclusion from the majority. Unlike African Americans, Jews can pass as the majority based solely on skin color; however, as Biale points out, “In terms of European immigrant groups, Jews were arguably the most difficult case [to assimilate] because they were both ethnically and religiously alien” (27). It is by accepting this dual nature that American Jews could realize the insider/outsider binary social status.

Scholars tend to locate the Jewish move from ethnic minority to white majority to the era around World War II. Coming out of the war, race began to overtake ethnicity as a marker of difference in American culture. In this context race refers directly to skin color whereas ethnicity refers to culture. Brodkin argues that Jews’ initial reaction to their newfound whiteness was vastly different from their European brethren, in that they consciously embraced their hyphenated status. She notes, “on the one hand, Jews had a justifiable wariness about the extent to which America’s embrace was real. They also had qualms about the costs of joining the mainstream to a Jewish sense of personal and social morality” (139). She goes on to say that many Jews were simultaneously hesitant to be seen as “too Jewish.” This, she points out, resulted in a cultural manifestation of the insider/outsider as “Jewish artists and intellectuals [of the late 1940s through mid-1960s]
found themselves in the unusual position of speaking in public forums as white Americans for white America, but also as white critics of the culture of 1950s whiteness” (140).

This notion recalls Isaac Rosenfeld who, in his 1944 essay “The Situation of the Jewish Writer”, notes that “Jews are, everywhere, a minority group” (572). However, he goes on to write, “For the most part, the young Jewish writers of today are the children of immigrants, and as such—not completely integrated in society and yet not wholly foreign to it—they enjoy a critical advantage over the life that surrounds them. They are bound to observe much that is hidden to the more accustomed native eye” (572). Rosenfeld adds, “As marginal men, living in cities and coming from the middle classes they are open to more influences than perhaps any other group” (572). It is in this ability to view American culture from both vantages that makes American Jewish authors’ work uniquely important to American literature, and clearly manifests in the work of Michael Chabon.

Scholars are careful to note that the “whitening” of American Jews did not result in the abandonment of their unique culture. Rather, those traditions evolved to reflect the new socio-cultural place of contemporary Jews, who embraced a hyphenated identity, both American and Jewish, with neither taking precedence over the other. In his essay, “In Defense of Shaatnez: A Politics for Jews in a Multicultural America” (1998), Mitchell Cohen notes, “the hyphen unites as much if not more than it divides” (39). He goes on to quote Michael Walzer saying, “The hyphen works…when it’s working like a plus sign” (40). For many American Jews, this is an affirmation of the hybrid nature of
American culture and Americans in general. Rather than assuming a false image of a monoculture, cultural pluralism acknowledges the many various and integrated cultural traits and traditions that make up the American citizen.

Because of the “whitening” of American Jews over the last half century and their embrace of a hyphenated identity American Jews are afforded a unique view of American life. This basic idea runs through much of Chabon’s work. As we will see, many of his characters find themselves in a sort of ill-defined place within social groups, accepted but always a step removed. In many cases, it is because of their semi-alienation that the character is capable of creating something that speaks to a wide audience, or solving a crime, or gaining a sense that a friend is heading for trouble.

1.3 The Borderlands

The “borderlands” is the notion that most clearly defines Chabon’s ideas about what makes for good and interesting literature, as well as what commonly characterizes excellent writers. By “borderlands” he means the incorporation of several elements of various genres into a story, in order to create something new. He argues, “all the mystery resides there, in the margins, between life and death, childhood and adulthood, Newtonian and quantum, ‘serious’ and ‘genre’ literature” (Maps 55). Writers appropriate aspects of a variety of writing modes and styles to create something new in those nebulous places between genres.

Over the course of the sixteen essays of Maps & Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands (2008), Chabon extols the virtues of comic books, science fiction, fantasy, folklore, mystery and horror, as well as illustrating how many of the authors
viewed as decidedly “literary” often employ elements of genre in their writing. He cites authors like Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, A. S. Byatt, Cormac McCarthy, and Jorge Luis Borges as writers who have “plied their trade in the spaces between genres,” who incorporate many types of genre writing into their own, but who are largely considered to be “literary” writers (Maps 13). For instance, Chabon describes Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor* as “an extended riff on alternate-world and time theories and a key early example in the retro-futuristic subgenre of science fiction that years later would came to be known as steampunk” (8). We must, of course, include Chabon himself in this category. As will be described more fully in chapter five, his novel, *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, is an amalgam of alternate history (a subgenre of science fiction) and hard-boiled detective stories.

In his essay, “Dark Adventure: On Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road,*” Chabon notes that the novel is a key example of how many authors blur the lines between genres. *The Road* (2006) is about a man and his son, travelling south to escape the harsh cold, in an America that has become a post-nuclear war wasteland. Chabon points out that McCarthy, though largely seen as an author of “literary” fiction, is writing a form of science fiction. Chabon writes, “Science fiction has always been a powerful instrument of satire, and thus it is often the satirist’s finger that pushes the button or releases the killer bug” (96). He goes on to argue that the post-apocalyptic story “is one of the few subgenres of science fiction, along with stories of the near future (also friendly to satirists), that may be safely attempted by a mainstream writer without incurring too much damage to his or her credentials for seriousness” (96).
McCarthy proves to be an interesting choice, here, given that much of his writing prior to *The Road* could be placed in the genre of the American Western, particularly his *Border Trilogy* and *Blood Meridian* (1985), a historical novel’s account of a group of scalp hunters who massacre Native Americans along the U.S.-Mexican border in the mid-nineteenth century. Chabon consistently refers to McCarthy precisely because so much of his work is illustrative of the kind of genre bending that he calls the literary borderlands. It is this type of amalgamation of genres that Chabon eventually attempts in his post-*Kavalier & Clay* novels.

It is the linking of “seriousness” to literary fiction that Chabon seems most eager to break. Chabon detects a knee-jerk prejudice against genre fictions, a suggestion that *because* a novel is a mystery or a western it must be inferior to, or less serious than, a “literary” novel. He points out that while many critics and writers dismiss genre fiction *because* this type of writing is overly formulaic, “literary” fiction is similarly beholden to convention. He lists a few of the elements that define “literary” fiction differing from other genres, and therefore, simply another type of genre fiction, citing “the primacy of a unified point of view…letters and their liability to being read or intercepted; the dance of adulterous partners; the buried family secret that curses generations to come; the ordinary heroism of an unsung life” (10). In short, Chabon suggests that “literary” fiction is little more than another genre with a different set of rules. Instead, he argues, all literature should be simply be judged on the quality of its writing, regardless of genre.

In many respects, the categorization of literature into genres and sub-genres can seem arbitrary. One could easily ask why Kurt Vonnegut’s novels about time travel and
interplanetary voyages are stacked on “literature” shelves while Ursula K. LeGuin’s novels about the same are in “science fiction.” Both have been deemed equally worthy of inclusion in literary anthologies such as the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. For Chabon, sorting literature based upon genre perpetuates the notion that certain books can be dismissed out of hand because of their classification.

Chabon does argue that literature’s fundamental purpose is pleasure, entertainment. While some might argue that *An American Tragedy, Native Son,* or *The Sound and the Fury,* for example, are not novels one would typically describe as entertaining, Chabon suggests that the problem is our conception of word “entertainment.” He admits, “I read for entertainment, and I write to entertain. Period” (*Maps* 2). Yet he attempts to change the way we think about entertainment. He writes, “I would like to propose expanding our definition of entertainment to encompass everything pleasurable that arises from the encounter of an attentive mind with a page of literature” (2).

Chabon suggests that we are drawn to all kinds of literature, ultimately, because we find pleasure in the emotional connections we make with it, whether it be a story of the decline of a once-wealthy southern family into ruin, or a comedy about a World War II bombardier trying to navigate the labyrinthine military bureaucracy, or a mystery solved by persnickety Belgian sleuth. Chabon asserts that entertainment can include:

- the outrageousness of whale slaughter or human slaughter in Melville of McCarthy; the outrageousness of Dr. Charles Bovary’s clubfoot correcting device; the outrageousness of outrage in a page of Philip Roth…a
momentary gain in one’s own sense of shared despair, shared nullity, shared rapture, shared loneliness, shared broken-hearted glee… (Maps 3).

He argues that an emotional connection to a piece of literature can be evoked as much by adventure, horror, or the interaction with oddness of another world as it can by character-driven examinations of the human condition. He asserts that we should recognize this bond to the work as pleasure, regardless of what kind of feeling it induces.

Chabon notes in a 2007 interview with Elizabeth Benefiel, “I hate to see great works of literature ghettoized, whereas others that conform to the rules, conventions, and procedures of the genre we call literary fiction get accorded greater esteem and privilege.” This idea is important to understanding his work because it informs his approach to writing. Recounting his early writing as an MFA student at the University of California, Irvine, Chabon recalls that many of his classmates and instructors steered him away from writing genre fiction. In a 2012 interview with Wired Magazine he recalls, “I had been taught early on in college and graduate school that I wouldn’t be taken seriously if I wrote genre fiction, and not only would I not be taken seriously, but people just really didn’t want to read it, like, my workshop mates and my workshop leaders.” He goes on to admit, “I had workshop leaders who just out-and-out said, “Please do not turn science fiction in to this workshop.”” Chabon admits that he “‘could've been rebellious, but it's really not in my nature. So I said, here I am at this fancy writing program for two years and I want to get the most out of it, so I just won't write that stuff anymore’” (AP). The result was The Mysteries of Pittsburgh.
Chabon calls into question the very premise undergirding many conceptions of genre difference and issues a challenge to defenders of genre demarcation: “Ask yourself just how damned different [sic] a book has to be, on the inside, from its neighbors, to get it consigned to the genre slums at the local Barnes & Noble. More different than *Moby Dick* is from *Mrs. Dalloway*?” (*Maps* 10). Granted, Chabon does nothing to argue how these same two books are similar. However, his central point is that the idea of categorizing literature is both counterproductive, because it inadvertently steers people away from books as much as it directs people towards them, and arbitrary, because the genre classification of a book can vary from store to store, depending on organization. Because so many authors occupy the “borderlands,” such classifications should be irrelevant.

Chabon admits that more forms of literature, including comic books, are gaining acceptance in critical circles as “literature.” However, the acceptance of genre writers as equally skilled as their “literary” counterparts remains a battle. In a 2010 interview conducted by Richard Lupoff, Chabon is asked how he has been able to write so much genre fiction without losing his credibility as a “serious” author. Chabon admits, “I think I was just lucky, in that I started out writing more mainstream stuff. Though if you look back at my first couple of books, which are almost entirely mainstream, naturalistic works of fiction, you can see elements of my interest in genre fiction. I suppose because I got off to a start in the mainstream, I think it was a lot easier to move toward genre and still be taken seriously.” This admission is in keeping with his assertion that many “serious” writers do, in fact, utilize elements of genre in their own work, but their early
successes in “literary” fiction immunizes them from the same dismissive charges of a lack of artistic merit that plague many others.

This is not to say that Chabon argues that all literature is of equal literary value. He admits that “the vast preponderance of art created for a mass audience is crap” (Timberg). This is largely in keeping with Dwight MacDonald’s assertion, in his essay “Masscult and Midcult” (1959). MacDonald distinguishes between what he terms “Masscult,” meaning cultural artifacts created to appeal to the masses, and “High Culture,” which he describes as “an expression of feelings, ideas, tastes, visions that are idiosyncratic and the audience similarly responds to them as individuals” (5). MacDonald admits, “Most High Culture has been undistinguished, since talent is always rare” (3). Yet he goes on to suggest, “Masscult is bad in a new way: it doesn’t even have the theoretical possibility of being good” (4). Ultimately, MacDonald argues that the fundamental problem with Masscult is that he sees it as “fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen” (13). In other words, Masscult is dictated by a drive to appeal to the universal tastes. It is driven by a need to appeal to as large an audience as possible. This, of course, is a naïve argument because all authors write and publish to make money, and publishers choose which works to publish with the same intention. It stands to reason that they would all seek as wide an audience as they can get.

Chabon essentially argues, along with others, particularly postmodernists, for a reevaluation of the standards, articulated by people like MacDonald, which differentiate high and low art. For Chabon, this does not mean that all art is necessarily created equal. Rather, he suggests that MacDonald is incorrect in his assertion that Masscult lacks the
possibility of being good. In fact, Chabon argues that nearly any genre, and type of 
literature, can be good; it depends exclusively on the author’s ability to use the genre he 
or she has chosen and find a way to make the audience rethink the ways in which they 
view their lives, through a story.

Ultimately, Chabon challenges his readers, critics, and literary scholars to 
reexamine literature that has long been dismissed as lacking seriousness. He argues, “The 
best response to those who would cheapen and exploit [entertainment] is not to disparage 
or repudiate but to reclaim entertainment as a job fit for artists and for audiences, a two-
way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection” (Maps 
5). He adds, in his essay “The Loser’s Club” (2009), “Art, like fandom, asserts the 
possibility of fellowship in a world built entirely from the materials of solitude” 
(Manhood 5). These two related ideas are the foundation of Chabon’s case for genre 
fiction’s inclusion into our conception of literature. As we will see throughout this 
dissertation, Chabon suggests that in overlooking genre fictions, we are depriving 
ourselves of surprising and singular voices offering insights into our lives while taking us 
on a strange and entertaining journey.

1.4 The Argument

Each of the following chapters focuses on a single novel, save for the sixth, which 
examines both of his novellas. Chapter one examines Chabon’s first novel, The Mysteries 
of Pittsburgh. The novel establishes many of the themes that will continue throughout his 
body of work, such as male sexuality, homosexuality, the notion of the insider/outsider, 
and the generational divide, particularly as it affects first, second and third generation
immigrant families. This novel most overtly explores the insider/outsider, through Art Bechstein’s quartet of relationships: his sexual relationship with Arthur; Phlox, his girlfriend; his platonic friendship with local thug Cleveland; and his complex relationship with his gangster father. This chapter shows how these overlapping relationships contributes to Arthur’s dual status, simultaneously accepted and alienated. Ultimately, this uncertain standing allows Art an insight into these relationships that his friends and family lack.

The second chapter looks at *Wonder Boys* from two perspectives. The first part of the chapter looks at how the novel reflects Chabon’s own experiences in writing his unfinished novel, *Fountain City*, and the extent to which it is a novel about the writing process, fame, and literary expectation. The second section focuses on Chabon’s explorations of modern conceptions of Jewishness. While in *Mysteries* Chabon touches on Art’s Jewishness in terms of his relationship to his father, *Wonder Boys* is his first extended examination of Judaism in America. Interestingly, he does so through the eyes of his non-Jewish protagonist, Grady Tripp. From this perspective, the novel shows clear appreciation for Jewish tradition and culture, as seen through a secular lens.

The third chapter centers on Chabon’s most well-known and well-received novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. An undercurrent running throughout the novel is Chabon’s argument that comic books are medium capable of producing fine literature. In this chapter I approach the novel in three distinct but related ways. First, I examine how Chabon employs the Golem of Prague folktale as a model for the superhero created by his two protagonists. (Chabon uses the Golem story as a framework for his
own novel.) Second, I draw attention to Chabon’s celebration of the decidedly Jewish origins of the superhero, in which he mines comic book history, incorporating many famous people and events to create a full picture of “Golden Age of Comics.” In addition, I look at how comic book superheroes, and their stories, become an American folk tradition. Third, I explore the ways in which the concept of escape manifests throughout the novel.

Chabon’s young adult novel, *Summerland*, is the focus of chapter four, and continues his exploration of folklore in America. In this otherworldly baseball fantasy we see Chabon moving away from talking about genre fiction and attempting to write it. This chapter illustrates the ways in which Chabon creates his own American mythology by incorporating other legends and tall tales, combining it with the American “secular religion”: baseball. As with other authors who have used the game of baseball in their own writing, notably Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* and Philip Roth’s *The Great American Novel*, Chabon highlights the fundamental Americanness of the game.

Chabon’s alternate history, detective novel, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, is the subject of this dissertation’s fifth chapter. This is Chabon’s most successful “genre” novel. In it he explores the nature of the Messiah, redemption, and Diaspora. In this chapter, I highlight the ways in which Chabon considers these issues as well as the confluence of the sacred and the secular in modern American politics. Finally, I point to Chabon’s use of two common genres, detective and science fiction, not as a gimmick, but rather to better communicate his arguments to his readers. I illuminate the ways in which Chabon draws on, and breaks, various genre conventions to make his larger points clearer.
and force the audience to reexamine its own ideas of how religion influences politics, and vice versa.

Finally, the sixth chapter examines Chabon’s two novellas, *The Final Solution*, and *Gentlemen of the Road*. The first is a Sherlock Holmes mystery, set during the Second World War, while Holmes is in retirement. The second is a medieval adventure story, set in the Khazar Empire, and featuring two Jewish road agent swordsmen as protagonists. Chabon readily admits that he wrote these two books for the pure fun of it, wanting to create something like the books he loved growing up. I include them together because not only are these two of Chabon’s clearest attempts at writing genre fiction, but they also explore similar themes, many of which he began in his earliest novels: alienation, Diaspora, conceptions of contemporary Jewishness, and the Holocaust. Though they are not amongst his finest novels, they remain important to study in order to get a fuller picture of Chabon’s approach to writing, and his place in the literary canon.

At the beginning of Joseph Heller’s novel, *Good as Gold* (1976), Bruce Gold tells his friend Lieberman that he has been asked to write a book about the Jewish experience. Lieberman immediately asks, “*Whose* [sic] Jewish experience?” (12). Novelists like Bellow and Roth certainly blazed the trail that Chabon is now travelling, by writing novels that speak to Jewishness in America, and, as importantly, what it means to be an unhyphenated American. Yet they spoke of and from their own experience, growing up a generation before Chabon and his contemporaries. Though his perspective differs from his predecessors, Chabon is picking up where those writers left off, reassessing Jewishness in America. In that sense he is continuing in the tradition of American-Jewish
literature. The Jewishness that he commonly depicts is more cultural than religious. His is a perspective borne out of his own experience and reflects changes in both American Jewish culture and American culture. Even as he looks backwards in history, or into an alternative history, it is with an eye on notions of modern American Jewishness. As I hope the following reading of the work of Michael Chabon bears out, his novels illustrate an important shift in how Americans, and specifically American Jews, view themselves in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
CHAPTER 2

“One More Pittsburgh Heartbreak”: The Evolution of Identity in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*

Michael Chabon’s first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1989), is a *bildungsroman*: the story of Art Bechstein’s first summer after his college graduation. Through the maturation of Art Bechstein, the novel’s protagonist and narrator, Chabon demonstrates the changing American attitudes toward sexuality, the ways in which the understanding of one’s identity continually evolves, particularly in a nation built on immigrants, and the resistance faced by those who attempt to challenge the commonly held ideas of what various socio-cultural groups should look like.

At the beginning of the summer Art meets and quickly befriends Arthur Lecomte, a fellow student who is openly gay. Art is quickly matriculated into Arthur’s circle of friends, most notably Cleveland, a small-time gangster who works as a collector for a local bookie and Arthur’s oldest friend, and Phlox, a fellow student, coffee cart employee, and Art’s soon-to-be girlfriend. Over the course of the summer, Art finds himself growing ever closer to all three, though it is his confusion over his feelings for Arthur that cause Art the most anxiety and exhilaration.

As the novel progresses, Art’s relationships with these three become more complicated because he falls in love with each of them. Art sees Cleveland as a sort of big brother, idolizing him for his brashness and worldliness. In Phlox, Art finds a woman
who relates to him, and sees an “all-American” future—marriage, kids, and house—for them. Yet, the relationship that most occupies Art’s mind, and the novel, is with Arthur, whom Art forms a close friendship that eventually becomes sexual.

In his own essay “On the Mysteries of Pittsburgh,” Chabon discusses his homosexual experience saying, “I had slept with one man whom I loved, and learned to love another man so deeply that it would never had occurred to me to sleep with him” (39). The former man is clearly an inspiration for Art’s homosexual attraction for Arthur. Interestingly, and less remarked upon, is the latter man. While Art’s attraction to Arthur is both intellectual and, increasingly, physical, his affection for Cleveland is as deep though purely asexual. Art’s relationship with Phlox is the least well developed in the novel and can be seen as existing, in part, to offer a contrast to his male relationships. Yet Chabon does not suggest that Art’s attraction to Phlox is insincere, or that Art is pretending to be straight in order to conform to social norms. Rather, through these three different but related relationships, Chabon explores the variety of bonds that people share, which are often all characterized as love.

*Mysteries* does not argue that sexuality is a spectrum along which one moves indiscriminately or according to one’s whims. Chabon suggests that human sexuality is more complex than a simple gay/straight dichotomy. Instead, sexuality seems to rely more on a connection between individuals, rather than gender. In each of these cases it is Art’s dual status as both included in the group but also somewhat alienated that allows him to understand his friends and family’s character and situations more clearly, but also induces tremendous anxiety, from which he is almost always suffering. Art regularly
breaks into tears when discussing his feelings with all of the major characters in the novel.

Additionally, *Mysteries* stresses the tremendous sense of possibility that graduating from college engenders in a young person; yet there is a looming sense that the emotions and relationships are fleeting. Art is in a transitional phase of his life, working at a bookstore, meeting new friends, and exploring his sexuality. However his father, Joe, an accountant for a Washington D.C. crime family and known as “Joe the Egg,” has larger plans for Art, and does not approve of any of his new associates. The novel concludes with Cleveland dying after an attempted robbery, a job he took on at the behest of a low-ranking mafia figure; Phlox breaking up with Art after discovering his homosexual relationship with Arthur, and Arthur being chased out of town by the Mafia, after Joe finds out the same. Finally, Art realizes that his mother, who had died tragically in his youth, was killed by the mafia rather than in a car accident, which was the story he had been told.

Chabon explores the awkwardness of youth, of trying to find one’s place in society through self-discovery. Through these new friendships Art gains the strength and confidence to confront his father and reject the path that his father has set for him. Yet he is inextricably connected to his father and his past. Though Chabon only tangentially refers to his Jewishness, Art is the embodiment of the insider/outsider. In all of his relationships he is both welcomed in as a member of the group, yet he always feels as though he is at a bit of a distance from the rest.
Art’s familial history remains important, especially his relationship with his father. Yet his general lack of overt expressions of his Jewishness is noteworthy because it resembles the acculturation process of many second or third generation Americans. In *Catholic—Protestant—Jew* (1955), Will Herberg remarks that the immigrant to America feels allegiances to two competing, yet related, groups: his or her ethnic group and to the sense of his or her Americanness. Yet, he argues, “Frequently, though not always, the man of the second generation attempts to resolve his dilemma by forsaking the ethnic group in which he found himself” (41). Herberg adds, “As the second, and in time, the third generation grew to maturity, affiliations based upon some remote immigrant ancestor became ever less meaningful” (42-3). These children and grandchildren of immigrants often see themselves as more American than Jewish, or Polish, or Italian, often rejecting their parents’ ideas about the proper level of assimilation. Art’s acculturation into American society is in many ways hampered by his father’s efforts to push him into accepting an identity that conforms to his father’s view of the world, rather than his own.

The tensions created by Art’s embrace of his hyphenated identity run throughout the novel and often result in Art questioning his own ideas of himself in light of the opinions of others. Art is continuously being pulled in multiple directions. He is simultaneously straight and gay, Jewish and secular, a member of a small circle of friends but removed from their history, a member of his family yet distant from his father.

Readers’ assumptions regarding human sexuality are similarly challenged because Art’s love for Phlox, Arthur, and Cleveland are equally earnest and believable. Art comes
to reject any conventional views of heterosexuality and homosexuality, preferring to embrace a hybrid identity that allows him to simultaneously belong to those two circles. Through the self-discovery of Art Bechstein, Chabon demonstrates the ways in which a hybrid identity can lead to that person becoming both a socio-cultural insider and outsider. In so doing, Chabon compels the reader to rethink his or her own assumptions regarding the nature of human sexuality as something beyond the simple straight/gay dichotomy.

The play on the name of Chabon’s protagonist, Art, can be interpreted in two ways, each of which underscores the tensions Art experiences. First, Arthur Lecomte is Art’s doppelganger of sorts. This is apparent upon their first meeting by their shared but slightly altered first name. Art immediately idolizes Arthur for his refinement and self-confidence, which hints at the notion that Arthur is a “completed work” whereas Art is a work-in-progress, still finding himself. Second, in his essay, “French Kissing in the USA” (1993), Graham Caveney argues, “As the very pun on his name suggests, Art opposes the laundered money of his family with the purity of the aesthete—a projection of himself whose value is measured by its distance from utility. In short, Art is not for sale” (75). Like any good work of art, Art Bechstein eventually comes to express himself in a way that challenges the assumptions of those around him.

Interestingly, while Chabon uses Art’s unique social position to provide the reader with uncommon insight into these various communities, Art himself is often too emotionally invested to comprehend his own status within them. He tries so desperately to be accepted by everyone, that he cannot fully understand why he remains semi-
marginal to each group. It is only through his role as the novel’s narrator, retrospectively telling his own story, that he displays the understanding of the interrelationships of his numerous social circles so typical of the insider/outsider.

Though many scholars have touched on issues of sexuality and familial relationships in the novel, critics have yet to explore how all of these associations are interrelated. In this essay, I aim to close that particular gap in scholarship. In all of his relationships, family, friendships and sexual relationships, Art finds himself in a similarly nebulous place: he is simultaneously an accepted member of the group, yet kept at arm’s length from the rest. Though the reasons for his semi-alienation differ depending on the social group, the result is always an increased anxiety and desire to fit in, coupled with times of increased insight into the groups’ members and inner workings due to his separation.

*The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* made Chabon a literary star at the age of twenty-three. In the April 10, 1987 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, William Goldstein reports that “Chabon’s manuscript came to the Barber agency [Chabon’s representatives] on the recommendation of novelist Macdonald Harris, a Barber client and also Chabon’s advisor at UC” (73). Helene Meyers reveals that Harris had shown the text to his agent without Chabon’s knowledge.

Excitement over *Mysteries* was widespread and almost instantaneous, leading to an intense auction for the novel, involving ten publishers. When all was said and done, the publishing house Morrow had won the bidding and Chabon was awarded an advance of $155,000 for the manuscript, “a record for a first ‘literary’ novel” (Goldstein 73).
Goldstein reported on the signing, by Morrow’s Douglas Stumpf, writing, “The high price paid for Mysteries was justified by the tremendous in-house excitement it generated” (73). Goldstein goes on to quote Stumpf, who said, “In my entire career I’ve never seen people respond so enthusiastically to a first novel…Everybody at Morrow…went completely crazy for the book” (73).

The keen interest in Chabon’s debut novel was widespread. Goldstein quotes Chabon’s agent, Mary Evens, who said, “‘what is so amazing’ to her…is that ‘an editor to whom the manuscript had not [sic] been submitted entered the bidding [based on a reading of a copy sent to a Simon & Schuster colleague who was on vacation]. That’s pretty unusual’” (73). She goes on to speculate that editors “‘must have been reading bootleg copies of the manuscript’” because so many editors who had not received official copies were asking to be a part of the auction (Goldstein 73).

While many critics praised Mysteries for its humor, realism, and frank description of homosexual love, also comparing it to other first novels of note (such as On the Road and Catcher in the Rye), the novel is in large part most successful as an exploration of the search for, and to some degree the making of, one’s identity. Caveney argues that the novel succeeds in showing Art breaking free from the expectations of his father, and deciding on his own path. Caveney writes, “Art’s heroic drive is to reject the corrupt acquisition of money as represented by his father, and embrace instead the sublimated currency of his contemporaries—the language of learning, the veneer of social bohemianism, the alternative realm of righteous possession” (75).
However, in his essay, “Teenage Wasteland: Coming-of-Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s” (2001), Kirk Curnutt sees Art as an exemplar of Generation X’s disaffection from social norms and familial ties. He cites a scene in which Art, Arthur and Cleveland orchestrate the mating of a dog, whose owner they dislike, and three pit bulls. Curnutt contends that this, and other works like it, exploits “the fear that youth’s emotional detachment can grow so extreme that they lose all empathy and devolve into creatures of pure sensation” (99). He sees a similar disengagement in Art’s relationship with his father, claiming that Art seems to be attempting to reconnect with his father. However, by novel’s end, Art has given up such hopes, vowing never to see him again. For Curnutt, this suggests that the youths of the age still desire to maintain familial-type relationships, though they often do so within a circle of friends, when the family does not provide the proper support. However, given the fact that Art is newly graduated from college, it seems just as plausible to read his rejection of his father as a natural part of his own maturation. Art is striking out on his own, making his own way in the world, and defining himself as apart from his father.

2.1 Discovering Art Bechstein

At its core, The Mysteries of Pittsburgh is a novel about Art Bechstein coming to terms with his own sense of himself and the various, disparate pieces that are cobbled together to form his identity. Art’s unified self is not homogenous, but rather it is
constructed out of various parts—associations, cultural connections, friendships, sexuality, and so forth.¹

Significantly, the elements that make up Art’s identity often seem mutually exclusive, for example, being both heterosexual and homosexual. Admittedly, the insider/outsider model does not work well in terms of Art’s bisexual realization, and the sexual relationships between himself and Phlox, or he and Arthur. One’s ability to reject or embrace aspects of culture, history, or religion is not equivalent to love, lust, or the biological basis of one’s sexuality. On the one hand, a person is born into a culture, and his or her familial history does play a role in shaping the individual. Because cultural traditions and religious beliefs are not determined genetically, individuals usually choose their level of acceptance of each. On the other hand, sexuality is commonly understood to be an expression of biology, which cannot be altered at one’s choosing. In other words, a person can choose not to embrace the religion of his or her parents, but cannot choose

¹ In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” (1985) Donna Haraway argues that, like the cyborg (a humanoid robot that is assembled out of various components to resemble and act like a human being, popular in science fiction stories) human identities are similarly fractured. “Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in ‘essential’ unity” (155). While Haraway is specifically talking about female identity, her analysis rings true across gender and cultural lines. Art’s identity is similarly reminiscent of Haraway’s model.
whom he or she is attracted to sexually. However, Art’s bisexuality does place him in a similarly ill-defined social space. He is in two different relationships with people who are not only unlike in gender, but also personality. Art finds himself neither fully engaged nor accepted in either relationship, largely because of his relationship with the other. Though imperfect, in this case, the insider/outsider idea suggests someone can be neither totally included in a group, nor excluded.

This uncertainty of social grouping is a common reaction to bisexuality in America, as well. In “The Bisexual Menace Revisited,” Kristin G. Esterberg points out that bisexuality is often seen as “a series of oppositions” (279). She notes that bisexuals are sometimes viewed as a part of the Gay and Lesbian community and at other times they “are seen on one side, the ‘queer’ side, versus gay men and lesbians on the others. In this version, lesbians and gay men are seen as more conventional – monogamous, more like straights” (279). Still some bisexuals see themselves as apart from all other “monosexuals,” maintaining that the latter focus too much on gender. These are only a few of the group associations that alternately claim bisexuals as members and reject them.

In *Multiculturalism and Diversity* (2009), Bernice Lott argues, “As with other cultural identifications, one’s sexual orientation identity is part of an individual’s multicultural self, its importance varying with the person, the context, the time, and other potentially significant variables or conditions” (94). In terms of social affiliations, there is clearly a similarity in the murkiness of how and to what extent homosexuals and bisexuals belong to any group. Throughout the novel, Chabon shows that Art is
continually fighting against people who would dictate what groups he should belong to, because, for Art, those categories are too restrictive to allow him to fully realize his identity.

In his book, *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity* (2011), Michael Hames-García argues, “Sexual identities have political salience because of what they tell us about the organization of the social world, not what they tell us about the existence of particular desires or behaviors” (70). He asserts that common conceptions of sexuality have changed over time, from early belief that homosexuality was an indication of deviancy to the more modern continually increased acceptance. He therefore suggests that the way a culture views sexuality is as much an indication of social and political attitudes as it is of personal attraction. Chabon illustrates this very idea through the differing views of Art’s sexuality, from the perspectives of each supporting character. Arthur, Phlox, Cleveland and Joe each attempt to enforce their own views of sexuality on to Art, none of which reflects Art’s own.

Because of Art’s simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from his social groups, through Art’s narration, the reader is capable of seeing his friends and family as both an intimate group member and as an outside, semi-detached observer. This is not the case early on, when Art is so desperate to belong that he cannot perceive his own nature, let alone that of his friends. However, as the novel progresses, and as Art eventually accepts himself, and come to terms with his sexuality, he also begins to exhibit the kind of singular perspective granted to those who both are and are not members of any particular group.
Art’s relationships with his father, Joe, with Cleveland, and in the love triangle between himself, Arthur and Phlox each challenge Art’s own conception of himself and highlights his eventual refusal to subvert his concept of self. Encountering both in the first pages of the novel, Arthur and Phlox are Art’s primary love interests. Art finds each strangely compelling upon first sight. He shares an extended gaze with Phlox, recalling the “aqua ribbon in her hair” and the “muscles in [his] neck warming and tightening,” while remembering Arthur for his choice of reading material, a “Spanish potboiler” (11).

Walking outside, he and Arthur exchange their first words while gathering with a crowd of people who are watching two young men argue over a woman, as the police try to break up the scene. Foreshadowing the love triangle that is to develop throughout the novel, Arthur says to Art “‘One more Pittsburgh heartbreak,’” which foreshadows Art’s numerous heartbreaks to come (14).

From this first meeting with Arthur, Chabon sets up Art and Arthur’s complex relationship. Arthur is the model for what Art would like to be. Arthur has the appearance of sophistication; he is adventurous, well read, and smooth talking. Art is awkward and unsure of himself, often blurtling out odd remarks when drinking. Shortly after being introduced to Phlox he drunkenly asks her “‘are you wearing a brassiere?’” (87). Later, seeing Cleveland take his shirt off at the beach, he clumsily observes, “‘Gee, you have a big stomach’” (127). Each of these statements betrays social discomfort: in neither situation is there a hint of irony or charm in his tone. When juxtaposed, each character’s traits stand out more clearly: Arthur’s mastery of cool and controlled interaction and style versus Art’s clumsy and emotional blurtings.
From the beginning Chabon establishes what will be the pivotal problem that haunts Art throughout the novel: his sexuality. Arthur makes no effort to hide it. Art remarks upon their first meeting: “I hadn’t a doubt that he was gay, that he was taking advantage of our having crossed paths to make good his short initial attempt in the library, and that he probably supposed that I was as homosexual as he. People made that mistake” (16). Art shows fear acknowledging his homosexual feelings while also noting how strangely captivating he finds Arthur. His admission that others have mistaken him for gay reveals his own underlying doubts about his own sexuality. Yet it is clear that Art is not necessarily a closeted homosexual. He has had girlfriends in the past, and nothing indicates that the reason that those relationships fell apart was because of latent homosexual urges. In his relationship with Phlox, he is both physically and intellectually attracted to her. Their troubles seem only to revolve around Arthur.

Art’s confusion over his sexuality is made more explicit when he remembers his lonely formative years, telling himself that due to his lack of a girlfriend he must be gay, only to have a former crush, Julie Lefkowitz, disabuse him of that idea, though never completely. “Once in a while I would meet an enthralling man who shook, dimly but perceptibly, the foundations laid by Julie Lefkowitz, and I wonder, just for a moment, by what whim of fate I had decided that I was not a homosexual” (40). Art’s recollections establish the tenuous nature of his sexuality, but they also challenge the notion that he must be either heterosexual or homosexual.

Chabon stresses through Art’s simultaneous love for Arthur and Phlox that sexuality defies strict categorization. In exploring Art’s confusion over his homosexual
feelings, particularly in light of his heterosexual attraction, Chabon highlights the subjectivity of sexual orientation. Sociologist Paula C. Rodríguez Rust observes that bisexuality is difficult to define. She remarks, “Most people who describe themselves as attracted to both men and women, or have had sexual contact with both men and women, do not identify as bisexual” (290). She goes on to note that this is in part due to a rather fluid conception of bisexuality. For instance, some define it as equal attraction to both men and women, when that might not be the case, or, that a person might be attracted to both men and women, he or she may have differing expectations of their relationships with each gender. In any case, Rodríguez Rust asserts, “They are not in denial or lying about their sexuality; they are simply defining sexual orientation in terms of preference for one gender or the other and describing themselves honestly within that paradigm” (290).

Despite his feelings for both Phlox and Arthur, Art has difficulty coming to terms with his sexuality relative to established norms. Late in the novel, Art admits, “I guess I still believe in absolutes,” (261). However, he consistently resists his friends’ pleas for him to choose one or the other. He finally begs Arthur, “‘Don’t ask me to choose. Please’” (268). The problem that dominates Art’s mind is not whether he loves Phlox, but whether he can also love Arthur in the same way. Art’s questioning of his heterosexuality rings somewhat hollow because it is always dependent upon his feelings for Arthur, not his feelings for Phlox. Art never doubts that his previous relationships with women were based on his denial of his homosexuality. His most consistent plea to them is to allow him to love them both. Art is essentially seeking permission to embrace his hyphenation.
Though Art has long questioned whether he feels sexually attracted to men, there is every indication that Art’s romantic attraction to Arthur is specific to the individual. For instance, though Art is clearly enamored with Cleveland, there is no suggestion that he harbors any sexual attraction. It is both Art’s realization that he is sexually attracted to a man and that he is, at the same time, just as sexually attracted to a woman that causes his social anxiety.

It is this confusion over his sexuality that first illustrates Art’s status as dually marginalized within his circle of friends. Whereas Arthur is a homosexual and Phlox is not only heterosexual but openly homophobic, Art falls somewhere in the middle. Lott writes, “We know that heterosexuality is taken for granted as the norm and is thus less often the subject of discussion and analysis than the cultures of sexual minorities” (94). Like many American minorities, of whom it is often demanded that they choose one affiliation over another, Art fits that same profile in that he is both heterosexual (majority) and homosexual (minority). And while America may have a place for both, the idea that both can coexist is difficult for many people to envision. For much of the novel, Art attempts to reconcile these two pieces of himself with the conventional notions of sexuality espoused by both Arthur and Phlox. Yet, as Lott notes, “Boundaries between [various sexual minority] communities vary in fluidity and sharpness; their definitions are not fixed, as they continue to be in process and to vary” (102-3). For Art, the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual is similarly hazy.

The “duality” of Art’s sexuality does not at first provide him any insight into the human condition or sexuality. His discovery of his homosexuality so jars him that he is
often too confounded by his feelings for Arthur to make larger sense of them. He confesses to being mystified both by his sexual interest in Arthur and the latter’s interest in him. Art is sensitive to any notions of intimacy with regards to Arthur. He expresses a fear that simply having a gay friend must make him gay as well. “I was, however, insecure (and stupid) enough to imagine that the only reason Arthur had befriended me was to seduce me” (61). In Art’s recollection of his first reactions to his and Arthur’s feelings for each other, Art highlights a typical, knee-jerk homophobia. Not only does he assume that Arthur was interested in him sexually from their first meeting, but that Arthur has been plotting to trick him into bed.

Phlox expresses this type of homophobia most overtly. Despite her friendship with Arthur, she is vocal about her dislike for homosexuals. She says of Arthur “‘I think it’s disgusting…I think it’s terrible that poor Arthur is gay….Men who sleep with men are just big cowards’” (95). She later says “‘Sure they’re nice guys, they’re beautiful, and it’s a goddamn shame they’re a bunch of hideous fags” (109). Her first statement argues for the innate revolting nature of the individuals in an out-group, and by saying they are cowards, she absolves her hatred of them by suggesting that theirs is a moral flaw that could be corrected if they so chose. Her “nice guys” caveat calls to mind the conventional qualifying remark “some of my best friends” are amongst the maligned minority. It should be noted that Arthur often expresses equal distain for Phlox, despite the fact that they often choose to hang out together. Art is thus torn between the insider (Phlox) and the outsider (Arthur).
The argument made by Phlox, Arthur and Art reflect the various popular opinions expressed about the subject of bisexuality. Esterberg remarks, “Bisexuality is seen by some as the ‘natural’ state of sexuality – what everyone would ‘naturally’ be before society has its way with you. Yet others argue that bisexuality doesn’t exist. Bisexuals are ‘really’ straight or gay or something else – or would be, if society hadn’t had its way with them” (278). Neither Arthur nor Phlox believe that bisexuality is possible, and argue that Art is merely confused as to whether he is gay or straight. Art is similarly uncertain; however, his doubt stems from his adherence to the idea that one must either be heterosexual or homosexual, and he falls somewhere in the middle.

Cleveland attempts to clarify Art’s dilemma. While Art continually struggles within himself to decide whether he is gay or straight, Cleveland opines, “‘I think you’re just clowning around with your sexual chemistry set’” (237). Though his is a more open-minded view of sexuality—that anyone can be expected to experiment with sexuality—Cleveland suggests, like Arthur and Phlox, that Art would be expected to choose one in the end because they cannot co-exist.

Despite his eventual embrace of his bisexuality, there is a certain amount of envy in Art’s view of Arthur. Whereas he has had to constantly fight his homosexual urges, Arthur fully embraces his sexuality, openly talking about his relationships with men. However, Art is unable to come to terms with his own, consistently trying to convince himself that his infatuation with Arthur is simply platonic. At one point, realizing he has been admiring Arthur’s physique while lying on the beach, Art finally allows himself to come to terms with his feelings about Arthur: “I was startled into thinking the sentence
that I had all summer forbidden myself to think: I was in love with Arthur Lecomte. I longed for him” (163). Arthur is able to express without shame what Art himself fights against. What is confusing for Art is crystal clear for Arthur. Art strives to emulate the self-confidence and comfort Arthur shows. However, Arthur’s homosexuality conforms to established ideas of human sexuality: either gay or straight, whereas Art’s hyphenated sexuality, both bisexual, is more complex. Clarity is easy when there are no competing factors in need of nuance.

Art’s coexistence in two, seemingly incompatible groups gives him the ability to sympathize with both Arthur and Phlox, and it is primarily why he works so hard to keep them both as friends and lovers. In the end, both leave him. Phlox leaves because of her homophobia. She says in a letter, “‘You must know that what you are now doing disgusts me utterly’” (229). And Arthur leaves because of Art’s father’s homophobia. Arthur remarks, “‘Some of your father’s associates came to see me today’” (292). Having seen the letter in which Phlox inveighs against Art’s homosexuality, Joe dispatched some people to chase Arthur out of town. Art knew the dangers of his father’s finding out about his sexual relationship with Arthur, as well as Phlox’s reaction. For this reason he attempted to keep it secret from them. In this case, because Art can better understand those around him, it does not mean that he can communicate that understanding to others who wish to dismiss the hyphenated self.

Art’s embrace of his dual sexuality conflicts with the people populating his numerous socio-cultural circles. They often attempt to wedge Art into their own conception of human nature as it relates to themselves, rather than accepting the
uniqueness of all human conceptions of self. Art’s friends and family fail to recognize that they, too, have built their identities on a mixture of disparate experiences and emotions. Art’s struggle to discover and maintain his own sense of himself is continually compromised by others close to him who seek to enforce their own social and cultural definitions upon him. However, Art’s eventual recognition that he does not have to compromise one part of himself for another makes him an insider/outsider.

2.2 Cleveland: Looking Out and Looking In

_The Mysteries of Pittsburgh_ is, in addition to a coming out story, very much a coming-of-age story. Beginning at the end of his last year of college, and with him meeting a whole new group of friends, with whom he spends nearly all of his time, Art is essentially starting his life over again and from scratch. Yet the group that he is joining is composed of people with a long history together. As previously discussed, while Art appears equally as infatuated with Cleveland as with Arthur, Art does not see Cleveland as an object of desire. Rather, it is reminiscent of the type of “innocent homosexuality,” meaning a non-sexual love between two men, that Leslie A. Fielder describes in _Love and Death in the American Novel_ (1966). Fielder notes that in American literature, “the tie between male and male is not only considered innocent, it is taken for the very symbol of innocence itself; for it is imagined as the only institutional bond in a paradisal world in which there are no (heterosexual) marriages” (350).

As with Arthur, Art feels an immediate kinship with Cleveland, simply through the early stories about him. Yet he laments early on, before they have met, that he has already missed too much to be truly a part of their circle. “I saw in their fancies, the great
epoch, the time when Cleveland and Arthur had been two and angelic and fast, was long
gone. Here I am, I thought...at the start of the first summer of my new life, and they tell
me I’ve come in late and missed everything” (39). While their willingness to include him
is unquestioned, Art senses his slight isolation from the first. He embodies that anxiety
that exists from his anomalous status within the group, representing “that boundary case
whose very lack of belonging to a recognizable group creates a sense of unease” (Biale et
al. 5).

Within that circle of friends, Art’s relationship with Cleveland most reveals Art’s
semi-marginality. Art first hears about Cleveland through stories of his many adventures,
as told by friends, and stories about Cleveland capture Art’s imagination long before they
meet. The mythology surrounding Cleveland defines their relationship. Art looks up to
him with a sense of awe. Yet as their bond becomes closer, and without the added
complication of sexual attraction that he shares with Arthur, Art begins to manifest the
uncanny understanding of Cleveland that is the product of his being both a part of and
separated from the group.

Cleveland provides Art with a different brand of rebellion than does Arthur.
Whereas Arthur challenges many social mores, with his open, unashamed homosexuality,
Cleveland is anti-authoritarian. At first blush, he is the typical rebel: leather jacketed,
motorcycle riding, beer swilling, profane, in touch with the local mafia thugs, and
unapologetic. Yet Art quickly discovers that Cleveland is bright, considerate, and without
prejudice. He challenges Art’s view of the city and its people by introducing him to a
class of people who are both intelligent yet down on their luck, whom Allen Ginsberg
might describe as “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked” (9). Through Art’s recollection, Cleveland is emblematic of the promising young people left behind by poverty.

Like Art’s father, in his early years, Cleveland is a man who is desperate and broke, and someone who looks to the mob as a way out of his poverty. Unlike Joe, however, Cleveland lacks the education and skill to rise up through the ranks and is a low-level thug. Art exists between the world of his father and that of Cleveland. For Cleveland, Art’s relationship to the mob is a way for him to move up. When Art protests his lack of influence, Cleveland says, “Your father’s a wise guy, Bechstein, he’s big. I told you. And by extension, see, you’re big too. You partake of the bigness of your father” (201). Cleveland essentially assigns him with the title of mob insider, even though his father blocks him from the business. Art is more connected than Cleveland, because he is somewhat acquainted with mafia people, but less than his father, neither truly a part of the mob, nor wholly apart.

Art’s self-identification—he is not a mafia member who can do Cleveland any favors—is trumped by Cleveland’s insistence that Art must be a part of the mob because of his father. Horace Kallen wrote in “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot” (1915), “whatever else he changes, he cannot change his grandfather” (78). Cleveland’s assumption and resistance to Art’s protest underscore this very idea. Regardless of the social and cultural associations that Art recognizes as his own, those outside of himself—even those who know him well—project their own classifications upon him based on his familial history.
Art feels a compulsion to keep his two worlds separate, and Cleveland’s entrance into it creates a sense of unease for him. Art realizes that despite his best efforts Cleveland “would breach the barrier that stood between my family and my life, and scale the wall that I was” (130). Art is very aware of Cleveland’s, at times myopic, motivation, and worried about the disastrous results of such a meeting, which he fears will further destabilize his already tenuous family life. Art’s father warns him not to hang around with “punks” and greedy “little morons who give their money to other greedy little morons” (104). And Cleveland is one such greedy little moron.

Art’s resistance to Cleveland’s meeting with his father is in large part due to his unique understanding of both worlds, an understanding Cleveland clearly lacks despite his involvement. While he does not himself belong to, or work for, the “family,” Art is caught between his father, a high level person who is largely insulated from legal repercussions for his actions, and Cleveland, a small timer who resides at the bottom where the fall guys generally reside. What Art can see that Cleveland cannot is that his drive to rise up in the organization, coupled with his lack of decorum or tact, will ultimately end in his ruin.

It is even clearer to Art, given his father’s journey into the mafia, that Cleveland feels stuck where he is and needs to convince himself otherwise. When Cleveland brings Art on his collection route, Art is dumbstruck by his shaking down of the poor and unfortunate. After Art challenges Cleveland on the morality of his job, Cleveland yells “‘Can’t you see why I do this?’” and unconvincingly suggests that he enjoys the work (190). What is clear to Art is that Cleveland does not possess the education that Art’s
father does, which he would need to have if he wished to advance beyond his current place.

For Art the real fear for Cleveland is the same fear that resonates within him whenever he thinks about his mother: that the mob will kill you if you fail. Knowing Cleveland as he does, and knowing his father and his father’s associates as he does, Art understands that Cleveland’s further involvement with the organization will get him killed. In fact, Cleveland, in trying to express his confidence in his ability to do the work, quotes the Bo Diddley song “Who Do You Love” saying “‘I wear a rattlesnake for a necktie’” (191). Tellingly, he omits the line that follows shortly thereafter: “I turned twenty-two and I don’t mind dying.”

