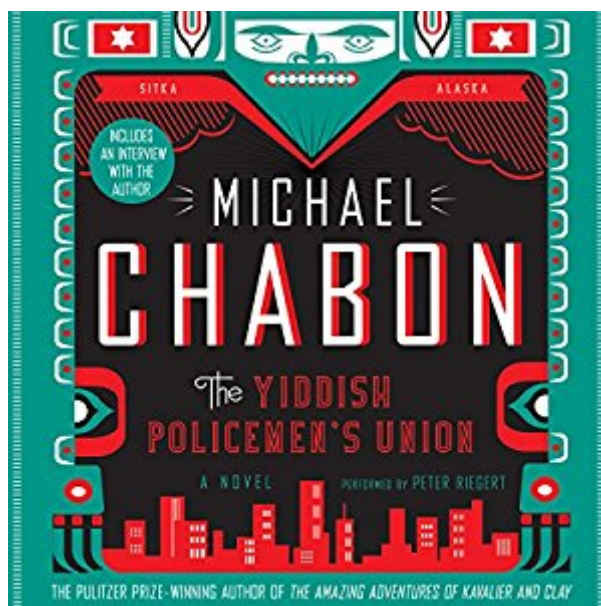


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The Yiddish Policemen's Union: A Novel



Synopsis

For 60 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. At once a gripping whodunit, a love story, and an exploration of the mysteries of exile and redemption, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is a novel only Michael Chabon could have written.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 12 hours and 38 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: HarperAudio

Audible.com Release Date: July 5, 2016

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B01F9PHMA6

Best Sellers Rank: #65 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Alternate History #157 in Books > Mystery, Thriller & Suspense > Mystery > Hard-Boiled #171 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Fiction & Literature > Historical Fiction

Customer Reviews

said the words out loud those who had assumed Yiddish was a language of the past only, suddenly felt it had been revived. . . . It seemed to be saying `khbin nisht vos ikh bin amol geven. I am not what I once was. Ober `khbin nisht geshtorbn. Ikh leb. But I did not die. I live." Irena Klepfisz. Yiddish is certainly not dead in Michael Chabon's "The Yiddish Policemen's Union". In fact, the primary

language of Jews throughout the "Pale of Settlement" (where Jews were allowed to live in Imperial Russia) suffuses this book with the rich aroma of a language whose every word can take on a paragraph or even chapter of meaning in the hands of the right speaker. Chabon is one such speaker (or writer) and "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" is a book that is rich in enjoyment. "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" is an artful blend of genres, a blend of crime fiction and alternate history. I think of it as a blend of Dashiell Hammett's dark crime stories like "Red Harvest" and Philip Roth's alternate-history novel "The Plot Against America". Chabon has created a world in which there is no Israel. Rather, Israel had been crushed in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Since that time the United States, partly as a result of guilt over the Holocaust has created a temporary homeland for displaced European Jews in and around Sitka, Alaska. Yiddish, not Hebrew, is the primary language. As the book opens, close to 60-years after the end of Israel, Sitka is due to revert back to U.S. control and the million or so inhabitants face the prospect of being stateless refugees. The hero, or protagonist, is Detective Meyer Landsman. Like one of Dashiell Hammett's characters he is a flawed, down-on-his luck cop with nothing much going for him except a strong sense of right and wrong and a personal integrity of the highest order. He is a drunk, he is divorced (and his ex-wife is his commanding officer) and he lives in a flea-bag hotel. He is awakened out of something of a stupor and told a murder has been committed in the hotel. It does not quite do Chabon's book justice to say that the story line is primarily that of Landsman's investigation into the murder of this stranger in his fleabag hotel. That is certainly how the book plays out. However, that is simply the structure of the book. As in Hammett, there is a murder in a town filled with greed and corruption and the path Landsman must walk is filled with hurdles and hidden minefields. As in Roth, the story of Landsman (which in itself is a Yiddish word that may be roughly translated as fellow countryman) is the story of a people set adrift and apart. It is a story of a people bobbing in a sea without an anchor, without a homeland. It is poignant but, ironically, it is poignancy without the schmaltz. Chabon's writing, like Yiddish itself, is rich and thick with meaning. But more importantly, it is both funny and thoughtful. The barbs and insults and sarcasm with which the characters express their fondness for each other and their scorn and loathing is, in my opinion, dead-solid perfect. As I read "Yiddish Policemen's Union" I could envision the body language and sense the arched eyebrows or sneers on the lips of the characters as words come tumbling out of their mouths in a torrent. Although I won't say anything to reveal the plot, I think Chabon shows excellent pace and timing in developing the plot. He neither rushes to expose too many details too soon nor leaves everything to a summary revelation at the book's climax. Chabon keeps the pot boiling and that kept me turning page after page after page long after I should have turned out the lights for the night. One slight cautionary note: I grew up in a

