



My Name Is Asher Lev

Chaim Potok

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Asher Lev is a Ladover Hasid who keeps kosher, prays three times a day and believes in the Ribono Shel Olom, the Master of the Universe. Asher Lev is an artist who is compulsively driven to render the world he sees and feels even when it leads him to blasphemy. In this stirring and often visionary novel, Chaim Potok traces Asher's passage between these two identities, the one consecrated to God, the other subject only to the imagination.

Asher Lev grows up in a cloistered Hasidic community in postwar Brooklyn, a world suffused by ritual and revolving around a charismatic Rebbe. But in time his gift threatens to estrange him from that world and the parents he adores. As it follows his struggle, **My Name Is Asher Lev** becomes a luminous portrait of the artist, by turns heartbreaking and exultant, a modern classic.

My Name Is Asher Lev Details

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From Reader Review My Name Is Asher Lev for online ebook

Josh Caporale says

4.5 stars

Chaim Potok's writing is quite remarkable! Being a rabbi, Potok's works would explore the lives of Hasidic and Orthodox Jewish subjects and their struggles, but often, these struggles took place internally or within their religious community as opposed to taking place in their exterior world. My Name Is Asher Lev is a prime example of the central character's very own struggle. Within a religion that is grounded, is filled with rules, and requires a lot from its followers, Asher sees a different sense of potential for himself and takes on a passion in art. The way that Potok writes, though, he does so in a way that any Jewish reader can find a sense of connection, while a non-Jewish reader does not only have the ability to connect in an emotional way, but it is written in a way that is accessible and in a way that they develop a greater understanding for Hasidism, their rituals, and how they go about serving their G-d.

Asher Lev is a Hasid that was born in 1943 and grows up living with his parents, Aryeh (father) and Rivkeh (mother). Aryeh works serving the Rebbe and frequently travels, feeling that it is best to meet the people he is helping face to face.

As Aryeh mentions:

"To touch a person's heart, you must see a person's face. One cannot reach a soul through a telephone" (117).

In a time and place where it is typical that people text and use their cell phone to the point that it is easier to reach them from a phone than in person, this line was a breath of fresh air and a reason that this can be deemed a modern classic.

Aryeh picks up a position in Europe, which creates a great strain between he and his son, one that has already developed on the basis that Asher is an artist that paints what he sees in as honest a way as possible. Aryeh feels art to be pointless and frequently scolds and chides Asher for his actions. Asher's mother does her best to serve both of their needs, as she studies Russian affairs to assist her husband, while providing Asher with the support and material he needs in order to paint, though most of this Asher gets on his own. As time progresses, Asher begins to establish himself as a painter and comes under the wing of Jacob Kahn, which creates a sense of extremity that positions itself on the complete opposite of the spectrum in which his parents would wish. Asher, though, seems to fall in the middle, where he wants to paint things as he sees them, but at the same time eats kosher, prays three times a day, loves his parents, and cares for those within his Hasidic community. This was an aspect of the book that I really liked, for it made Asher a human being that came with complexities for both sides, but yet he certainly had something to offer to the art community.

My Name Is Asher Lev is an accomplishment in how it addresses the bridge between religion and art and how it should be perceived and accepted. Being a reader that approaches this objectively as far as religion is concerned, I feel as if Asher is a very determined, but at the same time an individual that means well, even if it causes grief in his heavily religious parents. I like the nature and the fleshing out of each of the characters and how each meant well, despite being firm and passionate in their nature. I like the pacing of the piece, as it flows in a way that we get just enough of what we need to know about a particular event in Asher's life and highlights of other periods of time within. While there were moments in which I wish that information was not withheld (like when Asher Lev says that he has told someone something and yet we do not find out what it is), it was an overall very good piece.

I am definitely inclined to read more by Chaim Potok, including the sequel to this novel, *The Gift of Asher Lev*.

Reese says

You're a Hasidic Jew. Is that your identity? You're an artist, a "prodigy." Is that your identity? You're being pulled by opposing forces, urges, needs: You're Chaim Potok's Asher Lev; you're also Rivkeh Lev, Asher's mother. Or perhaps you're a nameless illustration of the human condition. If, however, your name is Asher Lev, then, unlike ordinary dual creatures, you come to realize that "paint" begins with pain and ends with the letter that looks like a cross. And the pain that is yours is not only yours.

Diana says

I hated to finish this book, because I loved it so much.

It is the story of a Hasidic boy who loves to draw and paint and has the ability to become a great artist, but his father hates his obsession with art because he thinks it is from the Other Side and is evil.

I loved how this story drew me into the daily life of this young boy, his family and his struggle to become who he was meant to be. I, too, had a gift for drawing and know how devastating it is to be not only not encouraged, but actively discouraged, from doing the one thing you love to do most.

I also realized how much I didn't know about the Judaism and Hasidism in particular. I loved learning about the prayers, customs, history and vocabulary.

This is a beautiful book. There was a sequel written in 1990 that I will be reading too.

dely says

Questo è un libro sostanzioso, ricco di temi interessanti affrontati con delicatezza. I temi principali sono il rapporto genitori/figli, il crescere in una famiglia religiosa e opprimente, la ricerca della propria identità che non riesce ad emergere perché soffocata dall'ambiente circostante; si parla della lotta interiore nata dal voler perseguire una passione e i sensi di colpa dovuti al ferire le persone che si amano; si parla di arte, di quanto possa essere incontrollabile una passione con la conseguente estromissione dalla comunità in cui si è cresciuti.

Asher Lev è un ragazzino nato negli Stati Uniti da una famiglia ebrea ortodossa, frequenta una scuola yeshivah e ha un padre famoso e rispettato da tutti. Sin da piccolo ha una passione sfrenata per la pittura; passione che viene considerata da suo padre una sciocchezza da bambini. Sin dall'infanzia, Asher non viene considerato come un essere umano a sé stante con una propria individualità, dei desideri e delle esigenze, ma è trascurato dai genitori che hanno sempre qualcosa di più importante da fare. La madre non è severa come il padre, anzi, ma alcune cose non riesce ad accettarle nemmeno lei. Entrambi sono devoti praticanti, Asher viene cresciuto con regole rigide che vanno rispettate e l'arte è considerata opera del demonio.

