

# BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE  
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES MICHAEL CHABON'S NOVEL

# THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION

*1-866-578-5571*

*BOOKCLUBINABOX.COM*

*INFO@BOOKCLUBINABOX.COM*

**THIS PDF GUIDE IS NOT FOR  
DISTRIBUTION OR RESALE.**

# **BOOK CLUB IN A BOX**

## **Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Michael Chabon's novel The Yiddish Policemen's Union**

Published by HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2007.  
ISBN 13: 978-0-00-714982-7

Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the hardcover edition of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion for *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* has been prepared and written by Marilyn Herbert, originator of Bookclub-in-a-Box. Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed., is a teacher, librarian, speaker and writer. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure.

This guide was co-written by Adina Herbert. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

### **Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for The Yiddish Policemen's Union**

**ISBN 10: 189708255X  
ISBN 13: 9781897082553**

This guide reflects the perspective of the Bookclub-in-a-Box team and is the sole property of Bookclub-in-a-Box.

©2008 - OC - BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Unauthorized reproduction of this book or its contents for republication in whole or in part is strictly prohibited.

**CONTACT INFORMATION: SEE BACK COVER.**

# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

|  |    |   |    |
|--|----|---|----|
| <b>READERS AND LEADERS GUIDE</b> . . . . .     | 2  | <b>Strong Women</b> . . . . .                 | 39 |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>                            |    | <b>WRITING STYLE AND STRUCTURE</b>            |    |
| Novel Quickline . . . . .                      | 7  | Story Framework . . . . .                     | 43 |
| Keys to the Novel . . . . .                    | 8  | Descriptions . . . . .                        | 44 |
| Author Information . . . . .                   | 11 | Deep Irony,<br>Grand Understatement . . . . . | 45 |
| <b>BACKGROUND INFORMATION</b>                  |    | Yiddish Phrases . . . . .                     | 46 |
| Jews in Alaska . . . . .                       | 17 | <b>SYMBOLS</b>                                |    |
| Hasidism . . . . .                             | 18 | Ghosts . . . . .                              | 51 |
| The Messiah . . . . .                          | 19 | Conflict Parallels . . . . .                  | 52 |
| The Red Heifer . . . . .                       | 20 | Pie . . . . .                                 | 53 |
| Yiddish . . . . .                              | 21 | Chess . . . . .                               | 53 |
| <b>CHARACTERIZATION</b>                        |    | Zugswang . . . . .                            | 54 |
| Meyer Landsman . . . . .                       | 25 | <b>LAST THOUGHTS</b>                          |    |
| Berko Shemets . . . . .                        | 26 | Conclusions . . . . .                         | 59 |
| Bina Gelbfish . . . . .                        | 27 | Glossary of Terms . . . . .                   | 60 |
| Mendel Shpilman . . . . .                      | 28 | Suggested Beginnings . . . . .                | 64 |
| The Verbovers . . . . .                        | 29 | <b>FROM THE NOVEL (QUOTES)</b> . . . . .      | 69 |
| Hertz Shemets . . . . .                        | 30 | <b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.</b> . . . . .            | 79 |
| The Other Players . . . . .                    | 31 |   |    |
| <b>FOCUS POINTS AND THEMES</b>                 |    |   |    |
| Belonging (nationality)<br>and Exile . . . . . | 35 |   |    |
| The Verbovers' Messiah . . . . .               | 36 |   |    |
| Faith and Redemption . . . . .                 | 37 |   |    |

# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

## You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

## How to Begin

**Relax and look forward to enjoying your bookclub.**

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more 'hands-on' support, feel free to contact us. (See Contact Information)

## What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

**INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.**

## **Do We Need to Agree?**

**THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.**

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences with us. You can respond on-line at our website or contact us through our Contact Information. We would love to hear from you.

## **Discussion Starters**

There are as many ways to begin a bookclub discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)

- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (not necessarily from the novel)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (not applicable to all novels)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

## **Above All, Enjoy Yourself**

# **INTRODUCTION**

**Novel Quickline**

**Keys to the Novel**

**Author Information**

# INTRODUCTION

## Novel Quickline

The backdrop to Michael Chabon's story starts in 1948, the year the Jews are once again denied a chance to return to their homeland, Israel. Instead, they are offered a temporary refuge in Alaska, Sitka District, where they try to rebuild their lives. Now, sixty years later, the Sitka District is to be handed back for Alaska to control.

Meyer Landsman, the novel's sharp-mouthed, hard-nosed protagonist, is a police detective. Newly divorced, he lives in a fleabag hotel where a dead body is discovered in Room 208. Meyer does not like to get involved in things, but there is something about the death of this unknown drug addict that Detective Landsman just cannot ignore. As Meyer uncovers the identity of the victim, Mendel Shpilman, many unanswered questions come to light. Mendel is the only son of the Verbover rabbi. Why has such a righteous representative of his generation been murdered? Why, in the midst of the Alaskan turnover, are the Verbovers not packing up to go elsewhere?

---

notes

As the story weaves its way through the precarious maze of friend and foe, the lawful and the outlaw, Chabon pits Jew against Jew, Jew against Tlingit native, Jew against the FBI and the American powers that be, and everyone against the Jew. Chabon asks complex questions about the idea and meaning of a homeland, ponders the destiny of the diaspora Jew, and explores at a deeper level what it means to hold on to a religious or political identity of any kind.

## Keys to the Novel

### Historical Information

- Chabon's idea of a Yiddish-speaking Jewish community in Sitka, Alaska is not simply a figment of his widely set imagination. There are documented historical facts that underlie this book of fiction. (see **Background Information**, p.17)
  - In a 1938 press conference, Senator Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, proposed Alaska as a "haven for Jewish refugees" seeking to escape Hitler's oppression in pre-war Europe. Since Alaska was not a state and did not have any population quotas, the Secretary recommended the Jews could be helped there. However, this proposal pleased neither the Jews, nor the Americans, nor the native peoples of Alaska.
  - Roosevelt himself wanted the plan suppressed because his preference was to limit immigrants to ten thousand people per year with a ten percent maximum allotment of Jews.
  - Of the four original Alaskan locations suggested, Chabon chose Sitka because it matched his fictional vision perfectly and the name has a Yiddish ring to it. Sitka's current population of nearly 9000 includes about 35 Jews.





**Thanks for previewing this  
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

**If you'd like to purchase the full guide in  
print or PDF format, just visit:**

**[www.bookclubinabox.com/discussion-guides](http://www.bookclubinabox.com/discussion-guides)**