Cleveland eventually meets with Joe, much to the displeasure of Art, gets a job breaking into a house to steal jewelry, and is eventually chased by the police to the Cloud Factory (an old industrial plant), where he falls to his death. While on the run, Cleveland calls Art hoping that he can orchestrate some assistance from his father, but it is to no avail. Cleveland tells him to call “‘all the magic names you know’” (282). Though Art tells him that he does not have the connections that Cleveland thinks, he does call his father who refuses to answer.

With Cleveland’s death, we see how Art exemplifies the outsiderness of the insider/outsider dichotomy. Art is, in Biale’s words, “doubly marginal” (27). He is neither fully a part of his own family, nor is he as close to Cleveland and Arthur as they are to each other. Cleveland still does not entirely understand Art; therefore he does not know whether to believe him or not, nor is he afraid to push Art to get what he wants.
Additionally, Art is removed from the organization. Therefore, he does not have the influence to sway their decisions. The death of Cleveland is a testament to the limitations of Art’s insight. He is ignored by all sides.

Despite the tragic ending, Arthur moving away—Phlox having broken up with him, and Cleveland’s death—Art does come away with a greater sense of his own identity. He admits that “all of this is not true remembrance but the ruinous work of nostalgia, which obliterates the past, and no doubt, as usual, I have exaggerated everything” (297). This admission suggests that this summer was truly the seminal time of his life, and that this is a time he regularly revisits in his mind.

However, Art’s admission at the end is even more telling in that it undercuts his reliability as a narrator. The reader is left to question how much of what is told about Arthur’s easy social graces, or Cleveland’s ultra-masculine hipness, can be believed. Art’s possible misremembering and admission of overstatement suggest that for him the actual events mean less than the recollection of the overall experience. Cleveland’s first appearance on a motorcycle and sporting a leather jacket and an attitude is a sort of caricature of rebellious cool. Arthur’s early depictions as overly suave and socially savvy are similarly hyperbolic in tone. Yet Art tells his story in a way that shows each character’s vision of the world and his or her place within it. Though his memory may have faded on the exact details, in his narration of the novel Art reveals that it is through knowing these people that he came to a fuller understanding of himself, as well as them.
2.3 The Generation Gap

Though Art’s Jewishness plays a rather minor role in his life outside of his family, at least overtly, it is in his relationship with his father that the significance of his Judaism emerges more clearly. In *The Jewish Writer in America* (1971), Allen Guttman notes, “Generational conflict was probably inevitable as the children of immigrants found themselves caught between the ideals of their parents and the realities of American conditions” (49). In this case, Guttman is talking specifically about conflicts between the first and second generations in immigrant families.

In their essay, “Hansen’s Law of ‘Third-Generation Return’ and the Study of American Religio-Ethnic Groups” (1968), Eugene I. Bender and George Kagiwada cite numerous scholars and studies that support “Hansen’s Law,” developed in 1938 by Marcus L. Hansen. Hansen argued that while the second generation of immigrants typically moved away from their ethnic roots in favor of a more secular Americanism, the third generation tended to embrace the culture of their grandparents. In *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955), Will Herberg notes that third-generation Jews broke with the pattern established by other ethnic communities. Herberg observes, “the third generation of American Jews, instead of somehow finally getting rid of their Jewishness, as the Italians were getting rid of their ‘Italianness’ and the Poles of their ‘Polishness,’ actually began to *reassert* [sic] their Jewish identification and to *return* [sic] to their Jewishness” (201).

Bender and Kagiwada point out that, unlike many other immigrant groups, “The third generation [of Jews] did not get rid of their ‘Jewishness’—on the contrary, they
reasserted it” (363). Bender and Kagiwada argue that the third-generation renewal of heightened Jewish identification occurred for two reasons: “(1) among the Jews alone, the religious community bore the same name as the ethnic community…and (2)…Jews were far better equipped to partake of and contribute to the success of denominational pluralism, applying their increasingly middle-class ‘outer-directed’ values and lifestyle” (363).

Many scholars agree with Hansen’s contention regarding third-generation American Jews. However, contemporary scholars, beginning in the late 1980s and continuing today, have noticed a shift back toward secular Americanism amongst many fourth generation Jews. In “Democracy and the Melting Pot Reconsidered” (1989), David Hollinger observes that social mobility has changed, relative to ethnicity, in the decades since Kallen’s work was published. He notes that at the time of Kallen’s writing, the act of “Americanization” was a movement toward a distinctly British WASPism. While granting the importance of Kallen’s work to the democratization of American society, Hollinger argues, “the domination by distinctly WASP elites has diminished during the last half century. It is easier than ever for the non-WASPs to feel that American traditions are truly theirs, available to be built upon or to be reformulated as one sees fit” (99).

In Beyond Ethnicity (1986), Werner Sollors asserts that as Americans “we are all third generation,” or at least we think of ourselves as such (230). By this Sollors means that most contemporary Americans all consider themselves fully “American,” rather than identifying with the ethnic origins of their grandparents. He notes, “If we are all third generation (at least as an ideal), we may have parents who, for all practical purposes, are
more ethnic than we are; but we can transcend them by invoking real or imaginary grandparents or founding fathers” (230). To put it another way, third generation Americans have the ability to create an identity based upon an American ancestry that best suits them. In this case, Art’s embrace of his bisexuality, de-emphasizing of his Jewishness, and rejection of his father’s plans for him as well his father’s worldview reflect such a self-determined identity.

In fact, sociologist Herbert Gans predicted this trend. Bender and Kagiwada note that Gans was skeptical that the “third-generation return” was a return to the traditional ethnic culture. Instead, Gans argued that the cohesiveness of the Jewish community he observed derived primarily from “attachment to Judaism as the minority status of Jews” (364). He further suggested that “both these factors are growing weaker, and if social barriers imposed on Jewry by the non-Jewish world continue to decrease, conceivably the Jewish community could disappear altogether in the distant future” (364).

Jewish communities in America clearly have not disappeared, and I do not suggest that they will. However, Chabon shows the complexion of American Jewishness changing. Art Bechstein is not a character primarily defined by his Jewishness. In Mysteries, the third generation to which Herberg and others refer to is the generation of Joe Bechstein. As Joe identifies more strongly to his Jewish identity, and attempts to dictate to his son the proper way to act, Art has come to embrace a more generically American identity. Through Art, Chabon shows American Jews beginning to follow in the footsteps of other, European, immigrant communities, becoming more outwardly secular.
Chabon shows that these clashes between fathers and sons continue as each successive generation defines for itself how to be a man, a Jew, and an American through Art’s constant clashes with Joe. Their inability to find agreement results in Art’s partial estrangement from his own family. As the novel progresses we see that while he is aware of the basic nature of his father’s affiliation with the mob, Art has little real knowledge of the extent that his father’s business has affected his family life. It is clear throughout that he and his father have a strained relationship that is only exacerbated by the nature of his father’s business and his mother’s death, which occurred when Art was young.

The generational divide between Art and his father is most clear in his disapproval of Art’s lifestyle. Though throughout most of the novel he is unaware of Art’s physical relationship with Arthur, his father fears that he has strayed too far from behavioral and career expectations. In the first pages of the novel, we see Joe critical of Art’s lack of motivation and sardonic sense of humor. When asked of his plans, Art responds, “I anticipate a coming season of dilated time and of women all in disarray” to which his father responds that “Claire [Art’s ex-girlfriend] had had an unfortunate influence on my speech” (10). He later diagnoses Art as “devout narcissist” and had said he worried that I might be ‘doomed to terminal adolescence’” (11).

From the first time he is introduced, Joe Bechstein exhibits a typical concern for the welfare of his son. This concern often manifests in the expressed desire for the child to accept the parent’s values without question. Joe wishes Art would adopt his own version of manhood. Chabon highlights the frustration inherent in the parent/child relationship, particularly evident when, as with Art, the child is newly striking out on his
own, and figuring out for himself just what kind of adult he will become. Art’s interactions with his father underscore the reflexive rebellion of child against parent at this time of self-discovery.

Interestingly, Joe “the Egg” is remarkable because his gangsterism goes against the stereotype described by Paul Breines as “the Jewish weakling and the gentle Jew” (3). In *Tough Jews* (1990), Breines traces how “in American as well as in Jewish American eyes, images of Jewish wimps and nerds are being supplanted by those of the hardy, bronzed kibbutznik, the Israeli paratrooper, and the Mossad (Israeli intelligence) agent,” what he cleverly refers to as “Rambowitz” characters (3). Breines recounts the origins of the stereotype of the weak Jew with historical context undercutting such assertions. For instance, he notes that at the turn of the twentieth century Eastern-European Jews occupied the same tenement buildings with other immigrant communities. He writes, “That oppressive, impoverished, and crime-breeding world was bound to tarnish the seemingly unblemished Jewish record of upstanding citizenship” (105). Breines adds, “Jewish gangsters, prostitutes, pimps, youth gangs, ruffians, and even assassins proliferated, as often as not operating in tandem with their subsequently better known Italian and Irish counterparts” (105).

Chabon contrasts the stereotype of Jewish success in America, which generally involves shopkeeping or working in the garment business, much like the eponymous David Levinsky in Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), with this “tough Jew” gangsterism. Joe calls to mind the Jewish gangster Benya Krik of Isaac Babel’s “Odessa Stories” as well as the various Jewish organized crime figures who are also a
part of American Jewish history: Arnold Rothstein, Dutch Shultz and more importantly, Meyer Lansky, who was the famous mob accountant for Lucky Luciano and Bugsy Siegel (another Jewish mobster of note) and clearly a template for Joe. Chabon’s Joe Bechstein is of a piece with these gangsters, rising out of poverty through organized crime. Joe’s going against type as a “tough Jew” subtly calls to mind Art’s own rebellion against both him and societal conceptions about sexuality.

Though Joe explicitly does not want Art to follow in his occupational footsteps, Art is kept at enough of a distance from his business to the point where his career as a Mafia accountant is seen as an ordinary, white-collar job. Art recalls, “When, on the afternoon of my bar mitzvah, my father first revealed to me his true profession, I enthusiastically declared that I wanted to follow in his glamorous footsteps. This made him frown. He had long ago resolved to buy college and ‘unsoiled hands’” (20). Art goes on to recount how his father stumbled into the Maggio mafia family, due to his business degree and the need for money after the death of his uncle. But Joe is ashamed of his work, especially when confronted by his idolizing son. Art says that “he forbade me to admire him for it. I saw that it inspired in him an angry shame, so I came to associate it with shame…which seemed to separate me in two different ways, from both my parents” (20). It’s clear that Art felt an initial connection to his father. However, Joe’s shielding of Art from such a large part of his life has resulted in a tenuous, almost mechanical, connection between the two characters. It is because of that separation that Art becomes an insider/outsider in his own family.
Similarly, Cleveland sees life in the mob not only as a way to make good money, but as a job with advancement opportunities. Chabon’s somewhat casual depiction of gangsterism suggests the ease in which someone can fall into a life of organized crime. It also points to how poverty and a lack of other viable options can lead to generally “good” people becoming involved in criminality.

Art and Joe’s relationship is also representative of the immigrant Jew/acculturated Jew dichotomy. Art notes that while Joe “was in many ways a man of modern tastes, for music, hats, and hotels, he looked to the Depression,” thereby establishing his father as a throwback to an era of glamorized gangsters like the aforementioned mob men. As mentioned above, like many of the immigrant men who ended up as members of crime families, Joe Bechstein stumbled into “the life” and never left. It was not necessarily the life he chose, nor would he choose it for his son, though it provided for the family. Joe wants Art to be both successful and true to the ideals that he has brought with him, a connection to where he came from, even if he cannot live up to that standard himself. Art describes him as “born forty years too late” and it is clear that he wishes to pass on to Art those aspects that most connect him to the past (102).

Art represents the acculturated Jew. His religion and ethnicity do not play a significant role in his relationships with his friends, but it does with his father. In fact, Art’s love life is remarkably cosmopolitan. Each girl that Art dates, or discusses having dated in the past, are gentiles, whom his father instantly disapproves. Before meeting Phlox, Joe remarks, “‘You dumped your crazy girlfriend and got yourself another one, who’s also frivolous’” (166). To add to the diversity inherent in Art’s taste in women,
Phlox herself has gone through several identity phases. She says, “I’ve done the punk thing, the biker’s girl thing, the seamstress thing, the prep school thing, and sort of the housewife thing” and she had also spent time as a devout Christian (101). (Ironically, for all of Phlox’s identity shifts, as we have seen, she is perhaps the most rigid ideas about “proper” sexual identification.) Art’s dating Phlox connects him to many of the subcultures of American society, none of which are a connection to the past, Jewish history and culture that his father prefers. Art sees himself as more American, or even white, than as a Jew.

Even more telling is the dinner shared by Art, Phlox and Joe. Over dinner, Joe “explained the Diaspora” and discussed his wife, whose life and passing he is angered to learn Art had talked to Phlox about (174). When Phlox steps away he asks “Don’t you tell her anything about your mother?” (176). For Joe, remembering the past and one’s personal history is as important, if not more important, than keeping with contemporary trends and ideas. Whereas Art sees a positive forward movement, not being constrained by ethnicity (or sexuality) when choosing a partner, Joe sees an abandonment of the past, which for Joe insults those who worked hard to make a more comfortable life.

Joe’s resentment at what he perceives to be Art’s cavalier attitude toward his past is also seen in his frustration over Art’s choice to spend the summer working a low paying job at a bookstore rather than applying himself and making more money. He says “I don’t know what to think of you…look what you’re doing this summer. What are you doing this summer? Working at that ridiculous bookstore. You can’t be satisfied with that job” (106). Despite what he says, for Joe, the real question is not job satisfaction, but
monetary success. For Joe, taking a job that is beneath Art’s talents and education is tantamount to insulting those who did not have the opportunities offered to him. Joe says, “‘You always profess such a distain for the business of your family. And those are men who, yes, don’t have the education you and I do, but who’ve been working hard all their lives….And now you, Mr. Academic, you’re hanging around with punks.’” (104).

Joe’s complaints to Art are reminiscent of Karen Brodkin’s description of the values traditionally held by many Jewish parents for their children. In How Jews Became White Folks (1998), she notes that her parents “believe that Jewish success, like their own, was due to hard work and a high value placed on education” (32). She suggests that the focus on the importance of scholarship played an integral role in the success of many Jewish immigrants in America, even before their “whitening.” Unlike most parents, however, Joe Bechstein has the ability and the willingness to use his underworld connections to force Art to act according to his own perceptions of proper behavior, as evidenced by his forcing Arthur to leave town.

Moreover, Chabon shows the many ways in which Art’s dually related and disconnected relationship to his family is more confusing than illuminating. Whereas Art knows vaguely what his father does, he is often protected from the actual day-to-day operations. He is therefore left to speculate as to what the consequences might be for being the son of a mob accountant. This is first shown in his first meeting with Cleveland. Art is working at a bookstore when an unknown man drives up on a motorcycle and loudly asks for a book titled: “‘Son of a Gangster, by Art Bechstein’” (62). Art immediately worries that he “was being called to account for my father’s sins; old scores
were being settled” (63). Art’s removal from his father’s business, while knowing a bit about who he works for, allows for his imagination to run wild when confronted with strange or unexpected situations. Since he has neither told anyone exactly who is father is, nor is he allowed to interact with any of his father’s business associates, he is forced to think the worst is about to happen.

Art assumes that he is about to be kidnapped or murdered because of his father. Art realizes near the end of the novel, after Cleveland has fallen to his death, that his mother died precisely as a result of his father’s association with the Mafia. While in the hospital, his uncle Lenny tells Art how worried his now estranged father was about him and lets slip an errant “ever since.” Art, finally coming to terms with what has happened to his mother, replies, “‘Ever since what, Lenny? They killed my mother instead of him?’” (290). While the suspicion had been there, he notes that he “must have sensed that I had been lied to,” Art is guarded from that world and can therefore never truly understand it (20).

Unlike his ill-defined status in his circle of friends, Art’s outsiderness is intentionally orchestrated by his father. Joe wants to limit Art’s exposure as much as he can, to prevent him from suffering the same fate as his wife. After Cleveland’s death, Art begins to put the pieces together, assuming that his father had orchestrated Cleveland’s downfall noting that everyone close to his father knew “that ever since his wife got dead, Joe Bechstein had been funny about that boy” (277). This “funniness” is then further explained when Art finally realizes just how much sway his father has had on his life without his knowing. “It would have never occurred to me that my success at remaining
aloof from the business of my family all that time might be the fruit of my father’s will as much as my own” (281). Because the separation was not of his design, Art lacks control over what he knows and what he sees.

*The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* put the twenty-three-year-old Michael Chabon on the literary map. With this novel he exhibited a vision and understanding of his world that it uncommon amongst writers of his age. Chabon displays an insight into the murkiness of human sexuality that illuminates for his readers its full spectrum. Writing at a time when homosexuality was largely considered to be aberrant behavior, and homophobia was largely accepted and the source of much comedy, Chabon delved into the mind of someone struggling with his own sexuality, and the judgmental hatred that is so harmful to those who were not hetersexual. Through Art Bechstein, he takes the reader on a journey of self-discovery that is simultaneously audacious, funny, touching, heartbreaking, uplifting and entertaining, yet nuanced enough to never give in to gratuitous sentimentality.

Through Art Bechstein Chabon forces his readers to rethink their conception of Jewishness in America. Art’s Jewishness is a part of who he is, but not his sole defining characteristic. As Roth, Bellow, Malamud, Ozick, and Singer built upon the work of Sholem Aleichem, Abraham Cahan, and Henry Roth, to illustrate their experiences of Jewishness in America, so Chabon does the same. For Chabon, Jewishness in America is inclusive and cosmopolitan. It is a part of one’s self, but not the sole defining characteristic. Chabon depicts an America that is more accepting of Jews than that of his predecessors, and therefore the cultural heritage of his characters is one to be revered, but
not a source of anxiety. By so fearlessly taking on these two critical subjects, Chabon stakes his claim to a place in the American-Jewish literary canon and announces himself as an important, fresh and challenging voice in American literature.
CHAPTER 3

Wonder Boys: A Portrait of the Artist

After the publication and subsequent resounding praise for *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, Michael Chabon set to work on his second novel, one that would burst out from the familiar confines of Pittsburgh. *Fountain City* was to be a sweeping novel about the building of the perfect baseball stadium. However, after five years of work, fifteen hundred pages, and no end in sight, he put the project on the back burner and set out to write a novel about a novelist who had seen great success, been the toast of the literary world, and now found himself mired in a book so sprawling that he had no idea how to finish it.

In 2010, Chabon finally published a hundred-page portion of *Fountain City* in *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*. Out of his own experiences with the internal struggle to meet the perceived lofty expectations brought on by the success of his first novel, Chabon imagined a new protagonist, Grady Tripp, a celebrated novelist who is similarly stricken, not with writer’s block, but by too many ideas and an inability to connect them into a coherent work.

Chabon recalls that while his wife, Ayelet Waldman, devoted herself to six weeks of intense study for the bar exam, he put *Fountain City* aside and “opened a new file called X. I started to write, and quickly found the voice of that shaggy old watcher in the shadows,” who would become Grady Tripp (*Maps* 148). Twelve weeks later, “file X”
was sent out as the first draft of what would become his second novel, *Wonder Boys* (1995).

*Wonder Boys* returns to Chabon’s familiar Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The novel follows Grady Tripp, a novelist and professor of creative writing at a small college, during the frenzied weekend of the Word Fest literary festival. At the beginning of the novel, Grady’s life is a shambles. He is struggling to finish his novel, also called *Wonder Boys*, his marriage is falling apart, and his mistress, a fellow teacher, finds out that she is pregnant with his child. Grady’s chosen method of dealing with all of his stressors is smoking copious amounts of marijuana and taking pills. Over those few days, he realizes that his inability to finish his novel is emblematic of the disorder in his own life.

As the novel progresses, Grady’s mistakes compound as he befriends a shy student, James Leer, and introduces him to drugs and sex. James drunkenly sleeps with Grady’s editor, Terry Crabtree. Grady shoots his mistress’s dog and keeps it in the trunk of his car, as well as a dead python he accidentally drives over, and is shot at by a pair of gangsters outside of a sporting goods store, while trying to retrieve his stolen car. Speeding away from the gunshots, Grady’s manuscript flutters out of an open car door.

Amidst the chaos, Grady takes a trip to his in-laws’ house with James to celebrate the Passover Seder. Though played for laughs through the erratic behavior of Grady’s sister-in-law, Deb, and the drunkenness of James, the Seder scene introduces Irv Warshaw, Grady’s father-in-law, who is the one figure who offers Grady a calming presence. Grady is not Jewish; however, he expresses an affinity for Judaism. The Seder
is the turning point of the novel, and Irv’s patience with his family amidst the commotion force Grady to come to terms with his own life gone out of control.

*Wonder Boys* is an interesting novel in Chabon’s body of work because in it he begins to more fully investigate the ideas that will continue to resonate throughout the next several years and books, but from the perspective of a non-Jewish character. Through Grady Tripp’s hazy recollection of this particular weekend Chabon comments on the role of Judaism in contemporary American life and on the role of the novelist in his or her own work. Like works of classical literature, Grady’s vision of his past, and the story that he molds around it, helps him understand himself, his values, and ultimately his own psychological origins.

Additionally, Chabon lays the groundwork in this novel for later, more in depth, studies of the way in which folklore and mythologies compose much of history both through his interviews and essays and by mining his own past as a creative writing student and young novelist. By simultaneously, and sometimes contradictorily, encouraging and discouraging comparisons between himself and Grady, Chabon contributes to a sort of myth making surrounding the creation of *Wonder Boys*.

When he finally set *Fountain City* aside, Chabon began returning to more comfortable literary territory, both in setting and in scope. In his essay, “Diving into the Wreck,” Chabon remarks that the “new book seemed to want to take place in Pittsburgh, and thus…I returned to the true fountain city, the mysterious source of so many of my
ideas” (Maps 148). In addition, like the three-month time frame of Mysteries, Wonder Boys takes place in the short span of a weekend, unlike the decades-long narrative of Fountain City. Despite the similar settings, with this novel Chabon shifts his focus from a young man, just graduated and looking to make his mark on the world, to an older man who has had success but is faced with inevitable failure.

Both novels are about self-discovery. Mysteries is the story of Art Bechstein’s discovering his sexuality. Each novel is about the nature of learning and self-realization. Art’s and Grady’s images of themselves are challenged over a short period of time. Whereas Art is a blank slate, learning about himself for the first time, Grady is forced to realize that he is no longer the man he once was or believed himself to be. Grady’s view of his literary successes and failures, coupled with those of his personal life, force him to question how he chooses to live and how that relates to his creativity, or lack thereof.

Wonder Boys touches on many of the themes established in The Mysteries of Pittsburgh: identity, sexuality, success and failure, and generational divides. Though Chabon approaches those themes from a decidedly different vantage point, the character James Leer, Grady’s student and eventual protégé, shares much with Art Bechstein. Like Art, James is a young, college-aged man who hails from a wealthy family, yet feels disaffected and is struggling to find himself in the world. Interestingly, like Art, James also realizes his homosexuality over the course of the novel, and does so as a result of a

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1 This essay first appeared in Swing, though the version used here is from Chabon’s essay collection Maps and Legends.
chance meeting with a more experienced and confident man. Yet sexuality is more of an afterthought in *Wonder Boys*.

The characters of James Leer and Art Bechstein should not be confused as mirror images, or doppelgangers. However, their names do suggest the differences in their character. The name “Art” hints at the desire to live openly, celebrating the uniqueness of his character as a thing of beauty. Leer implies one who watches from the shadows and is interested in remaining inconspicuous. James is a much darker character than Art, and more overtly depressed. Whereas Art is confused by his homosexual feelings, James affects no particular sexual proclivity. James’ own discovery of his sexuality is treated less as a revelation and more as a matter-of-fact.

Relatedly, both Art and James are Jews whose Jewishness does not loom particularly large in their day-to-day life: Art’s is only related through memories marking important dates, such as his bar mitzvah, and James is effectively irreligious and the Jewishness of his ancestors remains undiscovered until the end of the novel. *Wonder Boys* more explicitly illustrates the ways in which Chabon sees contemporary Jewishness in America, though it could be argued that the very fact that Art’s Jewishness plays so little a role in *Mysteries* is a tacit statement about many American Jews themselves. Nevertheless, while advocating a broad view of Judaism that is not necessarily limited to religious belief, Chabon shows his deep affection for the religion, ironically, through the eyes of a gentile.

The scholarship on *Wonder Boys* generally falls into two camps: discussions of the work as a “campus novel” and as an examination of the creative mind and authorship.
It is unsurprising that *Wonder Boys* attracts attention as a “campus novel;” its protagonist is a writing professor, the action takes place largely on a college campus or the surrounding buildings and homes, and the event underlying the plot is “Wordfest,” an annual writing conference. In “It’s a Small World, After All: Assessing the Contemporary Campus Novel” (2004), Robert F. Scott sees Chabon’s second novel as a part of a long tradition of novelists who have been drawn to the genre, which features “the absurdity and despair of university life; the colorful, often neurotic personalities who inhabit academia; and the ideological rivalries which thrive in campus communities” (82). Scott argues that *Wonder Boys*, which boasts nearly all of the aforementioned characteristics of the “campus novel,” puts Chabon in the company of many other talented, twentieth-century novelists who have been drawn to the genre.

In “The Rise of the Academic Novel” (2012), Jeffery J. Williams argues that *Wonder Boys* is emblematic of a prominent strain of, what he terms, the “academic novel,” which “turns on the mid-life crisis of a professor, reassessing his job and life” (571). In this case, according to Williams, Grady Tripp gains a sort of spiritual renewal after years of failure to live up to the artistic promise of his youth. In each case, *Wonder Boys* fits neatly with other “campus novels” of the time.

Other scholars have focused their attention on how the novel approaches the act of writing as a discipline in specific, and literary culture in general. They note that Chabon’s picture of the literary life is not a pretty one. In “Slouching towards Grubnet: The Author in the Age of Publicity” (1996), Gerald Howard argues that *Wonder Boys* is an example of “an emerging literature of disgust” (48). Citing Grady’s inability to finish
his novel, the absurdly boring yet self-congratulatory Wordfest, and the overt depression of almost everyone involved, Howard observes, “Wonder Boys is littered with casualties of the literary life” (48). In “Michael Chabon’s Imaginary Jews” (2008), D. G. Myers points out that “Tripp is the creature of his own writing; he experiences it rather than generating it” (575). He adds that the only words of wisdom Grady offers his students is that writing and suffering go hand in hand. Myers concludes, turning his focus away from Grady and toward Chabon himself, “This is the confession of a young writer drifting anxiously upon the winds of his talent, uncertain where he might be borne next” (576).

Wonder Boys is, in part, a novel about how one copes with failure. The title calls attention to both Chabon’s early success with The Mysteries of Pittsburgh, which made him a literary “wonder boy,” and the fear of becoming a “one-hit-wonder.” Chabon dealt with his own inability to finish his novel by creating Grady Tripp. Having abandoned the doomed Fountain City because of its overly complex and irreversibly convoluted mishmash of characters, plot twists and thematic elements, his seemingly simpler Wonder Boys laid the groundwork for his more expansive novels that follow, most notably The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay and The Yiddish Policemen’s Union.

3.1 Portrait of the Artist

Perhaps the most obvious connection to make in reading Wonder Boys is the relationship between Chabon and the novel’s narrator and fellow writer, Grady Tripp. Both Chabon and Grady struggled for years with texts that were unworkable. Both Chabon and Grady abandon their project, giving it up as a lost cause. Grady’s years-long
struggles with writing his fourth novel, *Wonder Boys*, and its eventual loss to the streets of Pittsburgh, can be read as emblematic of Chabon’s own exercise in creative futility.

And in many ways, Chabon encourages such a reading when describing his own six-year struggle to write *Fountain City*. While it would be inaccurate to argue that Grady Tripp is intended to be a fictional Michael Chabon, the similarities in their novelistic failures cannot be ignored. Chabon’s subsequent connecting of his own experiences with that of his novel’s protagonist initiates a fascinating blur between reality and fiction, between historical fact and apocryphal stories that play an enormous role in his works that follow *Wonder Boys*.

Chabon remarks that there was a fundamental psychological difference in writing his first novel as compared to the second. He notes: “I had no readers [while writing *Mysteries*], no book contract, no reputation, nothing but an MFA thesis to be written and a vague sense that in stringing together the seven thousand sentences of that thesis I was forging an identity for myself in the world as a novelist—or else failing abjectly to do so…I could feel myself succeeding in my ambition, or so I thought, with each new chapter I wrote” (Maps 146). Yet he recognizes the starkly different pressures and overall experience of writing the follow-up to such a critically and commercially successful debut. He writes:

> Where *Mysteries* had been a kind of Drake’s voyage, a wild jaunt in a trim ship to make marvelous discoveries and conduct raucous pirate raids on the great ports of American literature, *Fountain City* was more like the journey of Lewis and Clark, a long, often dismal tramp through the vast
terrain in pursuit of a grand but fundamentally mistaken prize. Mosquitoes, sweltering heat, grave doubts, flawed maps—and, in my case, no Pacific Ocean at the end. (146-7)

Chabon goes on to note that the most frustrating aspect of writing *Fountain City* was his inability to find a coherent progression and flow for his new novel. The above quote is typical of Chabon’s metaphor-laden essay style, but it communicates quite clearly the differences between the newness and the adventure of writing a first novel, and the grind of a second novel burdened with the great anticipation of an eager audience. This sense of writing being an arduous and endless slog through innumerable disconnected ideas is evident in Grady’s creative troubles in writing *Wonder Boys* and underscores Howard’s assertion of the grim picture of a writer’s life Chabon paints in the novel.

Whether it is intentional or not, Chabon effectively aids in the formation of a story around the creation of his own work. His readiness to conflate himself and his protagonist, as well as a qualified connection to his fiction and biography, is itself an act of creative invention. In effect, he invents a mythology of the creation of *Wonder Boys* and Grady Tripp. By speaking openly about how portions of his own life influenced his character, and being coy about others, he encourages further speculation amongst his readers. It is therefore important to examine more closely the connections between Chabon and Grady Tripp, as best as we can, in order to understand his burgeoning ideas regarding the role of myth and historical understanding in American life and literature.

In a 1995 interview with David Louis Edelman, Chabon speaks directly to the connection between himself and Grady Tripp saying that *Wonder Boys* “tells the story of
a writer named Grady Tripp who is even more lost in his unfinished book than I ever was. But I definitely gave Grady some of my own anguished feelings about that book I couldn’t finish.” While this admission is not surprising, especially to those who are aware of his long struggle through the writing of *Fountain City*, the connection between Chabon and Grady Tripp is edifying when we consider his later work. The Chabon/Grady relationship is reminiscent of other authors’ literary doubles, notably Philip Roth and Nathan Zuckerman. However, unlike Roth, Chabon more candidly discusses his personal connection to his protagonist than others, who often prefer to emphasize the literary license taken with real events.

The significance of Chabon’s open connection to Grady Tripp is twofold. First, it offers a unique look into the process of writing, and also, more vividly, the process—and toll on the writer—of an inability to write. It shows the added pressure that fame and reputation put on an author, and the ways in which that can derail the creative process, and in Grady’s case, his life in general. Second, Chabon’s willingness to discuss his own struggles with his second, ultimately abandoned, novel proves to be the early steps toward his later explorations of the interrelationships between history, myth, religion, and folklore that will be the foundation of several of his ensuing novels.

We are introduced to Grady Tripp as he finds himself in a predicament similar to what Chabon experienced while struggling with *Fountain City*: writing a rambling novel he cannot complete and weighed down by lofty expectations. Like Chabon himself, Grady admits, early in the novel, that his trouble with finishing his own follow-up has as much to do with the success of his previous efforts, as it does with the novel itself. He
recalls that his “third novel, *The Land Downstairs*, had won a PEN award and, at twelve thousand copies, sold twice as well as both its predecessors combined, and it in its aftermath…[the publishing executives advanced him] a ridiculous sum of money in exchange for nothing more than a fatuous smile from the thunderstruck author and a title invented out of the air” (11). These sentiments and pressures to produce the next Great American Novel expressed by Tripp could easily have been lifted from Chabon’s essay describing his own “sophomore slump” and vice versa.

The connection between *Fountain City* and Grady Tripp’s *Wonder Boys* can be seen in their respective, overly ambitious, working premises. Chabon describes *Fountain City* as:

> a novel about utopian dreamers, ecological activists, an Israeli spy, a gargantuan Florida real estate deal, the education of an architect, the perfect baseball park, Paris, French cooking, and the crazy and ongoing dream of rebuilding the Great Temple in Jerusalem. It was about loss—lost paradises, lost cities, the loss of the Temple, the loss of a brother to AIDS; and the concomitant dream of Restoration or Rebuilding. It was also, naturally, a love story… (*Maps* 147)

Clearly, this novel was meant to cover a lot of ground. Equally apparent is the herculean challenge of melding these various ideas and elements into a coherent narrative. Out of the self-imposed pressure to “become, once and for all, a writer” Chabon appears to have had lost his sense of the novel’s purpose. He rhetorically asks: “What was it about? This, unfortunately, is what I could never quite figure out” (*Maps* 147).
In an interview with Dave Weich, at Powell’s Books, Chabon admits more plainly that *Fountain City* had “all sorts of disparate themes running together, baseball and architecture, cooking and Paris; in that book I trusted my instincts but it didn't work. I couldn't get it to hang together.” Unlike *Mysteries*, a first person narrative that is set almost exclusively in and around Pittsburgh, over the course of a single summer, this second novel “had multiple points of view and took place over a fairly long period of time; it changed locales from one continent to another, all those kinds of things.” He goes on to note the disappointment he felt at the failure of that novel, pointing out that he still “had bigger ambitions” for his writing than he had accomplished to date. Significantly, when Chabon abandons *Fountain City* for *Wonder Boys*, he returns to Pittsburgh, first person narration and sets the action over the course of a single weekend.

When we compare Chabon’s wandering thematic descriptions of *Fountain City* to Grady’s own conception of his *Wonder Boys* novel, we see a similarly elusive grandeur. He admits that there were

- too many fine and miserable buildings to construct and streets to name and clock towers to set chiming, too many characters to raise up from the dirt like flowers whose petals I peeled down to the intricate frail organs within,
- too many terrible genetic and fiduciary secrets to dig up and bury and dig up again, too many divorces to grant, heirs to disinherit, trysts to arrange, letters to misdirect into evil hands, innocent children to slay with rheumatic fever, women to leave unfulfilled and hopeless, men to drive to adultery and theft, fires to ignite at the hearts of ancient morning…
This breathless sentence suggests how Grady sees himself as a writer: a visionary whose ideas are so vast that the principle problem is in stringing them all together. Yet, simultaneously, he seems to be comparing himself to the great writers who came before him, admitting that he is lacking their talent. The impulse to write the Great American Novel, a transcendent piece that captures the essence of a people, prohibits Grady from cutting out anything. It is all important. Instead he can only keep adding more in hopes that it will somehow all come together.

For both Chabon and Grady the end of the novel is ever elusive. Grady admits that “at two thousand six hundred and eleven pages, each of them revised and rewritten a half dozen times…[his myriad characters] had not even reached their zeniths. I was nowhere near the end” (12). Yet when asked by Crabtree, his editor, how it is going, Grady replies “‘It’s done…It’s basically done. I’m just sort of, you know, tinkering with it now’” (12). This may be a reflection of standard evasiveness that is manifest when an author is speaking to his editor; however, when examining the two quotations, which occur on the same page, we see Grady is unable to finish the work. Like Chabon, who saw *Fountain City*’s expansiveness as a sign of his maturity as a writer, Grady’s comes to see his failure as a sign of his stymied growth as an artist, or more disturbing, a signal of his having lost whatever spark of talent he had once possessed.

We later learn that Grady, in an attempt to reign in the various, intertwining storylines of *Wonder Boys*, has returned to a nine-page plot outline, and at twenty-six hundred pages, he is still not half-way through it. He laments that, despite his meticulously plotted sketch “nine central characters’ and a lifetime’s worth of destiny
that I had, for the last month, been attempting to compress into fifty-odd pages of terse
and lambent prose” remained unfinished (133). And in attempting to go back and use this
five-year-old plan, Grady seems disgusted by his own early pretention. “I reread with
scorn the confident, pompous annotations I’d made on that distant day…This scene
should read as a single vast Interstate of Language, three thousand miles long. How I
hated the asshole who had written that note!” (133). Grady’s visceral loathing for his
earlier pomposity betrays a growing sense of disappointment in himself.

This section marks a specific departure in approach between Grady and Chabon.
In a 2007 interview with Elizabeth Benefiel, Chabon explains his approach to writing is
one of discovery. He says that he generally begins “with just a very vague sense of what
I'm doing and where I'm going, what it's about. I might spend 100 pages trying to get to
know the world I'm writing about: its contours, who are my main characters, what are
their relationships to each other, and just trying to get a sense of what and who this book
is about.” He then begins to assess where the story appears to be going and then,
essentially, starts the writing process over with a clearer vision of how to proceed. It
seems as though Grady has taken a similar approach in the early stages of Wonder Boys,
but after a year of aimless writing, Chabon conceives of an ill-fated attempt to organize
his ideas prior to returning to the actual writing. Chabon suggests here that no amount of
planning could salvage a novel that was fundamentally flawed due to its overly complex
and convoluted plot. He simultaneously responds to some critics who suggest that his
approach reflects laziness in his plotting.
Grady’s frustration at his endless narrative manifests itself as self-hatred, compared to Chabon’s reminiscences of his own troubles with *Fountain City*. As discussed above, Grady is disappointed in his former, more ambitious and naïve, self. He literally grows angry at his own grandiosity. However, when Chabon recalls his own failed novel, his recollections often betray nostalgia for the ideas that he had attempted to work out. He remarks that he channeled some of his frustrations into Grady, but his life did not spiral out of control in the same way. Chabon, unlike Grady, has the benefit of a finished, well-received novel, *Wonder Boys*, to take the place of the failed *Fountain City*. While *Wonder Boys* is not a novel with as grand a scope as its aborted predecessor, its completion reassures the author that he has not lost his abilities after all. In discussing the novel, Chabon has the benefit of the completed novel as reassurance that he has not lost his abilities, that he is not a one-hit-wonder. Grady does not.

However, through Grady, Chabon shows the self-doubt that arises from great success. Despite his assertions that he did not experience the same mental and emotional breakdown as Grady, Chabon admits that his desire to expand the thematic scope of his next novel proved too daunting. His attempt to live up to the expectations of his readers, critics and himself resulted in an unmanageable novel. Grady’s experience, emotionally and creatively, is both a reflection of Chabon’s and a depiction of a more universal creative process. And this idea underscores much of the text: the lonely and sometimes chaotic life of the writer.

While their experiences are different, in both cases, the intense connection to these unfinished novels, the drive to somehow make it work in spite of the overwhelming
evidence that the cause is lost, in the end, seems to have little to do with the novel’s subject matter. Both Chabon and Tripp seem determined to see that their time has not been wasted. Chabon writes: “if only I’d had more courage, I would have dumped *Fountain City* years before I ever reached this lamentable state” (*Maps* 150). That feeling is palpable in Grady throughout the novel. Often his dialogue conflicts with his thoughts on his novel. To those who question whether the novel will ever work, he makes excuses for its unreadability, like comparing it to *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “It teaches you how to read it as you go along” (312). Privately, he admits that the book is a mess. This stark difference in expressed opinion betrays in Grady defensiveness rather than confidence in the worthiness of the work. It is as though with each passing year, Grady (as well as Chabon) has more invested in its overall success. Not only must the novel be finished, but it also needs to be brilliant.

It is because of this self-imposed burden that the loss of the manuscript is, at first, so devastating, but ultimately cathartic. Chabon describes composing a scene, four years into the writing of *Fountain City*, in which the architect presents a completed model of the ballpark. He says of writing that sequence: “It almost makes me feel sorry for myself, this pathetic attempt to give myself a kind of false taste, four years in, of that sweet nectar of completion” (*Maps* 150). Chabon’s recollection emphasizes the futility of this gesture, his completion of a project within a failed project. Chabon, however, offers Grady Tripp no such artificial sense of completion.

The significance of this connection between the two authors, fictional and real, is given another layer of ironic depth through the keynote lecture of Word Fest, in *Wonder*
Boys, titled “The Writer as Doppelganger.” Delivered by an unnamed, famous author, who is simply identified as “Q.”, the address illustrates how “over the course of his life as a writer he…had become his own doppelganger” (76). Using the analogy of Conrad’s secret sharer, the argument boils down to the assertion that the writer is his or her own double, a split personality: a troublemaker and an artist who uses those misfortunes and misadventures as literary fodder.\(^2\) Grady quotes Q. as asserting, half in jest, “‘I blame it all on him…the terrible mess I have made of my life’” (76).

Interestingly, while Grady professes to largely agree with Q on this matter, throughout the novel he uses Q.’s idea of the doppelganger as a means of making fun of him. He remarks, coming upon a drunkenly passed out Q. that “even in his dreams, apparently, Q. and his doppelganger were still going at it, because although his brow was knotted in anguish, the rest of his face looked peaceful, even self-satisfied, as if he were enjoying some well-deserved rest” (355). Grady’s complicated reaction to Q.’s thesis

\(^2\) The reference to the secret sharer is derived from the Joseph Conrad novella, The Secret Sharer, in which a young sea captain rescues a man from the ocean and hides him in his quarters. The relevant connection here is that, allegorically, Leggatt (the rescued man) is often viewed as the embodiment of the qualities that the captain lacks at the beginning of the novella, but comes to embrace at the end, when he allows Leggatt to escape. Since Leggatt is kept hidden from the rest of the crew, he may symbolically represent a piece of the captain’s own, as yet undiscovered, psyche. In short, Leggatt is a doppelganger for the captain.
reflects the complexity of Chabon’s own experience and experimentation in the often blurry lines drawn between the author and his or her works of fiction.

In his essay “A Recipe for Life,” Chabon notes that while writing *Mysteries*, a novel whose primary focus is on a young man discovering his romantic love for another man, he “feared—correctly, as it turned out—that people would think, reading the novel, that its author was gay” (*Maps* 154). He goes on to recall that “In *Wonder Boys*, I presented a character whose feelings of envy, failure, and corroded romanticism, not to mention heavy reliance on marijuana to get the words flowing, seemed likely to amount, in the view of the readers, to a less than appealing self-portrait” (154-5).

Given the assumptions made regarding Chabon’s sexuality by the public, it is understandable that he would anticipate that readers would presume that Grady Tripp is a thinly veiled Michael Chabon. In fact, Grady’s bemused agreement with Q.’s doppelganger hypothesis, when observed in conjunction with Chabon’s experience with *Mysteries*, suggests that the conflation of himself as the author with his protagonist is intentional. While he rarely, if ever, makes an explicit connection between himself and his character, Chabon’s willingness to expound upon his own difficulties with *Fountain City*, and the evident similarities with Grady’s own never ending story, certainly makes these connections reasonable ones.

Despite the many connections between Chabon, his experience in writing *Fountain City*, and his fictional character and novel, it would be irresponsible to ascribe too much of his writing to his autobiographical experiences, as many artists draw from their own lives for material. Philip Roth’s career, perhaps more than any contemporary
author, is emblematic for the often-confused nature of so-called autobiographical fiction. In his 1990 novel, *Deception*, the male adulterer, Philip, complained: “‘I write fiction and I’m told it’s autobiography, I write autobiography and I’m told it’s fiction’” (184). Roth, of course, complicates the issue further by creating fictional Philips who appear to be making complaints one would assume Roth himself at least entertains. But the various Philips, Nathan Zuckerman and David Kepesh are all, in the end, fictional. So to ascribe their actions in a novel directly to those of the author without his own confirmation is at best blind speculation. It would therefore be as disingenuous to suppose that Grady Tripp is purely an avatar for Michael Chabon as to read the Nathan Zuckerman novels as Philip Roth’s autobiography.

It is in this interplay between Chabon’s fiction and nonfiction that he performs a clever slight of hand. He simultaneously gives credence to the notion that we can somehow gain insight into the author’s personal relationship to the characters and events of his fiction, all the while undercutting that very idea with more dismissive responses to direct questions regarding his creative influence. For instance, Edelman asks Chabon whether he shares Grady’s cynical point of view. Chabon assures him that it is “more a function of Grady’s own spoilt romanticism — ‘all romantics meet the same fate’ — than

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3 Each of the characters in Roth’s novels, Philip Roth, David Kepesh and, most notably, Nathan Zuckerman have at one time or another been speculated to be literary representations of the author himself. Despite the protestations of the author, the suggestion that Roth airs his grievances through the character of Zuckerman persists.
[his] own.” It is likely the case that many aspects of Grady’s character are products of Chabon’s imagination.

However, Chabon’s readiness to discuss the ways in which the novel and character derived from his own experiences with *Fountain City* suggests that there exists a closer relationship between Grady and Chabon than he openly admits. Given his admissions to being amused by the way his own sexuality was speculated upon as a result of his Art’s “coming out,” Chabon appears to be performing a similar trick with his audience as does Roth. He acknowledges the similarities between the protagonist and himself, while simultaneously arguing that one cannot glean anything about the author through reading his fiction. Chabon is clearly aware that in the back of the reader’s mind is the question of how much of the author’s own experiences have found their way into this character, and his own contribution to that cause, through various interviews and essays, leads to further muddying those waters.

3.2 “A Religion of Choice”

In *Wonder Boys* is Chabon approaches the subject of Judaism in contemporary America from the vantage of the outsider: the lapsed Methodist, now essentially atheist, Grady Tripp. In so doing, he adds his voice to the ongoing discussion as to whether Judaism is specifically, and exclusively a religion, or whether a purely cultural Judaism can exist outside of a religious tradition. Significantly, the Warshaws, Grady’s in-laws, consist of a mother and father and three adopted, Korean, children, and a daughter-in-law who was once a Christian but has converted to Judaism. It is through this multi-racial, multi-ethnic family and through the eyes and filter of a largely irreligious narrator that
Chabon first overtly appears to endorse the idea of a multicultural Judaism. His narrative also suggests, in agreement with many contemporary scholars, that Judaism is a religion of choice, rather than one of family. Given the importance of this idea in *Wonder Boys*, and the fact that Chabon continues to examine issues of secular versus religious Judaism in subsequent novels, it is worth spending a little time parsing out its scholarly underpinnings.

Gerhard Falk, in *American Judaism in Transition* (1995), laments the more overt movement in America toward a secular, or cultural, approach to Judaism. He notes, “religion has lost its social significance and has become ‘marginal to the operation of society.’ This means that rational and not supernatural forces control the American Jewish community at the end of the 20th Century” (11). He goes on to argue that there is a sort of “hollowed out” religiosity in the United States, one in which “spiritualism” or a non-specific type of religiousness has worked its way into American civic life. In other words, many Americans reject any association with a specific religion, but maintain a vague belief in the otherworldly. He admits that religion is well respected in America but that the reason for this is because “religion itself [has become increasingly] secularized…Americans have succeeded in absorbing the views of the Free Religious Association while also participating or at least giving ‘lip service’ to organized religion” (92). While Falk concedes that secularization has been a long process, much like those on the political religious right who argue that America was founded as a Christian nation, he seems to suggest that this is a decidedly anti-religious movement.
This notion of a “secularized religion,” expressed by Falk, echoes Herberg who argues that Eastern European Jews, unlike their Spanish, German or other Western European predecessors to America, brought with them the Yiddish language, which “was a peculiar possession of Jews, the cultural mark of their Jewishness” (197). He asserts, “Religion and the cultural matrix in which [the Yiddish language] happened to be embedded were fused into a single religio-cultural entity known as Yiddishkeit (Jewishness)” (197).

