



The Yiddish Policemen's Union

By Michael Chabon
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Introduction

For 60 years, Jewish refugees and their descendants have prospered in the Federal District of Sitka, a "temporary" safe haven created in the wake of the Holocaust and the 1948 collapse of the state of Israel. Now the District is set to revert to Alaskan control, and their dream is coming to an untimely end.

Homicide detective Meyer Landsman has enough problems without worrying about the upcoming Reversion. He and his partner, Berko Shemets, can't catch a break in any of their outstanding cases. Landsman's new supervisor is the love of his life, who just happens to be his ex-wife. And in the cheap hotel where he has washed up, someone has committed a murder—right under Landsman's nose.

Despite orders from on high not to pursue the case, Landsman decides to investigate. Before long, he finds himself contending with the powerful forces—faith, obsession, hope, evil, and salvation—that make up his complicated heritage.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Meyer Landsman feel a special kinship with the murder victim in Rm. 208 of the Hotel Zamenhof, and how is that affinity responsible for his career's decline?
2. To what extent is Bina Gelbfish sympathetic to Meyer's professional situation? How does their current involvement as police department colleagues reflect the complicated nature of their history with one another?
3. Why does the prospect of Reversion compromise Meyer and Berko's ability to solve their outstanding cases, and what does that possibility mean to both of them?
4. How would you characterize the nature of the interaction of native peoples and Jewish immigrants in Sitka, Alaska, and its environs?
5. How surprising is the coincidence of the deaths of Naomi Landsman and Mendel Shpilman, given the small-world sense of "Jewish geography" in Sitka and the Alaskan panhandle?
6. Why does Willy Dick agree to help Meyer and Berko in their efforts to uncover the truth behind the Peril Strait, and what does his doing so reveal about his allegiances?
7. How does the author explore variations on the theme of fathers and sons in the relationships between Meyer and his father, Meyer and Django, Berko and Hertz, and Mendel and Rebbe Shpilman in this novel?
8. How does the author's use of copious historical facts throughout the novel impact your reading of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* as a work of fiction? To what extent does the Jewish settlement in Sitka, Alaska, seem like an actual community?
9. Why do Meyer, Berko, and Bina agree to suppress their knowledge of a vast conspiracy, and what does that decision reveal about their own sense of the balance between justice and self-preservation?
10. Of the many eccentric and unforgettable characters in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, which were the most memorable to you, and why?

About the Author

Michael Chabon is the bestselling author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. He lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife, the novelist Ayelet Waldman, and their children.