



The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay

by Michael Chabon

Content Synopsis

“The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay” opens in October 1939 with the meeting of Czech-born Josef Kavalier and his American cousin Sammy Klayman at the latter’s Brooklyn apartment. Kavalier has recently arrived from San Francisco, via Japan, as part of an effort to smuggle himself and the legendary Golem of Prague, a giant-sized clay homunculus believed to come to life in moments of crisis to defend the city’s Jewish Ghetto, from under the noses of the Nazis who were occupying Czechoslovakia. The two young men collaborate to create the Escapist, a comic book character meant to rival the new and commercially very lucrative Superman, appearing for the last two years in National Periodical’s “Action Comics.” The Escapist is Tom Mayflower, a Houdini-esque theatrical escape artist by day, but when night falls he fights alongside the League of the Golden Key, “coming to the aid of those who languish in tyranny’s chains” (121) and against the evil organization of slavers, the Iron Chain. The Escapist makes his debut in “Amazing Midget Radio Comics” under a Kavalier-painted cover of the Escapist punching Hitler in the jaw; this new character is a great success.

Sammy, under the pseudonym “Sam Clay,” writes “The Escapist” as the fulfillment of a wish to be able-bodied, since he is nearly lame

following a childhood bout with polio. But he also harbors the desire to be blonde and Protestant (Mayflower as a surname is a transparent marker of waspishness). For Joe Kavalier, the Escapist not only makes heroic his own short-lived career as an escape artist in Prague, but also feeds his desire to take action against the Nazi army who euphemistically “superintend” his Jewish family in Prague. Through the comic, he is able to fight Hitler. Joe puts the money he makes drawing the Escapist into a fund to free his family, going so far as to substantially bankroll a ship, the “Ark of Miriam,” whose mission is to take Eastern European Jewish children (including his younger brother Thomas) from a Catholic orphanage in Lisbon to the United States. In 1940, Joe briefly considers joining the Royal Armed Forces to join the fight against the Nazis more directly, but Clay is able to talk him out of it.

The Escapist makes the two cousins stars. Invited to a surrealist Greenwich Village garden party where Salvador Dali is the guest of honor, Joe meets Rosa Luxembourg Saks, the daughter of the host, and she becomes his lover and the inspiration for Judy Dark, a. k. a. Luna Moth, the first female superhero and the anchor of an anthology title of female characters called “All Doll Comics.” Sammy discovers homosexual longings he never

before acknowledged, and is seduced by tall, broad, and blonde Tracy Bacon, the voice of the Escapist on the radio serial adapted from the comic book. Kavalier and Clay don't own the copyright to character of the Escapist, having signed over all rights for a flat fee when they first brought the character to Empire Comics partners Sheldon Anapol and Jack Ashkenazy. Sammy and Joe are both making very good money, and Joe is able to sponsor a dozen other children on the "Ark of Miriam" beside his brother Thomas, but this is nowhere near the amount of money Empire Comics is making. This situation is grounded in a reality of the history of comics; Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, who created Superman, were bilked of their share of the profits, as would be Jack Kirby and many other significant comics creators.

In exchange for a 5% stake in future radio, moving picture, and merchandising revenues, Sammy perjures himself in a deposition that he did not create the Escapist as a rival to Superman, a preemptive legal maneuver Empire Comics is forced to make because National Comics, Superman's copyright holder, is trying to push all their comic book rivals out of business by claiming all costumed superheroes infringe on their copyright. Joe goes along to earn more money, to be able to save yet more Jewish children, but three days before the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, a German U-Boat sinks the "Ark of Miriam," with Thomas Kavalier aboard. For days, Joe is consumed by grief, but when, after Pearl Harbor, the United States enters the war, Joe enlists in the Navy, finally able to fight and ready to kill.

Simultaneous to the sinking of the "Ark of Miriam," Sammy has accompanied Tracy Bacon to a weekend retreat with other, prominent homosexual couples. When the retreat is raided by the police, Sammy fellates a police officer to keep his identity out of the police reports and press, and decides that his secret is too damning to risk revealing. He decides to stay behind instead of accompanying

Tracy to California, who has made the leap from being simply vocal talent to landing the role of the Escapist in the motion picture serials contracted by Parnassus Films. After starring in two "Escapist" motion picture serials, Tracy joins the Air Force and is shot down and killed over Europe.