In Beyond Ethnicity, Werner Sollors identifies a central problem in assertions such as those made by Falk, when he argues that one generation has taken the “wrong” approach to religion. Sollors recalls Hansen’s “Law” describing a version of the “third generational return” writing, “If we are all third generation (at least as an ideal), we may have parents who, for all practical purposes, are more ethnic than we are; but we can transcend them by invoking real or imaginary grandparents or founding fathers” (230). While the second generation often rejects much of their ethnic background in favor of more assimilation, the third generation will, in turn, reject their own parents by embracing the culture of their grandparents. However, Sollors observes, “if we count from our parents, we are all second generation; if we count from real or putative grandparents or ancestors, we are third; yet our own parents turn into the problematic second generation” (230). Put more simply, designating with any accuracy second from third generations is difficult because it is a matter of perspective. As a result, it proves just as complicated to identify which generation has stronger ties to its cultural roots.
Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan point out in Beyond the Melting Pot (1963), Jewish communities in America differ from other immigrant populations in that, unlike Italians, Irish, or Poles, Jews did not all come from the same place, with the same language. Focusing on New York City’s major minority populations, Glazer and Moynihan observe that the majority of American Jews came from Eastern Europe, speaking Yiddish. However, they note that the earliest Jewish immigrants, who “landed in 1654, were ‘Sephardic’ Jews…originally from Spain and Portugal…and spoke Portuguese” (138). They go on to observe that despite their diverse places of origin American Jews share a sense of community across the national divides and differences in belief.

Glazer and Moynihan write that “There is also, linking all Jews, the sense of common fate. In part, the common fate is defined ultimately by connection to a single religion, to which everyone is still attached by birth and tradition if not by action and belief” (142). They add, “This ‘community,’ then, is a group that may never act together and that may never feel together, but that does know it is a single group, from which one can be disengaged only by a series of deliberate acts. Only a minority are ‘Jews’ if we use some concrete defining index” (142). In effect, because many self-identifying Jews are not active followers (or believers) in the Jewish faith, some do not regularly go to synagogues, attend yeshiva, or speak a common language, a precise definition of what it means to be Jewish is difficult.

Herberg points out that many of the third generation American Jews associated their Jewishness in terms of religion, unlike their more secular parents. Yet, the shape of
Judaism in America began to resemble the major Protestant churches: “the same corporate structure, the same proliferation of men’s clubs, sisterhoods, junior congregations, youth groups…” (206). He adds, “The pattern of holidays and ceremonials had also undergone considerable modification,” and cites the emphasis on Hanukkah, which was “traditionally of minor importance,” because of its seasonal relationship to Christmas, and the lavish parties that have become typical of the Bar Mitzvah (206).

Herberg recognizes that, ironically, “Much of the institutional life of the synagogue has become thus secularized and drained of religious content precisely at the time when religion is becoming more and more acknowledged as the meaning of Jewishness” (212-3). In other words, for many American Jews, the religious traditions and ceremonies remain important parts of their lives, and ground their Jewish identity. However they do not necessarily view those traditions as part of a spiritual experience, but a cultural one, instead. Holidays become occasions for familial gathering rather than a time of religious reflection or commemoration.

Through Grady we learn that Emily and her siblings are not only adopted but Korean by birth, creating a Jewish household made up primarily of converts. Grady remarks upon the “odd agglomeration of Warshaws, the product of a long and determined program of overseas adoptions, with its combination of Jews and Koreans, intellectuals, space cadets, and sharpies, no two of them related by blood, seemed to offer me the best chance yet to wire my wandering meteor to the armillary sphere of a family” (129). This observation points to both the remarkable diversity of the family unit, but also its inclusiveness. He notes that Emily “was never more than sporadically observant [as a
Jew], and though not born into a Jewish family, her cultural connections were Jewish, not Korean, having left her native country as a child (205).

By contrast, Grady describes Marie, who converted to Judaism upon marrying his brother-in-law, Phil, as “the best Jew in the family, far more observant than her husband or his parents” and who had “transformed herself into the perfect Jewish daughter-in-law” (173). These two women show a distinct difference in their approaches to their Jewishness, though each is described as Jewish. There is no suggestion that Emily has renounced her Judaism for only celebrating holidays, nor is there a suggestion that Marie is less authentic for her having converted to the religion. Rather, Chabon proposes that Emily and Marie exhibit varying approaches to life, both viable within a larger Jewish tradition.

In the multicultural Warshaw family, Chabon fashions a family that represents the making of America. In his 1916 essay, “Trans-National America,” Randolph Bourne reflects on “the failure of the melting pot.” He argues that the “melting pot” essentially assumed that all immigrant cultures become more Anglo-Saxon. Bourne argues, “there is no distinctively American culture. It is apparently our lot rather to be a federation of cultures.” He goes on to praise America for its cosmopolitanism, noting, “In a world which has dreamed of internationalism, we find that we have all unawares been building up the first international nation.”

It is precisely this internationalism and cross-culturalism that Chabon creates in the Warshaws. They are a family that maintains traditions connecting them to their ancestors, while simultaneously intermingling with and welcoming in people of all
backgrounds. Bourne observes, “it is not uncommon for the eager Anglo-Saxon who goes to a vivid American university to-day to find his true friends not among his own race but among the acclimatized German or Austrian, the acclimatized Jew, the acclimatized Scandinavian or Italian.” In this mixing of cultures, Bourne sees the true essence of America. Chabon’s Warshaw family clearly embodies this sometimes harmonious, sometimes volatile cultural “tossed salad.”

Significantly, Chabon suggests that even Grady, an avowed atheist, also has a place within this family, and by extension, within Judaism itself. Grady’s father-in-law, Irv, despite the fact that Emily, having left Grady, does not want him there, invites him to the Passover Seder, reestablishing his place within the family.

Passover is a celebration of the Exodus from Egypt, and derives its name from the Biblical account of God killing every first born, human and animal, in Egypt, but literally “passing over” the houses of the Israelites, sparing their children. Passover is a weeklong commemoration of God’s deliverance of the Jews from slavery. The Passover Seder is a ceremony meant to remind Jews of the escape from slavery, and God’s hand in their liberation.

Despite his pending divorce and lack of faith, Grady experiences a connection to the family through this cultural and religious tradition that goes beyond actual belief. He remarks that “They weren’t my family and it wasn’t my holiday, but I was orphaned and an atheist and I would take what I could get” (144). Though he does not believe in the historical or religious significance of the celebration, Grady finds meaning in it nonetheless, through family. Because the Seder is a familial ritual it highlights Grady’s
need for family stability and the kindness of the Warshaw family, best exemplified by Irv. Through this inclusive, multicultural, familial setting Chabon illustrates the wide reach of Judaism.

The Warshaw family embodies the vastness and variety of Jewish thought many contemporary Jewish scholars argue is the best way to view Judaism. In *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), Mordecai Kaplan underscores the inherent inclusiveness of Judaism, and Judaism’s willingness to accept many varied viewpoints, particularly when compared to the other two Abrahamic religions. He observes, “The Jews were not quite as emphatic as were the Christians and the Moslems in declaring the rest of mankind ineligible to salvation. Rabbinic teaching was inclined to concede that Gentiles, who were righteous or saintly, had a share in the world to come” (7).

Later scholars have continued to build upon Kaplan’s argument. In *Judaism Without God?* (2007), Yaakov Malkin argues that Jews are a “Choosing People” because they “choose the manner in which they express their Jewishness and the Judaism,” and this includes ignoring their Jewishness all together (*Judaism* 60). This is not to say that Judaism is purely relativistic, but rather pluralistic. He notes that “in the recognition of the legitimacy and value of debate in the search for truth…an approach to conflict…treats ‘both [opinions]’ as ‘the word of the living God’” (44). For Malkin, the debate over what constitutes Jewishness can include a secularization of some aspects of Jewish life. For instance, he notes, “The Sabbath was intended to free men from the burden of earning a livelihood, in order to afford them a day of leisure” (51). For some Jews, a return to this idea, and away from Sabbath laws, does not constitute a rejection of their Judaism.
Herberg remarks, “Passover, coming at Easter time and made into the occasion of family reunions, retained its traditional importance, though with a changed significance” (206). Grady’s admission that he’s always had “a soft spot for Passover,” and his inclusion in the Seder, underscore Herberg’s point, that for many modern American Jews, Passover is as much a time for family gathering as it is a celebration of the Exodus (205). He quotes pioneering American Jewish sociologist Marshall Sklare, who observes,

“The rituals which had special appeal [to third generation American Jews]…were those which were joyous, which marked the transition from one stage of life to another, which did not require a high degree of isolation from non-Jews, which were capable of acceptance to the larger community, and which this larger community had itself reserved for the sacred order.” (207)

This is not say that all Jewish holidays have been stripped of their religious significance. Rather, Herberg suggests that many Jews continue to celebrate these holidays despite their lack of religious belief. Instead, these celebrations reinforce social and familial connections.

Grady’s own view comports remarkably with Sklare’s assessment. His attraction to Passover is mainly because of the sense of community he feels when sharing a meal with the Warshaws. He is also drawn to the religion because of its inclusiveness. In the Seder scene, Chabon highlights the ways in which a religious ceremony can maintain its cultural significance by bringing together disparate people, with divergent beliefs and backgrounds, even if the ritual does not have religious meaning for all involved.
This is not to suggest that Passover has lost all religious experience in America. It is clear that Irv continues to revere the spiritual aspects of Passover. However, Sklare’s and Herberg’s contention is evident in many of the Warshaws. Like Emily, who is not active in the religious aspects of Judaism, most of her siblings attend the Seder out of respect for their parents and because it is an opportunity to gather with the family.

Grady, in particular, embodies a respect for both Passover and Judaism, while rejecting the beliefs of the Jewish faith. He says of Passover, “I liked the fakery and slyness that went into preparing food, the way the ubiquitous ‘bread of affliction’ was magically transformed in the Passover repertoire into something manifold and rich” (205). He goes on, saying, “I like the way the Jewish religion seemed, on the whole, to have devoted so much energy and art to finding loopholes in its crazy laws; I liked what this seemed to me to imply about its attitude toward God, that dictatorial and arbitrary old fuck with his curses and his fiats and his yen for the smell of burnt shoulder meat” (206).

The “attitude toward God” that seems to appeal most to Grady is that of a negotiating partner. His vulgar description of God implies familiarity rather than dismissal or insult, as does his admiration for the ways in which Jews have continued to find ways to keep the spirit of biblical laws and customs, while adjusting to an ever-changing world. Despite his lack of faith, Grady betrays his envy at the relationship between Jews and God, and at the rituals that both express that relationship and create a sense of community.⁴

⁴ Even atheism has a precedent in Jewish thought. In “The Non-Jewish Jew” (1968), Isaac Deutscher looks to many Jewish thinkers, from Spinoza to Marx, through Trotsky
Yet, interestingly, Chabon clouds even more the somewhat murkiness of Jewish identity in the character James Leer. Grady invites James to come with him to his in-laws and, since he admits that this is his first Seder, Irv and Grady walk him through his role as the youngest. James’ ignorance is obvious. However, Grady later discovers an old photograph indicating that James has Jewish ancestry. The photo, identical to one that hung on Grady’s wall, is of several “serious men” standing in front of a banner reading “Zion Club of Pittsburgh” (279). One man is Emily’s grandfather and Grady notices that another man looks remarkably like James. And, like his grandson, seems almost invisible amongst the other men: “his features had an unformed, blurred appearance, as if he’d moved his head at the instant the shutter opened and closed” (279).

When asked whether he is Jewish, James responds, “‘Sort of…I mean, yes, I am, but my grandparents—they kind of, I don’t know. Got rid of it, I guess’” (282).

and Rosa Luxemburg, and on to Freud and finds that each of these thinkers share a universalist philosophy which, he argues, is not antithetical to Jewish thought, but instead consistent with it. He states that the “Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry belongs to a Jewish tradition” (26). Deutscher later remarks that “Marx saw Christ as the ‘theorizing Jew’, the Jew as a ‘practical Christian’ and, therefore, the ‘practical’ bourgeois Christian as a ‘Jew’” (32).

In Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought (2011), David Biale builds on Deutscher arguing that because the framework within which skepticism is allowed to flourish is itself imbedded in Jewish tradition, skepticism—even to the point of atheism—falls generally in the realm of Jewish thought.
Ironically, James, a man of Jewish descent, is taught the about the Seder from Grady, a man of Christian descent. Interestingly, whereas James represents Isaac Deutscher’s idea of the “non-Jewish Jew,” a person who is Jewish by birth but not in belief, Grady epitomizes what Shaul Magid describes as the “Jewish non-Jew,” or “the non-Jew who is a functioning participant in Judaism” (50). As noted above, many scholars argue that paths of both Grady and James are firmly within the Jewish tradition. Chabon, through these two contrasting characters, paints a picture of American Jewishness as one that embraces a variety of people and belief systems, and as a religion of choice.

Chabon goes a step further, suggesting that non-Jews have the same choices. Grady embraces the traditions and the familial ties, even if he does not outright consider himself a Jew. Through the Warshaw family, Chabon ultimately illustrates the tremendous diversity of American Jewishness, and celebrates its capacity to accommodate such disparate people and connect them on such a fundamental level. In fact, Chabon harks to Bernard Malamud who said “All men are Jews except they don’t know it,” adding, “it’s…a metaphoric way of indicating how history, sooner or later, treats all men” (Field 11). Grady’s admitted affection for Judaism despite his non-belief, as well as the Warshaw family, speaks directly to Malamud’s idea.

This is not to say that Chabon’s vision of American Judaism is universally lauded. D. G. Myers criticizes the Seder scene in the novel as “a comic set piece with the same function that seders [sic] have always served in middlebrow fiction—a marker of ethnic difference that is so familiar it smudges any real difference” (“Imaginary” 577). He goes on to criticize Chabon for using the Seder scene as a “celebration of modern liberal
inclusiveness”, ultimately accusing Chabon of having “loyalties…outside Jewish tradition” (577). For Myers, Chabon’s comic treatment of the Seder, and his non-Jewish narrator, suggests that he lacks the proper perspective to treat Jewish traditions with due respect.

Yet to take Myers seriously is to overlook that despite the humor of the scene, it is the patience of the venerable father Irv that Chabon highlights. Irv is ever reverent to his family, his guest, and the Passover Seder, never rising in anger despite the chaos around him. We are first introduced to Irv’s kindness when he invites Grady to celebrate with the family. His simple compassion is shown most clearly when Grady and James first go out and visit him in the garage. Irv immediately addresses Grady’s injured, dog-bitten, ankle and tenderly bandages him up. Grady admits he “had to fight off an urge to burst into tears of thankfulness for his solicitude” (184). Irv stands as the paragon of benevolence, and a primary reason why so many people from such varying backgrounds, continue to identify as Jews in the family, regardless of their individual beliefs or cultural origins. In many ways, Irv Warshaw embodies the acceptance of the various Judaisms into a larger whole that Chabon embraces as an American virtue.

Though Wonder Boys is not the novel Chabon set out to write, it does demonstrate his continued growth as an artist. Chabon makes full use of his humor and his keen sense for plot to illustrate a compelling assessment of Jewishness in an increasingly multicultural America. In Wonder Boys, Chabon argues that one’s Jewishness is not dependent upon adherence to specific beliefs or even hereditary culture. Instead he suggests that Judaism is wide reaching and can be home to a multiplicity of people,
backgrounds and ideas. With the Warshaw family, Chabon suggests that Judaism’s ability to incorporate various people from all walks of life and its celebrations involving familial gatherings is emblematic of cosmopolitan America.

Yet he also reveals a love for Judaism that is not apparent in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*. Throughout the novel, Grady sinks continually lower into his personal degradation. With each plot twist his life unravels a little more. Yet it is when he attends the Seder that he regains a sense of himself. Though he is not Jewish, it is a Jewish ceremony that saves Grady’s life. Though it is a seemingly straightforward novel about a weekend gone awry, *Wonder Boys* is simultaneously a challenge to the ways in which we envision Jewishness in America and an affirmation of the tremendous good that Judaism can do in a person’s life.
CHAPTER 4

Mythologizing the American Experience: The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay

In large part, Michael Chabon’s struggle to finish Fountain City was a result of his desire to prove himself as a writer by telling a large, expansive story, epic in scope, and his inability to coherently tie all of the various strands together. In the Washington Post, reviewer Jonathan Yardley concludes his review of Wonder Boys urging Chabon to take advantage of his prodigious skills and take on a project more fitting his talents. He states, “Though Chabon has demonstrated a keen understanding of other people’s minds and lives…it is time for him to move on, to break away from the first person and explore larger worlds. His apprenticeship is done; it has been brilliant, but the books as yet unwritten are the ones in which we will learn just how far this singular writer can go” (3).

In an interview with Dave Weich at Powell’s Books, Chabon recalls Yardley’s review, “he sort of clapped his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘You've done well, but you haven't really tried much. Now's the time to set your sights higher.’ I took that to heart.” With his third novel, the Pulitzer Prize winning The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, Chabon not only moves out of his familiar Pittsburgh setting to New York, but also achieves the decades- and continent-spanning narrative that eluded him in Fountain City.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay is a leap forward in Chabon’s ability as a writer. Whereas his first two novels were limited in time (a single summer in The Mysteries of Pittsburgh and a weekend in Wonder Boys), setting (both took place almost
exclusively in the comfortable confines of Pittsburgh, PA.), and thematic scope, *Kavalier & Clay* is extensive and adventurous. Shining through most brightly are his explorations of decidedly Jewish themes, ranging from the legend of the Golem of Prague, the Holocaust, and to the ways in which the Jewishness of Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay, the novel’s two protagonists, affects their lives in America and their own creative impulses.

*Kavalier & Clay* is a novel about two young cousins, Sammy Clay née Klayman and Josef (Joe) Kavalier, who, out of desperation and in a fit of creative genius, create the popular comic book superhero, The Escapist. Initially set in the late 1930s, and spanning two decades, the novel is Chabon’s celebration of “Comics’ Golden Age,” which is generally considered to have begun in 1938, with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 and to have ended around 1952. *Kavalier & Clay* is a piece of historical fiction in which Chabon attempts to capture how the time, place and, most importantly, the Jewishness of the early inventors of comic books led to the creation of the superhero in the folk stories they use both as inspiration and literary representations of their own experiences as young American Jews. Despite the fact that neither Sammy nor Joe is religiously observant, their Jewishness vividly emerges in their creative processes and in the outright anti-Semitism of both Nazi occupied Europe and American Nazi sympathizers they endured.

*Kavalier & Clay* opens with Joe’s arrival in New York and the first meeting between he and Sammy. The narrative immediately flashes back several months to Joe’s early life in Prague as a burgeoning escape artist, magician, and visual artist. These first chapters establish the book’s most important themes: escape, the Golem of Prague, and
the need for deliverance. The novel follows, first Joe as he escapes from Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia to New York, and then both he and his cousin Sammy as they help to develop superhero comic books.

The Golem, a prominent figure in Jewish folklore, is a man-made, human-like creature, created out of mud and animated through magic. Like so many myths and folktales, the Golem has changed in appearance and function throughout the generations. “Golem” appears in the Bible in Psalm 139:16 meaning “unformed” or “unshaped form,” and later becomes associated with the anthropomorphic protector created out of mud. In “The Idea of the Golem” (1965), Gershom Scholem notes that Golem stories all ultimately stem from the biblical account of the creation of Adam, who was himself created by God out of the earth. Scholem writes, “For obviously a man who creates a golem is in some sense competing with God’s creation of Adam” (159). He goes on to note that the Sefer Yetzirah, or Book of Creation, played an integral part in the conception of the Golem. The Sefer Yetzirah places great importance on the Hebrew words and letters as the catalyst for creation saying, “if one wishes to influence the spiritual realm, he must make use, either of the sounds of the letters, or of their names. This technique…is the one that is used when making a Golem” (22).

According to Scholem, the stories that emerged from study and interpretation of the text suggest, beginning in the third century, the point at which he dates the Sefer Yetzirah, that learned rabbis were able to replicate this creation process. Though, he adds, “such creation has no practical purpose but serves to demonstrate the adept’s ‘rank’ as a creator” (173). In Golem, Moshe Idel echoes this sentiment writing that Golem legends
“endowed some spiritual leaders of the Jews with the aura of archmagician which originates from the recognition of the profound acquaintance of some masters with Jewish lore, whether magical or mystical” (251). In this context, the Golem was not necessarily viewed as a “real” object, but it had the symbolic meaning.

Scholem goes on to note,

The golem—beginning with the end of the twelfth century the golem, appearing in a number of texts in the sense of a man-like creature, produced by the magical powers of man—starts out as a legendary figure. Then it is transformed into the object of a mystical ritual of initiation, which seems actually to have been performed, designed to confirm the adept in his mastery over secret knowledge. (174).

Golem making is the basis for the Golem of Prague, created by Rabbi Judah ben Loew, and the prominent superhero antecedent in Kavalier & Clay. In any case, the overarching theme in the creation of any Golem is seen as an intense spiritual experience that is generally driven by language, words either written or spoken. More importantly, to “the Hasidim the creation of a Golem confirmed man in his likeness to God” (Scholem 181). “Hasidim” refers to those who are uniquely pious. The Hasidim exhibit most closely ideal behavior, often going beyond the letter of the law to achieve closeness to God.

Chabon incorporates both the Golem itself and many of the elements and themes of the story into his own text, taking this story and making it both familiar and new. By merging the Golem of Prague so closely with his examination of the Golden Age of Comic Books, he shows how the Golem was a likely source for many of the common
motifs of the superhero, which essentially became a modern-day Golem. Additionally, he shows the importance of folklore in everyday life. The reason we remember and retell these stories is because they seem to have continued relevance beyond their time and place. Chabon’s incorporation of the Golem of Prague in the context of the superhero speaks directly to the ways in which folklore speaks to common human experiences.

As the novel progresses, Joe and Sammy create an iconic and immensely profitable comic book line, starring their brainchild, the Escapist, thereby helping to define the superhero genre. Chabon models the team of Kavalier and Clay after many of the most prominent comic book writers and artists of the day, such as Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, Joe Simon, and Will Eisner, and he appropriates many of their struggles and creative triumphs into the lives of his own fictional duo. For example, Joe and Sammy, in their excitement for being paid at all for their work, unwittingly sell all their rights to the character to the publishers, Sheldon Anapol and Jack Ashkenazi, for one hundred and fifty dollars, and eighty-five dollars for each supporting character, and were subsequently paid piece-work rates: “‘Sammy for seventy-five dollars a week and Joe at six dollars a page...[plus] twenty dollars for every cover he does’” (158).

This early fleecing of the two young artists mirrors the famous deal made by Siegel and Shuster with Max Gaines and Sheldon Mayer (publisher of the then-National Publications, which would later be known simply as DC Comics). In From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books (2008), Arie Kaplan recounts that “Siegel and Shuster...had sold the rights to their character to DC in 1938 for $130, their flat fee for the first 13-page story in Action Comics #1” and that they were then paid as any other
“work-for-hire” contract employee (21).¹ Both of these figures are a lot of money for poor kids trying to make a living with their creative gifts, but nothing compared to the massive amount of money that would be generated for the new owners of the superhero’s rights.

We also see the Escapist and his creators go through many of the other stages in the superhero evolution from the creators’ somewhat futile attempts to get a share of the tremendous wealth generated by their ideas, to the myriad marketing outlets to further enhance the brand: the Escapist radio program, lunchboxes, and the League of the Golden Key club to which fans could pay a little money and join. However, all this is not to suggest that Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay are merely substitutes for their historical counterparts. Chabon mixes the historical with the fictional to paint a picture of the early days of comic books, and the world in which they were born.

In addition to the financial successes, Chabon highlights the artistry of the genre, bringing it out of its “ghettoized,” less-respected station and into the realm of art. Chabon argues that the comic book can be a vehicle for social commentary, morality tales, strong intelligent story telling, and artistic innovation. Joe and Sammy rub elbows with Salvator Dalí and the (fictional) ambassador of Surrealism, Longman Harkoo, as well as Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway. In each of these cases, the aforementioned artist professes a love of comic books and, by extension, Chabon elevates Joe and Sammy to

¹ This is often referred to as comics’ “original sin” because it set a precedent for comic book publishers to claim sole ownership of, and thus profits from, all characters created by their employees.
the same level of auteur as these others, suggesting along the way that comic creators gained innovative ideas from these artists in other media, and vice versa.

Chabon’s assertions regarding the artistic and social value of comic books and their creators appear at times to be hyperbolic and ironic. However, when looking at both his essays and interviews on the subject of comic books, he is earnest in his defense of the genre. On its face, the argument that comic books, particularly those of the “Golden Age,” should be read and considered as a literary equivalent of other forms can be difficult to accept. They were directed toward children and were produced quickly, with most attention paid to making the deadline and mass appeal. It is true that no one will mistake an issue of *Action Comics* for *The Great Gatsby*. But, comic books quickly became a genre with its own language, narrative conventions, styles, and community of readers. As with any artistic medium, it is possible to see the brilliance and originality in the best of the genre, on its own terms, and in relation to others in the field.

For Chabon, and for this novel, the “Golden Age” period he describes is one of incredible creativity. The comic book was something no one had seen before and creators of the time were inventing the genre month by month, and truly great artists, like Will Eisner, did emerge from the era. Many did incorporate techniques from film and literature, and they did approach issues of social justice in the pages of their books, but they did so in the context of a different medium. For instance, drawing on his father’s death during a would-be robbery, Jerry Siegel’s early stories saw Superman defending regular people against street criminals, wife-beaters, and gangsters, rather than monsters.
from outer space. Later, Neal Adams and Dennis O’Neil’s *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series would address topics ranging from class warfare to heroin abuse.

From this perspective, we can better appreciate the inventiveness of these creators. They were engaged in a dialogue with a community of writers and artists. This conversation continues today, as the medium has matured to include both the superheroes invented prior to World War II and the more serious examinations of human experiences.

For instance, Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust memoir, *Maus* (1980) is a retelling of his father’s experiences in the Dachau and Auschwitz concentration camps, as well as a story about his own relationship with his father. Throughout *Maus*, Spiegelman depicts Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs, and himself wearing a mouse mask, giving a graphic representation to the relationships illustrated in the work.

Though Joe has escaped from the Nazis in Prague, their threat is brought to bear in the characters Carl Ebling, the head of the one-man Bund, the Aryan-American League (AAL). Ebling is an American Nazi sympathizer, writer of anti-Semitic newsletters, and a fan of the Escapist. He begins reading comic books in order to report on the anti-Nazism imbedded in the books, but finds that over time he comes to enjoy the stories, and often forgets to focus on the messages he despises. At times, the narrative switches to Ebling’s perspective and we see that he has come to imagine himself as a super villain, The Saboteur.

Chabon ties his novel together with a narrative approach that mimics that of an historical account, complete with footnotes and false or altered recollections by fictional characters. He opens the novel saying: “In later years, holding forth to an interviewer or
to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier’s greatest creation, that back when he was a boy, sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini” (3). This is a bit of historical revisionism on Sammy’s part, the narrator later explains: “The truth was that, as a kid, Sammy had only a casual interest, at best, in Harry Houdini and his legendary feats; his great heroes were Nikola Tesla, Louis Pasteur, and Jack London” (3). While the narrator concedes that Sammy’s tall tales about his role in the creation of the Escapist, “like all his best fabulations, rang true,” from the very first pages, he establishes the premise that, over the course of the text, he is going to set the record straight.

He goes on to add relevant footnotes remarking on events taking place much later than the novel’s setting, such as in “1998, the New York branch of Sotheby’s offered a rare copy of Amazing Midget Radio Comics #1 in Very Good condition...sold, after lively bidding, for $42,200,” or noting that a book written by Joe’s mother, which she refers to in a letter, has been lost, or inserts other additional, historical information that interrupt the narrative flow (169). Chabon imagines a conversation at a coffee shop between historical comic book creators Stan Lee, Gil Kane, and Bob Powell, along with those fictional creators that populated Chabon’s Palooka Studios branch of Radio Comics—Frank Pantaleone, Marty Gold, Julie Glovsky, and Sammy Clay. In so doing, and coupled with his often direct connections made between historical comic book creators and his two protagonists, Chabon creates a sense of historical veracity.
This approach has the added effect of accepting the legitimacy of the story of the Golem of Prague. With this novel, Chabon begins to explore ideas of Jewishness and Judaism in a more profound way than he has in his previous two efforts. In *Kavalier & Clay*, he examines the continued significance of the Golem in Jewish folklore by taking the story out of its sixteenth-century context and placing it in the twentieth-century. Unlike other writers who have played with the Golem theme, Chabon does not simply create a new Golem in a contemporary setting but, instead, he installs the original Golem of Prague, created by Rabbi Loew, into a novel masquerading as a biography. The end result is an intriguing reimagining of the story of the magical mud-creature, as Chabon shows the original Golem still performing his role as savior to the people (or in this case, the individual, Joe Kavalier) of Prague four hundred years after his creation and decommission by Rabbi Loew.

While Chabon covers some familiar thematic ground, he does so with a sophistication and thoughtfulness not yet seen in his previous works. Chabon’s characters are more complex than in his previous two novels. For example, Sammy’s homosexuality is a key part of his own life and emotional struggles, yet unlike *Mysteries’s Art Bechstein*, his confusion regarding his sexuality is merely a part of his story, rather than a nearly all-occupying obsession. Whereas the Jewishness of characters in his previous two novels plays very little role in their interactions with their world, Joe’s (and to a lesser extent, Sammy’s) Jewishness directly affects their daily lives, though they, themselves, are not actively religious.
This point is made most clearly through the anti-Semitism that Joe and Sammy face throughout the novel. Joe Kavalier, at the beginning of his life, gives little thought to his own Jewishness. Rather, he “believed—it was enshrined in the Czech constitution—that Jews were merely one of the numerous ethnic minorities making up the young nation of which Josef was proud to be a son” (24-5). The question of his Jewishness as a significant and differentiating characteristic of his identity did not occur to him. However, the Nazi occupation disabused him of that notion, as did the increasingly draconian rules instituted for all Jews living in Nazi-occupied Europe. Later, overt anti-Semitic remarks are leveled at Joe and Sammy, as are physical attacks by the inept, but deadly serious Aryan-American League (AAL). But it is also more subtly hinted at by the inability of Joe, Sammy or any of the other comic book artists to find illustration work in other, more respected media.

*Kavalier & Clay* has garnered the most critical attention of any of Chabon’s work thus far. Some critics have examined the novel as an example of how comic books are gaining literary credibility. In “*Ragtime, Kavalier & Clay, and the Framing of Comics*” (2008), Hillary Chute argues that “*Kavalier & Clay*…asks how one responds to or registers history—especially traumatic history—in a popular medium” (280). She notes that the novel “is about the articulation of history in popular, duplicable forms, whether those forms are repeatable performances of escape or mass-produced comics” (282). Chute adds, “*Kavalier & Clay* presents a trajectory, showing us how its creative cartoonist protagonists embrace and adopt various comic book methodologies for the project of representing history” (282).
Lee Behlman looks at the ways in which comic books created an avenue of escape for both the creators and readers from the horrors of the Holocaust. In “The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction” (2004) he argues that “Kavalier & Clay explores the use of fantasy not as a means of giving shape to the documentary facticity of the Holocaust, not as a set of stage properties surrounding the real, but as a potential means of ‘escape’ from the past” (62).

In “Josef Kavalier’s Odyssey: Homeric Echoes in Michael Chabon’s The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay” (2010), Daniel B. Levine highlights the notion of escape, comparing Joe’s journey to Odysseus’s travels. He argues that it is a novel, “where the protagonist is a Holocaust survivor whose adventures closely reflect those of his Hellenic prototype” (527). For instance, he cites Odysseus’s renown for being a kind of escape artist and references the famous Trojan Horse, which is echoed by Joe’s own method of fleeing the Nazis, hiding in a casket.

Scholars have also directed their attention to issues of masculinity, both in the context of the superhero as idealized male physicality and in terms of Sammy’s homosexuality. In “The Grand Illusion: Hegemonic Masculinity as Escapism in Michael Chabon’s The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay and Wonder Boys” (2010) Louise Colbran argues that masculinity, as seen through Harry Houdini, who inspires the creation of the Escapist, “comes to be defined in terms of the ability to overcome the body and the subjugation of the body to will” (120). According to Colbran, Houdini, and escape in general, reaffirm masculine strength, both of body and of mind.
In “A Half-Naked Muscleman in Trunks: Charles Atlas, Superheroes, and Comic Book Masculinity” (2007), Richard Landon argues that *Kavalier & Clay* “demonstrate[s] the desire for escape or transformation that Atlas so successfully tapped into” (201). Landon suggests that many young men look at the heroes in comic books and at the pictures of Charles Atlas, and the promises of speedy muscle-creation, with the idea of turning themselves into hyper-masculine musclemen. He notes that though “Chabon does not mention Atlas or his ads…they remain the best known metonym for the explicit metaphors of insecurity and metamorphosis that saturate the novel” (205).

However, these scholars often look past a central theme of the novel. *Kavalier & Clay* is about the decidedly Jewish origins of Superman, Batman and their fellow comic book protagonists. The very creation of the superhero, as we know it today, is arguably an American-Jewish phenomenon. Under that umbrella, Chabon extends his analysis of comic books beyond merely a retrospective love of the genre, and parses the many ways in which the lives of young American Jews of the 1930s and 1940s became woven into the very fabric of the modern superhero. He underscores how the fundamental traits of the superhero’s character were born out of their experiences. Chabon shows that it is precisely because of their Jewishness, their immigrant or first-generation American status and their cultural heritage, that the superhero looks and acts as it has since Superman’s startling appearance in the pages of *Action Comics* in 1938. Chabon’s novel suggests that the superhero, founded through mining Jewish folklore, culture, and the daily lives of American Jews, quickly grows into a distinctly, and universally, American mythology.
4.1 The Golem

The Golem has been adapted and readapted numerous times in works as varying as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Cynthia Ozick’s *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997), wherein Ruth Puttermesser, a low-level bureaucrat in the government of New York City creates the world’s first female Golem, and Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991), a story about a woman who falls in love with an android whose story parallels that of the Golem of Prague. In fact, the story of Rabbi Loew’s Golem is itself a reimagining of an earlier Golem legend from Rabbi Elijah of Chelm in the mid to late eighteenth century. Idel notes of the story surrounding Rabbi Loew and the Golem of Prague, “It is the specific attribution of the creation of a Golem to this outstanding figure that became the classical form of legends related to the Golem since the nineteenth century” (251).

Through his own adoption and reimagining of the Golem of Prague story, Chabon highlights the power of storytelling—all manner of storytelling—which has defined much of his literary career. In his essay, “The Recipe For Life,” Chabon notes, “I went looking for information about Golems, and found an insight into the nature of novel writing itself” (*Maps* 151). He argues that, though the words and letters used to animate the Golem have changed from telling to telling, language brings the figure to life. Chabon adds, “as the kabbalist is to God, so is a Golem to all creation: a model, a miniature replica, a mirror—like the novel—of the world” (152). Chabon asserts that like writing, the Golem is a reflection of its maker, who takes up the challenge of creation to better understand and improve the world he or she lives in.
Significantly, in each of these retellings, the general outline of the story of Rabbi Loew’s Golem of Prague remains relatively unchanged. In addition to Idel’s *The Golem*, I will rely on Chayim Bloch’s narrative telling of the Golem of Prague story, *The Golem: Legends of the Ghetto of Prague* (1925) as a model for comparison to *Kavalier & Clay*.

In the legends surrounding Rabbi Loew, the Golem, first and foremost, is created out of need. Having bested the Cardinal of Prague in an ecclesiastical debate, and fearing violence against the Jews of Prague by angry Christians led by the priest Thaddeus, Rabbi Loew creates the Golem to act as their protector.

In order to perform the intricate ceremony to create the Golem, Rabbi Loew enlists his son-in-law and his pupil who each walk around the figure, created out of the mud of the River Moldau, reciting the *Zirufim* (charms). “Then Rabbi Loew himself walked once around the figure, placed in its mouth a piece of parchment inscribed with the *Schem* [sic] (the name of God);” after which he bowed in all directions, the three of them recited a quotation from Genesis, and the Golem was born (Bloch 68). The Golem is created and begins to patrol the Jewish section of Prague.

Rabbi Loew is adamant about the Golem only being used as a force for the public good, and not as a private servant; yet, first at the behest of his wife, and then at his own choosing, the Golem is given menial tasks, which it performs too well. For instance, the Golem is sent to fetch water but is not told to stop and floods the house, which was replicated in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” chapter of Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940). Later, the Golem is sent fishing by Rabbi Loew and, again, takes his instructions too literally. As he is called home, with or without fish, “the Golem heard this [and] he quickly shook
the fish out of the bag into the water and ran home” (Bloch 74). This episode suggests that the Golem is insufficient for duty outside its original purpose. It also hints at the uncontrollability of the Golem. Even when given specific tasks, those tasks often end up failing. These two notions are critical to Chabon’s interpretation of the superhero as American Golem.

While the Golem successfully serves its designed purpose of protecting the Jews of Prague, it eventually loses its capacity to do so effectively, as well. This happens when first there is an attack on the Golem, followed by its running amok. According to Bloch, the Golem had been dispatched by Rabbi Loew to apprehend a man who had disobeyed an edict. It then went “straightway to the house of the porter, grasped him by the back of his neck, and carried him, like a slaughtered little lamb, through the city to Rabbi Loew’s house” (169). It is this gruff handling and inglorious parade through town that caused the man to identify the Golem as his chief antagonist and attack it, throwing it down a freezing well, which it eventually escapes.

The story of the Golem comes to an end when Rabbi Loew forgets to tell it what to do, one Friday afternoon, and “the Golem, like one mad, began running about in the Jewish section of the city, threatening to destroy everything. The want of employment made him awkward and wild” (189). The story of the Golem of Prague ends in a demonstration of the complete uncontrollability of the creation. Rabbi Loew later deanimates the Golem, “when the community was no longer molested by blood accusations” (192). The “blood accusation” or “blood libel” is an allegation that has evolved over time, but generally centers on the notion that Christian blood is required in
certain Jewish rituals, and that Jews would engage in ritual murder of Christians to attain the necessary blood. Having served its purpose, the Golem is no longer needed. Though it is human-like, the Golem is ultimately a tool and therefore when its utility is gone, it should be put away. This final lesson suggests the uncontrollability of nature—be it human or otherwise.

In his essay, “Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*: The Return of the Golem,” Alan L. Berger notes that while Chabon is “on firm ground” in his employment of the Golem in his novel, his interpretation of the Golem of Prague is, at times, problematic (83). Most notably, as Joe and his mentor in escapistry, Bernard Kornblum, rescue the body of the Golem and ship him out of Prague, the Golem, in effect, “flees the enemy, whereas traditional assertions contend that the Golem’s fearsomeness causes the enemy to flee” (85). Despite Berger’s reservations, I want to suggest that Chabon’s Golem of Prague is more representative of the social and psychological need for myth than a magically animated seventeenth-century creature. Chabon does not suggest that the Golem is anything more than a legend, but realizes the necessity and power of myth, especially for a desperate people.\(^2\)

\(^2\) See Alan L. Berger’s “Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*: The Return of the Golem” for his intriguing insights into both Chabon’s interpretation of the Golem of Prague and his illustration of Chabon as a “third generation novelist” writing about the Holocaust. Berger attributes Chabon’s “problematic” take on the Golem myth to his generational and geographic distance from the horrors of Holocaust, noting that Chabon’s “‘survivor’ Joseph Kavalier, is a refugee who does not have firsthand
figure of the Golem is fleeing, through the act of its rescue, a new Golem is being formed: the Escapist. It is worth noting that by taking Joe in, he is, in fact, rescued by the Klaymans, and it does not require a huge logical leap to see the symbolic connection to the “clay man” of Prague.

Many scholars have compellingly illustrated the numerous ways in which the Jewishness of early comic book writers and artists helped to form many of the common tropes associated with the superhero. For instance, super strength, the first and most common superhero attribute, is often associated with the biblical hero Samson. Superman’s origin shares many similarities with Moses. As a baby, Superman was sent away by his parents in order to save his life. He grows up, a foreigner passing as a native, secretly alien, and later becomes a savior of his people. Even the secret identity, shared by the vast majority of superheroes to this day, suggests both the desire of many American Jews of the time to pass as Gentiles—Kal-El adopts the name Clark Kent recalling the many Jews and other immigrants who anglicized their names upon arriving in America—yet conveying a sense that there is something inherently great in them behind the disguise.

In *Superman is Jewish*? (2012) Harry Brod asks rhetorically, “Can it really be coincidental that Kal-El’s original Kryptonian name spoken with a Hebrew pronunciation sounds like the Hebrew words for ‘all is God’ or ‘all for God’?” (5). The answer to this experience of the camps” (81). Berger suggests that it is from this remove that Chabon’s theme of escape arises as a response to the Holocaust.
question could easily be “yes.” Jerry Siegel has said that the name of Superman’s father, Jor-El is a contraction of his creator’s name: Jerome Siegel, and it stands to reason that Jor-El’s son would share his surname. However, many creators of the Golden Age have admitted that, in retrospect, Jewish themes are clearly visible in their characters and stories, even if by accident.

In fact, Sammy remarks to Joe, “‘[Superheroes are] all Jewish...Superman, you don’t think he’s Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself’” (585). By a similar token, it would be difficult to find a more “all American” sounding name than Tom Mayflower, the secret identity of the Escapist.

In *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (2007), Danny Fingeroth writes,

> the superhero was more than a cop with a cape….In part, he was an expression of the mostly unconscious messages that the immigrant Jews and their descendents were sending out to America. These messages included: Look out for the Nazis!; Have some compassion for the victims!; Don’t you understand we are just like you?; You have to help!; Here is how you can use your gifts, America—to help those in need and distress! [sic] (18)

The idea of a superhero—a man with a secret identity, often an outsider, hiding in plain sight, who has a power unseen by the masses and uses it to help those who might otherwise reject him/her—is a natural byproduct of the predicament and mentality of
many of those first and second generation, often poor, American Jews who found themselves in the comic book business. Comic book legend Stan Lee asserts that many of the comic books of the time did, in fact, push for direct intervention in Europe saying, “Nothing could have been more natural than for our own Captain America to try to rally the nation against the Nazis, the worst enemies that the Jewish people, in fact the entire world, had ever had” (10).

In her book, *Superheroes and Superegos: Analyzing the Minds Behind the Masks*, Sharon Packer observes that in many Western nations that value multiculturalism, particularly America, people must turn to common secular heroes to fill the void left by the absence of a shared religion. She argues, “Given this diversity of religious beliefs and persuasions and origins, there developed an even greater need for shared secular symbols that could unite Americans and reflect the country’s common values. That shared symbol came in the form of superheroes, which embody ideals from many religions and borrow from many cultural myths” (76).

Though Packer omits other unifying ideas in American culture such as the Constitution, the American Dream, and the mythologizing of many of the founding fathers, her argument is compelling with regard to contemporary America. Today there are superheroes of all ethnicities: African-American (Black Lightning, Black Panther, and Storm), Native American (Thunderbird and Warpath), Jewish (The Fantastic Four’s The Thing, Kitty Pryde, Ragman), Asian (Sunspot), and Muslim (Green Lantern Simon Baz, Dust). In addition, superheroes are an ever-present cultural phenomenon in film and television, as well as comic books.
Packer goes on to note that superheroes reflect the backgrounds and attitudes of the writers and artists who create their stories. However, those individual traits are combined with a reliance upon tropes from various mythologies which make the stories and characters accessible to a wider audience than just those who share a similar background with the artist. And it is this idea that resonates so clearly in *Kavalier & Clay*. Regardless of the ways in which specific superheroes have changed over the decades, their origin is steeped in the history and culture of the young American-Jewish men who created them.

While addressing many of these notions, Chabon highlights Jewish folklore rather than the Bible as the key source of inspiration for the superhero. His superhero is not the Moses/Samson amalgam, Siegel and Shuster bestowed with incredible gifts from God. His is a superhuman monster/protector, created through magic. Chabon’s linking of the Golem of Prague story directly with the creation of the superhero serves two purposes. First, it more firmly places the genesis of the superhero in a decidedly Jewish context. This is exceptionally important in light of the ways in which contemporary portrayals of many superheroes, notably Superman, have tended toward the Christ-like. This is particularly evident in the 1993-94 story arcs “The Death of Superman” and “Reign of the Supermen,” in which Superman is killed by the monster “Doomsday” and later resurrected.

In his book, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America’s Most Enduring Hero* (2012), Larry Tye remarks that the Christ imagery imbedded in the storyline “could
not have been clearer—from a noble death to the discovery of this empty tomb, the resurrection itself, and his making clear that he was back to redeem mankind” (251).

Bryan Singer’s film *Superman Returns* (2006) is filled with similar Christ imagery: Lex Luthor’s stabbing Superman in the side with a kryptonite blade which is preceded by a brutal beating and humiliation scene by Luthor’s henchmen; Superman’s body, lying with arms outstretched, as though crucified; not to mention his return to save humanity. Yet as Chabon shows, the foundation upon which the superhero is built is a distinctly Jewish folkloric tradition. The superhero as Christ figure is merely a late bit of revisionism, liberally borrowing from the tradition of superhero as Jewish hero.

Second, the reemergence of the Golem of Prague, both as a physical object and as the model for the superhero, underscores the importance of myth to culture. The Golem-turned-superhero is emblematic of an inherent cultural need for mythic heroes. Chabon thus suggests that the reason we remember and retell these stories is because they have continued relevance beyond their time and place. His incorporation of the Golem of Prague in the context of the superhero speaks directly to the ways in which folklore speaks to common human experiences. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell writes, “It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward” (11). He notes that mythical heroes of all cultures show striking commonality in character and their stories share a general narrative structure. The Golem of Prague and the superheroes inspired by it are no different. Superheroes and the comic books that tell their stories are all pieces of an
American folklore, borrowed from other traditions and reinvented to fit American
culture.

It should be noted that Chabon is not the first to suggest that the Golem is an early
inspiration for what would become the modern-day superhero. Tye observes that early
comic book creators needed heroic prototypes upon which to base their own characters,
and often looked to biblical characters for inspiration. He remarks, however, “a good
place to start was with the Golem. A he-man shaped from clay, this mythic character
emerged repeatedly throughout history to safeguard Jews from aggressors” (73). Brod
adds, “No matter the specifics, the Golem is always portrayed as a hulking brute. So it
was probably inevitable that one day there would actually be a story comparing the Hulk
to the golem” (40). Citing the December 1970 issue, The Incredible Hulk #134, called
“Among Us Walks the Golem,” Brod points out that at the end of the story, which takes
place in a small village in Eastern Europe, “The Hulk eventually plays the role of the
powerful, liberating Golem, helping overthrow the evil dictator against whom the
villagers are fighting” (41).

Arie Kaplan notes that Will Eisner “also viewed Superman as a mythic
descendent of the Golem, and thus a link in the chain of Jewish tradition: ‘[Jews needed]
a hero who could protect us against an almost invincible force. So [Siegel and Shuster]
created an invincible hero’” (17). Kaplan quotes Al Jaffee (of Mad Magazine fame), who
takes the notion a step further remarking that he “sees Superman as not only an updated
Golem, but also as stemming from a desire to embrace a messianic figure. ‘Who is the
Messiah? The Messiah is Superman, a Super-God. I think that’s a great part of Jewish
history, the need for a Messiah. And of course in modern times, the Messiah turns into Superman” (17).

In 1998 artist Jon Bogdanove and writer Louise Simonson took the step that Siegel and Schuster and publishers Harry Donnenfeld and Jack Liebowitz refused to, back in the 1930s and 40s, and placed Superman in Europe during the Second World War. As Kaplan describes it: in the three-part story arc, the Man of Steel “literally becomes a Golem, helping to defend the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto” (17). He adds that two of the children saved by the Superman/Golem look very much like Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster and “are mysteriously compelled to draw pictures and tell stories (respectively) about an ‘angel’ who ‘would save us,’ a caped and costumed celestial” who is conspicuously reminiscent of the Last Son of Krypton (17).

Despite the already wide acceptance of the Golem as an important superhero forerunner, Kavalier & Clay moves beyond comparisons between the super powered figure of Jewish legend and the superheroes of the modern day. Chabon takes this concept a step further by incorporating the Golem of Prague story both into the creative history of the superhero and into the lives of the creators themselves. Not only does the superhero bear a striking resemblance to the Golem, but the lives of Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay share a remarkably similar narrative structure with that of Rabbi Loew, creator of the Golem of Prague.

Chabon’s appropriation of the Golem story differs from previous literary Golems, and serves several purposes. The first, as mentioned above, is that he takes that old story, brings it into a contemporary setting, thereby giving it a new, modern resonance.
However, his approach is unique because, rather than using the Golem of Prague as metaphor, as in *He, She and It*, or reimagining the story with a completely new Golem without reference to Rabbi Loew, as in *Puttermesser*, Chabon incorporates Rabbi Loew’s Golem and suggests that it is the model for the “next generation” of Golem: the superhero.

