***Carlos Ramet***

# Ken Follett and the Scribbler's Trade: A Midnight Train to Somewhere

In his detailed, clever, and sometimes sardonic *Short History of British Journalism*, BBC political editor and commentator Andrew Marr observed that "there are two ways to be seriously posh in journalism: you can become the editor of a great newspaper or you can get out. Getting out often means becoming a novelist, which is today considered 'nice' or 'proper' for an ambitious person, rather as joining the colonial service or a 'good' merchant bank used to be" (42). Marr's own career trajectory was characteristic of many who entered "the trade" in Britain in the last third of the twentieth century: as opposed to the practical journalists who had made their way up straight from school through an apprenticeship program, Andrew Marr, and others like him, were university graduates, often with degrees in English. Numerous trainee programs for university graduates existed at that time but were strictly governed by the National Council of Journalists, which insisted that trainee journalists work for at least three years on provincial papers before moving to the national papers then associated with Fleet Street. Marr duly entered a trainee program at the *Scotsman* in Edinburgh and learned shorthand, which he terms "invaluable to anyone in journalism" (xxi), before moving to London to cover Parliament three years later.

As he put it, inspired by the examples of star journalists working for *The Financial Times*, the *Observer*, and other major newspapers, "there was a press of ambitious young people determined to find a way straight to Fleet Street" (40).

Much of what Marr describes is applicable to Ken Follett, the author of such best-selling novels as *Eye of the Needle* (1978), *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989), and *World Without End* (2007), whose training and journalistic background led to his ultimately "getting out" by virtue of becoming a novelist. Follett, who was born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1949, attended the University of London and graduated with a degree in philosophy in 1970. Subsequently, he completed a three-month post-graduate course in journalism through Thompson Regional Newspapers and was placed as a trainee reporter in Cardiff on the Thompson-owned *South Wales Echo*. He returned to London three years later as a general-assignment reporter for the *Evening News*, which at the time was Britain's leading evening tabloid. In some recent novels, Follett has depicted journalists—especially those in broadcast media—in highly unflattering terms. They are either unscrupulous and manipulative, such as the television reporter Carl Osborne in *Whiteout* (2004), or sanctimonious and fulminating, such as the radio talk show host John Truth in *Hammer of Eden* (1998). But such unrelentingly negative portrayals were not always the norm. An examination of two of Follett's earliest novels, composed closest to his own experiences as a practicing reporter and written on the cusp of his breakthrough success into book publishing with *Eye of the Needle*, reveals a more subtle and complex presentation of the life of the journalist and "the trade."

In addition, an examination of these works provides insight both into the newspaper craft of the time and Follett's reasons for leaving journalism. Rather than being the dead end he describes for his characters, journalism would allow Follett to break into publishing fiction, first with a series of books published under a variety of masks, and then with a short story he was proud enough to publish under his own name.

Follett wrote both *The Modigliani Scandal* and *Paper Money* in 1976, a little more than a year after having left journalism for the publishing business. Both books were published under the same pseudonym, Zachary Stone, because the books were similar in structure: "They lack a central character," Follett noted in the introduction to the second book, "but feature several groups of characters whose stories are linked and share a common climax" (*Paper Money* v). Both books also make considerable reference to the lives of reporters and editors, the frustration that comes from working on a daily newspaper, and the seamier side of investigative journalism.

In *The Modigliani Scandal*, Louis Broom is a young reporter who sits at his desk reflecting on his career. Although it had been "a short and spectacular one" which allowed him to move from Oxford to a small South London weekly to a news agency and now to a quality Sunday paper within five years, he realized there was "little substance beneath the glittering surface" (205). Follett's career path may not have been as "short and spectacular" as Broom's, but he shared with the fictional character a growing impatience. As with many other British college graduates from his generation, Follett had been politicized by the turbulence of the 1960s, especially *les événements*, the student protests in Paris in 1968 (qtd. in Jacques 51). He has said he was initially attracted to reporting because of his interest in politics and was inspired, as were many other would-be reporters, by the investigative reporting of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein into the Watergate scandal, which broke in 1972 (interview with Swaim).

However, Follett was also attracted to the opportunities for upward mobility represented by the journalism of the day: "I wanted to be rich, successful, make loads of money, sell millions of books," he acknowledged years later in an interview with the hometown newspaper, the *South Wales Echo*, where his writing career had begun (Jones 1). British life in the postwar period has often been characterized as a cultural conflict between socialism and materialism, but Follett, in assessing these competing strains, has commented that he's "never really had a problem" reconciling materialism with a social conscience, "though I know some journalists do" (Jones 6). In fact, Follett was part of that "press of ambitious young people" who wanted to move as directly as possible to Fleet Street. "All I'd ever really wanted to be was a hot-shot journalist," Follett has noted, "but when I got to Fleet Street, I realized I didn't have the patience to rise to the top in journalism. . ." (McDowell 96).

Louis Broom is equally frustrated because he knows he could do something better, given his education in literature and art, but that it will be "a very long queue for the art critic's comfortable chair" (*Modigliani* 205). There is a clear parallel with Follett's situation: he has stated that even as a reporter on the *South Wales Echo* he began to recognize that he wasn't going to become a great investigative journalist in the mold of Woodward and Bernstein nor become the editor of a major national newspaper as soon as he wished ("The Art of Suspense"). Instead, he started to write fiction

in his spare time, penning short stories which were never published but believing that he might have "something more" in him, something which would make him popular with a large reading audience (qtd. in Jones 1). In *The Modigliani Scandal*, Follett's fictional character Broom has grown cynical, knowing never to begin a project on the day it was assigned because the editor will surely change the assignment the next day. Broom's skepticism extends to anonymous tipsters, whom he suspects of being cranks and frauds (206), and to his editor, who is portrayed as crude and dismissive (209, 210). *The Modigliani Scandal* depicts a time and place where the young are already world-weary cynics and reporters like Broom are not above bribing a reception clerk for information or threatening a bank manager with a negative story should he not cooperate (211). As one character puts it in *The Modigliani Scandal* when considering unattractive career options: "Be a journalist, and find that you have to say what the editor thinks, not what you think" (74).

*Paper Money*, Follett's novel which followed on the heels of *The Modigliani Scandal*, provides even clearer parallels between a character's deepening disillusionment with journalism and Follett's own desire to leave "the trade." *Paper Money*, to an even greater extent than *The Modigliani Scandal*, gives readers a feel for the workings of a daily London newspaper and for the milieu Follett inhabited in the 1970s. Not surprisingly, the book contains the period details and lost occupations from a generation ago—copy takers answering phones and pounding out dictated stories on clattering typewriters; noisy vending machines dispensing instant tea with milk and sugar; middle-aged messengers wearing cycle clips on their trouser cuffs, and wire stories rolling out from the teletype on uncut reams of paper. The newsroom is described as "scruffy—chairs were scattered randomly, newspapers and sheets of copy paper littered the desks, and redecoration had been postponed in last year's economy drive" (28). A fellow reporter from that period, Mark Williams, has referred to Follett as "a well-remembered and respected colleague" on the *Evening News* (Williams, Afterword 32) while another writer from that same paper, who called it "the last of the great commonplace newspapers" (Thomas 12), confirms the atmosphere of the time: "It was smoky and littered; dusty papers and tea cups, *china* tea cups, piled together on wooden desks. There were still gas mantles grinning on the walls. It seems it had remained unchanged since Frank Harris had been editor in the nineteenth century" (10).