Asher, quindi, cresce in questo ambiente opprimente in cui non può esprimersi, in cui viene sempre messo da parte, in cui nessuno si prende il tempo di ascoltarlo o di capirlo. Inoltre, nella comunità ebraica in cui cresce nessuno fa niente senza l'approvazione del Rebbe, tutti seguono i precetti religiosi e ciò che non fa parte

della loro religione è considerato il Male.

Il libro tratta soprattutto dell'emergere della personalità di Asher attraverso la pittura. Riesce a far fuoriuscire i propri sentimenti e i suoi stati d'animo soltanto tramite i suoi quadri perché non ha il coraggio di affrontare i genitori. Quelle rare volte che ha tentato di spiegare l'importanza dell'arte nella sua vita, loro non sono riusciti a capire (il padre, inoltre, spesso non stava nemmeno ad ascoltarlo). Diventa famoso, è apprezzato da chiunque tranne che dai suoi genitori che continuano a non capire questo suo desiderio di dipingere. Per Asher, però, l'arte è l'unico modo per esprimersi, per dire ciò che non ha il coraggio di dire a parole; per lui non è una passione o un mestiere, è un modo di essere.

È un libro che procede lentamente, uno stile quasi freddo e distaccato, discorsi molto brevi e concisi; ciò si contrappone al linguaggio caldo e appassionato che si trova nelle descrizioni di quadri e artisti, e del tormento che Asher riesce a mettere su tela. È come se l'autore, con il linguaggio, seguisse gli stati d'animo di Asher.

Ho deciso di leggere questo libro perché fa parte della mia sfida curarsi con i libri. Secondo le autrici di *Curarsi con i libri: Rimedi letterari per ogni malanno*, leggere questo libro dovrebbe aiutare le persone che non amano il confronto e gli scontri; dovrebbe aiutarli a darsi una svegliata per non vivere come Asher. Dunque, è vero, io sono una persona tranquilla e pacifica che non ama gli scontri e spesso, piuttosto che litigare, lascio perdere. Ovviamente dipende anche con chi ho a che fare, non mi comporto con tutti allo stesso modo; se, inoltre, di fronte ho una persona ottusa, non ne vale proprio la pena d'impegnarsi in uno scontro/confronto. Però è vero, spesso preferisco fuggire piuttosto che affrontare una situazione o delle persone poco piacevoli. La differenza con Asher è che non sono alla ricerca dell'accettazione da parte degli altri. Asher aveva bisogno di essere capito e accettato, io no, quindi continuo a vivere tranquilla e serena e non me ne frega niente se gli altri non mi capiscono o non approvano il mio comportamento. Capisco però perché Asher non ha mai voluto scontrarsi con i suoi genitori: li amava e non voleva ferirli; preferiva vivere male piuttosto che dare ulteriori dispiaceri. Cosa ha risolto con il suo comportamento? Niente. Tanto vale fregarsene dell'approvazione degli altri. Asher viveva con i sensi di colpa per una passione che non riusciva a controllare. Capisco che l'approvazione e l'amore dei genitori è importante per una crescita serena e mentalmente sana, ma non sempre arrivano. Bisogna difendersi diventando, purtroppo, degli egoisti. Bisogna imparare a tirare fuori la propria personalità anche senza l'approvazione degli altri.

English:

This book talks about Asher Lev born in the United States in an orthodox Jewish family around 1950. They live in a closed Jewish community and Asher attends a Jewish school. Already as a child he loves to draw; it's more than a passion, it's something he can't control. His father doesn't understand this because for him drawing is non-sense and he hopes that growing up Asher will stop painting. Since his childhood, Asher isn't considered by his parents as a human being of its own with emotions, passions and feelings; they have never time for him and they never listen to him because they are too busy with their lives. Asher's mother is not like his father, but she too doesn't understand a lot about his son; she accepts in part that painting is important for him, but she doesn't accept that he draws everything. Both are devout practitioners, Asher was raised with strict rules that must be respected and art is considered a work of the devil. They also live in a closed jewish community so Asher was observed and judged by everyone. Asher, therefore, grows in this oppressive environment in which he can't express himself, in which he is always set aside, in which no one takes the time to listen or understand him. He needed the approval of his parents but he isn't able to talk to them, he is afraid to hurt them; he tried to talk to them but it was unsuccessful. He also lives his painting as a guilt: he knows he can't live without painting but he also needs the approval of his parents and of his community. Asher is able to bring out his feelings and emotions, his identity and personality, only through his paintings though he knows his parents won't understand.

This is a rich book, full of interesting themes dealt with sensitivity. The main themes are the relationship between parents and children, the growing up in a religious and oppressive family, the search for identity that fails to emerge because it is suffocated by the surrounding environment; it talks about the inner struggle between a passion and the guilt to hurt the people we love; it talks about art, about an uncontrollable passion

and the consequent exclusion from the community in which one grows up.

This book is part of my novel-cure-challenge and it should be read by people who are afraid of confrontations: if we don't want to live like Asher, we mustn't be scared by confrontations. Usually I'm not afraid of confrontations but it depends with whom I'm arguing. But it's true, I don't like to argue because I'm a calm and peaceful person and often I prefer to "flee" rather than face uncomfortable situations or unpleasant people. Asher needed to be accepted as he was, me not. I don't care if people understand or accept me, I am as I am with or without the approval of other people. But I also know that Asher is a young guy and he needed this approval to live in peace his passion. So I understand why Asher did never say something to his parents: in addition to be mentally closed and to don't be able to understand, he didn't want to hurt them. Did he solve his problem behaving this way? No, so I really don't care for approval and sometimes it's better to be an egoist. By sure everyone should find its identity and this should be done with or without confrontations though without an approval it's more difficult.

