

Meet Chaim Potok



When you write about one person or set of people, if you dig deeply enough, you will ultimately uncover basic humanity.

—Chaim Potok

For Chaim Potok (pronounced hīəm pō 'tāk), creating a link between one particular group and the rest of humanity has been a lifelong challenge. He became a novelist because he believed storytelling would help him explore the relationship between individuals and the larger society around them. Like many other writers, he chose a setting familiar to him—the deeply religious Jewish communities of his own youth.

Potok was born in the Bronx, a New York City neighborhood much like the Brooklyn community in *The Chosen*. The son of a poor Polish immigrant, Chaim remembers his father's shame the day the family went on public assistance. But he also remembers a vibrant community, made up not only of Jews but also of immigrants from many nations.

Potok was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family and attended a Jewish parochial school that focused on the study of the Talmud, or Jewish law. For Potok, whose interest in fiction and literature was growing, this emphasis on the Talmud presented the first of many conflicts between the religious and the secular,

or nonreligious, aspects of his life. His teachers and parents did not approve of his interests because to them literature was a distraction from the Talmud.

At about the age of his main characters in *The Chosen*, Chaim read *Brideshead Revisited* by British writer Evelyn Waugh, which drew him forever to the power of storytelling. Using his training in Talmudic study, Potok systematically read through the works of different authors in an attempt to understand and absorb literature more thoroughly. He also began writing fiction.

After attending Yeshiva University, Potok was ordained a Conservative rabbi, and later served as a military chaplain during the Korean War. While in Asia, he learned of cultures entirely different from Judaism. Not long after returning from Korea, Potok married Adena Mosevitsky, with whom he has three children. It was his experiences in Korea that led Potok to write *The Book of Lights*. Although this was his first novel, it went unpublished until 1981. *The Chosen*, published in 1967, was actually his second novel. As a best-seller, it established his popular reputation. *The Promise*, published two years later, continues the story begun in *The Chosen*. A later novel, *Davita's Harp*, in which Reuven Malter appears as a minor character, revolves around a young girl caught between her family's politics and the Jewish world of her school.

Potok himself strives for balance in his life. In addition to writing novels, he has continued to study Judaism. Potok has taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and has edited Jewish books and periodicals. His nonfiction book *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews* (1978) presents four centuries of Jewish history and was well received by critics. Potok's goal has never been to write solely about Judaism but rather to examine the constant tension between cultures that he feels and sees around him:

I have spent [my life] in an evolving reshaping of my faith. I have done this by writing novels . . . about certain kinds of culture conflicts in the present.

Introducing the Novel

. . . His speech rhythms are sometimes awkward, and the imagery blurred. And yet, while Reuven talks we listen because of the story he has to tell; and, long afterwards, it remains in the mind, and delights.

—Hugh Nissenson, *New York Times Book Review*

It was, above all, a story which cracked barriers so that we were made to look each other full in the face and see—not stereotypes and shadow but flesh and blood.

—Caroline Salvatore, *Book World, Chicago Tribune*

The Chosen received mixed reviews from critics. Nonetheless, the novel has appealed to many readers over the years. Describing an America deeply entrenched in World War II, the story is told in the first-person by 15-year-old Reuven Malter. Reuven lives with his father in an Orthodox Jewish community in Brooklyn. Mr. Malter is a scholar and writer who studies the Talmud. Reuven is enrolled at the local yeshiva, or Jewish parochial school.

