

CATCHER IN THE

MICHAEL CHABON PERCHES ON THE EDGE OF A CHAIR in his Los Angeles apartment, shaking his wavy shoulder-length locks from his eyes as he contemplates the near-disaster that somehow spawned his new comic novel, *Wonder Boys*. • “It was a really hard thing to do, the scariest thing I’ve ever done,” says the most illustrious graduate of the University of California, Irvine’s writing program. His voice is soft, barely audible over the din of traffic outside. • At 31 Chabon is angular, almost gaunt, an ascetic in a slightly rumpled open-necked shirt and jeans, moving with an almost ghostly grace. It’s disconcerting to compare him with the fresh-faced, angelic lad in a preppy jacket and tie who peered forth from the dust jacket photo of *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, the 24-year-old prodigy who pocketed a \$155,000 advance for his master’s thesis and then watched it sail onto the *New York Times* best-seller list. But that was seven years ago, in the quaintly innocent days of the late 1980s, when critics were worshipping at his Topsisider-encased feet and his ed-

Michael Chabon once was hailed as his generation’s J.D. Salinger, but he almost went over the edge trying to write the Big Novel.

The UCI grad saved his wonder-boy reputation by turning that near-debacle into a comic tour de force

BY PATRICK J. KIGER

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itor at William Morrow & Co. dared to publicly compare his first published work with J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.

Enriched by an even bigger advance, Chabon—as authors of clever first novels are tragically prone to do—promptly set out to write the Big Novel, the magnum opus that truly would cement his reputation. “It was called *Fountain City*,” Chabon explains. “It was set partly in Paris and partly on the Gulf Coast of Florida. I worked on it for four-and-a-half years. It had to do with architecture and this scheme to build this ideal baseball park in Florida and the architects...and this one young man who got involved with the head architect's daughter.”

“It had a lot of good stuff in it, but I could never really get it to work. I could never get the Paris parts and the Florida parts to really gel. They always felt like two separate things. And then the real world sort of caught up to me. As I was struggling with my novel all these years, they built Camden Yards in Baltimore and actually began to play games in it. When I started writing, it seemed unlikely that anyone would ever build a ballpark like that again. By the time I was ready to dump *Fountain City*, they were already building another one in Cleveland.”

By then, Chabon was in a real bind. He'd divorced his first wife, poet Lollie Groth, and given her half the advance he'd received for *Fountain City*, so he couldn't return it. “I didn't know what was going to happen to me,” he recalls. “I saw myself as one of those failed writers you hear about, the guys who've been working on the same book for 10 or 15 or 20 years. And then I started to think some more, really projecting myself into the future. And that is where Grady Tripp [the protagonist of *Wonder Boys*] arose from.”


QUIETLY, WITHOUT TELLING ANYONE—not his publisher or agent, not even his live-in companion, Ayelet Waldman, who since has become his second wife—Chabon began a completely new novel. “My wife, who's a lawyer, decided to take the California

Bar [exam] six months earlier than she'd planned. That meant she was going to have to cram for the next six weeks and would be completely busy, and I wouldn't be seeing her. So there was a little window of time, and I told myself, 'I'm going to try this other book, give it a shot.' If it doesn't work, I've only wasted six weeks, which out of five years isn't much."

Chabon, who then was living in Laguna Beach, sat up late at night in front of his Macintosh computer, straining to hear a voice inside his head. It was the voice of another writer—like himself a former prodigy, the author of a successful novel, recalling the day he'd garnered a huge advance from his publisher to write a follow-up masterpiece: "Crabtree and his bosses at Bartizan had felt sanguine enough about my imminent attainment to the status of, at the least, cult favorite to advance me a ridiculous sum of money in exchange for nothing more than a fatuous smile from the thunderstruck author and a tittle invented out of air and brainsparkle while pissing into the aluminum trough of a men's room at Three Rivers Stadium."

It was, of course, the big break that Grady Tripp—like Chabon himself—had come to rue. Grady was five years into *his* Big Novel, which in the heat of his ambition had decomposed into an unpublishable mess, 2,611 pages long and the end nowhere in sight. Chabon imagined Grady as older than himself, a middle-aged university professor. "That made it a little easier," Chabon recalls. "It gave me some distance from the pain of being trapped in a book like that. That's why I think I was able to make it humorous, to avoid that tone of self-pity, I hope. When Grady does pity himself, he immediately busts himself for it, makes fun of himself."