The action of Follett's novel *Paper Money* takes place during a single day in the life of a London evening paper, and he attempts to capture the rhythms of a newsroom from that era as well; the slow beginning to the day and the individual routine of employees as they arrive; the tense editors' conference and the frenzied activity as deadlines approach; the banter about sports and the writing of joke captions for spiked photos towards the end of the day. He also describes the process of writing a story, from tip to investigation to first draft to greatly edited published version. As noted in a recent profile, "like the early works of Frederick Forsyth, another journalist turned novelist, Follett's early thrillers devote much attention to *how* things are done" (SMSO). In *Paper Money*, the reader learns that a story might begin with an anonymous tip and that an investigative reporter is not above bribing someone or entering an apartment under false pretenses. It is a world imbued with the tricks of the trade as described by Marr: "We learned the soon-to-be-useless skill of removing the voicebox from a public telephone so that a rival couldn't phone his story back—this being several years before mobile phones arrived. We were told to bribe publicans to put 'out of order' signs on the bar phone and encouraged to call rivals with misleading train times—the field craft of a vanished era" (xxi). It is very much a pre-"Battle of Wapping" era. Follett recognized as much in the introduction to a reprint edition of *Paper Money*: ". . . I am not as sure as I was in 1976 of the links between crime, high finance, and journalism; but. . . . it presents a detailed picture of the London that I knew in the seventies, with its policemen and crooks, bankers and call girls, reporters and politicians . . ." (vii).

By the 1980s, that newspaper world had largely disappeared. As a former writer from the *Evening News* put it, the paper "finally died of modernization in 1980" (Thomas 9). By late 1985, even more significant changes were underway. When Rupert Murdoch, who would change much of British journalism through the acquisition first of tabloids and later of the Sunday *Times*, clandestinely moved his print operations to the London district of Wapping, he provoked a year-long trade union strike. When the strike itself ultimately collapsed, the demise of Fleet Street and restrictive trade union practices began.

Follett's characters in *Paper Money* remain blithely unaware of the transformation yet to take place. One of the characters in the book from 1976 affirms the centrality of Fleet Street at that time; "provincial diehards"

had warned him about its corrupting influence (179). Another character observes that restrictive labor practices are damaging both to ambition and to productivity: "[The pre-1980s] system had a double impact: bright youngsters stayed at school instead of becoming [news] messengers; and those who did become messengers knew they had no prospects, so they did as little work as possible" (30).

If his characters in *Paper Money* remain unaware of the social and economic changes about to occur, they do come to terms with their own internal change resulting from a crisis in the newsroom. Arthur Cole, whose health has been ruined by twenty-five years in newspaper work, is the worn-out deputy news editor of the *Evening Post*. He'd begun his career as a "Lad," or messenger, and received his National Union of Journalists card after the war. At the time, he reflects, "a smart Lad could become a reporter; nowadays, that road was closed" (30). His smart young reporter, Kevin Hart, is very much the post-1950s British journalist and the character who comes closest to Follett in age, appearance, and attitude. As such, he becomes a spokesman for the author's views and provides the best glimpse of what Follett may have thought about journalism shortly before leaving it.

As with Ken Follett, Kevin Hart (who shares a similar name with the author) is university educated and the product of a trainee program at a provincial paper. He'd been eager to make the move to Fleet Street because he'd believed that "would mean doing the important stories on a national level." As a trainee journalist, he had been content covering the routine stories about amateur theater, lost dogs, vandalism, and local politics. He had also written a few good stories on the plight of immigrants in a Midlands town, wasteful spending by the local government, and a hearing on the town planning process. But Hart "needed a way to shine" and was no longer content writing routine stories now that he was working for a London paper (*Paper Money* 180).

According to an article in the *South Wales Echo*, where Follett apprenticed from 1970 to 1973, he was "a mere cub reporter" at that time who did not want "the life of the newspaper equivalent of a firefighter or dog mess correspondent." Instead, he was full of "self-esteem or shrewdness" and had "a fat ambition to be a great writer" (Jones 1). In *Paper Money*, Arthur Cole also considers the young Hart to have "rather too much self-confidence" (74). Kevin Hart is twenty-three years old, one

year younger than Follett was when he made the move to the *Evening News* in London, and dresses stylishly—a practice that Follett has long maintained.

By the end of the novel, Hart has moved from the self-confidence and cockiness about his prospects which Arthur Cole observed to a more candid assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the newspaperman's life. He admits that he enjoys the physical sense of anticipation when he is investigating a story, yet worries that he might "not score" (132). He admits as well that he "had long known that the story which made his name would probably be a tragedy for someone else" (136). When his investigative piece is rewritten beyond recognition, he becomes angry because he "had not entered the business to become a mindless hack. Exaggeration was one thing—he was quite prepared to turn a drunken brawl into a gang war for the sake of a story on a slow day—but the suppression of important facts, especially concerning politicians, was not part of the game" (178).

Follett has recounted similar experiences on the London *Evening News*. If those experiences did not necessarily involve a heavily censored investigative piece, they did include exaggeration and the deliberate misleading of readers. As Follett recalled, "I worked for a London newspaper that didn't have a fine sense of responsibility." When he wrote a story about a schoolyard disturbance where "white boys were fighting white boys" and "black boys were fighting black boys" it appeared under a page one headline proclaiming "Race Riot!" On another occasion, he was asked by the London *Evening News* to question six people on the street about whether or not they supported a particular judge who meted out severe sentences: three were in support, two were opposed, and one was undecided. Predictably, the headline read "Londoners Say Judge is Right" (Christy 39).

Hart offers additional reasons for questioning "whether he really wanted to be a journalist" (180). He recognizes that there is altogether too much waiting involved, with only "the occasional high when something went right" (178). He realizes as well that the serious stories on a national level that he aspires to write are "handled by specialists and for those jobs there is a long line of bright, talented people just like Kevin Hart" (180).

Above all, he believes that the realities of the newsroom are at odds with his principles. While he denies being a callow idealist who is unwilling to accept the "prurience and. . . . sensationalism" that are part of the craft(179), he still believes that the suppression of details in his story was

an act of cowardice and that "newspapers should publish and be sued, or even arrested" (233). Although the novel does not end ambiguously for Arthur Cole, who has lost his job, it does end ambiguously for Kevin Hart. He has determined that "he did not care for his job as much as he had this morning" (179) and questions what else he can do in life, whether "advertising, or public relations, or retail management." However, he wants "to leave newspapers as a success, not a failure" (181). Ironically, Cole encourages him to stay in the newspaper business, but as a manager rather than a reporter. While Hart remains unsure, he has concluded that his high-minded principles have been "easy for him to believe [in]. . . , for he was not an editor" (233).

While the future for Kevin Hart remains in suspense in *Paper Money*, we do know how Follett became "seriously posh in journalism" by moving out of it. A colleague on the *Evening News*, Patrick Long, had published the thriller *Heil Britannia* (1973), which encouraged Follett to try his own hand. Within weeks, he had finished his first novel, a thriller about drug dealers, which was published by Everest Books as *The Big Needle* in 1974 under the pen-name "Symon Myles." "[It] wasn't a big success, but I began to think that my future might be in books rather than in newspapers," he reflected in recent public remarks ("The Art"). Two additional thrillers, also following the exploits of the series hero Apple Carstairs and published by Everest Books under the same pseudonym, came in quick succession (*The Big Black* [1974] and *The Big Hit* [1975]). By late 1974, Follett was able to leave newspaper work for good and begin working as a deputy assistant editor for his publisher, Everest Books, which he has described as a small company managed mostly by ex-newspapermen. "We were a young company and nobody knew anything about publishing because we were all straight out of journalism," Follett has stated. "But we knew how to promote, we knew the media, and that saved us" (McDowell 96).

Although Follett left journalism early in his career, the nearly four years he spent working for newspapers did allow him to develop and hone certain writing skills, to learn the life on the street and develop an interest in human stories, and to publish his first efforts at fiction. At both the *South Wales Echo* and the London *Evening News*, he had to learn sheer newspaper fluency. "A reporter is on constant deadline," he recalled in discussing the influence of journalism on his career. "There was no time for rewrites"

(Christy 39). He was helped in acquiring this fluency, and in being given interesting reporting assignments, because of his skill at shorthand—an ability which Marr has called essential for the journalist, even in today's mass communications and internet-dominated trade. This allowed Follett to cover court cases: "I was often sent to court," he reflected, "because my shorthand was so good. . . . Shorthand was necessary for court work because if you report something wrong in court you lose your immunity from prosecution" ("Salon Interview"). By the time Follett was writing and publishing his third international bestseller, *The Key to Rebecca*, in 1980, he observed that "fast" is his normal speed, a tempo he had mastered at a Fleet Street typewriter ("Niles" 87). However, he had recognized as well that in order to become a successful novelist, he had to "unlearn newspaper fluency, which would be too facile in a novel. Newspaper writing requires the bare facts stated concisely. In writing novels, I had to learn to linger at climactic scenes" (Christy 39).

