



*HoCoPoLitSo*  
Howard County Poetry & Literature Society

*Presents*

## An Interview with Michael Chabon

Michael Chabon likes to hover in the places where the boundaries blur. Between literary fiction and fantasy. Between imagination and reality. Between faith and doubt.

He calls it working between “the Empire of Lies and the Republic of Truth.”

Chabon’s fiction—he’s written realistic novels like his debut, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, and the daredevil tale that won the Pulitzer in 2001, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*—exists on the border, where things are in question.

Chabon gives partial credit to his origins—Columbia, the planned community where mapmakers purposefully smudged the boundaries between social classes and races and religions. Chabon grew up in a little rancher in the Longfellow neighborhood, where street names originate from Henry Wadsworth’s verse. In fact, all the streets in Columbia were named after lines from American literature.

In a piece in *The Atlantic* touting his 2012 novel, *Telegraph Avenue*, set in the shaky landscape of a Berkeley vinyl record shop (and its owners) on the verge of collapse, Chabon wrote about where he grew up.

“Maybe your hometown is always an imaginary place: the home of your imagination,” Chabon wrote. “If so, then mine—at its best, at its most vivid—whether the vanishing rainbow of Columbia, or the shifting restless polycultural territory manifesting in the joint between Oakland and Berkeley, is a place a lot like this place right here, a place to which people come most of all, I think, because they want to live around people who are not like them, because that is the very thing they have most in common, because they are dedicated to the self-evident truth articulated in one of the founding documents of my

hometown, that it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at."

Here's where Chabon is at. His books are huge. His reviews are excellent. After Columbia, he moved to Pittsburgh, then California. He lives in Berkeley with his four children, married to the former lawyer and now writer Ayelet Waldman (*Bad Mother*). His cartoon likeness has even scuffled with Jonathan Franzen on *The Simpsons*.

The *Chicago Tribune* says, "Chabon is a flat-out wonderful writer – evocative and inventive, pointed and poignant." *The Washington Post* called his Pulitzer-winner "absolutely gosh-wow, super-colossal—smart, funny, and a continual pleasure to read." His latest novel, *Telegraph Avenue*, was heralded for examining the depths of paternity, for bringing to life fully realized characters who are black and white, for putting the music back into fiction. Reviewers have also said he gives readers too much of a good thing. (Ron Charles in *The Washington Post* writes: "Swaths of the book suffer from a compulsion to pump every paragraph full of clever metaphors that scream, 'Look at me!' ")

The literary world has been screaming "Look at him!" since Chabon was 25 and a professor, without his knowledge, submitted Chabon's master's thesis novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, to an agent and it raked in record advances. Chabon has now written seven novels, numerous essays and worked on scripts for movies like "Spiderman" and "John Carter." Sunday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Chabon writes at least 1,000 words a day, with a turntable spinning out tunes in his home office that he shares with Waldman.

He spoke on the phone from that office, with occasional breaks to chase and chastise the family's new puppy, Mabel.

**Little Patuxent Review:** Could you talk a little about your childhood home, the planned city of Columbia, and how it has influenced your childhood and how that affected your writing?

**Michael Chabon:** We moved there in 1969, so there wasn't really much Columbia there yet. And what little there was still pretty raw. Trees were still being unloaded from trucks and being put into holes in the ground. A lot of it existed purely on paper and in the minds of Mr. [James] Rouse and the minds of the Working Group. It was very much a notional kind of place and I essentially fell for it, hook, line and sinker. At the age of six, I bought into the vision. I was already looking to live in the city of the future. As a member of my generation, I was trained to believe. I was the generation of the 1964 New York World's Fair and "The Jetsons" and the vision of the future

that began to get articulated in the Depression even, but by the end of the war had become this pure shining technocratic vision of the kind of world that is described in the Donald Fagen song “IGY.” I was primed.

