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Thrills! Spills! Chills!

Paul Zakrzewski - Special To The Jewish Week

Last year Michael Chabon edited “McSweeney’s Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales,” an anthology of original short stories gathered together for the single purpose of proving that the fine garment of literary fiction could be stitched together from the mass-produced scraps of genre-driven writing. Keeping with the premise, Chabon has just released a lavishly illustrated novella, “The Final Solution,” which borrows not only the mechanics but also the legendary hero of Arthur Conan Doyle’s original Sherlock Holmes stories. The result is a highly inventive mystery and a gorgeous meditation on aging and death.

It is July 1944, and the 89-year-old sleuth, already 30 years into retirement, is roused by local detectives on the heels of a murderer. Holmes reluctantly agrees to help only because the investigation yields a tantalizing, bizarre clue of the sort that always provoked his legendary inductive powers — in this case a mute German-Jewish boy whose stolen parrot appears to hold the key to Nazi submarine codes or Swiss bank accounts.

Published originally in The Paris Review, the novella starts off as stogy as a drawing-room whodunit, complete with an over-the-hill hero, a drunken vicar and a couple of keystone cops. This ham-fisted nonsense soon resolves itself into a jaunty, even genuinely witty story in which Holmes displays the sort of inductive sleuthing that made the original stories so much fun to read. Chabon deftly handles the interplay between the local constabulary and Holmes, and his descriptive powers — Chabon is unparalleled in his ability to lend emotional shading to even the most insignificant event (in this case a strand of snot) — helps to heighten the action.

As you'd expect from something called "The Final Solution," there are plenty of details that dutifully hint at the terrible crimes happening not far away. There is the acrid smell of ash, like hair, which emanates from an ashtray, and the appearance of a mute boy, a walk-on from a Gunther Grass novel, perhaps. Even the way in which Holmes remains nameless throughout the story is reminiscent of an enduring theme in Holocaust literature. Yet in the end, these passing Holocaust references feel a little too obligatory, a little too Spielberg-like, to be genuinely moving.

Instead the story's real power emanates from Chabon's emotionally nuanced reinvention of a classic (but static) literary figure. In this retelling, Holmes, always a cerebral and cold figure in the original Doyle mysteries, has grown irascible with old age; even his beloved beekeeping duties can't sweeten his temperament ("Like honey, do you?" a visitor approaching Holmes inquires. "Not particularly, no," the old sleuth observes dryly).

Furthermore, he is vulnerable in the ways that afflict the truly ancient. His cheeks are "flecked with the blood and plaster of an old man's hasty shave" and he must constantly weigh even the simplest physical action for its potential debilitating effects. Worse still, he endures several "senior" moments throughout the case, when even his most cherished faculty appears to have abandoned him: "The conquest of his mind by age was not a mere blunting or slowing down but an erasure, as of a desert capital by a drifting millennium of sand. Time had bleached away the ornate pattern of his intellect, leaving a blank white scrap." It is through this depiction of natural losses that we glimpse other, highly unnatural ones.

So it's unfortunate that Chabon gave in to the terrible pun of the title — no doubt meant to recall both the Doyle mysteries as well as the great detective's resurrection in contemporary books like

“The Seven Per Cent Solution” — since it gives added ammunition to critics; some of whom, like novelist Melvin Jules Bukiet, have already have lined up to fault the author for daring to mix the endless sorrow of the Holocaust with a seemingly trifling (if well-written) plot.

Their line of argument misses the power of this story, not to mention Chabon’s continued appeal to his readers. Like all gifted writers, he has found a way to reinvigorate what came before — even if in his case this extends to adolescent fantasies, whether it be gangster lore (“The Mysteries of Pittsburgh”), horror fiction (“Wonder Boys”), or comic books and golems (“The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay”), giving these genres real emotional depth.

Moreover, with his Fitzgerald-like ability to transmute the gossamer of language and image into a genuine tragedy, Chabon has become one of our major writers, constantly reminding us that behind a romantic’s exquisite, emotionally textured prose is the deeply human impulse to feel, to suffer, to be transformed. Whether it succeeds as a work of Holocaust literature, “The Final Solution” is certainly great fiction by an author who, it appears, can accomplish nearly anything he pleases.

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