

An American Golem: Comic Books, Creation, and the Virtue of Escape in Michael
Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

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Abstract

This thesis examines Michael Chabon's defense of escapist stories as manifested in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000). Through this work, Chabon traces the history of escapist stories and superheroes in Judaism through the anthropomorphic figure of Jewish folklore, the golem. Chabon explores the ways in which the creation of a golem overlaps with the creation of a comic book. Additionally, Chabon shows the ability of escapist stories—those that allow the reader to leave reality and enter into fantasy—to facilitate healing from deep emotional wounds. This healing is demonstrated through the journey of the protagonist, Josef Kavalier, as he relies on fantastical stories—both written by others and himself—to reacclimate to the world after trauma. In response to those who claim that escapist literature is only a turning away from reality and history, *Kavalier & Clay* demonstrates the value of escapist stories in facilitating recovery from trauma.

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After an almost fatal attempt at an ill-advised underwater escape by a young Josef Kavalier, his magic instructor Bernard Kornblum shares with him this piece of wisdom: “Never worry about what you are escaping *from*... Reserve your anxieties for what you are escaping *to*” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 37). All throughout *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) the question of escape—both physical and spiritual—remains central to an understanding of the narrative. Josef Kavalier, a Jewish refugee from Prague who has been trained in stage magic, escapistry, and fine art, teams up with his Brooklyn cousin, Sammy Clay, to create one of the most successful comic book heroes of their time—the Escapist. In *Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon asserts the cultural and spiritual significance of escapist stories and demonstrates their capacity for healing in the aftermath of trauma.

Defining Escapist Literature

Escapist literature is a relatively recent genre, and there is not a consensus on the kinds of stories which qualify, though typically genre fiction is most often categorized as such. In a broad sense, escapist literature can be defined as a work that causes the reader to temporarily leave *reality* and enter into *fantasy*, or as a “blocking of self-awareness” (Nell). However, under this simple definition, it is difficult to think of any work of literature that does not entail a departure from reality to some extent. *The Epic of*

Gilgamesh, *The Odyssey*, and *Twelfth Night* are all widely considered to be works of classic literature that also liberally employ elements of fantasy and escapism, as they each allow the reader to become immersed in a world that is not her own. Most fiction, regardless of its genre classification, is an experience of “enthralment as ironic liberation” (Heilman 439).

Robert Heilman examines the use of the term escape in reference to literature in an attempt to identify when the term began to be used as a pejorative. He states that “escape has long meant a departure from tangible sources of distress and disaster,” which as a result “introduces inevitably the counter idea of restraint” and imprisonment (Heilman 440). The growing interest in *escape* led to an interest in *escapism* and a necessity of classifying the latter appropriately: “The word *escapism* was born in the 1930s, grew rapidly, and in the 1940s and 1950s became a staple of all kinds of criticism—historical, social, and political, as well as literary and artistic” (444). While a minority “timidly inquired whether escapism is necessarily a bad thing, by mid-century *escapism* was the standard cliché of denigration that it has remained, perhaps with some loss of strength, ever since” (444).

As early as 1926 “escape” began being used as a popular metaphor, particularly in the service of selling books. Book titles promised escape “from the Primitive,” “from Fear,” “from Freedom,” and “from Authority” (Heilman 440). The popularity of these titles seems to suggest a deep dissatisfaction or anxiety in the readers of the post-war era. During the early twentieth century a genre of escape stories—those which featured actual physical escape from a dangerous situation such as the journey of a POW—grew in popularity, leading one literary critic in the January 1952 edition of the *Times Literary*

Supplement to wonder if “we all regard ourselves as prisoners” wishing to break free.

This presents a difficulty in that “for us the land of freedom we wish to reach is not so clearly determined as it was for them” (441). While the stories involved physical escape, readers turned to them in order to satisfy an internal, psychological desire for escape—a desire that in reality could often not be fully satiated. People have always turned to fiction to divert themselves from their lives, but some scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century began to wonder if literature that fulfilled this desire was truly beneficial. Writing in 1972, Sam Bluefarb, in his work *The Escape Motif in the American Novel*, notes that “in our time, escapism has been exemplified by the passive audience” (5). Reacting to the hippie culture of his time and their rejection of former values, he states that in the desire for escape present in American literature, it “has frequently been self-defeating” (11). The current definition of escapism in *Merriam-Webster* is “habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine,” which is identical to the definition in 1973, of which Heilman states, “though the glosses inevitably beg the question of what reality is, we nevertheless recall that separation from it is the basic element in a psychopathological state” (442). There is little room within this definition for a positive connotation, and so when a work is accused of being escapist it is intended as denigration.

