

Introduction to Michael Chabon

By Hollis Kurman

Years ago I received a fat, juicy book in the mail from my mother back in the US. The book was called *'The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay'*, front and back covers crammed with kudos, literary reviews and prizes, and topped by one of my mother's trademark sticky notes saying, 'you will LOVE this book!'. I remember having a quick skim and thinking, *hmmm, thanks Mom, but not really my thing*. Two young Jewish guys, one just escaped from the Nazis,



running around NYC and making a comic book...? But I read it. My mother was right, of course - I loved the book! (Why are mothers always irritatingly right??) I told everyone I knew to read it.

By the first page, I had grasped one of Michael Chabon's innumerable talents: He takes us to places that we never thought we'd go, or even *want* to go – and then gets us so hooked that we never want to leave. And like Patty Hearst and her Stockholm syndrome before us, we've fallen in love with our captor.

'Kavalier and Clay' was so original, so unlike anything I'd ever read or have read since... It had me wondering: How did you or your agent even *pitch* this story to publishers? Publishers generally like to compare stuff to other stuff. It makes it an easier sell. They especially like 'mash ups', such as: 'Great book. Like *Call it Sleep* meets *Spiderman*. Or *West with the Night* meets *Billy Bathgate*.' But this book defied comparison. Amazing, indeed.

Then came the Pulitzer Prize and all the prizes and books in between.... And here we are, 16 years later. It was worth the wait! What an honor to have this writer back with us tonight.

For those of you who are familiar with Michael Chabon's writing, you may have been struck by a dichotomy between the extreme sophistication and elegance of his writing on the one hand, and an irresistible, regressive quality on the other. His novels, children's books and film projects have Boyhood Fantasy written all over them: comic books, superheroes, magic, rocket ships, space travel, war stories, hide-outs, and dark family secrets. What else could a reader possibly want?

Maybe this is why highbrow critics have raved; the literary world's most coveted prizes have been bestowed; and the books go flying off the shelves. As reviewers point out, Chabon novels manage to walk the line between high literature and popular fiction. This is, of course, a sweet spot for publishers – and for us as readers.

And now there is *Moonglow*. Michael, I have to confess that I enjoyed *Moonglow* even more than *Kavalier & Clay*. Every gorgeous, scheming bit of it - from the fine print tucked into the copyright page to the fine print in the acknowledgements at the very end.

This book is a fictionalized memoir of Chabon's own family history. From his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather recounts his life's many adventures: growing up in Baltimore, tracking rocket scientists as a soldier in WWII Germany, doing jail time in New York, losing his beloved wife to an insane asylum, creating new adventures as an old man in Florida - and then finally in California, where he spills secrets and confessions to his grandson as he lays dying. But is any of it true...? We may never know.

The description on the back cover reads: 'A lie that tells the truth, a work of fictional nonfiction, an autobiography wrapped in a novel disguised as a memoir, *Moonglow* is Michael Chabon at his most moving and inventive.'

In other words, this book is Fake News – filled with Alternative Facts! And yet, Chabon is *authentically* fake. We can *trust* that he's taking us for a ride. It's all in the fine print: In the acknowledgements, for example, he cites a whole list of people who, 'if they existed, would have been instrumental to this work.' He also joyfully plants a Pink Floyd quote from their album *Dark Side of the Moon* in the mouth of Wernher von Braun, the Nazi's famed rocket scientist who became instrumental to the US space mission (and to this story). Chabon even closes his copyright disclaimer up front with 'Scouts honor'. Are there any former Boy Scouts here tonight?

However, with so much buzz about the 'trickery' and masterful sleight of hand used in *Moonglow*, it would be criminal to ignore the power and beauty of the writing itself. The good old-fashioned character building, plot puzzles, and achingly fresh use of language that (to quote Chabon out of context) 'makes your bones sing'...Why can't more books do that?

This is storytelling that not only makes us care deeply about the characters and what happens to them – but that also stops us in our tracks to marvel at the landscape of words. I found myself stopping every few pages to smile and re-read a passage or sentence that I particularly enjoyed or that gave me an acute case of Writer Envy. In a film, such things can be distracting (e.g., Meryl Streep's portfolio of perfect accents...). But in a book, these little sidesteps are a joy.

It is my pleasure to be able to introduce this evening's storyteller and superhero, Michael Chabon, who will now cast a bit of his *Moonglow* our way. After the reading, I will interview Michael and then open up the discussion to questions from the audience. Michael...?

Hollis Kurman is an expert in growth strategy, innovation and co-creation as well as a human rights advocate. She is the author of children books.

