



The Lightning Rod

Michael Chabon appears to experience life at a distance, notes *Antonella Gambotto-Burke*.

The celebrated American novelist Michael Chabon (“Shea as in Stadium, Bon as in Jovi”), 46, specialises in a heightened kind of meditation. Forever dazzled by the philosophical immensity of individuals, events, and themes, he prefers to throw his hands up and surrender to imaginings as contoured by marijuana smoke as they are by comic books, genre fiction, and the Western canon. And in this, he acts as a lightning rod for modern men, who question not only their context, but their understanding of masculinity itself.

In *Manhood for Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and Son*, Chabon’s first anthology of personal essays and second work of non-fiction, he observes that the “only medium susceptible to my genius was inertia. If someone wanted to get married, I would marry her. If she wanted out, it was time for a divorce.”

In 1987, the poet Lollie Groth wanted to marry Chabon and so he married her; in 1991, she decided she wanted out, and they divorced. In 1993, Ayelet Waldman, then a lawyer who had been in Barack Obama’s class at Harvard, proposed; despite the fact that he had only known her for three weeks, Chabon accepted. They now have four children, ranging in age from six to 15. In 1995, Waldman stunned America when she

acknowledged loving Chabon more than their children, describing their sex life as “always vital, even torrid” and as “more exciting and imaginative now than it was when we first met” before announcing that she could not imagine any joy without her husband.

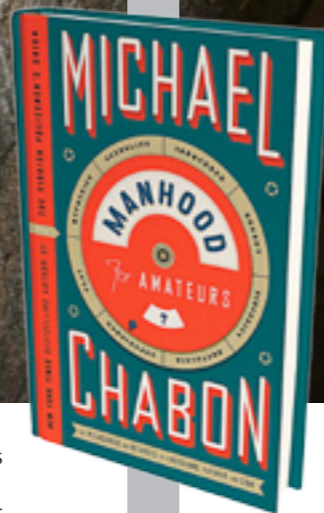
Chabon, the better writer, does not reciprocate Waldman’s awestruck carnal fizz; his every homage to her is even and profoundly loving, but essentially pragmatic. There is the sense that he celebrates the openly bipolar Waldman’s facility for heightening his experience of life rather than for her innate value. “[T]his woman has dragged, nudged, coaxed, led, stirred, embroiled, mocked, seduced, finagled, or carried me into every last instance of delight or sorrow, every debacle, every success, every brilliant call, and every terrible mistake, that I have known or made,” he writes, appearing to perceive her exclusively within the context of his desires and decisions.

He relates to men differently. With men, Chabon is vulnerable. Of his former father-in-law: “[H]is hands were meaty, and in repose there was something august about his heavy Midwestern features: pale blue eyes that, in the absence of hopefulness, might have looked severe.” It was, he admits, “a case of love at first sight”.

Such upgrades in fervor are not the only

Compiled by Daniel Murphy

MUST
HAVE



BOOKS

reason Chabon’s sexual orientation has been questioned. Before their involvement, Waldman purchased his first two books, which she later jovially described as a “short-story collection and a novel clearly written by a gay man”. The bisexual raptures in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, the work that propelled him into international renown, had him identified in *Newsweek* as a figurehead of the new gay wave. Chabon was happy with the error, as it “really opened up a new readership to me, and a very loyal one”. Seven years later, he acknowledged the experiences that led to such plausible representations of gay passion: “I had slept with one man whom I loved, and learned to love another man so much that it would never have occurred to me to want to sleep with him.”

To Chabon, longing and masculinity have always been enmeshed. His parents divorced when he was eleven and “preternaturally adult” with his “big black glasses and careful phraseology”.

He mostly lived with his mother, a lawyer who frequently expected him to mother himself. Attended by “all the usual guilt and bitterness and recrimination”, Chabon and his pediatrician father eventually moved, “in modern and terrible fashion, to opposite ends of the continent”. There were instances of intimacy, when his father, a man “whose neckties hang in a closet as neatly as the pipes of a church organ and whose desk drawers look like aerial photographs of a secret weapons facility in the Nevada desert”, took him on house calls.

Otherwise, Chabon at once embraces and reviles those of his father’s generation, “who, in their 20s and 30s, approached the concepts of intimacy, of authenticity and open emotion, with a certain tentative abruptness, like people used to automatic transmission learning how to drive a stick shift.”

In part, his father’s distance and reserve may have inspired Chabon’s soft uxoriousness. Startled in adulthood by a photograph of his parents embracing, Chabon was “transfixed by

this evidence that in some remote area there must have once existed, as some part of me had always known there must, a kingdom or civilization or some kind of lost world known, to scholars of dust, as my parents’ love for each other”. For after divorce, “there is nothing more pointless than the child, to that child, of that marriage”.