Newspaper work also brought him into contact with a range of people, places, and situations. In addition to covering court cases and spending time at Scotland Yard, he wrote a regular column on the River Thames and on his very first newspaper job had a pop music column, which allowed him to interview luminaries such as Stevie Wonder and the members of Led Zeppelin ("Salon"). In discussing his very first published novel, *The Big Needle*, Follett noted that "in those early days, I didn't do much research. Instead, I used backgrounds that I knew. Apples lives in London and knows neighborhoods, like Wapping and Bethnal Green, that I'd been to as a reporter. He comes across the kinds of villains I had seen in courtrooms" ("on early"). Follett, who would later be known for historical novels or for those set in the then-recent past, was drawing on his more immediate experiences, as he would for his two books explicitly about journalism, *The Modigliani Scandal* and *Paper Money.*

Finally, Follett's considerable contacts in journalism allowed him to break into publishing fiction, not only with several category books written under a variety of pseudonyms, but with an original short story under his own name. As we have seen, Follett used the pseudonym "Symon Myles" to publish a series of hard-boiled mysteries written at the rate of one every four to five months in 1974-1975, but from 1975 to 1978 was also writing children's stories, science fiction books, and crime capers under three separate pen-names—"Martin Martinsen," "Bernard L. Ross," and "Zachary

Stone"—one for each of the genres. Follett has offered two principal reasons for his use of pen-names at that time: most publishers only want to issue one book per-author per-year, and he was writing several (personal interview); secondly, he was advised by his agent to save his real name for the better works which would surely come later (Hauptfuhrer 107). By 1975, Follett was apparently feeling confident enough in his craft to release his first works of fiction as his own and did so through his knowledge of the world of journalism, with the novel *The Shakeout* appearing under his own name that year and the short story "A Midnight Train to Nowhere" appearing with the byline "Ken Follett" in the London *Evening News* in August of that same year.

For almost a century, an original short story had appeared in the London *Evening News* as a regular feature. According to the editor of a collection of these stories, publication in the *Evening News* was often a breakthrough opportunity for aspiring writers, many of whom became famous in later years. H.E. Bates, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Monica Dickens, and C.S. Forrester were among those who "cut their literary teeth in the *Evening News* short story pages." The stories were generally short-shorts of about 1,500 words and became so popular as a feature that the newspaper moved from printing a story every other day to running a short story on a daily basis (Williams, Preface 6). As a former reporter for the *Evening News*, Follett would have been keenly aware of the feature and of the opportunity it represented to reach the wide audience he desired to reach.

Follett discussed his ambitions with Peter Haining, an acquaintance with whom he shared a regular London Underground commute and a love of crime fiction. At the time, Follett had already left the *Evening News* and was an editor at Everest Books, which had produced three of Haining's books. "[Follett] told me he had already tried his hand at writing some fiction novels under the pen-name of Symon Myles," Haining has written. "None had proved very successful, but he was nevertheless developing the storytelling skills which have since made him a worldwide success" (455).

Shortly thereafter, the *Evening News* published Follett's short story, "A Midnight Train to Nowhere." The tale, which Follett said was inspired by his own late-night journey on the Underground, cleverly appeals to the experiences and fears of his presumed readers (qtd. in Haining 455). In the tradition of the *Evening News* short story series, "The World's Strangest

Stories”—“a series about hauntings, earthquakes, revolutions, murders, legends, and alleged miracles. . . . [about] anything difficult to believe [yet] riveting reading for the Londoner on the train” (Thomas 10), the story focuses on a central female character, Janet, who gradually realizes that she has inadvertently been let off the tube train at an abandoned station—one that won’t be reopened for a year. While the story seems indebted both to Edgar Allan Poe’s “buried alive” stories and to the “book of horror stories” Janet has fallen asleep over while reading on the train (“Midnight” 29), Follett creates mounting suspense with a sure-footedness that was missing in some of his earlier, more loosely constructed fiction. In contrast to the multiple plot strands and multiple points-of-view in the two flawed Apple Carstairs thrillers which preceded this tale (*The Big Black* [1974] and *The Big Hit* [1975]), in “A Midnight Train to Nowhere” Follett maintains an emphasis on unity and the “single effect” which Poe felt was essential to the short story. He does this in part by creating a dominant point of view.

As Poe noted in a famous review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, if the writer’s “very first sentence tend not to the outbringing of [an] effect, then in his very first step he has committed a blunder” (425). Follett seems aware of this dictum, because his story begins with the trainman and the guard both deep in daydreams, thereby establishing the precariousness of the night journey and the unreliability of the thought process late at night. This initial hovering point of view soon moves to a single narrative consciousness: it will be Janet’s thoughts, fears, and sensory awareness that will guide the reader through the tale, even if the reliability of her perceptions has been undercut by the late-night movement on a train and by the underground setting. “The station lights seemed very dim, and she had to peer into the distance to see the end of the platform,” the reader is told (29-30). When another train passes the station, images from inside the half-empty carriages flicker by like moving pictures on a screen: In one carriage, “a couple were necking; in another, a man had fallen asleep under an open newspaper. A third carriage was filled with a grey haze from an old gent contentedly puffing a pipe like a small furnace. . . . [until] the last carriage disappeared into the black throat of the tunnel and the noise died away” (30-31).

Other actions within the story also call into question the reliability of Janet’s—and the reader’s—perception. The structure of the story does

allow for the possible interpretation that Janet has remained asleep after reading the horror stories and therefore has only dreamt about leaving the train and being stranded on an empty platform. However, the reader is also told directly that Janet woke "with a start and, realizing she was well past Euston, jumped out just as the doors closed" (29). When she realizes, whether in a dream or in her waking reality, that there is no exit from the station, she becomes genuinely terrified and wonders if there was "such a thing as a ghost station, a place in the supernatural limbo where lost souls wandered for eternity, clutching their tube tickets in their hands, cursing the driver who had stopped by mistake and the guard who had opened the doors before realizing the error" (31).

The story further undercuts the reader's certainty by offering a resolution to Janet's conflict only through another dream. Screaming and exhausted, she slumps against a wall and shuts "her eyes tight, hoping she would wake up in bed" (31). Instead, "in a dream, she heard a West Indian voice" telling her that she's not in hell, only in a station that won't re-open for another year (32). But which part of this final dream—if any—reflects reality? If there is a West Indian custodian working late at night, then there is a way out from the station. If there is no West Indian custodian and only a blocked exit, then Janet will presumably die in this tomb-like place.

Follett's skill in this masterful story comes partially from his ability to blend genres—the psychological horror tale, the ghost story, the buried alive tale, the moving vehicle story, and so forth—but also from his willingness to adopt a style which establishes his narrative as fiction rather than non-fiction. In his earliest novels written under pseudonyms, Follett was often reliant on the fast-paced, breezy newspaper style which he later said he had to "unlearn," a reportorial style exemplified by the following section from *The Big Needle*: "Crown Terrace is an old street in the East End. Most of the property has been turned into small factories and beat-up offices or left empty to rot. Number 17 I had bought in a package, and I hadn't been able to do anything with it" (107). Although the passage shifts from objective reporting to subjective storytelling through the use of an interpretive first-person point-of-view, it favors summary narration over description and relies on short sentences and the simple present tense—hallmarks of newspaper style.