Jenny says

A tragically gripping, page turning work of total genius. I hate to even review it because it was that good and maybe just five stars would be better than me blubbering about it... I was completely engrossed and almost read 3/4ths of it one night, but stopped abruptly to have the novel follow me around the house and in my bag for another week because I didn't want to be through with it. I came back to it and finished it in one sitting. Some books change your life, some books are your life. Different art professors who meant a lot to me and friends through the years all have urged and recommended me to read this. All the recommendations were given at different times and curiously still, from people unrelated to each other - which held the title of the book in my memory for a long time as something of significance, especially in the way that they told me it especially for me. But like trips to Paris and having children... somethings take time to happen. The years have passed and a copy of the book never seemed to come my way. I'm so glad it finally did.

Doug Cannon says

Over the years, my Dad and I would occasionally have a conversation about this book. It would invariably go something like this:

My dad asks, "You have never read My Name is Asher Lev?"

and I would reply, "No, I haven't"

"You are so lucky! Now you still have the joy of looking forward to reading the book."

"We've had this conversation before, Dad."

"Then why haven't you read it yet?"

"Because as soon as I read it, you won't say I'm so lucky anymore."

I think the risk was worth it to be "less lucky" and I finally read the Asher Lev book. My reasoning is that I still have "The Promise" and "The gift of Asher Lev" that remain unread. I've already read "The Chosen" (twice), and "The Book of Lights".

Asher Lev is a practicing Hasidic Jew from brooklyn family that is very prominent and well known among his people, not only in Brooklyn, but in Europe, Russia, and many other places. He discovers early that art and drawing is very important to him, which is generally shunned in his culture. He once has a very pointed discussion with his father where he tells him to never call his drawing foolishness again.

Asher becomes a world famous artist despite his father's wishes, and his masterpiece is an incredible piece. The whole description of the time when his parents see the painting is very moving. Asher is painfully aware that his painting will hurt the people he loves, especially his parents. The ending of the book was very powerful.

Powerful enough, that I'll read the sequel, *The Gift of Asher Lev*. Being a little less lucky isn't so bad after all.

The beginning of my review is all the funnier to me, because I had already written that part (in my mind) but before writing it here, my brother wrote the comment you can see below. Apparently, it runs in the family to be jealous of those who can still look forward to unread Chaim Potok novels.

Doug Bradshaw says

This book reached me on many levels and gave me a lot to think about. Here are a few of them:

1. As parents, we push our children to do well in school, some of us want our kids to excel in sports, others want their kids to be leaders and to have a lot of friends and to be popular. Here we have a prodigy son who at a young age is a Mozart of art, and yet because of his parent's religious background and beliefs, he is made to believe his gift is bad and useless and that he should conform to their narrow and religious beliefs and forget about the gift. And yet a loving mother and a wise leader give him just enough space that he is able to become a master at a young age. It is painful that the parents are never able to understand the world of art and their son's gift. There seemed to be two statements to me here: Don't be this kind of myopic and selfish parent and make sure you understand your child's talents and needs. Quit trying so hard to mold him into a mini version of yourself. Luckily, Asher's mother was more understanding a loving than his father.

2. It seems like there was a lot to say about the whole mission of this particular branch of the Jewish Religion. In today's world as we hear about the extremists of each of the branches of various religions, there's not much to like. Extreme Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Catholics, Buddhists and others are remarkably similar in their lack of tolerance for behavior outside of their prescribed narrow box. The book does an excellent job of showing how religious beliefs are forced into the children. Asher is one of the few who is able to fight that pressure at a very young age.

3. Throughout the book, the art of art is described very well and in great detail. Anyone interested at all in the world of art will enjoy the evolution of the child prodigy into a budding successful artist and the influence of his outstanding and likable teacher.

4. I was disappointed that Asher didn't have any friends except for older mentors. No girlfriends or buddies. I don't believe that this is the case with most hugely talented artists, but perhaps in part, it is because of his Jewish religion and his strict way of life.

These are merely some of the main topics that I could think of quickly. The book is full of many metaphors and excellent psychology. The relationship Asher has with each of the adults in the book is very realistically described. It almost seems that it must be autobiographical.

Lucy says

Chaim Potok is a brilliant author who refuses to write a page-turning book. I can't tell you how many bad books I have finished hoping for a Potok-esque finish...moving depth that justifies the slow pace of his books.

This was a book I had a hard time finishing. It was too easily put down and, to be truthful, I didn't even like this book until about 3/4 of the way into it. Now, I emphatically say that it is one of the best books I have ever read.

There is so much to say about this book. Throughout my entire reading of it, I kept thinking the book was about "this" or "that", only to be surprised by realizing the subject matter went far deeper. At first I thought it was about an art prodigy; that a difficult path is taken when your child is special or gifted.

It kind of is.

Then I thought it was about the pain and awkwardness of being a religious Jew right after the second world war.

Again, kind of.

Then I thought it was like *The Namesake* and the struggle between parents and children and different generations.

Getting closer.

Ultimately, I think this book is about perception. What is honoring your father and mother and what is following your dream? What is tradition and what is truth? What is the better choice? What is the better life? Whose point of view matters?

I experienced a lot of frustration while reading this. First of all, this book is about so many things that I either know nothing about or that don't interest me. For instance, Asher Lev is a art prodigy. As he is the main character, art - its history and technique - is a frequent subject matter. I know very little about art. It was hard for me to respond to Asher Lev's need to draw and paint. As a person without any particular passion, I had to take his word for it that for him, drawing and painting wasn't a hobby, or something he liked to do, but that it was who he was, an insatiable need that controlled him. That sort of passion would probably cause problems in any family but when you are a Hasidic Jew and the son of an important emissary of the Rebbe whose life work is to create safe places to teach the Torah to religious Jews throughout Europe, that passion tears apart a family.

My second frustration is probably apparent by now. I know very little about Judaism. There is no apologizes approach to Potok's description of Jewish life. Obviously a Jew himself, he doesn't write for the goyim (are you frustrated? That's the Jewish term for the Gentile. Yeah...I know. I had to learn it all too).