So then when my parents brought me to Columbia for the first time and we went to the Exhibit Center and I saw the maps and the diagrams and these architectural drawings of how it was going to be, I was thrilled. I can remember how excited I was by the thought that we were going to be moving to this place. And it wasn't just that “Jetsons” thing; Columbia wasn't really like that. It was a strange '60s turning into '70s version of that future that included things like racial harmony and religious, ecumenical worship and radically transformed schools and classrooms and free public transportation and all of these things that were presented in a kind of earth-toned, early '70s, post-hippie crunchy granola vibe to it all as well that kind of mingled with the futuristic version of it. It was really appealing to a kid of my age and time. I loved the map of Columbia. I put it up on my wall in my bedroom when we moved into our first house in Longfellow. I believed in it. And I've written about what a powerful experience it was for me to watch this thing that was initially only on paper become into literal existence all around me. Every day, a little more of it was brought into being through the hard work and the force of one man's vision. All of this should furthermore end up with a nomenclature derived from the great works of American literature. I feel like the deck was stacked against me, or in favor, of me becoming a writer.

**LPR:** You had maps on your childhood bedroom wall, those that you drew, and those that you got from the Exhibit Center and DisneyWorld. Those seem to be a trope with your fiction as well. What do maps connote for you?

**Chabon:** I can only imagine that the experience of living in this map, of growing up on this map that I was given as a totem on my very first visit to Columbia, and then going to dwell there. When I was learning to read and falling in love with literature, I was drawn to works of fantasy that had maps in the endpapers. Tolkien and *The Phantom Tollbooth* and the Narnia books. It's a pervasive feature of many works of children's literature. There's always this conjunction of a map and an adventure. I had the map; therefore, my childhood became an adventure. I'm very lucky in that I grew up in a time when kids were allowed to go out and play by themselves. And get into trouble and

have adventures. I don't know if it's like that in Columbia still, but it's not like that where I live, certainly.

Knowing the map of Columbia was useful to me as a kid. I rode my bike everywhere. I made the discovery of alternate routes by looking at the map. At the same time, I was creating my own map in my mind, creating my imaginary map in my own mind, as kids do, with all the hazardous dogs and angry fathers and people who would let you cut across their back yard. That was the map I carried in my own mind. I think it was inevitable that maps and cartography would become associated in my mind with fiction, with literature, with fantasy, with adventure, with the experience of growing up. It has definitely endured throughout my career.

**LPR:** Can you describe what's on the walls where you write? Do you have maps on the wall now?

**Chabon:** I do, actually, funny you should ask. I just was working on a project that I've quit recently, but it was for Disney, it was called "The Magic Kingdom," so I have this huge vintage map of Disneyland from 1962 that's up on my bulletin board. . . . In my office, I have a cartoon map of Maine from the 1940s, a Yiddish language map of the United States of America, and I've got a plan of the 1939 World's Fair, and I've got at least two other maps. I've got a map of Antarctica that was given away with Grape-Nuts cereal during Robert Byrd's 1936 or '35 journey down to Antarctica. So, yeah, a lot of maps.

**LPR:** Could you speak about the writing of *Mysteries of Pittsburgh*? Were you following the advice of writing teachers to "write what you know?"

**Chabon:** Not consciously. If I had heard those words, or that advice expressed, I'm pretty sure it would have been with quotation marks around it, as an example of advice, rather than as actual advice. I don't think anybody ever really said that to me. What I remember is I went down to UC-Irvine to visit . . . and it just seemed to me that everybody there, everybody that I met that I was going to be with the next year, seemed to be working on novels. And I felt like I needed to start a novel in self-defense. So I had this impulse that I'd better try to write a novel. I tried to write one in college and got about 12 pages and gave up. I had made one prior attempt. I have to get serious about this, I have to write a novel. What do I write a novel about?

I was staying at my mother's house in Oakland. And down in this basement were all of my stepfather's books from college that he

had kept. Among them were copies of *The Great Gatsby* and *Goodbye Columbus*. I had read *Great Gatsby* before, but I hadn't read *Goodbye Columbus* before, and I read them one right after the other. I had this intuition that they might be helpful to me. Reading them back to back, I think *Goodbye Columbus* was very heavily influenced by *The Great Gatsby*. They have a similar structure, they're told over the course of one summer. They're told in first person, by this person who meets this group of people who will transform the way he thinks about things, over the course of this one summer that will end in calamity. It's a comedy calamity in *Goodbye Columbus*; it's not like what brings *The Great Gatsby* to an end by any means. But there were a lot of ties between those two books.

