

One for the Books

Michael Chabon

After earning a Master of Fine Arts in English Writing from the University of California, Irvine, Michael Chabon published a best-selling novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*. He was 23 years old. Chabon's subsequent books include *Summerland*, *Wonder Boys*, and *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier & Clay*, for which he won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. His most recent novel, *Telegraph Avenue*, was published in 2012.



Love of literature

When I was young, I loved reading *The Greek Myths* and *The Norse Myths*. I went through a period of intense interest in books about intelligent mice, including Beverly Cleary's Ralph books, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, and *Ben and Me*. Later, I read fantasy, science fiction, and adventure fiction, from Tolkien to Robert E. Howard's Conan books, and Asimov

to Larry Niven. I loved *The Dark is Rising* series, and I loved Sherlock Holmes.

In fiction's grip

In sixth grade, we had to write a short story. I was deeply in the grip of Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes stories. A book had recently been published called *The Seven Percent Solution*, written in imitation of Conan Doyle's style. In it, Sherlock Holmes goes to Vienna to receive treatment for his cocaine addiction from Sigmund Freud and gets caught up in a crime investigation. I loved that book, but I was also stunned by it: It never occurred to me that you could do that—what we would recognize today as fan fiction. I decided to write my own Sherlock Holmes story.

In my story, Sherlock Holmes encountered Captain Nemo from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. I tried to imitate Conan Doyle and make my characters speak in the way they spoke in late Victorian England. It was a pleasurable, challenging experience, I got an A, and my parents thought it was great. I thought, "This is what I'm going to do. It was really fun, and everybody's praising me for it!"

I was lucky. My parents are avid readers. When I said I wanted to be a writer, their response wasn't, "That's nice, honey, but you've got to make a living somehow." It was just, "That's nice, honey."

Measuring up

The inspiration for my first book was fear. I'd been accepted into the MFA creative writing program at UC Irvine, and I visited campus beforehand and sat in on a workshop. There were twelve people, and it seemed nine of them were writing novels. I didn't want to not measure up, so I went home and started writing a novel. But all those students writing novels had been a fluke, because when I got to Irvine the following fall, very few people were working on novels. In fact, workshops generally don't like to handle novels. They're too bulky.

But my book was already underway. I worked on it the two years I was in the program. I got my degree, but I also had a manuscript. One of my professors, an author, sent it—without telling me—to his agent in New York with a note to me saying, "I hope you don't mind that I've taken the liberty of doing this. I wouldn't expect too much, but I want her to know about you." And she took it on and sold it. In hindsight, I can see how rare that was, but at 23, I didn't have that perspective.

The pleasure of writing

Writing is a source of pleasure for me, even when I'm struggling. I've had periods where I didn't know what I was doing on a project. I've abandoned large investments of time and effort because I couldn't get them to work. But even in the midst of such times, I find the actual writing of sentences engaging and challenging. That sustains me when I have to deal with the hard parts.

Writing is also akin to reading. In addition to the pleasures of language and story that reading provides, there's the sense of contact with another human mind that you experience with a fine writer. You not only connect with Arthur Conan Doyle's mind as you imagine it through the writing, but also with Dr. Watson. It's exhilarating, and in writing, I'm trying to provide that experience for others.

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Finding my way in the dark

I find that the more detail in my outline, the more I know in advance what's going to be happening in a book and the less interested I am in writing it. It's about discovery, about feeling my way and learning things I didn't know about the world I'm describing and the characters in it. That's a necessary part of the process for me, and it's killed by outlining and planning. But because of that, I'm groping.

E.L. Doctorow described writing a book as driving on a dark road at night and you can't see farther ahead of you than the beam of the headlights. There could be something just beyond view, and sometimes it's too late to hit the brakes and you crash. I go down lots of dead ends and blind alleys. It's an inefficient, messy approach, but at least I stay engaged with the material.

The big bang of books

I usually start with the milieu of the book: the place, time period, and kinds of characters that might inhabit that milieu. Then I determine who my main characters are and what their initial situation is. Sometimes I'll start with an image. For the book I'm working on now, it was an anecdote about a great uncle of mine who was fired from his job to make room on the payroll for Alger Hiss when he got out of prison after serving time for perjury.

Just picturing my uncle getting the news was the starting place. It was early to late 1950s New York, a world that was very familiar to me in my imagination. It's like a snowball effect: I start with this little thing that rapidly begins to accrue a place and a story around it. Like the big bang, a lot accumulates in a very short period of time.

Sculpting characters

I don't build characters so much as uncover them. It's like an excavation, or the sculpture of David that

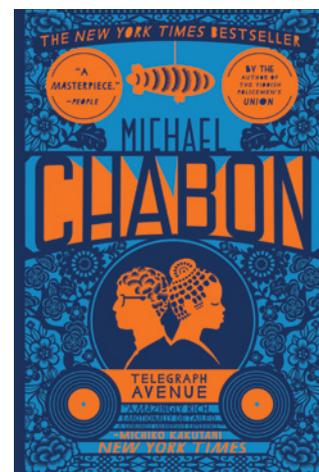
emerges from the block of marble one tap of the chisel at a time. If I were to determine a character's traits, qualities, and biography before I started, I would lose interest in my character.

For *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, it was the idea of this kid being awakened by his mother in the middle of the night and told to move over because he's going to be sharing his bed with his cousin who just showed up. Who is this kid? Who's his mother? What's she like? Why would she do that? How would he respond to it? Who's the cousin? You pose yourself a series of questions and set about trying to answer them in ways that feel true to the way people are.

It's elementary

It used to be if you were waiting in line somewhere, you had to look around and pay attention to people around you. It was boring, but you could absorb information about the world around you. Now, by taking your phone out and doing whatever, you have this wonderful pastime that makes waiting much easier, but then that passive observation withers away. Take your face out of your screen. Look around you and notice things.

Sherlock Holmes has that ability to notice a stray chalk mark on someone's cuff or a piece of seaweed trapped in the link of their watch band and come to some conclusion about who they are, where they work, how old they are, and if they're married. That remarkable, seemingly magical ability is a metaphor for writing. You imply an entire life, career, and set of difficulties with little details. You give the reader a few clues, but they're so perfectly chosen that they reveal an entire person. Where would Holmes be if he had spent all of his time looking at his phone? ■



Learn more about Michael Chabon and his work at www.michaelchabon.com.