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## Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*:

### The Return of the Golem\*

#### Alan L. Berger

Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, is marked by intricacy of plot structure and sophisticated use of language. Critics unanimously praised the work: *The New York Times* found the novel to be a "towering achievement," while the *Denver Post* described the author as a "literary Houdini." The novel utilizes different genres of creative writing including that of referencing comics in telling the story of both Prague-born Joseph Kavalier, who escapes from Europe on the eve of the *Shoah*, and his New York cousin Sammy Clay, née Klayman. In the process, Chabon's plot plays out against the background of America's pre-war isolationist policy that advocated an escape from moral responsibility. The novel in fact employs the metaphor of escape as a governing principle. Kavalier studies with an escape artist before escaping his natal city and the *Shoah*; Sammy overcomes or escapes the limitations of his physical handicap; the Holocaust is dealt with only obliquely.

*Kavalier & Clay* is comprised of two narratives, a longer and a shorter one. The former story deals with America and the history of the comic book industry and its oppression of creative artists between 1939 and 1955. The latter story treats response to the Holocaust in a distinctive yet problematic manner. Very few critics have, however, analyzed the novel in terms of Holocaust representation in the third, non-witnessing, generation of American-born novelists. Consequently, important issues such as the moral role of fiction, the relationship of imagination to history, and the contemporary use of Jewish myth in representing the *Shoah* have been largely elided.

### **Third Generation Novelists and the Holocaust**

Unlike Lot's wife, the third generation runs the risk of turning into pillars of salt if they do *not* look back. They are the new bearers of *Shoah* representation. But what does it mean to look back from a distance of three score years and ten? How do third generation authors represent the *Shoah* when they lack personal memory of the Jewish catastrophe? In short, third generation works represent the Holocaust through *indirect* means, as Jessica Lang argues in her insightful article "*The History of Love, the Contemporary Reader and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory*." Lang notes the common thread in the Holocaust writing of authors born in the 1960s or after, whose "fiction regularly refers to and incorporates events from the Holocaust, but it also balances and counters these references with other narrative strategies or counterpoints" (46). Furthermore, third generation authors view the Holocaust "as an indirect part of the narrative, one balanced by other, also important histories" (46). I add that these works tend to be inflected by the use of magical realism and motifs from Jewish myth, folklore, and mysticism.

Chabon's novel is, however, a significant departure from Nicole Kraus's *The History of Love* both in terms of distancing the Holocaust from American concerns and in the way it represents the *Shoah*. His "survivor," Joseph Kavalier, is a refugee who does not have firsthand experience of the camps. Furthermore, unlike Kraus's protagonist, Kavalier does not write a book. Rather, he *draws* over two thousand pages of the adventures of "The Escapist," an action hero based on the golem. Consequently, rather than confronting the horrors of the Holocaust, Chabon's protagonist seeks to escape them. Lee Behlman perceptively writes: "Chabon is most surprising, [in that] his novel guardedly presents the idea that . . . distraction may be itself a valid response. *Kavalier and Clay* is an extended meditation, with comic books as its central subject, on the value of fantasy as a deflective resource rather than a reflective one" (59). Moreover, unlike Art Spiegelman's *Maus* volumes, which use the comic format to bear witness to the real story of his father's Holocaust experience and Art's own traumatic inheritance as a member of the second generation, Chabon's novel avoids encountering the *Shoah*, suggesting instead that escapism is an appropriate response. The novel pivots on Will Eisner's comment, which serves as the book's epigraph: "We have this history of impossible solutions for insoluble problems."

### **Holocaust Representation in Chabon's Work**

Chabon's approach to writing about the Holocaust appears fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, he told an interviewer that "I think it's obvious from the way I have treated the subject, that I don't think I feel right about approaching it in any but the most indirect way" (qtd. in Maliszewski 6). On the other hand, however, he notes that "The Holocaust itself, in its overall scope and its particulars, just defies credulity, which makes it somewhat fertile territory for deniers" (5). He then provides warrant for his own literary treatment of the *Shoah* by contending: "But I

think we expect the incredible from the Holocaust” (5). In addition to *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, the Holocaust plays a role, although ambiguous and even deceptive, in Chabon’s *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* (2003) and in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007).

