

## Yidl in the Middle of Nowhere

### THE YIDDISH POLICEMAN'S UNION

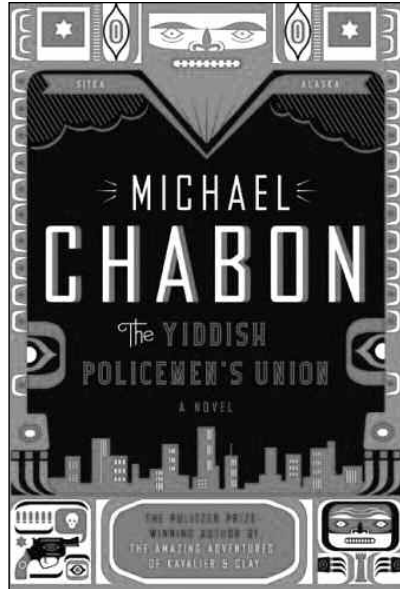
Michael Chabon. HarperCollins, New York, 2007.

Reviewed by Marty Roth

The wonder boy, Michael Chabon, has produced an amazing fiction in his most recent novel, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*. Richly imagined and finely rendered, it amounts to a magical resurrection of the vanished precincts of European *yiddishkeit* reimaged on the outskirts of the Western hemisphere, a "sprawling, poignant Judaic carnival" on the tundra of Alaska, as one reviewer so aptly puts it. More than that, it is also a mixed marriage. Chabon has crossed the affecting worlds of Sholem Aleichem and Marc Chagall with the tough, wise-cracking mean streets of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. *Shmeck* meets *noir*.

And it is the fabulous *shmeck* of the book that keeps backing up in the throat of this secular Jewish

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reader. The novel is jam-packed with homely details that you can almost taste. Chabon has an uncanny ear for those turns of phrase and inflection, real or mythical, that rang through our childhood and signified *yiddishkeit*. His new ghetto in Sitka resembles one of those large dysfunctional families of the thirties and forties (I'm thinking of the *seder* scene in Barry Levinson's *Avalon*) full of Byzantine resentments, where everyone shares a distasteful secret past with everyone else.

The folkways, however, are not those of the imaginary *shtetl* filled with the endearing complaints of dutiful Tevyes and Goldes. The reigning genius of this novel is the early Isaac Bashevis Singer, particularly his dark and twisted fictions like *Satan in Goray*. It is a place of *nebbishes* and *gonifs*, of unkempt, badly shaven men who exude the squalor of Eastern European or Lower East Side tenements.

In this alternate universe, the State of Israel never happened; instead Holocaust survivors were offered Sitka Federal District as a homeland, a bleak reservation ("a crooked parenthesis of rocky shoreline") on the Alaska ("Alyeska") panhandle. It was only meant to be a temporary stopping place for sixty years, and now it is 2007 and the 3 million-plus Jews in greater Sitka are about to lose their refuge as the district is scheduled to revert to its aboriginal community (with whom

the Jews, after early battles, learned to coexist uneasily). Many Jews have already left for other parts of the world, as an apocalyptic gloom descends on the community and another chapter looms in that 2000-year-old saga of wandering.

The hero of this caper is a circumcised dick named Meyer Landsman. The crime is the murder of a drifter and junkie named Emmanuel Lasker in the seedy hotel (the "Zamenhof") where Landsman also lives. Lasker's corpse was found beside an unfinished chess game; around his arm were the straps of his *tefillin*, but their worldly purpose was to tie off the arm for a spike of heroin. Landsman and his half-Tlingit partner, Berko Shemets, a marvellous oversized polar bear of a Jew, are the only ones who care enough to perform the last rites of justice for Lasker.

Lasker is soon discovered to have been one Mendel Shpilman, a rabbi's son and one-time chess prodigy who fell into drug addiction. He was rumored to possess healing powers and some believed he might be (might have been) the Messiah, finally arrived to redeem the world. Meyer and Berko, like earlier private eyes, official or unofficial, have to stay on the case after being drugged, beaten and repeatedly warned off by the powerful and authoritative.

Landsman is both hard-boiled and prone to tears, an open wound of Western masculinity. He is a burned-out cop with a drinking problem, a pessimist and unbeliever without faith in God or human nature. He is driven only by an exhausted sense of justice and a wretched, deep devotion to his ex-wife, Bina Gelbfish. And as in later *noir* (the novels, say, of Ross McDonald) the investigation leads him back to his own family past, to the still throbbing knots of pain in his life, like the unexplained death of his sister Naomi, an Alaska bush pilot who crashed into the side of a mountain. Similarly, Berko is forced to finally confront his father, a Sitka administrator forced into bitter retirement by charges of corruption.

