

A Campus Novel, a Picaresque Novel and a Double Bildungsroman: Reconsidering Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*

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ABSTRACT

Michael Chabon's second novel *Wonder Boys* (1995) focuses on Grady Tripp, a professor of creative writing whose personal and professional problems culminate during a writers' festival on campus. A first person account of a series of unexpected events that Grady and his student James Leer experience in and outside of Pittsburgh during one weekend, the novel received mixed reviews. Whereas Robert Ward praised the text for being "the ultimate writing-program novel," Michael Gorra denounced it, in a rather simplified way, as "another novel about a writer messing up his life." Most famously, Jonathan Yardley in *The Washington Post* review appreciated the novel's style and effective use of comic elements, but concluded that the text portrays a limited experience similar to the author's own, thus urging Chabon "to move on, to break away from the first person and explore larger worlds." While Chabon later seemed to follow Yardley's advice in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), an ambitious historical novel which earned him the Pulitzer Prize, this paper aims to reconsider *Wonder Boys* by drawing on its previous criticism and analyzing it as an amalgam of the campus novel, the picaresque as well as both Grady's and James's Bildungsroman.

KEYWORDS

American novel, campus novel, picaresque novel, Bildungsroman, Michael Chabon, *Wonder Boys*

In one of the essays from the collection *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing along the Borderlands* (2008), Michael Chabon recalls the genesis of his novel *Wonder Boys* (1995). Five years after the publication of his critically acclaimed debut *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988), a coming of age story of a young man whose father is a gangster, Chabon was living in San Francisco with his second wife, Ayelet, and trying to work on his second novel which by then he was calling *Fountain City*. However, as the novel was becoming rather lengthy and its many subplots seemed increasingly harder to connect, the frustrated author decided to leave the project:

Every night I went down to my computer in the room under our house on Twenty-Ninth Street and sat for hours, staring at the monitor, dreaming about all the other wonderful books I could have written in the last five years. On the day my wife told me she was going to be largely unavailable for the next six weeks, I went down to my office and found myself, inexplicably, imagining a scene. A straight-laced, troubled young man with a tendency toward melodrama was standing on a backyard lawn at night, holding a tiny winking Derringer to his temple, while on the porch of the nearby house a shaggy, potsmoking, much older man, who had far more reason to want to die, watched him and tried to decide if what he was seeing was real or not. [...] I opened a new file and called it X. I started to write, and quickly found the voice of that shaggy old watcher in the shadows.¹

Gradually, Chabon found himself combining this idea with his own recent experience and developing it into what eventually became his second novel, *Wonder Boys*. The young man from the description above thus became James Leer, a sophomore student of English at an unnamed university in Pittsburgh, and the watcher shaped into Professor Grady Tripp, James's creative

1 Michael Chabon, "Diving into Wreck," in *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing along the Borderlands* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 148.

writing teacher and the narrator of the novel. Because of its setting during a writers' festival on campus, the novel has sometimes been classified as a campus novel,² and as campus novels tend to be comic or satirical,³ reviewers such as Richard Eder have characterized the text as a satirical comedy.⁴ However, while Anglo-American campus novels, from Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) or Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952) onwards, usually focus on professors rather than students, Chabon's initial idea emphasizes that the text concentrates on the relation between the two men, the student and his mentor. Robert Ward is thus right to characterize the text as "the ultimate writing-program novel."⁵ As the friendship between the two men largely develops during their adventures after they leave the campus behind, Michael Gorra aptly observes that the novel is a "picaresque account of Grady's lost weekend."⁶ Finally, as not only the relation between Grady and James, but also their attitudes to life change significantly throughout the text, I suggest the novel may also be classified as a double Bildungsroman.