*The Final Solution* title is a literary tease, a misdirection that suggests one thing—the Holocaust—but provides quite another, a detective story. The work treats a mute German boy who is a Holocaust survivor and a talking parrot who repeats a series of numbers that may be a secret Nazi code. Sherlock Holmes comes out of retirement to solve the mystery of who kills the bird. Muteness means that the reader learns nothing of the *Shoah*. The conceit of *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is that after the Holocaust, and following the military defeat of the nascent State of Israel by Arab armies, Jews settle in Alaska, becoming “the frozen chosen.” The novel includes both implicit and explicit references to Holocaust survivors. Ex-partisans dig tunnels in case they have to fight again. Meyer Landsman, the novel’s detective protagonist is the son of a survivor who was a chess master. Landsman’s knowledge of the game enables him to solve a bizarre murder. As was the case during the Holocaust, messianic longing both continues and continues to go unfulfilled.

*Kavalier & Clay* can be read on many levels: it is a *kunstlerroman* and a Jewish-American immigrant novel that contrasts the naïveté and optimism of America with the ominous events in Europe. Furthermore, Chabon’s novel explores the role of comics as a serious contribution to American culture and as a means of escaping the grim reality of the Holocaust. The author steadfastly focuses on the major contribution of Jewish artists to comic books. Kavalier and Clay are loosely based on Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the Jewish creators of “Superman.” Moreover, as Behlman notes, the novel also is an expression of social realism in describing the unscrupulous ways of corporate culture, in the person of Sheldon Anapol, and his exploitive treatment of Kavalier and Clay (66). Chabon also employs his trademark concern about gay life and homophobia in writing about Sammy’s coming out of the closet and his abuse by the police department. There is also a vivid portrayal of Greenwich Village bohemian life in the person of Rosa Luxembourg Sax, who falls in love with Joseph. In addition, Chabon inserts cameo appearances by Salvador Dalí and Orson Welles as well as pivotal references to Harry Houdini.

Following a circuitous route Joseph arrives in America where he joins forces with his cousin Sammy, who fantasizes about writing the great American novel. The cousins produce a series of comic book heroes who vicariously defeat Nazism. Chief among these heroes is the “Escapist,” based on the golem, who singlehandedly knocks out Hitler and his armies. Joseph also seeks to rescue his young brother Tommy, who is trapped in Europe. Using the money he has made from his art he chartered a ship—*Ark of Miriam*—to bring several hundred children to America. Unlike the biblical Miriam, Moses’s sister who watches over him in the bulrushes, thereby ensuring his life and the Jewish people’s future, the doomed ship is sunk by a German torpedo. All aboard perish.

## **The Golem in Jewish Folklore**

Chabon is on firm ground in utilizing what he terms the “thinly fictionalized role [the Golem of Prague] plays in . . . *Kavalier & Clay* . . .” (*Maps & Legends* 183). Golem legends abound in the Jewish magical and mystical tradition. Moreover, Gershom Scholem notes, “the special fascination exerted by [the golem], in which so many authors found a symbol of the struggles and conflicts that were nearest their hearts” (158). The best known golem legend is that attributed to the sixteenth century scholar, Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, known as the *Maharal* (*Moreinu ha-Rav Rabbi Liva*). Although nothing in Loew’s vast writings concerns or even mentions the golem, his name is indissolubly linked with the creature. Perhaps, speculates Byron Sherwin, it is because of his stature as a “scholar, community leader, and national Bohemian hero” (19). Additionally, Judah Loew had achieved “fame as a wonder-worker” in Prague, and was invited by the emperor, Rudolph II, who had a personal interest in the kabbalah, to meet with him in his castle.

According to legend, Rabbi Loew and two disciples went to the banks of the Moldau River at four in the morning where they fashioned a golem on the river’s clay bank. Following a prescribed ritual, the rabbi placed a piece of paper containing the words *Adonai Emet*—“the Lord is Truth”—under the creature’s tongue. Thus animated, the creature stood. Loew named the golem Joseph (Yossele) because “he had implanted in him the spirit of Joseph Shida who was half-man and half-demon and had saved the sages of the Talmud from many trials and dangers” (Ausubel 608). Yet, as Hillel Kieval writes, it is important to note that the “golem legend “as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Polish rendition [viewed] the source of danger [as] residing within the confines of the community; in the very process of the creation of artificial life” (16). Kieval further argues that the tale is misremembered in the twentieth century “as if it had always been concerned with the danger posed by the outside world” (16). That is to say the golem was believed to protect the Jewish people from Christian mobs who, inflamed by the notorious blood libel, posed a mortal danger to Jewish life.