Chabon assumes the original tale of Rabbi Loew’s Golem to be true, supposing that the inanimate body of the Golem remains in hiding. In short, Chabon’s Golem of Prague existed in the real world. Though the Golem of the novel is no longer animate, it remains an important, inspirational and cultural symbol. This slight deviation from the writing of a modern-day Golem story is significant because it directly addresses the importance of the Golem, not as physical protector, but as a symbol of how Jews, through their own ingenuity and unique knowledge and abilities, can protect themselves against hostile forces. Thus through his linking the role of the Golem in Jewish imagination directly with the superhero he underscores the ways in which fictional characters can play a similar role in the minds of contemporary American Jews—and ultimately in unhyphenated America.

The second function of his utilization of the Golem story is akin to that of Piercy, Ozick, and Shelley (amongst others): Chabon’s characters create a Golem for themselves. However, unlike previous Golems, the creature created by Sammy Clay and Joe Kavalier exists only on the page of a comic book.

Finally, for Sammy and Joe, the Escapist affects their lives just as the Golem of Prague affected Rabbi Loew’s. Their story, therefore, follows the structure of the
traditional Golem tale. Like the Golem-makers before them, their creation stemmed from their collective imagination out of desperation and through the power of their words. It first served them well, making them rich and successful, but eventually raged out of control, threatening to destroy them.

Through this three-tiered approach, Chabon demonstrates how this piece of folklore can be lifted from its antiquated origins and connects generations of Jews, across the centuries and continents, through the power of storytelling. In effect, much like oral traditions, he adjusts a common story to fit his particular audience. Yet in so doing, by focusing his attention on a bygone era, he infuses this retelling with an historical grandeur, suggesting a timelessness in this story. *Kavalier & Clay* was published in 2000, and therefore, readers who are also comic book fans, would know how Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman have evolved over time. However, at the same time, because of this novel, readers are be able to recognize these similar themes continuing today, and in other media as well.

Chabon first presents his audience with the Golem early in the novel, while Joe is still in Prague. Here, the Golem serves a dual purpose, that of an artifact in need of saving and as the vehicle for Joe Kavalier’s escape. The narrator notes that as “soon as the German army occupied Prague, talk began, in certain quarters, of sending the city’s famous Golem…into the safety of exile” for fear that the Nazi’s would find it in their plundering of the city and “that the Golem would be packed up and shipped off to ornament some *institut* or private collection in Berlin or Munich” (13). This is significant because it links Joe directly to this distinctly Jewish bit of folklore, and it lays the
foundation upon which Chabon builds his argument for the fluidity of folklore. Here Chabon introduces the idea that religious stories can have a basis in history and that those stories can and do remain relevant and relatable in the modern-day.  

The famous escape artist, Bernard Kornblum, is charged with sneaking the Golem out of Prague before the Nazis are able to find it. Those who know that it has been hidden in a long abandoned apartment in a still-inhabited complex believe that Kornblum’s skills in escapestr would make him particularly adept at the task. Kornblum’s abilities become more necessary when Joe’s emigration from Czechoslovakia is revoked because of a missing stamp and that “the requirements had changed this morning [sic]. They had a directive, a telegram from Eichmann himself” (17). Upon discovering the Golem’s hiding place and realizing that it is a giant, a plan is hatched to pass it off as a corpse and to conceal Joe inside, behind a false panel.

Joe’s escape, coupled with the fact that the physical Golem does not reappear in the novel until near the end points to Chabon’s suggestion that the Golem as an idea, understood through stories, is what is truly important, not that it is reanimated to save the Jews of Europe from the Nazis. In fact, to do so would force Chabon to come to terms with the same, inherent problem faced by comics creators like Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, whose Captain America regularly fought Nazis, and will later plague Kavalier and Clay:

3 This intersection of folklore and religious belief with modern-day life is one that Chabon will revisit in various ways in his subsequent work. See chapters four and five of this dissertation for discussions on this theme in his novels *Summerland* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* respectively.
if the Golem existed as legend would have it, and it is reanimated, how then can one honestly and respectfully consider the realities of the Holocaust.

The fundamental problem with cultural mythologies that promise a superhuman protector is that when a community or nation is in dire need of that hero’s return, the myth breaks down. The Second World War destroys any illusions that the Golem stories—particularly the Golem of Prague—have any basis in truth. If there was a time when the Golem was needed, it was then. Superheroes faced a similar dilemma. Comic books needed to answer a critical question: how to best continue telling superhero stories during a time of real crisis. Unlike Marvel’s Captain America, DC Comics chose to avoid this problem by having Superman, as Clark Kent, fail his eye exam; he reads the wrong chart because his x-ray vision causes him to see into the next room. Superman then chooses to help the war effort from home.

Chabon shows both sides of this question. Joe and Sammy want to take the same approach as Simon and Kirby, sending the Escapist into the European theater of war. The executives at Empire Comics would prefer to avoid controversy and keep their character out of the war all together. In so doing, Chabon goes on to explore both the cultural importance of the Golem story, and the limits to the comfort that a story can provide. The Escapist is created in light of Nazi atrocities, seen first hand by Joe.

Chabon makes the importance of the Golem of Prague to Sammy and Joe’s development of the Escapist explicit throughout the creation process. When Joe is first tasked with drawing a superhero, a concept he had only just found out about a few hours
earlier, he draws the first hero that comes to mind: the Golem. Chabon describes the sole
drawing Joe completes:

Out of the shadows and into the light of the bat- scarred moon strode a tall,
brawny man. His frame was as sturdy and thick as his hobnailed boots.
For a costume he wore a tunic with deep creases, a heavy belt, and a big,
shapeless stocking hat like something out of Rembrandt. The man’s
features, though regular and handsome, looked frozen, and his intrepid
gaze was empty. There were four Hebrew characters etched into his
forehead. (85-6).

While this is a far cry from the bright, red, blue and yellow tights of Superman
and his fellow characters, Anapol immediately recognizes the drawing as the Golem. Joe
asserts, “‘To me, this Superman is…maybe…only an American Golem’” (86). In each
case, the superhero/Golem is charged with protecting a population of people and
performing heroic deeds. Both are gifted with superhuman abilities that can be either
extraordinarily helpful or can have catastrophic results. And both are, ultimately,
uncontrollable by those who hope to benefit from their abilities.

While this is clearly Chabon’s argument, placed in the mouth of Joe Kavalier, it is
a sentiment shared by other creators of the day, such as Will Eisner who said “‘The
Golem was very much the precursor to the Superhero in that in every society there’s a
need for mythological characters, wish fulfillment. And the wish fulfillment in the Jewish
case of the hero would be someone to protect us’” (qtd in Weinstein 50).
Chabon is at times overt about the connection between Golem-making and comic book creation. However, he is much more subtle in his illustration of the ways in which the story of Joe Kavalier, Sammy Clay and the Escapist mirrors that of Rabbi Loew and the Golem of Prague beyond the idea of the magical or super-powered protector created in a time of need.

Chabon’s description of the birth of the Escapist mimics the creation of the Golem as performed by Rabbi Loew. He writes, “Every golem in the history of the world…was summoned through language, through the murmuring, recital, and kabbalistic chitchat—was, literally, talked into life. Kavalier and Clay—whose golem was to be formed of black lines and the four-color dots of the lithographer—lay down, lit the first of five dozen cigarettes they were to consume that afternoon, and started to talk” (119). Significantly, Joe and Sammy also form their initial ideas while wandering around New York, fleshing out their ideas, mirroring the walking around the inanimate Golem by Loew and his two cohorts.

Connecting his two young comic book creators with the legend of the creation of the Golem of Prague adds a sense of historical importance to their endeavors. It also establishes the creation of superheroes with other, more universally lauded, acts of creation. Chabon, thus, makes two important suggestions in this scene: that the superhero is as important to the young Jews of mid-twentieth century America as the Golem of Prague was to those sixteenth-century Czech Jews, and that the Golem need not be a physical being, walking the earth, so long as it is a powerful enough idea to affect positive change in the lives of those whom it is meant to serve. In fact, Sammy assuages
Joe’s skepticism about whether there could be a social purpose to the superhero, when it is only a make-believe character, noting that through the vast sums of money they will make, Joe will actually be able to rescue his family and “in that sense, see, he really will be real…He will be doing what we say he can do” (136). Comic books and the superheroes who populate them, serve as images of safety and security during a time of fear and uncertainty, for Kavalier and Clay, and those who read them.

Like Rabbi Loew, fearing violence against Prague’s Jews, the Escapist is created out of dire need, and to serve as a protector, particularly in the case of Joe Kavalier. Having been the lone family member to escape the Nazis, he fears for his family. He is drawn to Sammy’s dream because of the promise of “big money” he can use to attempt to buy his family’s freedom. Putting the realization of Joe’s motivation into Sammy’s thoughts, Chabon remarks that Sammy “realized what the money was wanted for…It was hard enough being a disappointment to himself and [his mother] Ethel without have to worry about four starving Jews in Czechoslovakia” (71). Given these circumstances, it is little wonder that Joe’s idea of the superhero would be the Golem. It also establishes an early connection between the superhero and the Golem, outside of a physical manifestation. Each man, Rabbi Loew and Joe Kavalier, creates an artificial human-like figure that is brought to a form of life, for the purposes of rescuing those close to them from an aggressive, powerful, and violently anti-Semitic force.

Sammy’s purpose is less magnanimous. For him, at first, the Escapist is a vehicle for his own salvation. He is looking for a way out of poverty, and he believes comic books are his ticket. In convincing his mother and Joe (and later the stable of artists he
will need) he invents the exorbitant sums of money they will make: “‘Fifty dollars a week. Maybe more…Forty at least’” (78). While it is clear that he is pulling numbers out of the air, it is equally apparent that he is fully confident both in his own ability and the potential of the medium.

This proves to be a slight deviation from the themes of the story of Rabbi Loew’s Golem, but Sammy quickly amends his motivation to include the Kavaliers of Prague. For instance, he is willing to abandon the whole project if Joe’s cover of the Escapist punching Hitler in the jaw is not included. In addition the money Sammy earns is used to raise his mother and grandmother out of poverty as well as himself.

The Escapist is able to give hope to Joe and Sammy, and presumably freedom for their families. When they decide upon the concept of the super escape artist, Sammy is drawn to the idea that this hero frees from chains not only himself, but others as well. Just as the Golem of Prague is intended to send the anti-Semitic followers of Thaddeus scattering, the Escapist literally breaks the chains of those trapped by tyranny, seeking to destroy the oppressors.

Sammy and Joe’s Golem is originally created to make money, and it makes an enormous amount of it for the cousins and their financial backers at Empire Comics. Joe is given a ray of hope that he might be able to afford to bring his family over from Czechoslovakia. Similarly, Sammy is able to move out of his mother’s apartment and to support his mother and grandmother. Yet Joe and Sammy move beyond using the Escapist as a moneymaker. They give their Golem a second task and begin using Escapist stories to convince the United States, and its citizens, to get involved in the war effort.
against Nazi Germany. Though the Escapist can perform these additional duties, it cannot be controlled. The result is that while millions are reading and exalting in the Escapist’s monthly drubbing of Hitler and his Nazi goons, there is a destructive quality as these same exploits enflame the rage of the various Nazi sympathizers in America. This is first evidenced by the Nazi-sympathizer Carl Ebling’s fake bombing of the Empire State Building, and later, his real attempted bombing of the bar mitzvah.

Chabon brings up an interesting idea regarding whether the comic book could be seen as a form of propaganda directed at children. It is clear that Joe and Sammy intended for their stories to convince the nation to enter the war in Europe, and they knew that the vast majority of their readership was young boys. The real-world effect of these stories on the public beyond entertainment remains questionable, even by Sammy and Joe. However, comic books often reflected the concerns of the world, much like other literatures.

In The Sociology of Literary Taste (1923), Levin L. Schücking describes the late nineteenth century shift toward literary naturalism as resulting from the general public’s changing tastes. He argues that the “sense of the hollowness of the religious conceptions that continued to dominate the school and the life of the State,” along with growing social inequality and political conflict, women’s struggle for equality and other societal unrest produced a desire in many readers for a literature that “is striving after truth at any price, even, if it must be, at the price of disgust” (32). It is in this light that, in the wake of the atomic bomb, the Incredible Hulk was created as a result of an exposure to radiation. At the same time, Superman’s arch nemesis, Lex Luthor, began as a mad scientist, but, in the
1980s, he became a ruthless businessman. Chabon shows the Escapist, like Captain America, having difficulty maintaining readership after World War II because the character was so closely tied to the war effort, particularly the battle against Germany.

The negative response to the Escapist’s Nazi fighting has an indirect effect on Sammy. As a result of the arrest and conviction of the hapless Ebling, his sister Ruth is flushed with rage at those whom she blamed for his imprisonment: the creators of the Escapist. Chabon remarks, “the bubbling motor of Ruth Ebling’s hostility toward Jews was being fueled not merely by the usual black compound of her brother’s logical, omnivorous harangues and the silent precepts of her employer’s social class. She was also burning a clear, volatile quart of shame blended with unrefined rage” (402-3). As housekeeper for a man who was hosting a party with several of his gay friends, Sammy and Tracy Bacon, radio voice of the Escapist and Sammy’s lover, included, her anger results in her calling the police (homosexuality being illegal). This leads to Sammy’s humiliation and rape at the hands of two police officers, as well as precipitating the destruction of his relationship with Bacon and his return to rejecting his own sexuality.

For Joe, the consequences of the Escapist’s failure at its secondary task is less dramatic yet equally pivotal. Joe comes to realize that no matter how many Nazis the Escapist pounds into paste it does not result in the desired effect on American politics. Joe becomes disillusioned by this thinking: “If they could not move Americans to anger against Hitler, then Joe’s existence, the mysterious freedom that had been granted to him and denied to so many others, had no meaning” (172-3). Later, Sammy comes to feel the same impotence at their endless imaginary battles with Nazis: “though futility was not an
emotion Sammy was accustomed to experiencing, he had begun to be plagued by the same sense of inefficacy, of endless make-believe, that had troubled Joe from the first” (296). In the above cases of Carl and Ruth Ebling, the Escapist’s war on the Nazis works too well, causing chaos. Yet as a political motivator, it is an utter failure. In each case, the comic book Golem proves ill suited for the job.

The Golem’s brutishness is reminiscent of the superhero’s typical approach to fighting crime: lots of action, fistfights and feats of strength. The Escapist’s popularity is attributed to “his combination of earnestness, social conscience, and willingness to scrap” (360). Both are the proto-typical heroes of their time and place: the Golem as a servant to the unimpeachable Rabbi Loew, and the Escapist as representative of the American ideal, a loner who takes matters into his own hands, using his wits, strength and ingenuity to help those less fortunate. However, just as the Golem engenders hostility from some in the community, the Escapist suffers a similar fate in the raging piety and over-blown paternalism of psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham and his followers in the Senate.\footnote{See Dr. Fredric Wertham’s book \textit{The Seduction of the Innocent}. In it, he argues that comic books were poorly written and poorly drawn but goes beyond these old criticisms. Quoting Michael Schumacher’s biography of Will Eisner, \textit{Will Eisner: A Dreamer’s Life in Comics}, Wertham listed the areas in which comic books could have ill effects on their readers:

1. The comic-book format is an invitation to illiteracy.
2. Crime comic books create an atmosphere of cruelty and deceit.}
For both Joe and Sammy, the attack on the Golem comes at the hands of groups of moralizing reactionaries who come to blame comic books, and the Escapist specifically, for any and all societal problems. This attack leads directly to the character, in effect, running amok.

For Sammy, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency hearings, and his televised testimony, proves to be the direct downfall of his career in comics. The Subcommittee, convened in 1954, sought to prove that comic books were corrupting American youths and the root cause of juvenile delinquency, and leaned

3. They create a readiness for temptation.

4. They stimulate unwholesome fantasies.

5. They suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas.

6. They furnish the rationalization for them, which may be ethically even more harmful than the impulse.

7. They suggest the forms a delinquent impulse may take and supply details of technique.

8. They may tip the scales toward maladjustment. (137)

At the time these concerns were taken very seriously, leading to the creation of the Comics Code, a self-censoring organization.
heavily on the work of Wertham as evidence. Through their loaded questions, such as inferring a sexual relationship between Batman and Robin, one senator sarcastically suggests, “Perhaps they are just good friends” (614). After his inevitably disastrous testimony, Sammy is led out of the courtroom having been “publicly identified as a lifelong homosexual, on television, by members of the United States Senate” (617). While this marks the end of Sammy’s career in comic books, Chabon leaves the door open for a new beginning.

The Kefauver hearings’ unsubtle homophobia can be seen as an example of inherent anti-Semitism in the questioners. In Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man (1997), Daniel Boyarin notes that the image of the feminized Jewish man, particularly in the eyes of Christians, often included more than a thread of homophobia. Boyarin observes, “Since within this [Western Christian] culture, male hysteria and homosexuality are both symptoms and products of gender inversion, there is a slippage between them: the Jew was queer and hysterical—and therefore not a man” (215). It was no secret that vast majority of people working in comic book were Jews, at the time. Though Sammy is, in fact, a homosexual, he is not “out.” The senators use the implication of his sexuality as a means to discredit him out of hand. “Homosexual” is a label that they easily hang on Sammy.

5 Wertham famously, and with characteristic hyperbole, said, “I think Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry…They get the children much younger. They teach them race hatred at the age of four, before they can read” (qtd. in Hajdu 264).
The questioning of Sammy by the Senate committee poses an important question: if Sammy and Joe believe that their work should and can influence the public, as they did when they were writing their anti-Nazi comics, why is Wertham’s claim invalid? Despite their initial hopes for encouraging the American public to embrace the American intervention in the war effort through their stories, those hopes are shown to be futile. It was not comic books, or other entertainment, but the bombing of Pearl Harbor that galvanized the public. The same can be said of Wertham’s claims. The failure of Joe and Sammy’s political messaging to spur action indicates that comic books alone cannot completely influence the minds of a large population of people.

Yet for Joe, the destructive power of the Golem occurs earlier in the novel, when the ship carrying his brother Thomas is sunk by a German U-boat. He essentially blames the Escapist for killing his brother, reasoning that had he not made so much money, he would not have been able to pay for Thomas’s ill-fated place on the ship. It was the Golem’s stated duty (making money) that was the catalyst for Thomas’s death. In each case, the sub-committee hearings and Thomas’s death, Chabon underscores the idea that the Golem, once created, cannot be controlled. As was the case with Rabbi Loew, for Joe and Sammy, what seemed to be an ideal plan to enhance all aspects of their lives culminates in unforeseen, disastrous consequences.

In the end, like Rabbi Loew’s Golem, the Escapist is de-animated. As Sammy and Joe are clearing out Joe’s office at the Empire State Building, Anapol stops by to visit and admits that “‘Today…I killed the Escapist’” (588). The Escapist had fulfilled its original obligation, to earn enough money for the creators to move them out of poverty.
Anapol adds, “‘I’ve been losing money on the Escapist titles for a few years now…his circulation figures have been in a nosedive for quite some time. Superheroes are dead, boys’” (588). The Escapist had run its course.

Notably, the story of Rabbi Loew does not end with the destruction of the Golem, and neither does the discontinuation of the Escapist comic books mark the end of the line for Joe and Sammy. Rabbi Loew continues to be a leader for the Jewish community in Prague, even stronger and wiser for his experience with his Golem. Likewise, Sammy and Joe come out of their experience with the Escapist as smarter, more self-assured people. Sammy chooses to leave for Hollywood (which he had considered earlier in the novel) and Joe buys Empire Comics, set on producing his own comic book telling of the Golem of Prague story, which he had been working on tirelessly upon his return to the United States after his time in World War II.

The Golem of Prague reappears at the end of the novel, in the very box that hid the young Joe Kavalier during his escape from Prague to America; only the Golem no longer maintains its humanoid form. Having travelled too far from the river Moldau, its place of origin, it has crumbled back into a pile of dirt. This final return of the Golem to the narrative occurs just as Joe is thinking about buying Empire Comics with the money he had saved in order to buy his family’s freedom. Joe notices that the box is significantly lighter than it had been all those years ago, recalling Kornblum’s “paradoxical wisdom about Golems, something in Hebrew to the effect that it was the Golem’s unnatural soul that had given it weight; unburdened of it, the earthen Golem was light as air” (611). Here Chabon suggests that the so-called magic cannot be reclaimed. Like the Golem, too
far removed from its origins, through his forays into radio, television, and post-War campiness, the Escapist has lost its soul. This is emphasized by Sammy’s decision to leave comics all together. The person who first, and most whole heartedly, believed in the artistic, financial, and social value of superheroes moves on to something else.

This extended mirroring of the original Golem of Prague story with the lives of Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay succeeds in proving both the appeal of cultural myths and legends, and in explaining that appeal. Chabon suggests that these stories continue to resonate because their ebbs and flows reflect the ups and downs of everyday life, but they do so using tales of the fantastic. In that sense, Chabon seems to argue that the comic book is merely a contemporary version of those same tales.

By the end of the novel, Joe has returned from fighting in the war and has secretly taken up residence in the Empire State Building, drawing a comic called The Golem. This work aligns Joe with the later work of Eisner, who not only was integral to the creation of the superhero, but also comics-as-art. In his excellent book, The Ten-Cent Plague (2008), David Hajdu quotes artist Bill Bossert who remarks on the uniqueness of Eisner, saying, “‘He never looked down on comics. Of course, most people did, and I did too’” (25).

Eisner was famous for saying early on that he felt that comic books could be used to tackle serious subjects, and through Joe, Chabon underscores this idea. His seminal work, A Contract with God (1978), opened the door for others to see comics as more than “kids’ stuff.” In Contract, Eisner tells the story of Frimme Hersh’s crisis of faith. Hersh, as a young man, believed that he had made a contract with God that if he lived well and according to His laws, he would be rewarded. Yet when Hersh’s adopted daughter dies,
Hersh takes his anger out on God and becomes a slumlord, rejecting religion, until he convinces “the wisest of the elders” to fashion a new contract with God for him (42). In exchange, Hersh donates all of his money to the synagogue. Hersh is finally given his new contract, and he dies shortly thereafter. In this story, Eisner explores the nature of faith, how it is lost, and the nature of man’s relationship to God. Yet he also weaves in a critique of the often heartlessness of the owners of poor tenements, and the abuse they inflict upon their tenants.

And this is Chabon’s point throughout the novel: that comic books are capable of telling stories illuminating aspects of the human condition. That they do so using pencil drawing and speech balloons should not automatically detract from the story they have to tell. Chabon writes, “Something paradoxical had occurred in the five years he has worked on The Golem: the more of himself, of his heart and his sorrows, that he had poured into the strip—the more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle for personal expression—the less willingness he felt to show it to other people” (578-9). Chabon demonstrates throughout Joe and Sammy’s nature as artists. They are committed to their work, and always pushing the boundaries of their chosen form. Like Eisner’s A Contract with God, Chabon shows that Joe’s The Golem takes advantage of the endless narrative possibilities of pictures and text and thereby realizes the full potential of the medium.

The Golem of Prague again becomes the inspiration for Joe’s best work. In a way we can see a correlation between Kavalier & Clay and Joe’s The Golem. As is the case with Joe, Chabon’s utilization of the Golem of Prague is important for another reason,
and that is that it marks the first time in his work that he directly addresses specifically Jewish issues and concerns. Chabon tackles the Holocaust and its reverberation across the Atlantic to those immigrants and children of immigrants, safely in the United States. In employing the Golem as the inspiration for the original superheroes, often cloaked in the Star Spangled Banner and standing up for “Truth, Justice, and the American Way,” Chabon advances the notion that this folklore need not be parochially Jewish, but has resonance for all Americans.

4.2 Creating Mythology

In Tye’s history, *Superman*, he attempts to answer why Superman has continued to be such a powerful cultural phenomenon, seventy-five years after his original publication. He offers many ideas, but they all hinge on the idea that Superman taps into something uniquely American, an Americanness that spans race, culture of origin, and creed. In effect, Superman is the quintessential American folk hero because he embodies so much of the values that we hold dear. From his immigrant status, humble, small town upbringing to a pair of kindly, honest adoptive parents, to the hardworking, powerful force for good, Superman is America at its most idealized. Similarly, his trials, shortcomings (think the long love triangle with Lois Lane, Clark Kent, and Superman), longing for a connection with his ancestral home while simultaneously fiercely identifying with his adopted country, are all reflections of American identities.

The parallels that Chabon draws between the superhero and the Golem are not the only means by which he asserts the mythic status of superhero. This correlation suggests that superhero comics are essentially American folktales. With that in mind, Kavalier and
Clay function in a similar way as do other folk heroes, who are often based loosely in fact, but whose exploits are exaggerated and combined with others to form, in one individual, an idealized figure. Whether referring to King Arthur or Moses, many of the best-known legends have some basis in history and have been appropriated and retold to fit a specific time and place. Scholars believe that an historical Arthur was likely a Welsh king or warlord, first adapted to suit a twelfth century audience by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Sir Thomas Malory later revised the story to reflect England during the Wars of the Roses. With each adaptation, the story of Arthur changes slightly, becoming larger in scope, though maintaining familiar footing in earlier interpretations.

The same can be said about story of the Golem of Prague. Joe and Sammy share character traits as well as experiences with many prominent figures from the early days of comics, yet the two of them are wholly fictional, and the Escapist is purely Chabon’s creation. By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, Chabon creates the context in which he can stress both the specific concerns of those American Jews of the time, and also the quintessential Americanness of the characters they created out of those Jewish legends.

There are seminal moments in comics’ history that Chabon recreates which he uses to create a broad picture of the era. His first nod to comics’ history is the fleecing of Joe and Sammy on the sale of the Escapist. The politicizing of superhero comics recalls the early collaborations of Jack Kirby and Joe Simon while at Timely (later Marvel) comics, particularly Captain America. And in Sammy’s initial sales pitch to Sheldon Anapol, trying to convince him to create a comic book, Chabon incorporates the famous
assignment given to many young artists after the wild success of Superman. Anapol directs Sammy to “just get me a Superman” (88). This famously recalls Victor Fox (of Fox Publications) who “wanted [Will] Eisner to create a character that was more than just a Superman knockoff; he wanted a character that was virtually identical to the Siegel and Shuster creation” (Schumacher 51). Eisner created Wonder Man and Fox got sued. And like Eisner, who was told by Fox to “Lie about Wonder Man’s parentage when he was asked to testify,” which he did, Sammy offers to perjure himself in exchange for a larger slice of the Escapist money-making machine (Tye 54).

Finally, as noted above, Chabon recreates the Kefauver Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency. According to Hajdu, since the first comic books appeared on newsstands, parents and the arbiters of good taste railed against them as vehicles for poisoning the minds of America’s youth. 1954 Senate hearings nearly destroyed the industry. As a result the comic book industry created “The Comics Code,” a list of forty-one draconian rules governing the acceptable content of comic books. Hajdu remarks, “The Code was an unprecedented (and never surpassed) monument of self-imposed repression and prudery” (291). At issue were images of violence, horror, sexuality—particularly in the horror and crime comics such as Crime Does Not Pay and Tales from the Crypt. However, superheroes were not exempt and of particular interest was the relationship between Batman and Robin and other superhero/ward pairings. Though this was just one of many concerns about comics, and far from the most prominent, Chabon cleverly makes this the focal point of Sammy’s testimony and in so doing he calls
attention to the rampant homophobia of the time. Yet it also calls to mind the continued homophobia that exists in contemporary America.

Ultimately, by borrowing many of the most important events of comic book history, Chabon gives his novel a sense of historical authenticity. He adds to this sense by including occasional footnotes remarking on fictional events that occurred after the novel’s end, like a decades later sale of *Mighty Midget Radio Comics* #1 at auction. Similarly, through creating, in Sammy and Joe, characters that are composites of many historical comics artists and writers, he is able to take a wide-ranging and complex history and simplify it into something that can be more easily grasped and understood. Like the storytellers who took the Golem tale and transplanted it into the time and life of Rabbi Loew, Chabon creates out of history a story about the creation of folklore.

In making his case that Superman is fundamentally a Jewish character, Brod asserts, “I am not claiming Superman for a Jewish tradition, I am not reducing Superman to being only a Jewish character, not taking away from his more universal appeal. One always arrives at universal appeal from some particular place, and I am demonstrating how the Jewish tradition is Superman’s ancestral home” (52). This seems to me to be Chabon’s essential point as well.

Through the illustration of the Jewish origins of the superhero and recalling the wild popularity of those American Golems, he highlights the American experience. The Escapist, like Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman and all their super-ilk, reaches beyond ethnicity and taps into an unhyphenated Americanness.
Many of the common tropes of comic book superheroes recall Lord Raglan’s *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (1937). Raglan identifies twenty-two steps in what he refers to as the hero pattern. He identifies how characters as diverse as Oedipus, Heracles, Moses, and Robin Hood all reflect most of those characteristics. Significantly, many of these traits are also fundamental to the superhero:

(4) The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and (5) He is also reputed to be the son of a god…
(8) Reared by foster-parents in a far country. (9) We are told nothing of his childhood, but (10) On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom. (11) After a victory over the king and/or giant, dragon, or wild beast…
(13) Becomes king.

(179-80)

The stages after thirteen all deal with the fall of the hero, which, as we know, does not happen to the superhero (at least not for long) because he needs to reappear next month. Yet these are all characteristics that are seen in comic book superheroes.

Raglan observes that many folk heroes suffer from debilitating physical conditions, particularly of the legs. He writes, “Sometimes, it would seem, the child itself was wounded in the leg; hence perhaps the name ‘Oedipus’, ‘Swell-foot’, and the many heroes who are lame, or who have scars on their legs” (192).

The Escapist’s alter ego, Tom Mayflower, is a young man who has a debilitating limp, who idolizes his uncle/father figure, the escape artist known as Misterioso, and works as a prop man. When his uncle is killed by a mysterious group called the Iron Chain, Tom is given a golden key which not only heals his limp but gives him
tremendous power. Tom first resists taking the key, worrying that he does not possess the heroic spirit necessary to take up his uncle’s mantle. However he is soon convinced to do so and convinces himself and the fellow performers who had been his uncle’s partners of his worth. This is all in keeping with a foundational theme in comic-book superheroes; the weakling with an enormous heart is given powers to equal his spirit.

In 2004, Chabon created a comic book titled *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*. In the first issue he fleshes out the Escapist’s origin story as it appears in *Kavalier & Clay*. Though those twenty pages, he shows his character embodying the key elements of the model of the superhero set down by Richard Reynolds in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994), many of which correspond with Raglan’s hero: (1) Tom Mayflower is raised by his uncle Max, the escape artist; (2) after receiving a magic key, Tom’s limp is cured, he is gifted with super strength, and no lock can hold him; (5) the Escapist, acrobatic hero, showman is contrasted with Tom Mayflower, crippled, lowly stagehand; (6) the Escapist knows no jurisdiction and therefore travels the world freeing the captives outside of any nation’s laws; (7) Tom’s abilities stem from his magic key and the mysterious League of the Golden Key who are the keepers of its magic.

Chabon’s Escapist is the prototypical superhero. His story is about the tired and poor who, when given an opportunity, take it and use their abilities to benefit others. In other words, the Escapist is the embodiment of how Americans see themselves. Yet, interestingly, while American values are as unique as those of any culture, the storytelling structure and the character development show a universality shared by
cultures world wide, which is achieved through the mining of mythologies from many cultures in the creation of these characters.

4.3 Escapes and Escapists

The most prominent theme throughout the novel, and one that is directly related to immigrant (or children of immigrant) American Jews in first half of the twentieth century, is escape. At its most basic level the theme of escape directly stems from Joe’s flight from the Nazis in Prague, and his unending determination to ensure his family’s eventual deliverance. The presence of the Holocaust in Joe’s, and by extension Sammy’s, mind is always apparent. The novel begins with Joe Kavalier’s own escape from Nazi-occupied Prague. This escape eventually provides the basis for the Escapist, a superhuman, Houdini-esque escape artist who uses his abilities, in Sammy’s excited words, to “‘[free] the world of [crime]. He frees [sic] people, see? He comes in the darkest hour. He watches from the shadows. Guided only by the light from…His Golden Key’” (121).

This focus on liberation is unique amongst the superheroes of their time. Unlike Superman, who seems to simply be a powerful do-gooder without an apparent motivation beyond altruism, the Escapist has a specific, stated mission. Unlike Batman, whose crime fighting is inwardly focused, stemming from a need to avenge the death of his parents, the Escapist’s attention is projected outward, toward the people in need of rescue, rather than the criminals.

Yet the theme of escapism persists beyond the Holocaust and the Escapist himself. Sammy means to escape from his mother’s house, from poverty, from his polio-
crippled body and, eventually, from his homosexuality. Chabon writes, “Sammy dreamed the usual Brooklyn dreams of flight and transformation and escape” (6). He adds, “like most natives of Brooklyn, Sammy considered himself a realist, and in general his escape plans centered around the attainment of fabulous sums of money” (7). Sammy feels constrained by his limited life in Brooklyn and by his poverty, which creates in him an industrious spirit. “From the age of six, he had sold seeds, candy bars, houseplants, cleaning fluids, metal polish, magazine subscriptions, unbreakable combs, and shoelaces door-to-door” (7). Sammy’s hard-working nature, coupled with his desire to leave, allows him to see the potential in both the superhero as a moneymaking behemoth and in Joe’s artistic ability.

Sammy was born into the longing for escape. His father, the famous circus strongman known as the Mighty Molecule, abandoned his family while Sammy was an infant, preferring travel rather than a life at home, and raising a family. When he was thirteen, his father returns for a brief period, taking Sammy for walks and talking about his memories of carrying Sammy to the hospital when he became sick. Already feeling squeezed in by his life in Brooklyn, and fascinated with his father’s exploits, Sammy eventually asks to come with him. Yet he disappears, leaving Sammy behind. Later, upon hearing of his father’s death, “under the rear wheels of a Deere tractor he was attempting to upend, Alter Klayman had been crushed, and with him Sammy’s fondest hope, in the act of escaping his life, of working with a partner” (108).

In fact, both Joe and Sammy are connected through the loss of their fathers, as is Tom Mayflower. The absence of the father necessitates the fast maturation of the eldest
son, who is now responsible for the household, which was a situation faced by many young, poor men at the time, including Siegel, Shuster and other early comic book creators. Through the Escapist’s complex origin, based on both Joe and Sammy, Chabon highlights the underlying duality of the superhero’s character—both underdog and hero—that was so appealing to many readers. The crippled Tom Mayflower replaced his father figure, Misterioso, and carried on his business; he also became a superhero who protected the world. Similarly, through the creation of the Escapist, Sammy is able to overcome his physical shortcomings to provide for his family after his physically fit and strong father abandons them.

While not a god as Raglan notes is the case with many heroes, Tom’s father figure possesses with god-like powers, which he passes on to Tom. Tom’s origin also recalls Campbell who describes an important stage in the hero’s journey: the refusal of the quest. Because of his limp, Tom does not believe he is capable of taking the Misterioso mantle, let alone becoming a superhero. But he is eventually convinced of the necessity of assuming these roles.

Yet this, too, is a form of escapism. Fellow artist Frank Pantaleone remarks that the creation of these characters are “Wishful figments…it’s all what some kid wishes he could do. Like for you [Sammy], hey, you don’t want to have a gimpy leg no more. So, boom, you give your guy a magic key and he can walk’” (145). Through Pantaleone, Chabon suggests that, much like the characters they create, whose limitations often are transformed into strengths through magic, the creators themselves experience a release from their own demons and insecurities through their imaginations. They are able to live
vicariously through their own creations, and in Sammy’s case, he transforms himself from a shy, weak person into an athletic, altruist who fights tyranny. Interestingly, Sammy seems unaware of this connection between the Escapist and himself.

Comic books offer a somewhat different form of escape for Joe. Racked with guilt over his ability to immigrate to America while the rest of his family remained in Prague, comic books first offer Joe an avenue to vent his frustrations, leading to his assault on the Nazis in the pages of the Escapist. Joe also buries himself in his work, in part in hopes of buying tickets to America to free his family, and in part out of guilt he wishes to avoid living too comfortably and happily in America.

But for Joe, the real escape is out of his self-imposed isolation when he meets Rosa Saks. This chance meeting inspires Joe to create a female superhero called Luna Moth, as an homage to Rosa, and a way to branch out from the endless cycles of Nazi drubbings. Beginning with Luna Moth, Joe and Sammy go on to create a comic filled with female characters called *All Doll*. Chabon notes, “Though Joe kept fighting, Rosa could see that his heart had gone out of the mayhem. It was in the pages of All Doll, in realms far from Zothenia or Prague, that Joe’s art now blossomed” (318). While he continued to save money for his family’s emancipation, it was no longer an all-consuming obsession.

In fact, Joe stopped reading the letters from home, fearing what they might say and preferring to carry the last one with him unopened. Yet, it is pointed out that “just as his mother begged him (though he did not know it), Joe had turned his thoughts from Prague, his family, the war” (325). When he notices the unopened letters, he feels
ashamed of himself for having temporarily forgotten his family, and that shame becomes a need for revenge, causing him to abandon everything and everyone in America to join the armed forces in the hopes of killing Nazis. Through Joe, Chabon seems to suggest that, eventually, even the most horrific of circumstances can be overcome.

Joe curses himself for allowing his relationship with Rosa to take precedence over his mission to buy his family’s freedom. Joe fears that he will cease to remember his family at all. Chabon writes, “The true magic of this broken world lay in the ability of the things it contained to vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place” (339).

Yet it is clear that Chabon does not share Joe’s perspective. Rather, he indicates that Joe’s moving on is natural, and more importantly, healthy. His mother’s plea for him to move on suggests her desire for him to be happy, and her knowledge that Joe would be wracked with guilt for the rest of his life. Additionally, Chabon hints Joe’s intensity is unhealthy and unproductive. Without Rosa, Joe would simply be earning piles of money without the ability to put it toward Thomas’s freedom. It is Rosa who puts him in touch with the man who would find his brother Thomas a place on a ship headed for America. Chabon thus argues that escape should not be seen as abandoning or running away from the past, but as a natural transition.

Through all the various “escapes” by Sammy and Joe, Chabon points to both the way the creative process produces an outlet for everyday, and extraordinary, frustrations, and how “escape” marks the pace of life. Each “escape” from peril leads to a new adventure, which necessitates another break. The novel shows that there is never a secure
place in which a person can finally arrive; rather, Sammy and Joe find themselves in a new, but equally complicated place in life. As the novel progresses, the advice given by Kornblum becomes ever more pertinent: “‘Never worry about what you are escaping from [sic]…Reserve your anxieties for what you are escaping to [sic]’” (37). Whether it is Sammy’s coming out of the closet only to be exposed and humiliated later, or Joe finally finding happiness in America only to be stung by tremendous pangs of guilt at his brother’s passing and his own near death in the Antarctic, Kornblum is proven a mentor because with each new “escape” Joe and Sammy find themselves in a new set of metaphorical chains.

In a more complex way, Chabon demonstrates how comic books provide an escape for their readers. In his book Seduction of the Innocent (1954), Wertham admonished comic books for just this reason, blaming comics for all forms of juvenile delinquency. However, Chabon is a great defender of literature as entertainment, suggesting that it is capable of reaching people of all walks of life, and bridging cultural divides.

Joe first stumbles across the AAL during a period of anger at his inability to bring about his family’s emigration to America, and disillusionment with the unwillingness of the United States government to enter the war. Discovering, and breaking into, the AAL, Joe notices that the whole of Ebling’s work is an exhaustive study of the harm done to the German-American population by the Escapist’s Nazi battles. “In the opening paragraph of Carl Ebling’s memorandum, the costumed hero, his publisher, and his creators, the
'Jew cartoonists’ Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, were all identified as threats to the reputations, dignity, and ambitions of German nationalism in America” (202).

Yet, as Joe reads through Ebling’s memos, he sees that “By the fourth issue, he had stopped larding his descriptions with terms like ‘outrageous’ and ‘offensive’” (205). Instead, Ebling begins to simply summarize in great detail, the action of the books. By the end, Joe notices that, despite “append[ing] with unpunctuated haste that implied a certain shamefaced recovery of purpose, ‘Of course all this is the usual Jewish warmongering propiganda [sic]’” (205). Ultimately, he realizes “that there was no real purpose being served by the Ebling memorandum except the exegesis, the precisely annotated recording, of ten months of pure enjoyment. Carl Ebling was, in spite of himself, a fan.” (205).

Chabon illustrates two important ideas in Joe’s first visit to Carl Ebling’s AAL: first, he demonstrates the power of this literature. Ebling presumably picked up the Escapist comic books initially knowing that its creators were Jews (since most were at the time) and seeking out reasons to smear them as anti-American. Yet, in Chabon’s words, “in spite of himself” he comes to love their work to the point that he forgets to hate them. Instead, he begins to unabashedly enjoy their artistic and storytelling ability. This realization points to the overall power of art to move a person beyond ideology, based on the beauty of the work, or a personal connection to the story. However, the fact that Ebling does not renounce his anti-Semitism suggests that someone can enjoy artistic expression even if he or she does not comprehend its intended message.
Upon discovering that Joe Kavalier broke into his offices (though he first believes it to be Sam Clay), Ebling calls in a phony bomb threat at the Empire State Building, where the offices of Empire Comics were located, and is disappointed to find out that no one seems to notice. Later he attempts to bomb a bar mitzvah at which Joe is performing a magic act. Interestingly, Ebling becomes so enamored with the Escapist series that he begins to see himself as a character from the comic called the Saboteur.

Chabon shifts the narration from third-person omniscient point-of-view to Ebling’s perspective, exposing the grandiosity of his view of himself. Ebling imagines himself in classic comic book supervillain terms: living “right in Empire City—in a secret redoubt, disguised as a crumbling tenement, in Hell’s Kitchen. That is what makes him so effective and feared…He is every bit the dark obverse of the Escapist, as skilled at worming his way into something as the Escapist is as fighting his way out” (328). He goes on to describe his actions as though he is masterfully employing disguise and slight-of-hand to outsmart the clueless guests, all the while planting a deviously ingenious bomb, finally passing by his nemesis: “At the last moment, as he is passing the magician, he cannot prevent himself from raising his head and looking his adversary in the eye” (333).

Ebling’s point-of-view is abandoned in the following chapter, and the narrator takes over, explaining the delusional nature of Ebling’s self-image. Chabon notes that Joe immediately recognizes Ebling, disguised as a server and goes on to describe the clumsy nature of his plot. Joe calmly walks over to attempt to put out the fuse of the bomb (hidden in Poseidon’s trident), and a scuffle ensues between the two. Ebling is arrested.
and confesses to this, as well as a number of other vandalisms, fires and phone-booth bombings. Throughout his short stint in the novel, it becomes clear that Ebling is a sick individual, but not because of the comic books, but rather from his embrace of Nazi ideology. It would be impossible to rationally suggest that comic books led to Ebling’s violent behavior. And this is Chabon’s point. Ebling was a Nazi before the Escapist, and his reading of the comic books forced his devotion to that cause to diminish. The fact that he pretends to be a supervillain reflects the power of the narrative, but his violence remains, as does his anti-Semitism.

Against the advice of most of those close to him, we later discover that Ebling has pleaded guilty to all charges. His sister laments that he “much of the time seemed to be under the impression that he was a costumed villain in a comic book, [and] was clearly out of his mind,” and that he should not have gone to prison (403). While she turns to her brother’s anti-Semitism as a reason for his predicament, this incident also suggests the means by which people like Dr. Wertham and others would erroneously blame comic books for society’s troubled individuals. In this case, Chabon exposes them for misinterpreting the symptom (incorporating the identity of a fictional character while attacking and ranting against Jews) for the disease (intense anti-Semitism).

In her lectures at Yale on March 25 and 26, 1998, titled On Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry argues, “that far from damaging our capacity to attend to problems of injustice, [the appreciation of beauty] instead intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries” (39). She asserts that the ability to appreciate beauty will create a connection between the observer and the object that is admired, and that connection
eventually leads to empathy toward the other, and thus induces a desire for justice. At first blush, this appears to be what Chabon suggests through the character of Carl Ebling, that the kind of escapism that comic books provide can bring about an appreciation for those whom you do not understand.

It is a medium that is accessible and entertaining, yet can still provide a useful social function. However, the connection made between creator and reader cannot overcome the far more powerful ideology of ingrained hatred. Ebling loves the creations of Kavalier and Clay, but cannot move beyond his own prejudices for long. When he allows himself to get lost in the text, the hatred dissipates. Ironically, due to mental illness, as evidenced by his delusions of supervillainy, the two become intertwined in his own mind. Yet Chabon clearly demonstrates that Ebling, and by extension those like him, do not instinctively respond negatively to these stories. They are quite taken in by the adventure and romance of the narratives. Instead, because of its wide accessibility, he seems to suggest that this literature serves as an important means of opening up social channels that would normally be closed.

However, Ebling does not ultimately reject his anti-Semitism. He continues to attempt to kill Joe and Sammy. His appreciation for the stories does not overcome the prejudices he already holds.

Through Carl Ebling, Chabon also shows that comic book artists who chose to be politically provocative faced skepticism from their profit-minded bosses, and possible reprisals from angry readers. For his cover of the Escapist #1, Joe draws the titular hero delivering “an immortal haymaker” across Hitler’s jaw (150). This cover recalls the
famous cover of Captain America #1, drawn by Jack Kirby, which featured a similar image. This image is emblematic of the subversive and political undertones of many comics of the times. To many contemporary Americans, Captain America is a rather corny emblem of hyper-patriotism and naïveté. However, Chabon shows that these writers and illustrators were not merely coming up with ridiculous stories about fanciful heroes, but that they were artists like any other who were using the tools of their medium to convey a message that was near and dear to them.6

Yet in the same sequence, Chabon shows the skittishness of the publishers who were more interested in maintaining strong sales than courting controversy through idealism. Upon seeing the cover, Anapol expresses his concerns of possible backlash, saying “I don’t see Superman getting mixed up in politics. Not that I personally would mind seeing somebody clean Hitler’s clock” (154). This response was not unique, and the consequences were, at times, dire. Ronin Ro, in his book about the Joe Simon/Jack Kirby/Stan Lee partnerships, Tales to Astonish, explains, “The German American Bund objected to Simon and Kirby depicting their Führer and their own group as punching bags…They inundated Timely’s [later Marvel Comics] mostly Jewish staff with hate mail and telephoned death threats” (21).

The novel ends, as does comics “Golden Age,” with the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Judiciary Committee, led by Senators

6 Interestingly, in later years, Jack Kirby himself created a superhero escape artist called Mr. Miracle, who was raised on a war-like planet called Apokalips.
Estes Kefauver and Robert C. Hendrickson. In keeping with painting a picture of the time, Chabon highlights the most ridiculous of claims by those who were so fearful of comic books. Senator Hendrickson slowly hints that the boy sidekick, popular in comics since the introduction of Robin to Batman comics, is a creative device used to subtly pervert young readers. He argues, “that the relationship between Batman and his ward is actually a thinly veiled allegory of pedophilic inversion” (615). In making these claims, Senator Hendrickson remarks that Sammy has “a reputation in the comic book field for being particularly partial to boy sidekicks” (615). Yet, in typical senate hearing fashion, the senator ignores Sammy’s reasonable response that it is “standard procedure when you’ve got a strip that…has lost a little momentum…You want to attract young readers. The kids like to read about kids” (615).

In this exchange, Chabon shows the tremendous impulse to blame society’s perceived ills on something simple, ignoring the complexities of the problem. David Hajdu, in his excellent book, *The Ten-Cent Plague* (2008), notes that those who hyperbolically and hysterically condemned comic books were more than misguided. He argues that “to connect comic books directly to juvenile delinquency specifically was to provide them [those making the accusations] a conduit to the center of debate about the American way of life” (82). In this case, Chabon proves that these hearings had little to do with the safety of the streets, but was instead about homophobia and the Senators’ opportunities for moralistic grandstanding. Hajdu also points out that Senator Kefauver, the man heading the committee, had presidential ambitions and hoped to use these hearings to boost his electoral chances.
Interestingly, Chabon hints at what is to come by imagining a coffee shop conversation between comic book creators (some real, some fictional). Referring to Sammy, artist Bob Powell admits, “‘I always thought he seemed a little bit—you know’” (481). Marty Gold then makes a similar association that will later hang Sammy in front of the Senate committee adding, “He’s got that thing with the sidekicks…He takes over a character, first thing he does, no matter what, he gives the guy a little pal’” (481). Given the time frame of the novel, it is not surprising to find homophobia amongst many of the characters, but this is particularly interesting because Chabon suggests that, at least to some degree, comic book creators themselves were persuaded by Wertham’s claims. It is doubtful that they felt they were personally responsible for the corruption of their readers, and Hajdu suggests that many comic book creators of the time were too busy working to notice the uproar at all, until the hearings. Yet the fact that Sammy’s fellow comic book writers and artists are taken in by Wertham’s claims speaks to the insidious way in which arguments centering on taboo subjects can find unlikely supporters.