An accident during a baseball game brings Reuven together with Danny Saunders, a player on the opposing team and the son of a Hasidic rabbi. The story unfolds as friendship develops between the two boys. Despite the differences in their basic views of Judaism, they share many interests, especially a keen interest in learning. As they mature toward adulthood, both must make difficult choices and redefine their relationships to their fathers and to their faith. Both must also make sense of the momentous events around them—the end of World War II, the horror of Adolf Hitler's crimes against Jews, and the controversy about whether to create a nation for Jews in Israel. Both must decide what is most important to them and be willing to make sacrifices for it. Like most of Potok's other novels, *The Chosen* explores the issue of balancing personal values with values one finds in the surrounding world. Potok calls this a "core-to-core culture confrontation." Danny, in particular, finds his core value system at odds with the new world he encounters. As they stand poised on

the brink of adulthood, Reuven and Danny must build bridges to each other and to the world around them. They must learn to look for what people share, rather than for what separates them.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The Chosen is set in Brooklyn, New York, during the 1940s. World War II had been raging since 1939. The United States, following the bombing of its naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, had already been drawn into the war. Europe struggled to withstand Adolf Hitler's tyranny while Asia faced aggression from Japan. Most Americans, including the deeply religious Jews who lived in a somewhat isolated manner in Brooklyn, were in some way affected by the war effort.

Brooklyn is one of New York City's five boroughs, or sections. Settled by Europeans as early as 1660, Brooklyn is home to more than two million people. The borough is characterized by long blocks of row houses and tree-lined streets. Some of the older neighborhoods have carefully preserved houses that are more than a hundred years old. In the middle of Brooklyn is Prospect Park, which is designed so that its features look bigger than they really are. Coney Island, whose beaches are popular with New Yorkers in the summer, is located at the southern end of Brooklyn.

Many Jewish immigrants came to Brooklyn in the 1880s to escape persecution in Germany and eastern Europe. They founded enduring communities in Brooklyn, such as Williamsburg (where *The Chosen* is set), Crown Heights, and Boro Park. Many of the Jews living in Williamsburg are Hasidic. On Friday evenings, large groups of Hasidim clothed in black overcoats and fur-trimmed hats make their way to the synagogues off Bedford Avenue.

Did You Know?

Judaism is one of the oldest of the world's religions. It dates back about 4,000 years and was the first faith to worship one God rather than many gods. Judaism has much in common with the religions that grew out of it— Islam and Christianity. All three faiths teach that God is a guide and ultimately a judge. All three faiths have a day of rest and worship, which for Jews is from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

Three texts are considered holy in the Jewish tradition: the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and the Talmud. The Torah includes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Christians refer to the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament. The Talmud contains Jewish law.

Except in Israel, where Hebrew is the main language, most modern Jews speak the language of the nation where they live. Many Orthodox Jews in the United States use Hebrew for prayer and religious study and English for everyday conversation.

Over the years, different branches of Judaism have emerged. The four main branches of Judaism include the Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Reform movements. Only a small percentage of Jews practice Orthodox Judaism.

The way that Orthodox Jews practice their faith has changed very little over time. Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah, or first five books of the Bible, was given by God to Moses. They

apply their interpretation of the Torah's laws very literally to their everyday lives. During the Sabbath, they follow strict rules about not using any electricity, telephones, or cars; and they do no work of any kind. The Sabbath is also a day for Orthodox Jews to spend time with their families, to pray, and to study their sacred texts.

Even within the Orthodox branch there are different divisions. One group of Orthodox Jews is called Hasidim. This sect dates back to eighteenth-century eastern Europe, when strong leaders with inspiring personalities began to look at Judaism in a new way. These leaders, called tzaddiks, wanted to reshape their religion to focus more on the kind of heartfelt worship in which even an uneducated person could participate. Hasidim also wanted to protect Judaism from becoming too modernized. As a result, they kept their communities more separate than did other Orthodox Jews. People responded with great feeling and intense loyalty to the early Hasidic spiritual leaders. These rabbis gained great power over their people—a power they then passed on to their sons. Reb Saunders's character in *The Chosen* is based on the image of such a leader. Today, Hasidic men dress as did their Hasidic ancestors in eastern Europe. They wear black coats, black hats, and beards. In addition to Hebrew, many Hasidim also speak Yiddish, a folk language that evolved in eastern Europe.