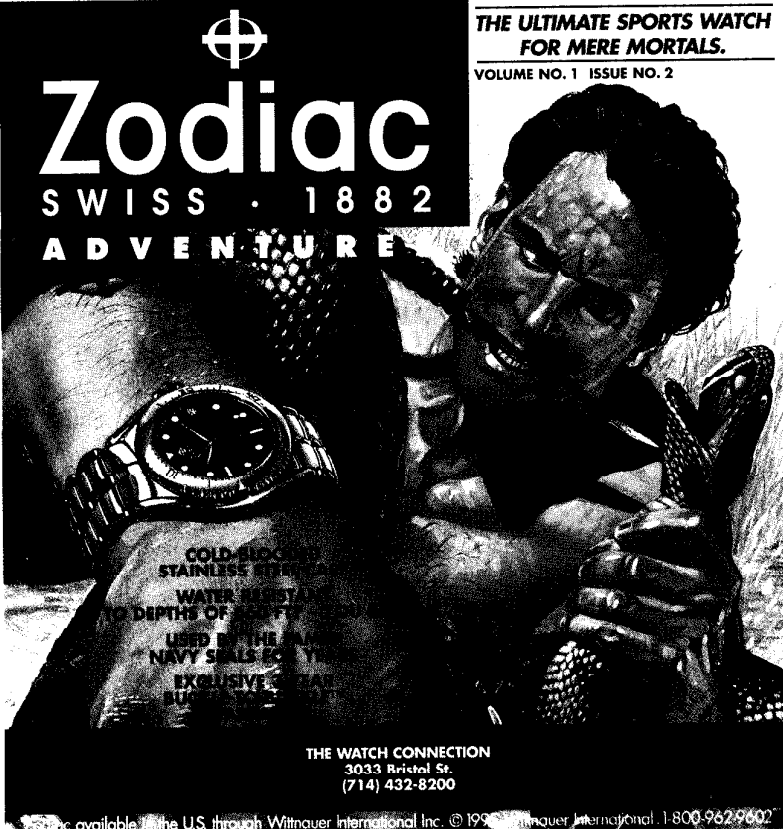
After six weeks, Chabon had churned out 110 pages. He was still listening to the voice, following it wherever it would lead him, sans outline. The Monkey's Paw curse of his fictional counterpart gradually grew to King Kongesque proportions. In *Wonder Boys*, not only has Grady's marriage



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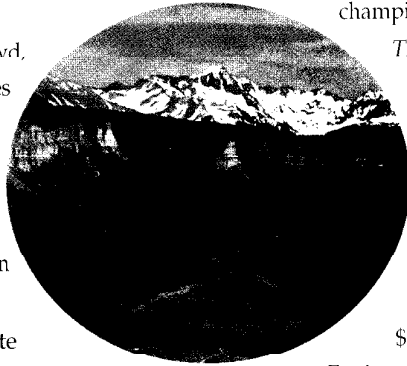
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failed, but the wife of his department head, with whom he's been conducting a long affair, has revealed that she is pregnant with his child. Terry Crabtree, his dissolute old pal of an editor, has arrived at the university's WordFest literary conference, stoned on codeine and with a tuba-toting transvestite on his arm, demanding a look see at the long-awaited final draft.

Abandoning the exotic locales of *Fountain City*, Chabon reverted to Pittsburgh, where he went to undergraduate school, as the setting. "I lived in Paris after college and know it pretty well, but not like Pittsburgh. And Florida—I've been there, but I was pretty much imagining. With Pittsburgh, I could do that setting almost in my sleep, so I could concentrate on the characters and the story more."

Chabon knew he was on to something. "I'd never had any fun writing *Fountain City*," he recalls. "It was just drudgery. But I was really enjoying *Wonder Boys*."

Seven months and a couple of rewrites later, Chabon called New York. "I said, 'Guess what? I finished my book...and oh, by the way, it's a different book than the one I signed to do.'"

Mary Evans, his agent, is used to Chabon springing surprises in his multiple rewrites, but this was a bit, well... "I was completely shocked," she recalls. "We'd been working on *Fountain City* for a few years and actually some of his best writing was in that book, although he couldn't get the two halves of it to mesh." But after she read through the first draft of *Wonder Boys*, she says, "I knew he had produced something astonishing."

AFTER READING *WONDER BOYS*, IT'S hard to disagree. Carcening wildly through 365 pages in a battered Galaxie 500, Grady survives a series of increasingly bizarre misadventures, from a calamitous seder at the home of his estranged wife's parents to the dilemma of how to return a mink jacket that once belonged to Marilyn Monroe which inadvertently had been stolen from his lover's husband.