It is important to note that for Chabon, escapism is not a concept to be scoffed at, but one to be embraced. Joe’s escape into his work, and into the character of the Escapist brings him a modicum of hope that he would one day be reunited with his family. It also brings him solace, for a time, that he is doing something that might help spur the United States into war with Germany. Similarly, Sammy does escape from Brooklyn and achieves the marvelous wealth and success for which he dreams. He is also, for a time, freed from his own fear of his homosexuality by the Escapist, in the form of Tracy
Bacon. It is because of the Escapist comics that Carl Ebling is able to, briefly, escape from his own prejudices and simply enjoy the work in front of him.

Hajdu recounts that in 1941, child psychologist, Dr. Lauretta Bender refuted much of the fear mongering regarding comic books and their purported responsibility for encouraging juvenile delinquency and perverting young minds. Arguing that comics may actually prove beneficial to young readers she wrote, “‘The comic…is the folklore of the times,’” and adding, “‘Comic books may be said to offer the same type of mental catharsis to [their] readers that Aristotle claimed was an attribute of the drama’” (qtd in Hajdu 44-5). The latter assertion may strike some as a bit of an exaggeration, but it is nevertheless suggestive of what Chabon demonstrates throughout the novel: the comic book is not only a work of art, but also a distinctly American cultural artifact.

_The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay_ is Michael Chabon at the height of his abilities. In this novel we have two protagonists who refuse to be broken down by tragedy. They are a pair of poor Jewish boys, who through grit and the power and faith in their own creativity come to speak for all of America. Their work reaches thousands of readers and becomes one of the most important cultural icons of the era. Through their comic books they challenge the nation to open its eyes toward the atrocities in Europe and embrace intervention over isolation.

Yet this is also a love story. Sammy Clay goes from hiding his sexuality, even from those closest to him, to enjoying a loving relationship with a man. Chabon shows how institutional homophobia damages gay Americans, and also how love can grow in spite of it. Through Joe and Rosa, Chabon illustrates how love can blossom in the midst
of heartbreak. Joe is able to come to terms with his family’s and his own fates through his relationship with Rosa. Theirs is a relationship that survives the death of Joe’s family, especially his brother Thomas, his abandonment of her in a rage, lusting for revenge against Nazis, and his return to New York, but not to them, choosing to hide instead.

Yet first and foremost, this is a story about Joe and Sammy. The love of these two cousins pushes them to new heights of creativity. Joe’s incredibly inventive artwork forces Sammy to write stories worthy of it. Sammy’s confidence in his own abilities compels Joe to take a chance on comic books, a medium he had never heard of before. But even more we see the sacrifices they make for each other. Sammy marries Rosa, when Joe is at war, to be a father to Joe’s son, and later abandons is comfortable life with Rosa when Joe returns. Joe uses the money he has saved to free his family to buy Empire Comics, in part because he believes that he and Sammy can rekindle their partnership.

Ultimately, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay is a novel that captures an era. Through the story of two Jewish boys, working for their piece of the American dream by creating stories for kids, Chabon illuminates the fears, failures and triumphs of the United States during this tumultuous time in its history. It was a time when Americans had a need for a new pantheon of heroes, which Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay provided.
CHAPTER 5

Summerland: The Myth of America and the National Pastime

Summerland (2002), Michael Chabon’s fourth novel, takes him into uncharted waters: young adult fiction. It is a fantasy novel about a young boy and his two friends who embark on an adventure to save the world from the destructive force known as “Ragged Rock.” Throughout the novel the three friends travel between dimensions, meet strange people and creatures out of various mythological traditions, and learn that baseball is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong in the universe.

The novel follows young Ethan Feld, “The worst ballplayer in the history of Clam Island, Washington,” as he and two friends cross dimensions aided by a Sasquatch, a werefox and a group of baseball playing ferishers (the proper name for faeries), as they attempt to stop the trickster, Coyote, from destroying the world (14). Because of a weather anomaly (“at the westernmost tip of the island, in the summertime, it never rained”) the game of baseball flourishes on Clam Island, making Ethan’s ineptitude all the more humiliating (14). In fact, Ethan is so bad that he is popularly known as “Dog Boy” by opposing players, “because of the way he was always hoping for a walk” (31).

Yet despite his utter lack of ability as a ballplayer, he is “scouted” by the legendary Chiron “Ringfinger” Brown, a former Negro League player, now well over a hundred years old and, as we discover, not human but a supernatural scouter of heroes. As the novel progresses, Ethan comes to realize his confidence and leadership, moving
from right field to catcher, while saving the world from certain destruction at the hands of Coyote. And throughout the novel, the game of baseball remains the focal point for all characters of all races/species. Every dispute is settled on the diamond. Chabon thereby suggests that baseball is more than a game. It transcends mere pastime, becoming the central organizing structure of the world.

In this, Chabon echoes Johan Huizinga. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1970), Huizinga argues that play is not a pointless distraction; rather, it has a distinct social function. He writes, “in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom, and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play” (23). Chabon’s *Summerland* is a world in which all of the social functions described by Huizinga are enacted through baseball.

In the novel, baseball was invented by Coyote eons ago and is the universally understood, indisputable arbiter of all. Ethan’s ability as a leader grows and is directly tied to his improvement as a catcher (the defensive leader of the team, who calls each pitch and dictates the game’s pace). Ethan, in effect, realizes his leadership potential by becoming an expert catcher, arguably the most important defensive position in baseball because of catcher’s influence on how a game plays out.

Ethan is joined by his friends Jennifer T., an excellent ballplayer who comes from a dysfunctional family, and Thor, a boy with an active imagination who pretends to be a robot. Thor discovers that he was not born in “The Middling” (the name for their home dimension), but was born in the Summerlands and is a “shadowtail”—“something
neither fish nor fowl...Always half in this world and half in the other”’—a being that can cross between the four dimensions (123). And as the novel progresses, Coyote’s plans for the destruction of the world are revealed. He kidnaps Ethan’s father in order to use a technology Mr. Feld has invented to aid in transporting a substance that erases matter.

*Summerland* ends with a final baseball game between Ethan’s and Coyote’s teams, with the fate of the world at stake. Ethan wins the game with a towering home run, becoming the hero that Ringfinger Brown knew him to be and saving the world. Though Coyote attempts to cheat, he is ultimately defeated. Ethan, Jennifer T. and Mr. Feld return home and Ethan’s love of baseball continues, bringing him and his father closer together.

Admittedly, *Summerland*, does not show the seriousness of some of Chabon’s other novels, written for a more mature audience. Adult readers could find the some of the moralizing to be oversimplified or naïve when comparing this novel to his others. Yet it is important to examine the book because of the way it fits into Chabon’s larger project of exploring genre fictions. Despite his targeting a different audience, familiar themes are evident in this novel, such as loneliness, confusion, saving the world and the intersection of the secular and the sacred in modern life. For instance, Chabon examines alienation in the form of three, middle-school outcasts: the tomboy, the “invisible” kid who does not seem to possess any discernable talent, and the “weird kid” whose over-active imagination causes others to steer clear of him.

Chabon also continues what he began in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by including characters from folklore, placing them into a contemporary world and infusing it with a sense of the “real”. This time, rather than adapting a story from Jewish
legend, he has turned to Norse and Native American mythology. That new audience forces Chabon to rethink how he views subjects such as American myth and identity. In short, in order to gain a fuller grasp of Chabon’s approach to writing, it is a novel that is impossible to omit.

In his essay, “Ragnarok Boy” (2008), Chabon writes that from a young age he was fascinated by mythology of all kinds, from the Greek pantheon to the books of the Bible. However, it was the Norse mythology that most appealed to him. He recalls, there was something in Scandinavian mythology that went beyond the straightforward appeal of violence, monstrosity, feats of arms, sibling rivalry, and ripping yarns. Here the darkness was not solely the fault of humans, the inevitable product of their unfitness, their inherent inferiority to a God or gods who—quite cruelly under the circumstances—had created them. (Maps 48-9)

He goes on to note that Loki was a uniquely intriguing character. Citing his contradictory nature as the trickster, a god who can be both clever and foolish, friend and foe, and often in the same story, Chabon observes, “Loki is the God of Nothing in Particular yet unmistakably of the ambiguous World Itself” (Maps 51). It is from this early love of mythology that Chabon set out to create one of his own. In writing a young adult novel, Chabon attempts to appeal to a readership close to the age he was when these stories first enraptured him.

Summerland is by no means bereft of artistic and thematic heft. J. K. Rowling’s wildly successful Harry Potter series proved that there is a young-adult audience for
long, complex novels. Chabon takes advantage of this, writing an intricate novel, combining the aforementioned mythology with the game of baseball, America’s most iconic sport. The novel imparts a message of environmental responsibility and the celebration of the underdog (another classic piece of the American tradition and identity), while elevating the game of baseball to a mythology all its own.\footnote{See D. G. Myers’s essay “Michael Chabon’s Imaginary Jews” for a running comparison between *Harry Potter* and *Summerland*. Though it should be noted that while there are many comparisons that can be made between the two works, it is overly reductive on the part of Myers to suggest a direct corollary—in fact, he stops just short of suggesting that Chabon cribbed the storyline and structure with simple substitutions. It is also useful in this context to note that similar associations are often made between Rowling’s work and that of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. In sum, fantasy literature, like all genres, shares specific conventions and *Summerland* follows in that tradition.}

But more importantly, Chabon engages in contemporary myth making, combining various traditions with baseball history and legend to create a fully American folk tradition, based on ideas of American independence and self-reliance.

An important idea that continues throughout *Summerland* is the “American Dream”—that through hard work and perseverance, anyone can rise above their station and achieve success in America. Ethan Feld is the clearest example of this ideal. Ethan moves from being “dog boy” and a player whose entrance into the game is dreaded by every teammate, to a talented catcher who can call a good game and lead his team. In fact, the novel’s last sentences showcase Ethan’s newfound excellence. Facing down a
runner charging toward home plate, “Ethan got knocked down. When he stood up again, his mouth was full of dirt, he had taken a knee to the eye, and his nose was bleeding. But he was still holding the ball” (500). Ethan’s transition from benchwarmer to star is due to careful study, reading *How to Catch Lightning and Smoke*, and determination. In other words, he willed himself to become a good player.

Chabon’s oversimplified take on the inherent virtues of hard work harks to the simple idealism of Horatio Alger. Alger’s eponymous protagonist in *Ragged Dick* (1868) is a poor boot black with nothing but ambition and the will to work and learn. In the end, his diligence and good character win out and he is financially rewarded. Chabon’s Ethan Feld embodies some of that spirit, though Ethan is not as self-motivated as Dick, nor does he see consistent reassurances or successes as a result of his work. The naïveté of this idealized view of the “American Dream” can be attributed to Chabon’s directing the novel to a younger audience, though it does speak to a fundamental premise of American life.

John Dewey notes the power of the image of wealth and power in America. He suggests that Americans often idealistically choose to view economic success as a sign of personal merit. In *Individualism Old and New* (1930) he writes, “We praise even our most successful men, not for their ruthless and self-centered energy in getting ahead, but because of their love of flowers, children, and dogs, of their kindness to aged relatives. Anyone who frankly urges a selfish creed of life is everywhere frowned upon” (13). He illustrates a fundamental contraction that is necessary in order to maintain the belief in the virtue of the “American Dream”; we must overlook the ugly side of capitalism, and
particularly those who have been financially or otherwise destroyed in order for the individual to acquire his or her massive wealth. The successful person cannot merely be a good businessman, he must also be an honorable human being.

In “Problems and Promises of the Self-Made Myth” (2013), historian Jim Cullen recalls that the idea that the American system allows any person of any economic standing to rise to the highest levels of wealth and power has been commonly held from the very foundation of the republic. He observes, “the core premise that laced through [all iterations of the self-made man myth]…is agency: the self-made man was master of his own fate” (19). He goes on to cite examples of self-made men as diverse as Abraham Lincoln, John D. Rockefeller, Apple Computers’ Steve Jobs, and Bruce Springsteen. But Cullen also notes, “none of these men began with nothing” (17). While each person was surely immensely talented, they all had a strong foundation upon which to build their own successful business.

Dewey points out that though in many circumstances individualism is trumpeted in order to “defeat government regulation of any form of industry previously thought exempt from legal control,” he argues that “the United States has steadily moved from an earlier pioneer individualism to a condition of dominant corporates” (35-6). Effectively, he contends that every American is indebted to others for his or her accomplishments, not only the massively successful.

Despite the knowledge that the truly “self-made man” is largely a fiction, the belief that it is possible to rise from poverty to wealth pervades the American imagination. The simplicity of Ethan’s will-to-succeed story exposes the inherent
childishness of the rags-to-riches ideal. However, in creating an American mythology out of the game of baseball, Chabon revels in his indulgence of those themes. Like many mythologies, the fact that the story is false does not make it any less compelling.

Though it is often considered a genre, young adult literature can cover a wide range of topics. Young adult novels are often about teens and involve themes of identity and are often coming-of-age stories. Their plots center on issues that are important to young adults, but those topics can be surprisingly diverse. In his book, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (2010), Michael Cart traces the history of this literature. He observes that early YA stories were decidedly uncomplicated. Writers believed that literature for teenagers should be a bridge from children’s to adult literature, but as a consequence, many authors erred on the side of simplicity.

However, over time, young adult fiction has begun to better reflect issues that many teens face such as violence, bullying, sex, diversity, multiculturalism, in addition to magic and superheroes. Cart argues, “It’s possible to view the history of young adult literature as a series of inspired exercises in iconoclasm—of envelope pushing, taboo busting, shibboleth shattering—[S. E.] Hinton’s acknowledgement of teen class warfare [in *The Outsiders*], [Alice] Childress’s of heroin abuse [in *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich*], [Robert] Cormier’s of evil’s ascendency [in *The Chocolate War*], and so on” (141). Though these novels target a young audience, the novels are not undemanding of the reader.

Perhaps because of its young target audience, *Summerland* has not garnered nearly the level of critical attention as some of his other works, D.G Myers devotes a
single paragraph to the novel in his essay “Michael Chabon’s Imaginary Jews,” in which he argues that Chabon is merely aping J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. I believe that Myers is too quick to dismiss the novel, as, I suspect, would Louise Colbran. In her essay, “Playing at Being Men: Baseball and Masculinity in Michael Chabon’s *Summerland*” (2008), she argues sport in American culture often breeds aggression and a desire for superiority over others, in those who play it. However, she observes that the game as seen in *Summerland* is “organized around principles of plurality and community rather than rather than segregation and exclusion. His text exposes a binary gender division as unnatural and makes gender hierarchy unthinkable” (145). She goes on to stress that Chabon emphasizes baseball’s ability to create communities of men. Ultimately, Colbran suggests that Chabon’s idealized game is one that accentuates egalitarianism amongst a mixed group of individuals.

Using the game of baseball as a metaphor for American life, both in tragedy and triumph, puts Chabon in good literary company. Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* (1952) tells of the rise, fall, rise, and ultimate fall of Roy Hobbes. Hobbes is a young man with immense talent who succumbs to temptation and is shot by a woman in his hotel room, derailing his career. He returns as an older man, displaying the same raw ability he did in his youth, only to fall, once again, accepting a bribe and throwing a game. Hobbes’s fall is reminiscent of “Shoeless” Joe Jackson and the rest of the Chicago White Sox franchise who famously threw the 1919 World Series in, what is now called, the Black Sox Scandal.
Over the course of Philip Roth’s thirty novels, the game of baseball often becomes symbolic of past innocence or a simpler, idyllic time, as is the case with Alexander Portnoy’s reminiscences of neighborhood games in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). In *American Pastoral* (1997), Swede Levov, the fallen protagonist and a former high school athletic legend, consistently returns to John R. Tunis’s old baseball novel, *The Kid from Tomkinsville* (1940), a story about a talented kid, overcoming the ups and downs of a baseball season. For Swede it harks to a time of promise, all but forgotten in the wake of his daughter’s joining the Weather Underground and bombing the local post office and the subsequent erosion of his family.

Roth’s comic baseball allegory, *The Great American Novel* (1973), follows the hapless Port Rupert Mundys, as they stumble through their season as the only team in the Patriot League without a home field (because their penny-pinching owners had offered it to the Army, just before the 1943 season). In part, team is meant to represent Jews in Diaspora, but he also fills his novel with nods to mythic and supernatural figures. The infamous pitcher, Gil Gamesh, has a world of talent, but his career is cut short when his temper gets the best of him and he nearly kills an umpire, throwing at his head. Big John Baal, is an ex-con, Babe Ruthian figure who is a powerful hitter, but, like the Baal from the Bible, is ultimately doomed to failure because of his own shortcomings—as well as the failings of his teammates. Just as with Chabon, in Roth’s novel the game and the characters that populate the teams and ownership are largely representative of American personality types, which highlight the flaws that make the nation so unique and vibrant.
While Roth’s approach is clearly absurd, his connection of baseball to American culture is unmistakable.

Don DeLillo’s novel, *Underworld* (1997), begins at the 1951 pennant game between the Giants and the Dodgers, with Bobby Thomson’s “Shot Heard ‘Round the World.” After the game, a scrum ensues for the ball that Thomson hit. As the novel progresses, moving on through the decades, with numerous characters moving in and out, the one constant is the trail of that ball through time, as it changes hands. For DeLillo, the ball is the steady constant that persists through the tumultuous changes of the times. It is also an item of value that moves from person to person, each searching for something different in the ball, but each with the feeling that this thing will offer a transcendent peace.

And Robert Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), explores how baseball can be the ultimate expression of life, the tragedy of death, and the search for perfection. Unlike the three aforementioned writers, Coover’s baseball league is not real; it is played by rolling dice, with each combination corresponding to a play on the field. Though the game is simulated and the players imaginary, Henry Waugh is consumed by his Association and the fates of his players. Waugh becomes obsessed with a young pitching phenom, Damon Rutherford, who dies while chasing an unprecedented second consecutive perfect game. As Waugh becomes increasingly obsessed with the UBA, Coover critiques the American fascination with sports and the personalities of the athletes who play them professionally. Yet, he also suggests that there is an inherent value to play. Through the game, people are able to feel
a sense of accomplishment and joy that many are unable to achieve through work or the mundane routines of daily life.

Each of these authors, Malamud, Roth, DeLillo, and Coover turn to baseball as a metaphor for American Life and American exceptionalism. In each case, the author is recognized for his ability to connect to an essential Americanness through an exploration of the game. For example, Thomas R. Edwards, of the New York Times, remarks of Roth’s *The Great American Novel* that the mood, of eternal memories mixed with a wondering fear, seems just right. In baseball we rediscover the pastoral world—sunlit grass and complex simplicity in the midst of urban distraction; but it is always pastoral in decline, on the verge of disappearing, doomed in the way that our own remembered childhood is doomed by the simple fact that it is ourselves, grown into wisdom and weariness, who do the remembering.

He goes on to compare the novel to other famous baseball novels, Mark Harris’s *Bang the Drum Slowly*, Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association*, and Malamud’s *The Natural*. As with these novels, and countless others, Chabon’s novel underscores the pervading notion that baseball is uniquely American. In *Summerland*, baseball’s fundamental Americanness becomes a sort of secular American mythology.

As is typical of any heroic story, and following Joseph Campbell’s model of the hero’s quest in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Ethan is reluctant to accept his role as the champion, even after Cutbelly (a werefox and the creature who first introduces Ethan to the structure of the multidimensional world in which the novel is set) asserts the
inevitability of his heroic character. He explains that Ethan was “‘dug up by old Chiron himself! The wight that scouted up Achilles! Arthur! Toussaint and Crazy Horse!’” (104). Yet since so much of the four worlds revolves around baseball, Ethan can only question the logic of his nomination. In this we see a hallmark of fantasy literature: the unassuming, unlikely hero (think Frodo Baggins of *The Lord of the Rings*, Harry Potter, or Arthur of *The Once and Future King*, who is also dubiously nicknamed, called “the Wart”) and their team of misfits whose quirks, which are often the reason for their outcast status, come to be of chief importance to the task at hand.

Chabon nods to *The Natural*, which, while a “literary” novel, uses elements of fantasy to highlight Roy Hobbes’s almost uncanny talent. Ethan’s bat, Splinter recalls Excalibur, which can only be handled by a worthy man, King Arthur. Ethan’s wielding of Splinter proves his worth because “‘woundwood [a piece of the sacred Tree of Worlds] is choosy [sic] about who it lets get a piece o’ itself’” (139). Similarly, Roy Hobbes also carried a bat he made, called Wonderboy. *Wonder Boys*, of course, is also the title of Chabon’s second novel, which is about a writer trying to regain his lost fame. In each case, the bat is the hero’s Excalibur, both a marker of their inherent greatness and the tool by which they demonstrate their fitness for their given task.

2 In the legends, Arthur acquires Excalibur in two ways. In Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* and in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, he is given the sword by the Lady of the Lake. Whereas in other tellings, notably T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, Arthur draws the sword from a stone, proving his worth.
There is a magical quality to the instruments of their trade. The very naming of the bat is an additional marker of its significance, and a common trope in fantasy literature. As Arthur’s sword is named, so is the sword of Tolkien’s Frodo Baggins (Sting), Thor’s hammer (Mjolnir), and the sword of Roland (Durandal). Naming a weapon gives it a unique importance as well as a story, and brandishing it conveys authority to the person who carries it. Arthur’s throne is legitimated by his ownership of Excalibur. Through the naming of his primary weapon, in the case a baseball bat, Chabon gives Ethan and his role legendary gravitas. By extension, the game itself takes on mythic status equivalent to the battles of other heroes. In all cases, the fate of the world depends upon the hero’s wielding of his magical weapon.

In *Summerland*, Chabon’s linking of baseball with a quasi-Genesis story complete with unbreakable rules of behavior, suggests an embrace of Christopher H. Evans argument that baseball is, in effect, a “civil religion.” In “Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story” (2002), he states, “civil religion describes how Americans throughout the nation’s history have created a collective national identity through bestowing sacred meaning on a variety of secular symbols, rituals, and institutions” (14). These symbols and rituals are used as evidence that God has marked America as a special nation. It is a reinterpretation of these events and actions that willfully bestow transcendence upon them. Baseball can be seen as a symbol of nobility and virtue (forget Ty Cobb’s racism and general nastiness, Mickey Mantle’s drinking habit, or Babe Ruth’s gluttony), rather than merely a game to be played on a sunny summer’s day.
Despite the novel being a fantasy, it is also a work of historical allusion. Chabon incorporates references to baseball greats as well as historical heroes such as Haitian hero Toussaint Louverture and Crazy Horse, along with legendary figures of Arthur and Achilles. As was the case in *Kavalier & Clay*, which combines the Golem of Prague with a fictional account of the “Golden Age” of comics built upon the real experiences of those early creators, in *Summerland* Chabon uses well-known people and characters in an attempt to craft a mythology that encompasses all of history. Heroes from across the globe and throughout recorded time can all be traced back to Coyote, Ringfinger Brown, and all of the other figures that inhabit the world he has created.

Chabon continually nods to this confluence of history and myth. Many of the stories passed down about countless prominent historical figures, from George Washington, to Wild Bill Hickok, to Satchel Paige, are pure fiction and embellishment. Through these connections, peppered throughout the text, Chabon effectively gives credence to the folklore that he is appropriating, making it a part of a larger American history. He thereby expands this non-Judeo-Christian belief system into a uniquely

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3 The historical heroes that Chabon chooses to lionize are non-White warriors who rebelled against European domination: the Lakota, Crazy Horse, and the Haitian general, Toussaint Louverture, who lead the Revolution against the French in 1791. This is relevant both to Chabon’s celebration of distinctly American, and specifically Native American mythology, and to the environmental message in which we can see the destructive forces of Coyote as analogous to the empiricism of Europe in the early centuries of the colonization of the Americas.
American creation story, not limited by race or culture-of-origin. Rather, the culture that assumes the most importance is, decidedly, amalgamated, melting-pot American. In fact, in an interview with Gavin J. Grant, Chabon remarks upon “the oldest layer of *Summerland*: the ambition to write a fantasy novel using American myth and folklore, in a way that the works of [C.S.] Lewis and [J.R.R.] Tolkien...use British and Celtic folklore.”

Rather than mythologizing historical figures, Chabon’s novel transplants the game of baseball into the worlds invented by a range of folkloric traditions. He uses the game to connect various legends to contemporary America. In so doing, the novel is both a paean to America’s pastime and a complex, Genesis-like tale celebrating American exceptionalism, best understood as a multicultural slurry in which the outcasts of society prove to be the most important leaders. It is also apparent that Chabon’s neo-folktale combines the best of the nation’s popular legends and tall tales with the traits that have become the stuff of the American view of itself as nation and a people: the triumphant underdog, the unlikely hero, the unassuming person with hidden talents, success by pluck as much as by luck or out of sheer will. The three protagonists, Ethan, Jennifer T., and Thor, could all easily be described in Emma Lazarus’s famous poem, “The New Colossus,” describing the hope of America in the “‘wretched refuse of your teeming shore’” (106). Yet, like those “‘tired...poor...huddled masses’” it is these pariahs who strive the hardest and are ultimately the driving force behind innovation and have the desire to work for their achievements. While this may be so much hyperbole to attribute
to a young adult novel about baseball, such exaggeration is the stuff of which myth is itself built.

5.1 An American Mythology

The world Chabon creates in *Summerland* rests on an ancient tree called the Lodgepole (significantly, an ash tree, which is the same type of wood in which baseball bats are made). The Lodgepole is the structure upon which the four worlds rest. The worlds consist of the Summerlands, the Winterlands, the Gleaming, the Middling. Each of the four worlds is akin to a limb on the tree (and symbolic of the four cardinal directions) with their branches and leaves crisscrossing one another. The doors used to travel from one world to the next are in certain magical places where the limbs have been “pleached,” meaning joined together, forming a “gall,” the spot where they are joined. Shadowtails are able to leap from leaf to leaf, or branch to branch, and thus travel between the worlds in places where others cannot. The idea of the Tree of Worlds, adopted for this novel, is common both in Native American and Scandinavian folklores. This also brings to mind the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, in Genesis, and the Torah’s laws are often referred to as the “Tree of Life.”

Chabon uses additional elements of various traditions to construct his American folktale. The Felds’ car is named Skidbladnir, which is from Norse mythology and, as Ethan explains, is a “‘huge, beautiful ship, so cleverly made that you could fold it up and stick it in your pocket’” (142). This reference also relates to Mr. Feld’s invention of the personal zeppelin, which features a balloon with the same qualities. In addition, Ragged
Rock, the term used in the novel for the end of the world, is likely an Anglicized translation of *Ragnarok*, which is a Norse version of the battle of Apocalypse.

As one might guess by Chabon’s choice of mythologies, Native Americans play a large role in the narrative, from the Rideout family to the ferishers. When Ethan first journeys to the Summerlands and meets Cinquefoil and his fellow ferishers, he notices that they “looked like a bunch of tiny Indians out of some old film or museum diorama” (47). Jennifer T. later asks whether “‘the Summerlands, like, is it an *Indian* [sic] world’” (229). Though contemporary American society is made up of immigrants from all over the world, popular culture often features white protagonists. Chabon’s decision not to anglicize his otherworldly heroes adds a long history and credibility that point to an authentic American origin story. Significantly, the multi-ethnic, or multi-species, make-up of the baseball team that Ethan and his friends form signals the multicultural America that we know today, which is also suggested by the three main characters. Jennifer T. is Native American; Thor is Scandinavian (though it is never mentioned from which country), and the name Feld is of Germanic origin.

Just as important is the fact that Ethan is not Native American. Jennifer T., who is established at the beginning of the novel as the best player on Ethan’s little league team, and Cinquefoil, who has hit 72, 954 career home runs, have already proven their prowess on the diamond, which is the single most important field of battle, but Ethan has not. While most of the Rideouts have seen ferishers before, her uncle remarks, “‘Some things were never meant to be seen by…white people’” (118). This statement underscores a key element in Chabon’s novel: advocating the social benefits of multiculturalism. In this
case, Native Americans are shown to have uncommon insight to the workings of the world that white people do not possess. Ethan’s whiteness, here, is a hindrance rather than a benefit to his understanding of and access to the world. Ethan’s success is attributed not to his racial or ancestral makeup, but rather to his hard work and an inherent ability that transcends those exterior qualities.

It should be noted, however, that the Rideouts’ ability to see and understand the otherworldly plays into the common stereotype of the noble savage, common to American Indian figures in literature and film. Whereas the Rideout’s do not live a traditional, “tribal” lifestyle, they are depicted as savages of sorts: Albert is a drunk; Jennifer T.’s aunts are seen as crazy by the rest of the town, and it is generally accepted that Jennifer T.’s life is hard. The unexpected knowledge passed on by the Rideouts also allows Ethan to become a hero and save a world described by Jennifer T. as an “Indian world.”

However, despite the stereotypical nature in which the novel’s only Native American family is depicted, Chabon’s ragtag team does highlight the social benefits of multiculturalism. Though Ethan is the story’s protagonist, the team’s success is built upon the united effort of all people and creatures, some of whom are age-old enemies, in much the same way that Tolkien’s, multiracial “Fellowship of the Ring,” from his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, join forces to stop the end of the world. In this sense, the baseball team itself can be viewed as representing the American melting pot.³

³ Some modern critics have pointed out that Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* seems to particularly celebrate whiteness as a sign of virtue, noting that though the “Fellowship” is
In another sense, the revelation that Thor is a shadowtail points to a similar idea of the unexpected champion. This description is very much in keeping with the cultural insider/outsider binary that continues in the background of much of Chabon’s work. But more importantly Thor’s having been born in the Summerlands and growing up in the Middling exemplifies various races (for lack of a better word) of people co-existing under the right circumstances.

From the very beginning Chabon stresses Thor’s otherness noting that he “was generally regarded as smart, but unfortunately was under the impression—most of the time—that he was a synthetic humanoid named TW03” (17). However, Thor’s eccentricity is explained by those with whom he interacts as nothing more than an overactive imagination. The coach, when putting him in the game, reminds him to “upload your, uh, your infielding software,” essentially indulging him in the fantasy (24). In fact, Thor is “different” from the other kids. Yet others see him as merely an odd person, not the alien from another dimension that he is.

In revealing that Thor is not of their world, Chabon cleverly highlights the absurdity of racial animus. Coupled with the many characters, such as Ethan and Jennifer T., who play against either gender or racial expectation, Chabon shapes a cosmopolitan worldview, stressing the American ideal that one should be judged on his or her abilities comprised of all types of character—hobbit, human, elf, dwarf, and wizard—all of these characters are white and “fairness” is equated to justice and power. It is also noted that the only dark skinned characters are the evil orcs, who are roundly slaughtered throughout the novels.
or character regardless of other, uncontrollable factors. While other characters typically react to Chabon’s protagonists, initially, with skepticism because of those prejudices, their eventual performance proves their worth and undermines those prejudices. And that these feats of greatness occur on the baseball diamond, on a multi-species team, adds to the multicultural underpinnings of the novel, and the quintessential inimitability of Chabon’s idealized American culture.

Horace Kallen speaks directly to the complexity of Americanism that is reflected in Summerland. In “A Meaning of Americanism” (1916), he writes, “to the man on the street [Americanism] expresses a mood, potent, excellent, desirable; to him the distinction between ‘American’ and ‘un-American’ is the distinction between good and evil” (36). Here Kallen stresses that for most people, Americanism is only a feeling that cannot be tangibly expressed. He argues that America, as a concept, is built upon three ideals: Liberty, Union, and Democracy. And all three of these have changed in the collective American mind over time.

Significantly, Kallen points out that unlike any other European country, “The ‘United States of America’ contains no ethnic implication” (43). This fact speaks to the immigrant nature of the country, suggesting that no one race or ethnicity has precedence over any other. Kallen describes America as “a mosaic of peoples, of different bloods and of different origins, engaged in rather different economic fields, and varied in background and outlook as well as blood” (51). And this very well describes the baseball team Ethan, Jennifer T., and Thor assemble. They are all people from differing backgrounds united
toward a common goal. Each individual performs a separate task, with distinctive purposes, but each works together toward a greater good.

The figure that seems to transcend them all cultural mythologies is the trickster, Coyote, who introduces himself to Ethan’s father saying, “‘Some people call me [Coyote]. Also the Changer. Monkey. Raven. Weasel. Snake. Loki, Herm, Legba, Glooscap, Eshu, Shaitan [Satan]. Prometheus’” (220). In this declaration he harkens to the various and widespread traditions that also feature some form of the trickster: Native American, Greek, Hebrew, Norse and African, to name a few. This reflects an American culture constantly evolving, creating a whole host of world cultures, brought to the United States by immigrants, and amalgamated into one, hybrid culture. Yet however similar these trickster characters are to one another, Chabon’s choice of Coyote is most significant in its direct connection to an American tradition.

In her essay “Native American Coyote Trickster Tales and Cycles,” Ellen Rosenberg vividly describes Coyote as: “Primal scatologist and scandalous omnivore, sacred progenitor and witness to creation, serial corpse and mythomaniacal traveling id” (155). She goes on to assert that Coyote is “one of the most ancient and important of the Native American Trickster figures in North America” (155). In nearly all traditions the trickster’s role is to create chaos. He is the rule-breaker and the challenger of both authority and the established norms. Folklorist Terri Windling quotes a “Navajo friend” saying that, importantly, Coyote also “‘reminds us not to be too simplistically dualistic in our thinking; that good can come out of bad; and that right and wrong are not always poles apart’” (5).
Throughout *Summerland*, Chabon highlights Coyote’s complex relationship to the world. Introducing Coyote as the agent of the end of the world to Ethan, Cutbelly stresses that causing trouble is “‘what Coyote does, among a thousand other mad behaviors’” (52). Later, the ferisher king and homerun champion of the three worlds, Cinquefoil, remarks, “‘Ya can’t never predict what old Coyote will do. Just about everything that could turn out two ways or more was invented by him, back when he Changed the world the first time’” (153). He stresses that prior to Coyote’s involvement, the world was completely predictable. Coyote personifies the seemingly random ups and downs and unexpected turns of life.

Yet in spite of his destructive nature, there remains a certain level of respect for Coyote amongst even those who are attempting to prevent him from destroying the world. Ethan wonders “why was there always the tiniest glint of *appreciation* [sic] in Cinquefoil’s eyes whenever he talked about Coyote?” (154). Later in the novel, Ethan is shocked by his own, similar reaction to Coyote: “Ethan felt, very much to his surprise, that he liked Coyote from the first moment he saw him” (433). And while it is never explicitly stated, the reason for Cinquefoil’s respect is that Coyote’s tricks can lead to good just as well as ill. Most notably, it is consistently remarked, he created the game of baseball, which is the single civilizing force throughout the four worlds.

Coyote’s dual nature is integral to his character and relationships with other deities and humans alike. Windling notes, “Tricksters are contradictory creatures: they are liars, knaves, rascals, fools, clowns, con men, lechers, thieves…but they are also culture heroes whose tricks can do great good as well as great harm” (5). Tricksters
appear in many folkloric traditions and all fill the role of the cosmic troublemaker. Chabon’s depiction of Coyote owes a debt to the trickster of Norse mythology, Loki. As Carl Bryan Holmberg notes in “Loki, the Norse Fool” (1998), Loki is a shape-shifter and prankster, who often spends his time irritating the gods. Holmberg points out that, like Coyote, “Loki offers both aggravations and benefits. Although he works mischief and annoys the gods and goddesses, his pranks usually result in some sort of boon or benefit” (296). A key difference is overly sexual nature of Coyote’s pranks: “Coyote tales are often rife with incest and transvestism, talking feces and talking anuses, detachable body parts, and ‘grandmothers’ who bid Coyote fetch them their dildos” (Rosenberg 157). This type of mischief is not often seen in Loki stories, and Chabon, for the obvious reasons of his intended audience, chose to offer a tamer version of the trickster.

Many of the things that Coyote takes, or is given, credit for creating in the world can be similarly ambiguous in the novel, beyond his invention of baseball. He is credited with bringing fire to the four worlds (as evidenced by his acknowledging Prometheus as one of his many names). While bragging to Mr. Feld, Coyote takes credit for inventing physics, as well as death. Finally, he notes, “‘you always have a choice…That’s another little fun feature of life you can put down to me’” (225).

In each of these instances, Chabon stresses the uncertainty of what Coyote has brought to the world. When discussing physics, he and Mr. Feld recall “Schrödinger’s Cat.” This is a reference to the thought experiment by physicist Erwin Schrödinger who theorized that a cat in a box can both be dead and alive until you open it. Each outcome is dependent upon an earlier, random, and unknown event. “Schrödinger’s Cat” is a
complex examination of nature of quantum systems, and has spawned many interpretations. However, Coyote and Mr. Feld hint that they both understand that it is impossible to know what will happen, until the observation is made. This reflects the uncertainty of life and the uncertainty of success for his heroes. However, once seen, there is no more speculation; in the case of Schrödinger’s Cat, it is either dead or alive. Coyote represents both life’s unknown and understandable. He creates the world as a place that can be comprehended, but he also revels in chaos. In so doing he is both creator and destroyer, much like the Hindu Goddess Shiva.

In Chabon’s hands, Coyote maintains his contradictory nature. He is the old, wizened creator of much of the known world and the many aforementioned joys and nuances of life; he is also a very childish character. He gives no reasoned purpose for his actions; rather, he appears to do things out of sheer boredom and a penchant for anarchy. In fact, the novel’s conclusion shows him to be mischievous. When Ethan hits his game-winning homerun, there is the sound of a window shattering. Coyote’s response is, “‘Uh-oh…We’re in trouble now,’” recalling a youth who has accidentally thrown a ball into the neighbor’s living room, calling the game, and running off (469). When his plans are ruined by Old Mr. Wood, resident of the house with the newly broken window, Coyote essentially throws a tantrum yelling “‘Go away, you big one-eyed bully! I’m not done!’” (472). Yet despite the juvenile characteristics that Coyote exhibits at the end of the novel, in contrast with the older, more knowledgeable character presented during the bulk of Summerland, the seeming randomness of his actions throughout make this interpretation tenable.
Rosenberg stresses Coyote’s paradoxical nature saying, “Coyote has always been old, although he typifies energy and movement. His impulsivity is usually associated with the young” (161). Chabon’s narrative captures this duality. Despite his, at times, terrible actions, sometimes his actions prove to be beneficial. And in this novel, his most important “trick” was creating baseball.

5.2 Baseball as Metaphor for American Life

In his book, From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports (1978), Allen Guttmann concedes that it is impossible to deny that baseball is America’s national game. He argues, “Two quite dissimilar factors are at work [in cementing baseball as the national pastime over other American sports like basketball and football]—the place of baseball in the cycle of the seasons and the tendency of baseball toward extreme quantification” (100). Guttmann suggests that part of the appeal is that it is an urban sport that appeals to a sense of the idyllic pastoral. The game brings to mind open spaces, grass fields, warm weather and sunshine.

Yet Guttmann also notes that baseball’s organization, both in terms of individual teams and the Major Leagues, appeal to a quantifiable desire for knowledge and expertise. He writes, “The spatial separation of the players on the field and the relative isolation of the batter and pitcher in their one-on-one opposition facilitated the accumulation of accurate individual as well as team statistics” (109). He goes on to note
that the many lulls in the game allow for spectators to share anecdotes and gain a better appreciation for the game’s history and strategy.\(^4\)

In his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Baseball*, Leonard Cassuto notes that it is the “link to national character [that] sets baseball apart from other American sports” (1). He observes that in many respects American history is mirrored in the national pastime. Whether we recall Ted Williams giving up the best years of his career to fight in World War II as a fighter pilot, or trace the history of Civil Rights as embodied by, first the “separate-but-equal” Negro Leagues, followed by Jackie Robinson’s heroic breaking of the color barrier and Peewee Reese’s public embrace of the first African-American major leaguer, or the growing “Latinization” of the game

\(^4\) In *Touching Base* (1980), Steven A. Riess argues, “the study of professional baseball’s myths, realities, symbols, and rituals can provide a useful approach to better understanding American mores, values, and beliefs” (4). Evans states, “Baseball became the national game because it succeeded in creating its own narrative tradition. At the core of that narrative tradition was a faith that the game was as pure as America itself” (15). What each of these scholars suggests, though with slightly varying nuance, is that for many Americans, baseball is itself symbolic of the nation’s idealized sense of itself. The attraction to the game is precisely because it has created a mythology all its own, and one that speaks the language of American exceptionalism.

*Also see The Empire Strikes Out: How Baseball Sold U.S. Foreign Policy and Promoted the American Way Abroad* (2010) Robert Elias
today, as it corresponds with a demographic shift in the general population, we cannot ignore the striking way the game of baseball reflects American culture at large. Cassuto suggests that more than any other sport, baseball reflects the ideals, and changing cultural attitudes of America, and it is that idea that Chabon taps into in *Summerland*.

It is worth noting that even the American legal system has adopted baseball lingo with the many, so called, three-strikes-and-you’re-out laws, which automatically bump up a person’s second crime to a felony and third to mandatory life in prison. It is difficult to know specifically what the genesis of such a law would have been—whether careful study proved that three is the exact number of crimes that any civilized society should reasonably be expected to tolerate, or whether the sheer prevalence of such a phrase in the collective American unconscious led the author to suggest three—but it nevertheless seems obvious that baseball has a tremendous cultural effect even beyond fans of the sport.

At the beginning of the novel, because of his lack of ability, Ethan focuses on the many failures that make up a baseball game. Yet throughout this, Chabon stresses the ways in which the sport itself reflects life in general. Chabon remarks. “Striking out. It was the way you described it when you failed at anything else in life, the symbol of every other kind of thing a person could possibly get wrong” (31). While Ethan seems to view this as his own disappointment made manifest elsewhere, Chabon is also pointing out the ubiquity of the terminology of baseball in American culture, and by extension the enormous impact that the game has had on American life. Similarly, many people talk about life “throwing them a curveball” or referring to successes as “home runs.”
In *Summerland*, Chabon engages the idea of the mythology of baseball, granting it the reverence normally given to religious traditions. The novel is filled with Edenic descriptions of ballparks, summertime, and the inherent beauty of the game itself. Repeated throughout the novel is what Chabon refers to as “the fundamental truth: a baseball game is nothing but a great slow contraption for getting you to pay attention to the cadence of a summer day” (64). In this statement he suggests both the joy of carefree childhood summers, often filled with impromptu baseball games, and the pleasant nature of those moments to a person’s memory.

In this case, Chabon is stepping toward a theory of the inherent Americanness of the game. Chabon’s “fundamental truth” is both central to his argument that baseball is quintessentially and intrinsically American; yet, it is also overly simplistic. It is tempting to overlook the idealism of Chabon’s assertion by recognizing that *Summerland* is young-adult fiction; however this is also an example of Chabon’s tendency to, at times, let his skill as a crafter of lyrical sentences undercut his overall point. That baseball and summer are somehow fully intertwined in the minds of those who play the game is a nice notion and written beautifully, but the too-cuteness of the remark does little to prove its “fundamental truth.” Rather, it undermines the claim.

Chabon’s amalgamation of baseball and life drives the novel’s action. It is as though the game itself was invented as a way to better understand human existence. Early on Chabon stresses the applicability of baseball as a metaphor for life, as Ethan grumbles to his baseball-loving father about the tracking of errors by the game’s official scorer. Ethan also objects to the unique terminology, *errors*, when other sports have fouls or
penalties, arguing, “‘Those are things that players could get on purpose...But in baseball they keep track of how many accidents [sic] you have’” (5). Yet his father counters, “‘baseball is more like life than other games. Sometimes I feel like that’s all I do in life, keep track of my errors’” (6). As with his “fundamental truth,” these analogies can come across as naïve. In the context of the novel they largely work, however they underscore the, at times, overblown idealism that runs throughout the narrative.

Ethan’s early futility on the field makes him indifferent, bordering on hostile, to the game his father loves. Yet, Chabon makes clear that in a game that is built upon countless failures, with a few critical successes sprinkled in, those various failures are to be learned from and built upon. When Ethan finally deigns to swing at a pitch, which he misses, his friend, Jennifer T., herself an outstanding ballplayer and lover of the game, reassures him with the cliché, “‘It was a nice looking swing’” (32).

In this short exchange, and one that can be heard during nearly every ball game, Chabon achieves two things: he highlights the ratio of failure and risk taking to eventual success, and he draws attention to the importance of others to one’s own success. Jennifer T.’s support is meant to help Ethan regain confidence, and her inclusion in the discussion signifies that she is just as involved in the outcome as Ethan. This is a theme he will return to as the novel progresses, and it is one of the hallmarks of the sport that separates it from others: winning a baseball game entails both strong individual performance and team effort. If either is lacking, the game cannot be won.

Chabon’s appreciation of the importance of baseball echoes George H. Mead’s contentions regarding the importance of play. In *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), Mead
argues that the purpose of games in one’s development is creating a sense of self through the understanding of others. The game is the organizing principle that allows for that understanding. Using baseball as an example, Mead notes, “Each one of [the player’s] own acts is determined by the assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team, at least in so far as those attitudes affect his own particular response” (154). Because they are all working toward a common purpose, each player must know how his or her teammates will react. Mead refers to the make-up of the team as the “generalized other,” indicating that this “other” represents the attitudes of the community as a whole. He goes on to argue that the “self is constituted not only by an organization of these particular individual attitudes, but also by an organization of the social attitudes of the generalized other or the social group as a whole to which he belongs” (159). The necessity of understanding others on a team, and how that understanding can lead to achieving a common good, is essential training of how to live in society at large. The understanding of shared rules and attitudes is paramount to social cohesion.

Huizinga takes a step further than Mead, arguing that play and the contest are integral parts of the development of culture. By “play” Huizinga refers to activities that appear to lack discernable social function. Baseball would fit squarely within this definition. Huizinga argues that “culture arises in the form of play” (66). He notes that while the contest serves no practical purpose, it performs an essential social function: it instills the desire for winning, for proving one’s superiority over others. Success, according to Huizinga, is a reward for the group, regardless of the tangible prize. He
suggests that the contest winner “has won esteem, obtained honour; and this honour and esteem at once accrue to the benefit of the group to which the victor belongs” (70). He goes on to identify cultures for which play is integral to religious experience: luck is seen as sacred; contests have a ceremonial significance, and one’s success in formalized play is a sign of virtue and nobility. Huizinga concludes, “we can affirm that Latin was right in calling the sacred contests by the simple word ‘play’, because it expresses as purely as possible the unique nature of this civilizing force” (96).

Chabon’s baseball metaphor taps in to a similar view of cultural evolution as described by Huizinga, though with a significant difference. Whereas Huizinga argues that culture develops out of play, eventually becoming a sacred ritual, Chabon suggests that baseball is more than simply a cultural phenomenon. Rather, nature, both human and otherwise, itself is reflected in the game. A strong case can be made that this is a profoundly silly assumption. However, in creating this fantasy world founded on baseball, he does highlight much of the lasting appeal that the game has enjoyed in American culture. Ultimately, Chabon’s suggestion that baseball has an almost sacred place in American culture is not too distant from Huizinga’s description of the importance of play to cultural formation.

In *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (1980), Steven A. Reiss speaks of the early days of baseball arguing, “Two of the principle functions ascribed to baseball were that it would teach children traditional American values and that it would help newcomers assimilate into the dominant WASP culture through their participation in the sport’s rituals” (7). We will
return to the idea of ritual later, but as Riess points out, baseball was perceived at the time to have great social implications outside of athletics, particularly in creating a sense of community. And while Chabon brings his ideas of baseball’s social functions into the twenty-first century (replacing the focus on WASP culture with multiculturalism) the importance of the sport as a civilizing force remains.

The notion that the appeal of baseball is its inherent appeal to an American ideology is not unique to Chabon or his novel, but is part of its history. Riess notes that men “from all social backgrounds could sit next to anyone else at the ball park, spectators from all classes and ethnic groups could momentarily feel that they were just as good as anyone else. For a few hours in the afternoon, they realized a part of the American Dream” (224). Fans from the same community, of all stripes, were united in their desires for the home team’s success and the away team’s failure. And despite the fact that this is pure myth—even more so today, in the era of luxury boxes and three hundred dollar tickets—it is a myth that is fully accepted by the throngs of people who cheer for a team as though their lives can be positively or adversely affected by the game’s outcome.

In *Summerland*, the outcome does matter. The fate of world comes down to whether Ethan’s team can defeat Coyote’s team in a ballgame. Coyote remarks, “‘I just love the idea of the fate of the entire universe coming down to the bottom of the ninth’” (450). In addition, Ethan’s watch, an electronic marvel created by his father, becomes a de facto doomsday clock; rather than a timer ticking down, it shows the inning of the game. Unlike a normal clock, with a predictable interval, baseball “move[s] at a Coyote pace, now wandering, now moving at a steady lope, now bearing down hard and quick”
The net effect of using a baseball game to mark the flow of life is twofold: first, it further signifies the unpredictability of life. One appeal of the game is that, because it lacks a clock, unlike most other sports, it can always be won as long as an out remains. Second, it allows Chabon to satirize the tremendous weight and personal pride that many fans give to the games themselves. In the novel, each loss could mean the end of their quest to save the world.