There is a noticeable lack of emotion written about such an emotionally charged situation. Short, perfunctory sentences that made me feel as frustrated with the situation as I felt Asher Lev did with his father who did not get art. By the end of the book, I could appreciate it for the technique that it was. Asher Lev was the narrator and we experienced the story through Asher Lev. That containment of emotion, the abrupt conclusion of dialogue with his parents...that was his existence.

It all builds up to this pinnacle of frustration, this burst of emotion that brings the most hurt to his parents although that is what his art is about...his hurt, his mother's hurt, his father's hurt. I actually cried through this part. I rarely cry. It's that good.

An incredible book. An important book. A book, most definitely, worth reading.

Roger Brunyate says

The Absence of Italics

I returned to reread this classic after reading Talia Carner's recent novel *Jerusalem Maiden*, since the protagonists of both are talented artists raised within Orthodox Judaism, struggling to reconcile their art to their faith. To succeed, the writers must convey the nature of both religious belief and artistic inspiration, a challenge that Potok meets brilliantly. Consider one significant example. Both novels are full of Hebrew words—Shabbos, Rosh Hadesh, Krias Shema, Hasidus, Rebbe, Mashpia, Torah, Chumash, Hashem, Ribbono Shel Olom—but one comparison struck me immediately upon opening the Potok book: he never uses italics.

Trivial? I think not. Italics imply a gap between the writer and the reader. They say, "I know these words are foreign to you, so I'll mark them as such and explain them as we go along." But Potok's absence of italics takes away all foreignness; these are words that his characters use every day, as common as "overcoat" and "arithmetic." By using them matter-of-factly, without self-consciousness, Potok's Asher Lev invites us into his world as an equal, erasing any gap between us. He is also denying any sense of religious observance as something special reserved for the Sabbath, rather a part of ordinary life, every hour of every day. Though not Jewish myself, I have read a great many novels with Jewish settings, but cannot think of any that immerse me so deeply in the culture as Potok's novels: this one and *The Chosen*.

Asher is the only child of Aryeh and Rivkeh Lev, descendants of two of the most prominent families of Ladover Hasidim; the branch of the sect is fictitious, but clearly based on the Chabad-Lubavitcher movement in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The Rebbe, or leader of the sect, is a charismatic figure—a marvelous creation on Potok's part, though undoubtedly inspired by the Lubavitcher Rebbe of the time, who preached a relatively liberal form of Orthodox Judaism at home coupled with widespread outreach abroad. Asher's father, like his father before him, travels widely for the Rebbe, and his mother takes a doctorate in Russian to help him in his work. The story, which begins in the fifties, is set against the persecution of Jews in Russia under Stalin and the Ladovers' attempts to bring them out after the dictator's death. It gives a strong undertone of historical fact to a story that, otherwise, is largely in the mind and home of its title character.

Asher is naturally expected to follow in the family tradition. But although he remains a pious and observant Jew throughout his life, he is consumed by a different force: a precocious talent for drawing. Here again, it is the absence of notional italics that convinces us of Asher's genius. Potok makes no attempt to highlight or explain; he writes no set pieces translating Asher's creations into picturesque words. Instead, he simply admits us into his thought, showing the process by which those pictures were created—more than that, showing art as the language through which Asher processes his entire life and conflicted feelings. As Jacob Kahn, his teacher throughout his teens, says, "Art is whether or not there is a scream in him wanting to get out in a special way."

And he has plenty to scream about. Although he will be very lucky in his mentors, Asher's gift isolates him from his classmates and alienates his father, who calls his pursuit of Art rather than Torah a "foolishness"—the same accusation that Potok's parents had leveled against his own artistic pursuits. Overruled by the Rebbe, who understands the different needs of both men, Aryeh Lev stores up increasing bitterness against what he sees as the irreligion of his son, especially when he starts painting subjects anathema to the Jewish tradition. Asher's mother, Rivkeh, is torn in two, not only between her husband and her son, but also between two radically different ways of honoring God—through a life of practical good

works, or through following the truth of a God-given spirit. The strife within his family and in his own mind will be the subject of the work which launches Asher Lev to notoriety and success: a pair of canvases known as "The Brooklyn Crucifixion."* Asher mentions this in his very first paragraph, writing the book to explain how an observant Jew could reach such an unlikely pinnacle. But never to apologize: "It is absurd to apologize for a mystery." Potok's great achievement is to exalt the mystery of both God and Art, while sharing the pursuit of each as though it were the most normal thing in the world. Extraordinary things described in everyday words; the absence of italics.

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Potok was also a painter himself, and painted his own version of "The Brooklyn Crucifixion." It is here if you want to look at it, but I am protecting it as a spoiler since I personally find his verbal evocation comes across much more strongly.

(view spoiler)

Eric Boot says

WHAT

THE

FUDGE

I knew you didn't expect me to ever say this (didn't expect it myself) **but this is the first school book I absolutely LOVED.** Like, loved-adored-wanttomarry. I gave it 5 stars at first, then decided to lower that to **4.5 stars** because I had some minor (really minor) issues with it.

I literally expected this to be pure crap, the worst smelly dung so to call it (most schoolbooks kind of are, especially the books our English teachers give us) (except this year, apparently we have better books to read now). But from the first page on, I was hooked, which really surprised me because (apart from the schoolbook-thing), I rarely reach for this genre (religious-themed books).

The book is about a boy named Asher Lev, who is a Hasidic Jew living in NYC. Hasidic Jews are one of the strictest kind of Jews and Asher's parents (mostly his father) is super orthodox. He works for a man named the Rebbe, who is kind of the leader of the worldwide community of Hasidics. The book starts when Asher is like five or six years old and focusses on his biggest passion: drawing. Only prob: the Hasidic community considers drawing to be really bad and from the 'Other Side', meaning the non-Hasidic world. Ashers drawing causes conflict between him and his parents and the community.