And I guess that's when I had the "write about what you know" thought, because I thought, I know about summer. I had always loved summer more than any other season, and had had a series of summers during my college years where a lot happened, and there were all these crazy characters I had known, so I had this sense right away: Why don't I try to write a book about summer that's structured around summer, like those two books? You have that natural three-act structure, June, July and August. I could do that, why don't I try that?

**LPR:** Your second novel was a really long, kind of convoluted book called *Fountain City*—how did you know when to let it go?

**Chabon:** I never did. Finally, it wasn't really like I let it go. It was like I cheated on it, as if it was a marriage that had gone bad and I snuck out one day to take up with this other little sexy number that came along, that said, "Hey, I'm going to be 350 pages long, and I'm going to take place over the course of a weekend, which is even less time than your first novel, and you know all about Pittsburgh, where I'm going to take place. And you've got all this experience under your belt that you can bring to bear on the writing of this story. So why don't you come hang out with me for a little bit?" So I stepped out on that novel and I never went back. It took about 100 pages of that new book, and showing them to my then-fiancée, now-wife, and having her say, 'Yeah, this is good, you should keep going with this.' That was the point where I said, 'I think I'm just going to put this book aside for a while.' And then I never went back to it.

**LPR:** You've said that *Wonder Boys* saved you. Is that true?

**Chabon:** Absolutely. Completely. I was in bad, bad shape. I hated that book [*Fountain City*]. I was so sick of it. I didn't want to work on it

any more. I felt just really down on myself; I had very little faith in my powers. So writing *Wonder Boys* and having it go so well, having it go rather quickly and feeling like I really did know what I was doing, and did know how to tell the story, and that I could create interesting characters that people would want to be with. I hit on the voice of the narrator, Grady Tripp, right away. It was just such a restorative experience. I still, to this day, I have people ask me which is my favorite book, and I say *Wonder Boys*, because whether it's my best book or not, I don't know, but it's definitely my most beloved, because it made me feel that sense of gratitude toward it. Writing it rescued me.

**LPR:** After *Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, *Wonder Boys* and *Kavalier & Clay*, you kind of turned away from naturalism. Why did you set out for those different genres—science fiction, fantasy, horror?

**Chabon:** It really started with the short story and my relationship to the short story. I published a collection called *Werewolves in Their Youth*. It got mixed reviews. Some critics liked it, and some critics hated it, or disliked it strongly. And at least a couple of those negative critics were critics I respected, or were reviews that seemed thoughtful and considered and they seemed to suggest that the critic had tried to engage with the stories. And that's always what I'm looking for; it's all too rare to find. I'd much rather get an astute, considered, thoughtful negative review than a kind of witless, shoddy, poorly constructed rave. There was enough of a thread, in reading those reviews, that was an echo of my own thoughts, in that I had sort of lost respect of my work in the form, and as a result I had lost respect for the form itself.

I felt like it was this narrow peephole on life. And what you get when you look through a peephole, of course, is something sordid. That is an inherent risk of the short story form; I have since moved on from that low point in my relationship to the short story, but I still think there is a measure of truth there. I think the short story form is an inherently cruel form. If you take any human life at one moment, the chances are, what you're going to see there is not very appealing. . . .

So this emerged in me as a really profound dissatisfaction with the short story, and with the idea of writing any more of the short stories like the short stories I had been writing since college, certainly since graduate school, when I had learned to write a classic short story. I began a historical exploration to look back at the short story, both as I had been taught it, and as I had actually encountered it as a reader, going back to my first encounters with the short stories in English class in junior high school, and just reading on my own, Sherlock Holmes

stories and Ray Bradbury stories. I went back and looked in my own history as a reader of short stories, and I went back in the history of the short story itself, the sources, which are usually reckoned to be Edgar Allen Poe and Guy de Maupassant and their contemporaries, up through Chekhov and Joyce and to the modern masters. What you see when you go back, both in my history and the history of the short story itself, was a ton of genre. . . . Ian Fleming wrote short stories about James Bond that I really liked when I was a kid. And of course, Isaac Asimov and Larry Niven. All the major science fiction writers from 1930 to the present really, but the golden age, really from the '40s through the '50s, '60s and '70s, even, just routinely had them published in magazines that routinely published short fiction.