Robert Heilman states that “all literature has in it something of the sanctuary, the entering of which resembles an escape from something else” (441). He traces the roots of a condemnatory attitude towards escape through literature to “the original Puritan attack on poetry (literature) and on drama... that fiction in and out of the theater is untrue in fact and immoral in effect” (447). The idea of the immorality of certain uses of fiction did not

end with the Puritans, and in the aftermath of the Holocaust the question of the morality of escape through literature took on a new dimension. Writers began grappling with “the ethical attitude appropriate for such a difficult historical moment” and whether or not fiction could actually help to “formulate individual ethical responses” or if it only provided a diversion and a removal of the reader from reality (Bayer 157).

In a study conducted by psychologist Victor Nell, he found that “The Protestant ethic teaches that pain and virtue are constant companions, and there are strong positive correlations between merit and difficulty rankings” (29). The inverse of this rule would assign easy, accessible stories lower merit, simply on the grounds that they are easier to interact with. The idea that reading is only beneficial if it is difficult is untrue and often used as a bludgeon against those who choose to read for pleasure rather than just edification. True to its Puritan roots, the accusation of escapism today carries with it a whiff of moral failure or weakness—an inability for the reader to cope with the world as it is. Reading for escape is seen as shameful, regardless of how ubiquitous the practice is.

Chabon on Genre and Escape Literature

Chabon has often operated within the field of genre work, such as in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* and *The Final Solution*, which employ elements of alternate history and detective fiction. Behlman notes that “escapism is a prominent characteristic of American popular art forms” such as blockbusters, serial television programs, and mass-market genre fiction, and it “is often dismissed by critics as essentially shallow or trivial” (62). Chabon has made it clear that he does not subscribe to the idea that genre fiction or other forms of popular art are “inherently debased, infantile, commercialized, unworthy of the serious person’s attention” (*Maps* 8). Conventions of a genre do not make it more

or less artistic, and regardless of form, genre work has within it the potential to communicate truth just as powerfully as a work of literary fiction. In an interview for the *LA Times*, Chabon pushes back against a “traditional highbrow argument” that wants to “privilege and protect certain kind of work” to the exclusion of genre literature. Chabon insists that “it’s not just futile, it’s ultimately destructive to try to fence things in that way” (qtd. in Timberg).

Even as Chabon communicates his own views on genre work, there are critics that still miss his greater point. In a review of *Yiddish Policemen*, reviewer Davis states, “[Chabon’s] books show a remarkable ability to be comfortable in exploiting the delights of genre writing and yet incorporate enough imaginative variation on the genres to be taken seriously by the literary establishment.” This attitude presupposes that the majority of genre work does not deserve to be taken seriously, and only the work that rises above the conventions as opposed to working within them can achieve the status of serious literature. Davis goes on to describe Chabon’s work as “guilty pleasures that you don’t have to feel guilty about” (10). The concept of a “guilty pleasure” is a byproduct of the diminishment of genre fiction by labeling it escapist.

In reference to Chabon’s usage of fantasy, Lee Behlman critiques *Kavalier & Clay* for presenting “the idea that distraction may be itself a valid response [to the Holocaust]” by partaking in the “admittedly problematic, quintessentially American phenomenon of forgetting” (62). Behlman views the use of fantasy as deflective rather than reflective and finds its use in *Kavalier & Clay* only operates to facilitate a turn away from history.

Comics as Escapist Literature

Comics, a much loved and much criticized form of escapist literature, have garnered higher praise in the literary community in recent years, but at their inception in 1939, the original superhero comics were, according to the narrator of *Kavalier & Clay*, “artistically and morphologically, in a far more primitive state.” In a description of the early days of comic books and their public reception, the narrator states, “From the beginning, there was a tendency... to view the comic book as merely a debased offspring of the newspaper comic strip.” In the original comic book form, neither the artists behind the comics nor the reader quite knew how to realize the potential that the form offered. There was a “highly fertile period of genetic and grammatical confusion” before the comic book became a unique medium categorically separate from newspaper comic strips (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 75). However, confusion about comic books remains. In her own defense of present-day comics, Katherine Roeder describes them as being “among the most democratic and accessible forms of visual culture” (5). Even though the comic book is highly accessible and widespread, it is difficult to categorize because it incorporates both visual art and dialogue. Nevertheless, comic books tell stories—predominantly fiction—and thus can be discussed in conjunction with other forms of story-based literature.