By contrast, the very opening of "A Midnight Train to Nowhere" establishes the tale as fiction through the use of a more deliberate literary

style characterized by third-person point-of-view, imaginative detail, sensory appeal, and metaphor: "The driver was thinking about winning the pools, champagne, early retirement, a holiday in Jamaica, girls in bikinis. Through the mist of his daydreams he saw a station and touched a brake" (456). Equally descriptive passages from "A Midnight Train to Nowhere" have been cited earlier.

Follett's experiences with the short story have been minimal, yet they have proved an important training ground. In addition to the short story "A Midnight Train to Nowhere," he published two science fiction stories for children in 1977 and 1979 under the pseudonym Martin Martinsen ("Dead Alien" and "Mind Bend") —and the case can be made that opening chapters from at least three of his novels (*Triple* [1979], *The Key to Rebecca* [1980], and *Lie Down with Lions* [1985] are crafted with the unity and compactness of the classic short story. (See Ch. 7, Ramet.) As Peter Haining noted in his introduction to Follett's earliest published short story, "the memory of [our] journeys added a special sense of *déjà vu* when I read 'A Midnight Train to Nowhere'. . . . . Follett's ability to generate thrills was already in evidence. . . . and it brings back a little chill of recognition whenever I find myself traveling on the line it features" (455-56).

Although Follett would return to non-fiction in 1983 with *On Wings of Eagles*, his account of a true-life rescue mission to Iran at the height of the 1979 revolution , his journey away from journalism was assured. He would become well-known for best-selling novels as different in setting as *A Dangerous Fortune* (1993), about a Victorian banking dynasty, and *Code to Zero* (2000), about the Cold War race to establish supremacy in space; as divergent in theme as *The Hammer of Eden* (1998), which examines the violent activities of a commune, and *Whiteout* (2004), which argues for the possibility of redemption through family. He would publish exclusively under his own name. For Follett, his after-hours apprenticeship as a fiction writer and his move away from journalism allowed him to catch a midnight train to somewhere.

**Carlos Ramet**
**Saginaw Valley State University**

## Works Cited

Christy, Marian. “Ken Follett: Master of Suspense.” *Boston Globe* 16 Oct. 1991, Living sec.: 39+. Print.

Fabrikant, Geraldine. “No Plot Twists in Novelist’s Portfolio.” *New York Times* 5 Aug. 2001, Business sec.: 2+. Print.

Follett, Ken. “The Art of Suspense: A History of the Thriller.” Saginaw Valley State University, Michigan. 7 Dec. 2004. Lecture.

—. [Symon Myles]. *The Big Black*. London: Everest, 1974. Print.

—. [Symon Myles]. *The Big Hit*. London: Everest, 1975. Print.

—. [Symon Myles]. *The Big Needle*. 1974. New York: Zebra, 1979. Print.

—. [Martin Martinsen]. “Dead Alien.” *Space # 4*. Ed. Richard Davis. London: Abelard-Schuman, 1977. Print.

—. Interview with Don Swaim. Wired for Books. WOUB Center for Public Media, Scripps College. 16 Feb. 1983. Web. 15 Jan. 2010. <wiredforbooks.org/kenfollet/>.

—. “A Midnight Train to Nowhere.” Ed. Peter Haining. *Murder on the Railways*. London: Orion, 1996. 455-59. Print.

—. [Martin Martinsen]. “Mind Bend.” *Space # 5*. Ed. Richard Davis. London: Hutchinson, 1979. Print.

—. [Zachery Stone]. *The Modigliani Scandal*. 1976. New York: NAL Signet, 1985. Print.

—. [Zachery Stone]. *Paper Money*. 1977. New York: NAL Signet, 1987. Print.

—. Personal interview. 14 Dec. 2007.

Haining, Peter. Introduction. “A Midnight Train to Nowhere.” By Ken Follett. *Murder on the Railways*. Ed. Peter Haining. London: Orion, 1996. 1-5. Print.

Hauptfuhrer, Fred. “Out of the Pages.” *People* 25 Sept. 1978: 107-08. Print.

Jacques, Martin. “Ken and Barbie.” (London) *Sunday Times Magazine* 19 Sept. 1993: 50-52. Print.

Jones, Hannah. “Follett Through to the End.” *South Wales Echo*. 13 Oct. 2007. Web. 12 Mar. 2009. <http://www.Walesonline.co.uk>. 1-8.

Marr, Andrew. *My Trade: A Short History of British Journali*sm. 2004. London: Pan Books, 2005. Print.

McDowell, Rider. “Focus on: Ken Follett.” *Espionage* Oct. 1986: 93-102.Print.

“Niles Wiles.” Rev. of *The Key to Rebecca*, by Ken Follett. *Time* 29 Sept. 1980: 80. Print.

“on early years.” *Ken Follett Official Website*. N.d. Web. 18 Jan. 2010 <http://www.ken-follett.com/bibliography/early.html>.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "Review of Twice-Told Tales." *Graham's Magazine*. May 1842.*Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter. Lexington, MA: Heath, 1994. 424-26. Print.

Ramet, Carlos. *Ken Follett: The Transformation of a Writer.* Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1999.

"Salon Interview: Ken Follett." Web. 6 May 2009. <http://www.salon.com/books/int/1998Cov_02intc2.html>.

SMSO. Web. 7 Jan. 2010. <http://www.smso.net/Ken_Follett>.

Thomas, Leslie. Introduction. *The Evening News Collection I*. Ed. Mark Williams. London: Chapmans, 1991. 9-12. Print.

Williams, Mark. Afterword. "A Midnight Train to Nowhere." By Ken Follett. *The Evening News Collection I*. Ed. Mark Williams. London: Chapmans, 1991. 32. Print.

—. Preface. *The Evening News Collection I*. Ed. Mark Williams. London: Chapmans, 1991. 5-7. Print.

# *2009 Whatley Award*

In memory of George Whatley, a founder and early president of the Popular Culture Association in the South, the editor and editorial board of *Studies in Popular Culture* annually recognize the article published in *SPC* that in their view best represents the scholarly values Professor Whatley sought for the organization and for the study of popular culture.

The 2009 Whatley Award winner is

***Sexed Appeals: Network Marketing Advertising and Adult Home Novelty Parties***

By

**Dawn Heinecken**
**University of Louisville**

***Bennett Kravitz***

# The "Aquatic Zionist" in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

The dark comedy that is at the heart of Michael Chabon's highly amusing yet deeply disturbing novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* projects the text's and apparently the author's ambivalence concerning all things Jewish and their intrinsic relationship with the concept of exile. In the *New York Times* book review appearing on Sunday April 29, 2007, Patricia Cohen notes that Michael Chabon uses the phrase the "Frozen Chosen" for the way that world Jewry describes those pioneers who made it to Alaska during World War II in Chabon's fantasy of Jewish history. Chabon's dystopia takes place in the real-life island of Sitka, Alaska, probably chosen because of its potentially Yiddish sounding name. There all similarity between the real Sitka and its dysfunctional imaginary counterpart comes to an end. The only other realistic aspect of the novel is that there was discussion in the US State Department of opening up Alaska in 1940 for European Jews who faced destruction at the hands of the Nazi regime. The Act was supported by then Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, but was defeated in Congress. An imaginary advantage of Chabon's novel is that three million Jews who died in the Holocaust ended up in Alaska instead of meeting certain destruction. The bad news is that the so-called Republic of Israel only lasted a few months before being defeated by the Arab world. Many of the scattered took refuge in Alaska, yet as the novel opens the "Reversion" is about to take place, with the Jews once again being forced to abandon their homes and seek their fortunes elsewhere. The Jews were given sixty years to settle in Alaska, but their desire to achieve statehood or permanent resident status was never approved by the American government.

It seems that only the ultraorthodox community that rules the Island as a mafia gangland enterprise will have no trouble obtaining papers to move elsewhere. Sitka will be returned to the aboriginals and most of the Jews will be forced to leave. Their future is uncertain, as most residents have been unable to create a viable alternative to their lives in Alaska. Although much of the novel offers a comedic reading of life, it is ultimately a grim, frightening picture of what happens when Jews are both granted and not granted a state. There seems to be no solution for a people that has been unable to win its independence in the Middle East and has committed many errors of judgment, as it tries to manage its semi-autonomous state in Sitka.