I realize my description is pretty crappy: this book isn't. The writing is absolutely beautiful and very touching at times. The character development is so realistic and I have the feeling I learned so many things about Jews and their entire world of rules and habits and about art in general. The main point of the book is whether Asher choses between his upbringing (the Hasidic faith) or his passion: drawing and painting. And this struggle is so real and honest and understandable, that it will make you shout and cry and do whatever at the same time.

Mike says

Let me preface this review by stating that I have little basis for identifying with many characters in the book: I am not Jewish, was not raised in a religious community, did not see my community nearly exterminated during the worst conflict in the 20th century, and couldn't draw a properly proportioned stick figure to save my life. In spite of all of these obstacles I found this book both challenging and emotionally compelling.

This book raises many questions: what does it mean to be an artist? What does it mean to be a Jew? Can the two be reconciled? Can someone meet the responsibilities of being an artist and a Jew without betraying the other? To what do we owe ourselves and what do we owe our family and community? These are not easily answered because they are so unique to every person. They are dependent upon a person's proclivities, experiences, and environment.

This book told the story of one particular Hasidic Jew, Asher Lev, his struggle with these questions, and the impact of them on those around him, especially his parents.

The setting is very important to this novel. It takes place from Asher's youth in the early 1950's through his early adulthood in the late 1960's. The holocaust is still a living memory for the Jewish community and Stalin was busy being Stalin towards Russian and Eastern European Jews. It was a time of great uncertainty for Jewish culture, yet another dark chapter in their history that threatened their continued cultural existence. Asher's father worked for a Rebbe (think of them as sort of mini-Popes for particular Hasidic Sects; next to God in their righteousness), traveling the country and later Europe establishing Yeshivas (Jewish educational institutions) to preserve and grow the studying of the Torah by Jews. Asher's grandfather worked for the Rebbe's father before being killed by a Russian peasant during Easter week back in Russia. Sufficed to say there was an expectation that Asher would continue this relationship, studying the Torah and working for the greater benefit of Jews worldwide by assisting the Rebbe.

But Asher is different, he is driven by a need to create art. He is very religiously observant: keeps kosher, prays three times a day, observes the Sabbath, etc. He wants to be a good Jew and honor his parents, make them proud of him, but he is driven to create art which his father thinks is foolish.

This book is about tension. The tension between Asher's artistic aspirations and his father's desire that he study the Torah and more serious matters. The tension between his Jewish heritage and the "goyish and pagan" world of art. The tension between his family's legacy (going back many generations and an integral part of how Asher views his place in the world) and the path he chooses for himself. The tension between what people want Asher to be and what he is.

Potok tells this story beautifully from Asher's limited perspective. When Asher was a child the narrative is simple, as seen from a child's perspective. As Asher grows, so too does the introspective nature of the narrative. Asher becomes more perceptive and aware of his world and his self. As his study of art grows he begins to see the world in terms of lines, contours, planes, and colors. The artist's eye grows and becomes an integral part of his perception of the world. He recognizes and is forced to come to grips with the tensions and conflicts in his life. More importantly, though, he also becomes more sympathetic to the struggles his mother and father endured. As he travels Europe he sees all the good his frequently absent father brought to many Jewish communities. As he reflects on his past he realizes the anguish and hardship his Mother endured trying to bridge the gap between himself and his father. He embraces both of their humanities in the creation of his greatest and most dangerous works of art.

As a reader I became more and more emotionally invested with Asher. I saw his triumphs, his struggles, the

choices he had to make and the choices that were forced upon him. He was told by a great artist who became his teacher that eventually his art would hurt people and the only way to atone for that was to become an even greater artist. But when faced with this reality at one of his art shows he feels dread, apprehension, doubt. He reacts as any human would when his essence directs him down a path that could alienate him from his family, his community, and his identity. Like life the resolution of this book is messy and tragic. (view spoiler)

This was a fantastic, if slow paced and introspective, book. I found it to be emotionally resonating and sympathetic. The characters were beautifully crafted and empathetic, the descriptions through an artist's eyes were evocative, and it ended as it should have without pulling any emotional punches.

Further notes:

-This book is populated by a wonderful variety of secondary characters that influence Asher: a Russian Jew who spent several years in Siberia before fleeing to the west, Asher's aged art mentor, Asher's Uncle who supports his art work while Asher lived with him, even the few times we see the Rebbe and his influence was interesting. So while the title of this book may be I am Asher Lev, it is also about all the other influences that made him the Asher Lev we see at the end of the book.

-While Marc Chagall exists in this world, it is pretty clear he also served as a template for Asher Lev: they were both Jewish artists that were some what anomalous among within their community. If you are unfamiliar with Chagall I highly recommend a Google image search, he had some very excellent and thought provoking pieces such as The White Crucifixion:

-While all of the above seems quite heavy and depressing there were plenty of moments of levity, such as when Asher has to paint his first nude, a task sprung on him by his blunt and crotchety (and awesome) art mentor.

-There were many interesting passages about the nature of art and what it means to be an artist. Truth, beauty, and self-honesty were very fascinating themes throughout the middle and later parts of the book.

-What I liked about this book was that there were no bad guys. His Father was very devoted to his family and lived through some very terrible times for his people. He believed that all Jews had a responsibility to help each other and bear the light of the Torah for the next generation. He had a very compassionate view on humanity, seeing the death of even one (Jew or non-Jew) as a great loss as there death deprived the world of future generations. But at the same he lives with the memory that his father was killed by a drunk Russian peasant during Easter week. This resulted in his aversion to Christian iconography (especially the Jesus on the crucifix) on top of the historic pogroms perpetuated against his people carried out under those symbols. He is not a bad man, just a man who cannot understand his son and his son's dedication to a practice he sees as distinctly un-Jewish. (view spoiler)

Annalisa says

Powerful. This is the story of a Hasidic Jew who is a gifted painter, a talent not approved of among orthodox Jews. His life becomes a struggle between his father--who tries to stir him away from the arts to more traditionally accepted hobbies all the while trying to understand him--and his need to draw to express himself. I could sympathize with all the characters in the book: his father for trying to hold onto his religious convictions without dominance but love, his mother for trying to love and encourage her son while staying at one with her husband, the mentor for his love and devotion to art, and especially Asher for trying to balance it all.