The novel, up till this point a nearly day-by-day record of life for the two men in the two years after the 1939 genesis of the Escapist, skips ahead two years to 1943 to find Joe at the Kelvinator Station, a Navy listening post in Antarctica. An accident asphyxiates everyone at the station but Joe, a Navy pilot named Shannenhouse, and a dog, Oyster. Alone, and forced to wait months before a September thaw will allow for the possibility of rescue, both men begin to go insane. Pushed beyond the limits of boredom, Joe reads through a sheaf of letters sent to him, over the last two years, by Rosa, letters that until then he had never read but put away unopened. In the letters, Rosa explains that after he left, she married Sammy and was having his child, a boy they named Tommy in honor of Joe's late brother. Later letters include photographs, more details of the birth and little Tommy's development. Read at the time they were sent, it would be easy to swallow Rosa's story. But read back to back and with nothing else to occupy his mind, Joe notices the chronological and developmental inconsistencies in the story of little Tommy, and arrives at the correct conclusion that Tommy is his son.

Still trying to complete his listening post mission, Joe intercepts transmissions from a German geologist, named Klaus Mecklenburg, the sole survivor of an incident at a German station on the other side of the frozen continent. Joe convinces Shannenhouse to fly the two of them there so that Joe can kill this German in retaliation for his brother's death. Between chapters and strangely unnarrated, the plane crashes and Shannenhouse is killed; fueled by hatred and the need for revenge, Joe manages to get the plane in the air again, but when he finally stands facing the German scientist,

his anger evaporates, but not before he accidentally kills the man. Joe wanders to an abandoned German camp at the shore of the Weddell Sea, fueled by morphine to dull the pain of his injuries and to counteract the cold, and is rescued.

The novel skips another ten years between chapters, this time taking us to Bloomtown, NY in 1953. Sammy and Rosa live in the model Long Island suburb; their son Tommy is twelve and up to something; he is caught twice playing hooky, and on occasion glimpsed wearing an eye patch despite his relative ocular health. It transpires that Tommy has been visiting with Joe Kavalier, whom he has been told is his uncle, but who hasn't been seen by the rest of his family since 1941 (Joe went underground after recovering from the Antarctic experience). Joe has illegally taken up residence in an office in the Empire State Building, and it becomes clear he is trapped, unable to reconnect with his old life. Tommy concocts a scheme to flush Joe out of hiding that snowballs till Sammy is called to the Empire State Building to watch Joe, dressed in Tracy Bacon's old Escapist costume, preparing to jump from the building's observation deck, with only rubber bands tied around his waist to stop his fall. The stunt fails, but Joe only falls a few stories; he is injured, not killed. Reunited with his cousin at last, Joe is evicted from the office in which he'd been living, and agrees to live with the Clays in Bloomtown till he decides what to do next. He has all his things, mainly 102 boxes of comics, shipped from his office to the suburban address. Another crate finds him there as well; shipped by an unknown agent, the Golem of Prague finally arrives at the end of its globe-spanning peregrinations, now disincorporated and reduced to a pile of river mud.

After their reunion, Joe shows Sammy what he has been working on for the last decade, a forty-nine chapter comic epic centered on the Golem of Jewish folklore. Nearly wordless, it is thousands of pages long, and, as Sammy confirms when he

skims the pages, a masterpiece. Sheldon Anapol explains to the two creators that National Comics copyright-infringement suit is finally coming due after winding through the courts for a decade. He has decided to settle, and to give the copyright to the character of the Escapist to National Comics. He is looking to sell Empire Comics, and Sammy is tempted to buy it, even though the sale would not include the rights to the character he and Kavalier made famous. He and Joe make plans to buy the company: maybe they will publish the Golem comic Joe has drawn. There is, however, a historical interruption that will stand in the way of the creative reunion of the two friends.

Sammy's predisposition to create kid side-kicks for the costumed heroes he writes makes him a target of psychologist Frederic Wertham's book "Seduction of the Innocent," a study that seeks to link juvenile delinquency, immorality, and homosexuality to reading comic books. Congress holds investigative sessions to determine the truth of these charges, and Sammy is subpoenaed to talk about his writing. Testifying in televised hearings held in New York, Sammy is outed as a homosexual by Senators Kefauver, Hennings, and Hendrickson. This reveals to everyone the sham-conventionality of his marriage to Rosa, which Joe at least thought was a genuine heterosexual union. Sammy is at first shattered by this unmasking, but then comes to see this as his chance to escape the life he has made for himself and go to California as he should have done with Tracy Bacon back in 1941. He explains this desire to Rosa and Joe, who has usurped Sammy's place in the marital bed while Sammy has taken Joe's place on the couch. And then, while the two reunited lovers sleep, Sammy departs for the West Coast.

Historical Context

The turbulent social history of the middle decades of the 20th Century plays a determinate role at several key moments in Chabon's novel.