In many American cities and towns the ballpark itself has come to be a defining marker in a community. Riess recounts the early days of baseball, when teams played in rickety wooden structures, often moving from location to location based upon the ease of public transportation. After fire and collapse showed just how dangerous the fields actually were, a movement for “fire proof” stadiums followed, and with that ballparks became a permanent fixture in the neighborhood and to the population living there. In cities like Boston (Fenway Park), Chicago (Wrigley Field), or New York’s Bronx neighborhood (Yankee Stadium), the field has come to be a significant public landmark.

The significance of the ballpark to the community is particularly clear when looking at the building of the new Yankee Stadium (completed in 2011). The architects took great pains to design the playing field as exactly as they could to the original Yankee Stadium. It is as though the very shape of the outfield and empty spaces of foul territory, bullpen position, and fences were critical to the club’s and the community’s identity.

Once again, Chabon emphasizes this connection, showing the pride that a given group of people has in their ballpark through the state of the community. This is best seen in the fferisher community on Dandelion Hill. Ethan and company are imprisoned by a
group of ferishers who are uniquely antagonistic “‘Ever since the ballpark was lost’” (237). In a comic nod to an ongoing argument amongst baseball fans, as a trick, Coyote convinced a young princess named Spider-Rose to introduce the designated hitter to their league, to which Cinquefoil responds upon hearing it, “‘You deserve to be in here [imprisoned]’” (248). 7 Spider-Rose explains, “‘Somehow the change in the rules unworked the grammers [magic] that done kept our grounds green, tamped and raked our infield dirt, fixed and laid our chalk lines, for the tens of thousands of years that we been living in this hill’” (249). The crumbling of the ballpark, signifying the loss of their society, leads directly to the destruction of a previously egalitarian society. Left to play lesser lawn games such as badminton and croquet, they fall into brutal totalitarianism.

Despite the clear connection between the ballpark and the community, Chabon’s narrative stresses the pastoral appeal of the game. Reiss remarks upon significance of the word choices made when describing a playing field. “The rustic titles and the layouts of earlier parks were rural metaphors, which had reinforced the agrarian ideology of baseball” (108). In fact, baseball games were first played, literally, in fields, before

7 The debate often falls between purists, who believe the pitcher should always bat, that the designated hitter rule lessens the need for in-game strategy, and is more a vehicle for fat, aging, otherwise unathletic players to stretch out there careers at the expense of other, younger talent, and those who argue that pitchers are almost always the worst hitters in the game and the game is more exciting with better hitters. There is also the problem, for some, of having each league playing by a different set of rules since the American League uses a DH, whereas the National League does not.
moving into dedicated structures. Reiss notes the fact that the names often included “park” (Fenway Park), “field” (Ebbets Field) and “grounds” (The Polo Grounds) as evidence for this appeal to the country. The novel opens by describing the magical place called Summerland, so called because it maintains the perfect weather for all outdoor activity, best embodied by a baseball game. The novel’s most idyllic place is “Diamond Green, where the four limbs of the Tree rise from the trunk…The same and very spot where Coyote laid down the lines for the first inning a baseball ever to be played” (161). Chabon successfully links these two concepts throughout the novel, and, as scholars such as Reiss, have shown, the link is not simply one invented by Chabon, but one that is ingrained in the American psyche.

An interesting aspect of the game of baseball is its singular combination of individual and group achievement. In many ways, America is a nation that celebrates both. The United States of America somehow manages to simultaneously see itself as a collection of individual, distinctive states, but the residents of those states share a set of ideals that cross state borders, while remaining unique within national boundaries. It is as though the nation is built upon the collective efforts of each rugged individual. Batting is

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8 Riess also notes that, as ballparks became larger, the word “stadium” (like Yankee Stadium) began to take over for the more rustic “parks” and “fields” suggesting a connection to a more urban setting. It should be noted that today there is a movement back to the “park.” The Minnesota Twins, for instance, first played in Metropolitan Stadium, then moving to the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome (a multipurpose stadium) and, as of 2010, the team plays at the smaller, more intimate Target Field.
the realm of the individual. However, defense requires a team effort. Though in practice, Marxists or other economic scholars might disagree, this is a useful metaphor for popular conceptions of the workings of the United States as a nation. The idea of American commonwealth is built on individual efforts, helping distinct states, combine to achieve national goals that generally benefit everyone.

Ethan best exemplifies this dichotomy. While Jennifer T. is talented on both defense and offense, Ethan is lousy on both sides. Yet he is the player that Chiron Brown scouts as the hero, and in this world, the hero must be a ballplayer. As the novel progresses, Ethan’s batting does not improve; yet, through his study of *How to Catch Lightning and Smoke*, he becomes an excellent catcher. His ability to catch three fastballs from the fireballing giant, Mooseknuckle John, frees the group from becoming his meal.⁵ As the novel progresses, “though his hitting languished, Ethan’s mastery of the craft [of catching]…daily improved” (331). While his individual performance leaves something to be desired, his performance as a team member excels.

Through Ethan’s education in baseball, Chabon underscores Mead’s argument. By the end of the novel, and after he has achieved a certain level of success, Ethan comes to realize, that “Mr. Feld was right; life was like baseball, filled with loss and error, with bad hops and wild pitches, a game in which even champions lost almost as much as they won, and even the best hitters were put out seventy percent of the time” (444-5). It is with this concept that Chabon emphasizes the fundamental relationship that exists between

⁵ This sequence also echoes Malamud’s *The Natural*, as a young, cocky Roy Hobbes shows off his skills by striking out an aging, Babe Ruth-esque, Whammer Wambold.
baseball and life: that the very structure of the game, its rules, its traditions, and its conventions, all reflect life’s daily slog. And while this might seem a rather childish point of view, the nostalgia inherent in this idea is part of what Guttmann points to when he argues that baseball’s popularity is in part due to an urban desire for the pastoral.

In modern-day America, baseball is not nearly as profitable, nor popular, as football. Chabon addresses the ongoing dispute between fans of either sport, comically comparing the pastoral elegance of baseball to the slobbering brutishness of football:

The mushgoblins tore open the heavy sacks and, grinning, spilled their startling contents onto the ice. Big frozen chunks of blood-red meat went skittering in all directions. A frenzied yipping went up from the werewolves, horribly reminiscent of human laughter, and then they fell on the meat, while the mushgoblins cracked their long black whips and sang a tuneless tune. The werewolves began to roll around on the ice, shoving, playing leapfrog and biting at each other’s throats with savage glee. Somebody broke out an ancient football and they got up a great bruising scrimmage, tearing across the ice. (212-3)

The differences in the two sports is plainly clear: throughout the novel baseball is a civilizing activity whereas football is pure blood sport, only enjoyed by the basest creatures. George Will argues, regarding the two sports: “‘football combines the two worst elements of American society: its violence, punctuated by committee meetings’” (qtd in Elias 263). Chabon playfully highlights the brutal appeal of football, and strikes a clear contrast between it and the more sophisticated baseball.
5.3 The Cult of Baseball: Baseball as Religion

While it may seem, in many ways, to be an odd juxtaposition, to combine mythologies with baseball, closer inspection shows that Chabon’s creation of a cult of baseball is effectively a satiric interpretation of how baseball has existed in the American mind, since its evolution from the English game, rounders, in the nineteenth century.

Whereas Chabon builds much of his story on Native American and Norse mythologies, baseball has a mythology all its own. In his essay “Baseball as Civil Religion” (2002), Christopher H. Evans argues that the game shares a similar place in the American psyche as any other religion. He points out that baseball as an institution, like other religions, has its own mythology (including an elaborate, and patently false, origin story), its own heroes, its internal paradoxes, all of which, the followers of the cult of baseball would argue, demonstrate the virtues of Americanness.

While people do not worship the game or ballplayers, he argues that baseball’s history and rituals serve a similar social function as other religions. Guttmann notes, “A curious fact about baseball’s ludic time and space may add to the plausibility of speculations about the force of ancient myth” (107). As with many sacred stories or religious dogma, the folklore of baseball explains and exemplifies the greatness of the people who are its adherents. In this case, baseball speaks directly to those who identify as Americans. To quote Evans, “Baseball was a game for the world, yet its origin and genius were unequivocally American” (16).

To speak in terms as sweeping as these may seem to be taking things a step too far. However, when examining the role of baseball in *Summerland* it is impossible not to
see a kind of religious devotion to the game. And to that end, Chabon’s attention to the
details of the game, the habits and superstitions of players and fans alike, only work to
further this assertion.

Baseball is a sport built upon ritual, perhaps more so than any other sport. As
Ethan Feld learns the game, Chabon stresses many of the routines that players go through
during the course of a ballgame, often not for any practical purpose, but because it is
simply how it is done. The aforementioned encouragement that Jennifer T. gives Ethan
upon his first swinging strike out is one such example. Given that Ethan had closed his
eyes before swinging, that he had never previously swung the bat at a pitch, and that he
missed terribly, her telling him his swing was “a good hack” could not possibly be true.
Ethan’s acknowledgment that he closed his eyes suggests that he knows she is lying. But
the lie is not meant to mislead; rather, as anyone who grew up playing the game
recognizes, it is a stock piece of “chatter” used in any situation when a batter swings and
misses.\(^9\) Rather than a piece of useful criticism or complement, “chatter” is a reflex
statement uttered in a certain situation. Specific events demand a particular response.

Chabon highlights the importance of these rituals by showing Ethan becoming
increasingly comfortable in participating in them, as he comes to better understand the

\(^9\) Other common ritualistic phrases both heard and employed by the author include: “Now
you’ve seen him,” for when a batter has a strike called when he or she did not swing the
bat; “Now you’re on him. Straighten that out”, used when a batter fouls off a pitch;
“Nothing hurt”, used when a pitcher gives up a run of any kind (and regardless of the
score or impact of that run), to name a few.
game. While playing the team of tall tales characters, Jennifer T. gets into trouble while pitching; the opposing team is hitting her best pitches, and Ethan goes to the mound saying, “‘Hang in there, Jennifer T…Just bear down, and keep it close, and we’ll get right back in this, okay?’” (394). Chabon goes on to remark, “Though she knew he had just read them out of a book, Ethan said the words with just the right amount of meaninglessness, and they made her feel better” (394). Jennifer T. is ultimately calmed down and ready to pitch again, not because of a good piece of advice, but because of the familiarity of her exchange with her catcher. The words spoken are clichés, but because she knows she should be reassured by these statements, it is clearly the routine, not the verbiage, that calms Jennifer T.

Many rituals are intended, at least in part, to ward off evil or bring about good. Most of baseball’s customs are no different. Often pitchers will refuse to touch the chalked baseline when walking on or off the field when they are pitching. When a pitcher is in the midst of a perfect game, his teammates will refuse to talk to him in order to avoid “jinxing” him. Fans and players alike will don “rally caps,” wearing the cap inside out, when they are losing a game, particularly in the last innings, but have had some success batting. This is intended to foster success. Ethan’s formulaic advice to Jennifer T. is intended for a similar purpose: to ward off whatever is causing her poor pitching. The meaning of the speech means little; it is the act that is important.

Evans recalls the early champions of the game, such as former commissioner of baseball A. Bartlett Giamatti, writer Henry Chadwick, and former player and later founder of a sporting goods empire, Albert Goodwill Spalding, who had a “tendency to
speak of baseball in…sweepingly nostalgic ways” (15). An obituary for Chadwick notes how he helped to instill in the sense that baseball was emblematic of all that was great and good about America, observing “reverently that he devoted his life to the single-minded purpose ‘in keeping the game he loved pure and free from evil’” (Evans 18). He goes on to stress, “Baseball became the national game because it succeeded in creating its own narrative tradition. At the core of that tradition was a faith that the game was as pure as America itself” (15).

Yet, as Chabon illustrates throughout the novel, and as is true of those who choose to believe any bit of popular folklore, the motivation behind it is the comfortable narrative that reasserts the importance and exceptionalism of the faithful. In Summerland, Chabon stresses throughout that only those who believe in ferishers can see them; only those believers are capable of the heroic deeds needed to save the world.

Interestingly, Chabon suggests that often one does not know whether he or she truly believes or not. Ethan’s early spotting of Cutbelly the werefox, which he believes to be a bushbaby, suggests that he is a believer, even if he is aware of it. Jennifer T. expresses a similar skepticism when asked, noting, “She believed there had been [sic] elves, over in Switzerland or Sweden or wherever it was, and a tribe of foot-high Indians living in the trees of Clam Island. Once upon a time” (91). Yet Cutbelly reaffirms that, despite her professed suspicion, that “‘She believed you [Ethan]’” (101).

Belief conflicts with the rational. Both Ethan and Jennifer T. are taught to disbelieve what they cannot see, especially when that belief is extended to magical creatures. The tight connection Chabon makes between baseball and the intrinsic
workings of the known (and unknown) universe, suggests that the game’s innate effect on American culture and ideology exists whether or not the majority of people believe it. Whereas most people in the novel do not believe in the existence of ferishers, as evidenced by their invisibility, Ethan and Jennifer T. attest to their reality. Similarly, whereas many people would not believe that the game of baseball has any significant connection to American life and culture, its familiarity and ubiquity in public life and speech suggest otherwise—everyone knows that it is three strikes and you’re out.

Chabon builds on the idea of baseball as a religion by giving the rules themselves a cosmic finality. Not only is the game invented by the supernatural, but also its rules are absolute, and under no circumstances can they be broken. This is particularly evident in the scene in which Ethan is challenged to catch three fastballs thrown by Mooseknuckle John. After catching two, his hand is throbbing to the point where he likely will drop the third and final pitch. However, he reads that as catcher it is his job to call the pitch and to “‘not be swayed by the passionate battery-mate, in particular if he is a fireballer; above all, _don’t let that rascal shake you off_ [sic]’” (188). Ethan calls for a change-up, and, despite his raging protests, Mooseknuckle John is compelled to throw it because the rules state that catcher calls the pitch and the pitcher throws what has been called.

The aforementioned demise of the Dandelion Hill ballpark was also due to the changing the established rules, adding the designated hitter (DH), by the ferishers who lived there. The purity of their game had been spoiled and, as a result, their ballpark fell into disrepair, and their whole society crumbled into chaos. In effect, by amending the rules to include a DH, they have sinned. They fell for Coyote’s tricks, gave in to
temptation, and like Adam and Eve’s fall, their paradise was no more. In each of these cases the rules are as powerful as any commandment from any deity.

Despite the acclaim from reviewers, outside of a young adult readership circles, *Summerland* is not a novel that will stand out as one of Chabon’s best works. It does not show the complexity of character or theme as *Kavalier & Clay*, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, or *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, which is due to its targeting of a younger audience than his other novels. However, in examining Chabon’s body of work in its entirety, it is a novel worthy of study, on its own terms as a young-adult novel. *Summerland* shows a thematic depth that is uncommon to the genre.

*Summerland* highlights Chabon’s adventurous spirit as a writer, and is a turning point of sorts in the way that Chabon will approach writing, much to the chagrin of many scholars who saw so much potential in his first three novels. Beginning with *Summerland*, Chabon’s next three works are a series of experiments in writing genre fiction. Some critics bemoan his “wasting” his gifts on dalliances with detective novels and fantasy adventures.

Yet those works, and *Summerland*, show a writer who is building on the literary credibility that he has earned with his first three novels and short stories and choosing to write the types of stories that he loves and that made him want to be a writer. In the case of *Summerland*, Chabon manages to take old stories of Coyote, Loki and the Tree of Worlds, add to it American tall-tales and the game of baseball, and spin these into a mythology that feels both new and familiar, a tale uniquely American.
CHAPTER 6

“Strange Times to be a Jew”: Alternate History, Messianism, and The Yiddish Policemen’s Union.

Michael Chabon’s fifth novel, The Yiddish Policemen’s Union [YPU] (2007) is about Diaspora, Redemption, and the possibility of the Messiah. Through the residents of Chabon’s fictional Sitka, Alaska, nervously waiting to find out their fate—will they or won’t they gain permission to stay in their homes—Chabon explores the real fears experienced by Jews world-wide, and throughout their history. He shows the cynicism that drives governments to marginalize minority communities, while highlighting the concern about the unknown felt by Sitka’s Jews, who are about to be evicted from their community with no where to go. Yet Chabon manages to examine these topics without a heavy hand. With the Yiddish Policemen’s Union’s mixture of two genres, hard-boiled detective fiction and alternate history, Chabon makes his strongest case that the genre itself proves to be instrumental in how that discussion plays out, and that an exciting plot is not antithetical to intelligent writing.

In a correspondence with this author Chabon writes, “The idea of return and restoration—and their impossibility—is a persistent theme in my work, and the longing to restore the Temple played right into the themes of that book [YPU]. But I was also alarmed by the insanity and impossibility-without-horrific-violence of that dream.” This novel is Chabon’s clearest examination of the consequences of a return to Israel. It also
explores fear that stems from the forcible expulsion from one’s home. In placing this study in the context of a murder mystery Chabon highlights the sometimes cruel and inhuman lengths people will take in order to achieve worthy goals, such as a restoration of the State of Israel.

_The Yiddish Policemen’s Union_ begins in a fleabag hotel, the Hotel Zamenhof, wherein resides Meyer Landsman, a down-on-his-luck, alcoholic detective with “only two moods: working and dead” (2). Landsman is wakened by the hotel’s owner after the body of a young heroin addict is discovered, shot to death, in the room just below his own. He quickly rejects the idea of suicide, settling on murder, and soon discovers that the victim—who was going by the name Emmanuel Lasker (the name of a chess champion and author of a famous _Manual of Chess_ [1925])—is Mendel Shpilman, who is the son of the powerful Rabbi Shpilman. Adding a new wrinkle into the investigation is the fact that Mendel is the Messiah.

Casting a long shadow over the novel is the upcoming “Reversion.” The charter established by the “Alaskan Settlement Act of 1940” is set to expire and the United States government is about to reclaim the autonomous Sitka from the Jewish community residing and governing the territory. Without the express permission of the U.S. government, any Jew living there will be expelled, and each resident is very aware of the fact that most of them will not be allowed to stay. In short, most of the Jews of Sitka are within a year of a new Diaspora, with nowhere to go. Landsman, his partner and cousin Berko, and Landsman’s ex-wife and commanding officer Bina are running out the clock, trying to close as many cases as they can before their mandate ends. Landsman’s growing
obsession with solving the murder of a seemingly unknown junkie endangers his and his family’s prospects for permission to stay beyond the Reversion. As he discovers more about the victim, he also comes to realize that Mendel’s murder is part of a much larger plan, involving powerful people, to secure another possible homeland in Israel.

As the novel progresses, Landsman uncovers a plot to attack Jerusalem (lost to Jews in 1948) by blowing up the Dome of the Rock and spurring a massive Zionist movement. This conspiracy involves Rabbi Shpilman, the most powerful man in Sitka, as much a political figure as religious, and several Christian Zionists in the U.S. government, including the President. Landsman discovers that Mendel was murdered to prevent the attack on Jerusalem, since it is believed that the Messiah must usher in the return to Israel. Yet the murder proves inconsequential because the plan is carried out anyway, and the mosque is destroyed.

By blowing up the mosque and beginning the re-emigration to Israel, Chabon creates a clear distinction between the weak and the powerful in society. Chabon’s depiction of the criminal Rabbi Shpilman, his overt influence in politics and war, and his dubious association with the Christian Zionist movement, sharply critiques the blending of these two realms, and the dangers therein. Chabon remarks that, “I am alarmed by the rise of fundamentalist extremism all around the world, but particularly in the US, regardless of what flavor it might be…I know that some of my alarm and concern is reflected in the plot of YPU.”1 The significance of the marriage between these

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1 Excerpted from an email to this author on 6 April 2012.
fundamentalisms plays out in dire ways, creating the possibility of all-out warfare in the Middle East.

In the end, the mystery has been solved. Landsman knows that Berko’s father pulled the trigger, killing Mendel, at the behest of Shpilman’s men. Berko’s father is in the hospital from a failed suicide attempt. Landsman and Bina have reconciled. But the plot in Jerusalem is carried out. Rabbi Shpilman moves to Israel, and the fates of the thousands of Sitka Jews remains uncertain.

As Landsman pieces the mystery together, the repeated mantra is, “these are strange times to be a Jew.” The murder of a Messiah-turned-junkie, the ever-imminent eviction from their home of sixty years with nowhere to go, and the alliance of Jewish and Christian Zionists make that statement ring remarkably clearly.

*The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* advances several ideas that Chabon has been building upon throughout his career. Like so many others, this novel addresses issues of disenchantment and of being the outsider. Here he does so on a character level—Mendel Shpilman is uncomfortable with his role as Messiah, particularly as a political entity, and is homosexual (another common theme in Chabon’s work); Landsman is alienated from nearly everyone in his life.

More importantly, in *YPU*, Chabon moves beyond examinations of individual alienation, to a study of Diaspora, with the imminent homelessness of the Jews of Sitka, Alaska. Regardless of where they eventually end up, they will have gone from a self-governing majority to a minority. Chabon establishes that there are no nations clamoring to take in these potential immigrants, thus he highlights the desperation, and fear that
accompanies such an unclear future. Through these numerous levels of isolation, Chabon emphasizes how limited the freedoms are, for people in a supposedly free society.

At the same time, Chabon also suggests that it is out of this tremendous uncertainty that fosters faith in the Messiah. More specifically, Chabon imagines how the Messiah might be received in modern-America. What he finds is that the Messiah will likely be dismissed by many, accepted by some, and exploited by those with the power to do so. In many ways, the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is a critique of the ways in which people with authority treat those whom they dominate. In short, Chabon suggests that the world is still not ready for the Messiah’s coming.

*YPU* is both a hard-boiled detective novel and an alternate-history novel. Never one to avoid discussion of his literary predecessors, Chabon recalls that other authors have similarly fused elements of seemingly disparate genres noting, “Isaac Asimov’s Lucky Starr novels—those are detective stories…*Blade Runner* was noir and SF at the same time” (*Locus*). Set in a contemporary Sitka, Alaska, though one in which, during the Second World War, European Jews were provided a safe-haven, and self-governance, in a small area of Alaska and the State of Israel does not exist, the novel is a murder mystery replete with drug addicts, tortured detectives, and a mysterious cabal wielding power in the community.²

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² While *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is Chabon’s first “genre” novel, he would write other pieces of genre fiction, notably the Lovecraftian short story “In the Black Mill,” and two novellas: the Sherlock-Holmes-in-retirement story, *The Final Solution* (2004) and the
In combining alternate history, a sub-genre of science fiction, and the hard-boiled detective novel, Chabon adheres to certain conventions of both genres. Because this combination of these two types of novels plays such a large role in how Chabon approaches subjects like Diaspora and the Messiah, it is worth spending a little time discussing them in some detail.

In her book, *Continuum Literary Studies: Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal Imagination* (2010), Elana Gomel notes that alternate history “presupposes the endless malleability of history, the radical distinction between the future and the past, and the unlimited human agency to effect change. For the one-to-one causality of determinism, alternate history substitutes a fluid contingency, in which a single cause might have multiple and unpredictable effects” (17). The mutability of history allows writers to envision the present in terms of an altered past, generally with the intended purpose of warning against attitudes, or cultural and political phenomena that they see as dangerous.

The author seizes on an event from the past that could seemingly have occurred in any number of ways, and speculates on how life may have been, given different circumstances. For instance, Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) imagines that the isolationist, professed anti-Semite, and American cultural icon, Charles Lindbergh, had beaten Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election. He goes on to describe the novel as one in which he “wanted America’s Jews to feel the swashbuckling adventure tale, *Gentlemen of the Road* (2008). See the sixth chapter of this dissertation for a discussion of these works.
pressure of a genuine anti-Semitic threat” (“Story”). In his “The Story Behind ‘The Plot
Against America,’ published in the New York Times, Roth writes, “I can only repeat that
in the 30's there were many of the seeds for its happening here, but it didn't. And the Jews
here became what they became because it didn't.”

From the very first page Chabon establishes that the action takes place in an
unfamiliar time, casually pointing out that the “night manager [of the hotel] is a former
U. S. Marine who kicked a heroin habit of his own back in the sixties, after coming home
from the shambles of the Cuban war” (1). In other respects the world is recognizable, and
Sitka’s Jews are, for all intents and purposes, American. The fact that the history of the
novel is different from contemporary American history prepares the audience to accept
ideas and events that it might not otherwise. In so doing, he is able to suggest the
dehumanization inherent in Reversion.

Given the long history of Jewish persecution Roth’s statement may seem out of
touch. In fact, any minority group likely feels as though their lives are under threat by the
majority. However, Glazer and Moynihan point out that as time has passed, American
Jews have come to enjoy the fruits of American prosperity. They ask, “where are the
dangers to Jews in New York City, or in the United States?” (178). They go on to write,
“never in the Diaspora have Jews wielded such weight and power in a great city” (177).
Though they concede that history does play a role in how many American Jews view
their current circumstances, the assertion that Chabon seems to embrace is that
contemporary American Jews have begun to lose historical perspective. Though anti-
Semitism does exist in the United States, the threat of pogroms or other mass violence
does not. It is that fear that each author attempts to mobilize by imagining an America where institutionalized anti-Semitism is a real danger.

Emerging in the pulps, during the 1920s and 1930s, writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler helped usher in a new sort of detective story. In his book, *Detective Fiction* (2005), Charles J. Rzepka explains,

American hard-boiled, or ‘tough guy’ fiction was conceived in part as a direct challenge to the Anglo-American classical tradition inspired by Holmes…the tough-guy writers cultivated a brusque, clipped, vernacular style. They also made a point of denigrating the formal puzzle element, along with the shallow characterizations and implausible conjunctions of events that it seemed to demand. Nonetheless, hard-boiled authors…retained the inductive challenge of classical detection under the garish surface of fast paced events, colourful personalities, and wise-cracking rejoinders. (179-80)

In “Crime” (2006), Erin A. Smith adds, “Hard-boiled heroes rely as much on brawn and tough talk as their brains, and the worlds they inhabit are often overrun by systemic crime” (138). The hard-boiled mystery reflects a hard, seedy world, often dealing with street thugs, drug addicts, prostitutes, and, generally, society’s underbelly. More importantly, the hard-boiled mystery often suggests that crime is rampant and that criminality is the norm.

The most important aspect Chabon borrows from hard-boiled fiction is the detective himself. The hard-boiled detective is generally a loner, who has a friend or two.
He is often an alcoholic, prone to stupid personal decisions (i.e. cheating on his wife, or cheating with the wife of another, taking copious amounts of Benzedrine, et cetera) and is someone whose past is filled with demons. Meyer Landsman is a down-on-his-luck, hard-drinking detective, haunted by failures and tragedies—including the suicide of his father—and one could easily place him alongside Hammett’s Continental Op or Chandler’s Philip Marlowe.

The advantage of the detective novel is that we are taken along with the detective. As he attempts to put the puzzle together, he is forced to repeat what he knows, adding newly discovered information to what is already known. The reader is therefore trained to treat new information with skepticism, along with the investigator, but trust the slow building of proof. By following Detective Landsman through the labyrinthine murder investigation, readers come to terms, alongside the detective, with what can be known and what cannot. Chabon shows the elaborate web that connects people to one another and the myriad, sometimes inexplicable, motivations that drive individual actions. Importantly, Chabon uses the genre to illustrate the chaos of the modern world. Essentially, Chabon shows that no amount of rational detective work can fully penetrate the mysteries of faith, religion, or myth. Instead, he suggests that questions will always remain.

Relatedly, the detective, by his very nature, is constantly asking questions, and he is unique in his ability to move across and between classes and groups. This allows the detective to gain information inaccessible to others. With each new piece of information, the detective needs to consider all the ways in which it can fit into the story, and therefore
is forced to reflect on all possibilities. For instance, Landsman asks himself, “How much
guilt did Mendel Shpilman feel? Had he believed what was said of him, in his gift or wild
calling? In the attempt to free himself from that burden, did Mendel feel that he must turn
his back not only on his father but on all the Jews in the world?” (196). These problems
occur throughout the novel. Through the investigation, Chabon is able to pose these
fundamental questions of faith, as well as bring his audience into the head of the
character without having to take a clear-cut stand either way. Instead, he forces his
readers to follow Landsman’s thoughts slowly changing, with every new piece of
information he gathers. In effect, Landsman acts to reinforce or articulate what questions
the reader might be asking, given the information that has been presented.

In The Doomed Detective (1984), Stefano Tani notes, “The literary detective
ovel…is nowadays written, generally speaking, by people who are not primarily
detective writers” (32). He goes on to cite Borges, Nabokov and Pynchon as examples of
authors making use of the genre for their own literary purposes. He points out that these
authors “intermittently use detective conventions with the precise intention of expressing
disorder and the existential void they find central to our time in a genre designed to
epitomize the contrary” (34). And on some level, Chabon is doing just that. By the end of
the novel, Landsman realizes, “there is no Messiah of Sitka. Landsman has no home, no
future, no fate but Bina [his ex-wife]” (411). Yet the question of when or whether a
Messiah will come is left open, as is what is to be done with all of the soon-to-be
displaced Jewish residents of Sitka, Alaska. The crime has been solved, but the
fundamental questions remain unanswered.
By the time *YPU* was published, Chabon had already published a detective story, *The Final Solution* (2004), *Kavalier & Clay* had further established him both as a major voice in American literature and a great admirer of comic books, and in countless interviews he extolled the virtues of genre fiction. It comes as no surprise, then, that much scholarship on the novel has centered on, or included a discussion of, the novel in the context of its hardboiled detective genre. For example, in “Mix and Match: Michael Chabon’s Imaginative Use of Genre” (2008), J. Madison Davis notes that Chabon faithfully “and without condescension” employs the hardboiled genre (10). He goes on to praise the novel as reaching “a higher plane through the use of an alternative history, a frequent device of science fiction” 11).

Whereas much discussion of the novel’s genre forms falls into this sort of admiration without comment, Anna Richardson seeks to examine the ways in which crime fiction has been employed by Chabon, and others, to examine the Holocaust. In her essay, “In Search of the Final Solution: Crime Narrative as a Paradigm for Exploring Responses to the Holocaust” (2010), Richardson she notes that in both Holocaust fiction and detective fiction, the underlying thread that connects them is the search for knowledge. She goes on to argue, “In recreating on a grand scale the cultural instability and dislocation that characterizes the setting of the detective mystery, Chabon provides himself with an ideal forum within which to explore responses to the Holocaust” (167). Ultimately, Richardson suggests, “Like Holocaust narrative, detective fiction arrives at its resolution by proving the reader with an [sic] answer; however this is not necessarily the [sic] answer” (169). It is this idea that I will build upon in this essay.
Chabon remembers the first glimmer of inspiration for *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* occurring when he stumbled across a copy of the phrasebook *Say it in Yiddish*. In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” he recalls the tragicomic notion of a “modern” Yiddish phrasebook, republished in 1993, given the paucity of contemporary speakers of Yiddish, let alone those for whom Yiddish is their only language, and the modern-day phrases translated therein. He cites phrases like “‘Where can I get a social security card?’” and “‘What is the flight number?’” pointing to the unlikelihood of their utility before the mid-twentieth century, and before half of the world’s Yiddish speakers died in the Holocaust, and many others who emigrated to other countries and voluntarily began speaking another language, keeping Yiddish as a second language.

In *Yiddish in America* (1965), Joshua A. Fishman largely agrees with Chabon’s observation. He observes that Yiddish has continued to diminish in popular usage over the years, though it continues to be a language of veneration for many American Jews. He argues that this is in part due to the reduction in Yiddish secular education, noting that the vast majority of such schools can only be found in or around New York. In addition, Fishman observes that as American Jews are increasingly entering public high schools, and come from English-speaking households, their connection to regular use of Yiddish is lessened. Fishman writes, “the language is actually related more to a web of sentiments and memories of the teachers and school board members than it is to any viable culture in to which children are or can be socialized” (25).

In “Diglossia” (1959), Charles A. Ferguson explains that bilingual communities do not arbitrarily switch between dialects or languages. Rather, both the “High” variety,
meaning the more formal and universal language, and the “Low” variety, the regional
dialect, are employed in specific situations. He notes, “The speaker is at home in [Low]
to a degree he almost never achieves in [High]” (9). He adds that while High and Low
both share similar lexicons, “it is not surprising that the [Low] varieties should include in
their total lexicons popular expressions and the names of very homely objects or objects
of very localized distribution” (13).

In *YPU*, Chabon approaches the High/Low model in two ways. It is understood
that the characters in the novel are all speaking Yiddish, and all governmental and
religious speech is also in Yiddish. In the context of the novel, therefore, Yiddish is the
High variety. Significantly, most often the characters swear in English. Chabon writes,
“‘Fuck!’ The word is spoken in American, Berko’s preferred language for swearing and
harsh talk” (47). In this Chabon brings the readers into a place that is strange because of a
language barrier.

However, the novel is written in English and the Yiddish terms he peppers
throughout the text are generally slang. He consistently uses words like *noz* (literally
meaning “nose” but used as a slang term for “cop”), *sholem* (gun, yet also means “peace”
adding an irony to the usage similar to the Colt “Peacemaker”), *papiros* (cigarette), to
name a few. In this case, the formal language is English and the dialect, from the reader’s
perspective, is Yiddish. Here Chabon gives life to the speech and legitimacy to the world
he has created since informality is the lifeblood of a language’s evolution and signifier of
its continued usage.
Also apparent in the above quotations is Chabon’s use of “yid,” which he does throughout, both in dialogue and narration. In a 2007 interview with The Guardian’s Stuart Jefferies, Chabon is asked about his pervasive use of the word. Chabon notes, “In Yiddish, yid means Jew. So when you say the greeting ‘Vos macht a yid?’ it means ‘How's it going?’ When spoken between Jews ‘yid’ has intimacy - and that's why I used it. It demarcates the fact that you belong to the group. So in my novel, which is set in a big ghetto, everyone is a yid.” In fact, this type of slang is another convention of the genre.

In most cases, in the novel, “yid” is used as a term of familiarity by those in the group with each other, much like African-Americans in similar fiction might use “nigger,” or some other derivation of the word, with each other in a social setting. By assuming this slang term as a commonly used one in the district, and employing it freely without calling attention to its usage, Chabon creates a more natural local, street-level culture. He essentially creates a vernacular for his invented community, which gives life to that world, making it seem more realistic and stylized. It therefore does not matter whether actual Jewish youths in cities in America refer to each other in such a way, because it feels natural that they would.

Chabon asks, “At what time in the history of the world had there been a place where not only the doctors and waiters and trolley conductors spoke Yiddish but also the airline clerks, travel agents, ferry captains, and casino employees” (165). Chabon has acknowledged that he has taken some criticism for his argument from Yiddishists and others, but he reiterates his point that a Yiddish phrasebook published in the 1990s, one
that teaches phrases articulating concepts that did not exist prior to the Second World
War, “proposes a world that never was and might have been, and makes it all feel
absurdly and beautifully ordinary” (*Maps* 172). Since he could think of no such world, he
created one in Alaska.³

³ Chabon has said that he originally conceived of the Sitka community as a possible
alternative to an Israeli homeland noting, “For a brief while, I had once read, the
Roosevelt administration had proposed such a plan” (*Maps* 167). Yet he goes on to point
out the stark, almost polar differences between the two places in climate and in
corresponding attitude: “I imagined [the imagined Alaska] at the time as a kind of Jewish
Sweden…organizationally and temperamentally far more akin to its immediate neighbor,
Canada, than to its more freewheeling benefactor far to the south” (167-8). He adds that
in such a place, speaking Hebrew would make little sense, since it is so closely tied to
both the place, Israel, and to religion, whereas Yiddish is a vernacular language. Chabon
omits places like Birobidzhan, in the former Soviet Union, which boasted a vibrant
Yiddish-speaking Jewish population with a climate similar to that of Alaska. However,
the Sitka Chabon imagines is a contemporary community, existing in the early twenty-
first century, with Yiddish as their primary language. In the mid-twentieth century, the
Soviets outlawed the teaching and writing of Yiddish in Birobidzhan, thereby effectively
eliminating Yiddish as a first language in the region. This is not to say, however, that
Yiddish is no longer spoken in communities around the world, particularly in Orthodox
communities.
Chabon creates a world in which a language barrier exists between the Jews of Sitka and their neighbors, in Canada and the United States. Additionally, by placing his novel in a Sitka that is predominantly Jewish, he both demystifies Judaism for the bulk of his American audience who might be unfamiliar with the religion and culture—Jewishness, in the novel, is no longer a mark of the “other”—and he also is able to critique contemporary political phenomena like the Christian Right. In so doing, Chabon employs a satiric tool used by others, such as Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). In the novel, Reed condemns the monotheistic majority’s derision of polytheistic religions as mere superstition by creating a society in which Voodoo and Hoodoo are the norm and monotheisms are the oddity. By establishing a similar political/religious association, yet with a different religious belief system to the one dominant in present-day America, Chabon can more easily highlight the dilemma that relationship causes because it is slightly removed. This unfamiliarity makes it stand out; yet the parallels remain clear.

Chabon has received criticism for his use of Yiddish in the novel, from some critics. They argue that he oversimplifies the language and its history, and that the secret cabal of Jewish religious figures is disparaging. However, Chabon takes the criticism in stride. In “Jews on Ice,” an interview with Sarah Goldstein, Chabon recalls his mother’s reaction to his first criticism. She tells him, “‘You’re in the club now.’” He goes on to say, “It made me think of Philip Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint*. You know, Roth is one of her favorite writers and she remembers very clearly all the outrage he has elicited at many times in his career starting with “Goodbye Columbus.””
Amelia Glaser, focuses her discussion of the novel, not on the genre but on Chabon’s choice to make Yiddish the spoken language of Sitka, Alaska. In “From Polylingual to Postvernacular: Imagining Yiddish in the Twenty-First Century” (2008), argues that Chabon “imagines a Yiddishland as the backdrop for a novel about the virtues of exile” (160). Glaser adds that Yiddish “has become a language that allows English-speakers like Chabon to question the status quo, whether politically, socially, or in their own relationship to Jewish culture” (160).

In fact, the Yiddish of the *Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is integral to the alternative Sitka that Chabon has created. It is both a marker of difference from the people who live outside of, and surrounding, Sitka, and a direct connection to the European homeland from which they had been evicted. In addition, it is difficult to plausibly argue that Chabon’s depiction of Jews in the novel is unduly denigrating. Given that Chabon sets his novel in an exclusively Jewish community, the criminals would logically be Jews as well as the detectives.

6.1 Messiah in Their Midst

One of the more interesting wrinkles that Chabon folds into the plot of *YPU*, is that the murder victim, Mendel Shpilman, was the Tzaddik, which means he had the potential to be the Messiah (“Anointed One”). His prospective Messiah-hood is well known throughout the Sitka community. Mendel was abnormally adept in his learning of the Torah and Talmud. It is remarked upon by many that Mendel’s body temperature always ran about two degrees warmer than normal, suggesting an added, and unexplained, energy. Despite his being the son of the most powerful Rabbi in Sitka, he
shares few personality traits with Rabbi Shpilman. Mendel’s homosexuality is seen by his father as an embarrassment and should be either corrected or hidden. In addition, Mendel is a disappointment to his father, given Mendel’s lack of political savvy and his seeming disinterest in fulfilling his role as Messiah.

An important distinction to make is the difference between the *Tzaddik* and the Messiah. They are not synonymous, though they are related. It is not assured that he will, or could, fulfill that role. In conceptualizing his Messiah, Chabon relies on the Hasidic tradition of the *Tzaddik Ha-Dor* (“righteous one”), which, in this case, is how Mendel is understood.\(^4\) The *Tzaddik Ha-Dor* is “an individual who is considered righteous in his relations with God and man” (Rothkoff 437). In *The Jewish Messiah* (1997), Dan Cohn-Sherbok adds that according to Hasidism, the *Tzaddik* “was seen by his followers as

\(^4\) There is also a more generalized idea of the *zaddik*, literally a “righteous person,” as “a mystic who employs his power within the social community and for its sake. A wonderhealer and miracleworker [sic], in the eyes of his followers he is a combination of confessor, moral instructor, and practical advisor” (Rubinstein 399). Additionally, “In Hasidism the *zaddik* is conceived of as the ladder between heaven and earth, his mystic contemplation linking him with the Divinity, and his concern for the people and loving leadership tying him to earth” (Rubenstein 399). In this case, the *zaddik* is a social leader within the community. There are several alive at once, each responsible for a different group of people, and lacking the messianic imperative. This is an important distinction since, in Chabon’s case, his characters are expecting Mendel to reveal himself as the Messiah and reinstitute the Davidic kingdom, not simply be a local leader.
possessing miraculous power to ascend to the divine realm” (152). In conversation with Rabbi Shpilman, Landsman describes the *Tzaddik Ha-Dor’s* potential: “If the conditions were right, if the Jews of this generation were worthy, then he might reveal himself as, uh, as Messiah” (141). As *Tzaddik Ha-Dor*, Mendel has merely the *potential* to be Messiah. Rabbi Shpilman then adds that, as “taught by the Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, that a man with the potential to be Messiah is born into every generation” (141).

The Baal Shem Tov (“Master of the Divine Name,” or “Master of the Good Name”), formerly Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), was the founder of Hasidism. He is described by Jan Doktór as “a plebian mystic, healer and miracle worker” whose character highlighted “the folk mien of Hasidism [and] helped to explain its rapid expansion[…]as a massive folk movement” (42). Doktór notes that current scholarship suggests that it is highly unlikely that the Hasidism came about through Baal Shem Tov, pointing out that this supposition “misses some crucial elements and inspirations of the emerging Hasidism” (42).

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5 It is worth noting that Chabon almost never uses the article “the” when referring to Messiah. While this might be in distinguishing the messianic conceptions he is working with in the novel from others, specifically, from the Christian idea, removing the article “the” also stresses the notion that many Messiahs have come and gone before Mendel, and many will follow as well. This seems to support the idea of the *Tzaddik* that Chabon is working with throughout the text.
It is critical to note that in the case of *YPU*, belief in the Messiah as real and the Bible’s foretelling of his coming as authentic is crucial. This is unlike the Golem, in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which is a folktale that Chabon argues can be just as powerful a symbol regardless of its historical authenticity. In *Mimesis* (1953), Erich Auerbach writes, “One can perfectly well entertain historical doubts on the subject of the Trojan War or of Odysseus’ wanderings, and still, when reading Homer, feel precisely the effects he sought to produce; but without believing in Abraham’s sacrifice, it is impossible to put the narrative of it to the use for which it was written” (14). He goes on to argue, “The Bible’s claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer’s, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims” (14). That Mendel is the tzaddik, capable of revealing himself as the Messiah, is not in question. What is in doubt is whether he would have been able to fulfill that role had he not been murdered, and what motivated the killer or killers.

Chabon goes to great lengths to identify Mendel as tzaddik. According to Louis Jacobs, “the zaddik appears as a spiritual superman, with the power to work miracles. He is the channel through which the divine grace flows, the man to whom God has given control of the universe by his prayers” (409). In *The Zaddik* (1960), Samuel H. Dresner notes that in times of crisis, “Around the zaddik a new community of souls could gather” (117). He adds, “all energy, infinite care and devotion should be concentrated on fashioning the new ‘cornerstone,’ the new ‘foundation,’ the zaddik” (117). Chabon includes an ancestral element to the tzaddik, remarking that Rabbi Shpilman is “tenth in the dynastic line from the original rebbe of Verbov, himself a famous worker of
miracles” (106). This suggests Mendel’s abilities are a part of his lineage, but also recalls the biblical covenant in which Yahweh promises David that his line will be special in His eyes, and reign over an eternal kingdom.

In discussion this novel, an important distinction must be made between “faith” and “religion.” Whereas religion indicates adherence to the organizing structure, and its rules for behavior, that is drawn directly from Biblical interpretation, faith signals a more ambiguous belief in the God and the otherworldly. Both involve belief in many of the same things, but Landsman’s later faith in the authenticity of Mendel as the tzaddik does not result in his becoming a practicing Jew. In short, “religion,” in the context of this discussion, refers to religious establishment.

In Landsman and Rabbi Shpilman, Chabon creates two characters who have opposing views on nearly everything, but particularly on religious matters. Landsman is self-professed to be irreligious. His skepticism makes him a good detective and he is described as “a dealer in entropy and a disbeliever by trade and inclination. To Landsman, heaven is kitsch, God a word, and the soul, at most, the charge on your battery” (130). Landsman’s overall disregard for religion also comes out in his often derisive descriptions of various religious ceremonies and artifacts. While searching Mendel’s hotel room he discovers that Mendel has used a tefillin as a tourniquet for shooting heroin. Chabon explains what a tefillin is, from Landsman’s perspective, saying, “Each morning the pious Jew twines one of these doodads along his left arm, ties another to his forehead, and prays for understanding of the kind of God Who obliges somebody to do something like that every damn day of his life” (23). Though he knows the religious
conception of the Messiah, and seems to take the word of people who claim that title for Mendel, he is by no means one to put too much faith in prophecy.

This sardonic attitude, of course, puts Landsman directly at odds with Rabbi Shpilman, who believes that Mendel’s gifts make it imperative that he lives up to his role as the Messiah. Shpilman also, therefore, believes that it is his, and all the world’s Jews’ destiny, to reclaim the Holy Land, beginning in Jerusalem. He also believes that the return to Israel must occur immediately. His piety is overt. At one point, after Mendel has disappeared before his own wedding, Shpilman directs his wife not to take a phone call, which she hopes will tell her where Mendel has gone. He advises his wife, “I wouldn’t answer if I could…If you have to break the Sabbath, at least don’t waste the sin’” (217).

Similarly, Shpilman consistently shows his dominance over others, and his certainty that his commands will be obeyed without question. For instance, when Landsman asks whether his wife might know something about Mendel, Shpilman condescendingly replies, “‘Do you suppose, Detective Landsman, that my wife would ever attempt to subvert my authority with respect to this or any other matter?’” (142). This authority extends beyond his family, to all who are in contact with him. Under no circumstances does Shpilman believe that he will be challenged.

It is through these two characters that Chabon examines the nature of the Messiah in contemporary life. He establishes that there will be both true believers and nonbelievers. More interestingly, he suggests that competing ideas about who the Messiah ought to be and his role in the world, can lead to power struggles between those
disparate groups competing for access. Clouded by their own interests, Chabon suggests that these factions unintentionally can hinder the Messiah’s coming.

Chabon shows that it is not exclusively in the hands of the prospective Messiah whether he succeeds in carrying out his foretold destiny, or whether he ends up another “diminutive prisoner of history and fate, another potential Messiah—for Messiah, say the experts, is born into every generation” (41). The generational appearance of the tzaddik stresses that the world must be ready, and Mendel’s murder suggests that it is not. Landsman and Shpilman offer contrasting figures whose fate is equally tied to, and in need of, that redemption.

The Messiah is said to have many differing roles and characteristics, and false-Messiahs often display some but not all of these. In his essay, “Messianism in Linear and Cyclical Contexts,” Jan A. B. Jongeneel notes, “The Hebrew Bible contains a variety of concepts regarding the coming Messiah…[namely] political, spiritual, and apocalyptic Messianism” (121). Political Messianism centers on the idea that when the Messiah comes he will be a descendant of David and reestablish Davidic dynastic rule in Jerusalem. Spiritual Messianists, according to Jongeneel, view “the coming Messiah as Yahweh’s representative on earth,” rather than as a national ruler, and is derived primarily from prophetic writings. Apocalyptic Messianism comes largely from Daniel and does “not connect the coming Messiah with ordinary events in human history. Instead, they make him a transcendent figure who suddenly will appear in the end-time” (122).
An important characteristic of the Messiah is that he will exhibit many, almost superhuman traits. Arie Morgenstern, in *Hastening Redemption* (2006), remarks that “Judaism sees the Messian song of David as a charismatic, particularistic figure, who will gather Israel’s Diaspora, rebuild the Temple, and restore the crown of Israel’s sovereignty” (166). He will be a warrior-king, yet also a teacher. In addition, the Messiah is said to be a sort of priest. In many traditions, such as with the Hasidic *Tzaddik Ha-Dor*, the Messiah is able to use his unique relationship with God and act as a healer. For instance, in “Innovative Tradition: Jewish Culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth” (2002), Moshe Rosman notes, “The Ba’al Shem Tov…went beyond helping individuals, employing his connections with the divine to try to avert or attenuate plagues and persecutions facing the Jewish community as a whole” (550-1). This trait is well documented throughout the novel. These are traits that Mendel is well known, throughout the community, for possessing. He is the ultra-intelligent teacher and judge, and it “was not just Mendel’s memory, the agile reasoning, the grasp of precedent, history, law. No, even as a kid, Mendel Shpilman seemed to intuit the messy human flow that both powered the Law and required its elaborate system of drains and sluices” (121).

