Great Expectations

Parker Ervick, Kelcey

To cite this article: Parker, Kelcey. “Great Expectations,” The Cincinnati Review. Winter 2008, v. 4, no. 2 pp.194-198.
Great Expectations

The truth is, I don’t read detective fiction. Nor do I know any more Yiddish than one learns from a few Mike Myers skits on *Saturday Night Live*. I don’t play chess. I haven’t read anything by Michael Chabon since *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* and *A Model World*, not even The Big One or the one made into a Michael Douglas movie. I did not know how to pronounce Chabon (*Sha-bohn*? *Chay-bone*?). So I would seem to be at a disadvantage reviewing *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Michael Chabon’s Jewish detective novel about the murder of a chess prodigy.

The first thing I did in preparation was read the opening chapter of *The Maltese Falcon*, in which a tall drink of water plays a damsel in red-headed distress for a leering and smoking detective. I was delighted that, in contrast, by the end of the second page of Chabon’s (CHAY bon’s) book there was not only a murder but a *character*, the sympathetically down-on-his-luck detective Meyer Landsman, who lives in a hotel; who does not sleep; who, when alerted to the murder, drains a “shot glass that he is currently dating, a souvenir of the World’s Fair of 1977”; and who, though his ex-wife believes otherwise, “has only two moods: working and dead.” Yes, I think, I like this Landsman, this gorgeous writing. I will like this book.

The novel’s teal spine reads, in various combinations of white, red, and black letters: HARPER COLLINS PRESENTS ***** THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN’S UNION BY THE PULITZER PRIZE WINNING AUTHOR OF THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER & CLAY ***** MICHAEL CHABON. Though the wordy, shouting spine is a bit much (Harper Collins *presents*?), it creates expectation in a reader, and I can only conclude that the strength of the first chapter coupled with the cover’s declarations contributed to how quickly I grew disenchanted. By page 34 I was already and probably unfairly asking, “overrated?”; by page 61, Landsman’s ex-wife Bina has arrived, and despite the tension inherent in the fact that Bina is now Landsman’s boss, the presence of a female character seemingly reduces Chabon to clichéd genre writer, the way, I suppose, a *Playboy* centerfold causes grown men to lapse into
junior-high mode (“a lock of corkscrewing red hair has sprung free of the green fur ruff”; “[Landsman] tries and fails not to observe the way her heavy breasts . . . strain against the placket and pockets of her shirt”).

I began to worry, and as concern took hold, I came across a video clip of a panel discussion at the 2007 Book Expo America in which writers and reviewers such as Francine Prose, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Tanenhaus, and John Leonard address the “Ethics of Book Reviewing.” Was it fair, they were asked, for them to review books by their friends? What sort of criteria should reviewers consider? What was better for a debut writer: a scathing review, or no review at all? But no one addressed the question burning in my mind: What about when an emerging writer reviews the work of a Pulitzer Prize–winning author and isn’t quite sure she likes the book (yet!), but the Pulitzer Prize–winning author is very charming and amiable in interviews, handsome in his jacket photo, probably tall, and certainly not anyone she would wish to offend by presuming to suggest his latest book should have a little more of this (Landsman) and a little less of that (Bina’s boobs, Jewish Messiah mafia)?

The only thing to do was get back to reading. But the mystery was not pulling me in, and I found my mind drifting, trying to recall the William Gass phrase: “The Pulitzer Prize in fiction takes dead aim at mediocrity and almost never misses.” For as I read a funny scene in which Landsman and his partner (and cousin) Berko interrogate “the Russian” at the Einstein Chess Club, I wanted it to be really funny—Gary Shteyngart funny. I wanted to feel a sharper pain over Bina and Meyer’s struggle to overcome shared sorrows, like the searing pain I feel for David Gates’s self-destructive protagonist, Jernigan. I wanted the narrative wit to be more wry, as in Binnie Kirshenbaum’s story “The Matthew Effect.” I wanted Landsman’s backstory to be as fully conceived and touching as that of Lila Mae Watson in Colson Whitehead’s The Intuitionist, a noir novel with which The Yiddish Policemen’s Union shares much. And shouldn’t a detective story have more suspense? I was more curious about whether Lynn Mason, the cool boss in Joshua Ferris’s Then We Came to the End, would die of cancer than I ever was about who shot Mendel Shpilman.

