
THE *Jewish Reader*

A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL YIDDISH BOOK CENTER

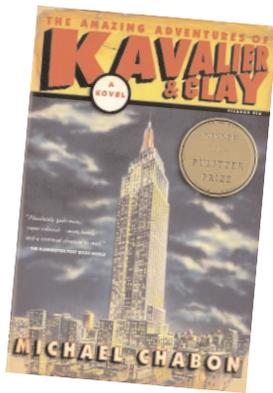
ISSUE #1 ♦ JANUARY 2002

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay

by Michael Chabon

PUBLISHER'S SYNOPSIS

Joe Kavalier, a young Jewish artist who has also been trained in the art of Houdini-esque escape, has just smuggled himself out of Nazi-invaded Prague and landed in New York City. His Brooklyn cousin, Sammy Clay, is looking for a partner to create heroes, stories and art for the latest novelty to hit America – the comic book. Drawing on their own fears and dreams, Kavalier and Clay create the Escapist, the Monitor and Luna Moth, inspired by the beautiful Rosa Saks, who will become linked by powerful ties to both men. With exhilarating style and grace, Michael Chabon tells an unforgettable story about American romance and possibility.



SELECTED PASSAGES

In later years, holding forth to an interviewer or 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 air-tight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini. "To me, Clark Kent in a phone booth and Houdini in a packing crate, they were one and the same thing," he would learnedly expound at WonderCon or Angoulême or to the editor of The Comics Journal. "You weren't the same person when you came out as when you went in. Houdini's first magic act, you

know, back when he was just getting started. It was called Metamorphosis. It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of transformation." (PAGE 3)

Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation. Every golem in the history of the world, from Rabbi Hanina's delectable goat to the river-clay Frankenstein of Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, was summoned into existence through language, through murmuring, recital and kabbalistic chitchat – was, literally, talked into life.

(PAGE 119)

Joe Kavalier was not the only early creator of comic books to perceive the mirror-image fascism inherent in his anti-fascist superman – Will Eisner, another Jew cartoonist, quite deliberately dressed his Allied-hero Blackhawks in uniforms modeled on the elegant death's-head garb of the Waffen SS. But Joe was perhaps the first to feel the shame of glorifying, in the name of democracy and freedom, the vengeful brutality of a very strong man. For months he had been assuring himself, and listening to Sammy's assurances, that they were hastening, by their make-believe hammering at Haxoff or Hynkel or Hassler or Hitler, the intervention of the United States into the war in Europe. Now it occurred to Joe to wonder if all they had been doing, all along, was indulging their own worst impulses and assuring the creation of another generation of men who revered only strength and domination. (PAGE 204)

"Weird Planet." (said Sammy to Rosa). He did not lift his pencil from the pad. "Guy lands on a planet. Exploring the galaxy. Mapping the far fringes." While he spoke, he did not look at her, or interrupt the steady progress across the ruled lines of the tiny bold block letters he produced, regular and neat, as if he had a typewriter hand. He liked to talk through his plots for her, combing out into regular plaits what grew

in wild tufts in his mind. "He finds a vast, golden city. Like nothing he's ever seen. And he's seen it all. The beehive cities of Deneba. The lily-pad cities of Lyra. The people here are ten feet tall, beautiful golden humanoids. Let's say they have big wings. They welcome Spaceman Jones. They show him around. But something is on their minds. They're worried. They're afraid. There's one building, one immense palace he isn't allowed to see. One night our guy wakes up in his nice big bed, the entire city is shaking. He hears this terrible bellowing, raging, like some immense monstrous beast. Screams. Strange electric flashes. It's all coming from the palace." He peeled the page he had filled, folded it over, plastered it down. Went on. "The next day everybody acts like nothing happened. They tell him he must have been dreaming. Naturally our guy has to find out. He's an explorer. It's his job. So he sneaks into this one huge, deserted palace and looks around. In the highest tower, a mile above the planet, he comes upon a giant. Twenty feet tall, huge wings, golden like the others but with ragged hair, big long beard. In chains. Giant atomic chains."

She waited while he waited for her to ask.

"And?" she said finally.

"We're in heaven, this planet," said Sam.

"I'm not sure I—"

"It's God."

"Okay."

"God is a madman. He lost his mind, like, a billion years ago. Just before He, you know. Created the universe."

(PAGE 563-4) 

ESSAY BY SHOSHANA MARCHAND

This audacious, sweeping crowd-pleaser of a novel is also a serious literary achievement, and that's no easy combo. Author Michael Chabon takes us from Brooklyn to Prague to the frozen Antarctic, to Theresienstadt by radio, and to the top of the Empire State Building. As Chabon traces the lives of two cousins who create a fascist-battling comic book superhero, the Escapist, he sweeps through decades of American history and Jewish history, limns the territory between the two, and still finds time to squeeze in cameos by Orson Welles, Salvador Dali, and Senator Estes Kefauver. Six hundred thirty-six pages, and not a wasted word.