Rabbi Loew’s golem embodies three features: it is created to serve practical purposes; as a servant in the Loew home his task was to draw water from a well and to carry wood. Second, the golem, as we have noted, is potentially dangerous. Third, the golem can harm its creator. One of the versions of the Prague golem portrays the creature as flooding the *Maharal*’s house. The rabbi is summoned, overpowers the creature—removing the name of God from under its tongue, and carries the body to the attic of the Altneuschul on the eve of Shabbat. He then decrees that only his successors be permitted entrance to the attic.

In Chabon’s reworking of the Golem of Rabbi Loew tale, Joseph Kavalier, son of two secular Prague physicians, is a talented artist who studies techniques of escape with his mentor Bernard Kornblum, an eastern European *Ausbrecher* (escape artist). With the German army occupying Prague, the Jewish secret society responsible for the golem’s safety enlists the aid of Kornblum in rescuing the slumbering giant before the German army can ship its remains to Berlin. The golem’s remains

had previously been spirited out of the *Altneuschul*—and hidden in an apartment house. The plan is to send the golem to Vilna.

### **The Golem of Michael Chabon**

Chabon compares the novelist to the maker of a golem: “the relationship between a golem and its creator is usually viewed as a metaphor for that between the work of art—in my case, a novel—and its creator” (*Maps & Legends* 183). Chabon’s novel, however, links the themes of physical escape with the escapism found in comic books, magic, and Jewish folklore tinged with mysticism. He refers to the “bitter truth of golems” writing:

A golem, like a lie, is the expression of a wish: a wish for peace and security a wish for strength and control; a wish to know, in a tiny human way, a thousandth of a millionth of the joy and power of the Greater Creation. (187)

Literature, attests Chabon, “like magic has always been about the handling of secrets, about the pain, the destruction, and the marvelous liberation that can result when they are revealed” (155). However, literature representing the Holocaust typically eschews the possibility of truly revealing secrets. Moreover, is it possible to ever feel “marvelous liberation” when writing of the *Shoah*? Chabon’s advocacy of escape from the *Shoah* is of course conditioned by time and space. He refers to himself as “a lucky man living in a lucky time in the luckiest country in the world” (154). Chabon is of course writing as an American whose worldview is not drenched in the blood of Europe.

Kavalier encounters bureaucratic difficulties seeking to leave Prague. Therefore, he joins forces with Kornblum to discover in which apartment house the golem is hidden. Disguising themselves as workers, they tell the building superintendent that the Jewish council sent them to survey the building in order to monitor the movement of Jews within Prague. By means of a ruse requiring all the building’s Jewish inhabitants to put a blue Star of David in the window, the pair discover the golem’s hiding place—it is the window without a star. As an aside it is worth noting that Kornblum utters the word “contemptible.” But Joseph was unclear whether his mentor referred to “the ruse itself, the (Nazis) who made (their story) plausible, the Jews who had (willingly complied), or (Kornblum) himself for having perpetrated it” (45). Chabon here implicitly criticizes alleged Jewish complicity in their own demise.

Disguising the golem as a “dead goyishe giant,” dressed in an oversize man’s suit and secreting Joseph in the casket’s concealed compartment, Kornblum has the casket loaded on a train headed to Lithuania where the golem and Kavalier subsequently arrive. At this point in the story, Chabon turns his attention from the liberated pair to focus on the subsequent adventures of Joseph. The physical remains of the golem do not reappear until the end of the novel, although symbolically the golem is present as comic book, as inspiration, and as therapeutic healer.

The novel’s story takes place primarily in America. Joseph meets and falls in

love with Rosa Luxemburg Sax and has a child with her. But he had left to join the navy without knowing of her pregnancy. The navy sends him to a listening post in Alaska. While there, he kills a German. By this device Chabon implies the futility of revenge for the Holocaust. During Joe's extended disappearance and silence, Sammy lives with Rosa. Together they raise Joseph's son Tommy. Joseph reappears in their lives. Rosa and Joseph reunite while Sammy seeks fulfillment of his gay lifestyle in Los Angeles. The casket of the golem, bearing Lithuanian shipping labels, mysteriously arrives at the end of the novel. Whereas the casket had been nearly weightless in Prague, in New York it is heavy, prompting Joe to speculate that the dust that once had been the mud of the Moldau contains the souls of the murdered Jews of Europe.