The novel's opening suite detailing Josef's escape from Prague is informed by the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, and when in New York City, Chabon regularly updates his reader with what information would have been available to Joe about the ongoing "superintendence" of the Jewish community in Prague. Similarly, the creation of the Escapist follows the 1937 publication of Superman's first adventures, in "Action Comics," at a time of explosive growth in the number of superhero titles and characters to take advantage of the interest in the Last Son of Krypton.

In other instances, Chabon's history is less exact; as he explains in his "Author's Note" at the end of the novel, "I have tried to respect history and geography wherever doing so served my purposes as a novelist, but wherever it did not I have, cheerfully or with regret, ignored them" (637). There was no actual "Ark of Miriam" whose sinking motivates Joe to join the Army, though German U-Boats were known to harass the Atlantic shipping lanes. Likewise, Bloomtown, Sammy and Rosa's model suburban community on Long Island is clearly patterned on Levittown, but it is not that first, famous planned suburb, only one of its innumerable imitators.

In other cases, the historical record impinges on the novel in more significant ways: the court case "National Periodical Publications, Inc. v. Empire Comics, Inc." whose settlement signals the end of the publication of the Escapist's adventures, is patterned closely on another suit which when settled did end the publication of the Captain Marvel character because of real and imagined similarities to Superman (similarities that, cosmetically at least, are much easier to see than those between the Escapist and Superman). And Frederic Wertham's book "Seduction of the Innocent" did lead to Senate inquiries into whether comic books encourage delinquency, homosexuality, and moral decline. As Chabon implies (623), though, there was no second day of New York testimony, and

obviously, no historical testimony offered by Sammy Clay.

Those characters Chabon created in his novel regularly rub elbows with historical persons; Salvador Dali and Orson Welles, obviously, were real people, though Rosa Saks father and host of the surrealist garden party where Joe meets Rosa, Longman Harkoo, is not. The kaffe klatch that meets at the Excelsior Café (likely named after Stan Lee's famous 1960s sign-off in his Marvel Comics editorials) is a mixture of real and invented characters. The real Gil Kane sits beside the imaginary Julie Glovitz. Likewise, the lists of comics titles and characters Chabon periodically gives the reader are a mix of real imaginary characters and imagined imaginary ones; if one didn't already know, it would be hard to tell the two apart, since they are all equally ludicrous.

Chabon notes that this novel, and all his work, is indebted to the work of Jack Kirby (639), one half of a series of partnerships that created some of the most enduring characters in comics history (The Hulk, The X-Men, The Fantastic Four, etc). History is unclear how much of these characters are his, and how much of them rightly belongs to his collaborators, a situation parallel to that which Joe faces; like Kavalier and Clay, Kirby never saw a fraction of the revenue generated by his creations, and at the time of his death was still struggling to have his original art returned to him from Marvel Comics. This story, sadly, is repeated throughout the history of comics.

Other figures, less clearly acknowledged, but still instrumental to the story, include Will Eisner, whose pioneering page layouts in "The Spirit" reappear in the splash pages of Kavalier's "The Golem." Likewise, Luna Moth and her psychedelic adventures owe a debt to Steve Ditko's 1960s work, through the character design and basic character of Nightshade, and the other-dimensional adventures of Dr. Strange. To make Kavalier's influence on the world of comics more profound, Chabon regularly

collapses the actual timeline of comics' development. So, in 1954, Kavalier has finished what is essentially the first graphic novel, about two decades before the actual publication of those texts who vie for the title now (Joe Sternanko's "Chandler: Red Tide," Will Eisner's "A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories," or Gil Kane's "His Name is.... Savage"). The character of the Escapist bears more than a passing resemblance to Mister Miracle, a super-escape artist created by Jack Kirby for DC Comics in the 1970s. And the stylistic revolutions and evolutions of Kavalier's pencil and ink work prefigure the best work of fifty years of dozens of actual cartoonists.

Societal Context

The historical time period Chabon mines for his novel allows him to explore the intersections of three marginal communities: Jewish, homosexual, and comic book artists.

It makes for a potent stew in the novel: nearly all the comic artists in the novel are Jewish, and Chabon suggests more than once that the Jewish need to be at once part of and separate from mainstream American culture informs the ways in which superhero characters, with their alter egos and masked identities, their double lives, develop. Chabon is not the first to notice the uniquely Jewish nature of Superman's character, and the story of Joe's escape from Prague, the last son of a community that is essentially wiped out, and his settling on welcoming but foreign shores, is not only the stereotypical immigrant story, but also a real world analogue of Superman's origin.

