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The Depiction of the Holocaust within the Theme of Escape in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

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The Depiction of the Holocaust within the Theme of Escape in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing
Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

Deirdre Toeller-Novak

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

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DEDICATION

Anne E. Mulder, Ph.D.

and

Thomas Toeller-Novak

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ABSTRACT

Escape sounds like a ram's horn throughout Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, looming large in the lives of his mostly Jewish characters. Only one, Josef Kavalier, is intimately tied to and escapes the Holocaust which destroys his entire family. The horrors of the Holocaust, however, cast a shadow that hovers over nearly every chapter of Chabon's 636-page novel. For most of the novel's other characters, intent on plotting their own escapes, the events of the Holocaust remain 4,000 miles away. Americans, Jew and gentile, politically astute and clueless, laborer and capitalist, prefer to maintain a safe distance in mind and in fact. While the Jews of Europe struggle to escape from the ghettos, boxcars, and death in the camps, the Americans of *Kavalier & Clay* take refuge in glamorous New York City with its big bands, surrealist art and the Golden Age of comic books.

Critical opinion about how the Holocaust should be portrayed and to what end, varies widely. The work of Jewish-American fiction authors, such as Michael Chabon, who were not alive when Allied forces liberated the camps, has generated new and thoughtful avenues of criticism. "Will this lead to a trivialization of Holocaust memory," Christoph Ribbat asks, "Or will these popular genres open the discourse of memory by making it more democratic and more accessible?" (206).

At the heart of scholarly work surrounding Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel are questions about his depiction of the Holocaust in a work that is not ostensibly about the Holocaust, but one which never escapes it. In this thesis, I explore Chabon's critique of America's response to the plight of Europe's Jews through the exploits of the Escapist, a golem-like comic book character designed to kill Hitler and defeat the Nazis. I examine his purpose in framing his novel within the Golden Age of the comic book industry and the avant-garde cultural life of New York City while the Nazis created a swath of deadly destruction in their march

across Europe. Central to my thesis is the theme of escape in the lives of the major characters as well as its role as an established policy in America with regard to the war in Europe.

This thesis expands the critical conversation about Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, most particularly within the theme of escape, which has not been widely explored. I argue that *Kavalier & Clay* makes an important contribution to Holocaust literature in its portrayal of America's effort to escape from an early and effective response to Hitler's attempt to annihilate the entire Jewish population. I also contend that *Kavalier & Clay* is a novel that constitutes a thoughtful tribute to Holocaust victims through the frames of a comic book and a hero called the Escapist; it is a call to Americans to consider their responsibility in the face of today's ongoing worldwide atrocities and civil injustices. Readers of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* are encouraged to look more deeply into the Holocaust for signposts and lessons as America continues to face questions of moral and ethical responsibility for its promises of liberty and justice for all. Through his novel, Chabon stimulates a unique and valuable understanding of the Holocaust's place in post-World War II America.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Shofar, or ram's horn, was used in ancient Israel to call people together. It is blown on Rosh Hashanah to mark the beginning of a new year and signifies the need to wake up to the call to repentance. It may inspire fear in the hearts of those who hear it for they are also called, like Abraham, to make sacrifices and to enter into a new life. Michael Chabon has sounded the Shofar for his characters and readers alike in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. His characters seek escape from what causes them fear at every turn, but Chabon expects more than merely a successful escape. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, characters and readers are called to atonement and the sacrifice of that which is precious. Naomi Diamant, in *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide*, describes *Kavalier & Clay* as "ultimately a tragedy built around the escapes that couldn't or didn't take place" (Roskies 309). While in many respects her observation is accurate, Chabon also insists on escape as a path to transformation. From the first page, Sammy Klayman, one of Chabon's two protagonists, muses about Clark Kent [Superman] and Houdini: "You weren't the same person when you came out as when you went in." He recognizes that, "It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of transformation" (*Amazing* 3). Chabon has signaled the reader that she will join his characters in undergoing a "Metamorphosis" (3) in the course of his story.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay begins with Josef Kavalier's 1939 escape from Prague as the Jews are increasingly oppressed under German occupation. It spans fifteen years that include the rise and fall of the comic book industry, culminates in the feel-good prosperity of the 1950s with its suburban escape to superficially happy families, and it recounts the double standard and human cost inflicted on homosexuals seeking to escape discrimination and abuse. *Kavalier & Clay* ends on a note of ambiguity that poses thorny ethical questions and challenges for readers.

The comic book industry takes center stage in Chabon's novel. Through it, he draws attention to the refusal of Americans to view the events in Europe at the same time or in the same way as those suffering under Hitler's regime. He catalogs the greed and callousness of a capitalist entertainment industry in the United States, and he uses it as a vehicle to reflect upon the consequences of America's failure to intervene to stop the Nazis. Hitler's greed for power and world domination was exercised by the Third Reich with catastrophic results while American capitalists, ignoring the growing threat abroad, were focused inwardly on their greed for wealth in a post-depression economy. They often failed with regard to the values of justice and fair play. Americans exhibited a desire to protect their interests at home and were reluctant to increase immigration quotas or to intervene to protect a persecuted population some four thousand miles away.

Alan Berger submits that Chabon writes about the *Shoah* from the perspective of "an American whose worldview is not drenched in the blood of Europe" (84), and he is correct. Chabon, a Jewish American fiction writer, born in 1963, has no family ties to survivors. Rather, he understands the perspective of witnesses "drenched in the blood of Europe" through first-hand survivor testimonies, his Jewish heritage, and tangentially through his wife, Ayelet Waldman, who was born to Canadian/American parents living in Israel, and who has family roots in Eastern Europe. Those ties are not insignificant, but do not substitute for first-hand experience. Chabon was raised in an upper-middle class secular Jewish home in which his mother, a lawyer, was a proponent of civil rights and justice issues. Chabon is not primarily a Holocaust writer. He writes in a variety of genres and consistently explores new subject matter for adults, teens, and children. In *Understanding Michael Chabon*, Joseph Dewey places Chabon in a category of postmodern writers who seek to produce serious fiction that also reclaims "the inviting imperative of

storytelling” (2). Chabon tackles topics that he cares deeply about—his Yiddish inspired Jewish heritage and the Holocaust chief among them. As the survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau and other concentration camps pass on, Chabon is a member of an important cadre of writers who have accepted the mantle of responsibility to assure that civilization never forgets. In a 1995 *Washington Post* review of Chabon’s *Wonder Boys*, Jonathan Yardley praised his skill and challenged him “to move on, to break away from the first person and explore larger worlds.” *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is Chabon’s response.

D. G. Myers acknowledges Chabon as a gifted writer but challenges the seriousness with which one should consider *Kavalier & Clay* and generally disputes that the novel—or others that Chabon has written—should be taken seriously as a part of the Jewish American canon. In a scathing summary suggesting that he may not have fully reviewed Chabon’s background, he asks, “For a Jew who turns his back on Jewish religion and the state of Israel, what remains but to invent a cultural alternative?” (588) Myers accuses Chabon with absencing Jews from the pages of his fiction. Helene Meyers counters: “As Chabon’s fiction has become more explicitly Jewish-centered, he has given the lie to any notion that there is one way to be Jewish” (76). Chabon says little in interviews or his writing about his religious observance or leadership role at Kehilla, a non-traditional California synagogue where he is a long-time member. He seems to have become more interested in exploring and preserving his Jewish roots in adulthood and more particularly since his marriage to Waldman, also a novelist. In a 1992 article, “What they left behind,” Chabon writes about a visit to Prague, where Hitler intended to establish his Museum of an Extinct Race and which is “haunted by Jewish ghosts.” The article gives a strong indication that the Jews who perished in the Holocaust were a part of his consciousness as he wandered through Prague several years prior to the publication of *Kavalier & Clay*. In a visit to the Jewish

ghetto of Prague, he recalled that “Everything that remained of the Prague ghetto by 1938 is still here, and in remarkably good condition. Only the Jews are gone. This was my first visit to a city that had lost its Jews, and I wondered if this were not the catastrophe that had left the city’s populace looking so diminished.” In what Chabon describes as a “troubled afternoon,” he visited the grave of Rabbi Loew ben Bezalel, the legendary creator of the late sixteenth-century Golem who appears early in *Kavalier & Clay*, and he was struck by the realization that the Golem and Franz Kafka appeared to be the most “popular symbols of the city.” On reflection, he considers “that maybe there was something fitting in this choice . . . to symbolize Prague with a couple of Jewish ghosts, because the city itself is a kind of ghost.” (“What they left behind”).

Relying on his Jewish roots and proven mastery as a fiction writer and storyteller, Chabon employs satire, irony, historical fact, and even humor in his portrayal of America during the war in Europe. New York City, the setting for the novel, is steeped in the avant-garde glamour of big bands and surrealist art. Throughout the novel, Chabon does not allow his readers to forget that coexistent with post-depression opulence in America, the most horrific acts of genocide that the world has known are being committed. He takes America to task for its refusal to direct adequate resources toward halting the horror of Hitler’s march across Europe. In virtually every chapter Chabon reminds the reader that behind his engaging stories there lies the dark shadow of German atrocities toward Jews from which Americans and their government try to escape. Using the image of “a pupa struggling in its blind cocoon, mad for a taste of light and air,” the narrator of *Kavalier & Clay* promises that the reader will experience a “Metamorphosis” (*Amazing* 3). By the time that co-protagonist Sammy Clay’s unfinished novel, *American Disillusionment*, is recalled on page 543, the reader has been repeatedly challenged to consider

the systematically engineered deaths of six million Jews while Americans go about their business of making money and escaping into New York's cultural allure.

Kavalier & Clay is not a novel about the Holocaust, but it is firmly undergirded by a Holocaust consciousness and is crafted by Chabon in part to call attention to the need for Americans to remember and learn from the catastrophe in ways that they attempted to escape in the years 1939 to 1945. Berger's primary concern in his criticism of *Kavalier & Clay* is that "escapism leads to forgetting. And forgetting is the ultimate form of Holocaust denial" (88). Lee Behlman adds that "escapism is a turn away from history. It is a safe refuge from the memory of the Nazi genocide and not a sufficient means of representing it directly—something that, to its credit, the novel [*Kavalier & Clay*] never attempts" (70). One of Chabon's major objectives in *Kavalier & Clay* is, I believe, to expose, block, and redirect a path that would allow Americans to escape the Holocaust. He turns our attention to the critical task of remembering and insists that we consider the cost of failing to recognize the tragedy and to intervene as members of a world community. Although it may be necessary to sacrifice our desire to isolate ourselves from the costs of intervention, Chabon calls on readers to heed the words of his character, Ausbrecher, Bernard Kornblum, "Reserve your anxiety for what you are escaping to" (*Amazing* 21).

II. OCTOBER 1939: ESCAPE, PRAGUE, AND AMERICA

ESCAPE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE HOLOCAUST

Sammy Klayman is an American-born Jew whose name ties him to the ancient golem fashioned from the mud and clay of the River Moldau in Prague by Rabbi Judah ben Bezalel Loew to protect the Jews in 1580. Sammy, who exhibits feet of clay in matters of the heart, is in most other respects, a dreamer, a visionary, and an early entrepreneur whose “dreams had always been Houdiniesque: they were dreams of a pupa struggling in its blind cocoon, mad for a taste of light and air” (*Amazing* 3). Sammy dreams of escape from the effects of polio that left him with “the legs of a delicate boy” (4) by building himself into the form of a superhero—or “a major American novelist” (6). His dreams include escaping the limitations of poverty and life across the “flatulent poison-green ribbon that separated Brooklyn from Manhattan Island” (6). Sammy joins his peers in 1939 in their “usual Brooklyn dreams of flight and transformation and escape” (6). Early on, illusion, in the form of magic and Houdinian escape from the most secure of locks and chains, is introduced by Chabon as entry into a world where any young boy can command agency and feel omnipotent. Sammy has also spent endless hours attempting to emulate the work of the great illustrators and cartoon artists of the day believing that “at the drawing board, a man could not only make a good living but alter the very texture and tone of the national mood” (7). We are told that at an early age Sammy begins writing “a massive autobiographical novel” (7), *American Disillusionment*, perhaps Chabon’s signal to the reader that the glamorous and exciting world that comprises much of *Kavalier & Clay* should not be viewed through rose colored glasses, but through the darker lens of greed, self-interest, and disappointment.

Josef Kavalier drops into Sammy's life and smack into his dreams of greatness and escape in October 1939. A young Jewish refugee from Czechoslovakia, Josef arrives at the home of Sammy and his mother—ending a journey that has taken him from his home in Prague through Vladivostok, Japan, and San Francisco. His parents have used their entire savings to buy their oldest son, a promising art student, safe passage to America in order to escape Nazi oppression. Chabon makes clear that Josef's passage to America came at a time when "Britain and America had all but closed their doors" (*Amazing* 21) to immigrants. Josef is able to obtain entry because he has a U.S. relative and because he was born in the Soviet Union, not German-occupied Czechoslovakia. When he is turned back by a rule change designed to prohibit Jews from leaving Czechoslovakia, "a telegram from Eichmann himself" (17), Josef is secreted out of Prague in a coffin intended to protect and preserve the Golem of Prague—the ancient servant/savior of the Jewish community. He arrives at the Klayman home with eleven American newspapers under his arm, and Chabon uses the opportunity to remind readers that the faces of the persecuted Jews in Europe had not become a present reality for Americans. Josef tells Sammy that he "was looking for something about Prague," and Sammy insists that "they must have had something in the *Times*" (10). Josef, however, tells him that there was "Nothing about the Jews" (10). On page three of its October 27, 1939 edition, *The New York Times*, reported what Josef already knew. Almost all of the Jews of Moravska-Ostrava, the location of the third largest Jewish population in Czechoslovakia, were forcibly transported to Poland and allowed to take only one small bag of belongings. The *Times* reported that those who were deported were unlikely to ever see their homes again and that "their existence henceforth will be determined entirely by Nazi dictates" ("Czech Jews are Sent to Poland by Reich"). Sammy and his mother, like most Americans, seem to know only a little about the events sweeping across Europe and

even less about their intended outcome. With sympathy, but an apparent lack of real comprehension, Sammy tells Josef that they have been worried about Hitler's treatment of the Jews. Sammy is reflecting the general American attitude toward Hitler's invasion of country after country across Europe.

Sammy and his mother did not appreciate the losses suffered by her brother, Josef's father and his family, nor the life that Josef lived as a privileged young man with indulgent parents who allow him to learn and practice stage magic "with a concentration that became more pleasurable than the trick itself" (*Amazing* 24). Before being forced to leave Prague, Josef takes lessons in escape artistry from Ausbrecher Bernard Kornblum, an Eastern European Jew and an atheist. Kornblum teaches Josef to free himself from a series of chains and locks while encased in small, claustrophobic places, and Josef consecrates "himself to a life of timely escapes" (24). When Josef has difficulty picking a lock, Kornblum tells him that the "pins have voices" (27). Josef is successful in unlocking himself, literally and figuratively, only when he listens carefully to the movement of the pins for directional guidance as they tumble at the touch of his pick. Kornblum's dictum will prove to be lifesaving. Josef's lessons with Kornblum come to a sudden halt when he attempts, without the Ausbrecher's permission, and knowing that he would disapprove, to free himself from a bag sealed and dropped into the mud of the River Maldau from which the Golem of Prague was fashioned four centuries earlier. His near drowning, and that of his younger brother and assistant, Thomas, are averted only by the fortuitous intervention of Kornblum, who then terminates their lessons because "[h]e privately believes that Josef is one of those unlucky boys who become escape artists not to prove the superior machinery of their bodies against outlandish contrivances and the laws of physics but for dangerously metaphorical

reasons. Such people feel imprisoned by invisible chains. For them the final feat of autoliberation is all too foreseeable” (37).

When Josef is prevented from leaving Czechoslovakia, he turns to his mentor, Bernard Kornblum. As he prepares to make a successful escape with the Ausbrecher’s help, he makes a secret return to his family home and finds that his family has been forcibly relocated. Nearly all of their belongings have been left behind to be confiscated by the Germans. He is surprised to find Tommy, who has briefly escaped the chaos of being squeezed into an apartment with relatives and neighbors, sleeping in the doorway. Tommy explains that he “wanted to come back here. Just for the night” (*Amazing* 56). Josef realizes that “the Jews of Prague were dust on the boots of the Germans, to be whisked off with an indiscriminate broom” (58), and he promises Tommy that he will not “rest until I’m meeting your ship in the harbor of New York City” (59). Tommy’s is one of the escapes that “couldn't or didn't take place” (Roskies 309).

With Josef’s arrival in Brooklyn, Chabon continues to suggest movement toward metamorphosis. Sammy has been repeatedly disappointed by the many escapes that his father has made from his life, but as he ponders “the usual caterpillar schemes” (*Amazing* 13), he is already trusting that Josef will be a “confederate” (13) and dreams of how he will fit into his plans. Chapter two opens with Chabon reminding the reader that “It was a caterpillar scheme—a dream of fabulous escape that had ultimately carried Josef Kavalier across Asia and the Pacific to his cousin’s narrow bed on Ocean Avenue” (14). She is to be alert for transformation while placing emphasis on the distance and difficulty that the journey will entail. The use of “scheme” seems to suggest that there will be failed attempts along the way.

The cousins’ first order of business is to escape their Jewish names, Josef and Klayman. They transform themselves into the more American “Joe” and Sam “Clay.” It takes little time for

the boys to discover their complimentary talents for artistry and storytelling as they concoct their plan to sell their youthful and heady skills to the owner of Empire Novelty, Sheldon Anapol, and his brother-in-law, Jack Ashkenazy, who owns Racy Publications. Anapol and Ashkenazy are assimilated Jews with their own dreams of escape. They were ripe for new ways of enhancing their income and their place within a financially comfortable middle-class America. Anapol had escaped a childhood as “an orphan of pogrom and typhus, raised by unfeeling relations” (*Amazing* 80). He was a penniless traveling salesman, talented, “likeable and cruel” (79) when he joined Empire. Fifteen years later, he owned the company. He had once dreamed of being a musician but is trapped in a loveless marriage, now living in his office, and saddled with family obligations demanding an increasing income. Anapol’s dreams of escape, like Sammy’s, center around the freedoms accorded by vast wealth. A discussion ensues as the brothers-in-law view Joe’s drawings. They compare his first efforts, which appear to look more like a golem than a superhero, to the historical Jewish superhero of escape, rescue, and transformation, Superman. Anapol and his brother-in-law have already seen the handwriting on the wall and confirmed that “They’ve been looking around for a Superman of their own” (84) in order for Empire to compete with Action Comics. Sammy and Joe boldly offer to create one. Dollar signs dance in the heads of Anapol and Ashkenazy; they give the boys a weekend to come up with “a Superman for us” (88). Sammy, thinking about his escape from Brooklyn and into the artistic greatness to which he aspires, sees himself “standing on the border of something wonderful” with “cataracts of money” (87) that would carry him to freedom. Joe thinks only of earning enough money to rescue his family from the Nazis. He needed a golem.

CONNECTING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT: THE GOLEM OF PRAGUE

The earliest stories of a golem can be traced to Psalm 139 predating, according to Nicole Morris, its reference in the Talmud. The golem's chief attributes include its formation from the dust of the earth as an unformed creature, a humanoid without a soul. It foreshadows the first Adam who becomes human when God breathes life into him giving him a soul. Early texts emphasize the magic and mystical aspects of the golem while later stories assume a more practical purpose in its creation. It is the Eastern European tales of the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that, for example, call on the golem to act as a servant on *Shabbes* when Jews could not perform certain work. A notable feature of both the golem and man is the loss of the creators' power over their creatures. Michael Chabon, speaking to an interviewer about "the idea of the novelist as the little God of his creation" (Morris 9), is also quoted in "The Recipe for Life" in a riff about the consequences of making golems which "break free of their creators, grow to unmanageable size and power, refuse to be controlled" (Morris 8). Echoes of Chabon's quote are seen in Joe Kavalier's Escapist character when he deigns to punch out Hitler. Cementing the connection of the ancient golem to the Escapist is a conversation between Chabon and the great cartoonist Will Eisner who, says Chabon, "brought up golems without prompting, mentioning how most of the golden-age comic-book creators were Jewish, how Superman is very golemlike" (Morris 139).

The Golem of Prague, part of the European tradition of golems, is imitated and replayed in fictional accounts of Jewish writers such as Thane Rosenbaum, Cynthia Ozick, and even in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. According to legend, the Golem of Prague is a mythical creation

attributed to Rabbi Judah Loew who was “a real historical figure and the wise High Rabbi of Prague” (Baer 3). It is “a particularly appropriate figure for Jewish writers seeking to represent the complexities of the Jewish relationship to power, powerlessness and justice in the light of the Holocaust” (Morris 17). As recounted by Elizabeth Baer and others, the Jewish community of Prague was under constant threat from gentiles, primarily Christians, who invaded the ghetto and terrorized its Jewish inhabitants. Members of the community begged their rabbi to find a way to stop the violence which grew to a crescendo when a false accusation was planted by a Christian priest that Jews had stolen and killed a Christian baby in order to use its blood to make matzoh for the Passover Seder—also called a blood libel. The rabbi, desperate to protect his community, was instructed by God in a dream to create a Golem from the mud of the River Moldau in Prague. Following the ancient, secret ritual, the rabbi breathed life into the Golem which became a servant/savior that followed the Rabbi’s bidding in all things. The name of the golem is “Joseph/Yossele” (Baer 3). In *Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*, Baer quotes Edward Rothstein who sheds light on the core qualities that Chabon may have considered most important when Joe fashions the Escapist:

But the Golem involves more than just a legend. It also embodies a strategy: to meet irrational hatred head on, to undermine terror and mitigate its impact with resolve and persistence. Death is the threat; the golem is the response. . . the golem has taken on a new metaphorical resonance (2).

In connecting the ancient Golem of Prague to post-Holocaust literature, Baer comments on the texts that tell “of a yearning for superheroes, of the Jewish community’s need to have a champion when danger and anti-Semitism threaten” (14).

Chabon connects the Escapist and the need for a present-day golem with the long history of the persecution of the Jews to Prague through a link to Josef’s parents who were accomplished, professional “Jewish refugees from Poland and Russia” (*Amazing* 24), and Kornblum, a Yiddish speaker from a shtetl outside of Vilna, also a refugee. Chabon uses Josef’s parents and their friends, as well as Kornblum, to remind the reader of the centuries-old stories of Jews who have been driven from their homes while enduring pogroms and persecutions. Until meeting Kornblum, Josef “had given very little thought to his own Jewishness” (25). He believed that he was simply one of the many ethnic minorities that populated Czechoslovakia. It is only as the danger imposed by the Germans grows that Joe begins to understand the meaning of being Jewish.

In a discussion of the challenges of postmodern assimilation of Jews in America within the context of *Kavalier & Clay*, David Moscovitz notes that Chabon adds another link between the Golem of Prague and America when he associates them through Houdini, “born Erik Weisz in Hungary” (303) but who claimed to have been born in Wisconsin. Moscovitz suggests that the Golem is represented by the residents of the shtetl which was Kornblum’s home; he compares the well-off, professional American descendants of Josef’s parents to Houdini in his wish to assimilate and hide his Jewish heritage. In addition, Moscovitz suggests that Chabon’s mention of Houdini’s often publicized desire to expose what is false, despite his own life of illusion and made-up personality, is a signal to readers that they must engage in critical interpretation

throughout the novel and be alert for the presence of false mediums versus those which may lead to transformation.

Bernard Kornblum is perhaps the only character in Chabon's novel whose escapes are behind him. At seventy (or more), he had retired from performing and moved to Prague to "await the inescapable" (*Amazing* 15). He is content to pass along his skills and wisdom to those deemed worthy to learn. Josef's escape from Prague is told within Kornblum's assent to a request from the Golem's keepers that he locate and smuggle the ancient Golem of Prague out of the city as it is taken over by Nazi occupation. The Golem had been hidden for centuries in the Old-New Synagogue, the Altneuschul, and subsequently moved to a now-forgotten location when the synagogue was threatened during earlier conflicts. Using a plan worthy of Sherlock Holmes, one of Chabon's heroes, Kornblum and Josef discover the location of the Golem in a crowded apartment complex and manage to remove the giant clay figure in a wooden coffin. The Golem's discovery is accomplished through a grim trick devised by Chabon that reminds readers of the state of affairs in Eastern Europe. The residents of the building, all Jews, are told by the disguised Kornblum and Josef to place a blue Star of David in their windows. To Kornblum's relief and shame, they do it—leaving only the Golem's hiding place without a star. Concealed inside the coffin housing the giant Golem, Josef is spirited away "with the condensed hopes of Jewish Prague" (62). They arrive safely in Lithuania, and Josef embarks on his journey to Brooklyn where he will breathe life into another golem designed to save his family.

Through the novel, Chabon continues to rely on variations of the golem myth—creating his own versions through Josef, the creator of the Escapist, and later, Joe's son, Tommy, who unwittingly becomes the servant/savior for his family. At its core, the golem is understood to be a figure formed by a rabbi or Jewish leader at a time of need. Andrzej Gasiorek characterizes

Chabon's golem as "a doubled figure: on the one hand, he represents Kavalier's divided nature (his desire for vengeance vying with his longing to atone for his guilt by an act of imaginative remembrance); on the other hand, he functions as the symbol of a lost way of life and a history of persecution and suffering" (888).

III: STRUGGLING FOR A TASTE OF LIGHT AND AIR

TALKING THE GOLEM INTO LIFE.

Joe and Sammy have been given a weekend to create a competitor for Superman and a cadre of support characters. They assemble a crew of free-lance artists, nearly all Jewish, with promises of a steady paycheck to fuel their dreams of assimilation and wealth. In their optimism, failure is not an option. Before tackling the how or the what, Joe and Sammy ask "Why is he [their superhero] doing it?" (*Amazing* 94). Before giving form and virtues to their superhero, they need to know his mission—his reason for being.

Joe's attempts at comic artistry take the form of a golem that is transformed into the Escapist and ties Chabon's twentieth-century tale to medieval Judaism—continuing to spin for the reader the thread of a history of pogroms and persecutions. Sammy and Joe's golem "was to be formed of black lines and the four-color dots of the lithographer" (*Amazing* 119). In crafting the mission of the Escapist, they follow the ancient ritual of "Every golem in the history of the world" (119) by talking it into life. It is Sammy's father, a vaudeville player, "Professor Alphonse von Clay, the Mighty Molecule (born Alter Klayman)" (*Amazing* 99), who serves as the physical model for the Escapist. He "could lift a bank safe over his head and beat a draft horse in a tug-of-war" (99). Sammy's father spent most of his life escaping from his birthplace,

Minsk, where Jews were segregated into certain areas of cities and towns, from his five-foot-two stature, and from a past full of failure and make-believe. His final escape before an early death was from a promise made to thirteen-year-old Sammy to take him along on his next vaudeville tour. Instead he escaped while Sammy was sleeping, leaving only a note. He was later crushed to death under a tractor that he was attempting to lift, taking with him “Sammy’s fondest hope, in the act of escaping from his life, of working with a partner” (108). Enter Joe Kavalier and their shared alter-ego, the Escapist. Sammy’s father is ultimately impotent in his dreams to achieve greatness within his false front—a failure that seems to foreshadow the future impotency of the Escapist.

Chabon wastes no time in forging the tie between his novel and the Holocaust when he declares through Sammy that what the Jews of Europe need is a “super-Kornblum,” (*Amazing* 120), and with the memory of their shared childhood interest in Houdini, the boys shape a Superman-like hero whose powers would include impossible and perpetual escapes. Named the Escapist, he would come in the darkest hour of the oppressed and would offer “the hope of liberation and the promise of freedom!” (121) Joe and Sammy create the backstory, the why, for the Escapist, through the fictional Tom Mayflower, perhaps a reference to the Puritans who escaped religious persecution in England. He is similar in build to his American creator, Sammy, with a “left leg that has been lame since he was an infant,” (124). Tom was rescued by his uncle, the escape artist Mr. Misterioso, from an orphanage in Central Europe and inherits his Kornblum/Houdini-like skills that so interested Sammy and which are possessed by Joe. Misterioso is shot during a performance, but before he dies he gives Tom a small golden key admitting him to League of the Golden Key whose mission is to “procure the freedom of others, whether physical or metaphysical, emotional or economic” (133). Chabon insures that the reader

is clear about the enemy in a conversation between Misterioso and Tom: “They have grown strong. Their old dream of ruling an entire nation has come to pass.” Tom replies “Germany” (133). With the golden key, he tells Tom that he must “Repay your debt of freedom” (134). As they walk and talk, “teasing their golem into life” (134), Sammy and Joe create the characters who will surround the Escapist, and they swear a sacred oath to secretly fight the “evil forces of the Iron Chain, *in Germany* (emphasis added) or wherever they raise their ugly heads” (134). Joe and Sammy believe that in making their golem, the Escapist, into a successful capitalist venture, he will assume a reality that will provoke Americans to demand intervention in Europe. They believe that they can correct America’s vision which has failed to see or acknowledge Hitler’s long-range goals that were promulgated as early as 1919 when, on September 16, Hitler issued his first written statement about the Jews declaring that the “ultimate goal must definitely be the removal of the Jews altogether” (“Adolph Hitler”). In talking their golem into life, Joe and Sammy have created a figure deserving a prominent place in the long history of golems created by Jewish religious figures, authors, and the media. He is both servant and savior.

Chabon’s use of the golem as a prominent figure in his novel that is grounded in the Holocaust while also framed within the larger context of the comic book industry and life in New York City, is illuminated by the work of Nicola Morris on the ancient concept of midrash within sacred texts and stories. Morris, quoting Daniel Boyarin, points out that “*Midrash* can thus be seen as a ‘radical intertextual reading of the canon, in which potentially every part refers to and is interpretable by every other part’ (4). Emulating the midrashic style of Jewish scripture, Chabon builds story upon story—each in conversation with the others and all against the backdrop of the Holocaust. In this way, *Kavalier and Clay* effectively becomes a midrash on the Holocaust. Morris characterizes the texts of certain Jewish authors, Chabon among them, as writers who

construct stories that defy a fixed meaning. Rather, they are in dialogue with each other and with many other texts. She notes that based on their long history of engagement with traditional texts, “Jews are especially prepared to deal with the idea of intertextuality, and to write and read texts that interrelate with many other texts, including themselves” (5). Chabon assumes that his sophisticated readers, Jewish and gentile, will appreciate the complexity of his texts. He is not shy about admitting that he writes for an audience that wishes to be intellectually challenged. In an email exchange with Chabon, Joseph Dewey quotes him as saying that “I will always put my hand out to the reader, to say, ‘come with me’” (2). Chabon goes on to say that he sees literature as “a partnership between reader and writer, a game played by equals, not to ensure one’s victory and the other’s corresponding loss but simply and purely for the pleasure to be had therein” (2).

The Escapist, Sammy and Joe’s hero, is the foundation for a complex weaving of historical fact, fantasy, and fiction in which their intertextuality and “dialogue with each other and with many other texts” (Morris 5) are critical to hearing Chabon’s message. He connects Prague, the war in Europe, and America, where Roosevelt correctly reads the mood of the American public in his decision to offer support to Britain, but to avoid becoming an active participant. Chabon surrounds the rise and fall of the Golden Age of the comic book industry with the surreal art and avant-garde, jazz-club atmosphere of the pre-war period demonstrating America’s propensity for escape into excitement and glamour while avoiding sending soldiers into battle. The stories of Josef, the refugee with a family left behind in Prague, and Sammy, the American-born Jew with American dreams of assimilation and wealth, are employed by Chabon to create a tension between Europe where life is increasingly desperate and an isolated United States focused on post-Depression growth. Lee Behlman writes: “*Kavalier & Clay* announces from its

beginning a fracture between the distanced American experience of the Holocaust and the events of the Holocaust themselves” (62).

The cover of the first issue features the Escapist in his Superman-like costume emblazoned with a golden key, and Hitler is established as the villain. Sheldon Anapol and his brother-in-law, however, express the doubts of a majority of Americans in their attempt to escape from what they perceive as a controversial topic when Ashkenazy protests that they don't want their hero getting into politics because “We're not in a war with Germany” (*Amazing* 159). When the boys bring the Escapist to Anapol, we are given some insight into Empire's current status as they seek to grow their success. Their offices are located in a downtrodden part of Twenty-fifth Street, in a block of “boarded-up woolens showrooms, and the moldering headquarters of benevolent societies that ministered to dwindling and scattered populations of immigrants from countries no longer on the map” (79). It is notable that Chabon calls attention to the charitable organizations whose services are no longer needed because of the smaller numbers of immigrants as well as the obliteration of the countries from which they came. Anapol and Ashkenazy have worked hard, survived the Great Depression, and achieved a modicum of comfort. They are afraid to risk their place in a middle-class American life. Their objections to the Escapist's war on Hitler are rooted in fears that they could lose their readers and their increasing incomes. In a display of courage not demonstrated by the United States, Sammy chastises Anapol, Ashkenazy, and their editor, George Deasey. He refuses to capitulate: “No, I'm sorry. That has to be the cover' [because] The Escapist fights evil. . . . Hitler is evil.” (160).

According to Christoph Ribbat, “Chabon feels encouraged to link the enormity of these events [WW II] with the history of the comic book, a popular genre that thrives on enormity, on supernatural strength and size, and on the ever-ranging battle between good and evil.” He

observes that “The history of this art form is used to tell the story of Jewish Americans in the mid-twentieth century, a story which is just as informed by the American metropolis and its highly modern and well diversified popular culture as by knowledge of the destruction of the European Jews” (208). Ribbat’s point is illuminated when, just as the Great Depression was beginning to lift at the end of one of America’s darkest decades, two Jewish Americans, Joe Shuster and Jerome Siegel, created Superman through which the comic book form began “to express the lust for power and the gaudy sartorial taste of a race of powerless people with no leave to dress themselves” (*Amazing* 77). The comic book arrived on the scene “at precisely the moment when the kids of America began, after ten years of terrible hardship, to find their pockets burdened with the occasional superfluous dime” (78).

HOPE, LOVE, AND DESPAIR

It is early 1940 when Sammy and Joe go to work for Empire Comics. Their dreams of escape are full of hope and optimism. Joe sees an escape route from Prague to America for his family. Sammy sees his way cleared to leave Brooklyn and to fulfill dreams of owning his own publishing company. On a sunny day in October, 1940, Joe’s hopes are high. In the pages of “The Escapist,” Adolf Hitler has been captured and taken before a world tribunal where “a universal era of peace is declared, the imprisoned and persecuted people of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free” (*Amazing* 166). Joe believes that in the figure of the Escapist, he is fulfilling the debt incurred by his freedom “by purchasing the freedom of others” (131). He learns that quite to the contrary, Hitler’s power is growing and that France has adopted “a series of statutes, modeled after the German Nuremberg Laws” (167) that enables the French government to relocate Jews to labor camps in

Germany. Chabon is referencing the news also seen in America that by mid-year the Germans had invaded and occupied the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. As fall arrived, they had begun bombing England's cities while the Russians had taken over the Baltic States and Romania. Jews under Nazi occupation were being forced to wear identifying armbands, and their homes and property were confiscated. Joe becomes discouraged when Anapol expresses concern about the increasing violence portrayed in the *Escapist*, and he begins to believe that "The *Escapist* was an impossible champion, ludicrous," that he was "*imaginary*, fighting a war that could never be won" (168). He believes that "If they could not move Americans to anger against Hitler, then Joe's existence, the mysterious freedom that had been granted to him and denied to so many others, had no meaning" (173). Anapol's response, "it makes me nervous" (174), is emblematic of American citizens who could not be moved to rage against Hitler.

By mid-1940, American sympathy was drawn to Britain which stood nearly alone against Hitler in Western Europe. The U.S. media focused on the relentless air assaults against England and prompted Americans toward a willingness to allow Roosevelt to offer warships to United States allies. In March 1941, Congress authorized the Lend Lease act providing additional U.S. war supplies to England. In an effort to protect America, but not in anticipation of placing boots on the ground abroad, Congress authorized an expansion of the Navy, and the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. During the 1940 presidential election campaign, Roosevelt proclaimed "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again; your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars" ("Teaching"). Americans were made aware of the growing strife in Europe through newsreels and the media as noted by Vincent Casaregola whose research demonstrates that Americans were regularly confronted with graphic images of the war and that they "came face to face with the growing menace of Axis power" (17). However, the newsreels

and print media did not, contrary to later claims, make their primary focus the increasingly dangerous plight of the Jews. Laurel Leff addresses the issue in *Buried by the Times* where she reports that “From the start of the war in Europe on September 1, 1939, to its end nearly 6 years later, the *New York Times* and other mass media treated the persecution and ultimately the annihilation of the Jews of Europe as a secondary story” (2). “Articles that focused on the discrimination, deportation, and destruction of the Jews,” she further notes, “made the *Times* front page just 26 times, and only in six of those stories were Jews identified on the front as the primary victims (3). The *Times*, read by some of the most influential persons in the United States, reached far beyond New York. The syndicate “sent *Times* articles to 525 newspapers, including the *Detroit Free Press*, *Chicago Tribune*, the *Denver Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*” (Leff 10). Casaregola points out that commentators such as the iconic Edward R. Murrow generally did not focus on stories like those of Joe’s family, but mostly on the thrill of bombers in action, their brave pilots, and the citizens of the threatened and bombed areas of Britain. According to Leff’s research, part of Murrow’s decision about his choice of material may have been based on surveys conducted by the Office of War Information. The OWI surveyed American journalists in order to determine their views on what, essentially, would sell newspapers as well as sway American sympathy toward the Allies. While a few journalists thought that news of the atrocities committed against the Jews would be useful, the majority advised against it. Based on their replies, military intelligence recommended an Allied propaganda strategy that included the dictum that “Vehement or sentimental defense of Jews” was one of 14 themes to be “carefully avoided.” In contrast, “the denial of Christianity and repression of churches by the Nazis” was one of 20 themes to be emphasized. One of the five

guiding themes developed for Allied propaganda was that “the Semitic question be avoided” (Leff 247).

Through the struggles and conflicting views of Sammy and Joe, and Sheldon Anapol, Chabon illustrates the choices faced at a much higher level—that of the United States government and the media. Sammy advances Joe’s desire to broadcast the growing atrocities committed by Hitler with bold, loud stories told through the *Escapist*. Anapol is concerned about the potential for alienating customers, the source of his income and ability to climb higher on the ladder of middle-class America. In each of their personal quests to escape, Joe, Sammy, and Anapol follow a downward spiral that parallels the events in Europe and embroils them in personal wars at home. Joe receives meager information about his family. Letters from his mother are heavily censored, but he is able to discern that “his family had had their bank account frozen. They had been forced out of the public parks of Prague, out of the sleeping and dining cars of the state railways, out of the public schools and universities” (*Amazing* 179). He views the “mad spires of Ellis Island” (181) as a reminder that the United States refuses to admit all but the smallest number of Jewish immigrants. In fact, according to Deborah Lipstadt, in her article “America and the Holocaust,” the Wagner Rogers act, introduced in the months following Kristallnacht, “was designed to permit the entry of 20,000 German children into America,” nearly all Jewish refugees (291). The bill died in committee with “strong opposition from various ‘patriotic’ and America First [anti-war] groups” (291).

Following over a year of meetings in which Joe chased the dangling carrot of hope through the German Consulate and the anti-Semitic personnel of the State Department, he is cruelly informed that his father has died of pneumonia. His first thought is to abandon *Empire Comics* and the *Escapist* and to join the R.A.F. Instead, he continues his efforts but loses faith in

the ability of the Escapist to force Americans to care about the increasingly deadly atrocities visited on the Jews of Europe—and his family. While the Escapist succeeds within the frames of a comic book in his war against the Axis, Joe feels his family slipping farther and farther away. Joe's stress and anxiety manifest themselves through physical aggression toward men who appear German, in particular the local representative of the Aryan American League. Forgetting Kornblum's counsel, Joe's anxiety is frequently focused on what he is escaping from—*his inability to force an American call to arms against the Nazis*. Although he attempts to focus on what he is escaping to—*life for and with his family in America*—he begins to drown in anger and hate, the equivalent of the river from which he was rescued by Kornblum. Golems are known for their tendency to turn on their creators, to wreak chaos and violence. Joe must continue to sell comics by turning out enticing graphics of his golem, the Escapist. But Joe, the Escapist's alter ego, "had begun to lose himself in a labyrinth of fantastical revenge whose bone-littered center lay ten thousand miles and three years away" (*Amazing* 222). He becomes like the out-of-control golem—an instrument of destruction. Through his exotic girlfriend, the flamboyant artist Rosa Luxemburg Saks, Joe also helps to fund space for fifteen children on the *Ark of Miriam*, a ship that will bring three hundred Jewish refugee children to America, including his now twelve-year-old brother. Joe's hopes rise. U.S. barriers to the ship's travel seem nearly insurmountable, and Lipstadt points to documentation "so damning of the State Department and the British Foreign Office that it becomes clear that at times they not only failed to rescue but actively worked to frustrate rescue efforts" (286). Such seemed to be the case with *Ark of Miriam*.

Chabon juxtaposes the competing interests of Americans opposed to war with a few industry leaders who believe that war will help to jumpstart an American economy still recovering from the Great Depression. In a scene packed with undercurrents that address

American capitalism, the American response to the war, and homosexuality, the fictional millionaire industrialist, James Love, meets with the historical Al Smith, former governor of New York, presidential candidate, and president of the Empire State Building Corporation. We learn through their conversation that “James Love was among a small number of powerful industrialists in the country who, because of the potential for an economic windfall, had been actively in favor of American entry into the war almost from its beginning” (*Amazing* 211). Smith and Love continue their discussion during the search for a fake bomb planted by the leader of the local Aryan-American League in the offices of Empire Comics, and when advised that the source of the bomb is the Aryan-American League, Smith replies: “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of them” (215). Al Smith, known to be an active Roman Catholic, lost a 1928 presidential bid due in part to his inability to overcome anti-Catholic sentiment. He would be presumed to be conversant with major international news—making his lack of awareness of the activities of the Aryan-American League and its relationship to the brutality in Europe startling. Through Smith, Chabon reminds readers of the Catholic Church’s failure, at best, to respond to the Jews; at its worst, the church was complicit in promoting anti-Semitism and cooperating with the Germans. The reminder is reprised in a later conversation between Sammy and his mother about Joe’s brother staying in a convent until he could leave for the United States. Chabon reminds readers that “the nuns were apparently under pressure from the Catholic Church in Portugal not to make harboring Jewish children from Central Europe a permanent thing” (312). In the course of a lengthy search for the bomb, another reason for Love’s desire to fight the Nazis is unveiled when Chabon reveals that “the one great and true friend of James Love’s life, Gerhardt Frege, had been one of the first [gay] men to die—of internal injuries—at Dachau, shortly after the camp opened in 1933” (212). Love meets Joe in a search of the Escapist’s offices, and his interest in the hero

sparks an offer to underwrite a radio program. Joe and Sammy assume that they will share in the profits to be garnered. Their bosses, responding to the allure of capitalism's ability to enhance wealth, do not give a moment's thought to fairness. They share no such expectation for cutting the boys in on a greater share of their profits than what was agreed to in the original, stingy agreement eagerly accepted by the naïve adolescents.

At the invitation of the *Escapist's* editor, George Deasey, Joe and Sammy plunge deeper into the magnetism of New York City. They attend a party resembling a surreal painting—complete with Salvador Dali dressed in full diving gear. It is a stunt devised to promote his exhibit, “Dream of Venus,” on display at the 1939 World's Fair. Guests include artists, jazz musicians, and the Greenwich Village glitterati. Sammy, hovering within a growing cloud of confusion over his sexuality, is stunned by his first experience of men in an unabashedly erotic relationship. Chabon uses the surreal nature of the party as a contrast to the suffering occurring in Europe that is generally ignored or disbelieved. Joe “did not feel that he ought—ever—to be enjoying himself socially” (*Amazing* 230). On this day in October 1940—fourteen months before Pearl Harbor—Rosa makes the prediction that America will enter the war and “We won't let them win” (240). Joe agrees, “*though Rosa's views were hardly typical of her countrymen, most of whom felt that the events in Europe were an embroilment to be avoided at any price [emphasis added]*” (240).

The *Escapist* has been unable to move America to enter the war, but prompts a war within Empire Comics over anti-Semitic threats received by Anapol. Anapol and Ashkenazy fight to protect the wealth that they have accumulated through the work of Joe and Sammy, and the boys are pressured, or more accurately bribed, to accept a small portion of the profits from the *Escapist* radio show in return for focusing the *Escapist's* efforts on common gangsters and

“crooked cops” (*Amazing* 284). Telling the boys that “I bear no good will toward Hitler,” he suggests that “We’ve got plenty of problems right here at home” (284). George Deasey crassly spouts an American capitalist mantra by telling them that there is only one way “of ensuring that you are not ground into paste by disappointment, futility, and disillusion. And that is always to ensure, to the utmost of your ability, that you are doing it solely for the money” (285).

Joe’s enthusiasm for the Escapist wanes, and he turns more of his attention and skill to the creation of other comic characters as well as occasional magic shows at Bar Mitzvah celebrations for the children of wealthy American Jews. He continues to save nearly every dollar that he earns, but he is also taken in by the spell of New York City and the enticements of his love for Rosa. His family memories recede along with his hope for their rescue, and he falls into a well of depression. His savings become a talisman against his superstition that to quit saving would be to admit that his family is doomed.

Joe’s depression was well founded. Deborah Lipstadt summarizes Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut in *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry 1933-1945* who “contend that even if there had been no anti-Semitism, bureaucratic indifference and the narrow interpretation of America’s interests would have prevented most rescue efforts” (286). Compounding the resistance, Lipstadt contends that anti-Semitism was significant in America before and during World War II, and she cites an occasion as late as October 1943 when President Roosevelt slipped out a back entrance of the White House “when he learned that 400 Orthodox rabbis had come to protest the failure to rescue” (286). In another example of Roosevelt’s anti-Semitism, Laurel Leff notes that the *Times* was vociferously opposed to the New Deal and other Roosevelt-inspired initiatives, but that “political animosity took a personal turn when *Times* publisher

Sulzberger learned the president had referred to a tax scheme the family had used to maintain ownership of the paper after Ochs' death as a "dirty Jewish trick" (238).

Chabon highlights the issue of anti-Semitism and the failure of the United States to see or understand the goal of Hitler's mission as one that was hidden in plain sight. At one of Joe's Bar Mitzvah performances, local Aryan-American activist Carl Ebling has hidden a bomb disguised as part of the decorations for the event, in plain sight, with the intent that when it explodes "the mongrels of Empire City will begin to know something of the terror their mongrel brothers and sisters are undergoing halfway around the world" (*Amazing* 333). In an analogy to Hitler, Ebling "cannot prevent himself from raising his head and looking his adversary in the eye" (333). Only Josef, the refugee with family still in Czechoslovakia, sees Ebling and is able to intuit his intent as he acts to prevent the deaths of dozens of the event's guests.

Throughout 1941, while the United States continues to try to keep a safe distance from the war in Europe, the Escapist radio program begins broadcasting in April; it was the best year ever for the partnership of Kavalier & Clay, but Sammy's escape into wealth does not bring the freedom that he seeks. He gives a hefty share of his income to his mother, indulges in custom-made suits, and purchases a \$645 "Capehart Panamuse phonograph" (*Amazing* 291), but the astounding amount left over leaves him nervous, restless, and unfulfilled. Sammy, Joe, and Rosa have set up a home together, and Rosa is earnest in her efforts to encourage Sammy to find a wife. Sammy, puzzled about his disinterest in women, turns to the "oft-revised first (and sole) chapter of his novel, *American Disillusionment*" (295). Despite his good fortune and their for-the-moment success in the fight with Sheldon Anapol to allow the Escapist to continue fighting Nazis, Sammy is himself disillusioned and less enthusiastic about "fighting the funny-book war" (296). He "had begun to be plagued by the same sense of inefficacy, of endless make-believe,

that had troubled Joe from the first” (296). In April 1941, the *New York Times* printed hundreds of articles, editorials, and reports about the war in Europe, but remarkably, there was little written about the Jewish ghettos of Krakow or Warsaw where Jews were made to wear identifying armbands, work at forced labor, register their property (that which was not confiscated), and live packed into overcrowded apartments where illness and hunger were rampant.

Sammy’s mother possesses wisdom that he does not give her credit for but which gives insight into Sammy’s growing anxiety. Through her, Chabon foreshadows the impending downslide of the comic book industry and America’s entry into World War II: “Each month that the comic book bubble not only continued to float but expanded exponentially just confirmed Ethel’s belief that the world was insane and growing madder, so that when the pin finally went in, the pop would be all the more terrible” (*Amazing* 297). Further, after meeting Tracy Bacon, Sammy’s mother sees in Sammy an emerging sexuality that he is not ready to admit. When Sammy meets the handsome, gregarious man who stars as the Escapist in the new radio show, he finds himself “a little afraid of Tracy Bacon” (305). In a weighted conversation between Sammy and his mother, she looks him in the eye for the first time that evening and asks “So how was he?” (313). Sammy, in a reply caught between Tracy’s suitability for the role of the Escapist and his growing affection for him, replies that “I think he’ll do fine” (313).

WAR AT HOME AND ABROAD

In the months that precede the attack on Pearl Harbor, Sammy volunteers as a spotter—civilians who watch the skies at night for enemy aircraft from the eighty-first floor of the Empire State

Building. With storm clouds “both literal and figurative” (*Amazing* 341) building in the east, Chabon hammers home America’s laissez-faire attitude toward the world outside America:

The rest of the world was busy feeding itself, country by country, to the furnace, but while the city’s newspapers and newsreels at the Trans-Lux were filled with ill portents, defeats, atrocities, and alarms, the general mentality of the New Yorker was not one of siege, panic, or grim resignation to fate but rather the toe-wiggling, tea-sipping contentment of a woman curled on a sofa, reading in front of a fire with cold rain rattling against the windows (340).

While Sammy fills out his reports for the Army Interceptor Command (modeled on the real-life Aircraft Warning Service established in 1941), the skies are filled with lightning and thunder that foreshadow another storm brewing inside; Tracy Bacon visits and sets Sammy on the road to thinking about an escape from his closeted sexuality. He finally capitulates to Tracy’s advances when they embrace, and “by the time his brain with its considerable store of Judeo-Christian prohibitions and attitudes could begin sending its harsh and condemnatory messages to the various relevant parts of his body, it was too late” (352). The sparks between them are as powerful as the approaching storms, literal and figurative, from the east.

Tracy becomes a staple in Sammy’s life as he tentatively accepts that they are in love. Joe and Rosa, and Sammy and Tracy become partners in love and work. During a screening of *Citizen Kane* attended by the couples, Chabon offers a startling example of the contrast between the dazzling life of New York and the war in Europe. The quartet is star-struck when they meet Orson Welles and mesmerized by dances with Delores Del Rio and Joseph Cotton to Tommy

Dorsey's band. Chabon uses the event to introduce an entire section that affirms the mission of the Escapist and likens his role to that of a golem. He calls the Escapist one of the giants of the earth whose "business, fundamentally, was one of salvation" (*Amazing* 360). Joe and Sammy have tried to fuel American anger by focusing on the "lunkish Germans" (360). Chabon takes another swipe at the United States through Sammy who is helping to fight Joe's war by giving the Escapist anti-Nazi speeches and, when the Escapist breaks up a Nazi spy ring, giving him the line, "I wonder what that head-in-the-sand crowd of war ostriches would say if they could see this!" (360). In a challenge to the U.S., the narrator declares the Escapist, a comic figure, a "perfect hero for 1941, as America went about the rumbling, laborious process of backing itself into a horrible war" (360). Joe, still desperate in his attempts to save his family, feels a fresh jolt of hope that the Escapist might cause their readers to see the evil of Hitler when he sees the new way in which Welles uses the "long upward tilt of the camera [and] the interlocking pieces of the jigsaw portrait of Kane" to make a film that is more than "merely a clever movie about a rich bastard" (362). Joe sees the potential for breaking out of the conventions of his art form in order to convince America that Hitler is indeed a "bastard."

Through a revision of the Escapist's form and structure based on what they had seen in *Citizen Kane*, Joe and Sammy immediately begin work on new, ground-breaking, "so-called modernist or prismatic Escapist stories" (363) that would encourage adults to read comic books. Adults, after all, would make the real decisions about saving the Jews of Europe. The boys take their new work to Anapol who drops the bomb that Parnassus' Pictures has purchased the film rights to the Escapist and that film episodes and future comic book stories featuring the Escapist fighting Hitler are henceforth banned because Parnassus's second-biggest market is Germany. Sammy and Joe's reputation precedes them "as antagonistic to the citizens and government of

that nation of fanatical moviegoers” (366). Sammy “looked appealingly at Joe, willing him to speak up, to tell Anapol about his family and the indignities to which, they were being exposed, the one hundred cruelties, gross and tiny, to which, with an almost medical regimentation, they were being subjected by the Reichsprotektorat” (366). But Joe, tired of fighting through the Escapist is weary and loses hope; he bows to the censorship. Self-censorship such as that demanded by Anapol for capitalist reasons was also a hallmark of the media before and during America’s entry into the war. That Anapol did not know more about the details of what Joe’s family, and millions of other Jews were suffering was the result of what Lipstadt calls a “gap between information and knowledge” that was “striking” (288). In her research of the coverage of the Holocaust between 1933 and 1945 in four-hundred American newspapers, she asks what Americans knew and how they knew it. “The press generally followed the government’s lead,” she concludes. “Even when the press had the information it often buried it in inside pages where it could easily be missed” (288). Bernard Kornblum’s earlier advice to Joe, “People notice only what you tell them to notice, he said. And then only if you remind them” (*Amazing* 60), was borne out in America’s lack of attention to the war in Europe. The leadership of Empire Comics, “a jaded editor and publishers who cared chiefly for safe profit,” insist on the “censorship of all story lines having to do with the Nazis (Japs, too), warfare, saboteurs. . .” (368). As a result, Sammy and Joe immerse themselves in experimentation with form and narrative, new stories, and popular new characters. Chabon asks what might have happened if they could have persuaded America to enter the war earlier:

Whether the delightful fruit of this collaboration came at a price; whether the thirty-two extra issues, the two thousand extra pages of Nazi-smashing obviated

by Anapol's ban, might somehow, incrementally, have slid America into the war sooner; whether the advantage gained in time would have precipitated an earlier victory; whether that victory. . . would have sufficed to preserve a dozen or a hundred or a thousand more lives; such questions now can have only an academic poignancy, as both the ghosts and those haunted by them are dead (369).

In the months before December 1941 Joe and Sammy, with their new characters, breakout adventures, and product spin-offs like those given out at a Burger King or McDonald's restaurant, created so much wealth for Empire Comics and Anapol that "It required shovels and snowplows and crews of men working around the clock to keep ahead of the staggering avalanche of money" (370). Chabon is relentless in his quest to remind the reader that the Jews of Europe did not fare so well. Joe's savings, "towered in fantastic drifts and was left that way, aloof and glinting, to cool the fever of exile from the day his family should arrive" (370). It is useless to his family, and Sammy's long-sought move to mainstream American comfort fails to protect him from his status as othered. In a pairing of themes that contrasts mainstream America's dreams to the closeted fears of disenfranchised citizens, Sammy and Tracy visit the now closed and empty grounds of the 1939 World's Fair. The Fair "promoted a belief in science and technology as a means to economic prosperity and personal freedom" ("Welcome to Tomorrow"). It was, in the wake of the Great Depression, to be "a much-needed antidote to the depression and confusion of the times. It provided the one saving grace which all of America needed – it provided hope ("Welcome"). The hope offered by the Fair, however, did not extend to either Sammy in his choice of lovers nor to Joe whose family did not exist in the minds of most Americans. Tracy and Sammy consummate their forbidden love in the Perisphere, a large

orb that contains a model planned city of the future. “Democracity” is a model that does not include them as neighbors in its carefully sculpted communities. Neither does it contemplate the reception of displaced Holocaust survivors. In a commentary on the greatness of America’s past, her failed promises, and the war that America would be forced to join three months hence, Chabon describes Sammy’s thoughts in an indictment of the meaning of freedom in America:

The candy-colored pavilions . . . the austere and sinuous temples of the Detroit gods, . . . the statues of George Washington and Freedom of Speech and Truth Showing the Way to Freedom had been peeled, stripped, prized apart, knocked down, bulldozed into piles, loaded onto truck beds, dumped into barges, towed out past the mouth of the harbor, and sent to the bottom of the sea. It made him sad, . . . seeing it this way, he felt in his heart what he had known all along, that, like childhood, the Fair was over, and he would never be able to visit again. (377)

It is overreaching to make a comparison between the experiences of Sammy’s realized expectations of persecution when he is identified as a homosexual with that of homosexuals who were persecuted under Paragraph 175 throughout the Third Reich. However, Chabon uses Sammy’s experience to call to mind the atrocities suffered by gay men during the war and to remind the reader of the double standards applied to those who did not conform to expectations in America. When Sammy accompanies Tracy and several other men to James Love’s mansion for a weekend, a tip to the local authorities results in a round-up and arrests by local law enforcement, federal agents and others who are eager to flush out a “fairy nest at a beach house of one of the richest men in America” (*Amazing* 413). In a violent display of sadistic

homophobia, Sammy is raped by a federal agent whose “semen was in Sammy’s mouth, along with the putrid sweet flavor of his own rectum, and he would always remember the feeling of doom in his heart, a sense that he had turned some irrevocable corner and would shortly come face-to-face with a dark and certain fate (413). Following the assault, Sammy slams shut the door of his barely opened closet for the next thirteen years.

The bottom falls out of Joe’s and Sammy’s worlds on the same evening—December 6, 1941. The United States follows several hours later when Pearl Harbor is bombed. Joe is planning to propose marriage to Rosa later that night; Tommy is due in New York in three days. Rosa sees the news report first. It gives little information except that “a boat filled with refugees, many from Central Europe, most if not all of them believed to be Jewish children, is missing in the Atlantic off the Azores and believed lost. There is no mention, as there would not be for several more hours, of a U-boat, a forced evacuation, a sudden storm tearing in and out of the northeast” (*Amazing* 396). But Joe already knows. As the grand climax to his magic show at a Bar Mitzvah, he attempts to commit suicide by failing to escape while sealed in a box in the pool of the hotel fountain. His rescue prompts an escape into the Navy where he believes that he will fight real Nazis, avenge Tommy’s death, and save his family. In a scene that begs to be cast in a comic book or dark situation comedy, Joe flees their apartment for the Navy, and Sammy appears at the door telling Rosa that his torn clothing is a symbol of mourning. In the aftermath of the raid and rape the night before, Sammy has sent Tracy Bacon to Los Angeles without him; the United States is at war, and his best friend has fled. On learning that Rosa is pregnant with Joe’s child, of which he has no knowledge, Sammy escapes into marriage with Rosa and life in the suburbs.

Joe spends most of the war in training and, during some of the most intense efforts to complete the extermination of the Jews in Europe, January 1944, he finds himself stationed in Antarctica. He is part of a company of twenty-two men and eighteen dogs whose primary mission is to monitor their short-wave radios for U-boat transmissions and to look for German movements toward the continent. The men live underground in a series of rooms and tunnels beneath the frozen tundra that recall the underground tunnels of the Warsaw ghetto that were dug by the Jews in their efforts to hide from certain death as the Germans steadily increased deportations to Treblinka. While Americans continued to attempt to avoid the mounting evidence, massive transports were made from the ghettos to the camps where Jews were sent to their deaths or forced to work to support the extermination efforts. As if to shock the reader into recalling the deaths in Europe, Chabon depicts a freak accident at the Navy base. Twenty men and seventeen dogs perish from carbon monoxide poisoning when the ventilators are plugged by snow. Only Joe, a beloved dog, Oyster, and a pilot survive. They await the Antarctic spring in September when they might expect rescue. Their sanity is tenuous and, as the winter drags on and Joe broods, “the corrosion that had been worked on his inner wiring for so long by his inability to help or reach his mother and grandfather, the disappointment and anger he had been nursing for so long at the navy’s having sent him to the fucking South Pole when all he had wanted to do was drop bombs on Germans and supplies on Czech partisans, began to coalesce into a genuine desperation” (*Amazing* 441).

In the months before a rescue is possible, Joe monitors the airwaves for news, but like Joe’s first months in New York when he combs the papers for news of his family or the Jews, “there was now never anything on the radio that gave him any indication of how they might be faring” (*Amazing* 442). Joe’s despair is not just that there is no news about his family, but that

there is no news at all about the Jews of Czechoslovakia. And then he hears the voice of his grandfather singing “Der Erlkonig” – a poem depicting the death of a child by a mysterious, dark force. Joe knows that the rest of the broadcast which touts Terezin as a happy, model community in which there is music and culture “masked some dreadful reality, a witch’s house made of candy and gingerbread to lure children and fatten them for the table” (442). Chabon’s reference to the German fairy tale made popular in America seems to suggest that America, having a long experience with witches, imaginary and real, should have recognized sooner the fairy tale that was Terezin.¹

A mere week before their anticipated rescue from Antarctica, Joe detects the presence of a lone German geologist some 1,000 miles away, and he takes a final step into the form of an out-of-control golem with his “desire for revenge, for a final expiation of guilt and responsibility” (*Amazing* 447). He decides, without permission from U.S. Command and believing that they would prohibit the action, to kill the German. As the pilot prepares the plane for flight, he uses the skins of the dead dogs to sheath the frame of the ancient plane. The reader shudders as Chabon calls to mind the now iconic Getty news image of a field of human skulls in front of a mountain of bones photographed at the July 1944 Russian liberation of the concentration camp at Majdanek (*Getty Images*): “Stacked in a neat pyramid beside the plane, like cargo waiting to be loaded on board, sat the skulls of seventeen dogs” (*Amazing* 449). One spot remains to be covered in order to make the plane air-worthy; Joe loses all perspective and

¹According to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s “Timeline of Events,” 7,003 German, Austrian, and Czech Jews were deported from the camp-ghetto Theresienstadt (Terezin) to Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944. The reason for the deportations was to “thin out” the Jewish population of Theresienstadt in preparation for the visit of representatives of the International Red Cross and the Danish Red Cross in June. Upon arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the prisoners on these transports were incarcerated in a “Theresienstadt family camp” in Birkenau prior to their death.

agrees to shoot Oyster knowing that “The man they were going to kill had done nothing to harm either of them. He was not a soldier” (453).

Joe, like the ancient Golem of Prague, becomes dangerous when frustrated by his ability to effect justice in the face of a tyrant. Joe is no longer a servant/savior to his family and the Jews. His hope and trust in America, like that of so many American survivors, has been violated. He is locked into the body of an out-of-control, angry victimizer willing to execute an innocent man. Misterioso taught Tom Mayflower, aka the Escapist, and Kornblum attempted to train Joe in the ways of Golden League, but Joe has spent years in the grip of a self-devouring and impotent anger. He has despaired of being able to pay his debt by fulfilling Misterioso’s dictum: “freedom was a debt that could be repaid only by purchasing the freedom of others” (*Amazing* 131). Joe’s self-imprisonment and his salvation are depicted by Rosa in her final portrait of him in which “he is entirely entangled, from head to toe, in heavy metal chains from which, like charms on a bracelet, dangle padlocks, cuffs, iron clasps, and manacles. His feet are shackled together with leg irons” (388). With a wisdom of her own, Rosa has painted herself into the portrait which reflects Joe’s heart as a large lock, and she is holding the key.

In a flash of remorse and an overwhelming desire for companionship, Joe attempts to befriend the German; after an explosion of misunderstood signals, he kills him, and later says, “It made me feel like the worst man in the world” (*Amazing* 590). Joe spends several months in psychiatric care at Guantanamo Bay and is ironically awarded the Navy’s Distinguished Service Cross. When released shortly before V-E Day in 1945, Joe Kavalier, unable to return to Rosa, Sammy, and the son that he now knows is his, promptly escapes into isolation.

IV: POST-WAR ESCAPES

ONLY LOVE

Following the war, Joe has lost the key to freedom that he was trained to use by Kornblum and which he attempted to use to free his family from Prague and their death at Auschwitz-Birkenau. His golem, The Escapist, was a falsely conceived savior, a fantasy. Knowing that Joe has been discharged, Sammy and Rosa even hire a private detective but Joe manages to elude him. After traveling aimlessly across the country for several years, in 1949 Joe takes up the life of a hermit in an office in the Empire State Building with a false front, Kornblum Vanishing Creams. In a later conversation with Rosa, Joe acknowledges that his plan had always been to return to her and Sammy, but the longer he waited, the harder it became, and in the end, he just didn't know how. In attempting to understand Joe's flight into isolation, Sammy speaks for vast numbers of survivors when he explains that, in a very real sense, Joe had no home to come to. His family were "All dead. Every one of them, his mother, his father, his grandfather. His kid brother's boat was torpedoed. Just a little kid, a refugee" (*Amazing* 490). Rosa believes that Joe, like so many who suffered from survivor's guilt, may have committed suicide.

Joe, similar to other refugees and survivors, has no map for re-entry and integration into life. Little-to-no assistance was forthcoming from the government. The country's post-war political machines and media were quick to share the news of humanitarian efforts in Europe to liberate and support the Jews in their resettlement efforts, but Americans, particularly those in power, seemed to assume that the surviving Jews would simply return to their pre-war homes. In reality, survivors more often than not found that their homes either no longer existed or had been appropriated by the frequently anti-Semitic residents of the towns from which they had been

deported. The United States was reluctant to make a place for Jewish refugees in the land of the free at a time when “Most congressmen knew little about displaced persons, could not understand why they had not gone home after the war, and feared an economic depression or a glut on the labor market if a large number of immigrants started coming to the United States” (Dinnerstein). In 1947 Congressman William Stratton introduced a bill to allow 400,000 displaced persons to come to the United States over a four-year period. Senator Chapman Revercomb, R-WVA, chaired the Immigration Subcommittee and expressed the roots of the McCarthy Red Scare that was to take hold of American consciousness:

Many of those who seek entrance into this country have little concept of our form of government. Many of them come from lands where Communism had its first growth and dominates the political thought and philosophy of the people. Certainly it would be a tragic blunder to bring into our midst those imbued with a communistic line of thought when one of the most important tasks of this government today is to combat and eradicate Communism from this country.

(Dinnerstein)

A watered-down measure of the bill severely reduced the number of displaced persons to be admitted and favored Germans displaced from Eastern Europe after the war. It was administered by a trio of liberal administration officials appointed by President Truman who managed to interpret the bill in a way that admitted at least a fraction of Jewish refugees needing homes.

America’s interests, worries, and the news of the day had moved on to the Cold War and the bomb. Holocaust survivors and refugees were forgotten. A search of the *New York Times* for

all of 1954 returns 310 front-page articles with the terms “Cold War” or “bomb.” On November 20, one is titled “President in Bomb Shelter Leads Drill for Atom Raid: Eisenhower Leads Atomic Raid Drill” (“President”). An August series of editorial cartoons in the *New York Times* comment on the Cold War fears of Americans. One shows a dove flying high over the world with a banner titled “Russian Peace Propaganda,” and below, a large, black missile with the caption “Russian War Preparation” (“Six Cartoonists Variations”). A similar search of the *Times* throughout 1954 using the terms “Jews,” and “refugee” returned fewer than five on-point articles.

Sammy’s disillusionment with an America that fears otherness and diversity, an America focused inward rather than outward as a member of a world community, continues after the war. He has entered a platonic marriage with Rosa, and he raises Joe’s son, Tommy, named after Joe’s dead brother, in a relationship “thick with regret and pleasure” (*Amazing* 474). He and Rosa have followed much of America into suburbia, a neighborhood called Bloomtown, one of America’s newly minted communities imagined during the World’s Fair. Forgetting their more exciting and dangerous dreams, they attempt to become a part of the new American dream where “An entire generation of young fathers and mothers raised in the narrow stairways and crowded rooms of the rust-and-brick boroughs of New York” sought refuge from the “bundles of raw nerves they felt their families had become” (473). Sammy is no longer wealthy following a series of “ill-advised investments” (473), poorly timed purchases, and the faded glory of Empire Comics. Following a series of unsatisfying, low-paying jobs, but because he has bills to pay and a family to support, he takes a job as an editor at Gold Star Comics and concedes that “he had at last thrown in the towel on his old caterpillar dreams” (481). Sammy’s “by-now legendary novel,

American Disillusionment” (543) is in its fifth version and has failed to attract a publisher. In its continued search for success, *American Disillusionment* offers a metaphor for America:

[it is] that cyclone which, for years, had woven its erratic path across the flatlands of his imaginary life, always on the verge of grandeur or disintegration, picking up characters and plotlines like houses and livestock, tossing them aside and moving on. (543)

Sammy and Rosa form a working partnership and maintain the appearance of a marriage. She has taken over the graphic art work to go with Sammy’s stories, and her current work features the bomb as the other woman in a relationship. It was “based on an article that she had read in *Redbook* about the humorous difficulties of being married to a nuclear physicist employed by the government at a top-secret facility in the middle of the New Mexico desert” (*Amazing* 545). Like those marriages that prompted articles in the *Ladies Home Journal*’s “Can this Marriage be Saved” column, Rosa accepts that “Sammy had been having lunch, on and off, with a dozen men over the past dozen years or so” (565). She learns only their first names and they disappear after about six months. Rosa pretends to herself that these friendships “went no further than a lunch table” (565) even while she has also found relationships outside of marriage. Sammy’s current project is a story titled “*Weird Planet*” (565)—it is a caricature about the atom bomb that feeds fears created by government-sponsored drills for elementary school students in which they practice hiding under their desks. It is also Chabon’s indictment of the American tendency to forget. *Weird Planet*’s hero hears terrible sounds, screams and sees “[s]trange electric flashes” (563), but the hero of the story is told that he is dreaming as everyone goes

about their business as though nothing had happened. He cannot resist investigating and finds God wearing “Giant atomic chains” (564). Chabon expresses the feelings of large numbers of Holocaust survivors still recovering from the war as well as Americans anticipating a future atomic war when Sammy, recounting the story to Rosa, declares, “God is a madman. He lost his mind, like, a billion years ago. Just before He, you know. Created the universe” (564). Over the years, Sammy contemplates escape, but instead, he allows the world to “wind him in the final set of chains, to climb, once and for all, into the cabinet of mysteries that was the life of an ordinary man” (547).

Tommy is the center of Sammy and Rosa’s world—the cause of their transformation, however difficult, into parents who have forfeited other avenues of escape. Tommy, like Joe, is something of an escape artist, and a lover of comic books, especially “The Escapist.” In loyalty to Sammy for whom the now pedestrian comic book character only brings pain, Tommy reads “The Escapist” at Spiegelman’s Drug Store—perhaps providing Chabon with the opportunity to acknowledge the work of second-generation Holocaust survivor, comic artist, Art Spiegelman. Tommy has created Bugman, a “costumed crime-fighting alter ego” (*Amazing* 503), that recalls the work of the father that he does not know. With skills inherited from each of his parents, including his artist mother, Tommy writes Bugman’s stories and draws accompanying graphics. Borrowing from Superman and America’s fears of the atomic bomb, Bugman is a scarab beetle which “had been caught, along with a human baby, in the blast from an atomic explosion” (503). Consistently making the connection between the Holocaust and the American response, Chabon relays that Tommy sits in his classroom under the bust of the man who may have been able to save his grandparents and uncle from dying at Auschwitz-Birkenau—Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Tommy's interest in magic and illusion is spurred by the intense curiosity of a young boy in the disappearing hard-boiled egg tricks of a friend as well as the mysteries that comprise his family which he has puzzled together in an incomplete picture through overheard conversations. Chabon calls to mind the survivors whose silence about their experiences shaped the lives of their children with whom they were unable to talk. In a foreshadowing of the intense curiosity about Joe's place in his life—and his mother's—Tommy's impatience to know feels like “a tightening in his chest, a tapping of his feet, a feeling like the need to urinate—unbearable at times” (*Amazing* 499). When his interest in learning the secrets of magic for himself takes him to the still popular Louis Tannen's Magic Shop, one of the few places frequented by Joe, it is not a surprise when their paths cross. Bernard Kornblum's lifesaving advice for releasing a lock—“The pins have voices”—(27) has been securely encased and is dormant behind the many doors protecting Joe's heart. He remembers Kornblum directing him to listen carefully to the movement of the pins for directional guidance as they tumble with the movement of his pick, and Joe at last hears an opportunity that will crack open one of the doors of his solitude and makes himself known to Tommy in Spiegelman's. As they walk out of the drugstore together, Tommy picks up the Summer 1953 issue of *Escapist Adventures* #54 in which the bound, blindfolded Escapist is shot by none other than Tom Mayflower: “I'M ABOUT TO BE EXECUTED BY MY OWN ALTER EGO!!!” (508) While Tommy knows that the cover is a misdirection, something he has become quite expert at, the reader knows that Joe is preparing to leave his alter-ego behind.

For seven months Tommy makes secret trips to the seventy-second floor of the Empire State Building where Joe, in a manipulation so well known to illusionists and Holocaust survivors, is hiding in plain sight. Joe, whom Tommy believes to be his cousin, is practiced in

the art of forging Rosa's signature and signs notes excusing him from school in the event that he is quizzed about why he is on the train to the city rather than in school. Instead of Nazis, Tommy is on the lookout for Communists when he visits his "Gotham City" (*Amazing* 516). In developing Tommy's cover story, Chabon is unable to resist one of his relentless jabs at America's poor vision. Joe gives Tommy the disease of strabismus, commonly known as crossed-eyes, a condition in which the eyes do not line up in the same direction, and therefore do not look at the same object at the same time. Joe also teaches Tommy the secret to a successful "false pass" (512)—a skill of illusion involving misdirection that works both for card tricks and in life. The false pass has allowed Joe to elude friends and family for nine years. It has also allowed Sammy and Rosa to successfully play their parts as a family modeled on those found in *Family Circle* or *Good Housekeeping*. Speaking from long experience, Joe says to Tommy: "You really do have to know how to do a pass. . . Even if it's only a false one" (512).

Tommy senses the grief, the wound, carried by Joe that has rendered him unable to return to Sammy and Rosa. Joe's depression after the war recalls that of thousands of other Jews who survived—most from within the camps themselves. Through Joe, Chabon offers a glimpse of the trauma suffered by American Jewish refugees impotent in their efforts to prevent their families' deaths. Grief and desperation compounded a failure to receive anticipated rescue and assistance from the government of the land of the free. Money earned by Joe during the fat years of the Escapist has all been placed into savings where it continues to grow to a vast sum, leading him to torture himself with grand dreams of how he would have provided for his family: "the money always felt to him like a debt owed, and unrepayable. He had bankrupted himself on plans" (*Amazing* 600). His guilt is compounded by having paid ten-thousand dollars "to doom fifteen children to lie forever among the sediments of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge" (591). During Joe's long

recovery after the war, he sees psychiatrists, finds solace in morphine, and wanders the country aimlessly, before secreting himself within the Empire State Building where he finds that his best source of therapy and the antidote for his morphine craving is an escape into comic books, “a pile of *Captain Marvel Adventures*” (575).

Within Kornblum *Vanishing Creams*, Joe attempts to escape his failure to rescue his family through either the Escapist or his own military service. Over a five year period, he draws a two-thousand page graphic novel, *The Golem*, and begins to heal as he faces his Jewish roots and immerses himself ever deeper into “potent motifs of Prague and its Jews, of magic and murder, persecution and liberation, guilt that could not be expiated, and innocence that never stood a chance” (*Amazing* 577). “To reimagine the Prague ghetto,” writes Gasiorek, “is to pay homage to a community that was destroyed and to insist that there is a continuity between that destruction, earlier Christian pogroms, and the Holocaust” (887). Joe imagines himself as “Josef Golem,” a strange, lost child who sacrificed himself in an attempt to do the one thing that he felt he had been charged to do—save his family.

Tommy is unable to talk Joe into coming out of hiding. Instead, he latches onto a wild-hare fantasy mentioned by Joe in which he jumps from the Empire State Building in an effort to embarrass Sheldon Anapol. “Tommy could see that Secretman was trapped in his Chamber of Secrets, and that the Bug was going to have to rescue him” (*Amazing* 525). The announcement is made in the *Herald-Tribune* the next day. Aware that Tommy has faked the announcement, Joe sees an opportunity to save Tommy from certain trouble, but his motives are not pure as he desires to once again perform for the adulation of a crowd by bringing the Escapist to life. He purloins the Escapist’s costume once worn by Tracy Bacon from Sammy’s office, devises a bungee cord made of rubber bands, and prepares to follow through. In doing so, he fulfills

Kornblum's prediction: "Such people feel imprisoned by invisible chains. For them the final feat of autoliberation is all too foreseeable" (37). It is only sheer luck that Joe's leap does not result in a final escape into death. He is jarred by Tommy, however, into a passionate realization that freedom may be possible:

When Joe saw the boy, his son, join the motley crowd that had convened on the observation deck to observe as a rash and imaginary promise was fulfilled, he suddenly remembered a remark that his teacher, Bernard Kornblum had once made. 'Only love,' the old magician had said, 'could pick a nested pair of steel Bramah locks.' (532)

Long before, in Prague, Kornblum had told Joe the secret of Houdini's failure to escape from a set of Bramah locks, notorious for their inability to be picked. They "had gone unpicked, inviolate, for over half a century" (533). The orchestra played and five-thousand people looked on as Houdini struggled for two full days to pick a lock that required "a bizarre double key" (533). Finally, haggard and spent, Houdini asked that his wife be permitted to bring him a glass of water. She did, and in five minutes he was free. But it was not the key that she placed in the water that freed him, it was love. "Like Harry Houdini, Joe had failed to get out of his self-created trap; but now the love of a boy had sprung him" (536). Tommy, like Tom Mayflower, thereby becomes a member of the League of the Golden Key, a real-life Escapist, a golem. Chabon's message to America may appear trite; but if love can be defined as caring about the welfare of others, America received failing grades.

Chabon gathers a symbolic group of onlookers to view Joe's jump. He tears back the thin veneer covering a multitude of false passes and in doing so returns the reader to the war, the Holocaust, and America's penchant for moving on. Many of the observers "peered up through fine German binoculars" (*Amazing* 492). Some are veterans who briefly escaped the war by reading "The Escapist" from their foxholes "in Belgium or in a transport off Bougainville" (493). Detective Lieber is a newly-minted, gay, Jewish detective, "kind of the prototype" (490). A group of children from a Catholic orphanage remind Joe of his drowned brother. They are joined by Sheldon Anapol who still occupies offices on the twenty-fifth floor of the Empire State Building. In Anapol's hearing, the detective, working on a motive, asks Sammy, "how many people knew this whole story about how you and your cousin were robbed and cheated and taken advantage of?" (494). "There were contracts involved, copyrights" (494), says Anapol. Joe observes Sammy's haggard complexion and "felt as if he were looking at a clever imposter" (536). As Joe holds court before his jump, Chabon has summarized the tragic consequences of Joe, Sammy, and Anapol to realize their dreams of escape.

TRANSFORMATIONS: HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Joe's isolation and jump, in a metaphorical way, represent the seemingly impossible task faced by Holocaust survivors who remained virtually hidden in plain sight for a decade or more. Their decisions to share their stories created big news that drew the attention of the world. Joe lands on the roof-ledge of the eighty-fourth floor, and his arrival at the Clay home causes the pieces of a carefully constructed, cookie-cutter American family to crumble when Sammy and Rosa come face-to-face with Joe holding his sleeping son: "they each seemed to notice that this was what the

other was doing, and they blushed and smiled, awash in the currents of doubt and shame and contentment that animated all the proceedings of their jury-rigged family” (*Amazing* 552). The veil covering the illusion of their marriage is lifted in the days following Joe’s return. Joe learns from Sammy that “I married her because I didn’t want to, well, be a fairy” (580). Rosa’s loyalty to Sammy and her love for Joe persist with equal amounts of rage and resignation “with all the force and frustration of a dozen years of lovelessness and longing” (548). She is writing stories that “portray the heart of that mythical creature, the American Girl, whom she despised and envied” (548). In the days that follow, Joe, Rosa, and Sammy begin to emerge from their cocoons through a series of frames again constructed by Chabon to mirror the pages of a comic book. The realizations are powerful and painful. Sammy and Rosa confront their marriage and begin to try to map their futures. Joe begins to understand the sacrifices that Sammy has made on his behalf and the futility of his attempt to live “crouched in the false bottom of life” (582). Finally, he understands the inability of the Escapist to function as a savior. There are no false passes as Joe, Sammy, and Rosa put to rest the individual golems that they have attempted to construct. In order to do that they must confront what they have tried to escape from:

The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something—one, poor dumb, powerful thing—exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. (582)

Chabon here makes clear the temporary respite offered by the kind of escape that is fueled by a desire to avoid the cost of facing the pain of life and the evils of the world. Success is unlikely, and the potential for deadly consequences is high. He believes that the reader will see the connection to the larger picture for America, but the story doesn't end before Chabon has pounded home the message that transformation requires sacrifice.

Sammy has been subpoenaed in response to Dr. Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* to appear before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Judiciary Committee as it probes the suitability of comic books for children. He is accused of being a pederast and creating characters with a similarly nefarious nature, and he is publicly outed as a homosexual. George Deasey, often the mouthpiece for clear vision, counsels Sammy that, "I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out in the end that Senator C. Estes Kefauver and his pals just handed you your own golden key" (*Amazing* 625). Sammy's freedom and transformation, however, comes at the cost of an uncertain reception by his peers and the likelihood that he will be ostracized in American society.

Joe's 2,256-page graphic novel, *The Golem*, "the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution" (*Amazing* 579) is seen by Sammy as a breakthrough in the comic book form—a graphic novel for adults. They grow excited about the potential for publishing *The Golem* just as Anapol announces that he has "killed the Escapist" (588). Profits have plummeted, and a court ruling finding in favor of a lawsuit claiming that the Escapist too closely resembled Superman has sealed his fate. Anapol announces the sale of Empire Comics, "I want to get some sucker in there before the roof falls in" (589), and Chabon takes the opportunity to reprise the vagaries of capitalism and Anapol's crassness. Anapol's transformation, a return to his wife and synagogue attendance, is cosmetic only—a false pass.

In the event that the reader has missed his overriding message, Chabon issues an unambiguous reminder when Sammy and Joe discuss whether Joe should use his accumulated savings of nearly \$1 million dollars to buy Empire Comics. Joe hesitates, and Sammy says “I understand you don’t want to touch that money. I mean, I think I understand. I get that. . . . well, that it represents something to you that you don’t want to ever forget” (*Amazing* 593). Even Joe concedes, however, that “Days go by, and I don’t remember not to forget” (595). Therein lies our contemporary problem—remembering to remember.

Joe, teetering on the divide between another escape and hope, visits Houdini’s grave where he comes to the realization that he has given up his belief in illusion and magic but is willing to crack open the door of hope. In a dream-like state, he sees his mentor, Bernard Kornblum and asks what he should do. “For God’s sake . . . Go home” (*Amazing* 608) is his answer. In a commentary on the use of escape as an antidote to unbelievable trauma, Chabon notes the critically important role that it serves as he recounts the losses suffered by Joe, and he defends Joe’s refuge into comic books by observing that “the usual charges leveled against comic books, that they offered merely an easy escape from reality, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf” (575). Chabon notes, through Joe, the perhaps necessary if also temporary time of escape to allow healing before the realities of the tragedy can be faced. But they must be faced.

Waiting for him at home, his new American home, is the Golem of Prague in the casket in which the Golem and Joe had fled Prague fifteen years earlier. Saying “Tommy told the delivery guy that it was your chains” (*Amazing* 609), Rosa has identified what the responsibility of the Golem had become for Joe. Chabon’s page one promise is reprised; “I don’t know what’s in there, Joe said. It’s not what it used to be” (609). “The entire box was filled, to a depth of

about seven inches, with a fine powder, pigeon-gray and opalescent, that Joe recognized at once from boyhood excursions as the silty bed of the Moldau” (610). The Golem weighs much more in this state than when Joe had accompanied it in a casket out of Prague:

He reached in and took a handful of the pearly soil, pondering it, sifting it through his fingers, wondering at what point the soul of the Golem had reentered its body, or if possibly there could be more than one lost soul embodied in all that dust, weighing it down so heavily. (612)

Joe purchases Empire Comics which also enables him to return to his roots where he plans to publish “a series of comic books based on Jewish *aggadah* and folklore” (601). Joe will use his vast savings in order to assure that Americans will never forget, but his freedom is purchased at the cost of recognizing, finally, that his family has perished in the Holocaust.

In a final transformation into new and ambiguous lives, Sammy and Joe perform a final escape—this time into new lives based on truth rather than illusion. Sammy buys a ticket to L.A. and returns home only long enough to say goodbye to Rosa, his best friend, and his son, who now knows that Joe is his biological father. Sammy, writes Helene Meyers, “heads westward, a conventional American journey signifying new possibilities and fortunes” (73). This time, it is Sammy, rather than Joe, who pulls off a final feat of liberation as he insists on sleeping on the couch, sending Joe to Rosa’s bed and placing the dirty linens from Joe’s couch bed and their lives aside for laundering. Rosa “handed the sack of dirty linens to Joe and started down the hall.

Joe stood beside the couch for a moment, looking at Sammy . . . as if trying to work his way backward, one at a time, through the steps of the clever feat of substitution that Sammy had just pulled off” (*Amazing* 636).

CONCLUSION

Stories of escape and transformation are universal. They are a defining story of the Jews since the earliest recorded history. The horror, enormity, and almost unbelievable scope of the Holocaust has generated nearly three-quarters of a century of news reports, testimonials, works of fiction, memorials, films and, in at least the past two decades, entertainment grounded in the type of humor used in *Seinfeld* and *South Park*. Concurrently, critical analysis about how the Holocaust should be portrayed has grown exponentially in scope and volume.

Beginning with Moses, the Jews have been persecuted and forced to transform and rebuild. Andrew Bell-Fialkoff's "A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing" recounts ethnic cleansings "from Assyria to Serbia" (111) and notes that although they continue to be based in religious terms, the first cleansings based primarily on ethnic discrimination were carried out by England against Irish Catholics in the mid-to-late seventeenth century. In a discussion of Turkey's efforts to rid the country of Greeks and Armenians, Bell-Fialkoff notes that it is "only in the nineteenth century that the complete destruction of an ethnic group manifested itself as the goal of a state" (113). He goes on to describe cleansings of and by the Germans and Russians, and he details the long years of tragedy in the Balkans. Bell-Fialkoff does not address genocides in China, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Darfur—more examples of man's unspeakable inhumanity to man. He suggests, however, that it is against the Holocaust that such events must be measured when he writes that "It is with the Nazi campaigns against Jews that ethnic cleansing reached its height: annihilation." (114). He continues, "It [the Holocaust] combined elements of deportation, expulsion, population transfer, massacre and genocide. In that way it was 'complete,' truly a final solution" (114). The Holocaust atrocities against Jews did not, as in other instances of ethnic cleansing, result from border disputes, political, or purely religious

differences. The Holocaust was a systematic, carefully engineered plan to create a race of Aryan peoples as defined by the Third Reich.

Commentary on how the Holocaust should be remembered or depicted often begins with Elie Wiesel's famous quote, "Whoever has not lived through the event can never know it" (qtd. in Lang 49). In a 1986 interview, Wiesel is asked about Alvin Rosenfeld's book *Imagining Hitler*, in which Rosenfeld "discusses the trivializing of [the Holocaust] as a common phenomenon of popular culture" (Franciosi 294). He responds: "Absolutely, that's a very good, a very powerful analysis, one of the best, and he is right" (294). In a 1989 article Wiesel reiterates that "Auschwitz is something else, always something else. . . Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge" (Franklin 5). This writer has not found any evidence that Wiesel has an opinion about *Kavalier & Clay*, but one may guess that he would find it puzzling at best as a novel that purports to inform and comment on the Holocaust. If, however, as I argue, Chabon's intent is to call to mind the failure of America to act at a time when intervention may have made a difference in the lives of millions of Jews who perished in the Holocaust through a novel that makes the events accessible to a broad range of readers, Wiesel himself might approve.

In a review of Peter Novick's book *The Holocaust in American Life* Monty Noam Penkower notes that Novick "doubts that the Shoah can teach the lesson of resisting genocide: witness the world's passivity in the face of recent human slaughter in Biafra, Rwanda, and Bosnia" (129). Elie Wiesel agrees that the world has thus far failed to learn but believes that to continue to push for enlightenment is an imperative goal. During a 2009 Days of Remembrance presentation he asked, "Will the world ever learn? I think it hasn't. Had the world learned, there would have been no Cambodia and no Bosnia and no Darfur, and all racism would have

disappeared. Anti-Semitism would have vanished.” Wiesel and his wife, Marion, established The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity whose mission, rooted in the memory of the Holocaust, is “to combat indifference, intolerance and injustice through international dialogue and youth-focused programs that promote acceptance, understanding and equality” (“About Us”).

In *A Thousand Darknesses*, Ruth Franklin points out that the deaths of first-hand witnesses create a paradox in which fascination and interest in the Holocaust seems only to have grown and with it a question of whether only the original first-hand witness accounts will be the standard as sources of understanding. She suggests that we “have yet to sate our voracious cultural hunger for novels, films, plays that might somehow help us understand the Holocaust” (5). It is her belief that that in looking to literature to teach us about life, we naturally expect it to deepen our understanding of the Holocaust, and “As the writers of this generation begin to tell these stories from their own vantage, they have turned Jewish literary tradition inside out. And in doing so, they demonstrate that the stories of the Holocaust remain tellable” (238). Franklin, then, takes the position that the body of Holocaust literature must grow despite the loss of first-hand witnesses and, someday, their children. Franklin adds that “It does not detract from the memory of those who died [in the Holocaust], or from the pain of the survivors, to allow their experiences to remind us of others’ suffering. There is enough mourning to go around” (242).

In discussing the depiction of the Holocaust through literature, Sue Vice offers a perspective that is perhaps another way of thinking about midrash. She points to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin’s “doublevoiced discourse” (9) that utilizes discourse from a wide variety of sources which compete for a prime position. “In Holocaust fiction” she writes, “the clash is likely to come about from the juxtaposition of literary with historical discourse or that of different and opposed historical sources. This is an especially significant feature in Holocaust

fiction, where critics and readers may precisely not want to read a polyphonic text, wishing rather for the clear utterance of moral certainties” (9). *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is both polyphonic and without clear moral certainties, but it is written with skill and engrossing tales that avoid either overloading or offending the reader while delivering an important message. Through multiple lenses, historical and fictional, as well as his panoply of characters, Chabon presents critically important questions and exposes a history of false passes. In the end, his characters, while transformed, remain ambiguous. The reader is left to draw her own conclusions. It is noteworthy that the idea for a portion of Chabon’s polyphonic text could have been taken from Elie Wiesel’s book *The Golem* with illustrations by the noted Jewish artist Mark Podwal. Podwal’s drawings are echoed in Joe’s graphic novel, *The Golem*, as they recreate the scenes of ancient Prague and the Golem of Prague’s story as told by Wiesel.

In *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, Hilene Flanzbaum traces the history of Holocaust remembrance in America from its earliest roots in *The Diary of Anne Frank* through the emergence of first-person testimonies that did not appear until nearly fifteen years following the end of WW II. Concurrently, she traces the explosion in critical response about what constitutes appropriate representation of the Holocaust as the event is portrayed in movies, television, and the stage. In her introduction, Flanzbaum quotes Alvin Rosenfeld who “wonders how any story of the crimes of the Nazi era can remain faithful to the specific features of those events and at the same time address contemporary American social and political agendas” (5). She finds a response in Michael Berenbaum who argues the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s position that the story must be told in such a way “that it would resonate not only with the survivor in New York and his children in San Francisco, but with the black leader from Atlanta, a Midwestern farmer, or a Northeastern industrialist” (5). In an effort to study, raise public

awareness, and promote action, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum established the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide with the caveat that “As we learn more about the risk factors, warning signs, and triggering events that have led to it in the past, we are also learning ways to prevent it in the future” (“Preventing Genocide”).

Could it happen again? Despite the often repeated slogan, “Never Again!” delivered in high powered speeches, anti-Semitism is alive and growing in the United States and abroad. Consensus is building that another Holocaust is not only possible, but likely. In February and March 2015, the *Huffington Post* online edition published several articles detailing reports of anti-Semitism including one pointing to the increase of anti-Semitic activities on American college campuses (Markoe). On March 10, 2015, *Fox News* online published an article titled “Blurred Line: Anti-Israel campus climate leading to bigotry, warn critics.” (Chiramonte). In November 2014, Deborah Lipstadt expressed her concerns for growing anti-Semitism in Europe in an article, “Anti-Semitism Creeps into Europe’s Daily Routines.” Ruth Franklin, in recounting her young son’s fascination with the Czech opera for children *Brundibar*, a not so thinly veiled story of the Holocaust, quotes from the final lines of the performance in her insistence that literature must continue to address the Holocaust:

They believe they’ve won the fight,
They believe I’m gone—not quite!
Nothing ever works out neatly—
Bullies don’t give up completely.
One departs, the next appears,
And we shall meet again, my dears!

Thought I go, I won't go far. . .

I'll be back, Love, Brundibar. (242)

A novel, she says, “about Auschwitz can never only be a novel about Auschwitz: it is a novel also about Armenia, about Siberia, about Cambodia, about Bosnia, about Darfur” (243). That is the point that Chabon asks his readers to consider.

Chabon's depiction of the Holocaust is not enough, but it is an important contribution. It does not, in the tradition of Wiesel or Levi, provide the first-hand testimony of *Night* or *Survival in Auschwitz*. Wiesel's and Levi's depictions are particular to the Holocaust and make no attempt to universalize the experience. In response to Christoph Ribbat's question, “will these popular genres open the discourse of memory by making it more democratic and more accessible” (206), Chabon has joined the chorus of Jewish American fiction writers who consider the Holocaust a critically important event for the world and for literature. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* moves beyond informing the reader about the events of the Holocaust to a consideration of future responsibility for attention to anti-Semitism, genocide of any group, and even the bullying of children. “We need literature about the Holocaust not only because testimony is inevitably incomplete, but because of what literature uniquely offers: an imaginative access to past events, together with new and different ways of understanding them that are unavailable to strictly factual forms of writing” (Franklin 13).

Chabon confronts the Holocaust in a relentless recounting of history and refuses to allow Americans—or any people—to avoid the consequences of turning away from evils that occur within the world community. The reader, Chabon hopes, is, like the Golem of Prague, not what she used to be. Today's reader of *Kavalier & Clay*, experiencing disillusionment with America's

failures to fulfill its promises and to meet its responsibilities, will be encouraged to be on the lookout for golems because he is “no fool or monster, but a figure of intuition, intelligence, and compassion who may yet return, perhaps in our own generation, to protect the Jews from their enemies—” “And he is waiting to be called” (Wiesel, *The Golem* inside back flap, 96).

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