Queens, New York neighborhood at a time when Yiddish words and expressions were sprinkled liberally throughout every conversation both in my family's apartment and throughout my neighborhood. However, if you don't have any prior experience with Yiddish I suggest going on line and keeping a Yiddish-English web page handy if you find you have any difficulty with the odd word or phrase. Ultimately the pleasures of this book so far outweigh the minimal burden of pondering the occasional strange word. I mention it just so the potential reader is aware in advance that they might see a few words that may not be readily understood by every reader. I got a great deal of pleasure from reading Michael Chabon's "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" and recommend it heartily. L. Fleisig

I've been reading Chabon since I first picked up "The Mysteries of Pittsburgh" over a decade-and-a-half ago, and it's been fun seeing his writing evolve with each new work. I believe that "Kavalier and Clay" is one of the best American novels of the past ten years, and that's not even because I'm such a comic book fan; it's just an extraordinary novel on many levels. When I heard of the concept of "Yiddish Policemen's Union," I was worried that it sounded a bit too high concept; then I considered that Chabon is such a great writer that I'll forgive him for anything - even his recent "Simpson's" voiceover where he and Jonathan Franzen got into a fistfight. Luckily, no forgiveness needs to be granted (like Chabon couldn't care less anyhow; who am I in the Kakutani-era of literary criticism?) Chabon's newest novel is just further confirmation of his skill. This book 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. A few reviewers have commented that they missed out on Jewish in-jokes. I'm a goy through and through but didn't feel I was missing anything by not picking up on them, so do not let that keep you from reading the novel. I want to read the book again just to get a feel of the words and unique narrative style that follows the grammatical phrasing of Yiddish. (Another exceptional touch.) By setting the novel at the end of an era, Chabon has also been able to sidestep any possibilities of a franchise with "the continuing mysteries of ..." Actually, that doesn't sound like it would be such a bad idea but I'd rather Chabon take on a completely new subject. Bravo, Mr.

Chabon.

What can you say about a book like this? Not much without giving something away. It's audacious as can be believed. What's it about? Read the Publisher's Weekly blurb above. Or, better yet, don't. Chabon is a genius and a madman, a wizard and a mensch. He's a wrecking crew, a culture-blender, and a rebbe packing heat. Who else would, or could, take Nick Charles and put him in Shalom Shachna's body? (Or maybe it's the other way around.) Equal parts Kabbalah and Ka-Bar, it's funny and gripping, and entertaining, and so heartbreaking at times it's hard to breathe. In sum, I found it extraordinary - the concept, the language, the characters and the plot. It's not perfect, but it is simply one of the best novels I've read in a decade. Is that "helpful"? I doubt it. If I were you, I wouldn't want to know more. Spoilers are odious, irrelevant, and available elsewhere. If you love Chandler, Hammett, Roth, and I.B. Singer, I suspect you will love this. Put some Manischewitz in a lowball and sit by the electric fire and crack this book open.

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