Chabon’s meditations on his own capacity for fatherhood are both transparent and oblique; he writes from the perspective of a son and also from the paternal “mountaintop” from which he issues “arbitrary and contradictory demands” to his children, neglecting their desires “in the name of something I told myself merited the sacrifice”. There is no shame or rancour about his fallibility; as he points out, the “handy thing about being a father is that the historic standard is so pitifully low”.

Nostalgia and Judaism, too, are enduring themes. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, the novel that reaped Chabon the Pulitzer Prize, reworked the concepts of heroism and failure. Struck by the high percentage of Jewish comic book creators, Chabon, a Jew, began the novel with an idea of a Jewish artist-and-writer team before and after WWII, the “Golden Age of Comics”. He recalls being told that Jews “have this narrative history of trying to come up with ways of solving the problems of the world through various kinds of mystical means”, and remains fascinated by the juxtaposition of art with the quotidian. *Captain America* creator Jack Kirby, for example, was a “small, drab looking man” who quietly voyaged “out into the universe and created characters like Galactus, the big devourer of worlds”.

CHABON SEEMS SURPRISED TO FIND THAT HE, TOO, BLEEDS

If Chabon has a literary flaw, it is that perpetual observation and analysis can drain him of subjectivity. In three books, he has a character expressing some measure of bemusement at his own blood – that is to say, at his own humanity; on some level, Chabon seems surprised to find that he, too, bleeds. He shies away from full emotional disclosure.

“I would lie in my room feeling alone and friendless and contemplate the ache in me with a distinct sense of anticipatory pleasure, like a child watching his lima bean sprout on a damp paper towel in a dish,” he dismissively writes.

In certain respects, Chabon seems to experience life at a distance – through the blue haze of the “million” spliffs he smoked until 2005, and the abstracting process of converting life into literature. Which is, of course, where Waldman’s brio becomes necessary: her animal intensities tether his tendency to discarnate into fantasy. In turn, their children also impel him to be intimate “with their shit and piss, sweat and vomit, with their stubbled kneecaps and dimpled knuckles, with the rips in their underpants as you fold them, with their hair against your lips as you kiss the tops of their heads, with the bones of their shoulders and with the horror of their breath in the morning”.

Manhood for Amateurs is, like all of Chabon’s works, stylistically untouchable. His is the language of secrets. Mostly wise and always elegant, he is, above all, a dreamer, holding the illusion of constancy as closely as he does his awareness of impermanence. ♣

Philippe Matissas/Opale/Headpress

BOOK REVIEWS



THE BLACK RUSSIAN
Lenny Bartulin (Scribe)

Jack Susko’s rare book emporium is drowning in red ink, so when a first edition is pinched from his satchel during a hold-up at an art gallery, he’s in a tight spot. But the gallery owner’s police-shy and agrees to pay for Jack’s silence. What was stolen? Who is the Russian with a penchant for bruising soliloquy? And what is Jack’s ex doing in the middle of it. Set in a simmering Sydney, this international-ish crime caper ain’t *The Thomas Crown Affair*, but it is comfy noir full of spiky dialogue and a toast-dry hero. Margarita?



BLOOD’S A ROVER
James Ellroy (Random House)

The final instalment of the “American Underworld” trilogy arrives a full 15 years after the first. Ellroy’s clipped brand of epic chaos is even more hardboiled and more immersive as he maps hidden roads in subversive 1970s America. Wayne Tedrow Jr. and Dwight Holly return to infiltrate black militia in LA, recruiting talented ingénue Don Crutchfield (a young Ellroy, transpotters) to create havoc on the streets of Chicago and Haiti. Beautiful, radical women Joan and Karen have their own agendas, and there are millions in emeralds everyone wants. Fans will rejoice – the Demon Dog barks louder than ever.



LOVE MACHINE
Clinton Caward (Penguin)

The sex shop love story is under-represented in Gen X/Y/i-Lit and, despite its earthy charm and pitch black humour, there are two reasons Caward’s likeable debut won’t inspire imitation like, say, *The Da Vinci Code*. First, Caward knows the awkward messiness of a Kings Cross sex shop better than one would care to; through the anti-hero Spencer, you’ll wrinkle your nose at what men can find sexy. Second, even in this irradiated exotic locale, love finds its way the way it often does – slowly, with discovery, care, a change of heart and the odd golden shower.



HORNS
Joe Hill (Orion)

Ignatius Perrish is from a privileged family in Gideon, New Hampshire. The rape and murder of his girlfriend Merrin Williams a year ago has made life hell. Never charged, he is despised by the townsfolk who believe him guilty. After yet another drunken night of self-loathing he wakes to find horns growing out of his head. The horns seem to inspire in people the need to tell him dirty secrets, unfiltered and unbidden. Hill, the son of Stephen King, proves as sure a hand at New England Gothic as the old man. A resonant, brooding and decadent tale.