Since they are so accessible, comics are typically seen not only as *low art but* also as childish avenues of escapism without much, if any, artistic and technical merit. When Joe and Sam initially pitch their comic book idea to Sheldon Anapol and Jack Ashansky, Jack advises the detail-oriented and art-school-educated Joe that, when drawing a superhero, “half bad is maybe better than beauteeful” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 89). For the businessmen who owned the rights to the characters, comic books were

just another product to sell, and advertising opportunities were more important than artistic or literary merit. The writers and artists behind the early comics, such as Sam Clay and Joe Kavalier, viewed the situation quite differently. Though they did not see the majority of the profits, they continued with the laborious effort of creating new content at a pace fast enough to satisfy their quickly growing fanbase primarily because of their dedication to their art and their belief in its ability to enact change.

Chabon's novel—a Pulitzer Prize winning work categorized as literary fiction—engages in “an internal debate about the merits of two different kinds of art: the purely literary versus the hybridized form of the comic book” (Gasiorek 878). This internal debate is carried out by Chabon's ekphrastic inclusion of prose versions of the stories Joe and Sam create in *The Escapist*. By linking textual and pictorial art, “it juxtaposes alternative ways of perceiving, knowing, and communicating,” while also asking the reader to contemplate “the question of how reality is to be apprehended and portrayed” (878). Chabon intersplices the story of the Escapist, as well as stories of other comic book characters that Joe and Sam create, to allow readers to experience multiple forms of reality that are portrayed in the novel. Indeed, if as Donoghue believes, “the purpose of reading literature is to exercise or incite one's imagination; specifically, one's ability to imagine being different” (56), then the escapism carried out in the accessible and fantastic elements of comic books gives the reader ample opportunity to exercise the imagination in this way.

Escapism as Transformative Engagement in *Kavalier & Clay*

One of the primary accusations levied at escapist literature in general, and even at *Kavalier & Clay* in particular, is that it encourages a turning away from reality that is

both psychologically unhealthy and, in many cases, morally wrong. Behlman critiques the comic book in *Kavalier & Clay* as “a form of fantasy that resolutely avoids the real, for it seeks to resolve history either by overcoming it through neat, miraculous reversals or by escaping its terms completely” (57). He argues that encouraging an escape from history—in this case World War II and the Holocaust—prevents American engagement with this tragedy of history “because [American engagements] tend to turn facts into abstracted ‘ideals’” (70). By distancing oneself from the Holocaust, Behlman argues, one can ultimately ignore its real-world implications, thus allowing them the opportunity to recur.

Behlman states that even though “Chabon is careful to mark out escapism’s limitations... the fact remains that even in the short term, escapism is a turn away from history” (70-71). This turn from history can be seen near the beginning of Joe’s career as a comic book artist: “It was six o’clock on a Monday morning in October 1940. [Joe] had just won the Second World War, and he was feeling pretty good about it” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 165). Fantasy and vicarious vengeance play a pivotal role in Joe’s work. However, while there is a certain amount of escape from the present and from history in Joe’s experience with comics, Behlman’s description of escapism implies that the turn from history is a permanent one and carried out for its own sake. Rather than engage with the world in a meaningful way, Behlman argues, Chabon is proposing a total neglect of reality in favor of a more comfortable and delusional life of fantasy—an idea that is not present in *Kavalier & Clay*. Behlman’s reading oversimplifies Chabon’s defense of escapism and ignores Chabon’s larger emphasis on escape as a catalyst for

transformation—an emphasis which is as much about the process of escape as it is the consequences.

While *Kavalier & Clay* does allow for a certain amount of turning away from reality, it does so in the service of the ultimate goal of turning back toward reality in a position better suited to face it. In the opening chapter of the novel, the narrator succinctly presents this theme by stating that “It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of *transformation*” (*Kavalier & Clay* 3). Chabon uses images such as “a pupa struggling in its blind cocoon” as well as many references to Houdini to demonstrate the transformative nature of escape, which is not about abandoning reality, but going from one form of it to another (3).

When Joe arrives in America and begins his career as a comic book artist, he does so with the desire to bring about real-world change, namely, the rescue of his family. Joe’s anger and frustration at the situation that his family faces manifests itself in his work. The first cover that Joe paints for their first issue of *Amazing Midget Radio Comics* depicts the Escapist punching Hitler in the face. The image “stirred mysterious feelings in the viewer, of hatred gratified, of cringing fear transmuted into smashing retribution” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 150). Joe’s initial foray into the fantastic through comic books takes its material directly from headlines of the day, and transmutes the monotony and tragedy into glorious, premature victory: “The war was over; a universal era of peace was declared, the imprisoned and persecuted peoples of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free” (165). Deep down, Joe does not believe that he has the power to encourage the United States’ involvement in World War

II through his work, but he still exerts what little influence he has over current affairs by channeling his rage directly and unsubtly into his art.