The action often is slapstick. But as in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, what really

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jumps off the page is Chabon's inventive use of language, the crisp dialogue punctuated with droll *bon mots*; the lyrical internal monologues of his protagonist; the long, graceful sentences that weave excruciatingly funny metaphors. In recalling a literary party, Grady observes that "there were so many Pittsburgh poets in my hallway that if, at that instant, a meteorite had come smashing through my roof, there would never have been another stanza written about rusting fathers and impotent steelworks

S.J. Perelman to John Cheever and Eudora Welty." He laughs. "Plus, I have a big vocabulary and I like to use it."

Indeed, although Chabon has read the entirety of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, he admits to having read relatively little recent fiction. "I should, but there is so much great writing out there that I haven't caught up with the contemporary writers yet. I'm still trying to fill holes in my background—I've never read Walter Scott, for example, and my Thomas Hardy is very limited. So if I

"UNDRESSING HER WAS AN ACT OF RECKLESSNESS, A KIND OF VANDALISM,

LIKE RELEASING A ZOO FULL OF ANIMALS OR BLOWING UP A DAM."

—FROM "WONDER BOYS"

and the Bessemer converter of love." In contemplating his zaftig mistress, who favors figure-control pantyhose and keeps her hair elaborately pinned, he notes: "Undressing her was an act of recklessness, a kind of vandalism, like releasing a zoo full of animals or blowing up a dam."

And even as Grady comes to his most disturbing epiphanies, the juxtaposition of the sad and the ridiculous makes life seem less than bleak: "I saw that I could write ten thousand more pages of shimmering prose, and still be nothing but a blind minotaur stumbling along on broken ground, an overweight, unsuccessful wonder boy with a pot habit and a dead dog in the trunk of my car."

As with *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* and his 1991 short-story collection, *A Model World*, Chabon's elegant prose is a startling contrast to the herky-jerky, jargon laden, television- and cyberspace-influenced style of his contemporaries, such as Douglas Coupland. "I guess my style reflects what I like to read," Chabon says. "I like writers whose language is complicated, who do interesting things with rhetoric and phrasing and startle you with new conjunctions of words. That will take you anywhere from Vladimir Nabokov to

read something that's out now, I always feel like I'm cheating, like I have to wait for my dessert until I get through with my dinner. But I did just read *Ordinary Love and Good Will* by Jane Smiley, and I loved it. She's great."

FOR A COMIC NOVELIST, CHABON draws intimately believable characters. So much so, in the case of *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* and its bisexual protagonist, Art Bechstein, that *Newsweek* cited Chabon in a list of up-and-coming gay authors. (Twice married, he is now the father of a 7-month-old daughter, Sophie.) "You just use your imagination," he explains. "I think that's all there is to it. It's silly to say a man can't write a good woman character, or a woman can't write a man, or a black writer can't write a white person, or a gay writer can't do a straight person."

At the same time, while his books aren't autobiographical in the strict sense, his characters spring mostly from different parts of his personality. In *Wonder Boys*, for example, protagonist Grady acquires an unwanted protege: a painfully self-conscious student and would-be novelist named James Leer, an expert on movie-star suicide trivia. "James is different from me, but like

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Grady, he's a kind of projection of myself, taking parts and exaggerating them, mixing them with things from other people I've met. I can remember being in the position that he was in, wanting to write and trying really hard—like the scene where he's at the party, and he's hanging around in the margins because he hasn't been invited, but he just wants to be there because that's where all the writers are."

Chabon wanted to be in that literary world from almost as far back as he can remember. Born in Washington, D.C., Chabon grew up mostly in the Irvine-like master-planned suburb of Columbia, Md. After his parents divorced, he spent summers in Pittsburgh with his father, a physician. "I was very bookish, almost nerdy when I was growing up," the author recalls. "I never had many friends, maybe one close friend at a time. I had a very active fantasy life—I like to draw maps of imaginary kingdoms, and read science fiction and comic books. I was always curious about the writers who wrote the books that I liked. I remember trying to write a letter to Robert Lawson, who wrote *Rabbit Hill* and other kids' books that I loved, and looking in the encyclopedia to see if they had his address, and discovering that he was dead—I was just crushed."

The beginning of Chabon's own writing career was a short story he did for his eighth-grade English class. "It was about Sherlock Holmes joining forces with Captain Nemo from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*," he explains, smiling. "Professor Moriarty had built himself an ironclad, and I forget what else he was doing that was so awful. But my teacher gave me an 'A' and my parents thought it was great." As he pursued his dream at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1980s and then on a Henry Miller-inspired sojourn in Paris, his family continued to spur him on. "My parents are both big readers of novels, and they have a lot of respect for writing," he says. "I think they thought it was pretty unlikely that I'd ever be a real writer, but they never said that, and they definitely encouraged me to try it."

