

WINNER of the PULITZER PRIZE



A NOVEL



the
AMAZING
ADVENTURES OF
KAVALIER
& **CLAY**



"IT'S ABSOLUTELY
GOSH-WOW, SUPER-
COLOSSAL—SMART, FUNNY, AND
A CONTINUAL PLEASURE TO READ."
—THE WASHINGTON POST
BOOK WORLD



MICHAEL

CHARBON

Praise for

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay

Winner of

The Pulitzer Prize

The New York Society Library Book Award

The Bay Area Book Reviewers Award

Finalist for

The National Book Critics Circle Award

The PEN/Faulkner Award

The *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize

**Named one of *Entertainment Weekly's*
Best Books of the Decade**

“The depth of Chabon’s thought, his sharp language, his inventiveness and his ambition make this a novel of towering achievement.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“I’m not sure what the exact definition of a ‘great American novel’ is, but I’m pretty sure that Michael Chabon’s sprawling, idiosyncratic, and wrenching new book is one.... [It] had me hooked from the first, wistful, epic-tinged sentence ... to the final poignant line.”

—*New York*

“Towering, swash-buckling thrill of a book ... the themes are masterfully explored, leaving the book’s sense of humor intact and characters so tightly developed they could walk off the page.”

—*Newsweek*

“A page-turner in the most expansive sense of the word: its gripping plot pushes readers forward.... Chabon is a reader’s writer, with sentences so cozy they’ll wrap you up and kiss you goodnight.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Mr. Chabon has fashioned a big, ripe, excitingly imaginative novel.... Especially impressive about *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is its success in reaching for big settings (the top of the Empire State Building), big creative leaps (*Citizen Kane* plays a role here), and big historical relevance without strain.”

—*The New York Times*

“Some books you read for their plot, some for their style. When, like Chabon’s, both are exceptional, you’re in a rare place.”

—*USA Today*

“Lyrical ... exquisitely patterned ... composed with detailed scenes, and spotted with some rapturous passages.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“The kind of charged prose that leaps six hundred pages of fantasy and social history in a single bound ... never before told with as much

imagination, verve and affection.”

—*Time*

“[Chabon’s] magnum opus.”

—*The New York Review of Books*

“Richly imagined and unexpectedly moving, *Kavalier & Clay* shows a thoroughbred author writing at the peak of his talents.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Starts out as one of the most pleasurable novels of the past few years. It ends as one of the most moving.”

—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Michael Chabon’s new novel is the product of sparkling intelligence, undeniable talent, and consummate skill ... a triumph both of style and storytelling.”

—South Florida *Sun-Sentinel*

“[Chabon’s] biggest and most ambitious work so far. High-spirited, fantastic yet historically grounded, written in a charming, fluent, witty prose, it is a highly engaging and entertaining book.”

—*Newsday*

“Chabon’s highly propelled, magnificently furnished, linguistically unbuttoned and joyfully melancholy tale ... is not merely hypnotically

compelling but, even better, fall-on-the-floor-funny-but-with-a-lump-in-your-throat.”

—*Memphis Commercial Appeal*

“Chabon takes center stage as a literary Houdini. It’s a crowd-wowing performance, one that pushes the author toward the top ranks of his generation of American writers.”

—*The Denver Post*

“Well researched and deeply felt, this rich, expansive and hugely satisfying novel will delight a wide range of readers.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“*Kavalier & Clay* is full of the kind of exquisitely figurative language and gorgeous sentences for which Chabon is deservedly celebrated.”

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“More than a novel about the American Dream ... a grand novel about dreamers selling dreams, reminding us that part of the thrill of dreaming is not the dream itself, but the realization that we *can* dream.”

—[CNN.com](#)

“This is a glad-hearted novel, rich in story and character and invention, and an argument for the virtues of escapism.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A stroke of sheer conceptual genius ... [a] huge enthralling third novel.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is an important, generous, beautifully written book, rich in wit and detail, overbrimming with marvels of narrative invention.”

—CHARLES FRAZIER

ALSO BY MICHAEL CHABON

The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man

Manhood for Amateurs

Maps and Legends

Gentlemen of the Road

The Yiddish Policemen's Union

The Final Solution

Summerland

Werewolves in Their Youth

Wonder Boys

A Model World and Other Stories

The Mysteries of Pittsburgh

**MICHAEL
CHABON**

RANDOM HOUSE
TRADE PAPERBACKS
NEW YORK



The
**AMAZING
ADVENTURES
of KAVALLER
& CLAY**

A NOVEL

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To my father

*We have this history of impossible solutions
for insoluble problems.*

—WILL EISNER, in conversation

Wonderful escape!

—NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, “Wakefield.”

