



MICHAEL CHABON

A writer with many faces



BY BRYON CAHILL

“At the beginning of the summer I had lunch with my father, the gangster, who was in town for the weekend to transact some of his vague business.”

I read the sentence again, this time aloud to the empty classroom. This, the opening line of Michael Chabon's debut novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, was my first introduction to the man. I was in my senior year of college, and a respected writing professor had just handed me the book and told me to “get a load of this Chabon fellow; he does a lot of interesting things in his writing that I think you'll appreciate.”

Eager to read on, I smiled at the “vague business” and ran to the edge of the campus, down by the Hudson River, to escape into the book. Before long, I knew I had discovered a writer of great talent, one from whom I could learn just by reading his words. I had no idea who this “Chabon fellow” was outside of the book; I only knew that there had better be more.

THE WRITER AND ME

Michael Chabon has been keeping himself extremely busy since 1987, when he wrote *Pittsburgh* while in graduate school. He has written everything from adult novels and short stories to children's literature and comic books. He even helped write the screenplay for *Spider-Man 2*. Oh, yeah, and did I mention that he also picked up a Pulitzer Prize along the way?

Now 41, Chabon resides in northern California with his wife, Ayelet Waldman (also a successful writer), and their four children (dutiful readers). As fate would have it, I have been blessed with a pretty sweet job that allows me to harass my heroes—literary celebrities—for interviews.

When I called Chabon on a thrilling Wednesday morning not long ago, I tried my best to keep the fanatical admirer in me at bay; it wasn't easy. After settling into our conversation, I asked him to describe how he feels when he is writing—how does he get into the groove?

“When you are writing, you're so caught up in the world you're creating that everything else seems to fade away,” Chabon answered. “Fiction and stories are one of the only ways we have of getting a sense of what it might be like to be somebody that we're not. This is something that we can really never

know, but in fiction it becomes possible. And that is a kind of escape. You're escaping from your own self.”

It was true. It was so true! I wanted to tell him that when I read his books, I feel that escape too, that his writing pulls me into the character's world in a way that the words of few other authors can. But there were bigger issues to discuss—all more important than my insane gushing.

I asked him if he could pinpoint a time in his life when he knew that he wanted to be a writer. He said that when he was just 10 years old, he had to write a short story for a class assignment. The result was a tale about Sherlock Holmes. It was a grand success, receiving an A and flattering kudos from his parents. Interestingly, 30 prolific years later, Chabon's most recent book, *The Final Solution*, is a novella centered on the character of Holmes as an old man (though the author never actually names the famous detective).

Chabon recalled his first short story as a turning point in his life that convinced him that he would be a writer. “I thought to myself, *That's it. That's what I want to do. I can do this.* And I never had any second thoughts or doubts.”

I picture a glorious light and angelic music accompanying young Michael's epiphany.

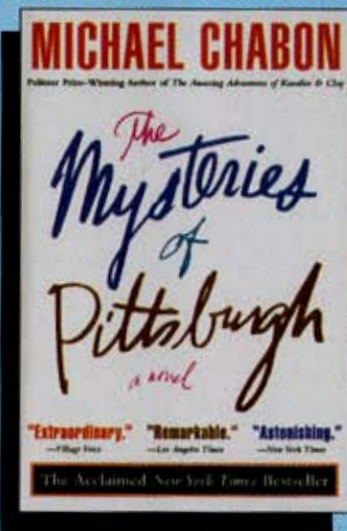
THE COMIC-BOOK EFFECT

In 2001, when Chabon won the Pulitzer Prize for his third novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, he was elated to suddenly find himself in an exclusive club that includes such legendary authors as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck. “When I first heard [about the award], I thought the whole thing was a joke,” he said. “It was not something I was expecting or even thinking about, [so] when it happened, it just felt like a gift from above.”

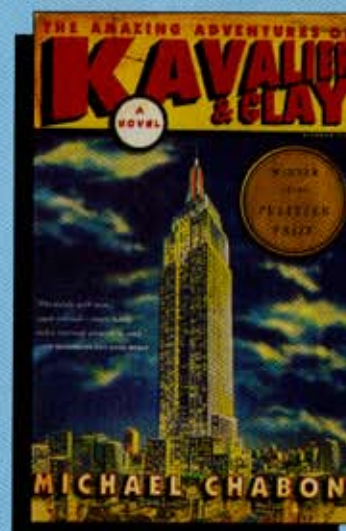
The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay is about a pair of budding comic-book artists, Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay, in 1940s Brooklyn. Chabon said the book was heavily influenced by stories he heard as a child about his father's youth in 1940s New York. “I loved those stories, and I always wished I could see it [all] for myself,” said Chabon. “The novel served as a time machine for me.”

He also tapped into another childhood love—comic books. “I read a ton of comic books growing up. I don't have any doubt, nor would I try to deny, that all that reading had an impact on what I write,” Chabon told me.

The first time I read *Kavalier & Clay*, I vividly imagined Sammy pacing in a room, immersed in his creative bubble. I remember



What are the mysteries of Pittsburgh? You don't need to be Sherlock Holmes to find out!



In 2001, Michael Chabon's third novel won him the top American literary honor—the Pulitzer Prize.

'When you are writing, you're so caught up in the world you're creating that everything else seems to fade away!'

—Michael Chabon

being in that room with him, feeling his creative strain as if it were my own and stumbling with him as he gave birth to a superhero, proclaiming:

"To all those who toil in the bonds of slavery and, uh, the, the shackles of oppression, he offers hope of liberation and the promise of freedom! ... He is ... the Escapist!"

"The Escapist." Joe tried it out. It sounded magnificent to his unschooled ear—someone trustworthy and useful and strong. "He is an escape artist in a costume. Who fights crime."