Mendel is the healer. He perceives the illness in his chess-partner Zimbalist’s mistress and says, “‘tell her that I send her my blessing’” (123). The morning after having done so, “Zimbalist’s lady friend woke him and told him to go home and eat breakfast with his wife. It was the first coherent thing she had said in weeks” (124). While Landsman is interviewing people who have had contact with Mendel, most relate similar instances of Mendel’s miraculous healing ability. For example, a barren woman gave
birth after meeting Mendel. In another instance, a man heavily in debt is called by lawyer who tells him “that he had just inherited half a million dollars from an uncle he never knew” (215). Though he is soft-spoken and unassuming, his reputation as the Messiah is strong throughout the community.

The aspect that Mendel is particularly ill suited for is political leadership. Jongeneel explains that “many exiled Jews expected the coming of a descendent of King David who in the near or far future will act as the triumphant messianic ruler and will restore the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem” (122). This is the box that Mendel’s father attempts to force him into, and the area in which he is most uncomfortable. Rabbi Shpilman tells his wife, “[Mendel] has no choice…Even if he has fallen into unbelief. Even if in staying here, he risks hypocrisy or cant. A man with his talents, his gifts, cannot be allowed to move and work and hazard his fortune out there in that unclean world” (221). However, Shpilman’s forcing of Mendel into the role of a de facto military leader foreshadows his later attempts to force God’s hand when he invades Israel after Mendel’s death.

Chabon shows Rabbi Shpilman to be distorting the very religious conviction he advocates. By attempting to force Mendel to be something he is not, to be a political leader, and pressing him to be Messiah, Rabbi Shpilman is essentially attempting to force God’s hand. This is also apparent, and will be discussed in more detail below, in his colluding to blow up the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine built upon the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem, hoping to compel a mass Zionist movement. Yet Shpilman admits that “There are numerous and persuasive teachings against acting in any way to hasten
the coming of Messiah’” (344). It is out of hubris and fear that he proceeds with his plan anyway. In this context it would be an act of self-deification to presume that he could affect the Messiah’s arrival. It is through the very flawed Rabbi Shpilman that Chabon stresses the idea that “Every generation loses the Messiah it has failed to deserve” (197).

In *Messiah in Context* (1984), Jacob Neusner explains the prohibition on “forcing God’s hand,” expressed by Shpilman. Neusner notes that “Israel bears ultimate responsibility for its own condition” and “therefore has the power to…revise and reshape its destiny” and perhaps hasten the Messiah’s coming (184-5). However, he goes on writing, “The principle condition, encompassing the specifications of various laws which must be kept in order to bring the Messiah, was that Israel was not to bring the Messiah before his time, on the one hand, and that Israel was to accept the burden of suffering and pagan rule, whether in Exile or in the Land, on the other” (186). It is in his eschewing of this notion that Shpilman betrays his disbelief, or at least his selfish intentions. By allowing the killing of Mendel and proceeding with the invasion of Israel, he indicates that he does not believe that his son was the Messiah. By moving forward with the plan, despite the clear prohibition and futility of attempting to force the Messiah’s coming, he reveals his motivation to be rash and narcissistic.

It is important to note that through the imperfect Messiah, Mendel, Chabon highlights the tremendous hope for redemption, particularly in times of trial, that many Jews place on this figure—and by extension, each Tzaddik that had come before him. But, he also points to the very humanness of the person who is given these gifts.

Landsman asks himself the questions: “How much guilt did Mendel Shpilman feel? Had
he believed what was said of him, in his gift or wild calling? In the attempt to free himself from that burden, did Mendel feel that he must turn his back not only on his father but on all the Jews in the world?” (196). Chabon is particularly sensitive to the stress that any Messianic figure would be under, and how any human being would crack under the pressure to be all things to all people. Mendel’s humanity is particularly evident in his heroin addiction and his homosexuality. As Landsman puts it: “Once he had been fitted for the suit of the Tzaddik Ha-Dor and then decided it was a straightjacket” (280).

Mendel’s personal suffering is very much in keeping with his role as Tzaddik. Describing “the descent of the Tzaddik,” Dresner notes, “His willingness to undergo persecution for their sake is palpable evidence of the zaddik’s concern for the people. His life is often one of peril and suffering” (157). Dresner describes the trials of the Tzaddik as being both physical and spiritual in nature, but that he must overcome them. While Chabon depicts Mendel as a character who endures physical and mental suffering, he also portrays him as not prepared to accept the role of Tzaddik Ha-Dor and eventually Messiah. Despite his healing ability, his relapses into drug abuse and his running from his marriage suggest that Mendel rejects the larger responsibilities of being Tzaddik.

It is the issue of his sexuality that marks the first fissure in his relationship with his father. As we have seen in previous chapters of this dissertation, the issue of sexuality is one that reoccurs in Chabon’s work, starting with his very first novel, The Mysteries of Pittsburgh. While each new investigation on the nature of human sexuality is unique, the key assumption in each case is that homosexuality is normal. For Chabon’s gay characters, adverse consequences of their “coming out,” such as familial or societal
rejection, mockery, and rape or other physical violence, always come as a result of homophobes who do not recognize the normalcy of homosexuality.

In Mendel’s case, this is no different, but the consequences are even more dire. Mendel’s sexuality must be seen in the context of his father’s position as a powerful Rabbi because, as in many religious communities, homosexuality is considered an abomination in Hebrew Scripture. Yet, while he never overtly acknowledges Mendel’s sexuality, Shpilman tacitly admits the truth. Despite knowing that his son is gay, Rabbi Shpilman insists on Mendel’s marriage, telling his wife that other homosexuals “‘hide it. Out of modesty and humility and the fear of God, they clothe it’” (220). When Mendel skips out on his wedding, Chabon states, “The Tzaddik Ha-Dor was tendering his resignation” (226). Mendel essentially resigns himself to being another false Messiah, or simply human.

Mendel’s resistance to being forced into the warrior-king role convinces him to abandon the Sitka community. His father’s refusal to accept his son for whom he is (both in terms of homophobia and his insistence that he become, politically, what he is not) precipitates Mendel’s leaving. While there are attempts at rehabilitation, the last one leading to his final escape and the murder of Landsman’s sister (who both brought Mendel to the rehabilitation facility and helped him escape from it), they always fell apart due to the pressure put on Mendel to reveal himself as the Messiah. In effect, Mendel repeatedly attempts to refuse his role as Messiah, but his father attempts to force it upon him.
It is possible to look at this in two ways. The first is simply Chabon’s attempt to come to terms with why a Messiah has not arrived. He seems to suggest that the very humanity of the Messiah could be a factor, but he also points to the many ways in which Jews are not yet ready. By placing the Messiah’s coming (or potential coming) in the present day, Chabon is able to explore how people might react and highlight many of the problems he sees in contemporary America. In this case, Chabon is clearly critical of religiously based homophobia. He also speculates that fundamentalist actors will try to usurp the Messiah’s, and God’s, authority by planning, and carrying out, the invasion of Jerusalem whether he wants them to or not.

Another way to interpret the relationship between Mendel and his father is in the context of a more contemporary view of Messiah. Cohn-Sherbok notes that most modern Jews find problematic the idea of a miraculous savior who comes and makes the world right for Jews. He argues, “Rather than await the coming of a divinely appointed deliverer who will bring about peace and harmony on earth, Jews should themselves strive to create a better world for all peoples” (171). This idea meshes well with Chabon’s narrative. He goes to great lengths to show the dire condition of the Jews of Sitka. Yet he also shows the internal problems of corruption, both political and personal, that plague the community. The argument suggests that before any renewal of the community there are many problems that first must be addressed.

While the novel hinges on the murder of the Messiah, the text remains remarkably agnostic on the idea of whether messianic redemption in the sense of the warrior-king will be a reality. Tellingly, Landsman asks Berko whether he is really waiting for
Messiah. Berko responds, “‘It’s Messiah…What else is there to do but wait?’” (127). This puts in a nutshell what Chabon appears to be communicating in the novel: that one never knows if and when the Messiah will arrive, so the best one can do is try to be ready and to be prudent. And in this case, being ready is clearly to solve many of the social problems that still infect the community in Sitka, Alaska, and by extension, American life in general.

It is important to note that Chabon’s modern-day Messiah recalls the life of the Hasidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Rabbi Schneerson was the Lubavitcher Rebbe (1951-1994), named for Lubavitch, the town in Belarus from which the community originated. Over the course of his life he became an extraordinarily influential figure. In The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson (2010), Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem M. Friedman describe how his followers slowly came to believe that Schneerson was the Messiah: “The Messiah, as the Rebbe described him….would be ‘a real human being’ and not ‘something abstract,’ a great leader and scholar who studied and observed Torah and mitzvahs but would not immediately be recognized by the world at large…Looking around for such a man, many of his followers were convinced that their Rebbe was that Messiah” (214). They note that despite frequent “reminder[s] of his limitations and of a lingering challenge to his leadership,” his followers continued to believe that he would reveal himself as the Messiah (216).

As David Novak recounts, in his essay “The Man-Mad Messiah,” Rabbi Schneerson began a program of outreach to the American Jews, who were largely viewed
by the Eastern-European Orthodox Jewish communities as overly secularized. He did so, because “this outreach was necessary to bring about the arrival of the Messiah” (34). In “The Rebbe, the Jews, and the Messiah” (2001), David Berger adds, “he was a man of such extraordinary talent that most of the accolades heaped upon him by present-day messianists…are true” (25). As his influence increased, Novak notes that even after his death, the “thrust of this messianic theology is the strong suggestion that Rabbi Schneerson himself is the Messiah-King, thus making the essential task of his representatives…to prepare the Jewish people, and along with them all humankind, to affirm that kingship” (33).

Chabon’s naming his murdered Messiah “Mendel” is telling. Like Schneerson, Mendel does inspire those around him and perform extraordinary deeds—in Mendel’s case, actual healings. The linking of the two figures indicates both an understanding of the desire for the Messiah’s arrival, but also skepticism toward the likelihood of his coming. Dismissing the notion that Schneerson was the Messiah, Novak points out, “The Messiah is assumed to perform certain acts that identify him as such…the Messiah is still expected to gather all Israel into the land of Israel, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and establish an optimal polity having strong influence” (36). Neither Rabbi Schneerson nor Mendel Shpilman achieved any of these feats.

In addition to the examination of the nature of the Messiah, Chabon shows the need for messianic redemption. Cohn-Sherbok, observes, “prior to the coming of such messianic deliverance, the world would be subject to serious tribulations defined as ‘the birth pangs of the Messiah’” (43). He later goes on to note that, throughout history,
messianic expectation intensifies during times of increased unrest. Cohn-Sherbok cites the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE, the collapse of the Roman Empire, and the Crusades, as examples of chaotic times which also saw an increased hope for the arrival of the Messiah. Chabon’s “strange times to be a Jew” are just such a period of uncertainty. No one knows for sure whether she or he will be allowed to stay in Alaska, and if not, there is no guarantee that another country would take them.

Notably, by creating such a period of fear and doubt, Chabon not only adds tension to the plot, but also gives an historic and emotional significance to the characters’ desire for Mendel to fulfill his role. It makes Landsman’s eventual belief and Rabbi Shpilman’s wrong-headed prodding understandable, given the hopelessness of the situation. Chabon therefore suggests that the fundamental driving force behind messianic expectation is the hope for a better future. In fact, Chabon points to people actively forgetting that Mendel is dead and that he—and the Messiah—was human. Zimbalist tells Landsman, “‘They’re saying Mendel is coming back…That when they get to Jerusalem, Mendel is going to be waiting for them. Ready to rule over Israel’” (388). Chabon points out the destructive nature of that hope when focused in the wrong direction. In that case, the harm is in false hope.

In another respect, Rabbi Shpilman’s pushing Mendel to reveal himself as Messiah, and his plan to attack Jerusalem whether Mendel is present or not, exposes inherent folly of his plan. Even according to his own reading of Scriptures, if Mendel were actually the Messiah, without him Israel cannot be redeemed. For many Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, such as Sitka’s Verbovers, religious Zionism of the kind Shpilman
engages in is contrary to their beliefs about messianic redemption because it is, in effect, forcing the hand of God.

Cohn-Sherbok notes that critics of Zionism argue that it is “an heretical attempt to usurp the privilege of the Messiah to establish a Jewish kingdom” (159). To be sure, religious Zionists assert that a home in Israel must be established prior to the coming of the Messiah; however, this goes directly against Shpilman’s own beliefs. Shpilman’s many attempts to aid Mendel’s recovery are never described as a result of concern for his son’s well being. Rather, he and the other Verbovers “intend to restore him to practical use” (280). Mendel’s health is only important because of his larger usefulness to the specific, violent Zionist cause led by his father and the U.S. government.

Chabon shows that Shpilman’s impatience undercuts his own cause, and his sudden conversion to religious Zionism seems to stem more from pride than religious conversion or conviction. His haste also leads him to make questionable connections and decisions that have lasting effects on all of Sitka’s Jews, and challenge his own religious authority.

Interestingly, when interviewing Shpilman, who notes that Mendel’s murder investigation had officially been quashed, Landsman asks himself, “Has Shpilman known all along that his son is dead…Did he himself do the killing?” (142). By opening this line of inquiry, Chabon lays the groundwork for a larger critique of religious hierarchy. Namely, he implies that fundamentalist religious figures, regardless of how powerful they may be, are not beyond reproach. He suggests that there is an inherent danger in allowing
too much deference to anyone, based on their outward religious authority, since their very
humanness leaves them open to corruption.

6.2 The Intersection of Politics and Religion

In addition to an exploration of the Messiah, *YPU* is very much a critique of
contemporary American politics, and the undue influence that various religious groups
have in secular governments. This is best embodied in Rabbi Shpilman, Hertz Shemets,
and a U.S. government official named Cashdollar. Each of these characters is depicted as
having a specific agenda in mind, one that is often more ideological in nature than
practical, or good policy. And each makes a series of dubious choices that compromise
the good of the many to see their plan carried out. Through these three characters,
Chabon shows the dangers of fundamentalists of all stripes, especially when given a
position of political power. The central paradox that Chabon exposes in his examination
is the undue influence that powerful religious figures and groups have on secular
governments. It is true that any system of belief, religious or otherwise, will exert its

6 In this, and other novels, Chabon uses names that can be seen as significant or
metaphorical. Cashdollar seems pretty blatantly representative of the U.S. interests that
would callously evict thousands of Jewish residents after sixty years of sovereignty.
Similarly, a “Landsman” is a compatriot who comes from the same town. “Shemets,” the
surname of Berko and, more importantly, his father, the CIA operative, means “whisper”
and reflects his role in the novel of quietly working with the U.S. government as well as
his murder of Mendel to try and derail Rabbi Shpilman’s plans.
political power. However, Chabon’s Sitka, Alaska is not a theocracy; its governing system is secular and maintains the American ideal of a separation of church and state. He suggests that when these two cultural elements comingle, political power perverts religion and overly powerful religious institutions undermine the logic of secular decision-making.

As we have already seen, Rabbi Shpilman wields much power in the Sitka community, so much so that he is able to suppress Mendel’s murder investigation because it was proving uncomfortable. Chabon stresses that his power is often reminiscent of a mafia don. Noting that the Chasidim of Verbov (or Verbovers), survived a de facto pogrom in Ukraine, he explains: “he found a way to remake the old-style black-hat detachment…He built a criminal empire that profited on the meaningless tohuboho [sic] beyond the theoretical walls, on beings so flawed, corrupted, and hopeless of redemption that only cosmic courtesy led the Verbovers even to consider them human at all” (99). He later adds that the “Verbovers, with their Talmudic grasp of systems, their deep pockets, and the impenetrable face they present to the outer world have broken or rigged many mechanisms of control” (105). Yet a sort of cult of personality has generated around Rabbi Shpilman. He is presented as an unimpeachable, religious authority, which he fully embraces.

As Landsman’s investigation moves forward, he unearths the plot to invade Jerusalem, mostly funded and orchestrated by Rabbi Shpilman and his followers. In so doing, they must first destroy the Dome of the Rock. The consequences of this action would surely launch World War III. Shpilman loses all religious credibility for choosing
to move forward with the attack after Mendel’s murder, because it cannot result in the coming of the Messiah. Bina surmises, “‘I guess they were too far along to stop…I guess they just went ahead without him’” (359). This realization exposes Shpilman as a fraud. His justification for the bombing hinged on the idea that the Messiah would come and restore the State of Israel, yet he is fully aware of the impossibility of that occurrence when the bombing does take place.

Shpilman is similarly shown to be interested in his status while overseeing the disassembly and shipping of his palatial house to Israel. Shpilman presumes that he will make a triumphant return to the Holy Land, and it is apparent that he intends to wield the same power in Israel as he did in Alaska—an influence that would have been significantly greater had his son, the Messiah, lived. Chabon suggests, with the actions of Shpilman after his son’s murder, that his drive for personal gain trumps his fealty to any religious concerns. His hypocrisy is evident when recalling his initial conversation with Landsman. Shpilman fondly recalls Mendel’s “remarkable nature as a boy” and his eventual push for Mendel to assume the role of Messiah, for which Mendel is not capable of fulfilling. In so doing, Shpilman exposes himself as both cold-hearted and a charlatan. The face he presents of doting but disappointed father and man of God sharply contrasts with the hardened, calculating, mafia don-like persona seen in the recollections of those with whom he has conspired. Shpilman sees Mendel’s talent and his religious authority as a means to gaining more power, and the kind face is a façade.

The conspirator that is most troubling is the U.S. government agent, Cashdollar. Chabon establishes early on that Cashdollar is, first and foremost, a Christian Zionist. He
is introduced as “Mr. Cashdollar, of miraculous birth in Oregon,” in a clear, tongue-in-cheek play on his professed piety (336). His tendency to quote the Gospels, even to Landsman, as proof of the righteousness of his cause, marks him as a true believer. He tells Landsman, “‘the end times are coming. And I for one very much look forward to seeing them come. But for that to happen, Jerusalem and the Holy Land have to belong to Jews again’” (366). He is also referred to as “fulfilling the divinely inspired mission of the president of America” (339).

Chabon makes clear that Cashdollar is interested in aiding the Verbovers attempt to forcibly claim territorial rights in Israel because he believes it will set in motion the second coming of Jesus. This knowledge makes the deal struck with Rabbi Shpilman, and Shpilman’s motivations for accepting the offer, all the more dubious, because neither man is looking to aid the other. Both Cashdollar and Shpilman see the other as a means toward achieving their own religious glorification. Cashdollar’s unabashed desire to see that Jews regain a home in Israel simply to fulfill Christian doctrine suggests that not only is he, but also the presidential administration, engaged in naked self-interest. It has little to do with providing a home for people who are about to be displaced by his government.

True, on one level, the results of this alliance can trump the intentions of either side. Both Shpilman and Cashdollar want to see Jews reoccupy Israel but for very different reasons. As Biale writes, in Cultures of the Jews (2002), beginning with St. Augustine, “‘Jews were to be tolerated [by Christians] as witnesses of the veracity of biblical prophecy but, until they converted to Christianity, they had to be kept in a
degraded state” (306). This is the attitude of Cashdollar. This association Chabon highlights the strange and sometimes seemingly contradictory coalitions that are often made in pursuit of larger political goals.

It is in the partnership between Cashdollar and Shpilman that Chabon makes his sharpest social critique. Their collaboration mirrors the contemporary alliance between Christian Zionists and Jewish groups, who both, seemingly, seek the same result: a Jewish State in Israel. Yet their motivations are contrary. Morgenstern notes that Christians believe that the redemption of Israel will be “followed by the ‘millennium,’ a thousand-year period during which Jesus, having reappeared will reign” (166). He adds, “Against that background, we can understand why the missionaries concentrated their efforts on the Jews and on the Land of Israel: the redemption of the Jews is a precondition to that of the world; and the redemption of the Land of Israel and its restoration to the status it enjoyed in its golden age are necessary steps in the process of human redemption” (166).

William Martin, in his essay, “The Christian Right and American Foreign Policy,” echoes Morgenstern, but points out that in America, the missionaries have turned to politics to meet their desired ends. He argues that the Christian Right’s staunch support of Israel does “not [stem] from guilt over past Christian sins against Jews,” but is a part of a religious view that “a complete restoration of the nation of Israel, including the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, is a prerequisite to the end of the present age…which will usher in the Second Coming of Christ” (73). From this perspective, Jews are not seen as people; rather, they are merely agents used to hasten the Second Coming.
Chabon calls attention to this through the full-throated Christianity of all the U.S. government officials that come to Sitka. For instance, Spade, the man taking over the Sitka police department, is first identified by his lapel pin, which is “in the shape of a stylized fish” (325). This is colloquially known as a “Jesus Fish.” But he also points to the ways in which Rabbi Shpilman uses this intense religious desire on the part of American Christians to help himself and his own cause. Before the successful bombing of the Dome of the Rock, the best that any of Sitka’s Jews could hope for was a U.S. government permit to remain after reversion. Landsman discovers that through these connections, “the rebbe put the fix in. Green cards for everyone.” (105). That is, for all the Verbovers. The rest are on their own.

Chabon also highlights the blatant disregard, on the part of the people planning massive political upheavals, for those who would suffer from such an action. Personal political gains supersede potential deaths. Besides looking at Mendel as a necessary casualty, both Shpilman and Cashdollar refuse to see the human cost of a potential, and needless, war. Bina suggests, of the Americans, “Maybe they’re hoping [sic] for World War Three. Maybe they want to crank up a new Crusade. Maybe they think if they do this thing, it will make Jesus come back” (322).

Shpilman is similarly callous. He and Alter Litvak, a now broken-down old man who has a long history of clandestine work for both the United States and the Sitka settlement, conspired to send over the people to carry out the bombing in Jerusalem, all but guaranteeing the war. Chabon stresses how easy it is for the people who plan an attack, to gain most of the power and influence from a victory in war. Yet they do not
participate in the fighting, and overlook the probably losses of human life. In the cases of Shpilman and Cashdollar, those decisions can be made all the easier, since they cloak their intentions in religious fervor.

While it is clear that Chabon sees this connection between Rabbi Shpilman and the American government as cynical pairing, and one that is more destructive than constructive, he also acknowledges that it is born out of desperation as much as greed. In explaining to a doctor who has correctly diagnosed his heavy drinking, Landsman analogizes the situation: “‘if the country of India were being cancelled, and in two months, along with everyone you loved, you were going to be tossed into the jaws of the wolf with nowhere to go and no one to give a fuck, and half the world had just spent the past thousand years trying to kill Hindus, don’t you think you might take up drinking?’” (277). It is this knowledge of the past, combined with a desire for a permanent home, that causes Shpilman to make these ill-advised decisions.

Landsman’s assessment is very much in keeping with the hope inherent in the idea of the Messiah as warrior-king. Neusner observes, “The Messiah’s kingship would resolve the issues of Israel’s subordinated relationship to other nations and empires, establishing once for all time the correct context for priest and sage alike” (9). In this context, Neusner’s “Israel” is meant to imply all Jews living throughout the world, and it is therefore easy to see why Shpilman might be interested in taking on a partner like Cashdollar, if the end result is the restoration of Israel. However, though Shpilman does say that his actions are for the benefit of all of Sitka’s Jews, Chabon shows him to be very much a bully of questionable morality who has grand plans for himself once Israel is
restablished. Given his dubious motivations, Shpilman’s assertions that he is only working toward the common good ring hollow.

The conflict of character, between Mendel as healer and Mendel as warrior-king, is apparent, when a man named Litvak, the chief architect of the plan to destroy the Dome of the Rock, is given his orders from Rabbi Shpilman: “If Roboy [the doctor at the rehabilitation clinic] could get [Mendel] Shpilman up and running again, then Shpilman could inspire and lead not merely a few hundred armed believers or thirty thousand black-hatted hustlers looking for new turf, but an entire lost and wandering nation” (352). In this sentence, Chabon establishes both the bad and the good that could potentially come from the plan. Yes, the instigators are mostly in it for their own enrichment, but ends might justify the means if it leads to a permanent home.

The undercurrent of uncertain and contradictory motivations in the novel is also reflected in Berko’s father, Hertz Shemets. He is famously “the first Jew hired by the Sitka detail of the FBI, its first director, and eventually, having caught Hoover’s eye, ran the Bureau’s regional counterintelligence program” (32-3). While working with the U.S. government, Shemets admits that his primary concern was achieving permanent status for the Sitka settlement. He eventually tells Berko and Landsman that he has previously worked with Litvak, though “‘Permanent Status never meant anything to him. Neither, I’m certain, does the cause he’s working for now’” (315).

Chabon stresses two important things. First, Shemets’ lifelong work toward Permanent Status suggests that not all of the Jews of Sitka are interested in immigrating to Israel. They see Alaska as a safe place that freely allows them to practice their religion
and culture. Second, the prospect of a violent return to Jerusalem seems a risk without much chance for a reward.

Shemets’ murder of Mendel underscores the severity of the conflict. He tells Landsman and Berko, “I thought I was doing the right thing, that it would put a stop to Litvak…But then the bastards went ahead and decided to try it without him” (405). Shemets believes that convincing the U.S. government to make Sitka a permanent Jewish state would be the best option, as opposed to starting a war in Palestine. Yet he includes a blatantly self-centered reason, as well: “He knew how badly I hate losing. That I couldn’t let Litvak bring about this foolishness…Everything I worked for all my life” (404-5). An acceptable loss for him is Mendel. Like Shpilman, Shemets performs destructive acts, for personal reasons, but to some degree, with the greater good in mind.

For both Shemets and Shpilman, Chabon makes it difficult to see whether their selfishness or magnanimity is most prevalent. That is precisely the point. Chabon emphasizes the mix of wishful thinking and a practical knowledge of the past. Early in the novel he says,

The Holy Land has never seemed more remote or unattainable than it does to a Jew of Sitka. It is on the far side of the planet, a wretched place ruled by men united only in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews…Jerusalem is a city of blood and slogans painted on the wall, severed heads on telephone poles. Observant Jews around the world have not abandoned their hope to dwell one day in the land of Zion. But Jews have been tossed out of the joint three times now—in 586 BCE,
in 70 CE and with savage finality in 1948. It’s hard even for the faithful not to feel a sense of discouragement about their chances of once again getting a foot in the door. (17)

Here he stresses the physical distance between Sitka and Jerusalem.

In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” he remarks upon the environmental differences. He says, of a Jewish State in Alaska, “The resulting country would be a far different place than Israel. It would be a cold, northern land of furs, paprika, samovars, and one long, glorious day of summer” (Maps 167). These passages highlight the need for a place to call home, in particular, a home in which Jews are not a minority, but rather a political and cultural majority, in charge of their own destiny. We can see how complex characters like Shemets and Rabbi Shpilman develop. The desire for the restoration of Israel is tremendous, but Chabon uses these characters as cautionary examples for the tremendous risks involved in attempting to bring it about.

In his preface to Cultures of the Jews, David Biale observes that the concept of exile and return recurs throughout the Bible. He sees that this long cycle, and Jewish success in homelands outside of Israel, has led to a complicated relationship between the ideas of “exile” and “homeland.” Biale writes, “The belief in a ‘Promised Land,’ the Land of Israel, lies at the core of the biblical narrative and subsequent Jewish thought; it is this belief, in barely secularized form, that animated the Zionist movement in its reestablishment of the Jewish state” (xxvii). It part, it is this idea that animates Shpilman’s push for a return to Jerusalem and reclaim it as the seat of a Jewish nation.
However, Biale also points out, “the Jews of many Diaspora communities, while holding onto the messianic vision of return to the Land, often saw in their own countries a remembrance of an ideal past and a taste of that messianic future: so it was that the Lithuanian Jews referred to Vilna as ‘the Jerusalem of Lithuania’” (xxvii). In fact, he goes on to note, “Even the modern return of the Jews to their historic homeland and the restoration of Jewish political sovereignty have not definitely resolved this dialectic between Land and Exile...Rather than and end to Jewish wandering, the new nation of Israel may only be the latest phase in an eternal cycle of leaving and returning, Homeland and Diaspora” (xxvii). Biale stresses the sense of the impermanence of any return to the Land of Israel, beginning with Abraham’s leaving Israel for Egypt soon after he arrives.

For many Jews, living in Diaspora, a return to occupying Jerusalem was not necessary to maintaining their connection to Jewish faith or Jerusalem itself. In “Hellenistic Judaism” (2002), Erich S. Gruen points out that even before the destruction of the Second Temple, most of the world’s Jews lived in Diaspora and felt as strong a kinship to their homeland as they did toward Jerusalem. He notes, “The respect and awe one paid to the Holy Land stood in full harmony with a commitment to the local community and allegiance to gentile governance. Diaspora Jews did not bewail their fate and pine away for a homeland. Not, by contrast did they shrug off the homeland and reckon the Book as surrogate for the Temple” (123). Rather than relocate to Israel, many Jews made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, paying tribute while there. Importantly, pilgrimage suggests leaving the city and returning home.
However, the key to the ability to pilgrimage to Jerusalem is having a home to return to. This is the Jews of Sitka differ from those in Diaspora described above—or those who currently live in the United States. The idea of a “Promised Land,” bestowed to the Jewish people by God, remains while living in Diaspora, and Chabon shows that it becomes more critical to Jewish identity and hope for the future when there is no other home to return to. Chabon shows that, though he is attempting to maintain his political power and has the connections to Washington D.C. to remain in Sitka, Rabbi Shpilman taps into the desperation of the rest of the Sitka’s Jews in order to gain support and aid for his actions. Chabon ultimately demonstrates that the lack of a secure homeland increases the already existing spiritual connection between Jews in Diaspora and Jerusalem.

Ultimately, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is a novel about faith. In a career spent largely extolling the virtues of a cultural Judaism that is often not concerned with the religious aspects of one’s Jewishness, Chabon finally looks squarely at belief in God and finds reasons to believe. This novel is his boldest, most audacious and arguably his most important examination into Judaism in American life. This is a novel about the Messiah, the need for redemption, and an exploration of Diaspora. He imagines what it must have been like for the Jewish communities throughout antiquity, up to the middle of the twentieth century, who were forced out of the only homes they have known.

Though in this novel, an independent Jewish state does not exist, its absence is keenly felt throughout the narrative. Chabon illuminates the importance of the State of Israel to the world’s Jews by erasing it from history. He shows that even for Jews living in Diaspora, Israel is a place to call home. The Jews of Sitka are much like the Jews of
other, disparate nations throughout history who have found themselves suddenly without
a place to live. Chabon shows that Israel is necessary because it offers a spiritual home,
place to which Jews in Diaspora can turn for security when things grow dangerous in the
wider world.

Redemption is the tie that binds all of the Jews of Sitka who need a home. Landsman is lost to alcohol and depression. Rabbi Shpilman is filled with a desire for
power and influence. A lifetime of expectation for the Messiah’s arrival becomes
profound disappointment, and leads him to allow for the murder of his own son. Each
color character needs to be saved from himself. Berko his troubled by the sins of his father and
needs to escape his past. Bina and Landsman’s relationship fell apart over guilt of an
aborted child. Chabon urges his readers to see that everyone is in need of a Messiah—
even Mendel himself, haunted by drug addiction, the pressure of living up to his
potential, and his father’s disapproval.

Mendel Shpilman’s Messiah-hood is not merely a narrative gimmick. Through
Landsman’s pursuit of Mendel’s murder Chabon illustrates the desire for deliverance in
an uncertain world that is out of your own control. Through the investigation of the
cynical Meyer Landsman Chabon suggests that Mendel was the Tzaddik, and though he
may have never realized his nature as the Messiah, his loss was a tragic step toward
assuring the moral destruction of the Sitka community. But Mendel’s power to heal, in
effect, does not stop at his death. Though he is unsure of his fate, Landsman has
reclaimed a bit of his faith. In The Yiddish Policemen’s Union, Chabon shows that
redemption is possible, with or without a Messiah. Unlike his other works, YPU stresses
that the underpinnings of religion are real and that belief is rational. Remarkably, he achieves all of this through a murder mystery that sacrifices none of the action required of the genre.
CHAPTER 7

Michael Chabon’s Adventures in Genre: The Final Solution and Gentlemen of the Road.

Between the young adult novel, Summerland, and the hard-boiled novel, The Yiddish Policemen’s Union, Michael Chabon published two novellas, the Sherlock Holmes mystery The Final Solution (2004) and the medieval adventure serial Gentlemen of the Road (2008). Both are further examples of Chabon’s indulging in writing the kind of literature that he grew up reading and loving. However, these two short novels are more than dalliances with Chabon’s favorite literary guilty pleasures. Each features characters who are displaced, required to adjust to their new reality. In Gentlemen, the two protagonists band together, living as thieves and mercenaries, but maintain a code based loosely on their shared Jewish ancestry. In The Final Solution, Holmes has left both London and his job as a consulting detective behind, but is thrust back by a new case involving a young German-Jewish boy. The boy is himself a stranger in a strange land, having escaped the Nazis to England; yet he speaks no English.

The concept of displacement is a common theme throughout Michael Chabon’s body of work. As we have seen, the fantasy novel, Summerland, takes three children to another world. Even The Mysteries of Pittsburgh’s Art Bechstein is a character who is out of place, struggling to come to terms with new environments, friends and himself. In the Yiddish Policemen’s Union and The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, Chabon shifts his focus from displacement with the assumption of a return to a comfortable and
familiar home, to studies in Diaspora. Both feature characters who have either been forcibly removed from their homes, or are about to be relocated. *Gentlemen* and *The Final Solution* continue in this tradition. Each of these novels features Jewish characters who are in Diaspora: In *Gentlemen*, Zelikman, a Frank living in the Middle East, longs for a country that is ruled by Jews, and the boy of *The Final Solution* who has been recently removed from his home by the Nazis.

With *Gentlemen of the Road* and *The Final Solution*, Chabon writes in two very different genres, each reviving an old literary form: the classical mystery in *The Final Solution*, and the weekly serial adventure in *Gentlemen*. However, in both novellas Chabon continues to examine this overall theme that has continued to develop throughout his career. And he does so by first following each genre’s conventions rather closely, but then deviating from those standards to underscore his overall contentions regarding the relative unknowability of human nature and the nature of contemporary Judaism in America.

As yet, little scholarly attention has been paid to *Gentlemen of the Road*. However, Andrew Hoberek sees the novel as emblematic of a larger challenge to the High/Low Culture dichotomy, by many contemporary authors. He argues that Chabon’s reimagining of the Khazar Empire is a metaphor for his view of adventure fiction in general, as a representative of his overall view that genre fictions have been unfairly dismissed and that “literary” fiction is simply another genre. Hoberek compares Chabon’s turn to genre fiction to a similar transition made by Robert Louis Stevenson. He notes that Stevenson, like Chabon, “counters a (here still nascent) prioritization of one kind of
novel with the leveling assertion that all novels evince traits of type, or as Stevenson says “class,” as well as individuality” (86).

Scholars have tended to look more closely at *The Final Solution* than *Gentlemen*, particularly as a novel about the Holocaust. In “Michael Chabon’s Manipulated Final Solution,” Julia Braun Kessler worries that because the Holocaust is scarcely mentioned, Chabon does not treat it with the proper respect, but rather as a cheap narrative device. However, Anna Richardson remarks that the novel is peppered with Holocaust symbols that the reader would recognize. She notes that the reader is “invited to construct his/her own narrative of the Holocaust and so complete the narrative arc of the text” (164). Interestingly, she suggests that the reader’s own knowledge of the Holocaust puts him or her at an advantage over Holmes, who is unaware of what is happening in the war.

In “Traumatic Mirrorings: Holocaust and Colonial Trauma in Michael Chabon’s *The Final Solution*” Stef Craps and Gert Buelens argue that the novel “belongs to the genre of postcolonial trauma narrative just as much…as it is a novelistic reflection on the Holocaust” (573). They note the colonial overtones of the novel; however, unlike Conan Doyle’s Holmes, the Holmes in Chabon’s novel does not hold up the British Empire as obviously superior to its German enemy and, therefore, deserving of reverence or protection” (576). Ultimately, they argue that the novel is a “complex, multilayered text that contextualizes the Holocaust within a broader history of European imperialism and colonialism, suggesting that the old order embodied by the Holmes figure—a modern icon and the epitome of rational thought—was itself inherently violent and generative of untold suffering” (583). They suggest that the novel breaks with the notion that the
Holocaust is an incomprehensible event. Theirs is a clever argument; however, Craps and Buelens often seem to eager to wedge the novel into a theory that the text does not support. Rather, their analysis puts too much stake in events peripheral to the story, such as guessing at Bruno the Parrot’s life before the action of the novel, and overlooking the fact that this is a novel about Sherlock Holmes.

It is the revelations of Holmes’ character, and the adaptations Chabon makes to the genre established by Arthur Conan Doyle, that are most important to understanding Chabon’s point. It is apparent that Holmes’ realization of the realities of the Holocaust forces him to admit that his understanding of human behavior, through which he solved so many crimes, is fundamentally flawed.

7.1 The Sherlockian

Directly preceding his hard-boiled novel, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Chabon published the short novel, *The Final Solution*. While both are detective novels, each of these stories stakes a claim to two distinctive styles within the larger “mystery” genre. Whereas *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is a novel in the spirit of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, *The Final Solution* is a “classic” mystery story, in the tradition of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Arthur Conan Doyle, and features Sherlock Holmes as its protagonist. Interestingly, Chabon’s two detective stories represent major developments in the genre’s evolution, beginning with the aristocratic, logic-based deductive approach invented by Edgar Allan Poe and perfected by Conan Doyle, that defined the “Golden Age” of detective fiction and evolving into the rough and
often seedy hard-boiled style that became popularized in the second half of the twentieth century.¹

While both involve a crime, a detective, and a sequential accumulation of clues, and ending with the solving of the mystery and exposure of the criminal, there are several important distinctions between the classical mystery and the hard-boiled novel. The former centers on a cerebral detective, whose intelligence and superior observation set him apart from his contemporaries, whereas the latter detective is more reliant on tough-minded determination and street knowledge than intelligence.²

*The Final Solution*’s title, first and foremost evokes the Nazi plan for Jewish extermination, but also harkens to Conan Doyle’s first attempt to kill off Holmes, “The Final Problem,” in which Holmes and his arch-nemesis, Professor Moriarty, tumble off the Reichenbach Falls. Throughout the novella, Chabon nods to important characters and events developed over the course of the four novels and fifty-six short stories that make up the Holmsian canon.

¹ These two approaches also mark a difference in the British style, which specializes in the classical mystery, and the American style, popularizing hardboiled stories.

² This type of detective is again popular, particularly on television, with shows like *Monk*, *Psyche*, and, notably, Steven Moffatt’s Holmes-in-the-twenty-first-century adaptation, *Sherlock*. Each of these shows feature a quirky investigator who is not himself a police officer, but who has such rare abilities that he is called in when the police are particularly stumped.
Chabon’s Sherlock Holmes is an old man, no longer living in London, and retired
to a life of quiet beekeeping, which is in keeping with Conan Doyle’s Holmes. Conan
Doyle begins his penultimate Holmes collection, *His Last Bow,* with a short preface by
Holmes’s companion and chronicler, Dr. John Watson:

The friends of Mr. Sherlock Holmes will be glad to learn that he is still
alive and well, though somewhat crippled by occasional attacks of
rheumatism. He has, for many years, lived in a small farm upon the downs
five miles from Eastbourne, where his time is divided between philosophy
and agriculture. During this period of rest he has refused the most princely
offers to take up various cases, having determined that his retirement was
a permanent one. (293)

Here Watson remarks that Holmes has since moved out of London, implying that Watson
does not see him as much as he had in the past. Chabon takes this as his chance to tell a
“non-canonical” Holmes story set in this country home.³

The novel follows Holmes who is dragged into the case after a long absence from
detective work. He discovers that the young, mute, Jewish boy living in a local rooming
house, has had his pet parrot stolen. The parrot, a gifted mimic, is remarkable for its

³ This, ironically, would be neither Sherlock Holmes’ “last bow,” in fact, nor would “The
Final Problem” turn out to be his final problem. The extraordinary popularity of the
character, coupled with Conan Doyle’s need for money, kept him writing Holmes stories
long after he had tired of the character. Though many fans, Chabon (and this author)
included, would argue that was to all of our benefit.
penchant for rattling off a series of numbers in German, numbers which the rooming house guests pay close attention. As the mystery unfolds, Reggie Panicker, the son of the rooming house owners, is accused of murdering the suspected parrot thief (which Holmes learns is untrue). Holmes discovers the reason for the widespread interest in the parrot, and, in the end, the true murderer and kidnapper are found. And all of this is discovered with the Holmesian flair for noticing small, overlooked details and discerning their significance.

Chabon is coy about his subject. He never overtly identifies the old man as Sherlock Holmes. Instead, he relies upon offhand descriptions that hark to Holmes’ most unique and identifiable qualities such as, “he had once made his fortune and his reputation through a long and brilliant series of extrapolations from unlikely groupings of fact” (2). He similarly hints at Watson and their close relationship, describing his magnifying glass as “brass and tortoise shell, and bore around its bezel an affectionate inscription from the sole great friend of his life” (29). Chabon writes: “[Inspector Bellows] had heard tales, the legends, the wild, famous leaps of induction pulled off by the old man in his heyday, assassins inferred from cigar ash, horse thieves from the absence of a watchdog’s bark” (25). Here Chabon recalls one of Conan Doyle’s most interesting innovations, which is Watson’s publication of Holmes’ exploits. Chabon’s incorporation of all of these narrative approaches recognizes Holmes’ cultural ubiquity and has the added effect of treating his audience as insiders who need only a wink and a nod to identify the shared knowledge.
The Final Solution adheres closely to the conventions of the “cozy” mystery. The setting is a small town in Northern England, and often, a rooming house. The suspects are restricted to those who reside there, and the narrative moves forward purely on the strength of Holmes’ deductions. Chabon is careful to lay out the clues. The boy never speaks. His only form of communication is writing; he is prone to both misspellings and inverted spelling, suggesting dyslexia. Chabon uses these clues as misdirection when the boy identifies “BLAK” as the man who stole his bird, leading them to the London shop of a shady trader named Black, who advertises “Birds Rare and Exotic.” Holmes, though, recognizes that the boy means Kalb, the boy’s advocate. Through the detective’s uncommon abilities, the mystery is solved and the boy is reunited with his parrot. The reader is informed of the reasons behind the theft of the parrot—the Allies believed the numbers to be related to Nazi codes, though Chabon never reveals what they mean—and the world is set right. The criminal is arrested, and the victims can return to their normal lives being little worse for wear.

As the mystery unfolds Holmes is prompted to return to London, after his years-long absence. When he does, he sees a resilient city in the throes of great change, showing the scars of the war. Holmes repeatedly says, “‘That’s new’” and “‘That was not here’” to his travelling companion, Mr. Panicker. Chabon writes:

His voice, as they plunged deeper into the changes wrought in London by construction crews and German bombs since that Sunday afternoon in 1921 [when Holmes had last set foot in the city], fell to a harsh, appalled whisper…And now here he was confronted by not simply the continued
existence [sic] of the city but, amid the smoking piles of brick and jagged windowpanes, by the irrepressible, inhuman force of its expansion. (101) Holmes understands that the city will never be as he knew it, and the former expertise that he showed throughout his career, and contributed so greatly to his unique talents as a detective, is gone with it. Sherlock Holmes, a man identified with Victorian London, is overwhelmed by the city a few decades later. This suggests that not only has the structure and aesthetics of the city changed, but the social fabric as well, and also hints at Chabon’s further experimentation with the genre.

He ends his Sherlock Holmes novel with a jarring twist, breaking from the traditional Holmsian story structure. In so doing, he does more than write a classic mystery story, or emulate a childhood idol. Instead, Chabon adapts the genre in order to address post-World War II themes. Remarkably, Chabon ends the novel with an unanswered question. The title therefore emphasizes, that not all questions have been answered, nor all puzzles completed.

In Talking About Detective Fiction (2009), P.D. James establishes the fundamental differences between “detective” fiction and other works that may also contain crime, mystery, or other elements of the genre. She states that what we can expect is a central mysterious crime, usually a murder; a closed circle of suspects, each with motive, means and opportunity for the crime; a detective, either amateur or professional, who comes in like an avenging deity to solve it; and, by the end of the book, a solution which the reader
should be able to arrive at by logical deduction from the clues inserted in
the novel with deceptive cunning but essential fairness. (9)

She goes on to admit that this definition might be too restrictive, and is more
representative of the period she refers to as the “Golden Age between the wars.”

However, the genre conventions James illustrates are the ones used by the likes of Conan
Doyle, Christie and Sayers. This is the type of mystery story that influenced Chabon in
*The Final Solution*.

Poe’s 1841 story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” introduced the literary world
to Chevalier August Dupin, the Parisian detective whose powers of observation and
creative thinking, what Poe termed “ratiocination,” set him apart from others as the
detective par excellence. Dupin appears in two other stories, “The Mystery of Marie
Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). Poe’s three tales established many of
the tropes common to the classical detective story, also called the “cozy” mystery. Best
seen in the works of the aforementioned authors, “cozy” mysteries

frequently involve a close, intimate community—a family, a small town, a
university. The character of the detective is central to the story’s

unfolding, and the book’s appeal to readers. In these stories, the detective

uses close observation and rational deduction to explain how a crime was

committed, identifies the single individual responsible for it, and

ultimately restores social order by expelling that individual from the

community. (Smith 137)
Crucial in this approach is the revelation of important clues, giving readers the opportunity to solve the puzzle along with, or before, the detective. In fact, the London Detection Club, a group of writers of detective fiction, created guiding principles, in 1928, which “included such guidelines as not withholding clues from readers; avoiding reliance on coincidence, intuition, and hunches rather than reason; and minimizing use of suspect devices like evil twins, conspiracies, and lunatics” (Smith 138). This was all intended to challenge as much as entertain the reader.

While not the first protagonist of the classical mystery, Sherlock Holmes set the standards of the genre. In Mystery and its Fictions (1979), David I. Grossvogel remarks, “Whatever vicissitudes may have affected the recognition of Poe, the English-speaking world has not been inclined to grudge him the paternity of the detective story” (93). While Chabon acknowledges that Poe’s trio of short stories laid the foundation for the classical mystery, he writes, “with all due respect to Poe and Chevalier Dupin, Conan Doyle invented [the classical detective story]” (34). He makes this claim suggesting that it was Conan Doyle who took the kernel of an idea that Poe presented and made it a work of art.

Despite Conan Doyle’s debt to Poe’s Dupin, Sherlock Holmes is based on a physician that Conan Doyle knew when he was a medical student at the University of Edinburgh, Dr. Joseph Bell. Before devoting himself to writing, Conan Doyle worked as a physician, much like Dr. Watson, the narrator of the Holmes stories. Chabon writes of Dr. Bell, “His favorite trick…was to diagnose patients in the waiting room of the infirmary without even speaking to them or directly examining them” (30). Dr. Bell’s
explanations as to how he came to his conclusions sounded remarkably similar to what would become Holmes’s trademark: a long list of minute observations that when taken individually would mean very little, but when taken together paint a clear picture of the individual and his or her life.

In addition to being a work of genre fiction, *The Final Solution* is also fan fiction. One of the more compelling essays in *Maps & Legends*, “Fan Fictions,” is as much homage to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the writer, as it is to Sherlock Holmes, the character. Similarly, we can view *The Final Solution* as being, on one level, a reverent nod to this character who first sparked his imagination. Chabon highlights the literary innovations of Conan Doyle, focusing on his merits as a storyteller. This is an important look into Chabon’s overall argument regarding the value of various forms of genre fiction: telling the story is paramount.

Chabon’s protagonist in *The Final Solution* is Sherlock Holmes, unquestionably *the* iconic literary detective. Chabon recalls that Conan Doyle was “the first writer that I really fell in love with.” He adds, “the first story that I ever wrote was a Sherlock Holmes story” (Inskeep). He goes on to say that it seemed natural for him to go back, as an established author, and revisit those old Sherlock Holmes tales.

Though many modern detective stories leave readers and detectives alike with lingering questions, such an ending is atypical of the classical mystery. In *The Final Solution*, Holmes admits, “I doubt very much…if we shall ever learn what significance, if any, those numbers may hold” (129). He goes on to say, “The application of creative intelligence to a problem, the finding of a solution at once dogged, elegant, and wild, this
had always seemed to him to be the essential business of human beings—the discovery of sense and causality amid the false leads, the noise, the trackless brambles of life” (129).