Sentence by sentence, however, the writing is nothing less than what one expects from a Pulitzer Prize–winning author. The similes
and metaphors alone are worth the cost of the book. They come one after the other: “The information is like a hot black mouthful of coffee. [Landsman] can feel himself coiling around Rafael Zilberblat’s freedom like a hundred-pound snake.” They personify: Halibut Point is “where the city sputters and the water reaches across the land like the arm of a policeman.” They create visceral reactions: “The first bullet blackens the air alongside Landsman’s right ear like a fat humming fly [. . . ] the next bullet finds the back of his head and burns it like a trail of gasoline touched by a match.” They are beautifully apt: “The need for drink is like a missing tooth. He can’t keep his mind off it, and yet there’s something pleasurable in probing the gap.” They turn literal phrases figurative, as in the funeral train (which, here, is not a locomotive carrying a coffin, but a slowly moving line of mourners) that Landsman watches from a distance: “The long dark train, discharged of its goods, starts back down the hill toward the gates. At the head of it, puffing slowly, head erect, broad-brimmed hat running rain, comes the locomotive bulk of the tenth Verbover rebbe.” And they resonate with meaning: “This half-island [the Jews] have come to love as home is being taken from them. They are like goldfish in a bag, about to be dumped back into the big black lake of Diaspora.” At some point, however, the comparisons become too similar and too many, like a portrait artist’s series of celebrity sketches at the last tourist hot spot you visited.

There is a pleasurable subtlety to Chabon’s humor, as when Berko warns Landsman not to attempt contact with the mother of the murder victim: “[Berko] was making a nice policeman-like distinction between the things that balls could accomplish and those that the breakers of balls would never permit.” And Chabon does excellent work with comic-relief characters. In a mere five chapters, the four-foot-seven inspector Willie Dick saves Landsman and steals the show. “Jesus Christ, Landsman,” Dick says when he finds a nearly naked Landsman being chased down, “You look like a fucking fetal pig I saw one time pickled in a jar.” Later, when Berko and Landsman discover a red cow painted with white spots, they piece together that it is a rare red heifer, which the Verbover Jews intend to sacrifice as a means of ushering the Messiah’s return. Dick interrupts their detective work to say, “Not that I’m a religious man, God knows . . . but I feel compelled
to point out that the Messiah already came, and you bastards fucking killed the motherfucker.”

The premise of the book is brilliant, really. I love the risky idea of imagining Sitka, Alaska, as an alternate but temporary Jewish homeland on the verge of Reversion (an idea pulled straight from the bag of Actual-But-Never-Implemented Political Proposals). I love that a Jewish mafia is secretly rebuilding the temple, while the man once believed to be the Messiah is a murdered gay drug addict. There is just enough character development and plot to propel the story forward, and there is equally enough material to interest scholars of detective fiction, Jewish fiction, or even “chess in literature.” Each of these parts is compelling and will hold up to further exploration. I only wish that the whole was greater than (even equivalent to) these parts. Someday it will not matter. The book will appear in college courses and dissertation chapters, and only the parts will be addressed; only the parts will be necessary. But for now, in this book presented by HarperCollins directly to the New York Times bestseller list, the parts are like lovely flowers competing for the same soil, wanting to grow and bloom but getting tangled in each other’s roots.

Hermione Lee, in writing about being a judge for the Man Booker Prize in 2006, claims that “in the end [the judges’] arguments came down to matters of taste.” Twenty years ago William Gass argued that prizes come down to personal and professional politics (and perhaps the only way to pretend it’s anything else is to call it “taste”). My response to Chabon’s book could simply be a matter of taste. Like I said, I don’t tend to read detective fiction. But what I enjoyed most about the book was the awkward tenderness (perhaps “tender awkwardness” says it better) of the male relationships and the complex construction and unraveling of a murder mystery; I enjoyed Chabon’s use of Yiddish and of Jewish culture; I even dug the chess analogy (which was adopted from Nabokov).

In the end, though, what I really wanted was for Chabon to break my heart (over the plight of Landsman, of the Jews) and then help us (me, Landsman, the Jews) heal, but Chabon, like the Jewish Jehovah, withheld his messianic might. Just as his Mendel Shpilman wrongly assumed his gay tendencies were in conflict with his mystical powers and retreated to the underworld of drugs, Chabon wrongly assumed
the solving of the crime should determine the ending of the book and wrapped up the subplots too abruptly. And so I believe my response is less a matter of taste—and certainly not of politics—than of my deep value for literature, my desire for this book to realize its huge potential and meet my high expectations, and my sense that in the end, it falls just short.