

For Sunday 8/21/2011

Good morning! This is Andy Haas. You're listening to "Reading between the Lines" brought to you by the Friends of the Homer Public Library.

What was your favorite book? That's really hard to answer isn't it? We all grew up on scatter of loves. When I was young, a rainy day in Cleveland made me ache for a Robert Mitchum movie, or a Raymond Chandler book: a private detective, a smoky bar, tales of trust and betrayal. I still remember when Chandler described a blond whose icy glance would make a bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window. And I grew to love the artful phrase that would lovingly describe the everyday.

We really don't need Shakespeare or a poet to teach us how to love words. The lesson can often come in a grimy detective book. And so when I picked up the *Yiddish Policemen's Union*, I knew that I found another gem.

It may be tough to get started. It takes place in an outrageously fictional setting that requires a shift in your perspective. It is a Jewish community established when Jews were allowed to immigrate here from Nazi Europe—an opportunity that almost really did occur. This is a Jewish Sitka, still stuck in a world of fedoras, cigarette smoke and Yiddish. And after 60 years, the town is reverting to the American government.

But once you get into its groove, you are hooked by the rich descriptions. Our protagonist Detective Landsman is a drunken detective living in a seedy hotel. One night, a heroin junkie is lovingly executed down the hall with an unfinished chess game before

him. Of course the junkie was more than that, he was too special and too important: a man who would either destroy or redeem a very dark world- “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” –possibly the messiah.

It is Michael Chabon’s great gift as an author that he can make you believe that such a person is more than likely, he is inevitable. Chabon lovingly describes all of his characters. For instance, an ordinary author might say that an elderly landlady opened the door. But Chabon wrote it like this, “When after careful consideration, she can’t fit his partner into her taxonomy of lowlifes, Mrs. Kalushiner spits into her cup. Then she returns her gaze to Landsman and sighs. By one kind of reckoning, she owes Landsman 17 favors. By another, she ought to give him a punch in the belly. She steps aside and lets them pass.”

You should slowly read this book. Like its frequent Yiddish, the book’s language is gritty and full of life. Rather than saying that a woman is dying, Chabon writes "The lady has been in and out of the hospital lately, dying in chapters, a cliffhanger at the end of every one."

Through its seedy, film noir type setting, he quietly brings the promise of redemption. And those things don’t come in a cinematic flash of light. They come slowly like the chess games I love in this book. This book is about a promise of redemption that we may all miss when we do not know our neighbors. It is a promise that Landsman may yet reclaim.

When his abandoned wife sees Landsman again, “She puts a hand to his mouth. She has not touched him in 3 years. It probably would be too much to say that he feels the darkness lift at the touch of her fingertips against his lips. But it shivers, and light bleeds in among the cracks.” I’ll admit that the ending was a little disappointing for me: so fantastic that it is almost silly. But the journey of well-described characters slowly finding love and redemption among squalor and poverty makes the read so very worthwhile.

Read it. You don’t find that many good detective stories set in Sitka. You will find it and many other gems at the Homer public library. The Library hours are Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Tuesday and Thursday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tune in next Sunday morning at this same time for “Reading between the Lines” right here on KBBI 890, Homer!