Chabon's use of the golem has given rise to various interpretations. Behlman contends that the figure "represents both the dead hope of Jewish life in Europe and the ever-living promise of Jewish creativity, which can be transferred to the new world" (63). Nicola Morris suggests that the golem is a "metaphor for power and powerlessness" (16-22). The creature was powerless to save the Jews of Europe, but it did save Joseph both physically and later in America psychologically. I will return to this idea shortly. Chabon himself combines the dimension of renewal and power in having Joe contrast the golem's use in literature and folklore, from Rabbi Loew to Victor von Frankenstein, with his own use of the figure.

The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something – one poor, dumb, powerful thing – exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the straightjacket of physical laws. (582)

It is instructive at this point to contrast Chabon's golem with traditional understandings of the creature, noting several ironic reversals. The sixteenth and seventeenth century versions of the golem posit the creature as saving the Jewish people. In Chabon's reworking, the golem is saved by Joseph and Kornblum. Furthermore, in being smuggled out of Prague in a casket, Joseph replicates the act of Yohanan ben Zakkai who, Jewish folklore attests, fled Jerusalem, which was besieged by the Romans in the year 70 CE. The vital difference is, of course, that whereas Yohanan ben Zakkai founded the first rabbinic academy (in Yavneh), thereby birthing a transition from Temple religion to Rabbinic Judaism that enabled Judaism to survive, Chabon's protagonist saves only himself.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Chabon's golem is that his creature flees the enemy, whereas traditional assertions contend that the golem's fearsomeness causes the enemy to flee. But in 1945, a Holocaust survivor from Prague, who was not religious, told a story about the golem, which confirms the tale's power even in the face of Nazi evil.

The Golem did not disappear and even in the time of war it went out of its hiding place in order to safeguard the synagogue. When the Germans occupied Prague, they decided to destroy the Altneuschul. They came to do it; suddenly, in the silence of the synagogue, the steps of a giant walking on the roof, began to be heard. They saw a shadow of a giant hand falling from the window onto the floor . . . The Germans were terrified and they threw away their tools and fled [sic] away in panic. I know that there is a rational explanation for everything; the synagogue is ancient and each and every slight knock generates an echo that reverberates many times, like steps or thunder. Also the glasses of the windows are old, the windowpanes are crooked and they distort the shadows, forming strange shades on the floor. A bird's leg generates a shade of a giant hand on the floor . . . and nevertheless . . . there is something. (Idel 256)

The survivor's story, unlike Chabon's novel, affirms the golem's traditional task of scattering the enemies of the Jewish people. The golem is neither powerless nor inert. Moreover, the golem's act concerned not an individual Jew, as is the case with Joseph Kavalier; rather, the creature saves the Jewish House of Worship. This version may be a fantasy, but it is not a lie. Nor does it embrace the concept of escape from the *Shoah*.

The golem as a "gesture of hope" serves a therapeutic purpose in Chabon's novel via the medium of comic books. Kavalier muses first on the escapist role played by comics.

Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history-his home-the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. (575)

Escape from reality seemed "a worthy challenge, especially right after the war." Drawing *The Golem* occupied all of Joseph's time and helped heal him psychically.

And as he dreamed, night after night at his drawing table, the long and hallucinatory tale of a wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem, that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit world whose safety had been entrusted to it, Joe came to feel that the work – telling this story- was helping to heal him. (577)

The *Golem* functions as nothing less than Joseph's "writing therapy," "secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution."

### **Chabon's Use of Other Myths**

Chabon also reworks the Talmudic myth of the Lamed Vov Zaddikim, which contends that the world exists owing to the presence of thirty-six hidden righteous men. These individuals, hidden because their generation is unworthy, are tasked with



fighting evil. The Zaddikim, or “just” men, frequently need to descend into evil’s depths in order to extricate Jews who have fallen into its clutches. This is termed the “descent in behalf of the ascent.” Moreover, the Zaddik is one who puts things in their proper place, thereby restoring a notion of cosmic order that enables humanity to live in spite of apparent injustice or disorder.

Chabon’s retelling of the myth involves inventing “The League of the Golden Key,” a secret society whose members “roamed the world acting, always anonymously, to procure the freedom of others, whether physical or metaphysical, emotional or economic.” The Golden Key’s foes were agents of the “Iron Chain” whose aim was the enslavement of humanity. The novelist appears to suggest by this literary invention that escapism—the Golden Key—can rescue individuals from what Max Weber termed the “iron cage” of history. Tom Mayflower, the crippled apprentice to his magician uncle Max, is cured of his affliction upon receiving the golden key from the mortally wounded Max. Tom raises the key and swears “a sacred oath to devote himself to secretly fighting the evil forces of the Iron Chain in Germany or wherever they raise their ugly heads and to working for the liberation of all who toil in chains—as the Escapist.”