I loved that it wasn't a story about how his parents rejected him because he was different but tried to

understand and love their son the best way they knew how and still maintain their faith. It was an honest parent/child relationship and I think Asher valued his faith and his parents more for their attempt at understanding him. I enjoyed learning about Hasidic Jews and understanding their religious convictions as well as experiencing the aesthetic pull to explain the world through art. The backdrop was so real to me that I could feel this boy's life. My one complaint would be that I still wonder what a few of terms mean. Like what exactly does Ladover mean?

Asher says this of painting: "I paint my feelings. I paint how I see and feel about the world. But I paint a painting, not a story." I absolutely loved that the writing style correlates with a painting style. Asher is non-descriptive about his feelings, only stating his replies to people's questions instead of delving inside his own emotions. Just a painting, the reader is left to interpret those for himself. The story flows through the years smoothly, but it is the writing style that puts it on a higher level. When style can add another layer by making you feel Asher's love of painting, it makes the book beautiful.

The reason this is one of my favorite books is that I connected with this book on a deeply personal level. As someone who dabbles with the art of writing and an extremely religious person, I often wonder how I would balance art and religion. I hate that it has to be a choice, but if you are going to commit yourself that deeply to an art, there will come a time when you have to pick your art or your faith. I hope I would pick faith, but where I draw the line may differ than someone else's and therefore I run the risk of offending. Part of being an artist is coming to terms with this displacement. It is the reason I empathized with Asher and come back to his story time and again in my own quest to balance it all.

amapola says

Dice Chaim Potok: *“Noi abbiamo sempre raccontato storie, fin dall’inizio della nostra specie: le storie sono il modo grazie al quale diamo un significato alla nostra vita. (...) La tensione fra l’individuo solo che aspira alla propria realizzazione e la comunità è proprio l’argomento delle storie moderne, diversamente da quanto avveniva in passato. La vita non è semplice così le storie non sono semplici, la vita è tragica così le storie sono tragiche, la vita è piena di domande difficili così le storie sono colme di domande difficili”.*

Il rapporto che intercorre tra l’esigenza di affermazione di se stessi e il bisogno – tutto umano – di essere accettati dalla propria famiglia e dalla comunità di cui si è parte, è un rapporto altamente drammatico. Asher Lev (ebreo, della comunità chassidica di Brooklyn) ha un dono e una vocazione, la pittura. Coltivarlo, perseguirlo, però, significa mettere a repentaglio tutto ciò che ha: famiglia, tradizioni, comunità di appartenenza, credo, amici... che fare? Affermare sé, assecondare le proprie aspirazioni o rinunciare in favore dell’appartenenza al proprio popolo, alle tradizioni? Dove sta di casa la libertà?

C’è una frase del Vangelo di Luca (Lc 9,25) che dice: *“Che giova all’uomo guadagnare il mondo intero se poi perde se stesso?”.*

Qui, in un certo senso, è come se Potok capovolgesse l’interrogativo: giova all’uomo realizzare se stesso se poi perde tutto il (suo) mondo?

Che romanzo potente! Che scrittore magnifico! Che bella sorpresa!

E il pensiero vola a Marc Chagall...

sigurd says

devo dire che è un libro scritto molto bene; non so se l'autore, Chaim Potok, abbia seguito il consiglio di Cechov di scrivere soltanto quando si è freddi come il ghiaccio, perché qui e là trapelano punte di nostalgia scottante, bollori e schegge arroventate di rivalsa personale. Ma gli ebrei scrivono sempre per espiare colpe come in un inferno, mai trionfalmente.

Non è quello che propriamente si potrebbe considerare un romanzo, con una trama vera e propria, ma una specie di autobiografia artistica (fittizia) con tanto di anelito e di ostacolo. Numerose sono le frasi a uso dei giovani artisti presenti. Asher Lev si scontra con una tradizione, quella del suo popolo, per rimanere fedele a un'altra tradizione occidentale, quella della pittura e dei suoi soggetti. Questo lo spunto drammatico che ci accompagnerà per tutto il libro. Così che si avvicina al soggetto per eccellenza, la crocifissione di Cristo, perché il suo ebraismo è così ben assorbito che sa bene quanto la teologia ebraica sia solo una teologia negativa, come diceva Steiner. Persino il mondo divino dei greci è tanto vicino alle nostre sofferenze, poiché riempie la natura delle sue manifestazioni. Ma il monoteismo ebraico stacca come la vetta del Sinai, e solo una capacità estrema di astrazione potrebbe figurare quel dio ammonitore vicino a noi. Egli rimane lontano e non ci consola nei nostri piccoli tormenti quotidiani. Però quanto più è lontano, tanto più invade il presente, in maniera insopportabile, come un occhio perennemente puntato, e sparge ovunque i suoi dettami, i suoi decreti, le sue regole e precetti. Castiga fino alla terza generazione. Potok, benevolmente, è affianco ad Asher Lev, a raccontare la sua piccola grande battaglia contro il dio invisibile.

Heidi says

Books like this are wasted on the young. I'm so glad I was a lazy middle school student and didn't read it because I would have missed most of the meaning and then passed over it now.

Though it started slow for me, sputtering out of the gate with 3 stars, it soon picked up speed and crossed the finish line with 5 stars - not because the story was racing, but because my mind was. You will see religiously devout parents through the eyes of a child; you will see the Hasidic Jewish world through the eyes of an artist, you will see Christianity through the eyes of Jew. And in the end you may see a little less black and white in your own world.

What I enjoyed most was riding shotgun with a boy who begins as a prodigy and ends as an artist. You see his mom and dad, the conflicting worlds of art and his religion, and masterpieces like the David and the Pieta through his eyes and you hear his thoughts as he processes all this information to create great art himself. It's fantastic. You won't need a seatbelt but you will need your brain. Enjoy the ride.

