The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, by Michael Chabon, was published in 2000 to critical and popular acclaim. Some critics found Chabon’s novel overly long, but all agreed that it is stylistically sound and well written. Kavalier & Clay took the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2001 and has drawn as much notice as Chabon’s previous book, Wonder Boys, which was made into a feature film. Kavalier & Clay is an epic tale that is topically unique within Chabon’s body of work but stylistically consistent with his distinctive, graceful use of language.

Drawing on his own love of comic books for Kavalier & Clay, Chabon deftly weaves historical facts and figures together with light touches of fantasy. The author’s inspiration in part came from Superman’s creators: two Midwestern Jewish boys, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, who sold their nascent superhero to the publisher of Detective Comics (DC Comics) for a hundred and thirty dollars. Kavalier & Clay follows two Jewish cousins in New York City, Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay, who grow into adulthood during the onset of World War II. They experience fame, tragedy, love, and a little bit of magic. With its clever mix of literary self-consciousness and shameless adventure, Kavalier & Clay is one of those rare books which appeal to readers of both serious and popular fiction.
Michael Chabon (pronounced shay-bon) was born May 24, 1963, in Washington, D.C., to Robert and Sharon Chabon. His father worked as a lawyer, physician, and a hospital manager; his mother as a lawyer. His parents divorced when he was eleven years old. Chabon grew up in Columbia, Maryland, while most of that planned city was still being constructed. He was introduced to comic books as a child by his grandfather, who brought them home from the plant where he worked. Chabon earned a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh in 1984 and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at the University of California at Irvine.

Chabon has been a successful writer since the publication of his first novel, The Mysteries of Pittsburgh (1988), which was his master’s thesis and became a bestseller. His second novel, Wonder Boys (1995), was made into a feature film in 2000, starring Michael Douglas. The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay (2000) won Chabon the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. As of 2006, a film adaptation was reportedly in the works. With Summerland (2002), Chabon dabbled in the young adult market and won the 2003 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award. The Final Solution, a short novel about Sherlock Holmes, was published in 2004.

As of 2006, Dark Horse Comics, in conjunction with Chabon, was publishing a quarterly comic book edition of The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist, drawing on the fictional history of this superhero. The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist won the 2005 Eisner Award for Best Anthology. Chabon has also published two volumes of short stories and a number of screenplays, including part of the popular movie Spider-Man 2 (2004).

Chabon often writes about Jewish identity, homosexuality, and single parenthood.

Plot Summary

Part I: The Escape Artist

Chapter 1

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay begins in October 1939. Josef Kavalier has just arrived in New York City after escaping Nazi-occupied Prague. He hopes that his cousin Sammy Klayman can help him find a job because he needs money to free his family.

Chapter 2

In trying to leave Czechoslovakia, Josef is sent back to Prague on a paperwork technicality. Too ashamed to face his family, he asks his former mentor Bernhard Kornblum for help. Kornblum agrees so long as Josef will go by way of Lithuania.

Chapter 3

It is 1935 and fourteen-year-old Josef attempts a dangerous escape feat that results in his near drowning and that of his brother Thomas. They are saved by Kornblum. Thereafter, Kornblum ceases his escape artist instruction of Josef.

Chapter 4

Kornblum and Josef find where the Golem has been hidden and prepare it for travel disguised as the corpse of a giant. Josef smuggles himself inside the casket. Once in Lithuania, he secures papers to get him to San Francisco.

Part II: A Couple of Boy Geniuses

Chapters 1–3

Sammy and Josef pick grown-up, American names: Sam Clay and Joe Kavalier. Inspired by Joe’s artistic skill, Sammy pitches a comic book
Chapters 5–6

In July 1953, Sammy takes Tommy to Louis Tannen’s for a birthday gift. Tommy sees Joe in Tannen’s back room. Days later, Tommy spots Joe at Spiegelman’s Drugs, and they finally meet—as cousins. Tommy asks Joe to come to dinner. Joe will not, but he helps Tommy with his card tricks. They meet every Thursday for seven months in Joe’s office/apartment in the Empire State Building. Tommy realizes that Joe cannot figure out how to return home. Based on something Joe said, Tommy writes the infamous letter.

Chapters 7–9

Tommy leads Sammy, Lieber, Anapol, and Harkoo to Joe’s office, but he is not there. He is on the observation deck, dressed in Bacon’s old Escapist costume and wearing a harness of rubber bands. When Joe sees Tommy he realizes that he has failed to escape his own trap of fear and habit, which has kept him from returning to his family. He steps backward into thin air, but the rubber bands fail to hold him and he lands on a ledge two floors down. He assures everyone that he is all right. Sam rides with Joe to the hospital and the long-lost cousins reunite at last.