Chabon plays dark variations on Jewish fundamentalist and Zionist



beliefs. It is hard not to read the book as an end-run around the creation of Israel that responds to the current politics of the Middle East. In this alternate universe, European Jewry barely got a toehold in the Holy Land when they were “tossed out of the joint . . . with savage finality in 1948.” *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, then, must be reckoned an anti-Zionist book, both because of the end-run and because the eventual installment in Eretz Yisroel, when it does surface late in the book, is something between a scam and a bombshell.

I would suggest that the novel is anti-Zionist for a third reason, because the *yiddishkeit* of diasporic weariness, resignation, and endurance that only toughens the individual *Yid* is an existential pose that is commonly read today as an affront to Zionist certainty. That is why the critic of a major daily can ask “do we really need a novel that flaunts every vicious stereotype of the Jewish people?” of a book that I read as celebratory.

Be advised that this is a survival manual for secular Jews. Religious

need not apply. To Landsman, heaven is kitsch, God a word, and the soul, at most, “the charge on your battery.” The Orthodox are presented in tones as dark as their clothes, as a vast criminal enterprise, their neighborhoods shady no-go zones that the police hardly dare visit. The Hasidic Jews, called “black hats” and led by Rabbe Shpilman, a domineering mountain of flesh, are labouring to bring about the apocalypse and the Rapture, through foul means or fair.

The problem with the book (in addition to a little dragging toward the end) is the *noir* base to which it adheres, perhaps too slavishly. Because of it, characters remain in a kind of stereotypical infancy. And Chabon never justifies his choice of narrative armature. Why is the hard-boiled detective a proper disguise for the last honest Jew? (I can think of reasons, but I want the book to do so as well). Why does a plot of misleading clues and traces, double-crosses and total corruption at the top resonate as the world enters the late stages of Diaspora?

As for its politics, the book cer-

tainly walks an exhilarating tightrope. It will be easy to find much of it offensive. I can only say that I didn’t; I loved every greasy spoonful. With a world that is in seventeen different kinds of mess, it is more offensive, I think, to uphold pieties that have never really worked.

Whichever way you turn as a reader, I hope you can still find it a brilliant achievement. As Meyer and others of his *lantsmenner* say, “These are strange times to be a Jew.” Strange indeed—just “last week, amid the panic and feathers of a kosher slaughterhouse on Zhitlovsky Avenue, a chicken turned on the shochet as he raised his ritual knife and announced, in Aramaic, the imminent advent of Messiah. According to the *Tog*, the miraculous chicken offered a number of startling predictions, though it neglected to mention the soup in which, having once more fallen silent as God Himself, it afterwards featured.”

You don’t have to be Jewish to enjoy the book, but it couldn’t hurt. ♦

## PALESTINE: PEACE NOT APARTHEID

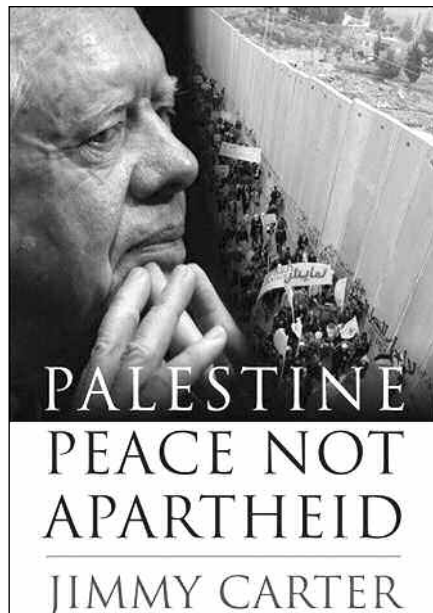
Jimmy Carter. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2006. 288 pages.

Reviewed by David and Toby Brooks

**F**ormer U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s very accessible book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, presents a useful perspective on the long, sad story of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Carter

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has visited most of the countries of the region, and met most of their leaders on numerous occasions. He found that most of them were open to the possibility of peace with Israel, as were most of the earlier leaders in Israel. However, he finds a growing intransigence, particular-

ly among recent Israeli leadership, and puts much of the blame for the current hiatus in the peace process on their shoulders.

The virtues of the book lie in its understanding of the history of two peoples struggling for the same land, of the ways in which their struggle was manipulated by one side or the other during the Cold War era, and of the several times at which peace was within reach and then aborted by events or lack of courage. Carter is clear in his support for Israel as an independent and democratic state within secure borders, and he speaks warmly about his contacts with many Israeli leaders. At the same time, over his years of involvement with the peace process, he became more and more discouraged by Israeli policy, particularly regarding the settlements. In fact, Carter makes many legitimate criticisms of specific Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, criticisms that even Prof. Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Univer-

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