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PART I

The
**ESCAPE
ARTIST**

1

IN LATER YEARS, holding forth to an interviewer or to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier's greatest creation, that back when he was a boy, sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini. "To me, Clark Kent in a phone booth and Houdini in a packing crate, they were one and the same thing," he would learnedly expound at WonderCon or Angoulême or to the editor of *The Comics Journal*. "You weren't the same person when you came out as when you went in. Houdini's first magic act, you know, back when he was just getting started. It was called 'Metamorphosis.' It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of *transformation*." The truth was that, as a kid, Sammy had only a casual interest, at best, in Harry Houdini and his legendary feats; his great heroes were Nikola Tesla, Louis Pasteur, and Jack London. Yet his account of his role—of the role of his own imagination—in the Escapist's birth, like all of his best fabrications, rang true. His dreams *had* always been Houdiniesque: they were the dreams of a pupa struggling in its blind cocoon, mad for a taste of light and air.

Houdini was a hero to little men, city boys, and Jews; Samuel Louis Klayman was all three. He was seventeen when the adventures began: bigmouthed, perhaps not quite as quick on his feet as he liked to imagine, and tending to be, like many optimists, a little excitable. He was not, in any

conventional way, handsome. His face was an inverted triangle, brow large, chin pointed, with pouting lips and a blunt, quarrelsome nose. He slouched, and wore clothes badly: he always looked as though he had just been jumped for his lunch money. He went forward each morning with the hairless cheek of innocence itself, but by noon a clean shave was no more than a memory, a hoboish penumbra on the jaw not quite sufficient to make him look tough. He thought of himself as ugly, but this was because he had never seen his face in repose. He had delivered the *Eagle* for most of 1931 in order to afford a set of dumbbells, which he had hefted every morning for the next eight years until his arms, chest, and shoulders were ropy and strong; polio had left him with the legs of a delicate boy. He stood, in his socks, five feet five inches tall. Like all of his friends, he considered it a compliment when somebody called him a wiseass. He possessed an incorrect but fervent understanding of the workings of television, atom power, and antigravity, and harbored the ambition—one of a thousand—of ending his days on the warm sunny beaches of the Great Polar Ocean of Venus. An omnivorous reader with a self-improving streak, cozy with Stevenson, London, and Wells, dutiful about Wolfe, Dreiser, and Dos Passos, idolatrous of S. J. Perelman, his self-improvement regime masked the usual guilty appetite. In his case the covert passion—one of them, at any rate—was for those two-bit argosies of blood and wonder, the pulps. He had tracked down and read every biweekly issue of *The Shadow* going back to 1933, and he was well on his way to amassing complete runs of *The Avenger* and *Doc Savage*.

The long run of Kavalier & Clay—and the true history of the Escapist's birth—began in 1939, toward the end of October, on the night that Sammy's mother burst into his bedroom, applied the ring and iron knuckles of her left hand to the side of his cranium, and told him to move over and make room in the bed for his cousin from Prague. Sammy sat up, heart pounding in the hinges of his jaw. In the livid light of the fluorescent tube over the kitchen sink, he made out a slender young man of about his own age, slumped like a question mark against the door frame, a disheveled pile

of newspapers pinned under one arm, the other thrown as if in shame across his face. This, Mrs. Klayman said, giving Sammy a helpful shove toward the wall, was Josef Kavalier, her brother Emil's son, who had arrived in New York tonight on a Greyhound bus, all the way from San Francisco.

"What's the matter with him?" Sammy said. He slid over until his shoulders touched cold plaster. He was careful to take both of the pillows with him. "Is he sick?"

"What do you think?" said his mother, slapping now at the vacated expanse of bedsheet, as if to scatter any offending particles of himself that Sammy might have left behind. She had just come home from her last night on a two-week graveyard rotation at Bellevue, where she worked as a psychiatric nurse. The stale breath of the hospital was on her, but the open throat of her uniform gave off a faint whiff of the lavender water in which she bathed her tiny frame. The natural fragrance of her body was a spicy, angry smell like that of fresh pencil shavings. "He can barely stand on his own two feet."

Sammy peered over his mother, trying to get a better look at poor Josef Kavalier in his baggy tweed suit. He had known, dimly, that he had Czech cousins. But his mother had not said a word about any of them coming to visit, let alone to share Sammy's bed. He wasn't sure just how San Francisco fitted into the story.

"There you are," his mother said, standing up straight again, apparently satisfied at having driven Sammy onto the easternmost five inches of the mattress. She turned to Josef Kavalier. "Come here. I want to tell you something." She grabbed hold of his ears as if taking a jug by the handles, and crushed each of his cheeks in turn with her lips. "You made it. All right? You're here."

"All right," said her nephew. He did not sound convinced.

She handed him a washcloth and went out. As soon as she left, Sammy reclaimed a few precious inches of mattress while his cousin stood there, rubbing at his mauled cheeks. After a moment, Mrs. Klayman switched off