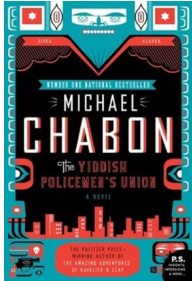




Lambda Sci-Fi

DC Area Gaylaxians



The Yiddish Policemen's Union
By Michael Chabon
Discussed November/December 2013

Characters & Notes

Cast of Characters, in order of appearance, (alive and dead) {Uncompleted list...}:

- Meyer Landsman: protagonist, alcoholic detective with fears of the dark, haunted by the death of his father, his sister, and encouraging the abortion of his first offspring.
- Emanuel Lasker: a pseudonym for the “dead yid” found in Meyer Landsman’s hotel. Actually the name of a well-known chess player.
- Naomi Landsman: Meyer’s recently deceased sister, pilot killed in a small plane crash.
- Django Landsman: codename of Meyer and Bina’s offspring, aborted due to a genetic abnormality.
- Tenenboym: the night manager at Hotel Zamenhof. Finds Emanuel Lasker/Frank/Mendel dead and summons Landsman.
- Elijah: homeless wanderer who wanders in and out of the Hotel Zamenhof in the first hours of the investigation.
- Netsky: police officer
- Menashe Shpringer: night shift criminologist
- Inspector Felsenfeld: squad commander who resigns and is replaced by Meyer’s ex-wife, Bina
- Isidor Landsman: Meyer’s father. Successful chess player.
- Hertz Shemets: Meyer’s uncle, father of Johnny “the Jew” Bear/Berko Shemets. U.S.
- Fredyl Shemets: Meyer’s mother
- Berko Shemets: half-Tlingit, half-Jew cousin to Meyer. Detective, husband, father.
- Ester-Malke Taytsh: Meyer’s sister-in-law. Mother of Feingold “Goldy” Taytsh-Shemets, and “fat baby”, expecting her third child.
- Bina Gelbfish: Meyer’s ex-wife. 2 years out from her divorce during the novel. Police officer and she becomes his boss.
- Dennis Brennan: non-Jewish reporter who is assigned to cover the Sitka beat. He uncovered the immoral and illegal acts of Berko’s father.
- Mrs. Kalvshiner, owner of the Vorscht and Hershel the dog
- Velvel, Vassily Shitnoviter, Saltiel Lapidus, Fishkin, Alter Litvak: chess players who Berko and Landsman get info from.
- Dovid Sussman: Harvaky resident who is known to Berko from his time there in the police.

- Itzik Zimbalist: a boundary maven and neighbor of Rebbe Heskell Shpilman, tells B+L the true identity of the Emanuel Lasker/Frank/Mendel
- Heskell Shpilman: descendent of the original founder of the Verbover sect, current spiritual leader of the sect.
- Melekh Gaystik: wellknown chess player to this community.
- Rudashevsky men: a family of bouncers who protect Rabbi Shpilman
- Aryeh Baronshteyn: son-in-law, assistant, and attorney for Rabbi Shpilman

Important places throughout the novel:

- The Hotel Zamenhof: a “crap-ass hotel” in Sitka. Meyer Landsman has been living here since his divorce, and where Emanuel Lasker/Frank/Mendel is found assassinated.
- Sitka: home to 3 million Jews
- The Untershtot: A bad neighborhood home to Hotel Zamenhof and the Pearl of Manila restaurant
- The Hotel Einstein: “in whose café the great exiles of Jewish chess met every day to demolish one another without pity or heart”. The site of Isidor Landsman’s suicide/overdose.
- The Harkavy: the area where the Verbover sect lives in Sitka.

Sects of Jews mentioned throughout:

- Lubavitcher, Bobover, Verbover, Satmar, Ger (and all the other black-hat sects...)

Discussion Questions

1. Did you read/finish the book?
2. Would you have voted for the book to win the Nebula Award (it also won the Hugo Award among others)?
3. Did you think you had slept through a lecture on U.S. history and missed out on learning about the settlement of Sitka by Jews? Were Sitka and the people devised by Chabon believable? How about the alternative history, such as a different ending to the Arab-Israeli War of 1948? Would you want to visit Sitka, or even live there?
4. What’s your familiarity with U.S. Jewish culture? European Jewish culture? What did you think of the depiction of Jewish culture(s) in the book?
5. Any comments about Meyer Landsman’s observation that “apart from homosexuals, only chess players have found a reliable way to bridge, intensely but without fatal violence, the gulf that separates any given pair of men” (p. 88, Harper Perennial paperback)
6. What did you think about the references to Mendel being gay, his dressing as a woman to visit his mother before running off from his wedding day, etc? Was Mendel being gay just a way for Chabon to have Mendel not be the Messiah figure?
7. Was the book too violent, right amount, not enough for your tastes in reading fiction?
8. What is the relationship portrayed between native persons and Jews in Sitka and elsewhere in Alaska?
9. What did you think about the overall story telling in the book? Did you see it coming that there was going to be a connection between the death of Naomi (Meyer’s sister) and Mendel?
10. What to say of Chabon’s portrayal of female characters? If you were Bina Gelbfish, would you have returned for the final assignment to close things out before Reversion, to work with your ex?
11. One recurring theme in the book is father-son relationships. What were your reactions to the characterization of the relationships and the ways that some of them ended?
12. Who was your favorite character, or best described character?

13. Did your edition of the text have a glossary/commentary by the author? Did you read/use these, find them helpful?
14. Have you read/would you read any other Michael Chabon books? How does this compare?
15. Anything else you would like to discuss about the book?