



The Final Solution

By Michael Chabon
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Introduction

There was nothing remarkable, nothing at all, about the crooked X that death had scrawled in the dust of Hallows Lane.

What is remarkable, observes a retired detective recruited to help authorities solve a brutal murder behind the town vicarage, is the event that sparked the crime -- the arrival of a mute Jewish boy who escaped Nazi Germany with his exotic African gray parrot. More interested in the pattern of beekeeping than that of the world around him, the once-famous English detective is nudged from self-imposed isolation by his curiosity and, more importantly, by his compassion. For what brings the cynical old man out of retirement isn't the death of a stranger, but, rather, the related disappearance of Bruno -- a parrot that rattles off mysterious chains of numbers in German. With his beloved companion gone, Linus Steinman is a boy lost in the silence of loneliness.

Making tracks to find the missing bird, the 89-year-old detective (a character the author chooses not to name) quickly starts to link together the elements of the case. There is the suspect Reggie Panicker, the minister's angry son who was found with the business card of an exotic bird dealer; the victim Mr. Shane, a lodger at the vicarage; Mr. Parkins, another lodger who had meticulously recorded Bruno's numerical songs; Mr. and Mrs. Panicker, the minister and his wife, who have taken in the broken-spirited Linus, someone who mirrors their own stifled marriage; Mr. Kalb, the handsome gentleman from the Aid Committee who oversees Linus' case; and Linus himself, a "shadow of a boy, stealing through the house, the village, the world."

As the mystery of the murder unravels and the symbolic numbers start to add up, readers will feel privileged to discover the unspeakable secret within *The Final Solution* -- a secret that is shared only between the boy and his bird ... a truth that eludes even the greatest of detectives.

Discussion Questions

1. "For the first time in a very many years, he felt the old vexation, the mingled impatience and pleasure at the world's beautiful refusal to yield up its mysteries without a fight" (page 8). Why do you think the arrival of Linus and his parrot awakens the old man's curiosity and passion for detective work?
2. Discuss the title, *The Final Solution*, and its dual meaning in the story.
3. "Then he reached into the old conjuror's pocket ... and took out his glass. It was brass and tortoise shell, and bore around its bezel an affectionate inscription from the sole great friend of his life" (page 29). What meaning does this hold for the readers? What else did you find mysterious about our detective?
4. "When he heard the old man's name, something flickered, a dim memory, in the eyes of Mr. Kalb" (page 37). "Years and years ago his name -- itself redolent now of the fustian and rectitude of that vanished era -- had adorned the newspapers and police gazettes ... " (page 43). Why do you think the author avoids telling us the name of the 'old man'? Do you think it is an effective technique? Why or why not?
5. What significance or clues, if any, did you find in the illustrations on pages 7, 34, 76, 89, and 130?
6. " ... his shame was compounded by the intimate knowledge that Richard Shane's brutal murder in the road behind the vicarage had echoed, in outline and particulars, the secret trend of his own darkest imaginings" (page 94). What are Mr. Panicker's 'darkest imaginings'? Why do you think he is so tortured? How is his marriage used in the book?
7. "He was, by irremediable nature, a man who looked at things, even when, as now, clearly they terrified him" (page 99). What things do you think terrifies the old man? Be the detective here and piece together what you know about the old man's life.
8. " ... he was confronted by not simply the continued existence of the city but, amid the smoking piles of brick and jagged windowpanes, by the irrepressible, inhuman force of its expansion" (page 101). Destruction versus hope is a common struggle in war accounts. What do you think makes Chabon's approach to this struggle unique?
9. Consider the character of the detective: "It would please him well enough to amount to no more in the end than a single great organ of detection, reaching into blankness for a clue" (page 83). "I doubt very much ... if we shall ever learn what significance, if any, those numbers may hold" (page 129). If this is the detective's last case, do you believe he is a success even though he fails to find answers in Bruno's mysterious set of numbers? Why or why not?
10. The African gray parrot, the old man's bees, and the many references to trains give *The Final Solution* a rich population of symbols and motifs. Discuss how each contributes to the narrative.
11. What meaning is hidden in the train song? To whom, and how, is this book an homage? How did you feel when you read the last sentence in *The Final Solution*?
12. Consider the theme of detection, discovering the true character of something or someone, within the novella and the detective's conclusion "that it was the insoluble problems -- the false leads and the cold cases -- that reflected the true nature of things" (page 131). Do you agree with this? Why or why not? What other themes did you find in the novella?

About the Author

Michael Chabon is the Pulitzer Prize-winning and bestselling author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. He has received wide critical acclaim for his previous books, including *Wonder Boys*, *Werewolves in their Youth*, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, and *A Model World*. He lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife and children.