



Research on Michael Chabon and His Jewish Narration

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Abstract

The article discusses the research of Michael Chabon from home and abroad, which is mainly from three aspects. That is the author himself, the genres of the fictions and Jewish ethnic, Jewish identity, the difficulty. It also introduces his famous work “*The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*” from the perspective of Jewish themes.

Key words: Jewish; Narration; Identity; Ethnic

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INTRODUCTION

Michael Chabon is the bestselling and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, *A Model World*, *Wonder Boys*, *Werewolves in Their Youth*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, *The Final Solution*, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, *Maps and Legends*, *Gentlemen of the Road*, and the middle grade book *Summerland*. He altogether writes 10 fictions till now. His fictions involve intense male-male relationships and his work has become increasingly and explicitly Jewish-centered. There are also some specific topics in

his fiction, such as Holocaust in Chabon’s fiction or his depiction of gay characters and relationships.

1. THE RESEARCH OF CHABON AT HOME AND ABROAD

In recent years, more and more scholars focus on the research on Michael Chabon both in the theme of his fictions and his relationship with the Internet and Media. Till now there are two books that introduce his work in detail. One is Helene Meyers’s book *Reading Michael Chabon*. Helene Meyers is professor of English and Mcman’s University, chair at southwestern University in Georgetown. In this book, the author gives us an introduction of Michael Chabon’s life, his work *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, *Wonder Boys*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*. In each chapter, the author narrates the summary, characters and themes of each fiction. And there is also the pop culture in Michael Chabon’s work, Michael Chabon on the Internet, Michael Chabon and the Media and so on. Another book *Understanding Michael Chabon* is written by Joseph Dewey. He is an associate professor of contemporary American literature in the university of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, USA. His book gives us nine novels written by Michael Chabon and the theme of each novel.

There are also some papers that relate to the fictions of Michael Chabon, which is analyzed from three aspects by the foreign scholars. First, they comment on Michael Chabon from the perspective of the author himself and discuss the Jewishness and the writing trend. In 2010, Kravitz Bennet delivered an essay *The Aquatic Zionist by The Yiddish Policemen’ Union*. It challenges to consider Chabon as an anti-Zionist and believe that Chabon has his seamy side although the plot of the novel is comic. In 2012, Colby Tanner’s essay *Can a White Author Write Black Characters* in *Slate Magazine*. In 2014, Kravitz

Alan published *Creating a Genuine Rogue: Successful Narrative Techniques for Exploring the Difference Between Dishonesty and Morality in an Unreliable Narrator An Introductory Essay and an Original Novel*. This essay explores the techniques that contemporary authors use to make dishonest or unlikeable characters—often known as tricksters—compelling and believable. The characters examined in this essay are Grady Tripp from *Wonder Boys*. The author finds that Chabon employs a variety of tools in order to make these characters multi-dimensional and even reliable. In *Wonder Boys*, Chabon relies heavily on metaphor. Second, scholars analyze why Chabon's work are popular and the genres. In 2006, Bond Gwenda's essay *Fantasy Goes Literature in the Publisher Weekly* focuses on the popularity of novels featuring prominent fantasy or supermatural elements. For decades, an imaginary but effective chain—link fence has divided the science fiction and fantasy genre of literary fiction, scared every now and then by a few writers. Reflecting the rise of fantasy and science fiction in popular culture, literary writers like Michael Chabon ascended to the top of their field. Saricks Joyce delivered the essay *At Leisure: The Hyphenate, Our Newest Fiction Genre* in July 2010 in the *Booklist*. The article discusses novels which combine various genre traditions, nothing that they are often read as they are difficult to categorize. Several examples are presented, including *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon. And in December 2008, Davis. J. Madison published *Mix and Match: Michael Chabon's Imaginative Use of Genre*. Literary criticism of the book *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is presented. The author comments on how Chabon writes novels that present variations on a popular genre. The author discusses how the book combines elements and archetypes of mystery novels with an alternate history and comments on surreal elements of the book's plot. In Septmeber 2008, Nance Kevin's article *Invasion of the Genre Snatchers in Poets and Writers* compares the literary and genre fiction categories in novels. A differentiation of the two types are presented, stating that literary fiction is high culture, respectable and serious, while genre fiction is low culture, disreputable and shallow. It cites several books that were influenced by both categories such as *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, by Michael Chabon. Third, from the perspective of the Jewish ethnic, Jewish identity, the difficulty and ransoming, including the Jewish ethnic political problems, the internal family problems, problems of friendship and so on. During the summer in 2008, Meyer Helene published *Reading Jewishness as a Marker of Ethno-Racial and Culture History*. The author describes the difficulty of teaching Jewish American literature at a college in Texas with mostly Christian students and faculty without making Jewish literature seem too foreign or too normal, which

she describes as heterosexual and masculine. She says she begins her courses by teaching the students about the history of Jewish American identity and by convincing them that Jewish culture can be secular as well as defined by religion. She uses works such as the novel *Kaaterskill Falls* by Allegra Goodman which aloes deals with feminist theory, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* by Michael Chabon and the play *Caroline, or Change* by Tony Kushner. Also, in the fall of 2008, Myer. D. G's article *Chabon's Imaginary Jews*, explores the modern Jewish tradition. Chabon's novel, which includes *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, *Wonder Boys*, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* are discusses.

From the essays written by the foreign scholars of the new generation, we can see that they pay more attention to the Jewish work Therefore, we can see that Chabon's emphasis on the living condition of the Jewish people, political positions and identity embodies the his deep concern. Michael Chabon uses different genres to narrate his stories and gives us the space to imagine and do fantasy and sometimes face to reality. The reason why Chabon uses different kinds of genres is to satisfy his own desire to give Jewish people the right to live in the mainstream society and the right to choose what kind of life they should lead.