Lù says

Intriso di religione fino al midollo, in modo quasi soffocante e inconcepibile per me, ma giustissimo per il libro in questione. La trama è in apparenza semplice: un bambino ebreo ortodosso di Brooklyn che - in una realtà tradizionalmente ostile alla rappresentazione figurativa - ha ricevuto in dono un immenso talento per la pittura e per quel dono è pronto anche a perdere l'appoggio della sua famiglia. Ma nel libro c'è molto di più: è un libro che parla di genialità, dolore e solitudine. Parla del conflitto tra generazioni, del tentativo di conciliare mondi in apparenza inconciliabili, della ricerca della propria strada e di tutta la sofferenza che questo può portare.

Allora sii un grande artista, Asher Lev; quella sarà l'unica giustificazione per tutto il dolore che causerai.

Czarny Pies says

"My name is Asher Lev" est un bildungsroman bien réussi dont le protagoniste est un jeune newyorkais né dans une famille hassidique du groupe loubavitch. L'hassidisme est un mouvement judaïque intégriste et Kabbalistique fondée du dix-huitième siècle en Pologne. Les membres vivent en communautés séparées des chrétiens. Ils suivent le code vestimentaire judaïque moyenâgeux. Les hommes portent des papillotes et les femmes mariées portent des perruques. Vus de l'extérieure le but des Hasidim semble être de résister la modernité à tout prix.

Je recommande fortement "My name is Asher Lev" à tous ceux qui veulent comprendre la culture américaine du vingtième siècle. L'importance des Hasidim dépassaient de loin leur très faible nombre. Par le fait d'exister, les Hasidim dérangaient beaucoup la majorité des juifs américains hautement assimilés cars ils semaient la doute chez eux. Les Hasidim forçaient les autres juifs à se demander s'ils pratiquaient le judaïsme de la bonne manière. En même temps par leur ferveur ils dérangaient énormément les chrétiens aux É.-U. qui devenaient de plus en plus tiède dans leurs pratiques. Lors de sa parution en 1972 on pensait que "My name is Asher Lev" s'adressaient à l'Amérique en entier.

Potok commence par analyser les inconvénients d'être hassidique. D'abord les Hasidim sont ridiculisés dans les rues parce qu'ils ont l'air bizarre. Asher Lev est fortement gêné par les regards qu'il attire lors de ses visites au Metropolitan Museum. Un problème plus sérieux est qu'Asher possède un don pour la peinture et tandis que sa religion lui interdit de représenter des êtres humaines.

Le père d'Asher est furieux quand Asher néglige ses études pour consacrer toute son énergie à la peinture. Heureusement le père est parti la plupart du temps en Europe où il organise des nouveaux Yeshiva (écoles juives). Laissé seul, Asher développe son talent et devient un artiste célèbre.

Le père d'Asher sort immédiatement de sa première exposition à cause de deux tableaux avec des femmes nues. La deuxième exposition provoque une rupture définitive. Cette fois Asher représente son grand-père assassiné à Paques par un chrétien comme Christ crucifié. Son père est hors de lui et le Rabbin expulse Asher de la communauté. À la fin du roman, Asher comprend qu'il devra faire son chemin tout seul.

Potok est déchiré par son protagoniste. Il défend son droit de suivre son étoile. Aussi il insiste que les intentions d'Asher étaient bonnes. Néanmoins, les écarts d'Asher sont extrêmement graves. "My name is Asher Lev" n'offre pas de solutions faciles. Il a perdu beaucoup de son actualité mais il est toujours un roman très puissant.

Chris says

I've heard good things about Potok's "Chosen" and it sounds like that's his book that most people have read. I enjoyed his style here and I suspect I'll pick up *The Chosen* to read later.

Content/Theme

Before commenting on anything else, I need to comment on the theme and content of the book.

This book is deeply entrenched in the Jewish culture and has many references that are likely very commonplace to those in the Jewish culture, but were very foreign to me. I got the general meaning of most things from context, but I still have a long list of terms, phrases and actions to look up and better understand.

This book also has a lot of great detail about the art world. This is another realm in which I am an

inexperienced traveler. I had a better understanding of art than Judaism, but there were still numerous names, periods, phrases and theories that I didn't understand directly.

One suggestion that I would make which added huge depth to me, is to Google the names of the various paintings/sculptures/artists that are referenced and that Asher studies intently. Some are more important than others, but just seeing what it is he's seeing and experiencing brought a huge new depth to the book.

Characters

Obviously, Asher is the main character. He is a very deep character with a ton of internal conflict and a lot of passion which he doesn't understand or know fully how to direct. His development throughout the novel was very subtle. I found it very interesting that he was portrayed largely as a pawn in his own life. A few times, he tells his father that he "can't control it", meaning his art. In much of the "dialog" that happens between Asher and most characters, he is largely a character who isn't directing the actions of his world. He is often silent and lets others make their assumptions and their decisions. And yet, through that silence, he imposes his will on those who are closest to him.

Asher's parents are also very lucid characters. Asher's mother is passionate and very torn between her devotion to her husband and to her son. The final climactic work of Asher truly captures his mother's character. His father was also very well portrayed. I found myself frustrated with him at times but also sympathizing with him. There was a section where Asher tries to explain art to his father, going into the technical artistic terms and phrases. That scene was a very profound description of the huge disparity between their two worlds.

The other characters in the book were largely there as tools either for Asher's own development or for exploring the gap between Asher's two worlds, art and Judaism.

Plot/Writing/Pacing

There were times that I would have liked the story to pick up the pace a bit. The descriptions were great (very artistic) and the depth that the scenes gave to Asher and his family and friends was huge. I'm not sure what scenes I would have cut or tightened up, but there were times that I would to have liked it to speed up a little.