The novel's general ambivalence towards Jews, Jewishness and a Jewish State has caused outrage among many of the critics, some of them extremely harsh with Chabon, if not decidedly irrational. Thus, for example, John Podhoretz claims that the author's ambivalence posits virulent anti-Zionism. In a bizarre interpretation, he manages to equate Chabon's so-called disdain for Israel with the novelist's "new-found passion for the half-Kenyan, half WASP Hawaiian-born Senator from Illinois…His [Chabon's] Obama is at least as much a fictional character as Kavalier or Clay." No less perturbed by the book is James Lewis in his review, "The Ultimate PC Novel":

> There are no pleasant, constructive or even likeable human beings in this gigantic book, written by an American Leftwing atheistic Yiddishist, living, significantly, in Berkeley, California. There is no lively State of Israel in Chabon's imaginary world; there is no thriving American Jewry in the most prosperous and tolerant country on earth; the world of Christian Americans and other religions barely appears, and then only as cardboard cutouts…There is no love unspoiled by hate in this book.

Lewis indeed goes over the top when he notes that the book may be original, but that the same could be said of *Mein Kampf.* In a much more rational though extremely negative review, Ruth Wisse declares the novel's and author's ambivalence and perhaps contempt for the Jewish State. Writing in *Commentary,* Wisse discusses Chabon's "staged alienation" (John McWhorter's term) to turn a profit among the Jews: "Audiences pay good money to enjoy abuse at the hands of their own." As she views the novel,

which she claims perpetuates a poor excuse for proper Yiddish terms, it is a "deliberate and sustained act of provocation, tap[ping] deeply into Chabon's vein of irreverence by inventing…a Jewish territory and a half-borrowed, half made-up language to go with it" (5). But worse than that is the way Wisse views the novel's so-called message: "the intimacy he [Chabon] creates is, of course, the intimacy of exile, of powerlessness. Chabon's mock-Yiddish reinforces the sentimental stereotype of the Jew as a 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…Messages – in this case, beware the Zionists bearing death – hardly come clearer than this" (4-6). I can only imagine that Chabon would be pleased to know that his novel inspires so much emotion, albeit negative.

I suspect that Chabon's ambivalence towards exile and a Jewish homeland is the root cause of the hostile reactions to his text. This feeling was crystallized when I read Shlomo Sand's *Invention of the Jewish People,* in which he argues that the exile of Jews from the holy land – as an entire group – may well be a creation myth to sustain the notion of a unified Jewish people throughout history. It is difficult for the invested to confront the mythological history of any nation; in that sense Sand and Chabon have something in common. Both in their own way force Jews to examine their feelings towards exile and the creation of the Jewish State.

Fascination with exile, as we all know, does not begin with Chabon or Sand. Arnold Eisen reminds us that in the beginning there was exile, as we can understand from a reading of Genesis (xi). Moreover, Eisen raises a question that is central to understanding Chabon's work: "What can it mean for Jews to come home, impelled by their tradition, if what they find and build there falls far short of the fulfillment stored up in every traditional promise of return? American Jews turn to the same sources for help in justifying and comprehending their own ambivalent relation to the center" (xii). Michael Chabon answers Eisen's question with a vengeance. What he finds lacking in the "promise of return" takes a central part in the plot he creates, both for the fictional Jewish settlement in Sitka and the "real" Republic of Israel, which is fictionally wiped off the map after a mere three months of existence. Nevertheless, this essay, while acknowledging that the authorial ambivalence towards Jewish exile and return is the prime mover

of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union,* will also demonstrate that the novel – through its glorification of exile – is an affirmation of Jewish life and thought.

The novel sees the world through a glass darkly because of the inevitable failure of the Jews as an independent people. No less problematic is the idea that the settlement the novel creates, supposedly representative of "the Jewish People," is hardly that. For some strange reason, half the Jewish population, that of Sephardic and Mizrachi (oriental) origins, is ignored, as if those Jews had never gone to Israel and didn't exist. What exactly became of them when Alaska became the home to millions of Jews? How is it that the new Jewish homeland uses Yiddish – or Chabon's watered-down version of it – as its national language, effectively denying those Jews who speak Arabic or Ladino?

In her review of the novel, Erica Lipper informs us that "More than just vocabulary, Yiddish is the linguistic trademark of a diaspora [sic] people ever teetering between joy and sorrow, living in the space between." I would amend that argument to note that what is true of Yiddish is also true of Ladino, the infusion of Castilian Spanish with Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and French that Sephardic Jews have spoken ever since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Yiddish only represents part of that Diaspora people, yet the novel and the review assume that the Diaspora relates to Yiddish speakers only.

In Abigail Nussbaum's review of the book, she notes that Jew is often substituted for person, but this is not negative but rather universal because it refers to everyone in that geographical space. She claims that "For the residents of Sitka… substituting 'Jew' for 'person' isn't an act of exclusion but in fact its opposite – an address which remarks not on a differentiating quality but on a universal one. Jews are the same as people because all people are Jews." Yet the universality she observes is actually a double disenfranchisement. All people of Sitka are not Jews because the aboriginal Tinglit Indians are living there as well. Moreover, the Jews are not universal but exclusionary, since they only account for those of Eastern European descent. While the novel makes hysterical if not always appropriate use of the Yiddish language to invent many wonderful words or applications, every Jew not of Ashkenazi or Eastern European origins – along with the Tinglits – is effectively present only by her absence.

That the novel is a dystopia, or at least a saga of failure and ambivalence, is evident from the first page of the hardboiled, "Chandlerian," detective frame story. [1] Meyer Landsman, the fallen detective, must solve the murder of Mendel Shpilman, Tsadik Hador (in Hebrew and Yiddish) which means, approximately, the righteous one of his generation, who had the miraculous powers of a potential Messiah. Unlike that other young Jewish rabbi who performed miracles in the holy land two thousand years ago, ours is more of a fallen Messiah, one who couldn't face the pressure of being the son of the Verbover Rabbi, a great rabbinical authority and head of a powerful criminal enterprise. The Tsadik Hador, Shpilman, decides to escape from his responsibilities because as a gay youth he can't imagine acquiescing to an arranged marriage with a female. An alternative explanation is that he is unwilling or unable to accept the weight of the Jewish people's salvation as his "cross" to bear. Perhaps it is a combination of these circumstances, though I suspect that Mendel Shilman is wise enough to understand that once the possibility of Messiah is close to fruition it reverts to an impossible dream. Messiah is only possible when it is impossible. He realizes that Jews, unlike Christians, can never look forward to the actual coming of the Messiah and, in that sense, must always live in exile. Overwhelmed by this knowledge and his personal circumstances, our unwilling Messiah unfortunately finds his solace as a junkie addicted to heroin and abandons his father's house to disappear in the underworld.

The author's apparent ambivalence toward the idea of a Jewish state, which is a focal point of this novel, is well presented from the first page, when we are introduced to our down-and-out detective in the Hotel Zamenhof, named after the father of Esperanto who fantasized about saving the world from the miscommunication derived from multiple languages. The results of that project are well documented. All of the hotel signs, put up fifty years earlier, are in Esperanto, perhaps signifying the futility of the Jewish project as a whole.

