



A Model World and Other Stories

By Michael Chabon
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Introduction

The people in these beautiful stories can be flawed and neurotic, and largely unable to look beyond the narrow circumstances of their lives. But with the insight and compassion that distinguishes all of Chabon's writing, the imperfections of human nature are embraced with poignancy and humor. Reading these stories can change the way one sees the world.

In Part I, "A Model World," Chabon demonstrates a nuanced understanding of his characters' foibles. There's Bobby and Suzette, ex-lovers who meet in an L.A. café and seem to be happy only when they are making each other miserable. Reminiscent of Chabon's "Wonder Boys, the title story, "A Model World," recreates the small, highly pressured world of Academia in fresh and surprising ways. Part II, "The Lost World," is a progression of linked stories in which we meet Nathan Shapiro, a careful and caring boy who moves through his teenage years with unusual grace and tenderness. Like a still point

in a carnival, Nathan watches his parents fight, divorce, and begin new lives, always asking the question that he voices in the dark at a Halloween party, "Guess who I am now?" (Page 185)

Chabon captures the disappointment that accompanies growing up, and the discomfort that underlies any search for identity. Here there are no happy or sad endings, only ordinary people finding their way into and out of moments of truth and beauty.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the first story, "S Angel," Ira looks into Carmen's purse as if he is looking into her mind and seeing her secrets. Why does he steal Carmen's prescription medicine? What do you think about the kiss that ends this story? Does it change your view of the rest of the story?
2. "Ocean Avenue" opens with the sentence, "If you can still see how you could once have loved a person, you are still in love; an extinct love is always wholly incredible." (Page 40) Have you had the experience of meeting a former lover and being unable to believe that you ever loved them? Did this affect your opinion of Lazar and Suzette? If not love, what is it that seems to make them unable to let go of each other?
3. In "A Model World," just about everyone in the story is doing something that would reasonably cause them to feel shame. Everyone at the party at professor Baldwin's home seems to want someone to break the spell of mutual deception by telling the truth. But when the narrator is asked to reveal the worst thing he's ever done, instead of announcing that he is sleeping with the professor's wife, he describes a childhood memory that caused him great shame. (Page 70) Does Smith's truth telling have any effect on the others? What does this story have to say about shame?
4. "Blumenthal on the Air" tells the story of a young man's unrequited love for his rather unattractive wife. The two have married only so that Roksana will be able to stay in this country. Why does Blumenthal fall in love with her? The last sentence of the story is, "In the sudden absence of music, it comes to me that Herve has already told me what to do, and that I must follow, until the finish, the foolish policy of all my race." (Page 89) What is this policy?
5. "Millionaires" has a subtle undertone running through it about the metaphor of the "toy." What are the different possible meanings of this word, and how does Chabon use those meanings in this story? Does the metaphor provide some understanding of these characters? Why is the story called, "Millionaires"?
6. In Part II, "The Lost World," the reader follows a boy and his family through some years of crucial changes. In what ways is the experience of reading these stories similar to reading a novel, and in what ways is it different?
7. At the beginning of "The Little Knife," Nathan is ten years old and on summer vacation with his family. It is the last summer before his parents will separate. From the first page the reader learns that Nathan observes the world around him in great detail. When he lingers over the sight of an old Coke machine, he is filled with, "a happy sadness, or, really, a sad happiness; he was not too young, at ten, to have developed a sense of nostalgia." (Page 132) What does this reveal about Nathan's character? How does this sense of time and nostalgia show up throughout the rest of the stories?
8. "More Than Human" provides a lot of insight into the character of Dr. Shapiro, Nathan's father. He has a love of rituals and quizzes, and sometimes uses them to insulate himself from painful realities. It is through some of these rituals that he is able to communicate with his son. How does Nathan see his father? How does his view of his father change as he gets older?
9. Nathan becomes a kind of caretaker of both his parents. When a boyfriend abandons his mother, Chabon writes, "She told him, crying; the story came out in little bursts as if she held her breath between each sob. And over a breakfast at which Nathan drank coffee, and they heard Ricky's cartoons come on upstairs, as she confided to him other, less desperate tales of checking up on Chuck, he had felt himself, almost physically, growing older." (Page 157) What are the positive and negative aspects of Nathan's position in this family? What does he learn from his mother's confiding in him? How does it change him?

10. Nathan's costume for the Halloween party in the story of that name is "a guy in the process of having an idea for a costume." (Page 178) Nathan is certainly in the process of having ideas, about himself and the world, as he progresses through his teenage years. What are some of the many ways in which Chabon portrays people who are in the process of having ideas, uncertain, in between, alienated, or, as Nathan puts it, "insubstantial"? (Page 206) Discuss the tension that Nathan and the other characters feel between what is authentic and what is pretence, and the ways in which it affects them.

About the Author

Michael Chabon was born in Washington D.C. He received his B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh and his M.F.A. from the University of California at Irvine. He is the author of **The Mysteries of Pittsburgh, A Model World, Wonder Boys, Summerland, The Final Solution,** and **The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier & Clay,** for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. He lives in Berkeley, CA with his wife, Ayelet Waldman, and their four children.