The original superhero comics of the 1940s were filled with “wishful figments” and *The Escapist* is no different. Davie O’Dowd, Sam and Joe’s friend and fellow comic book artist, bluntly describes the effect of wishful figments on Sam’s own character creation. “It’s all what some little kid *wishes* he could do. Like for you, hey, you don’t want to have a gimpy leg no more. So, boom, you give your guy a magic key and he can walk” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 145). Joe, who desperately wants to be able to secure freedom for his family, and thus creates the ultimate hero capable of “performing amazing feats and coming to the aid of those who languish in tyranny’s chains” (121). In *The Escapist*, Joe utilizes his own abilities as a trained escape artist and magnifies them to a level powerful enough to cross continents and change history in order to enact an imagined large-scale liberation. The danger of wishful figments lies in an inability to accept the limitations from which such figments are born. While acting out one’s desires through art can bring about a certain amount of psychological satisfaction, it is unlikely that it can affect physical or material change.

However, after several months of wish fulfillment, Joe begins to tire of his imaginary victories: “The surge of triumph he felt when he finished a story was always fleeting and seemed to grow briefer with every job. This time it had lasted about a minute and a half before turning into shame and frustration” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 168). Joe’s escape into the world of the *Escapist* has yet to achieve any real-world results, and as long as his family remains imprisoned, Joe is unable to fully turn away from the reality of their plight. Joe’s pressing need to enact change even makes its way into the panels of

The Escapist, with the superhero's alter-ego, Tom Mayflower, being instructed to not "allow your body's weakness to be a weakness of your spirit. Repay your debt of freedom" (134). The idea of freedom incurring a debt that must be repaid haunts Joe, who feels that any fidelity to or enjoyment of his new American life is a betrayal of his family who cannot share his freedom.

Additionally, Joe's preference for comic books to channel his frustrations and ultimately use the proceeds to free his family carries unexpected moral complications. When Joe discovers that he has a fan in the Nazi-sympathizer Carl Ebling, the founder and sole member of the Aryan American League, he feels shame "for having produced work that appealed to such a man." In the fight against fascism, Joe recognizes the danger of "glorifying, in the name of democracy and freedom, the vengeful brutality of a very strong man... Now it occurred to Joe to wonder if all they had been doing, all along, was indulging in their own worst impulses and assuring the creation of another generation of men who revered only strength and domination" (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 204). Joe is not ignorant of the effects that art can have—particularly popular art—in the way that it shapes and describes the desires and values of those engaging with it. The art that Joe made on a daily basis was unbridled in its violence, and it only intensified his own desire—as well as that of his readers—for violent action.

Perpetually frustrated by his inability to enact change in his present reality, Joe becomes plagued by the idea that he must accomplish something *real* in the fight to free his family. When he learns of his father's death by disease most likely due to unsanitary living conditions, Joe goes off to enlist in the R.A.F., telling his cousin, "I'm tired of waiting" (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 187). Joe never makes it to Canada. Instead, he

quickly realizes that he can be more beneficial to his surviving mother and brother by continuing to attempt to secure their freedom financially, and that “it was imperative for him to remain focused on the possible,” rather than “running off and trying, like the Escapist, single-handedly to end the war” (189). However, Joe’s desire to act out his anger does not diminish and continues to build as he finds himself with enough money to get his family to America, but nowhere to spend the money to make it a reality. In his frustration he begins picking fights with Germans that he encounters throughout New York, often getting beaten terribly (194). This culminates in his encounter with Carl Ebling. After a scuffle, Joe successfully knocks Carl unconscious, and “in the aftermath of his first victory, Joe hoped—he never forgot this wild, evil hope—that the man was dead” (205). The shock of this encounter puts a stop to Joe’s foray into picking fights, and he instead refocuses on his work, putting more and more of his earnings into various futile attempts to retrieve his family from their imprisonment by the Nazis.