Chapters 10–12

In Joe’s office/apartment, Lieber, Harkoo, Tommy, and Sammy find a vast amount of comic books and four to five thousand pages of a comic book Joe is drawing about the Golem of Prague. A man comes to the office and delivers a congressional subpoena to Sammy. Sammy, Joe, and Tommy return home. Rosa and Joe talk to each other as if nothing has happened. In bed that night, Sammy tells Rosa he convinced Lieber to drop charges against Joe. He and Lieber are going to have lunch together—a euphemism for a date. They talk about the Senate subcommittee hearing. Wertham’s book has indirectly labeled Sammy a homosexual, and he believes this is why he is being summoned.

Chapter 13

Joe still loves Rosa and finds her attractive. He feels guilty because he does not want to be a homewrecker. Joe apologizes to her and they kiss briefly.

Chapters 14–16

Sammy looks through the epic Joe has drawn after Joe packs up his office. Sammy loves the book and wants to publish it. Anapol stops by to tell them that he has retired the Escapist character because he lost the Superman lawsuit. After Anapol leaves, Sammy and Joe talk about buying Empire Comics. Joe has nearly one million dollars in his old bank account. He stays up all night thinking about it, borrowing the Studebaker to drive around in the early morning. Joe winds up at Houdini’s tomb where he takes a nap and dreams of Kornblum telling him to go home. While Joe is gone, a large, heavy pine box arrives at the Clay house from Nova Scotia. Joe returns and recognizes the Golem’s casket but is dumbfounded as to how it found its way to him. The box is filled with silky silt from the banks of the Moldau. The Golem’s soul has departed.

Chapters 17–18

Later that same day of April 22, 1954, Sam testifies before the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. Senator Hendrickson all but accuses Sammy of homosexuality and promoting pedophilia through his use of sidekicks. Later, Sammy realizes that he feels liberated by his public outing and regrets his cowardice regarding his relationship with Bacon. He is ready to make a change and maybe go to Los Angeles and work in television.

Chapters 19–20

At the bottom of a crate of memorabilia, Tommy finds a strip of photos showing Joe and Rosa from when they were younger. They finally explain to him that Joe is his biological father. Tommy understands but is concerned about Sammy. Sammy returns home late at night with train tickets to Los Angeles. Rosa and Joe ask him to stay; Joe has bought Empire Comics and wants to work with Sammy again. Sammy says he can send his stories from Los Angeles, but he is definitely going this time. When they wake up in the morning, Sammy is gone.

Characters

Sheldon Anapol

Sheldon Anapol, an owner of Empire Comics and Joe and Sam’s boss for several years, is a businessman first and foremost and plays his historic role in cheating two naïve young men out of their multi-million dollar idea. But he is not without a conscience, having worked hard more than a decade at his own, less-successful novelty business. As co-owner of Empire Comics (with his brother-in-law Jack Ashkenazy), Anapol is subject to both its successes and its troubles. Even as Anapol is settling into a life made comfortable by lots of money, he is also receiving death threats from...
Agent Frank Wyche
Agent Frank Wyche finds Sammy hiding at Love’s house and sexually abuses him.

Themes

Escapism
Chabon’s overarching theme in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is escapism: escape from tyranny, escape from reality, escape from death. Joe Kavalier, trained as an escape artist by a master Ausbrecher has an ability to escape and survive that pushes the limits of reality, even a fictional reality. In the day-to-day grind, Joe escapes the painful reality of the growing war in Europe by battling Nazis on paper. His more dramatic escapes include the River Moldau, Nazis in Prague, the fountain of the Hotel Trevi, a happy life with Rosa, carbon monoxide poisoning, Antarctica and madness, Sammy and the rest of his family, and finally—the most difficult of all—his self-imposed exile. Joe is the novel’s real-life escapist.

Sammy Clay, although much more grounded and practical than his cousin Joe, finds escape from his life in daydreams: traveling with his father; providing for his mother and grandmother; being a famous and respected publisher. Sammy’s master feat of escape is from his own homophobia. After a few happy, clandestine months with his first and only love, Tracey Bacon, Sammy turns his back on romantic love and spends the next thirteen years in proverbial chains. These chains of shame burden Sammy. When Senator Hendrickson effectively springs the last lock and exposes Sammy’s homosexuality in public forum, he is not humiliated but relieved. Bacon is gone from this world, but Sammy is finally ready to pick up where he left off and move to Hollywood.

Escapism is a precarious indulgence—too much and one is beyond rational judgment; too little and one is mired in real world minutia. Comic books from their inception were understood to offer a fantastical escape, generally geared toward young boys and girls full of hope to change their situation in some way. Joe and Sammy’s superhero, the Escapist, is thus a metafictional device for comic books in general.

