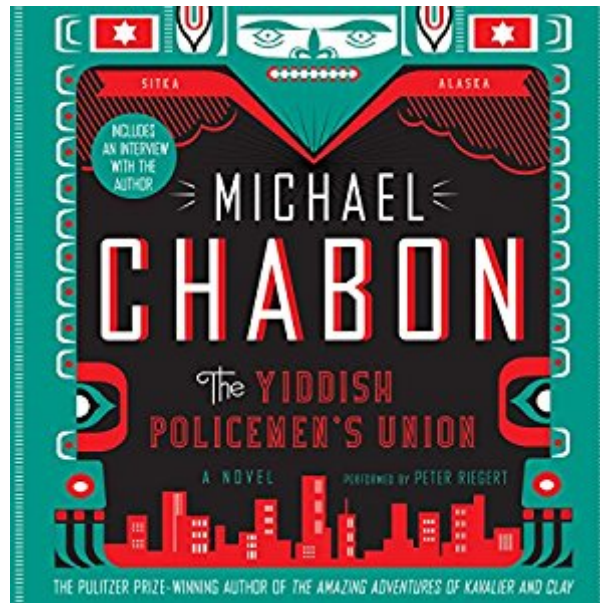




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The Yiddish Policemen's Union: A Novel



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

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Customer Reviews

A really engaging combination of alternative history and hard-boiled classic noir. In Chabon's imaginings, the Jewish diaspora is offered refuge in Sitka, Alaska, but that refuge is limited in space and in duration. Their 50 year dispensation is coming to an end and the Sitka District is soon to revert to the American government. With two months left until Reversion, we see Sitka through the eyes of Detective Meyer Landsman. Landsman is, in the great tradition of noir, worse for wear, a

functioning alcoholic, and divorced. He chews scenery with the best of them, and the dialog comes hard and fast. Here, the mystery surrounds a murdered heroin addict who lives in the same crappy, run down hotel that Landsman inhabits. But the heroin addict is more than he seems and the trail to his killer uncovers deeper plots and machinations. Chabon mixes in more than a few metaphors that will tickle the fancy of hard-boiled buffs, and the convoluted nature of the eventual solution can be forgiven because the ride to get there (full of colorful characters, cutting insight into the historical plight of the Jews, and clever details about what a Jewish enclave in Alaska might look like) is so incredibly diverting.

Michael Chabon is certainly an interesting writer. This novel, an alternate-history noir detective story, is perhaps a case of the author showing off his considerable inventive genius at the expense of developing a story. While Chabon's setting is intriguing and his descriptions are very clever (if a trifle overwrought at times), the characters are rather cartoonish, the dialogue is pretty stilted, and the various plot lines are never really resolved satisfactorily. I thought the abrupt ending was a slap in the face to the reader who had hung in there with Chabon the whole way. So "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" (which is a union, btw, was not really a major part of the story, and it was never clear if it was actually a joke) gets five stars for inventiveness and the creativity of its setting, plus overall writing style "but then loses three of the stars because the story is never fully developed, and the ending was horrible.

Don't be put off by the unlikely hypothetical premise of a US - sanctioned Jewish shtetl in Sitka, Alaska -- Chabon could take any premise at all, regardless of how crazy, and do anything he wants with it so long as he keeps writing in his characteristic, highly evocative style that exactly places the reader in the moment right down to the components of a particular smell or color or thought or memory, or light or mood. He delivers his easy, almost free wheeling exactitude of description, with unparalleled and seemingly effortless turn of phrase, through multitudinous and constant allusion, delightfully concise and incisive by turns, nailing it, never letting the allusion get in the way, speeding by it, allowing it to spring forth as from a well rehearsed comedian, in consistently dense prose aching and enviably to the point in stream of consciousness types of controlled leaps from this to that, precisely conveying in disarmingly simple words, a likeness between the object or emotion or taste at hand and things we know intimately, all with shocking accuracy, constantly drawing a string of minute comparisons and likenesses in a made up world made undeniably palpable and familiar, a made up world especially for Jews, but so enjoyably particular and intimate

in its description that in the end, his wild premise seems not so terribly unlikely. As for the plot, it's as wild as the notion of a remote Alaska Jewish shtetl set up by the state, and yet it moves along briskly enough, implausible --or not? -- as the outcome may be. Crazy enjoyable read, although it helps if you are Jewish or nearly Jewish by association owing to near constant cultural and actual Yiddish references (a lot of which, however, are self explanatory by context). All of this creates a feeling akin to an inside joke best understood by Jews, but again, the language is so beguiling to anyone enchanted by a well written turn of phrase, that it would be a shame for only Jared to read this and for non Jews to miss out. I encourage all linguaphiles, whatever their ethnic background, to dive in, maybe with a mini Yiddish reference dictionary on hand.

I read this for a book group. Would have never gotten beyond the first few pages otherwise. Glad I forced myself to keep reading, but it will never be a favorite. Writing is self-indulgent. Technique of using words with no dictionary or glossary definitions is effective in making the reader understand the feelings of being an outsider, but that's not what I want when I read. The main character, Landsman, grew on me until eventually I did care what happened to him. But it was a slog to get there. Best part of the book was the relationship between Landsman and Bina, his ex. Very well done in both the present and the backstory. I've read Kavalier & Clay which had many of the same problems for me. Unless I get out-voted in book group, this will be the last Chabon tome I force myself to read.

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