The novel opens with a dead "Yid," or Jew, signed in as the chess great Emmanuel Lasker; he has been discovered in the flophouse with a bullet in his brain. Emmanuel is a fitting pseudonym, meaning, in Hebrew, God is with us. Indeed, this is one of the ways that Jesus is referred to in the New Testament. But there will be no mission of redemption for our would-be Jewish Messiah. He has been unwilling to take the sins of the world

upon his slight shoulders. If the job of Messiah is turned down by many, or accepted only by the unworthy, our floundering detective seems to audition for the part, though on a much smaller scale. He would like to get to the bottom of this murder, even though he is about to be out of a job in six weeks, once the Alaskan Reversion takes effect. Perhaps he identifies with the victim, another son who has disappointed his father and will never meet his expectations. It seems that Meyer Landsman is outraged that the Jews were deprived of their Messiah just when they most needed one. Whatever the reason, Landsman is deeply motivated to get to the truth. Like an ancient Hebraic interpreter of signs, a Jewish Phillip Marlowe, Landsman approaches his task with unexpected gusto. [2] Perhaps it is the case that will allow him to regain his interpretive powers and refashion his life. Landsman is the typical down-on-his luck hardboiled detective with an interesting twist. That is, his work has become meaningless except for the meaning that he decides to assign it. No one cares if he solves the whodunit; and a lot of powerful people would prefer that he didn't unravel the case at all.

Like all Jewish residents of Sitka, Meyer Landsman's native tongue is Yiddish and the reader is treated to delectable inventions in the language to describe all kinds of people and artifacts. In fact, Landsman's last name means compatriot, family member, or member of the tribe in Yiddish, signifying his connection to the murder mystery he stumbles upon. [3] The piece he carries is known as a "sholem," peace in Yiddish and similar to Shalom, peace in Hebrew, a kind of Jewish-cowboy peacemaker. His cell phone is known as a "shoyfar," which is a ram's horn, a communicative instrument that is part of the Yom Kippur ritual. A true "Sitkanik," Meyer is the most decorated "shames," or detective, in Sitka's history, but since he has decided to abort his and his wife's potentially genetically deficient fetus, Django, as he painfully refers to him, and has suffered the consequences of a guilt-ridden subsequent divorce, he has become a dysfunctional alcoholic.

Landsman is not only fascinated by the murder, but also by the chess problem left behind on a paper board in the victim's room. Landsman's father was a champion chess player, which is one of the reasons that our detective hates the game. Yet Landsman and his partner, Shemets, must solve not only a murder but also a chess conundrum—which are intimately connected.

The chess problem, as will later become apparent, is indicative of the impossibility of Messiah, the State of Israel, and perhaps the impossibility of the novel. The problem, as Landsman eventually discovers, creates the situation known as *Zugzwang* in chess. The latter is "a situation in which a player is limited to moves that cost pieces or have a damaging positional effect" (*Dictionary*). But the practical result of *Zugzwang* is much worse. Every move a player makes can only lead to defeat. The player is literally forced to move, albeit through his own volition, toward a position of checkmate. Thus, there is no correct move and a skilled chess player, once recognizing *Zugzwang,* will concede the game rather than drag out the inevitable defeat. This seems to serve as a metaphor for the authorial voice's view of a Jewish homeland. Exile and the resettlement of the land both lead to political *Zugzwang.* To establish a state had been impossible in the Holy Land and the efforts to transfer the state to Sitka are also about to end in failure. But the detective Chabon has created will not accept this position. He will do his utmost to arrive at some sort of satisfactory solution, despite the harsh reality he must face, whether it is with the chess board, the murder investigation, or the upcoming removal of the Jews from Alaska.

In his noble efforts to solve the case, Landsman encounters an old Jewish bum named Elijah, collecting coins for the reestablishment of the nation of Israel. During the traditional Passover gathering a glass of wine is poured at the table for the Prophet of Israel, Elijah, who is expected to return one day to announce the coming of the Messiah. Landsman's Elijah, a homeless man, may be collecting donations for the re-establishment of the State of Israel, but inspires little confidence in the viability of the project. As the narrator informs us,

> The Holy Land has never seemed more remote or unattainable than it does to a Jew of Sitka. It is on the far side of the planet, a wretched place ruled by men united only in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews. For half a century, Arab strongmen and Muslim partisans, Persians and Egyptians, socialists and nationalists and monarchists, pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists, traditionalists and the party of Ali, have all sunk their teeth into Eretz Yisroel (land of Israel) and worried it down to bone and gristle. Jerusalem is a city of blood and slogans

> painted on the wall, severed heads on telephone poles. Observant Jews have not abandoned their hope to dwell one day in the land of Zion. But Jews have been tossed out of the joint three times now – in 586 BCE, in 70 CE, and with savage finality in 1948. It's hard even for the faithful not to feel a sense of discouragement about their chances of once again getting a foot in the door. (17)

While it is true that the narrative seems to disapprove of the project of statehood for the Jews, it is not with an unequivocal voice. In the above passage this "wretched" place is not merely suffering from the Jewish presence but also from a radical and nationalist Islam that has "sunk its teeth" into the land of Israel and "worried it down to bone and gristle." The implication is that the holy land is overrun by extremists and that it is only the ultra-observant among Jews who would want to return. Perhaps the passage presents some kind of transference in the motivation to resettle the land. That is to say, it is psychically easier to discuss the homeland desires of religious Jews than to acknowledge that the very same yearning for a state might apply to secular Jews as well. Perhaps it is embarrassing to want to have a state in a land that is in constant turmoil, a place where death seems to be worshiped no less, if not more, than life.

When Elijah tells him the Messiah is coming, thus implying that the historical state will be returned to the Jews, Detective Landsman hands him a twenty dollar bill, wishes him well, and: "'that works out well,' Landsman says jerking his thumb towards the hotel lobby. 'As of tonight, we have a vacancy'" (18). Landsman has no patience for religion, especially not for his own. Indeed, the emptiness and hypocrisy of religious fervor also come under attack. Not only are the most religious Jews the crime bosses, but the barrenness of ritual is well portrayed in the way the junkie Messiah tied off his veins. He used the ritual phylacteries or tefillin, in Yiddish and Hebrew, to bring a vein to the surface of his pathetically skinny arms so that he can inject his heroin (23). Leather thongs that are used for daily prayer serve this junkie to get his fix, which is, to say the least, not an auspicious state of affairs for a would-be Messiah or his religion.

If there ever were a place for the Messiah to appear, Chabon's 21$^{st}$-century Sitka seems to be ideal. Chaos and despair abound. The Jews have been defeated and are about to be removed from their temporary home-

land. In the fictional 1948, after the Republic of Israel collapses and is overrun by Arabs, Jews are slaughtered and driven into the sea. Sitka seems to be their last hope. Yet no "JewLaska, lawmakers promise," but rather an interim period for Sitka as a federal district (29). It seems that no matter where Jews are given autonomy, trouble is unavoidable—seemingly in real life, but certainly in Chabon's dystopia.

The upcoming Reversion is perhaps the darkest event of the novel. What greater nightmare could the author create than the dispersal of the Jews when no state is particularly willing to take them in? Indeed, the American officials responsible for carrying out the Reversion are known collectively as the "Burial Society" "to prepare the corpse for interment in the grave of history" (55).

Despite these grave events our detective is determined to see justice done. Landsman's quest to discover the Messiah's killer leads him to Verbover Island, a neighborhood completely dominated by the Verbover Rabbi and his mafia chieftains. Chabon seems to be criticizing the power of the religious orthodox Jews in Israel, which is not quite Mafioso-like, but certainly enjoys, because of the oddities of the parliamentary system, a disproportionate influence on Israeli politics and budgets. In Chabon's imaginary world, the Verbovers not only serve as a religious sect, but also double as the most successful crime family in Alaska, if not in the world (103). When Landsman confronts a couple of body guards near the Rabbi's house he realizes the futility of his mission:

> Landsman pulls at his chin. Madness, he thinks. Chasing a theoretical lead in a non-existent case, you lose your temper for no reason. The next thing you know, you have caused an incident among a branch of black hats with clout, and a stockpile of Manchurian surplus and Russian firearms recently estimated by police intelligence, in a confidential report, to be adequate to the needs of a guerilla insurgency in a small Central American Republic. Madness, the reliable madness of Landsman. (103)

But we all desire closure, even if ironic, and Landsman is no exception. What better way to complete his career as a detective in a country soon to be lost than by solving a case that no one wants solved? What better tribute to the demise of his national existence than to get the job done just

because the opportunity presents itself? What better way to affirm Jewish life and thought than to act as if with power in a powerless situation? It is almost as if Landsman decided to play the role of secular Messiah, to do something uplifting in a time of need and despair.