However, there are few essays that discuss the issue of Michael Chabon in China. In August, 2001, ZhangYongyi delivered the article *From Three Johns to Two Michaels: The Change in American Literature* in the Chinese Reading Newspaper. It discusses American literature changes from the age of three Johns to the Age of two Michaels. They are Michael Cunningham and Michael Chabon. The creation space of the novelists is bigger and bigger from the epic style of the middle class to the style of diversification. Literature is no longer the attempt by a few people, no longer relies solely on some newspapers and magazines. Bei Xiaorong published his article *What Kind of Writer is Michael Chabon?* in 2007. The author introduces the background of the plots of Chabon's two novels *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and speaks highly of the imagination and the use of language. In October, 2015, Sang Ba translated BBC's column writer, Jan Ciabattari's article, *BBC Chooses the 12 Greatest English Novels*. The author made a survey of some authorities and critics. Michael Chabon's *The Adventure of Kavalier and Clay* was praised to be delicate writing, rich emotion and the profound meaning of history and moral.

From the above, there is no denying that the research on the work of Michael Chabon is still on the way in China. There are so many works of Michael Chabon valuable to explore and discuss. Chabon's works are full of specific topics, such as the Holocaust, gay characters, Jewish identities and relationships.

2. MICHAEL CHABON'S *THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION*

The Yiddish Policemen's Union is unique as it's not a speculative novel masquerading as Jewish noir, nor is it noir with a glossy veneer: it's everything at once. The questions of Jewish identity and what will happen to the community once the Reversion happens never takes away from the main tale; it's so well tucked in with the main action that Chabon never goes off on a tangent. All the while, Chabon plows ahead with a mystery that will set off chuckles of recognition as he hits and bounces upon every noir convention like a pinball. Informers, grieving mothers, loyal partners, the obligatory moment when an unconnected crime enters the frame - it's all there, but with its overlay of the Jewish community in the north, it feels fresh.

2.1 The Trauma after the Holocaust

In this novel, Michael Chabon recalls, even as he rewrites, a great deal of Jewish history. While the losses of the Shoah and the founding of Israel resulted in the diminishment of Yiddish and the rebirth of Hebrew, The Yiddish Polcimen's Union strives to re-create the pre-World War II world of Eastern European Yiddishkeit. In the creation of a provisional Jewish homeland and the imminence of reversion, the novel represents the challenges and fears faced by Jews living in the diaspora and the impact that narratives of exile and a home in Zion have on Jewish psyches.

Within the splendid reach of "what if", Chabon with ingenious daring challenged the imagination to reshape history itself to accommodate such a place. Imagine a contemporary world without the nation-state of Israel. What if months before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1940 when America was still officially neutral? Chabon asks us to imagine the American Northwest suddenly opened up and millions of oppressed European Jews, facing the menace of Nazi brutality accepting the offer of asylum in a distant and decidedly hostile frontier much like first generation puritans.

For sixty years Jewish refugees and their descendants have prospered in the Federal District of Sitka, a "temporary" safe haven created in the wake of the Holocaust and the shocking 1948 collapse of the fledgling state of Israel. The Jews of the Sitka District have created their own little world in the Alaskan panhandle, a vibrant and complex frontier city that moves to the music of Yiddish. But now the District is set to revert to Alaskan control, and their dream is coming to an end. Homicide detective Meyer Landsman of the District Police has enough problems without worrying about the upcoming Reversion. His life is a shambles, his marriage a wreck, his career a disaster. And in the cheap hotel where Landsman has washed up, someone has just committed a murder—right under his nose. When he begins to investigate the killing of his neighbor, a former

chess prodigy, word comes down from on high that the case is to be dropped immediately, and Landsman finds himself contending with all the powerful forces of faith, obsession, evil, and salvation that are his heritage.

2.2 The Jewish Theme in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, Chabon uses the conventions of detective story to narrate an alternative afterlife of the Holocaust. There are two main characters in this novel, Meyer Landsman and Berko Shemets. Meyer Landsman is a decorated detective on a downward spiral. Divorced, alcoholic, mourning both an aborted son and a younger sister killed in an airplane crash, he identifies with the chess-playing junkie murdered in the hotel he provisionally calls home. Berko Shemets is Landsman's partner and cousin. His mixed parentage caused him grief as a youth but allows him access to both the Tlingit and Verbover worlds as a police detective. In sharp contrast to Landsman, he is a stable family man and has two sons.

In this novel, Michael Chabon recalls a great deal of Jewish history. "While the losses of the Shoah and the founding of Israel resulted in the diminishment of Yiddish and the rebirth of Hebrew, The Yiddish Policemen's Union strives to re-create the pre-World War II world of Eastern European Yiddishkeit. In part, this is accomplished through the language of the novel". (Meyers Helene, 2010)

"The Yiddish Policemen's Union is a tale of a home lost. But Chabon offers us what is lost to his characters: a kind of home that is far more durable, far more stable, and far more sheltering than the improvised homeland of Jewish Sitka". (Joseph Dewey, 2013)) But *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is less a political tract, less a defense of a Jewish state, less even a murder mystery, than it is a dispassionate examination of the logic and soundness of plots, the construction of events into a convincing pattern of causality, the heroic effort to re-form raw event into inevitability.

CONCLUSION

Michael Chabon has used genre fiction and his imagination to express his commitment to the Jewish American tradition. Some of Chabon's novels have the same themes, like Jewish centered discussion and male-male relationship. Till now, research on him abroad is mature to some extent, while in China it still has a long way to go. When we analyze the works of Michael Chabon, it also gives us a great number of benefits and experiences to analyze works of ethnic literature.

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