The author deploys the linguistic ease of Nabokov or Joyce (and a dictionary-buster of a vocabulary to match) as he romps through 1940s New York, with its miles of bars, swing music bursting frantically out of every doorway, and the fabulous blossoming of pop culture — in particular, comic books. He draws for us the naïve, puzzled American Jews, and their far more sophisticated, far more frightened refugee cousins, obsessed with the newspapers, desperate to get just one more member of their doomed families out of a fiercely unraveling Europe.

Critics have compared this novel to E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, in its use of an historical moment not just as setting but as a fully developed character in the story itself. And to the work of John Irving, for its sprawling, picaresque, impossible plot twists. It might well be compared to the work of I.B. Singer. Chabon mines Singer territory here, in his learned and respectful use of Jewish folklore, and in its coupling with a thoroughly modern sensibility — especially regarding matters political and sexual.

Chabon is especially daring in his use of the "escape" metaphor. There are, of course, the actual escape tricks that Joe studies as a teenager in Europe and performs off and on in America. There is the refugee's escape from Europe to America. There is the confinement of a closeted homosexual, and his botched escape attempts. There is the Escapist himself, a comic book character who hides out in "the keyhole," his secret lair under the Empire State Building. There are fabulous wartime escapes and metamorphoses of all kinds.

It's worth noting Chabon's wonderful character names, surprising only because they seem so right, and never heavy-handed. It actually takes a while to realize that Sammy Clay, originally Sammy Klayman (Clayman) is named for the clay of the Moldau, out of which the Golem was formed. Is Sammy, then, a new Golem, his ideas of furious battle brought to life by his cousin's brilliant craftsmanship? Or does their mutual creation of the comic book Escapist create, in turn, the dashing Joe Kavalier of New York City, the dancer, the romancer, the man-about-town? And, of course, Rosa Luxemburg Saks, half dashing radical, half

department-store heiress, inspiration for Luna Moth, known by day as Judy Dark.

Some names are used as elaborate set-ups for excellent jokes. There's the devastatingly handsome and kind-hearted blond actor Tracy Bacon, comfortable with his own homosexuality even in the 1940s, Sammy's first and only love. When a newly unfolding Sam brings the young man home to meet his mother, he wonders whether he's "more afraid of Tracy Bacon or of showing up for dinner at Ethel's late, reeking of gin, and with the world's largest piece of *trayf* in tow."

As the darkness of the Holocaust settles over the book, dashing the hopes and dreams of his protagonists, Chabon whistles in the dark, asking such Jewish questions as whether *babka* is a dessert or "actually a kind of very small hassock." But even the Escapist, though he repeatedly thwarts the fictional dictator Haxoff, can't hold off the all-too-real Hitler forever. The book includes such miniature tragedies as an unopened letter from Joe Kavalier's mother, trapped in Prague and losing all hope. "In all likelihood this letter will not find you but if you are reading this, then please. Listen to me. I want you to forget all of us, Josef, to leave us behind once and for all. It is not in your nature to do so, but you must. They say that ghosts find it painful to haunt the living, and I am tormented by the idea that our tedious existence should dim or impair your enjoyment of your own young life." Joe never opens that letter and never knows its contents. He carries it around, guilty at not wanting to read more dull, bad news from home. Finally, at a hotel bar mitzvah celebration at which Joe Kavalier is set to perform magic and escape tricks as his alter-ego Cavalieri, a bomb explodes, and the letter is lost.

On that same night, Joe receives the unbearable news that his younger brother has died in transit, his ship sunk by a U-boat. Events unfold with terrifying speed. In rapid succession: Joe tries to kill himself in a deliberately botched escape trick. The vice squad crashes Sammy's country-house-tryst with Bacon. Rosa confides her pregnancy, by Joe, to Sam. Joe enlists and is sent off to a horrifying post in the Antarctic, where madness, a deathly malfunctioning stove, and a flesh-

eating pilot are only a few of the horrors at hand. Joe hears, by short wave from around the globe, his own grandfather, a former operatic tenor in Prague, singing on a Nazi propaganda broadcast from the Theresienstadt ghetto. He also hears a German soldier making lone broadcasts from elsewhere on the same miserable, lonely, Antarctic ice, and sets off on a bizarre, single-minded quest, first to kill the German, then to save him, and then to mourn him.

Back at home, Rosa and Sam marry and move to Midwood and then to Bloomtown, a suburb a lot like Levittown, to raise the child, Tommy. Their false, sexless marriage is a proto-feminist evocation of suburban maternal misery for Rosa. Sammy and Rosa's listless lives parallel the loss of energy in their creative work, as the comic book world begins its sad decline, culminating in the 1954 Senate trial that labeled comics-writers as the cause of juvenile delinquency.