Chabon also offers readers “Luna Moth,” a feminist tale of the transformation of Miss Judy Dark, “Under-Assistant Cataloguer of Decommissioned Volumes,” whose office is deep underground in the Empire City Public Library. Interrupting the theft of an important artifact, the Book of Lo, Judy is electrocuted by a live wire, becoming Luna Moth, a creature who receives instructions from the Cimmerian moth goddess Lo. Lo tells her that Cimmeria, once ruled by women, was a peaceful Queendom overthrown by men who “have been making a hash of things.” Lo tells her new disciple that “she has only to imagine something to make it so.” Henceforth, Judy/Luna will “haunt the night”—a time when evil often occurs—and defeat the evil ones. The fantasy scene culminates with Luna Moth rescuing the Book of Lo and freeing the kidnapped library guard. In Chabon’s telling, these various myths each offer an angle of vision on the escape motif where the imagination overcomes physical death and suffering.

## **Conclusion**

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* illustrates both the possibilities and challenges of third generation Holocaust representation. On the one hand, Chabon seeks to acknowledge both the bond and the barrier existing between Jews on the American and European sides of the Atlantic. He recognizes that American innocence must yield before the enormity of the Holocaust. And he skillfully portrays the isolationist sentiment in America and the reluctance to antagonize Germany prior to America’s eventual entry into World War II. Moreover, escaping the nightmare of Auschwitz, at least temporarily, may enable one to continue one’s existence. It is, after all the case, that apart from a very few survivor memoirs, American novelists did not begin responding to the Holocaust for approximately fifteen years after the War.

On the other hand, the novel endorses a typically American embrace of the happy ending. Joe is reunited with Rosa and their son. Moreover, the protagonist is at peace psychologically and emotionally. He has, with the “help” of the golem, worked through the trauma of having lost his entire family, thereby enabling him to achieve at least a temporary *tikkun* (healing/repair). But this *tikkun* is of the self (*aztmi*). It does not address the broader and classically Jewish notion of *tikkun ha’olam* (repair of the world). Further, visiting Houdini’s grave, Joe muses on the distinction between hope and belief: “No; he could be ruined again and again by hope, but he would never be capable of belief.” This distinction is important but ultimately misleading. While it is certainly true that the *Shoah* destroyed the possibility of belief for some survivors, for others it was a reaffirmation of their faith. The faith and doubt of Holocaust survivors is a complex issue, and while Chabon’s novel emphasizes the destruction of hope, it does so at the expense of admitting the possibility of continued faith after Auschwitz.

A further word needs to be said about Chabon’s Holocaust representation. He utilizes magic and mysticism as they coalesce in the golem figure. Consequently, the *Shoah* is transformed into a metaphor and there is no distinction between the mysticism of hope and the Nazi mysticism of death. As John Podhoretz writes:

The Jews of Central Europe, both those who were murdered and those who escaped murder, were ordinary people. In attempting to memorialize them and pay tribute to their suffering, Chabon descends into a false mysticism. It is true that their tradition featured a certain mystical strain, but it is also horrifically true that mysticism was among the forces that led to their extermination—an evil mysticism that promised the world would be purified by their removal. (71-72)

Moreover, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* generalizes the *Shoah* so that Europe’s murdered Jews are a nameless and anonymous group whose memory may, or may not, be for a blessing.

What is the moral responsibility of the novelist? On the one hand, while the reader’s first impulse may be to recoil at Chabon’s new direction in Holocaust representation, it may be that embedding the Holocaust in a broader narrative is one way to ensure that readers are reminded of the Jewish catastrophe. In the post-modern and multicultural world, novelists need to determine ways in which to navigate the shape-shifting contours between the particular and the universal in a new and challenging environment. However, I cannot avoid the uneasy feeling that it is one thing for Elie Wiesel to write: “The ghetto was ruled by neither German nor Jew; it was ruled by delusion” (12). At that time the Jews of Hungary did not understand that they were to be exterminated. It is quite another thing for Chabon to advocate escapism at a time when everything is known, at least about whom the Holocaust was designed to eliminate and why. Finally, there are two unhappy results of escapism. The first is that one cannot escape the Holocaust any more than one can escape the impact of Rome’s destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Second, escapism leads to forgetting. And forgetting is the ultimate form of Holocaust denial.

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