The Golem

Josef Kavalier, a Jewish immigrant from Prague, and his cousin Sammy Clay, one of many “little men, city boys, and Jews” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 3), represent a certain segment of 20th century Jewish American culture, particularly through their creation of *The Escapist*. Joe and Sam blend their Jewish heritage with their trust in the American Dream, believing that through their own labor they can create something of lasting significance, and make them exceedingly wealthy. The Escapist himself is born out of Joe’s original vision of a superhero—the golem: “[T]he Golem is commensurate with the comic book superheroes and with comic books themselves as artifacts of

‘escapist’ Jewish creativity in the fecund commercial world of American pop culture” (Behlman 68). Significantly, the early creators of comic books were in large part Jewish, such as Joe Shuster and Jerome Siegel, the creators of Superman (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 77). Michael Chabon himself, in his essay “Imaginary Homelands,” recognizes the unique position he is in “as a Jew and as a teller of Jewish stories” particularly as it relates to his “heritage as a lover of genre fiction” (Chabon, *Maps* 158). Throughout the novel the comic book is both implicitly and explicitly compared to the golem, suggesting “that comic books are a subgenre of modern Jewish literature” (Meyers 578). Outside of *Kavalier & Clay*, the golem has been a part of the comic book tradition, particularly in early *Marvel* comics, and Robert Weiner notes that even though the comic book iterations of the golem are “varied and complex... they all remain faithful in spirit to the original golem legend” (72). By approaching the comic book as a type of golem, it reveals the nature of early comic book creation as a reflection of the desire for escape and the transformative power of that escape.

The history of the golem. The Hebrew word for golem “occurs only once in the Bible, in Psalm 139:16, which Psalm the Jewish tradition put into the mouth of Adam” (Scholem 161). The word itself can be translated as “unformed substance,” while the Hebrew word *Adam* means “one taken from the earth,” leading many in the Jewish community to view “Adam as proto-golem” (Krause 114). This is significant in the way that it underlies the “belief that human beings are golems” (Christensen 164), and that we are only granted our soul and our humanity due to the fact that humanity’s creator is God. Therefore, the original purpose of making a golem as a Jewish spiritual practice was “as a

way of knowing God by His art in creating man and as a validation of one's piety and mastery of esoteric truths" (Krause 113).

For the majority of its early history, the golem served as an act of worship to God, the ultimate Creator. The Kabbalists—practitioners of Jewish mysticism—used the words of God to speak the golem into being, acknowledging the sacred process of creation while also recognizing their own inability to create life as God has. However, in the 12th century, the figure of the golem underwent a drastic transformation in Jewish literature where the Kabbalists' "mystical and spiritual motives were replaced by utilitarian ends" (Krause 126). The creation of the golem became less an act of worship or reverence, and instead the emphasis shifted to a focus on the actual product of creation—the golem as a created being took on greater significance than the ritual of creation. Much like the *The Escapist*, the golem became an avenue for deliverance and practical aid in addition to—and often superseding—its role as a work of creation. Interest turned to the golem and its interactions with the world, and "whether the golem had a soul became the subject of debate" (123). Kornblum references this 12th century issue when he, along with Joe, is planning to relocate the golem somewhere out of the Nazis' reach. The men are surprised to find that the giant figure is actually quite light. "'*Mach' bida lo nafsho,*' Kornblum said, quoting Midrash, when Josef remarked on the lightness of their load. 'His soul is a burden unto him. This is nothing, this... Just an empty jar'" (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 62). When God makes a golem, he makes a human being, but human beings are only capable of making a representation of a human without any life of its own.

The golem and escape. In the 17th century and into the 20th, in the face of renewed oppression of Jewish communities, the view of golems was radically

transformed from that of the 12th century: “Now the golem was made for an altruistic purpose: to protect and defend the Jewish community” (Krause 126). This new view of golems was predicated on the desire of the Jewish people to escape—to be delivered—from their present circumstances. Wittingly or not, Sam draws to mind this 17th century perspective on the golem when he describes the purpose of the Escapist, stating, “To all those who toil in the bonds of slavery... he offers the hope of liberation and the promise of freedom!” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 121). *Kavalier & Clay* makes this equation more explicitly when Joe muses that the creation of a golem “was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation... It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape” (582). The creation of a story of a hero that Joe desperately wishes were real operates within the same cultural framework as Joe’s religious predecessors. Joe’s comic book is intended in a practical sense to free his family from the Nazis, thus it operates as a deliverer of the Jewish people. Comparable to the golems of the 17th century, Joe’s comic book is built on a similar desire to acquire freedom—both for himself and for those closest to him.

The golem in *Kavalier & Clay*. Much like the golem, the superhero stories of comic books are an embodiment of human hope in the face of fear. However, neither the golem nor the comic book is free from the uglier aspects of humanity. In his essay, “What Time is it Now?” Rothberg describes the golem as an “unfinished creation” that is “malformed from birth and deformed thereafter. And because he was man and human he was replete with violence, hatred, viciousness, lust and ambition” (207). This description brings to mind one of *Kavalier & Clay*’s descriptions of the original comic book—a “mongrel art form” with comic strips “forced, not without violence” into a new format.