The plot itself was intense. The novel was divided into "books" outlining different parts in Asher's life and development. Each "book" built on those before it and none of the sections came to a final "conclusion" or at least to a "happy ending." Even though I would not like to see them split into stand alone books, looking back, I see that as a possibility. They each had their own rising action, climax, and hint of resolution. And together through the course of the novel, they provided an overall rising action, with the final book having the greatest climax before the final "resolution."

Overall

Even though this book focussed on conflict between art and Judaism, it goes much deeper than that dynamic. I found myself relating many times to things that Asher would say or think. He was conflicted between his religious heritage and the "carnal" world. He was conflicted between respecting his parents and becoming his own person. He was conflicted between Tradition and Growth. He was conflicted between two things that were both "good." So much of his character development embodies principles that apply to us all.

The story and the writing was very interesting and thought provoking. I enjoyed reading it. The final climax made my soul churn as I realized there was no "happy" way for things to resolve. I'm not one to beg for happy endings, but after getting so attached to Asher, I had hoped that things would turn out better. Still (not to spoil the end), things didn't end up as grim as they could have done. I believe Potok wrote a second book about Asher Lev. I may have to read that as well to see what becomes of him beyond this novel.

The reading isn't "heavy", but the tone of the book is heavy. But Definitely Recommended.

3.5 Stars

Tim says

A new favorite.

Roberto says

“Si è mai sentito di un grande artista che fosse felice?”

Asher Lev è un bambino che ha un dono prezioso, sa disegnare. Sente il bisogno irresistibile di esprimere le sue emozioni ed i suoi sentimenti attraverso la pittura. Questo sarebbe una cosa pregevole, se non fosse che è ebreo.

Il padre è un importante rappresentante della comunità dei Chassidim Ladover di Brooklyn ed è molto religioso e rigoroso applicante degli usi, dei costumi e delle tradizioni. E' un uomo buono ma di vedute ristrette, vede l'arte come qualcosa che distoglie l'attenzione dalle cose importanti, che lui pensa siano solo la religiosità, lo studio, la preghiera. Un uomo che, attento solamente a soddisfare gli obblighi che Dio sembra avergli richiesto, non è in grado di capire chi lui stesso ha generato.

Asher, che racconta la sua storia in prima persona, passa quindi la sua infanzia combattuto tra il suo bisogno di esprimersi con l'arte e le limitazioni imposte dal suo credo religioso che condanna l'arte figurativa in quanto contraria a Dio.

Fino a quando incontra un mentore che gli fa capire che l'arte non può che essere libera, altrimenti è solo propaganda. E che:

"ogni grande artista è un uomo che si è liberato della sua famiglia, della sua nazione, della sua razza. Ogni uomo che ha mostrato al mondo la via alla bellezza, alla vera cultura, è stato un ribelle, un "universale" senza patriottismo, senza casa, che ha trovato la sua gente in ogni dove"

Un artista non può avere paura di mostrarsi; deve liberarsi degli ormecci, delle costrizioni, degli obblighi, delle tradizioni. Deve essere libero di innovare. Anche se questo gli causa sofferenza. E in effetti, *“si è mai sentito di un grande artista che fosse felice?”*

In tutta la prima parte del libro assistiamo al continuo tentativo di condizionamento del ragazzo: mio padre faceva così e il padre di mio padre faceva così. Non ti vergogni a dire cosà? Cosa direbbe tuo padre se ti sentisse? Cosa penserebbe tuo padre se ti vedesse? Tuo padre è un grand'uomo; cosa ha fatto per meritarsi un figlio come te? *"Asher, onorare tuo padre è uno dei Dieci Comandamenti"*

“Il mio nome è Asher Lev” risponde Asher. Che significa che lui è un'altra persona. Che significa affermazione dell'io. Che siamo tutti diversi; che tutti dobbiamo trovare la nostra strada. Che non esistono strade prefissate. Che dobbiamo affermare con forza la nostra individualità, evitando di cedere ai

condizionamenti. Anche se così facendo finiamo per ferire chi più amiamo. Ognuno vivendo afferma il proprio io e lascia vittime sul proprio cammino, anche senza volerlo.

Molto simile, sotto certi punti di vista, al concetto di tradimento espresso da Oz in Giuda, l'innovazione, il cambiamento, visto come tradimento dei valori del passato.

Il libro parla anche diffusamente di arte, del concetto di arte in senso lato. L'arte non è tecnica, ma una trasposizione fedele del mondo interiore dell'artista. Dovendo quindi guardare dentro di sé, l'artista non può essere limitato da una qualsivoglia ideologia, ma deve guardare tutto e rappresentarlo senza filtri, senza limiti, senza condizionamenti. L'arte deve mostrare le cose per come sono, non deve allietare, né convertire, né convincere.

"La vera arte è in stretto rapporto con il dolore. Causa dolore, mostra il dolore. Crocifigge."

Deve provocare reazione, deve urticare, non deve blandire. Ritorna il concetto appena visto nell'Orfeo di Powers: *"Lo scopo della musica non è commuovere gli ascoltatori? No. Lo scopo della musica è svegliare gli ascoltatori. Significa imparare che cosa ripudiare e quando"*

Tanti spunti di riflessione, quindi, in questo libro: assecondare o no la via che i figli vorranno intraprendere? Fino a che punto è corretto il rispetto delle tradizioni? E' sempre giusto non seguire le orme dei padri? E' giusto credere "ciecamente" in qualche religione? Qual è il rapporto tra arte ed artista?

E inoltre: i rapporti tra ebraismo e rappresentazione artistica, tra ebraismo e cattolicesimo, l'importanza al negativo della crocifissione nella religione ebraica (Gesù è stato crocefisso dai romani e da quel momento milioni di ebrei sono morti).

Credo che quello che Potok ci abbia voluto dire nel libro è di aprire la mente, sforzarsi con umiltà di comprendere i punti di vista altrui ma alla fine pensare sempre e comunque con la nostra testa.

Un grande, splendido libro, interessante, ben scritto, denso, scorrevole, profondo, con personaggi magnificamente caratterizzati.