And then mystery stories, and crime fiction and horror fiction and Gothic fiction and sea stories and spy stories. Short stories were just all over the map of genre. . . . I felt this sense of excitement about the short story, and also puzzlement. Why did we lose—with all due respect to the short story as written by Eudora Welty, or Cheever or Alice Munro—but is that it? . . .

As a writer, my writing did not at all reflect my life as a reader. Just as the modern short story did not reflect its own history, my work did not reflect my life as a reader. I still read science fiction, I still read fantasy, I still read crime fiction. I still dig out the James Bond novels every once in a while. I like to read for pleasure, and pleasure for me is a really, really broad spectrum. I don't really discriminate by genre, I discriminate simply by quality. . . . But I apply that exact same standard to quote unquote literary fiction, and abandon just as much of it on the same grounds. I had to ask myself, "Why?" Just as I asked myself about the short story: Why would I want to become a writer who limits himself to this one little corner of the fictional map, when as a reader, I range freely all over it.

I didn't have a good answer. Well, I did have a good answer. I kinda had it drummed out of me and when I got to graduate school at UC-Irvine, I was writing science fiction. I was writing what I hoped was literate science fiction, on the model of J. G. Ballard and Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges and writers who were already on the borderline, especially in the case of Borges and Calvino, who were taken seriously and were considered to be literary writers but their work was obviously rooted in science fiction and crime fiction and so on.

What I was doing was overtly genre. I got such a cold shoulder in the workshops, from my fellow workshop mates and from teachers too. . . . I had the experience of having them say, 'I can't help you

with this.' They might even say, 'I gave this a look, but I don't read science fiction, I don't like science fiction. I can't help you.' I could have argued, I could have tried to persuade them. But I wanted to take advantage of this program I had gotten into, so I just adapted. It's not like I didn't love F. Scott Fitzgerald, or I didn't love John Cheever, I did. I loved that kind of work just as much. I didn't feel like I was sacrificing anything, I just changed directions and adapted to the situation, which is kind of my nature. And then I never looked back.

I met with success, so I didn't have any incentive to go back, until I reached this point where I began with this sense of dissatisfaction with my short fiction. It was coupled with, and had been creeping back a little bit in my work. In *Wonder Boys*, there's this character who's offstage the whole time, a horror writer, August Van Zorn. And so I got to kind of tease myself with that a little bit, to flirt with it a little bit. And when I embarked on writing *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, even though it is a naturalistic novel, [it] had big elements of comic book and fantasy, and so it had crept in, and now it was really starting to flow in. All of this came together, it transformed what I can and can't do as a writer, and how I think about what I can and can't do as a writer, to the point where my only rule now is to write the kind of books that I like to read, however I define that.

**LPR:** In many of your books, Judaism is pervasive, but many of your characters seem to be doubters. Could you talk about that?

**Chabon:** Yes. If you look at a book like *Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the main character is certainly a doubter. His partner tries to believe. And many of the characters are believers. I guess all of my point-of-view characters who are reckoning with Judaism tend to be doubters, and that probably reflects that I myself am a doubter. I think that inherently feels more interesting to me than to be a believer. Maybe it's that I'm so incapable of belief that I don't even know what that would feel like, to believe.

**LPR:** One of your characters from *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* calls her work as a detective "an appetite for people's stories." There seems to be a parallel between detectives and writers.

**Chabon:** Well, I think so, or at least writers think so.

**LPR:** I wonder if detectives think so.

**Chabon:** Exactly, I think it's all one-sided. I've never heard a police homicide detective compare what he or she does to writing. But

writers seem to compare what they do to detective work all the time. It seems that there would be natural parallels. The best of writers, like the best of detectives, are extremely observant, they notice small details. They're curious, maybe insatiably curious, about human behavior, about how things are and how they got that way. They are dogged, persistent. They are willing to devote time and effort to reconstructing how things must have happened, and to do that they draw heavily on their imagination and on their observations, and on the knowledge of human nature and behavior that they've acquired by dint of persistent observation of people's behavior around them. It seems like there would be parallels, but you never hear detectives talking about them.

