

Panel Proposal: Escapism in the Works of Michael Chabon

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Critical interpretation of Michael Chabon's oeuvre has so far focused, to a large extent, on two main areas: the study of Jewish identity in his fiction; and the relationship between his work and the popular culture that is often its subject, and which provides it key intertextual sources.

Yet one of the crucial concepts in Chabon's oeuvre remains the pursuit of escapism, as symbolized most notably by the fictional superhero at the heart of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. If Chabon's oeuvre is often concerned with the chasm separating reality and history on one side, and the domains of art and imagination on the other – what *The Yiddish Policemen Union* calls “the world and the idea” respectively – then escapism is represented in his fiction as a desire to bridge this chasm, and to escape the horrors of one side for the wonders of the opposite one.

While the term has historically had strong negative connotations, Chabon's fiction strives to recuperate it, portraying time and again the soothing, healing and redemptive powers of escapism. At the same time, none of the author's novels can be taken as a full-fledged, unambiguous apologia for escapism, whose implied dangers – paramount among these a loss of connection with the real world and its commitments – are instead highlighted in works such as *Kavalier & Clay* or *Wonder Boys*. Moreover, while striving toward the ideal world of imagination, acts of escapism inevitably take place in a broken reality, where the horrors of history strive to ruin any such pursuit; be they of an immense magnitude, such as World War II in *Moonglow*, or more local and apparently benign, such as the opening of a retail chain store in *Telegraph Avenue*.

The proposed panel would tackle the concept of escapism, and related issues, within the fictional and non-fictional oeuvre of Michael Chabon. It would constitute a unique occasion, in the context of the 2019 ALA conference, to debate the current state of Chabon criticism, granting scholars a chance to focus on one of the most accomplished and polymorphic American writers of the last few decades. The panel could also constitute a first step toward establishing a Michael Chabon Society, dedicated to the study of the Berkeley writer.

Possible topics for discussion include, but are not limited to:

- Chabon's preoccupation with escapism in the context of recent theories of contemporary literature – including trauma studies, “New Sincerity,” etc.
- The relationship between nostalgia and escapism in Chabon's work.
- Trans-media approaches to Chabon's cultural sources. How, for example, is *Telegraph Avenue*, deeply concerned with the world of music, different from *Kavalier & Clay* with its focus on comic books?
- The relationship between history and imagination in his fiction.
- The relationship between Chabon's works and those of other writers who have been associated with him because of their relation to popular culture, genre fiction, and intertextuality, eg Jonathan Lethem, Jennifer Egan, Junot Diaz, Colson Whitehead, etc.
- The relationship between Chabon's treatment of escapism in his fiction and non-fiction.
- The relationship between Chabon's “literary” works (*Pittsburgh*, *Wonder Boys*, *Kavalier & Clay*, *Telegraph Avenue*, *Moonglow*, most of his short stories) and his “genre” works (*Summerland*, *The Final Solution*, *The Yiddish Policemen Union*, *Gentlemen of the Road*, the short stories “Under the Black Mill,” “The God of Dark

Laughter” and “The Martian Agent”).

- The relationship between escapism, disorientation and addiction in Chabon's works.

Please send all paper proposals, including a short abstract, to Mattia Ravasi at
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