In fact, the scene that provided the author with the idea for the novel does not appear until page 46, when Grady participates at the writers' festival, WordFest, and goes out onto the porch during an opening party at the college Chancellor's house. As the preceding section of the novel serves to introduce the narrator and his life experience, the reader learns that Grady Tripp had been brought up by his grandmother until he went to college in 1968. From that time onwards, Grady has always been largely inspired by the Beat Generation and their rejection of conformist lifestyle: "I'd read Kerouac the year before, and had conceived the usual picture of myself as an outlaw-poet-pathfinder, a kind of Zen-masterly John C. Frémont on amphetamines with a marbled dime-store-pad of lined paper in the back pocket of my denim pants. I still see myself that way, I suppose."⁷ It was in college, in a creative writing class, that Grady met Terry Crabtree who later became his editor. Crabtree has also come to WordFest in order to pick up the completed text of Grady's fourth novel, *Wonder Boys*, the title of which refers to its characters, the three brothers of the Wonder family. The manuscript, however, is far from finished; rather, Grady's description of the troubled writing process echoes Chabon's own failed efforts to complete *Fountain City*:

I had too much to write: too many fine and miserable buildings to construct and streets to name and clock towers to set chiming, too many characters to raise up from the dirt like flowers whose petals I peeled down to the intricate frail organs within, too many terrible genetic and fiduciary secrets to dig up and bury and dig up again, too many divorces to grant, heirs to disinherit, trusts to arrange, letters to misdirect into evil hands, innocent children to slay with rheumatic fever, women to leave unfulfilled and hopeless, men to drive to adultery and theft, fires to ignite at the hearts of ancient houses.⁸

2 See e.g. Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen, *American Literature: A History* (London: Routledge, 2014), 245.

3 See e.g. Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2–3.

4 Richard Eder, "A Bag of Pot, a Purloined Jacket, and Thou," review of *Wonder Boys*, by Michael Chabon, *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1995, accessed May 28, 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-26/books/bk-47049_1_michael-chabon.

5 Robert Ward, "Writing High," review of *Wonder Boys*, by Michael Chabon, *New York Times*, April 9, 1995, accessed May 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/24/reviews/boys.html>.

6 Michael Gorra, "Youth and Consequences," review of *Wonder Boys*, by Michael Chabon, *New Republic*, June 26, 1995, 41.

7 Michael Chabon, *Wonder Boys* (New York: Random House, 2008), 17.

8 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 12.

Nevertheless, the similarities between the narrator and the author do not extend beyond their inability to complete their works in progress. While Chabon was only thirty-two years old when *Wonder Boys* was published, Grady is about a decade older. Unlike Chabon, whom the *People* magazine, to his disapproval, wanted to place on their list of the “50 Most Beautiful People,”⁹ Grady repeatedly refers to himself as potbellied. Furthermore, apart from being unable to finish his novel, Grady faces problems in his personal life. Grady’s third wife, Emily, has just written to him a note announcing she is leaving him, probably because she found out about his long-lasting affair with the college Chancellor, Sara Gaskell. On reading the note, Grady feels honestly sorry for Emily, who disapproves of divorce. With respect to his affair, Grady also pities Sara’s husband Gaskell, the head of the English Department: “I liked Walter Gaskell, and I could never lie in his bed without feeling that there was a coarse thread of shame running through the iridescent silk of my desire for his wife.”¹⁰ While Grady and Sara were not planning on divorcing their spouses, on the day when Emily leaves him, Sara announces to Grady that she is pregnant with him. While Sara believes there must be some way for her to have the baby, as both hers and Grady’s marriage have been childless, Grady feels reluctant to make a decision and accept responsibility.