The most nebulous of all Landsman's encounters in the novel – and perhaps the key to understanding it – is his meeting with Zimbalist, the so-called Boundary Maven, or he who understands boundaries and borders. The Boundary Maven specializes in setting up boundaries around the homes of people with rows of string so that they can carry out their illicit activities on the Sabbath, without, supposedly, breaking the mandate to rest on the Holy Day (110). Landsman is furious about this activity, blaming both man and God for what he views as a sham:

> Landsman has put a lot of work into the avoidance of having to understand concepts like that of the eruv, but he knows that it's a typical Jewish ritual dodge, a scam run on God, that controlling motherfucker. It has something to do with pretending that telephone poles are doorposts, and that the wires are lintels. You can tie off an area using poles and strings and call it an eruv, then pretend on the Sabbath that this eruv you've drawn – in the case of Zimbalist and his crew, it's pretty much the whole District – is your house. That way you can get around the Sabbath ban on carrying in a public place, and walk to shul with a couple of Alka-Seltzers in your pocket, and it isn't a sin. Given enough string and poles, and with a little creative use of existing walls, fences, cliffs, and rivers, you could tie a circle around pretty much any place and call it an eruv. (110)

Understanding this passage is essential to understanding the novel's ambivalence towards Jews, Judaism, exile, Ashkenazi Jews and a Jewish State. Ultraorthodox religion has been reduced to a sham because of its apparent insistence on outsmarting God and avoiding his laws. It is yet another attempt to create a failed boundary between the believer and his or her home, state, or individual transgressions. It is also liminal, a boundary that sets off one world from another, though what the new world might be like is far from clear. Just as creating the boundaries of the real State of Israel has been unsuccessful so, too, is the attempt to rope in God, almost

literally, and have every manmade Sabbath activity declared “kosher.” If the Ashkenazi Jews are granted ethnic exclusivity in the novel, they also come under attack because they are the trickster lawmakers and dubious religious authority.

Though the Boundary Maven implies that Jews finally have boundaries, physical and mental, with which to function, just as the real-life current State of Israel is involved in its own volatile quest for recognized boundaries, still the omniscient narrator highlights the futility of such an endeavor. In the last analysis, the Boundary Maven and his followers are only fooling themselves into thinking they behave appropriately on the day of rest.

Questioned by Landsman, the Boundary Maven is able to recognize the photo of the deceased; it's Mendel Shpilman, authorially named so as to call attention to the so-called Jewish Messiah, Menachem Mendel Shneerson, the real-life (or after-life) Rabbi of Lubavitch (117). A replica of his house in Brooklyn has been exactly recreated on a plot of land near Ben- Gurion Airport, waiting for his return from the dead. Perhaps the proximity to the airport indicates that the Messiah will one day fly into the country. The Boundary Maven explains that as a child Shpilman showed signs of genius, with an IQ of 170, mastering numerous languages and displaying a chess prodigy's mastery of the game (117). The narrator notes that most miraculous of all, Mendel, even as a young child, understood the messiness of human life:

> The older Mendel got – the more dazzling his feats of scholarship, the brighter his reputation for acumen beyond his years – the more painful this waste appeared. It was not just Mendel's memory, the agile reasoning, the grasp of precedent, history, law. No, even as a kid, Mendel Shpilman seemed to intuit the messy human flow that both powered the Law and required its elaborate system of drains and sluices. Fear, doubt, lust, dishonesty, broken vows, murder and love, uncertainty about the intentions of God and men, little Mendel saw all of that not only in the Aramaic abstract but when it appeared in his father's study, clothed in the dark serge and juicy mother tongue of everyday life. If conflicts ever arose in the boy's mind, doubts about the relevance of the Law that he was learning in the Verbover

> court at the feet of a bunch of king-sized ganefs [thieves] and crooks, they never showed. Not when he was a kid who believed, and not when the day came that he turned his back on it all. He had the kind of mind that could hold and consider contradictory positions without losing its balance. (121)

Yet his ability to understand these "contradictory positions" did not enable him to accept the unacceptable: to play the part of the Jewish redeemer. Mendel as Messiah echoes and mirrors the positions of the real-life State of Israel, Chabon's imaginary temporary Jewish homeland of Sitka Alaska, and the chess problem that is Mendel's parting message to the world. Every move that one makes in all these settings forces one into a bad place. There seems to be no appropriate strategy for coming out ahead. So although the text is ambivalent about the idea of a state for Jews and Jewish exile, there is also more than a tinge of regret about such complex existential realities. In the real-life state, the latest manifestation of impossible existence is the war in Gaza. This novel was published before the war, but it expresses the frustration of the dynamic before its latest outburst. Although the reality on the ground is much more complex than I will present it, Israel, aside from its obvious excesses, felt required to make a choice about privileging human life: whose children are more important, yours or mine? In the land of Sitka the terms of existence are, by definition, impossible. How can a people thrive when they know that their existence as a nation is under severe time constraints, the nation's demise scheduled in advance? How could they develop as an autonomous entity without impinging on the rights of the native Alaskans? And how can a Jewish Messiah accept his role, understanding full well that the moment he is declared Messiah he can no longer accept the burdens of the world on his shoulders? Finally, how can even a chess prodigy escape the constraints of *Zugzwang*, which demands that one move towards one's own destruction?

The would-be Messiah, we are informed, was born on the 9th day of the Hebrew month Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the holy Temple (195). This suggests that he, too, was fated to fail, on the way to his own destruction from the day he was born: a life of *Zugzwang,* so to speak. He is unwilling to fulfill anyone's expectations, especially those of his family, and not even his own. Thus, Mendel runs away from his wedding dis-

guised as a woman. His father sees him as a "freak, an aberration" and blames his wife for the results (219).

Exactly what tortures Mendel is probably a conglomerate of issues. It might be his gayness, having the world on his shoulders, the hypocrisy of his rabbi-gangster father, or the impossibility of being alive and a Messiah or all of the above. As the narrator explains it:

> The Tzaddik Ha-Dor (the righteous one of a generation) was tendering his resignation. He could not be what the world and its Jews, in the rain with their heartaches and their umbrellas, wanted him to be, what his mother and father wanted him to be. He could not even be what he wanted himself to be. She (his mother) hoped – sitting there, she prayed – that one day, at least, he might find a way to be what he was. (226)

Suspended from duty and armed with only his pathetic union card, the Yiddish Policemen's Union, Landsman doggedly pursues the investigation he has been ordered to shut down. All of the various and tangential aspects of the case, including his sister Naomi's supposed accidental death after she flew the Messiah to a rehabilitation facility, are connected to the futility of the Zionist project:

> It was from an early boyfriend that she had caught the itch to fly. Landsman never asked her what the attraction was, why she had worked so long and hard to get her commercial license and crash the homoidiotic world of male bush pilots. She was not one for pointless speculation, his dashing sister. But as Landsman understands it, the wings of an airplane are engaged in a constant battle with the air that envelops them, denting and baffling and warping it, bending and staving it off. Fighting it the way a salmon fights against the current of the river in which it's going to die. Like a salmon, that aquatic Zionist, forever dreaming of its fatal home – Naomi used up her strength and energy in struggle. (238)

Naomi's flying, Shpilman's messianic tendencies, a search for a homeland, and Landsman's desire to detect and live a meaningful life, all seem

reduced to the same impossibility that a salmon discovers while swimming upstream, attempting to fulfill the role of an "aquatic Zionist." Indeed, according to the text, perhaps all Zionists are like salmon: they swim upstream, try to accomplish the impossible and are launched on a path to certain death. Yet the text informs these endeavors with nobility, which is in itself an affirmation of Jewish life and thought.