Guilt
Guilt is a feeling of responsibility for wrongdoing. Sammy, reserved about spending money after growing up on modest means, feels guilty about indulging in the luxuries he and Joe can afford when they are at the height of their success. The excess money itself is a physical representation of guilt which must be experienced any time money is spent. Sammy buys a beloved and costly phonograph over which he never stops feeling guilt. Despite his weak legs, he rarely takes a taxi. More devastating is the guilt Sammy feels regarding his homosexuality. In the world of this novel, there is a strong taboo against homosexuality, which makes it even more difficult for Sammy to come to terms with his sexual orientation. The raid in Pawtaw and sexual abuse at the hands of the FBI agent only serve to justify Sammy’s shame. But there is no denying human nature, and Sammy is fortunate to survive Wertham’s trial by fire and thus free himself of this crippling guilt.

Joe suffers from survivor guilt during the three years he is first living and working in New York City. For two years he does not even allow himself to have fun or to spend any more money than is necessary. Joe spends all his spare time trying to safely extricate his father, mother, brother, and grandfather from Prague. One by one his immediate family is taken away from him even as he is building a new family in the United States. He finds love and happiness with Rosa, but his guilt over the accidental death of his brother Thomas drives Joe first to attempt suicide and then to run away from everyone who loves him. Having failed to protect his brother, Joe denies himself comfort and pleasure by leaving Rosa and Sammy. The war eventually ends, but Joe’s guilt over abandoning them and fear of rejection obscure the way back to the only family he has left. It takes Joe ten years and the love of his son to overcome that last, difficult hurdle.

Family
What makes up a family is a question explored throughout *Kavalier & Clay*. The most unusual arrangement occurs when Sammy and Rosa marry to raise Rosa and Joe’s son, Tommy, as well as to hide Sammy’s homosexuality. In Prague, Joe lives in an extended, or complex, family including his parents, his brother, and his grandfather. In New York City, Joe first lives with Sammy, his aunt Ethel, and his grandmother Bubbie; later Joe and Sammy move into their own apartment and Rosa unofficially lives with them part-time. When Joe leaves to enlist in the navy, Rosa and Sammy find themselves both in vulnerable situations with only each other to look to for security. What Chabon expresses through these
Topics
For Further Study

• Individually or in groups, create a superhero and write a story featuring him or her. Include a weakness along with a superpower, a villain, a secret identity, and sidekick or other supporters. For extra credit, illustrate your tale.

• Science has traditionally been important to superheroes and their villains, either as a source of superpower or inventions to aid in fighting or causing crime. What area of science interests you? For example, biology, nuclear physics, astronomy, chemistry, geology, etc. Dream up an invention or application of technology within your field of interest that would be an aid to a superhero or villain. Create an illustrated poster demonstrating your idea.

• Research a heroic figure from legend or history. Does this figure fit any of the superhero criteria such as a secret identity, superpowers, and an idealistic mission? Write a brief report to share with your classmates.

• One of Rosa’s artistic expressions is a dreambook. In her dreambook, Rosa uses collage, illustration, and text to tell the stories she experiences when she is dreaming. Find or make a blank journal and create your own dreambook based on a dream you have had.

• The Holocaust took a terrible toll of loss and displacement on the groups targeted by the Nazis. Unfortunately, genocide still happens to this day. Research an incident of genocide that has happened in the recent past, examining why it was carried out and what can be done to stop future genocides.

• Letter writing was an important form of communication before widespread use of email in the 1990s. Write a letter by hand (not computer) to a friend or family member whom you do not see often. Tell the person what is new in your life and any interesting stories that have happened to you. Enclose relevant photographs, drawings, or article clippings. After your teacher has checked that you have completed the assignment, mail your letter.

• Joe spends most of a year stationed on Antarctica, monitoring radio waves for the U.S. Navy. Research current political and scientific activity relating to this unusual continent. Also look up information about Antarctica’s climate and geography. Which countries have laid claim to portions of Antarctica? What scientific studies are being conducted there and why? Are there parts of Antarctica that have yet to be explored? How does the size of the land mass today compare to one hundred years ago? Write an essay about the current importance of Antarctica.

• Under Judaic law, a boy reaches maturity when he turns thirteen and is made a bar mitzvah (“son of the commandment”). Girls are made bat mitzvahs (“daughters of the commandment”) at twelve years of age. They are then responsible for following and upholding Jewish traditions, which is expressly a religious aspect of Judaism. Secular or ethnic Jews do not always choose to become a bar or bat mitzvah. What other rites of passage do you know? What time of life do they typically occur? Are they cultural, religious, or related to some other aspect of life? What are the components of the ritual? What are the conferred rewards and responsibilities? Prepare a presentation for your class using PowerPoint, slides, overheads, or other visual aids.

• Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic and Joe’s childhood home. What foods are particular to the Czech people? Research authentic Czech recipes, assemble a cookbook to distribute to each student in the class, have everyone select a different recipe to prepare, and then host a Czech food day. What are your favorite dishes? What flavors are unusual to you? Is there anything you would like to make again? Share your answers with your classmates as you enjoy this new cuisine.