Both the golem and the hero within the comic book carry with them the “full measure” of the creators’ “hopefulness and desperation,” but the superhero also embodied “the lust for power and the gaudy sartorial taste of a race of powerless people” (77). The question of power and what it does to those who revere it and those who possess it has haunted the legend of the golem and can be found within the pages of the comic book as well.

Both superheroes and golems can act as repositories for many unsavory aspects of humanity, yet they still operate as means of deliverance from persecution and an expression of heroism. As such, the golem is “the embodiment of hope for God’s marvelous spiritual intervention,” and can serve as a gesture of humility and mankind’s powerlessness (Christensen 167). This powerlessness and the resulting desire for a powerful entity to intervene, while often flawed in its expression, can be linked to a natural human desire for salvation—a desire that can be seen in many forms throughout the text and thought of Judaism.

From the very beginning, Josef Kavalier’s fate is inexorably tied to that of the golem. Around the time that Joe is attempting to leave Prague, the Jewish community there is trying to relocate their golem—a task which falls to Joe’s old magic teacher, Bernard Kornblum. When Joe is unable to leave Prague by legally emigrating, he consults Bernard Kornblum who allows Joe to escape with the golem. Pretending the golem is a corpse, Joe is able to leave Prague by hiding in the golem’s casket. The journey is painful and harrowing, taking Joe across many countries before he finally arrives in New York.

From the moment of his escape from Prague, the connection between the golem and a literal, reality-based escape is implanted in Joe’s mind. When asked to create a

superman for Sheldon Anapol, Sam's employer, Joe draws a golem, stating, "To me, this Superman is... maybe... only an American Golem" (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 86). Even though Sam and his employer seek to dissuade Joe from enacting his plan—specifically for being too "Jewish," the Escapist bears resemblance to the Prague golem from its inception. The initial creation strongly resembles both Rabbi Hanina's golem and Rabbi Judah Loew's: "Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation," and Sam and Joe's creation is no exception: "Kavalier and Clay—whose golem was to be formed of black lines and the four-color dots of the lithographer—lay down, lit the first of five dozen cigarettes they were to consume that afternoon, and started to talk" (119). Just as the golem inspired hope in 17th century Jews, the comic book inspires a similar hope in Joe that through its creation he can help his family escape from their plight.

Creation and Escape

While the superhero serves as an imagined agent of escape, the act of creating operates in much the same way for Joe, both literally and figuratively. In his essay "The Recipe for Life," Michael Chabon states that "much of the enduring power of the golem story stems from its ready, if romantic, analogy to the artist's relation to his or her work" (152). Joe hopes to free his family through his art, and for this reason "the comic book itself becomes the key means of imaginative escape for Josef, who works constantly to effect the physical escape of his brother, Thomas" (Behlman 63). Yet often throughout the novel Joe doubts the effectiveness of this path to freedom. Right after he creates the Escapist with Sam, Joe, filled with shame at his own freedom that his family cannot partake in, tells his cousin, "I wish he was real." Sam comforts Joe by telling him that they would make a fortune off of the comic book business and with that money Joe will

be able to “pay what you need to pay to get your mother and father and brother and grandfather out of there... And in that sense, see, he really *will* be real... He will be doing what we’re saying he can do” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 135-136).

There is also a figurative aspect to creation as a form of escape. Behlman states, “fantasy itself... can give pleasure to an artist and an audience, and that pleasure may be a distraction from the past” (62). After the death of his family, Joe relies on creation as distraction in a deep and necessary way, but even while they are alive Joe relies on the immersive experience of creation. Early in his career as a comic book artist Joe reflects on his life in New York and feels grateful that New York “had laid at his feet the printing presses and lithography cameras and delivery vans that allowed him to fight, if not a genuine war, then a tolerable substitute” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 167). But while Joe is fortunate to be able to escape into art in a way that has the potential to financially secure the literal escape of his family, it is also a great burden to him.

The Infliction of Trauma and the Limitations of Reality

In the immediate wake of Joe’s escape from Prague, he does not allow himself to enjoy the freedoms of his new life in America to their fullest. Joe’s “mind is dominated by the belief that he has no right to be alive and that the only purpose of his existence is to get his relatives out of Europe” (Gasiorek 883). With this frame of mind, his art is “fraught with anxiety and rage; how can he play at creating ephemeral art while his family members are under sentence of death?” (883). He feels a great responsibility, though unlike a golem or the Escapist, he lacks the power to bring about the freedom that he so desperately desires for his family. When news of his brother’s death at the hands of the Germans reaches him, his desire for escape becomes more literal and life threatening.

