



The Mysteries of Home

On an Alaskan island, writer Michael Chabon meanders through a harbor town, observing the locals as they move in a landscape between the mountains and the sea. While he strolls past fur stores and diners, he wonders what the streets would be like if the United States had followed through with a 1940 plan to resettle thousands of Jewish WWII refugees to Alaska. How might his grandparents and others of their generation have made a home in this remote yet striking place?

Chabon (A&S '84), winner of the 2001 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, is traveling along Alaska's coast, searching for the perfect town in which to set his book. His

idea for the novel germinated with a traveler's handbook called *Say It In Yiddish* (Dover Publications), which made him wonder how the Yiddish language—a mix of Hebrew and German—changed with the movement of people in the Jewish Diaspora. Then he began thinking about where Jews have lived and where they *might* have lived had history been different.

As he walks around the town of Sitka, which sounds a little Yiddish, he envisions skyscrapers and men tromping to chess matches in galoshes and black hats. Yes, this will be the perfect setting for his next novel. Chabon, who has lived in dozens of U.S. locales, says that his own wanderings have led

him to question the meaning of home and to build imaginary homes within his novels.

Back in his writing studio in Berkeley, Calif., he sits with piles of notes about Sitka and vague ideas about a murder-mystery plot. Nearly every day for a year, he works beside a pipe-and-book photograph of his grandfather to craft one sentence after another, until the sentences become a 600-page story. The manuscript—about a homicide detective living in a fictional Sitka that's a Jewish metropolis—is sprawling and complicated, not the hard-boiled detective novel he had intended. So he starts again at page one. In the next draft, Chabon uses a third-person narrator, shortens his sentences to fit the detective genre, and streamlines the plot. Eventually, his words fuse into a 411-page story of love and the eternal search for home, becoming *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (HarperCollins Publishers), a best-selling novel.

This spring the author stopped in Pittsburgh on a national book tour. On a Friday evening, fans crowded into Joseph-Beth Booksellers on the South Side. Some of them were Pitt students eager to see the legendary alumnus. After all, his popular first novels, *Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (Morrow) and *Wonder Boys* (Villard Books), draw upon his experiences as a Pitt undergraduate. At the bookstore, Chabon began to read. For a time, he was home.

—By Cara J. Hayden



STEPHANIE RAUSSER

Chabon

Tether

A raging bonfire, leaping velvet, snakes freezing into stone—such imagery surrounds poet Romy Shinn Piccolella (A&S '00) in her work "Mid-Afternoon Bonfire." In her book *Tether* (Pudding House Publications), she reflects on life and the confluence of nature and space, love and death, birth and release. Sometimes graphic, sometimes gentle, this first collection of poems deals with repressed violence, abuse, and the natural world. Here, the poet is surrounded by life yet seems surprisingly isolated.

The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation

In hip-hop, booming music and lyrics will move a crowd. Pastor Ralph C. Watkins (SOC '97) learns this as he spins records at his daughter's party. The party comes to life but then a fight breaks out. Suddenly, Watkins wonders if he is in the right place. His book, *The Gospel Remix* (Judson Press), which includes essays from urban ministers, offers ideas about how to reconcile the divine with hip-hop and how to move the hip-hop generation in a new direction.

Sarah's Girls: A Chronicle of Big Ugly Creek

Aunt Lena returns to the community of Big Ugly, West Virginia, to care for nieces Madge, Pearl, Ida, and Edna after their mother dies. In *Sarah's Girls: A Chronicle of Big Ugly Creek* (Ohio University/Swallow Press), author Lenore McComas Coberly (KGSB '47) draws inspiration from some of the family stories she heard as a young girl about the indomitable spirit of the people in this mountainous place. By unlocking the past, Coberly reminds us all of the strength in a place called home.

Janie's New Legs

In the company of a once-abused horse named Silver, a young girl finds herself. Paralyzed in a car accident, the youngster can't use her legs and is confined to a wheelchair, but her friendship with Silver helps her to heal within. Galloping along on the rescued horse, Janie, too, is set free. Told from Silver's point of view, *Janie's New Legs* (BookSurge) by Diana Tuorto (A&S '02) is an uplifting story of shared survival, hope, and love.

—By J. D. Thrasher

Tether



Romy Shinn Piccolella