**LPR:** You've said you had an attitude of "pre-emptive cynicism" toward Hollywood. Could you talk about that attitude and why you write for movies?

**Chabon:** I had sort of been warned by everything I had ever read, from Fitzgerald writing about Hollywood and its unhappy stories, and other memoirs and stories about Faulkner and Chandler working in Hollywood. There is vast wisdom on the subject, which recommends cynicism as the only viable strategy, so I didn't really have any choice in the matter. I was well educated to know what happened to writers in Hollywood, even before it began happening to me.

I had some provider anxiety that seized me when my wife and I were expecting our first child. And I thought, well, I know, I'm going to write a screenplay and sell it for a million dollars, 'cause that was an era where a couple of famous writers wrote screenplays and sold them for a million dollars. Why I thought that meant I would be able to do it is an object of some wonderment to me at this point. I decided that was what I was going to do, so I wrote a screenplay. I sold it for vastly less than a million dollars to a producer named Scott Rudin who then proceeded to send me on his dime, essentially, to screen-writing school, and to put me through draft after draft after draft on that script until I actually, at least rudimentarily, learned how to do it, which is more than what I had known when I started.

And the script that emerged from that process, although it didn't get produced, was a calling card for me. I was able to parlay it eventually into getting lots of different screen-writing assignments over the years. I have done a lot of unproduced screenwriting, and I have a couple of credits at this point. What I discovered was that even though I wasn't getting that huge paycheck, like I had imagined, is that there

is this amazing Writer's Guild that you have to belong to, that provides incredible health insurance and that, as a writer, is incredibly valuable to me. I kept doing it, for the longest time, to maintain that, because as my family grew, it became more and more important. And then, really to my surprise, somewhere along the way, I discovered that I enjoy it. I found it, especially when you're working on the first draft, certainly, to be every bit as engaging, artistically, as anything else. In a way, all of my cynicism went for naught, and they had me. Now I'm doomed because I actually care. I view it as a legitimate artistic employment, and that's when they have you at their mercy.

**LPR:** I've read that you listen to music, on vinyl, when you're writing.  
**Chabon:** I have to get up every twenty minutes to flip, and it forces me to get up and stretch and go to the bathroom, and take a little break to turn the record over. Twenty minutes is the recommended interval for people who counsel you on repetitive stress injury, or doctors who worry that sitting for too long is bad for your health. They say, get up every twenty minutes and take a break. And that's exactly how long the average vinyl side is. It's perfect therapy.

**LPR:** Does the music influence your writing?

**Chabon:** The music reflects my writing, I would say. Some music that I might listen to perfectly contentedly while I'm writing one particular project becomes completely inappropriate when I'm working on another, and I can't stand it at all. Sometimes I'm trying to set a mood, to get myself into a mood. When I was working on *Kavalier & Clay*, I listened to a lot of big band swing. Working on *Yiddish Policemen's Union* I listened to a fair amount of Klezmer music, not always, but certain passages.

Working on *Telegraph Avenue* I listened to tons of 1970s soul/jazz fusion music that was big at the time. It really helped me get into the mood and the spirit of the writing. Then there are pieces of music that transcend any project and they work for everything, like the music of Steve Reich, especially the "Music for 18 Musicians," which I've listened to probably, conservatively, 7,500 times. And just putting it on immediately puts me in the frame of mind to work and to concentrate.

**LPR:** So what's on your turntable now?

**Chabon:** Well, the project I'm working on now—I'm working on this TV pilot with my wife for HBO—it's a spy story called "Hobgoblin"

and for some reason Wagner is working for that. So I'm listening to a lot of Wagner, putting on these old big, boxed sets of Wagner's opera, so you can get the entire *Die Valkyrie* or *Gotterdammerung* on five discs in a cardboard box for \$3.

~Susan Thornton Hobby