Likewise, Sammy Clay's nascent homosexuality implies another way to read the double lives of comic characters. His desire, first for the character he creates, then for the living embodiment of that character, Tracy Bacon, suggests a perfected narcissism: the desire for a better positioned, more culturally privileged version of the self. This same desire, perhaps, inspires Clay to create kid

sidekicks, since in his relationship with the tall and blonde Tracy Bacon, he sees himself as the sidekick. Chabon himself is deliberately ambiguous when he talks about the importance of homosexual desire in Clay's creation of these sidekicks; Clay notes that sales jump 22% when a sidekick is introduced, and it's unclear if the reason for this is some sort of latent homosexual identification or simply a broader desire for younger readers to locate a character with whom they can identify in their escapist fantasies. Chabon is a lot less ambiguous about the corrosive effects of Clay's secrecy regarding his sexual orientation, and it is clear in the book's final chapters that it is only by "escaping" conventional standards of appropriate desire that Clay can be happy.

None of the main characters make a big deal out of practicing Judaism, but nearly all of them operate in a Jewish demimonde that provides a social backdrop for the novel: a key moment in Clay's relationship with Bacon is taking the actor to his mother's Shabbat meal. And Joe Kavalier has an emotionally rewarding sideline business as a stage magician at the bar mitzvah's of boys who are the natural fans of the Escapist. Judaism, in this way, introduces to the novel a series of cultural benchmarks that have a lot to do with daily life and little to do with the explicitly supernatural elements of religious practice. Except, of course, for the Golem, who in the novel is evidence of the supernatural, and in other ways is the divine spark that sets Kavalier and Clay going.

Religious Context

As noted above, most characters in the novel are raised as part of a Jewish milieu that connects them to a common experience, whether they are American like Sammy or European like Joe. This background functions, mostly, as more of a social than a religious touchstone, but the influence of Jewish mysticism and myth is relevant, especially when it concerns the Golem and Kabala.

The Golem, both Rabbi Loew's Golem of Prague that Joe helps to liberate from its city of origin, and "The Golem," Joe's long, nearly wordless graphic novel, exist as fantastic commentaries on the creative process. Mythically, the Golem is made of clay, and life is "breathed" into him by carving letters from the Hebrew alphabet into his forehead. In this way, "breath" becomes "speech," a communicative act that summons the Golem into being. In Jewish tradition, there is talk of a line of Golems who have, at different times, protected and served the Jewish people, including even a clay goat, talked into life and then killed for its meat so that its creators would not starve.

When Joe first tries to draw what Sammy describes as a superhero, he draws a Golem, which then evolves, after a weekend of cigarettes, coffee, and hours of talk, into the Escapist. Later, he plots and draws the epic graphic novel he calls "The Golem" that explores the history of the Golem in relation to the history of the Jews. This work also features appearances by the archangels of Kabala, the mystical and numerological arm of Judaism.

From what we are told, "The Golem," as a work, seems a history of sorts. The motivating idea, though, seems to be the way language, and speech, lend animation to a man (Joe Kavalier) and a people (the Jews) via the intercession of a divine spark, breath shaped into words. As Ken Kalfus noted in his review of the novel for the *New York Times*, "Chabon... always returns to the incantatory power of the word."

John Podhoretz, writing about Kavalier and Clay in the magazine *Commentary* sees the pile of dirt the Golem of Prague becomes, when it has finished its travels and finds Joe in the garage of the Bloomtown house as Chabon's recognition of what became of the Jews in ghettos in Prague, Krakow, and Lviv. It is true that Rosa mistakes the Moldau Rover mud as ashes, and recoils in

horror at the implication when the crate is first opened. But this reading feels to me a little overstated, given the relative calm with which Joe confronts the evidence. Instead, Joe speculates that the Golem has degraded to dirt because the soul has gone out of it, and it's easiest to believe that's what Chabon means by having it lose its animation in America.

Scientific & Technological Context

The physical facts of early comic book publishing played a strong role transforming Josef Kavalier, late of the Prague School of Fine Arts, into Joe Kavalier, penciller and inker of the Escapist, the Luna Moth, the Four Freedoms, and Mr. Machine Gun. Printed on the same rolling presses as newspapers, and onto crude wood pulp, the cheapest grade of paper available, the fine feathering of Josef's early work would not reproduce on the inside pages of the comic (the covers, printed with different stock, are where Joe does his most artistic work, like his famous cover of the Escapist punching Hitler). Joe's art evolves to be at once bolder and more simple, because this is the extent of what the poor quality reproductions will allow. The path followed by Chester Gould, artist of the blocky and thick-lined Dick Tracy newspaper comic, is parallel to that Chabon assigned to Kavalier; as Dennis Drabelle notes in *Civilization*, "Gould overcame... the pulpy pages... by drawing shapes so strong that you hardly notice their flatness." Writing for *American History*, Richard Marshall explains that "factors of technology and commerce played important roles in the birth of the comic strip," and the limited technology, and the limits of what men like Sheldon Anapol were willing to spend on as uncertain a venture as costumed superheroes meant that the work was kept basic and primal. It was working in this vein, however, that Joe became a legend, an inspiration via his line to both the surrealists and the pop artists after them.