After his mother relocated to Oakland, Chabon drifted out to California and decided that he wanted to go to graduate school. When Stanford rejected him, he was left to choose between UC Davis and UC Irvine. "I picked Irvine mostly because I came down to visit and I rode the Balboa ferry, and I said to myself, 'This is great, I want to live here,'" he recalls.

When Chabon came to Irvine, he already had begun *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, and the writing program's then-co-directors, Oakley Hall and the late Don Heiney, quickly spotted its promise. "The first time that Don saw a section of it, he said, 'You're doing great, just keep going and don't let anyone distract you,'" Chabon says. "Every step of the way, he was very supportive." Indeed, as the *Los Angeles Times* would later report, Heiney irked some other writing students by not allowing them to critique an early version of the novel, fearing that Chabon would get bogged down.

Although Hall, who has since retired, claimed at the time that Chabon produced the novel without much help, Chabon disagrees. "Oakley was more critical and harder, and pushed me to have my plot really down. Both of them were really helpful, in different ways. If both of them had been critical, or both had patted me on the back, the book might not have come out the way it did."

Shortly before Chabon was to submit the novel for his final workshop, he showed it to Heiney, who rushed it by Federal Express—without Chabon's knowledge—to Evans, his own agent, who agreed to represent the fledgling novelist. The then-unheard of \$155,000 advance that *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* garnered from Morrow not only turned Chabon into a literary celebrity at age 24, but hyped UC Irvine's writing program as well. Within two years of his splashy debut, applications had doubled.

Since then, other UC Irvine writers have gone on to spectacular successes; Whitney Otto's *How to Make an American Quilt* also reached the *New York Times* list, and Marti Leimbach's *Dying*

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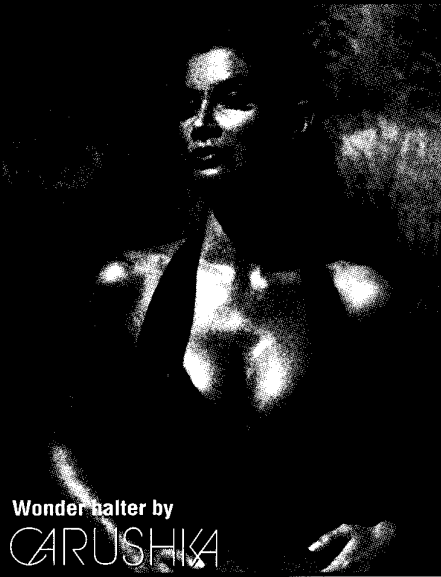
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CATCHER IN THE WRY

Young merited a \$150,000 advance and was adapted into a film starring Julia Roberts. With so many contemporary novelists coming out of programs such as UC Irvine's rather than the real-world experience that forged the Ernest Hemingways and Henry Millers of earlier generations, some question whether literature is poorer and more sterile as a result. Chabon, for his part, concludes that "It's a silly controversy—at this point in time, it's like arguing whether there should be fluoride in the drinking water. Maybe there was a time to debate it, and maybe it was a communist conspiracy, but now kids' teeth are better. And writers are coming out of programs all over the country, and there's a lot of good writing out there, from what I can tell. But I think writing should be judged on its merits, and not whether the writer got a degree."

Though he's been a man of many forwarding addresses—Paris, Pittsburgh, Newport Beach, Seattle—Chabon hints that he and his family will be making their home in California from now on. In late 1993, a year after returning to Laguna Beach, the couple moved to Los Angeles when Ayelet was transferred from the Santa Ana branch of the federal public defender's office to the downtown Los Angeles office. "I really like living here [in Southern California]," Chabon says. "I feel a lot of affection for the place."

He's written short stories set in Irvine and Laguna Beach, but it may be a while before Orange County shows up as a setting for one of his novels. "A lot of writing for me is remembering. As I get farther away from a place, my memories tend to take on a life of their own. Certain parts of them become heightened, and I feel almost a kind of nostalgia for things I may not even have been aware of when I was experiencing them. I think back, and say, 'Yeah, that was a good place and a good time.' And those strong emotions make it much more vivid to me, and that makes it easier to write about." OC

Patrick J. Kiger is a freelance writer living in Takoma Park, Maryland.