Joe attempts to commit suicide by drowning himself under the guise of an escape trick for a child's bar mitzvah (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 399). When he is unsuccessful at his suicide attempt, and knowing he has no one else left to save, Joe joins the army, hoping to exact revenge for the destruction of his family or at least to escape from the helplessness and guilt that he feels.

Bayer describes trauma as a "festering wound," and Joe's initial strategy is to try to rid himself of this wound by any means necessary. Before Joe learns of his brother's death, he has formed a close relationship with a woman, Rosa Saks, who he plans on marrying. His relationship with his cousin, Sam, as well as his aunt, has grown and deepened, and he has developed a substantial community in New York. Yet in the aftermath of his brother's death, Joe wants "nothing to do with Rosa, with Sammy, with his aunt or his parents or anyone who could tie him, through any bond of memory or affection or blood, to Thomas" (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 417). The death of his father and brother as well as his knowledge of the impending fate of his mother and grandfather in the concentration camps leaves Joe with many of the effects common to those who lived through the Holocaust, such as survivor's guilt and "the sense of devastation that pervades postwar Jewish communities" (Gasiorek 881). Thomas's death coincides with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, so Joe takes full advantage of the United States' involvement in the war. Overcome by his devastation, Joe joins the Navy and, in doing so, attempts to isolate himself to prevent further pain and suffering, though this does nothing to heal him from the trauma that he has experienced.

Once stationed in the Arctic at Kelvinator station as a radioman, Joe finds that he has neither successfully escaped his pain nor fulfilled his desire for revenge. For the most

part, his time in the Navy leaves Joe feeling impotent and ineffective. His desire for revenge “grew in intensity as it was frustrated again and again by the inscrutable plans of the U.S. Navy” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 457). For this reason, when the opportunity arises to finally have a military encounter with a German soldier, Joe immediately states, “I want to go kill Jerry” (449). However, before Joe goes out on what he fully intends to be a suicide mission, he finally reads the letters from Rosa that she had sent continuously since he left for the Navy. He discovers that after he left she married Sam. This fact at first infuriates Joe, but he quickly realizes that she only did so because she was pregnant with Joe’s son, and Sam had been willing to serve as a father to the child. Joe allows himself to grieve the life that he lost and feel the love for Rosa that he thought he had killed. As for his son, Joe decides that “the boy was much better off without him” and even if he did survive, “he would never have anything to do with any of them, but in particular with this sober and fortunate American boy” (459). Having experienced it himself, Joe is aware of how “traumatization is carried through to the lives of the children and the next generations,” and as such he wants to protect his son from his own influence. Having escaped once from the lives of his loved ones, Joe does not see a way forward to re-enter their lives, nor does he believe that he has the capacity to do so.

When Joe kills the German Geologist—the first and only life that he takes during the war—he first tries desperately to save the man that he had originally wanted to “torment and terrify” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 461). He is unsuccessful. While Joe was trying to rescue the man, the narrator notes that “nothing that had ever happened to him... had ever broken his heart quite as terrible as the realization, when he was halfway to the rimed zinc hatch of the German station, that he was hauling a corpse behind him” (465).

In his effort to absolve himself from guilt and heal himself from trauma through an act of revenge, Joe only compounds the effects of trauma.

Escapism as a Remedy for Trauma

When direct action fails, Joe turns to escapist fiction and the process of artistic creation for healing. Bayer states that “this ethical mission of fiction speaks directly to trauma’s need to find a means of representation beyond the literal” (159). For Joe, his healing involves escape both as a reader and as a creator. Heilman states “one may escape into a simpler and more ordinary world or into a richer and deeper one... the ultimate issue is whether, and in what frame of mind, one returns from the adventure of escape” (Heilman 458). Through his composition of fiction, Joe goes into both ordinary worlds and richer ones both physically and psychologically wounded, but he is able to emerge at the end transformed.

The initial stage of Joe’s healing requires him to spend vast amounts of time fully immersed in the fantastic worlds of comic books. Chang describes Chabon’s use of the comic book as a healing agent for Joe by stating that Chabon utilizes comic books “as a structuring principle to question what conditions lead to redemption” (1). For Joe, the redemption and healing that he seeks requires the “emotion altering power of reading” (Begum 741). The first step towards recovery from trauma requires an escape from the physical addiction that Joe has developed in order to self-medicate: “Comic books had sustained his sanity during his time on the psychiatric ward at Gitmo” after the war, and “it was only ten thousand Old Gold cigarettes and a pile of *Captain Marvel Adventures*... that had enabled Joe to fight off, once and for all, the craving for morphine with which he

had returned from the Ice” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 575). The escapism of comics served not only as a distraction, but as a method of healing.