While consistently following the structure of the classical mystery throughout the novel, and solving the central puzzle to the reader’s satisfaction, Chabon expands the scope at the end, suggesting that such quaint tales of lost jewels and the troubles of the English nobility are no longer issues of great importance in the post-War era. Though he finds the parrot, Holmes is not able to give his final synopsis of the crime, wherein he recounts the motives and actions from the beginning to the criminal’s apprehension. By extension, murder is not easily explained as the extraordinary act of a single person with a clear motive, but is both senseless and common.

This brings to mind Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). She describes the disbelief of judges and psychiatrists alike to the latters’ findings that Eichmann was not in any way insane, observing that they “did not believe him, because they were too good, and perhaps also too conscious of the very foundations of their profession, to admit that an average, ‘normal’ person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong” (26). In the wake of the Holocaust, murder can no longer be seen as “singular” (to use Watson’s favorite descriptor) but rather as a “routine” occurrence perpetrated by ordinary people. Holmes realizes that he cannot restore the sense of natural stability because World War II, the Nazi party, and the Holocaust, have inalterably changed the way one understands human nature.
Arendt is echoed by Hayden White, in his book *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), who writes about the decline of history as a science, stating that while historians often stake a claim to objectivity, theirs is as much an interpretive field as a scientific one. Historians present a series of facts and construct a narrative to explain those events in a rational, orderly, and almost novelistic way. This, according to White, undercuts the historian’s claim to neutrality because he or she is inevitably fitting these facts to fit a rationally understandable world. He argues that history can be particularly ill suited for explaining catastrophic events. Referring to historians of World War I he writes, “When they did not merely parrot the current slogans of the governments regarding the criminal intent of the enemy, historians tended to fall back on the view that no one had really wanted the war at all; it had ‘just happened’” (36).

In *A Study In Scarlet*, Watson observes, “His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing” (11). Holmes responds that he views the brain as “‘a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose…It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones’” (11-12). In short, whatever does not directly relate to his catching of criminals is unimportant. Though certainly not a renaissance man in the classic sense—he is, however, a virtuoso violinist—Sherlock Holmes is in many ways the ultimate expression of enlightenment thinking: that through reason alone one can come to a complete understanding of the world. He learns as much about science and human nature as he can to better comprehend the world in which he lives.
However, having witnessed to the devastation of World War II, Chabon’s Holmes realizes the folly of that thought. Though he does not seem to embrace a traditional theology, he does begin to come to terms with a world beyond rational comprehension. Much like Job, Holmes is forced to reject the idea of knowing God or His plans, but accepts that the world will continue to contain unsolved, perhaps unsolvable, mysteries. By putting the realization that the world is unexplainable into the mind of Sherlock Holmes, Chabon stresses the universality of the claim.

Chabon argues that the “prevailing view of the Holmes stories as neat little allegories of Victorian positivism is belied by the concluding lines of ‘The Cardboard Box’” (“Fan” 39). He then quotes at length a final, much overlooked, monologue of Holmes in which he questions the motivations of criminals and killers. Holmes asks, “What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to what human reason is as far from an answer as ever” (340). Conan Doyle’s Holmes, toward the end of his career—this story appears in His Last Bow—begins to question why criminals are driven to crime, why they are driven to commit violent acts against others. For many, the thought of an unpredictable world is a reasonable conclusion.

However, in the world Doyle has created, Holmes has built his career and his conception of humanity by believing that everything can be understood. In The Sign of Four, Conan Doyle’s second Sherlock Holmes novel, Holmes remarks to Watson, while criticizing Watson’s overly romanticized recollection of a case, “The only point in the
case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes, by which I succeeded in unraveling it” (109). According to Holmes, human nature is as predictable as the seasons, and there is a discernable and explainable cause for every action. For Holmes, a chaotic world is an earth shattering realization.

The change in Holmes’s perception of mankind and its relative understandability, between the *Sign of Four* and “The Cardboard Box,” can be, at least partly, viewed in terms of historical events. Published in 1917, near the end of the First World War, it is unsurprising that Conan Doyle looked at unprecedented slaughter and questioned the motivations of humankind. Chabon notes the post-WWI shift in Holmes’s thinking and suggests that the devastation and inhumanity wrought by World War II, just twenty-one years after the First World War, must bring a similar reassessment. Chabon’s Holmes questions whether his own faith in logic and a purely scientific worldview has any value in a world gone more insane. By creating a mystery around a single, displaced and traumatized Jewish boy who finds himself, accidentally, in the middle of the conflict between the Axis and Allies, Chabon cleverly distills much of the confusion of a post-war understanding of human behavior into the small, enclosed community of the classical mystery.

In the case of *The Final Solution*, Chabon’s deliberate use of the “classical” mystery genre makes his ambiguous ending significant. The social order has been upended by war, and the Holocaust has made murder seem commonplace. The severity of this social cataclysm is such that even Sherlock Holmes is forced to reexamine his own belief in the salvation of logic and deduction. In effect, Holmes begins to view the world
less like the classical, cerebral detective who understands crime to be an aberration, and more like a hard-boiled detective like Philip Marlowe. As Rzepka notes, the world of hard-boiled fiction is “polluted by self-interest and full of challenges and snares, in which no one is to be trusted and all must be tested” (180). This is very much the London that Holmes encounters in Chabon’s novel, a city devastated “amid smoking piles of brick and jagged windowpanes” (*Final 101*). And the young boy’s advocate is the criminal.

One of the most iconic elements of the Sherlock Holmes canon is the voice of Dr. John Watson, the narrator of all the stories. Chabon remarks upon the ingenuity of this technique, pointing out that most of the stories begin with a person recounting what has happened to him or her to Holmes and Watson, and end with Holmes explaining all of the previously hidden elements that he has uncovered. With this method, “Conan Doyle…invented a way to tell stories about the construction of stories without the traditional recourse to digression, indirection, or the overly self-referential” (*Maps 37*).

Conan Doyle added a metafictional element to the stories, wherein he draws specific attention to the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson as the writer of those stories for popular consumption. Watson, within the context of the fictional world Conan Doyle has created, publishes his accounts of his adventures with Holmes, and Holmes comments—often derisively—on those narratives. Commenting on Watson’s ostensible publication of the first Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, he tells him, “‘I glanced over it…Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it’” (*Sign 108*).

With this clever nod to Watson’s published accounts, which are also Conan Doyle’s, Chabon argues that Conan Doyle uses this device as a sort of self-deprecating
humor, slyly ribbing himself and his creation. He also suggests that “Watson’s repeated insistence on his own active part in the stories’ finding their way into the hands of the reader—fully half begin with some kind of recognition of their own published status—encourages us to confuse the two doctors, Watson and Conan Doyle, who seem physically and even in their appetites to resemble each other” (“Fan” 40). The significance lies in Conan Doyle’s merging of fact and fiction, which leads directly into the voice of the narration itself. As Chabon points out, this blend has also led fans, presumably under the impression that Sherlock Holmes was a living person, to write him fan mail, addressed to 221B Baker Street.

Conan Doyle’s style (and by extension that of John Watson) is so recognizable that the first hurdle the author of Holmes fan fiction needs to leap is accounting for the lack that iconic narrative voice. A second potential problem is how to place a new story within the well-known Holmes canon. Authors of Holmes fan fiction have approached this problem in several ways. Nicholas Meyer, in his popular novel about a “recently uncovered” Holmes adventure, _The Seven-Per-Cent Solution_ (1974), opted to tell the story through the pen of Watson. However, in the “Introductory” of the volume, ostensibly written by Dr. Watson, he adds an explanatory caveat, explaining the shift in narrative voice. He remarks that this story is written ten years after Sherlock Holmes’ death and that he waited so long because “there was another party in the case,” and that keeping their affiliation private prevented Watson from publishing the story (xv).⁵ He

⁵ In this case, the third party was Sigmund Freud who, according to the novel, Watson engaged to help Holmes overcome his cocaine addiction. Interestingly, Meyer attempts to
adds, “my style may appear dissimilar to that of my earlier writing because this adventure of Sherlock Holmes is totally unlike any that I have ever recorded” (xvii). Meyer hereby is able to mimic Conan Doyle’s literary approach, while being free to tell the story, more or less, as he wishes. Meyer also frees himself to write a novel that might not naturally fit in with the rest of the Sherlock Holmes canon, because he establishes at the beginning that it was suppressed for its controversial subject matter.

Chabon takes a different approach to the problem of the authenticity of the narrative voice. In setting the novel late in Holmes’ retirement, presumably after the principle characters of the original stories are long dead, Chabon tells the story from the third person, omniscient perspective. This allows him to do things that Conan Doyle does not: get into the heads of those who encounter Holmes and his amazing deductive gifts for the first time (apart from Watson himself). More importantly, he opens a window into Holmes’ private thoughts. Because the stories, as written by Conan Doyle and others, are told through the eyes of Watson, each of these points of view are impossible to know.

account for the relative strangeness of “The Final Problem” (wherein Holmes and his arch enemy, Professor Moriarty, die, falling off Reichenbach Falls) suggesting that that story was a fabrication meant to cover up the events told in The Seven-Per-Cent Solution and Holmes’ subsequent absence from the public eye. A second interesting addition Meyer makes to the Holmes canon is the revelation that Professor Moriarty was not, in reality, a criminal mastermind. Rather, he is Holmes’ math teacher who a drug-addled Holmes comes to believe is his arch nemesis.
Chabon takes “new perspectives” to an extreme as the penultimate chapter is told from the perspective of Bruno, the stolen parrot, as he is trapped in a closet.

Chabon’s most radical modification is tracing the thoughts of Holmes himself. Conan Doyle’s Watson can only recount the words spoken aloud by Holmes. Chabon describes Holmes’ deductive process: “A delicate, inexorable lattice of inferences began to assemble themselves, like a crystal, in the old man’s mind, shivering, catching the light in glints and surmises. It was the deepest pleasure his life could afford, this deductive crystallization, this paroxysm of guesswork...” (61). Chabon suggests that it is the finding of order amidst chaos, of proving his intellectual prowess, that drives Holmes. In effect, Chabon opens a window, though a small one, into Holmes’ own thought process, something upon which Watson and Conan Doyle can only speculate. In so doing, he is able to give a new perspective to one of the most well known characters in all of literature.

Less radical, but no less interesting, is Chabon’s exploration of the reactions of those who witness Holmes’s famous leaps of logic. When Holmes first speaks with Inspector Quint, whose grandfather worked with Holmes in his early days in London, Quint is shocked by Holmes’s ability to read him. Quint thinks, “He had read the trend of the inspector’s thoughts; no, that was impossible, too. Read his face [sic], then; the cant of his shoulders” (23).

Chabon, again, allows his readers a view into that world. In each case, predictably, those characters are dumbfounded, given Holmes’ ability to see through their deceptions. With these perspectives Chabon pulls off a trick similar to the blurring of the
fact/fiction line by Conan Doyle. Chabon, however, takes the point of view of the fan, someone who is familiar with Holmes but who remains amazed by his powers. The novel can therefore be seen as fan fiction in two ways: first, as one written by a Sherlock Holmes fan; second, as fiction from the perspective of the fan.

Yet, simply remarking that *The Final Solution* is fan fiction does not take away from the larger social issues addressed. Through this novel Chabon highlights the people who were displaced by the events surrounding the Second World War, as well as the psychological damage done. Chabon asserts that “all literature, highbrow or low, from the *Aeneid* onward, is fan fiction” (44). He goes on to say that through parody and pastiche, allusion and homage, retelling and reimagining the stories that were told before us and that we have come of age loving—amateurs—we proceed, seeking out the blank places in the map that our favorite writers, in their greatness and negligence, have left for us, hoping to pass on to our own readers—should we be lucky enough to find any—some of the pleasure that we ourselves have taken in the stuff we love: to get in the game. All novels are sequels; influence is bliss. (45).

In short, no writer comes of age in a vacuum, and that all literature is, in many ways, the result of the whole reading history of its author.

In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom also argues that writers often appropriate the work of those who came before them. However, he writes that “self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness” (5). Bloom suggests that poets cannot read poetry in the same way, or as well, as critics can; therefore, much
poetic influence on later poets is based upon a misreading, or revisionism. This accounts for the evolution of poetry, as through these misreadings new authors create space for their own work. This is a dubious claim that essentially removes intention from the writer and suggests that contemporary writers are merely poor imitators. There is no question that writers and artists of all media build upon the work they admire. But *The Final Solution* shows Chabon to be openly emulating Conan Doyle, and also to be purposefully straying from the genre conventions, not misunderstanding Conan Doyle’s approach. Despite its shortcomings, with *The Final Solution*, Chabon takes a long way toward proving that genre—and fan fiction—can take a serious look at the world while maintaining largely an adherence, to the conventions set forth by the genre.

7.2 “Jews With Swords”

Chabon’s second short novel, *Gentlemen of the Road*, further explores various storytelling devices. Originally published serially in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2007, and later collected into a single volume, the novel is first and foremost an adventure filled with swordplay, fantastic settings, thieves, royal usurpers, and, notably for Chabon’s thematic interests, Jewish protagonists. *Gentlemen of the Road* combines elements of epic travel narratives and swashbuckling action, while examining issues of religious faith, Diaspora, and the value of multiculturalism. As is the case with *The Final Solution* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Chabon addresses these issues without sacrificing the story or slowing down the narrative action.

Published in serial installments, with *Gentlemen*, Chabon returns to a style of publication that has been largely abandoned. Charles Dickens famously printed many of
his novels in magazines, as did Arthur Conan Doyle with his four Sherlock Holmes novels. This gives the author the added challenge of balancing each chapter, both in length and, most importantly, in reader interest so that said reader will look forward to the next installment a week or more later.

*Gentlemen of the Road* is a picaresque novel that follows Zelikman and Amram, two “gentlemen of the road,” a kinder euphemism for “road agent,” or “travelling thief,” or “hired sword,” as they, reluctantly, embark on a quest help young prince Filaq oust the usurper, Buljan (likely a play on the Khazar king Bulan). (It is revealed late in the novel that Filaq is not a prince, but a princess. Because throughout most of the novel the character is referred to as “he,” I will do the same throughout this chapter, for the sake of simplicity.) The novel is set in the medieval Khazar Empire, what is modern Iran (known in the novel as the Kingdom of Arran) and the southern Caucasus; the setting is a crossroads for peoples of all religions and cultures. Notably, it is a place occupied by both Jews and Muslims, with Christians to the west and north. Zelikman and Amram are both Jews and are both displaced. Zelikman is Frankish and Amram is an African who “called himself a Jew” (17). In each case, their Judaism sets them apart in their homeland, and despite the many Jews in the Empire, that separateness lingers.

Chabon introduces the characters engaging in an elaborate ruse, staging an argument and fight, in hopes of winning a gambling stake. Their physical appearances are depicted as polar opposites, Zelikman: white, blonde, and lanky, often described as resembling a scarecrow, and Amram: black, tall, and muscular. Similarly, they come from two very different places, Zelikman from the Frankish Kingdom and Amram from
Africa. The world of *Gentlemen* highlights the cultural diversity of the residents of the Empire, and an ideal that Chabon seems to be pursuing, throughout his body of work. Like Mendele Mocher Seforim’s quixotic hero in his short novel, *The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third* (1885), who steps out of his small town with his trusty sidekick, Senderel, in search of adventure in the wider world, Chabon’s two protagonists travel to increasingly exotic locations. More interestingly, Benjamin, who is searching and at times mistaken for the Red Jews (lost tribes), Zelikman and Amram, highlight the variety of the world’s Jewish people.

Zelikman and Amram soon are paid to return Filaq to his family in Atil, the Empire’s capital. The adventure takes them through the Khazar Empire, encountering marauding bands of northerners known as the Rus, fighting Buljan’s armies, evading gruesome execution, and meeting the kagan, a recluse by tradition, and the supreme authority in the land who boasts both religious and political power. Eventually, as one might expect, Buljan is deposed; Filaq is made both the new bek (the equivalent of the king) and kagan (which is the religious authority above the bek, and an office that is essentially done away with), and Zelikman and Amram hit the road again, the world having been set right.

In the afterword to novel, Chabon says, “The original, working—and in my heart the true—title…was Jews with Swords” (197). He goes on to admit that the words “Jews” combined with “swords” “clangs with anachronism, with humorous incongruity” (197). Yet, as he points out, most people do not think of Jews in certain roles, particularly hyper-masculine, men-of-action. He says that
Jewish soldiers fought in the blade-era battles of Austerlitz and Gettysburg; notoriously, Jewish boys were stolen from their families and conscripted into the czarist armies of nineteenth-century Russia. Any of those fighting men, or any Jews who served in the armed forces, particularly in the cavalry units, of the homelands prior to the end of WWI might have qualified, I suppose, as Jews with swords. (197-8)

It would similarly stand to reason that in a region with a high Jewish population, such as the medieval Khazar Empire, Jews would occupy all walks of life, including swordsmen and thieves. In this case, the novel is a sort of reclamation project. Chabon’s Jewish swordsmen directly challenge the stereotype that Jews are weak or cowardly. He shows them to be quite the opposite, and more akin to the biblical heroes that have become ubiquitous in western culture.

In *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (1997), Daniel Boyarin argues that the feminized Jewish man is “a mere canard of antisemites [sic]” (81). Instead he asserts that unlike in Christian cultures, Jewish manhood is multifaceted and not based solely in opposition to the feminine. Therefore, the scholarly “feminized” men are not demasculated when compared to the “men-of-action.” Boyarin goes on to show that many Jewish men are both. In making his case he contrasts Freud and Theodor Herzl, comparing the feminizing of psychoanalysis, and Freud’s own concerns over his own masculinity, with the Zionism of Herzl. Boyarin writes, “The dominant male of Europe, the ‘Aryan’ is the one who is already ‘physically strong and active, the head of the family, dominant in the public world of politics at home
and abroad’ and thus not queer, so an assimilation that would lend the male Jew these characteristics would accomplish the same heterosexualizing project as Zionism” (231). He stresses that regardless of whether one is scholarly or physically active, in Jewish cultures neither is considered less “manly.”

The various depictions of Jewish manhood is a common theme throughout Chabon’s work. In many cases he stresses the idea of the Jewish tough guy beginning with the gangster, Joe Bechstein, in The Mysteries of Pittsburgh, through Meyer Landsman in The Yiddish Policemen’s Union. Chabon, of course, is not alone in portraying these types of Jewish characters. Isaac Babel’s Benya Krik, of his “Odessa Stories,” is also a Jewish gangster, as is the historical Dutch Schultz, born Arthur Flegenheimer) who is the protagonist of E. L. Doctorow’s novel, Billy Bathgate (1989).

In Zelikman Chabon has created a character that fits between both depictions of Jewish manhood. He is a warrior and a scholar. He is a trained doctor and whose his weapon of choice is a long needle allowing him to cause less pain, which is a somewhat dark and ironic notion to be sure, though because of his background as a physician, we see Zelikman healing as often as causing physical harm.

Chabon did not invent the Khazar Empire of Gentlemen out of whole cloth. It is based upon an historical medieval empire, located in the Caucuses. The Khazar Empire grew out of a nomadic Turkic tribe, called the Khazars who settled near the Caspian Sea. Living in a land dominated by Islam and Christianity, the leaders of the tribe eventually converted to Judaism. According to Eric Maroney, in The Other Zionists (2010), “The region they conquered was most likely home to Muslims, Christians, Jews, and native
pagans,” and the multi-ethnic population of the kingdom was emphasized in letters from the various rulers (53).

Even more telling, Chabon points to the most ubiquitous compilation of Jewish adventure stories: the Bible. Referring to Jewish history as “a five-thousand-year Odyssey,” he observes, “The story of the Jews centers around—one might almost say that it stars [sic]—the hazards and accidents, the misfortunes and disasters, the feats of inspiration, the travail and despair, and intermittent moments of glory and grace, that entail upon journeys from home and back again” (203). It is therefore a more modern cultural quirk that Jews are not seen as great warriors despite the prevalence of Jewish fighters and conquerors such as David, Samson, and Joshua in prominently Judeo-Christian western culture.

Yet Chabon’s “Jews with Swords” is more than a novelty act. He uses this basic premise to further several ideas that he has been exploring throughout his body of work. As we have seen in his previous novels, Chabon is particularly concerned with the nature of Jewishness, whether it can be viewed in a cultural sense or whether it is purely a matter of religious belief. In Gentlemen of the Road, both Zelikman and Amram, while identifying as Jews, are fiercely secular. However, despite their rejection of the spiritual side of Judaism, Chabon shows them, particularly the cynical Zelikman, to be moral men who remain observant of certain practices. Their embrace of a secular Judaism suggests a conception of Jewishness that is based more on a shared cultural history than one that is purely based on a shared belief system. Though the traditions and laws come directly from the Bible, the idea of a cultural Judaism questions whether the Bible is divinely
inspired. Instead, the Bible is seen as the central piece of Jewish literature and culture. Additionally, through these characters, Chabon underscores the notion that Jewishness is an individual conception, not a rigid structure to which each Jew must conform.

As with several of his other novels, Chabon’s two Jewish road agents represent a more open, cultural Jewishness. He argues that there are many variations of belief and practice and none of those variations “represents a deviation from the norm” (71). Rather, there many differing interpretations of Judaism, many of which are as “correct” as another. Chabon’s two protagonists represent two different conceptions of Jewishness, though neither is seen any more or less Jewish than the other, nor any more or less “correct” in his understanding of his own Jewishness.

Zelikman, of all of the characters in the novel, is the most outspokenly dismissive of blind faith, and God in general. When Filaq admits that he wants to see Buljan suffer greatly before he dies, Zelikman responds, “‘You and God have a great deal in common’” (36). He is later described as a man “who honored the commandments in nearly the same measure as he despised them” (57). Zelikman describes himself, somewhat hyperbolically, saying, “‘I am a gentleman of the road, an apostate from the faith of my fathers, a renegade, a brigand, a hired blade, a thief’” (119-20).

His animosity toward religion contradicts his strict adherence to the commandments. While his lack of religious zeal is obvious, there is no implication that he is somehow less Jewish than believers. Zelikman seems to see the commandments as general, culturally derived rules for living. It is their ascription to a higher power that he rejects. The possible source for the name “Zelikman,” Seligman, meaning “Blessed,”
hints at the notion that despite his rejection of faith, Zelikman is a strong example of the spirit of Jewishness.

Amram provides a related but slightly differing approach to the same problem. He is of African descent, though also identifies himself as a Jew, “a son from the line of the Queen of Sheba when she lay…with Solomon, David’s son” (17). This short genealogy echoes the long pedigrees of the Hebrew Bible, connecting its greatest heroes to each other, and back to the beginning of the human race. Recall that David himself is shown to be the great-grandchild of Ruth who is notable for being a Moabite who married into a Jewish family. This is particularly useful in the case made by Chabon in that Ruth’s non-Jewishness biblically underscores a broader, more inclusive definition of Jewishness. It also recalls the wide dispersal of people over generations.

Tellingly, though the majority of characters in Gentlemen are self-described as Jewish, they are all radically different in terms of origin and their conception of Jewishness. This emphasizes what David Biale, in Cultures of the Jews (2002), terms “the most defining characteristic of modern Jewish culture [which] is precisely the question of how [sic] to define it” (726). He goes on to note, “During all periods and in all places before the modern, Jewish culture was, almost by definition, the culture produced by the Jews. Not so in modernity. Just because many Jews participated in creating modern physics does not make that science ‘Jewish’” (726). Biale observes, “It is only in the modern period that this very question arises, because only in modernity has it been possible for Jews to contribute to the majority cultures in which they live without their Jewish identities playing an explicit role in their doing so” (726). This, suggestion
overlooks the tremendous influence that Hebrew Scriptures have had on the formation of most Western civilizations. Nevertheless, it is the reality described by Biale that Chabon reflects in *Gentlemen of the Road*. Though, not only are the Jews in the novel contributing to majority cultures, they are the majority.

In his book, *Secular Judaism* (2004), Yaakov Malkin asserts that the “defining qualities of Jews are their common national history and their capacity to embrace divergent and contradictory beliefs” (8). Mordecai Kaplan, in *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934) writes, that Reform Jews see Biblical law, not as rules created and communicated by the divine, but as unimpeachable ethical principles. Therefore, “Through its ethics, no less than through its conceptions of God, Judaism has its unique contribution to make” (105). In this light it is therefore easy to see how Zelikman can be both hostile to, yet careful to uphold, the commandments without sacrificing his own sense of his Jewishness. He views the commandments as an important cultural relic, but decries their being ascribed to an intelligent higher power. We can likewise see how Amram, despite his African roots, can recognize his Jewishness through a common history, which he traces to Solomon, specifically, and by extension all the way down the biblical family tree to Abraham. Likewise, the novel stresses the value of such openness.

Kaplan suggests that Jewishness is more than adherence to religious faith. He argues that most often Jewish otherness (which he describes as “difference in entity”) is conceptualized through religion because it is the faith that is the most obviously different. However, he writes, “the truth of the matter is that what is at stake in our day is the very maintenance of Jewish life as a distinct social entity” (177). Ultimately he suggests,
“Judaism...includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organizations, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization [sic]” (178). While these terms are vague, they speak broadly to the basic building blocks of culture.

Biale echoes Kaplan suggesting, “Jewish culture on all levels—literary, religious, and popular—is culture grounded in Jewish sources” (726). Acknowledging that “Jewish sources” is a rather nebulous term, he offers that “Jewish culture in the modern age is that which expresses the modern Jewish experience, frequently drawing the raw materials for such expressions from the historical tradition, either directly or by inversion” (727). Admittedly, Biale’s description is circular and imprecise. Such ambiguity reflects the wide range of interpretations of Jewishness that are taken into account when trying to describe modern Judaism. In this reckoning, while the culture of Jewishness may derive from the religion, belief in the divine is neither necessary, nor even the most important definer of one’s Jewishness. Instead, they suggest that the combined acceptance and adherence to a variety of social, cultural, and ethical values and traditions differentiates Jews from non-Jews. Biale’s imperfect definition of Jewish culture attempts to include all variations of Jewish religious interpretation as well as irreligious Jews who still identify themselves as Jewish.

This begs the question of how does this relate to Gentlemen of the Road. It is this broad definition of Jewishness that Chabon’s characters symbolize. Though they do not all share a belief in the Jewish faith, they are all adherents to many Jewish customs and social practices. Zelikman and Amram, embody this tremendous variation. And despite
their differing backgrounds, their Judaism is never in question. As we have seen, Amram connects his history back through many Biblical heroes, thereby asserting his own place in line of Jewish history.

Zelikman affirms his connection to his Jewishness in his longing for the homeland. Living in Christian, dominated Western Europe, he asks, “‘Is there really such a place…where a Jew rules over other Jews as king?’” (22). Interestingly, this echoes Chabon’s own thinking during the genesis of The Yiddish Policemen’s Union, published the same year, when he was inspired to imagine an American community of Yiddish speakers. While Yiddish was the language of Eastern European Jews and Hebrew is spoken in Israel, the sentiment remains the same. Each is a lament for something lost.

Zelikman expresses a longing for the State of Israel, which, as Malkin suggests, is perhaps a more important factor in signifying one’s Jewishness than any specific religious belief. Chabon’s longing for a place where Yiddish is still the primary language is implicitly a desire for a home as well, but a home in Europe rather than the Middle East.

Notably, Zelikman and Amram do celebrate many Jewish rites, despite their divergent beliefs or outright unbelief. The importance of their continued practice of various Jewish rituals has little to do with belief in their religious significance, but rather their function as a shared, familiar experience. In fact, Chabon specifically notes that they shared their Sabbath celebration with the clients of the brothel, “Hanukkah and Sarah and Flower of Life [two prostitutes] and of a number of infidel whores who saw no greater
harm in marking the sacred time of the country than in accommodating the needs of its men” (190).

While this is a scene played for laughs, much like the Passover Seder in *Wonder Boys*, the humor underscores the communal aspect of the celebration that Chabon highlights. Instead of a pious ceremony, he demonstrates how the simple beauty of the ceremony itself can bring together people from disparate backgrounds into a shared experience. In this case, the community is the clientele and employees of a brothel. This is not to say that all of these people are necessarily Jews. Like with Grady Tripp, who, though not Jewish himself, was invited to his in-laws’ Passover Seder, Chabon suggests that there is an openness to share the ritual with non-Jews that is unlike other religious traditions.

In this simple scene Chabon points to a larger notion regarding the primary importance of these religious/cultural ceremonies. The very inclusiveness of the ceremony—he notes that the “women and men alike covered their heads and hid their faces behind their hands and blessed the light”—suggests an idealized, multicultural and multiethnic conception of Jewishness, open to anyone who wishes to participate, regardless of the specifics of belief. This idea echoes Malkin’s assertion that many who practice certain Jewish rites do so without necessarily believing in the religious aspects of Judaism. This notion is supported by Kaplan, who remarks that many Jews view religious practices as social or cultural, rather than directed toward the divine. Central to this claim is that embracing a cultural Judaism as well as religious is not a bad thing.
Taking it a step further, Stephen J. Whitfield argues in “Declarations of Independence” (2002), “Jewish culture is not synonymous with Judaism,” meaning that one’s Jewishness is not defined by religious adherence (1102). These scholars contend that traditions that previously held exclusively religious significance have, over time, become imbedded into a culture that is not tied down to the sacred. The argument can be made that one could see his or her life as being sanctified through custom or convention, but it this underscores the idea that rites remain important as a cultural practice, rather than religious.

Like much science fiction and fantasy literature, which, in Genreflecting (2006), John H. Timmerman argues, are not simply escapist fantasies but “attempts…to engage our reality in new and startling ways,” the political issues facing his tenth-century swordsmen reflect contemporary issues, such as the aforementioned argument over the nature of Judaism: can Judaism be cultural or must it be purely religious (371). Yet beyond that issue, the political and cultural situation of the Khazar Empire, as described by Chabon, resembles many of the contemporary issues surrounding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

The world of Gentlemen of the Road is a rough and tumble place with much tribal conflict. The Rus travel south, sometimes on their own, other times at the behest of Buljan, to sack cities and loot them. The mayor of a northern, Jewish city remarks that in “‘Baghdad during the Days of Awe this year, the Muhammadans burned Jewish prayer houses and put to the sword any who would not profess Islam’” (93). He then quotes Buljan, who was claiming the consent of the kagan, as saying, “‘If the great Caliph in
Baghdad sees fit to permit his Jews to be burned, it would be improper for the kagan of the Khazars not to ensure that his Muslims receive the same treatment” (93-4).

It is impossible not to see the parallels of this cross-cultural/cross-religious quid pro quo and the modern-day conflict in the Middle East. Zelikman responds the above assertions saying, “‘This is madness,’” and it is that perspective that Chabon underscores throughout the text (94). Zelikman’s perspective is particularly important given his own, and his family’s, history. When Filaq inquires about what life was like in Francia (Zelikman’s home), Amram remarks, “‘The cities of the Christians are mean and mildewed and devoid of splendor. They do not love Jews. Zelikman’s family, learned men all, suffered persecution from mobs and princes alike’” (99-100). Chabon describes a Christian Europe that is both aesthetically depressing and xenophobic. This juxtaposition suggests that the two are closely related: fear, rejection and hatred of other cultures make for a dull, dispirited and unbearable monoculture.

As previous chapters in this study have illustrated, much of Chabon’s work affirms a preference for multiculturalism as the ideal social perspective, often centering on groups of people from various cultures and walks of life.6 David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel assert in their introduction to Insider/Outsider, many American Jews favor a national ideal based upon cultural pluralism rather than monoculture. They note, “As a land of immigrants, America has always struggled with conflicting self-definitions, between what is today called ‘monoculturalism’ and ‘multiculturalism’” (3). Biale et al draw a distinction between cultural pluralism, which

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6 See, particularly, chapters one and four of this volume.
they assert is preferred by most American Jews, and multiculturalism. The former they argue, “affirm[s] privately held ethnic identities as long as groups affirmed the Anglo-Saxon character of America,” whereas multiculturalism “challenges the priority of this monolithic identity in American history, highlighting racial as well as ethnic diversity” (3). In practical terms, multiculturalism, which no longer views WASP culture as the default American culture, embraces the proliferation of the multitude of equally “American” cultures. While Chabon does not seem to make as clear a definitional distinction between these two concepts, it is apparent that the novel argues for a society that embraces its diversity and views it as a strength, rather than a weakness.

Chabon contrasts the xenophobic, violent exchanges between the region’s Jewish and Muslim leaders with Filaq’s father, who is described as “‘that great respecter of the property and the faiths of all his peoples’” (88). Buljan’s desire for retribution killings on behalf of the suffering of his own Jewish people at the hands of Muslim leaders

7 Biale et al. go on to focus on the fact that from a multicultural perspective, racial and ethnic identities are highlighted to “[claim] public resources on behalf of these groups” (3). They, in part, suggest that the reason for the ambivalence for multiculturalism by many American Jews is the “whitening” of Jews in American society after World War II. In short, as is best celebrated by cultural pluralism, Jews were able to enjoy the privileges that come with whiteness in American society while maintaining their cultural individuality. Multiculturalism’s focus on difference rather than commonality undercuts those inroads Jews had made. See Insider/ Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism, David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel eds.
underscores Filaq’s father’s embrace of the multicultural composition of his kingdom. The implication is that the period of Filaq’s father’s reign was one of peace and prosperity. It is one that ought to be returned to. Chabon therefore provides an example of healthy multiculturalism through his team of Amram and Zelikman, whose differing backgrounds prove to be beneficial to their professional success. Additionally, he outlines a governmental, or social, structure and perspective that would best take advantage of multiculturalism through Filaq’s father, and eventually, presumably, Filaq.

It should be noted that, for the most part, the characters themselves do not overtly espouse a desire for a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multicultural society. As noted above, Zelikman is in awe of a nation ruled by Jews, tacitly hoping to be a part of the ruling class. There is plenty of professed dislike for the Muslims who live in the area and, especially, the Rus from the north. Yet, Chabon suggests that the genesis of this animosity lies not in incompatible cultural difference, but rather through political violence and hate-mongering. It is through the adventure, the following of two ethnically and culturally divergent Jewish “Gentlemen of the Road” and the people they meet, that Chabon’s celebration of multiculturalism becomes evident. What Chabon achieves, furthering his larger genre reclamation project, is an adventure plot that centers on these larger issues, wherein the action communicates the message.

With Gentlemen of the Road, we see Chabon writing a novel for the sheer fun of it. In the afterword he admits that in this novel “you catch me in the act of trying, as a writer, to do what many of the characters in my earlier stories—Art Bechstein, Grady
Tripp, Ira Wiseman—were trying, longing, ready to do: I have gone off in search of a little adventure” (200).

Chabon’s admission that in writing Gentlemen of the Road, he sought to recreate the adventures stories he grew up with does beg the question: is being a fanboy really the tradition of literary greatness? In part this question relies upon how we define fan fiction. It is important to recognize Chabon’s conception of fan fiction as it diverges from the popular understanding. Commonly, fan fiction is associated with people borrowing characters and a fictional world, created by another author (often an amateur), and building on that world, through their own imaginings. He takes a very broad view of the subject. In a 2009 interview, Charlie Jane Anders asks Chabon, “Why do you think people often see fans as in opposition to ‘true’ creative people?” Chabon’s response is telling. Quoting at length:

Well, I'm not sure I fully accept the premise of the question…Fans began to take over creative responsibility in the world of Science Fiction as early as the mid-thirties; I doubt that by the mid-seventies there were many major practitioners in the genre who had not started out as a passionate, Con-going, zine-compiling fans. The second great age of American cinema was entirely created by fans (Coppola, Scorsese, Rafelson, Ashby, Spielberg, Lucas, et al); The Godfather is as much about the intensive study of gangster films as it is about gangsters. Same goes, even more so, for Scorsese. Rock and roll, same deal. The Beatles work is fan fiction on the work of Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers…This kind of process,
by which one generation of fan/critics (because anyone who doesn't understand that a fan is a critic doesn't know what a fan is, and there is nothing sadder to contemplate than the idea of a critic who is not also a fan) becomes the creators whose work inspires and obsesses and is critiqued by the next generation of fans, who in turn become critic-creators, has occurred in every popular art form across the board going back fifty or five thousand years. The apostles wrote fan fiction on Torah.

So your “people” are silly people, and we don't need to listen to them.

Chabon’s concept of fan fiction is based on influence, taking the strongest elements from those who came before and adding to it. In other words, Chabon’s idea of fan fiction hinges on the notion that writers, musicians, filmmakers or any other creator of culture, were once fans of the medium in which they now work. The artist is, without exception, reacting to what came before.

This is very much in keeping with T. S. Eliot’s assertion, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). He writes, “if we approach a poet without this prejudice [of always looking solely at a work’s difference from others] we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (22). Eliot argues that literature exists, in effect, in a perpetual present, that works continually speak to one another. But he adds that tradition is not something “handed down” or “inherited” from one generation to the next. Instead, he suggests that tradition is kept alive through careful study of past works.
However, Bloom argues that rather than empowering authors, the writers who have come before hinder originality. The “anxiety of influence” is the idea that an author guards him or herself against his or her predecessors by willfully misreading those tests. Yet given Chabon’s defense of genre, and homages to those who have come before him, suggests that this is not an opinion he shares. Rather, Chabon’s definition of fan fiction is an outcropping of Eliot’s “ever-present” tradition. Eliot might argue that works like *The Final Solution* and *Gentlemen of the Road* are too self-conscious in their references to the past to be considered “high art,” and surely these are not examples of Chabon’s best work. Nevertheless, Chabon and Eliot do share a similar view of the role of the literature’s long traditions on writers who follow.

*Gentlemen of the Road* and *The Final Solution* offer a window into Chabon’s guilty pleasures. There is little question that these two novellas will not be held in the same esteem as *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, *Kavalier & Clay*, or *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, they are nevertheless fascinating views into his sensibilities as a reader. As a young writer, Chabon recalls being discouraged from writing science fiction. Having established himself as a major voice in contemporary American literature, *Gentlemen* and *The Final Solution* are clearly his attempt to enjoy himself as a fan of reading. These novellas are akin to him being a grown man playing a kid’s game, endeavoring to write the kind of literature he loved to read.

Despite the obvious fun of the stories, Chabon still infuses them with the kind of large thematic concepts that have defined his best works. Through eyes of Sherlock Holmes he seeks to better understand, or come to terms with not understanding, the
unfathomable scope of the Holocaust. We see the way that its horrors reach out beyond Nazi occupied Europe to touch lives hundreds of miles away. Chabon emphasizes that the world has fundamentally changed as a result of the Second World War.

Likewise, in *Gentlemen* Chabon introduces his readers to a world that many would have never imagined. His “Jews with Swords” are Jewish warriors as well as scholars. His Khazar Empire is both tumultuous and a vibrant, multicultural world, where Judaism, Christianity and Islam all converge. At this religious and cultural junction Chabon’s two Jewish road agents explore what their Jewishness means to them. Through them, Chabon explores what Jewishness might mean to some in America today. Chabon’s adventurous nature as a writer, constantly moving into new literary territory, is reflected in Zelikman and Amram, who roam from place to place, just to see where the road might take them.
CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Over the course of this dissertation I have attempted to provide a reading of Michael Chabon’s work that takes into account the most important ideas of each novel, while keeping an eye toward thematic continuity over the course of his body of work. We have seen some concepts revisited throughout his career, most notably human sexuality, multiculturalism and Judaism in contemporary American life. In 2012, Chabon published a new novel, *Telegraph Avenue*, in which he returns to topics such as multiculturalism in America, homosexuality and genre. The novel features two protagonists: Archie, who is African American and Nat, who is Jewish. Together they own a record store specializing in obscure jazz records, and their sons are both film buffs with particular interest in blaxploitation films. And Nat’s son, Julie, realizes that he is gay, midway through the novel.

Though these familiar themes crop up in many novels, Chabon is continually refining his thoughts, exploring these ideas from new angles. Witness the trajectory of his approach to human sexuality over the course of his career. He begins with an extended meditation on the emotional toll that the realization of one’s homosexuality or bisexuality can have on an individual, living in a society where such expressions of sexuality are seen as abnormal or even disgraceful. Chabon’s next novels also involve homosexual revelations, but the character’s sexuality is merely a piece of the person’s complex
identity, and not the all-encompassing, defining personality trait. Finally we come to *Telegraph Avenue* where Julie’s homosexuality is met with a shrug both by him and his parents. In all cases, Chabon stresses that homosexuality is normal; as he progresses through his novels, the characters themselves begin to treat it as such.

Chabon is a writer of his time but whose work is not dated. For instance, the evolution of his approach to homosexuality reflects the changing cultural attitudes of Americans in general. The widespread acceptance for marriage equality testifies to a dramatic shift in American perceptions of human sexuality. But this is not an indication of his following a tide of popular opinion. When *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* was published, in 1989, homosexuality was far from being commonly accepted in American culture at large. Yet the novel remains fresh and exhilarating, despite the growth of LGBT literature since its publication.

Chabon has established himself as a major voice in contemporary American literature. His novels are widely anticipated and largely met with critical acclaim. Some of that excitement comes from a shared nostalgia for the genres that he loves so much, such as detective fiction, science fiction, comic books, and horror. As Cathleen Shine said it, in her review of *Telegraph Avenue*, “Chabon seems particularly drawn to collectables, the ephemera of modern pop culture.” Many readers are similarly drawn to his work out of a love for those artifacts of their own youth.

However, as I have endeavored to illustrate in the preceding chapters, Chabon’s best work is more than kitschy winks to his guilty pleasures. His best work ties those pop culture relics to the larger story of America. Comic books connect us to our past in
unexpected ways. The solving of the mystery of a lost item or a death leads to bigger questions about life’s mysteries. His work seeks to understand why we hold on to these items from our past.

At this point in his career, we have seen that Michael Chabon is capable of towering novels taking on subjects as wide ranging as the Holocaust, the Messiah, contemporary Judaism in America, human sexuality, and comic books. As a twenty-three-year-old he made his name as a daring novelist with an uncommon sensibility toward people struggling to find their place in the world. Mysteries’ Art Bechstein’s embrace of his bisexuality, in spite of his closest friends and family all bent on convincing him his feelings were wrong, reflects an author who is as fearless as his protagonist. Chabon’s first novel openly challenged popular conceptions of sexuality. That he maintained a narrative that was sensitive, nuanced, funny and flashed moments of action and suspense was a revelation.

Though Mysteries and Wonder Boys are both excellent novels, Chabon is at his literary best when he thinks big. The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay builds on the premise of exploring the Jewish influence on the Golden Age of Comic Books and ends up a love story that is simultaneously a meditation on the effects of the Holocaust on those who escaped, survivors guilt and heartbrokenness at the loss of family, and a celebration of Jewish folklore and its new life in comics. This is a novel that is big enough to span three continents and two decades, yet contained enough to illuminate the intricate lives of a single family.
Likewise, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is, on its face, a run-of-the-mill hard-boiled novel. However, Chabon takes this genre and spins a tale in which a detective who only trusts what his five senses can detect finds a reason to believe in the possibility of God. Chabon emphasizes not only the hope for the Messiah but a visceral need for his coming. *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is a novel that drags you in through the mystery, and without warning forces you to reassess what you think you know about what the arrival of the Messiah might mean to a community and to the world. Expectation of the Messiah proves as powerful as the anticipation of the mystery’s solution.

Chabon’s writing across the “borderlands”, his intermingling of various genres while attempting to come to terms with subject matters as large and nebulous as the nature of religion in America, contemporary conceptions of Judaism, human sexuality, and the changing face of American culture, demand that his readers approach these subjects from a new and at times uncomfortable point of view.

The “borderlands” are about the act of creation. In “Trickster in a Suit of Lights,” Chabon writes, “all around the world—think of Robert Johnson selling his soul—Trickster is always associated with the borders, no man’s lands, with crossroads and intersections. Trickster is the conveyor of souls across the ultimate boundaries, the transgressor of heaven, the reconciler of opposites” (*Maps* 12). This is what all of his explorations into genre fictions are ultimately about. His work always mixes seemingly mismatched themes or styles: A coming-out story combined with a gangster tale, Sherlock Holmes and the Holocaust, a political thriller and the Messiah, baseball and
Ragnarok. Yet at his best, Chabon uses these thematic mixtures to force his reader to re-imagine them from a new perspective.

Creative people populate many of his novels and his defenses of genre fictions always include a case for the creative genius of the writers. Not only is Grady Tripp a writer of some renown, but also his idol was a horror novelist. Joe Kavalier pushes the boundaries of the comic book art form. Telegraph Avenue celebrates Jazz music and filmmaking. Chabon’s love of Sherlock Holmes circles back to his immense appreciation for Arthur Conan Doyle’s narrative innovations. And the writers he cites as his biggest influences all seem to spend much of their writing lives “writing across the borderlands.”

It is in that boundary crossing, risk-taking spirit in which Chabon’s writing career has taken shape. Whether it is writing in an amalgam of several genres, exalting in maligned and marginalized books, or retelling the story of Rabbi Loew’s transformation of lifeless mud into a superhuman protector, Chabon’s work often comes back to the act of invention.

Similarly, over the course of five novels, two novellas and two collections of short stories, Chabon’s career has been one of reinvention. Beginning as a “literary” novelist he transitions to a genre writer, and, returning to the “literary” novel in Telegraph Avenue. D. G. Myers argues that with Kavalier & Clay, Chabon reinvents himself as a Jewish writer, and to a degree he is right. But Chabon’s vision of Jewish life in America is unlike that of his predecessors because his experience was different from theirs.

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Chabon has approached many fundamental issues of American-Jewish life often from the perspective of the outsider or agnostic. His writing reflects a new generation of American Jews, a more acculturated generation whose conceptions of their Jewishness is more cultural than religious. While his work follows a different path than that of Bellow, Roth, Ozick and others that have come before him, it is clear that it follows a continuum that is constantly reassessing American Judaism. Whereas writers such as Abraham Cahan and Henry Roth were writing about immigrant and first generation Jews, trying to make it in America, Bellow, Philip Roth and others of their generation began writing stories about Jewish characters who are more integrated into unhyphenated America, though they still see themselves as outsiders in American life. Chabon’s novels reflect another shift in American Jewish literature. His characters show a further advance toward so-called Americanization. While they maintain a sense of their Jewishness, Chabon’s characters are more comfortable in unhyphenated America than those of his predecessors.

This comfort is reflected in the multicultural America that Chabon depicts in his work. Chabon’s America is one that sees its diversity as a benefit rather than a hindrance. His novels often feature multiethnic and multi-racial groupings of people, demonstrating that, in the end, all people essentially want the same things: love, a home, and a sense of belonging. And he sees contemporary American Jewish culture as one that maintains its traditions and celebrates its history. But also as an American Judaism that can exist outside of religion, in which American Jews can be both Jewish and largely secular.

Despite his idealism, Chabon is not blind to the realities of American life. His is an America that is rife with contradictions. He writes in “Imaginary Homelands,”
it is impossible to live intelligently as a member of a minority group in a
nation that was founded every bit as firmly on enslavement and butchery
as on ideals of liberty and brotherhood and not feel, at least every once in
a while, that you can no longer take for granted the continued tolerance of
your existence here than you ought to take the prosperity or freedom you
enjoy. (Maps 159)

Though he often writes about these culturally pluralistic places and groups, they are never
without tumult.

*Gentlemen of the Road* features the most diverse setting in his novels, and it is
filled with groups vying for power. But within that struggle, individuals find common
ground. And throughout his body of work, Chabon shows that the best place to stoke
peace, and find tranquility and comfort, is through Judaism. This is true whether one is
Jewish or not, religious or secular. Recall Grady Tripp’s Passover Seder, Joe Kavalier’s
Golem of Prague, Meyer Landsman’s faith in Mendel Shpilman, and Zelikman’s
adherence to the Ten Commandments.

Chabon’s depiction of Judaism in America reflects a reality that is different from
the generations that came before. The trajectory of American-Jewish literature, from the
newly arrived immigrant to an integrated and integral part of the American social fabric,
is *the* American success story. Chabon’s characters may not be overtly religious, but they
have not forgotten their roots. Chabon’s two greatest novels, *Kavalier & Clay* and *YPU*,
demonstrate that though the faces of this literature have changed, as have the stories they
tell, Chabon, and many American-Jewish writers of his generation, are building upon the
foundation laid by authors going back to Sholem Aleichem and even further to the books of the Bible. Superman began his life as the Golem, as Samson, as Moses. As American-Jewish literature continues to reinvent itself, reflecting new realities, Michael Chabon is, and I suspect will continue to be, an important and captivating link in that chain.
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