But it's the boy Tommy who sets the final escape in motion. Through his truant visits to a magic shop in the city, Tommy rediscovers his real father, Joe. Long thought lost or dead, Joe has in fact been drawing like a maniacal genius, living a hermitlike existence in the same beloved Empire State building where the boys built their original comics empire, and where Sam and Tracy shot sparks from their fingers during a long-ago lightning storm. In yet another bizarre death/escape scene, Tommy stages a would-be leap from the building.

In an elegiac tone that soars above the narrative, Chabon concludes:

Later, after the world had been torn in half, and the Amazing Cavalieri and his blue tuxedo were to be found only in the gilt-edged pages of deluxe photo albums on the coffee tables of the Upper West Side, Joe would sometimes find himself thinking about the pale-blue envelope from Prague. He would try to imagine its contents, wondering what news or sentiments or instructions it might have contained. It was at these times that he began to understand, after all those years of study and performance, of feats and wonders and surprises, the nature of magic. The magician seemed to promise that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might

reappear, that a scattered handful of doves or dust might be reunited by a word, that a paper rose consumed by fire could be made to bloom from a pile of ash. But everyone knew that it was only an illusion. 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. 

**AUTHOR INTERVIEW:
JEWISH READER EDITOR PHILIP GRAUBART TALKS
TO MICHAEL CHABON**

PHILIP GRAUBART. Tell me about your Jewish background. Did you go to Hebrew School as a kid? Attend a synagogue? How did you feel about Judaism growing up?

MICHAEL CHABON. My father was raised by anti-religious labor-union Jews, without holidays, synagogue, bar mitzvah – they would have none of it. But he always very strongly identified himself as Jewish nonetheless. My mother’s parents were Conservative Jews, more or less. I grew up in Columbia, Maryland, an experimental planned community constructed on egalitarian, liberal, Great Society principles, and we belonged to a synagogue called the Columbia Jewish Congregation. Today I believe it is a Reconstructionist *shul* but back then it was a wildly independent movement of one, which it called Innovative Judaism. Our rabbi was Martin Siegel, a rebellious soul as well as a very spiritual man. I went to Hebrew school, became a bar mitzvah – and then ‘fell out’ of Judaism almost completely. For years I thought it was enough to be like my father and simply ‘feel Jewish,’ whatever that meant. I married a non-Jew. It was in the wake of that marriage’s failure that I began to look at my Jewishness in a new light and to try to reclaim my religious as well as my cultural heritage as a Jew.

PG. How does your Jewish background, and Jewishness in general (you can define that as broadly as you like) inspire your creativity? Is Judaism a rich source of inspiration?

MC. Jewish artists, in particular American Jews, have always been among my greatest heroes, going back to

the time I was a kid discovering the Marx Brothers. This was the way that my dad most articulated his own sense of himself as a Jew – by having Jewish heroes, from Einstein to Hank Greenberg. In my case those heroes tended to be artists of some kind, and over the years I have been inspired by the works, achievements and struggles of people like Bob Dylan, Marcel Proust, S.J. Perelman, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and the aforementioned brothers. As I have gotten older, however, and as I have tried to get along as a writer, I have increasingly had the experience of turning to find something to write about, a story to tell, and finding that (often much to my surprise) that story presents itself to me in a Jewish context. This – the surprise included – was definitely the case with *Kavalier & Clay*.

PG. Many of your books, not just *Kavalier & Clay*, contain Jewish characters and deal with Jewish themes. Do you think of yourself as writing within the tradition of Jewish creative literature?

MC. Yes, increasingly, over the past seven to ten years. This parallels the period of my divorce, remarriage, and the births of my three children, as well as my increasing involvement with Jewish life, with the life of our synagogue (Kehilla Community Synagogue in Berkeley). I feel that I have come increasingly to claim my Judaism, to proclaim it and to acknowledge its claim on me.

PG. Are there particular Jewish writers whom you admire? Are there Jewish writers who have especially influenced your work? Non-Jewish writers?

MC. Those already mentioned, plus I. B. Singer, Isaac Babel and Bruno Schulz. And of course Jack “King” Kirby. The biggest influences I’m aware of are probably Proust, Perelman and Roth. It broke my heart when Philip Roth told me he never cared for Perelman’s work.

PG. You portray the creative process of crafting comic books with such loving power and vitality. What attracts you to comic books?