Even in his criticism of *Kavalier & Clay*, Behlman notes that “the novel is most vivid and ultimately most convincing in its defense of fantasy not as a device that gives shape to the real but as one that is inevitably, hopelessly, and yet somehow hopefully distant from it” (70). The criticism that comics “offered merely an easy escape from reality” had existed since the origin of the comic book form, but to Joe, this seemed “actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 575). Having escaped from innumerable dangers and difficulties, “The escape from reality was, he felt—especially right after the war—a worthy challenge” (575). In the span of time that Joe immersed himself in a comic book, he was able to escape from his pain, guilt, and suffering and see the possibility of a life free from the confines of his trauma. Ever aware of the public’s view of comics, Joe muses that “It was a mark of how fucked-up and broken was the world—the reality—that had swallowed his home and his family that such a feat of escape, by no means easy to pull off, should remain so universally despised” (576). The peace and freedom that escapist literature granted Joe enabled him to begin to see the possibility of returning to his loved ones in New York and of meeting his son.

Joe’s utilization of escapism does not result in a permanent distance from reality, however. After the war and his treatment at the psychiatric hospital, Joe returns to New York. Upon arrival Joe does not immediately make his presence known to Sam, Rosa, and Tommy, his son. Instead he rents an office in the same building where he had once illustrated *The Escapist* and continues his life of isolation, though this time with hope of

full healing. Even though Joe is “broken psychologically... As he gradually recovers, he returns to comic books in order to work another transformation in his art, one that enables him to confront history rather than to evade it” (Gasiorek 885). He does this in the form of one long comic book, or graphic novel, entitled *The Golem*.

Gasiorek compares the angry and broken Joe to the golem who is “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). The protagonist of Joe’s comic book is named Josef Golem, and it is through this creation that Joe is able to find a significant means of expression that he finds therapeutic. The comic book centers around the life of a Jewish community in Prague. All of the “Jewish stuff” that Joe was instructed to keep out of *The Escapist* he puts into *The Golem*, a work that alludes “to the long history of European anti-Semitism... to reimagine the Prague ghetto” and pay homage to it (887). In creating this work, Joe also “fulfills his own sense of escapism by revitalizing the narrative of the presassimilatory, premodern Golem for an increasingly assimilated, modernist age” (Moscowitz 312). The allegiance that Joe feels to his family and homeland—an allegiance that often conflicted with his life in America—can be maintained through his creative outpouring and free him from some of the guilt that he carries.

Joe tells himself that “when he was finished with *The Golem*, then he would be ready to see Rosa again” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 577). As he continued to realize his world of “magic and murder, persecution and liberation... Joe came to feel that the work—telling this story—was helping to heal him.” What he could not communicate to

psychiatrists, strangers, or even his own family, “all of it went into the queasy angles and stark compositions, the cross-hatchings and vast swaths of shadow, the distended and fractured and finely minced panels of his monstrous comic book” (578). While the Escapist offered easy, if imaginary, solutions such as prematurely killing Hitler, Joe’s golem operates within the complex and painful ambiguity of an “unresolved past” (Gasiorek 888). The ability to come to terms with the vastness of his experience and the history connected to his pain creates more healing than Joe thought possible for himself. While the superhero stories of the comic books he had grown to love brought Joe back from the brink of despair, the escape into creation allowed Joe to rebuild the relationships that he had abandoned and gain hope for the future.

As he works, Joe discovers that “the more of himself... that he had poured into the strip—the more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression—the less willingness he felt... to expose what had become the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 579). By the novel’s end, the only person who has read *The Golem* was Joe’s cousin and partner, Sam, who recognizes right away the significance and artistic merit of what Joe has done. He also recognizes the personal nature of the work, and how much its existence testified to Joe’s own growth and healing.

In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon demonstrates the value of escapist stories as found in comic books as an avenue for artistic expression, cultural connection, and ultimately healing. In Joe Kavalier’s life, the art form of the comic book was central. He loved comic books, to which he owed his life in America, predominantly for the ways in which their creators were able to transfigure “their

insecurities and delusions, their wishes and their doubts, their public educations and their sexual perversions, into something that only the most purblind of societies would have denied the status of art” (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 575). This art form provides the catalyst for Joe’s healing from trauma through an interaction with his own Judaism and cultural history, and ultimately enables him to reunite with his family and form a relationship with his son.

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