Despite all obstacles, in his own small world Landsman is able to create a coherent if not particularly satisfying chain of events. He stumbles upon the Beth Tikkun Retreat (the house of repair), which is either a rehab facility for junkies or a training station preparing for the Messiah and reconquest of Israel or both (249). Landsman seemingly accidentally discovers the shady plots of the Verbovers, guarding their genetically manipulated red heifer, which now has a white spot. That is how the red heifer must appear if it is to be appropriate for the sacrifice at the new Temple in Jerusalem, which the Verbovers believe they are destined to rebuild. They do have a slight problem to overcome, however, as they must blow up the mosque known as the Dome of the Rock, which supposedly sits on the temple site (276, 295). Unfortunately, towards the novel's end fanatics do succeed in blowing up the mosque, suggesting that Jewish fanaticism is every bit as poisonous as its Muslim counterpart. And if Jews can be such fanatics, the novel seems to ask if they are worthy of statehood at all. It is ironic, however, that other peoples and nations are rarely required to answer that question.

Landsman also discovers that his sister was killed by the Americans to safeguard their plot to remove the Arab presence from Jerusalem, the idea having found particular favor with the "imaginary" American fundamentalist president at the time. This "make believe" administration is interested in returning the Jews to the Temple Mount so that the Messiah can come. Of course, they also believe that on the last day all the Jews will accept Christ as their savior. Their Jewish fanatical partners are willing participants in the plot, though their plans for the final day are very different.

In a tidy conclusion, Landsman and Berko (his Jewish-Indian cousin and partner) learn who killed the Messiah as well as the secret of Berko's Indian mother's death: "Berko calls his wife. He explains to her, not very coherently, that his father and a man named Alter Litvak were indirectly

responsible for his mother's death during the worst Indian-Jew violence in the sixty-year history of the District, and that his father had shot himself in the head (after he admitted shooting the would-be Messiah to put him out of his misery)" (320).

At the novel's end, Landsman notes that "every Jew has a personal Messiah who never comes," a declaration that well fits Chabon's authorial voice (331). Indeed, perhaps this best sums up the novel, though the fact that Jewish religious fanatics are responsible for the destruction of a holy shrine in Jerusalem doesn't make the Jews look very good. Or perhaps they are merely mirroring the role of Hamas, since the shoe is on the other foot, so to speak. Conqueror is conquered; winner is loser; and all oppressed people are capable of great cruelty and fanaticism. It seems that Chabon has created a *Great Gatsby* for the Jews. We recall the narrator of Gatsby imagining that green, virgin land that the Dutch sailors first saw on their voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. At that pristine moment, we are led to believe, everything was perfect and everything was possible in America. But there has never been true virgin land or perfect opportunity in America. The latter is true for the Jews of Sitka and of Israel; it is even so for the coming of the Messiah: indeed, as the text informs us, "A Messiah who actually arrives is no good to anybody. A hope fulfilled is already half a disappointment" (349). Put quite simply, "*Every Messiah fails…the moment he tries to redeem himself*" (335). Perhaps that is why Mendel Shpilman wanted to die, to avoid such a defeatist position, mirrored in the *Zugzwang* chess problem he left behind.

Once Landsman unravels the whodunit, he decides to make the most of the situation. Although as secular messiah he cannot redeem his people, he is able to protect his immediate family. Since he knows about the American plot to remove the Muslim presence from Jerusalem, he has the means to trade his silence to the American government for papers for his extended family. He secures documents for Berko, his wife and kids, and papers for his reconciled ex and himself (367). Justice, with a twist, is the best he can do. He opts for love with his wife Bina, the boundaries of his redemption reduced to the area of the wedding canopy. His salvation will not depend on the Messiah, nationhood or anything else (411). Apparently Landsman believes the borders of love, without a Boundary Maven, are more manageable and much more honest than the types of borders that burden the Jews,

existential, religious and secular. Optimistically, the novel ends with Landsman calling a long time acquaintance reporter, and letting him know: "'Brennan…have I got a story for you'" (411). Beyond the conundrum of statehood, telling good stories is the essence of being a Jew: for Landsman and perhaps for Michael Chabon as well.

What is most interesting about this story, however, is that it portrays such an ambivalent attitude towards the notion of a Jewish state and what it means to be Jewish. The alternative reality that Chabon creates is representative of failure on at least three levels: the so-called Republic of Israel is destroyed after a few months in 1948; the Reversion will remove the Jewish presence from Sitka; and the Non-Ashkenazi Jews, a majority in Israel of the 21st century, have disappeared. Nevertheless, I cannot help but acknowledge something optimistic about Chabon's struggle with exile and ambivalence vis-à-vis the Jewish people.

Franz Rosenzweig has noted that exile is an integral part of Jewish existence. Writing in 1972, he declares that "The events which have dictated the terms of Jewish existence in our generation – Holocaust and Statehood – have had an especially profound effect upon recent Israeli reflection concerning the meaning of Jewish homelessness and homecoming" (*Star of Redemption* 117). In that respect, nothing much has changed over the past thirty-eight years, and what Rosenzweig says about Israelis is true about Jewish Americans as well. Jewish homelessness and homecoming, exile, statehood, and redemption are still critical issues that Jews must engage. I find no reason to fault Michael Chabon for creating such a wildly entertaining, engaging, and noble effort to do so.

**Bennett Kravitz**
**University of Haifa, Israel**

## Notes

[1]For a discussion of the "Chandlerian" prose, see Elizabeth McCracken's review of the novel in the *Washington Post*, May 13, 2007. For the grim reality of the book, and its similarity in that respect to Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America,* see "Raymond Chandler on Ice," the *Guardian*, June 9 2007. Cal Godot describes the novel as "a sort of Saul Bellow meets Raymond Chandler."

[2]Michiko Kakutani describes Landsman as "one of the most appealing detective heroes to come along since Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe."

[3]The perfect hilarious exemplification of the term occurs in *Frisco Kid* (1979) when "Rabbi" Gene Wilder mistakenly assumes a group of Amish are indeed his Landsmen because of the way they dress.

[4]I take issue with Sam Anderson's *New York Magazine* review of the novel; he argues that "Anyone looking for a precise political allegory hidden in this backwoods American Diaspora won't have an easy time. Chabon seems more interested in his alternate world as a novelistic challenge – how to bring something so outlandish to life? – than some kind of subtly coded analysis of contemporary Middle Eastern politics." Were fundamentalists on all sides to have their way, Middle Eastern politics might well be as explosive as they are portrayed in the novel.

## Works Cited

Anderson, Sam. "The Frozen People." *New York Magazine*. 29 Apr. 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

Chabon, Michael. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union.* New York: Harper, 2007. Print.

Cohen, Patricia. "The Frozen Chosen." *New York Times Book Review.* 29 Apr. 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

Diski, Jenny." Raymond Chandler on Ice." *The Guardian*. Saturday 9 June 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

Eisen, Arnold. *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. Print.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby.* New York: Scribner, 1925. Print.

Godot, Cal. "Review of Yiddish Policemen's Union." *Literary Kicks*. 21 May 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

Kakutani, Michiko. *NYTimes Book Review*. 1 May 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

Lewis, James. "The Ultimate PC Novel." *American Thinker*. 5 July 2008. Web. 1 June 2010.

Lipper, Erica. "Northern Exposure." *The American Prospect*. 1 June 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

McCracken, Elizabeth. "The Promised Land." *The Washington Post*. May 13, 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

Nussbaum, Abigail. "*Yiddish Policemen's Union* Review." *Strange Horizons*. 30 July 2007. Web. 1 June 2010.

Podhoretz, John. "The Not-So-Amazing Adventures of Chabon and Obama." *Commentary.* February 4, 2008. Web. 1 June 2010.

Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption.* William W. Hallo Trans. Boston: Beacon P, 1972. Print.

Sand, Shlomo. *The Invention of the Jewish People.* Yael Lotan, trans. New York: Verso, 2009. Print.

Wisse, Ruth. "*The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon." *Commentary.* Web. 1 June 2010.