MC. I grew up on comic books. My dad turned me on to them when I was in first or second grade, and I amassed a fairly huge collection. At the time – in the early seventies – the ‘nostalgia craze’ (remember that? remember when recycling pop culture was a ‘craze’ and

not the dominant mode of consumer culture?) was in full swing, and the people at DC Comics were busy reprinting tons of their stuff from the Golden Age of Comics in the back pages of their new books. So the comic books that I grew up on were, in a very real sense, exactly the same ones that my father himself had read as a kid. This provided a strange continuity of childhood for me that led from suburban Columbia in 1972 straight back to Ocean Avenue in Flatbush in 1945. I think it was inevitable that when I began a journey into the past, into my own past and the country's, I would find comic books waiting for me there.

PG. In your novel, and in real life, most of the creative pioneers in comics were Jewish (Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, Bob Kane, Siegel and Schuster). Is there something Jewish about comic books? Is there something in the Jewish experience that leads to this particular form of creativity?

MC. Well, I think I argue something like this in the book, and I do think it's a valid argument. It's impossible for me to look at Superman and not see an allegorical retelling of the Jewish immigrant experience, in its sorrow (the loss of Krypton), assimilationist tensions (Clark Kent, poisonous kryptonite), and dreams of power and success. And I do think that both the Golem and Harry Houdini (a rabbi's son) were hitherto unacknowledged forebears of the idea of the superhero. The trade itself was very heavily Jewish-owned, managed and operated. Finally, it was the exclusion of Jewish artists from the more established commercial art fields – advertising, magazine illustration – that drove young Jewish guys who could draw into the comic book field. Of course the medium itself is in direct contradiction of the Second Commandment, right?

PG. Your novel is filled with escapes. Besides the obvious (the Escapist, Kavalier's tricks) there's Sammy's botched escape from the closet, Kavalier's escape from Europe, his brother's failed escape, and even the Golem's escape from Prague. Why are you so attracted to the theme of Escape?

MC. This motif just grew out of the material. It imposed itself on me, and not at all the other way

around. I was several drafts into the writing of the book before I even noticed how prevalent was the idea or role of escape, and it was at that point I reconceived the character that Sammy and Joe create as the Escapist, to try to integrate and draw strength from this motif.

PG. Many contemporary writers are putting Golems into their stories or novels (you, Cynthia Ozick, Thane Rosenbaum, among others). The previous generation of American Jewish writers (Bellow, Malamud, Roth) never wrote about Golems. I don't recall seeing a Golem even in I.B. Singer's work. What is it about the Golem that's so inspiring, and why has the theme become especially inspiring these days?

MC. I can really only speak for myself. When I was a little kid, I had a book about the history of fantastic cinema, going back to the Meliès brothers. There was this one panel that transfixed me – it showed the page-boy-bob-wearing Golem from Wegener's silent film, *Der Golem*. That was the first I had ever heard of the Golem, which was, incidentally, briefly the main character of a Marvel Comics series of the mid-70s. I have been fascinated by the figure of the Golem ever since, and it was one of the high points of my life to stand in the *Altneuschul* in Prague and think that Rabbi Loew's Golem might be lying up there in the attic. To me there is allegory, pain and poignancy in the idea of the creature who never asked to be made, whose fate is so thoroughly shaped by his parents' intentions, might and desire, whose relationship to life is so tenuous and easily erased.

PG. Who's a better superhero, Spiderman or Superman? (Please don't say Spiderman.)

MC. The correct way to phrase the question in comic-fan parlance is: Superman vs. Spiderman – who wins?

In many ways Spiderman is a reformulation of Superman, down to his fondness for red-and-blue.

Hey, I love 'em both. 

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does a modern writer have the right to use ancient Jewish legend, like the Golem, in a novel of modern themes? Is it jarring to find such material jostling with contemporary sex scenes and descriptions of jazz bands?
2. Do the American Jews in this novel do much of anything to help their European brothers and sisters? What does the author imply about American Jewish attitudes before the fullness of the Holocaust was revealed?
3. Is Palestine ever mentioned in the novel? Why is it not a part of the characters' consciousness?
4. Does the section called "Radioman," which takes place in the Antarctic, belong in this novel?
5. Would you call the novel's final chapters hopeful? What can the characters hope for?
6. Can things, or people, "become so lost that they might never have existed in the first place"?
7. Why does the Golem disintegrate before it arrives by mail in Bloomtown?
8. What is "the golden key, a skeleton key to herself" that Sammy hands Rosa when he offers her the chance to draw a women's comic? What is she escaping from?
9. Is Sammy cowardly when he abandons Tracy on the train?
10. Kavalier and Clay are acted upon by history, again and again. To what extent does the author think they are in control of their lives? Do you agree or disagree with the author?
11. In what ways does the author's tone enter the story to engage in period speech, and in what ways is it an

omniscient voice? Can you find any rhyme or reason for this shifting of voice?

12. Is it okay to be funny, even profane, when writing about the Holocaust? Is it useful or appropriate?

13. In Chabon's witty aside, Sammy wonders: "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."

So, *nu?* Is Superman Jewish, or not? 

THE *Jewish Reader*

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