Besides indulging in an extramarital relationship, Grady regularly smokes marijuana, which, according to some other characters, explains why his second novel went out in so many directions. While he never admits to marijuana having a negative effect on his writing, he confesses that it sometimes makes it difficult for him to differentiate between objective reality and his drug-induced imagination: “As a lifelong habitué of marijuana I was used to having even the most dreadful phenomena prove, on further inspection, to be only the figments of my paranoid fancy.”¹¹ Consequently, although Grady often appears irresponsible, the reader cannot avoid sympathizing with him, as he honestly admits to his faults. Thus, while Michael Gorra argues that *Wonder Boys* is only “another novel about a writer messing up his life, [...] a novel written in the kind of ingratiating ‘I-know-I’m-an-asshole’ voice,”¹² I agree with Robert Ward who suggests that “despite (or maybe because of) his failings, Grady Tripp is an appealing hero. [...] Though Grady Tripp is a mess as a man and an artist, he’s very much a lovable mess.”¹³ In addition, Gorra’s characterization of the novel is rather imprecise with respect to the rest of the text, as Grady not only “messes up” his life, but also realizes he has to face his problems and reflect on the consequences of his behavior. Another reviewer, Jonathan Yardley, appreciated the novel’s style, but concluded that the text portrays a limited experience similar to the author’s own, thus urging Chabon “to move on, to break away from the first person and explore larger worlds.”¹⁴ Chabon later seemed to follow Yardley’s advice in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), a Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novel whose wider scope benefitted from the traditional omniscient narration.

9 See Lewis Buzbee, “Michael Chabon: Comics Came First,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2000, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/24/reviews/000924.24buz.html>.

10 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 32–33.

11 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 29.

12 Gorra, “Youth and Consequences.”

13 Ward, “Writing High.”

14 Jonathan Yardley, “The Paper Chase,” review of *Wonder Boys*, by Michael Chabon, *Washington Post*, March 19, 1995, accessed May 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1995/03/19/the-paper-chase/a75194ce-c901-46c9-85f4-c7a523185127/?utm_term=.1e9f5aefda22.

However, in *Wonder Boys*, the first person narration is a key feature of the novel, as Grady wins the reader's sympathy by telling his own story. Moreover, the development of Grady's understanding relationship to James makes him even more of a likable character. Not being in the mood to talk to the self-important participants of the WordFest, Grady goes out onto the porch and sees James standing on the lawn playing with a pistol. Grady is worried that James might want to kill himself, but James claims the gun is a fake which his mother won in a penny arcade when she was in Catholic school. The two men continue talking and Grady encourages James to keep writing, as he is convinced that the student is immensely talented, although his short story about a flawed relation between a young boy and his mother set against the background of the corruption of the Catholic Church was not appreciated by his classmates earlier that day. It is passages like these that highlight an additional meaning of the title of Chabon's novel, *Wonder Boys* referring to all the young writers such as James, whose hearts are, in the author's words, "filled with the dread and mystery of the books they believe themselves destined to write."¹⁵ Thus, Robert Ward is right to observe that largely due to Chabon's lyrical language, "his comedy always reins in his romantic impulses," and "his work seems to reflect a nature that is at once passionate and satirical."¹⁶ In particular, Chabon's characters are often confused and foolish, yet treated with sympathy and compassion.

Accordingly, in their conversation, Grady shows a lot of understanding for James, even experiencing a strong moment of connection with the gentle and insecure young man: "I felt as though he were the only person whose company I could possibly have enjoyed at that moment, awkward and isolate and hopeless as he was."¹⁷ As James is a big fan of Hollywood actors from old movies, Grady uses his knowledge of the Chancellor's house and invites him inside to show him the most precious piece of Walter Gaskell's collection, a jacket Marilyn Monroe was wearing in 1954 when she married the baseball player Joe DiMaggio. James is excited, as he had already written a novel called *The Love Parade*, titled after the 1929 musical film.

As the two men keep talking, they stay behind all the other WordFest participants who leave the house in order to attend an evening lecture. In a moment, Grady is attacked and bitten by Sara's dog, an Alaskan malamute called Doctor Dee, that had never liked him, and the shocked James happens to kill the dog with his gun which proves not to be a fake after all. In the ensuing chaos, James takes the jacket away with him. