

# Young writer tackles success and neglected Jewish heritage

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Grinning shyly, Michael Chabon was genuinely surprised to get a warm reaction from a packed room at Black Oak Books early last month.

"I guess I just figure there's no reason why I should expect to get a good turnout or expect people to buy my books," he said later in an interview. "I only expect my relatives to show up out of obligation."

Haltingly, he had thanked the Berkeley assemblage — many with blue-and-yellow copies of his new book, *A Model World and Other Stories*, on their laps — for coming to see him, and introduced the story he was to read aloud. "It's about...uh...disillusionment."

Reading from "The Lost World," his voice grew strong, coursing through striking, lovely narration and dialogue, relating a chapter in the fictional life of teenager Nathan Shapiro, a Jewish son of divorced parents.

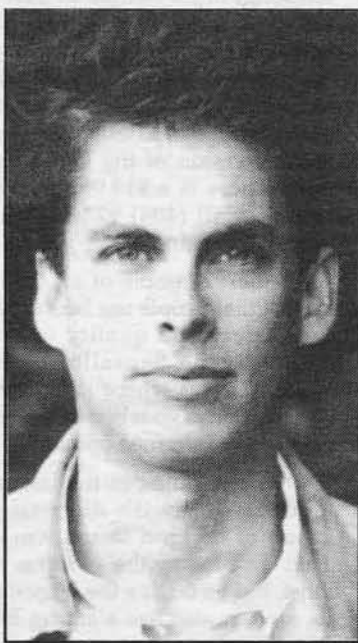
Afterward, listeners lined up to collect autographs and offer praise. "You really brought the story alive," several told the blushing young writer.

From his Seattle home, Chabon observed that "the stories about Nathan Shapiro seem to elicit comments from people going through divorces. They say, 'Now I feel a lot worse about this.'"

Chabon, who turned 28 last month, should be far more accustomed to evoking emotions and admiration. His first book, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, was an enormous critical and popular success. *A Model World* was published in April to high acclaim.

Though both *A Model World's* Nathan Shapiro — protagonist of five of the collection's stories — and the narrator in *Mysteries* are Jewish, the writer has spent only the last year or so examining his connections to the religion.

"At the moment I'm in a real state of questioning," Chabon said. "For a long time it hasn't been important at all, and I have really had as little to do with it as I could. But in the past year or so



**Michael Chabon**

I've started to re-evaluate my relationship to Judaism, to acknowledge the influence it's had on me."

Chabon blames much of his longstanding disaffection from Judaism on his upbringing. "I must say that I don't think my Jewish education was a very good one," he said. "I never felt inculcated with any sense of wonder about Judaism, and it was never given to me as anything more than an obligation."

The Maryland congregation at which he celebrated his bar mitzvah was "somewhere even to the left of Reform," he said. "I think they called it 'innovative.' It was very relaxed and sort of 1960-ish."

Judaism "was always presented to me as kind of a weekend activity, and one that you do in a different language, which pushes it even to a farther corner of your life," Chabon continued, "and one which was given to me in such a broken-up fashion that it just didn't make sense to me. I just don't think I was shown what it really means to be a Jew."

Readers, Chabon said, are likely to find his questions and answers — and rediscovery of his heritage — explored in future novels and stories.

Chabon has wanted to write professionally "as long as I can remember. I think I first started announcing to anyone who would listen that I was going to be a writer when I was about 12 or 13. But even before then I'd always been interested in writers because I always loved to read and I was always curious about the people who wrote the books."

His favorite short-story writers and novelists are the masters of those genres: John Cheever, John Updike, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gustave Flaubert and Marcel Proust.

Like most serious writers, he hopes to one day become part of that legacy. "It would be nice to fill a niche in the pantheon of literature. If my work were able to continue to be read after I was no longer around to write it, that would satisfy my highest ambitions."

Following the publicity tour for *A Model World* — and visiting his mother, who lives in Oakland — Chabon returned to Seattle to wrap up his second novel. "I think I've almost got it done. It's about Paris and the west coast of Florida, and it has something to do with architecture, and" — he paused — "maybe I'll leave it at that."

His religious explorations also will continue. "I'm still not going to temple," he conceded, "but whereas at one point that would be the last thing I would want to do, at this point it's something I'm really thinking about seriously."