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## Books in Review

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### Slap Shtick

#### The Yiddish Policemen's Union

by Michael Chabon

HarperCollins. 432 pp. \$26.95

Reviewed by  
Ruth R. Wisse

**P**ROTRACTED hostility tends to tarnish the culture of any group that it assaults. Black rappers and comedians get away with flaunting harsh stereotypes of their kin that would be promptly labeled racist if coming from outsiders. This brand of “staged alienation,” as John McWhorter calls it, has long turned a profit among Jews no less than among blacks; audiences pay good money to enjoy abuse at the hands of their own. But what sort of art do such in-group muggings produce?

The question arises inevitably in the case of this new novel. Its author, Michael Chabon, shot out of the literary starting gate twenty years ago

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RUTH R. WISSE, *who teaches at Harvard, is the author most recently of Jews and Power, forthcoming from Schocken Nextbook.*

with *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, a coming-of-age novel that captured the unsteadiness of a younger generation handicapped by the twin afflictions of prosperity and inexperience. So insecure was the hero, even about his own sexuality, that for a time Chabon was classified as a gay writer (which hardly hurt his critical or commercial ratings).

In *Wonder Boys* (1995), Chabon tackled the anxieties of the professional writer, something else he knew about from personal experience. But then, still evidently chafing at the thinness of an upper-middle-class American upbringing, he turned to fantasizing its opposite: *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier & Clay* (2000) took as its subject matter the superabundant trauma of a Jewish community under siege in World War II—as seen, in part, through the protective lens of comic-book creators.

*The Yiddish Policemen's Union* attempts a similar feat of juxtaposition: combining the gravitas of 20th-century Jewish history with biff-boom-bam vaudeville, only this time in the form of what the jacket copy advertises as an “homage to 1940's *noir*” fiction. Chabon's setting is

“Sitka,” an imagined all-Jewish territory in Alaska to which, in 1948, the United States sympathetically directed some two million refugees from Israel's lost war of independence. In this temporary federal district, the Yiddish-speaking “Frozen Chosen” have lived more or less contentedly ever since. But now, some 60 years later, the district is about to revert to the U.S., thus creating, in the novel's ironic refrain, “strange times to be a Jew.”

This is the backdrop against which the opening chapter introduces us to a Jew with a bullet through his brain, an unfinished chess game, and a detective named Meyer Landsman who undertakes to solve this mysterious homicide. Landsman, a kind of a circumcised Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, is “a tough guy, in his way, given to the taking of wild chances . . . a momzer, a crazy son of a bitch.” On account of a bureaucratic reshuffling, he finds himself unhappily answering to Bina Gelbfish, his fellow officer and former wife. When she warns him off the investigation, he instead obeys the conventions of the detective genre by making the case truly and uniquely his own.

With the help of his sidekick, a half-Jew, half-Indian named Berko Shemets, Landsman identifies the dead man as one Menachem Mendl (thereafter Mendl) Shpilman, a chess-and-heroin addict and the only son of Rabbi Heskell Shpilman, who heads the Verbover sect of black-hat hasidim (the local branch, as it were, of the Corleones and Sopranos). Although blessed from birth with magical powers of empathy and healing, Mendl had refused to assume the mantle of spiritual leadership. Now he has ended up dead in a seedy hotel room; why?

Finding Mendl's killer requires penetrating the Verbover enclave, an island of sinister oversized men and black-cloaked women. And here the plot thickens. In the waning days of Jewish autonomy in Alaska, it emerges, certain members of this hasidic sect have been plotting with certain non-Jewish Americans to ignite an internecine Arab war in the Middle East. By means of an elaborate subterfuge, involving a red heifer the conspirators have located in Nebraska and poor Mendl Shpilman as the potential Jewish messiah, they intend to win back Jerusalem for the Jews. Exposing the killer involves foiling this Zionist plot, and bringing its American facilitators to justice.

Chief among the latter is Cash-dollar, an evangelical Christian with a Goldfinger itch. He orates:

[The] end times are coming. And I for one very much look forward to seeing them come. But for that to happen, Jerusalem and the Holy Land have to belong to the Jews again. That's what it says in the Book. Sadly, there is no way to do that without some bloodshed, unfortunately. Without a certain amount of destruction. That's just what is written, you know? But I am trying very hard . . . to hold all that down to the absolute minimum. For Jesus' sake and for the sake of my own soul and all our sakes. To keep things running clean. Hold

this operation together until we have sorted it out over there. Lay down some facts on the ground.

One of those "facts on the ground" turns out to be the corpse of the saintly Mendl, who has contrived to have himself shot rather than join these Jewish and Christian fundamentalists in their foul intent to stir up a war among innocent and unsuspecting Arabs. At the fadeout, Landsman, now reunited with Bina, is about to seal the fate of the scheme by spilling all to the Sitkan *Front Page*.

CHABON HAS made no mystery of how, in 1997, he discovered the running gimmick for this novel in a phrasebook titled *Say It in Yiddish*, compiled four decades earlier by the scholars Uriel and Beatrice (Bina) Weinreich. Books of this sort, then as now, featured a standard set of conversational gambits geared to the needs of tourists in foreign lands. Faithful to the form, the Weinreichs had obligingly seen the traveler through everything from ordering lunch or tickets in Yiddish to applying a tourniquet. Upon uncovering this tome, Chabon published an essay registering his bittersweet amusement at its (to him) inherently absurd assumption of a "Yiddishland" and of tourists making their way through it—only to be taken aback when aficionados of Yiddish expressed irritation at his condescension.