"He doesn't just fight it. He frees the world of it. He frees people, see? He comes in the darkest hour. He watches from the shadows. Guided only by the light from—the light from—"

"His Golden Key."

"That's great!"

Chabon liked the superhero he had created in *Kavalier & Clay* so much that he decided to give the Escapist another life, this time in comic-book form. In February 2004, *Michael Chabon Presents ... The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist, Volume 1* hit the stands. In the book's "80 pulse-pounding pages," the character Tom Mayflower becomes the Escapist, a superhero who fights the "evil forces of the Iron Chain."

SPIDEY-SENSE

Chabon's love of comic books also led him to collaborate on the writing of the screenplay for *Spider-Man 2*, a film some critics have called the best superhero movie ever made.

Chabon played the role of intermediate screenwriter. Taking an existing screenplay and adding his own flare, Chabon then passed the

script on to the next writer. "I received clear instructions from [director] Sam Raimi that I was supposed to make Spider-Man suffer—to have Peter [Parker, who is Spider-Man,] tormented to the degree where it was just one thing after another. I tried to do that as much as I possibly could," Chabon said. (Like many great writers, he knew that suffering offered a wealth of storytelling possibilities.)

For the five of you who haven't seen *Spider-Man 2*, Chabon succeeded immensely. In the film, Parker nearly loses his family, his love life, and his job at the *Daily Bugle*. He inevitably gives up on the Spider-Man gig in order to try to make sense of it all.

STARTING OVER

Not all of Chabon's writing projects have been huge successes—or, for that matter, even seen the light of day. After *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* was published, Chabon began *Fountain City*, a book that would consume and frustrate

him for five years and 1,500 pages. No matter how hard he worked on it, he was still without a story. It was killing him creatively.

When Chabon finally mustered up the courage to put *Fountain City* aside, he found himself sitting in his office staring at his blank monitor for hours. Suddenly, he began to envision a "straight-laced, troubled young man with a tendency toward melodrama" trying to end it all.

Chabon began anew. Plot composed itself, and well-rounded characters formed easily. He created Grady Tripp, an aging English professor who mentors the young man while struggling with his own never-ending novel. In a matter of days, Chabon had written the first 50 pages of



Even iron chains cannot bar Michael Chabon from expanding his incredible writing talent to new audiences.

'Burdleburbleslurpleslurpleburbleslurp,' said the clam, more or less.

—from Summerland

his second novel, *Wonder Boys*. He was excited about writing again.

On his Web site (michaelchabon.com), he wrote: "I didn't stop to think about what I was doing ... what the critics would think of it, and, sweetest of all, I didn't give a single thought to what I was trying to say. I just wrote. I had characters. I had their story to tell. And, most importantly of all, I had the voice to tell it with."

Although Chabon abandoned *Fountain City*, he does not advise aspiring writers to give in to discouragement. "Sometimes that voice is ... just the voice of insecurity and self-doubt," he said. "That voice lies! You should ignore it and strangle that voice and just keep going."

THE STUFF OF LEGENDS

That sentiment of trusting your own strength shines throughout *Summerland*, Chabon's 2002 novel for young adults. It is a story about heroes, myths, legends, and the allure of American baseball. It's also about saving the world. In it, 11-year-old Ethan is growing up, facing his fears, and trying to rescue his father from unlikely abductors.

In *Summerland*, Chabon paints a scene of perfect summer life in the fictional community of Clam Island, Wash. In this town, where it never rains and Little League reigns, Ethan is the world's worst ballplayer. So when an ancient scout recruits Ethan to be a baseball star, the boy knows he has crossed into a very different world—where things are far from perfect. Magical creatures called ferishers whisk Ethan into a wild and unpredictable adventure where he encounters fantastical things, such as a giant, spitting, fortune-telling clam:

There was a deep rumble from inside the clam, and Ethan's heart began to beat faster as he saw the briny lips of the shell part. ... As it opened Ethan could see the grayish-pink glistening muscle of the thing, wet and slurping around in its pale lower jaw.

"Burdleburbleslurpleslurpleburbleslurp," said the clam, more or less.


Summerland is a free-flowing journey around the bases of an imaginative world. It inspires kids of all ages to dream with their eyes open as they dash across the pages.

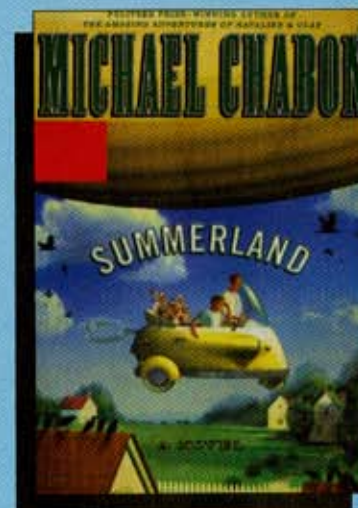
LIVING INSPIRATIONS

Writers crave inspiration. They sniff it out and hunt it down like starving, drooling dogs. Without inspiration, writers can't become consumed by creativity or escape into their writing. Where does Chabon find his? "Reading a book that is just so wonderful that it makes me want to write a book as wonderful—that is the

time when I'm most aware of being inspired," he told me.

As Chabon is inspired by other writers, he surely inspires others (yours truly included). He breathes so much life into his characters, they practically beg to be real.

Chabon's amazing adventure has taken him from comic books to the movie screen to the top of the literary world. When I asked him to define the word *writer*, he stumbled just a bit before digging out a gem of an answer. "How do I define the word *writer*? Ummm ... I don't." Chabon chuckled. "It's just one of those things you kinda know what it is. I know I'm a writer. That's all I really need to know." 



Baseball, folklore, and fantasy join forces in Chabon's novel for kids, a book that also appeals to adults.