Biographical Context

“The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay” marks a transitional period in Michael Chabon’s writing. It’s the fifth book in a career marked by what critics note as strong early promise in his first novel, “The Mysteries of Pittsburgh,” and a well-received movie adaptation of his second novel, “Wonder Boys,” starring Michael Douglas and Tobey Maguire. Two short story collections also predate the writer’s third novel.

The differences between this novel and his earlier works is worth remarking upon. In the first place, “Kavalier & Clay” is a closely observed and research intensive work of historical fiction. Its setting is also striking: in his previous novels, Chabon had carved out a niche for himself by setting his novels in the also-ran cities of the Eastern seaboard, Pittsburgh where he was born and Baltimore. But in this novel, Chabon trades that distinctive quality to immerse himself, and his narrative, in New York City. That said, he tackles the project with gusto, indulging internecine borough squabbles like a native.

Likewise, Sammy Clay’s questions about his sexuality echo the casual bisexuality of Art Bechstein, the protagonist of “The Mysteries of Pittsburgh.” In this new novel, though, the theme of struggle over finding oneself is developed in a more closely observed context: Clay struggles with his attraction to men, unlike Bechstein who is blasé and a bit omnivorous in his sexual conquests. All of this, of course, emanates from the imagination of a writer who is happily married with children.

As much as this aspect of the novel looks back to Chabon’s earlier work, the sustained interest in “Kavalier & Clay” in genre writing charts a progression that, so far, has dominated his subsequent work: the first book Chabon published after this one was “Summerland,” a novel for children that some have described as an American entree into the Harry Potter marketplace. This was followed

by “The Final Solution,” a detective novel, and not, as a reader of “Kavalier & Clay” might imagine, an exploration of Hitler’s policies toward the Jews.

As a child, Chabon was given comics to read by his father, and he cites this early exposure to the brightly colored adventures as the secret origin of his interest in superhero comics (Tobias). He has shown an sustained engagement with genre writing beyond these books he’s written: speaking at the 2004 Eisner Awards Ceremony, an industry event where comics professionals honor their own, Chabon scolded publishers for chasing an adult audience at the expense of their character’s appeal to children, and he proposed several ideas that would, he says, bring kids back to comics. In that Eisner keynote speech, he develops the importance of escapism in a way that is consonant with the novel, but in this new formulation, the only ones who get to escape are young people. This is in direct contrast to how Lee Behlman, in “SHOFAR,” sees “Kavalier & Clay” as “remarkable for the intimate ways it shows how much pleasure and value may be found in producing and reading fantasy,” especially for American audiences and artists wrestling with the disparities between “the unbridgeable historical divide between a relatively comfortable American Jewish present and the dark European Jewish past.” It is difficult, at times, to reconcile what Chabon seems to be after in his novel (the way pulp and genre literature managed the tensions of its adult writers) and what he proposes now for how pulp and genre writing is, or ought to be, consumed by its audience. He has also written a number of short essays under the name Malachi B. Cohen; in this guise, he has extended the publishing history of the Escapist beyond the embargo leveled against the character in 1954. Under the masthead of a prodigiously profligate series of small publishing houses, Cohen tells of the further published adventures of the Escapist and the Luna Moth, adventures that reflect contemporary trends

in comics, such as the socially relevant comics of the 1970s, and the grim-n-gritty style of the 1990s. One of these essays was published in “The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist,” an anthology of comics creators creating Escapist stories to flesh out these publication histories; for the first time in February 2004, the Escapist saw print in a superhero comic, making the belated transformation into real imaginary superhero.

Chabon’s novel played a role in the rehabilitation of comics as a site for legitimate literary work. He has also taken up arms alongside Dave Eggers and his McSweeney’s Press to promote a return to genre prose writing by established authors, and has edited a collection of pulp writing for the press. It’s possible to read the theme of escapism that runs through the novel in contradictory ways, but Chabon’s comments are less ambiguous about simultaneously enjoying pulp writing and denying its potential as worthy of “serious” attention.

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