The present novel, a more deliberate and sustained act of provocation, taps deeply into Chabon's vein of irreverence by inventing just such a Jewish territory and a half-borrowed, half-made-up language to go with it. Sitka's Hotel Zamenhof sports an *elevatoro*. The detective hangs out in the Polar-Shtern Kafe-teria. A failed commercial development is called the Shvartsn Yam ("Black Sea"; should be "Shvartser Yam"). Sometimes funny, frequently sophomoric, Chabon's japes are geared to those who know about as much or as little as he does about

European Jewry and its historic language—in other words, the bulk of his Jewish readership. For those who know still less, some of his terms and allusions can be Googled, and one imagines a web-page will soon be launched to explicate the rest of the comic “Yiddishisms” he has coined.

LITERATURE adores feats of invention, and, if the result is Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, it hardly matters if the landlocked country of Bohemia should have somehow acquired a seacoast. But one cannot help asking how the cause of literature has been advanced by a writer who undoes the establishment of the state of Israel for the sake of a faux-*noir* detective story with scenery recycled from *Northern Exposure*. Nor, artistically speaking, does imagining a Jewish religious world-conspiracy, with military training camps borrowed from the al-Qaeda handbook, seem a fair exchange for pumping a little action and suspense into a novel otherwise short of both. And what about Yiddish itself? What has it ever done to deserve this reduction to shlock and shtick?

By Chabon’s own account, he is merely taking aim at the pesky critics of his 1997 essay; but his derision actually strikes farther back, at the Jews who once sustained Yiddish and the national-religious civilization that gave it life. To this end, evidently, he gives us the following portrait of Mendl’s father:

Rabbi Heskel Shpilman is a deformed mountain, a giant ruined dessert, a cartoon house with the windows shut and the sink left running. A little kid lumped him together, a mob of kids, blind orphans who never laid eyes on a man. They clumped the dough of his arms and legs to the dough of his body, then jammed his head down on top. A millionaire could cover a Rolls-Royce with the fine black silk-and-velvet expanse of the rebbe’s frock coat and trousers. It would require the

brain strength of the eighteen greatest sages in history to reason through the arguments against and in favor of classifying the rebbe’s massive bottom as either a creature of the deep, a man-made structure, or an unavoidable act of God. If he stands up, or if he sits down, it doesn’t make any difference in what you see.

I could swear I encountered something resembling this vulgarized hulk in Gary Shteyngart’s novel *Absurdistan* (2006), another exercise in generic humor that tries to compensate by manic verbal feats for limp human drama. After several centuries of being lampooned by some of the finest Jewish writers who ever lived, hasidic rebbes surely merit a more richly textured satire than this. Yesterday’s Jewish humorists would have regarded such off-the-shelf hyperbole as much too crude and unoriginal for their wit. Today’s draw their inspiration from literary models long since hackneyed.

THERE IS more. Like the use of ghetto slang in hip-hop, the use of Yiddish in this novel does indeed serve to sweeten what might otherwise justly offend. Jewish-sounding surnames, plus a smattering of low Yiddish expressions rendered into English, impart an air of cozy, chuckling intimacy. They have certainly charmed Chabon’s reviewers, so enamored of his goofy spoofing as to have largely ignored his message.

But message there is. For the intimacy he creates is, of course, the intimacy of exile, of powerlessness. Chabon’s mock-Yiddish reinforces the sentimental stereotype of the Jew as harmless refugee, one who does not threaten the peace of the world, or the peace of the Jews themselves, unless and until he fatally conspires to resettle the land of Israel. A feisty character in the novel is described as fighting like a salmon—“that aquatic Zionist, forever dreaming of its fatal home.”

Messages—in this case, beware the Zionists bearing death—hardly come clearer than this.

The Arab alternative version of Jewish history, which erases Israel from the map of the world while simultaneously fantasizing a gigantic Zionist-American anti-Arab crusade, has been making inroads in the “progressive” circles to which Chabon belongs. Again, nothing new here: protracted hostility, as I

say, tends to tarnish the self-image of any group that it assaults, and Chabon, as a supplier of mass culture, also dutifully supplies an example of the syndrome.

That he himself is not joking about it, however, becomes clear from his literary choices. In *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, the Jewish fundamentalists meet to discuss their plot on a snowy Tuesday “at the corner of Ringelblum and Glatshiteyn.”

Why, one wonders, these particular street names?

No historian ever did his people a greater service, or merited greater respect from those who value the written word, than Emanuel Ringelblum, who between 1939 and 1943 performed prodigies of meticulous documentation in Jewish Warsaw under the Nazi boot. As for Jacob Glatstein, on the same day I was reading Chabon’s novel I came across a column by that great American Yiddish poet describing his emotions on the morning of November 29, 1960—thirteen years to the date in 1947 when the United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine, thus enabling the birth of the state of Israel. “How very impoverished and desiccated,” Glatstein wrote on that day,

the Jew who gets up this morning and starts chewing up the day like a bland breakfast without recalling that something very great has occurred in Jewish life! . . . We have yearned so long for miracles. How can we fail to see the bright hand of the miracle to which we have awakened?

Merrily conscripting Jewish cultural heroes to the purposes of his farce, Chabon chops them down to his own size, and with them everything they represent, the “miracle” of which Glatstein wrote no less than the late, faithful witness borne by Ringelblum to the decades and centuries of death that preceded it. The “corner of Ringelblum and Glatshiteyn” is a purely personal crack, and an exceptionally annihilating one.

The Yiddish writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer may have been the first to realize that the obliteration of European Jewry gave the “demon-writer” leave to distort its culture and historical experience to his heart’s content. The writer of fiction was now free to reinvent, without challenge from the deceased, any aspect of the Yiddish-speaking world they had once

inhabited. His own conscience did not prevent even Singer from toying with the memory of the vanished Jews; but neither did the sport ever dull his conscience. His literary heirs, babes in Yiddishland, are free of any such compunction.

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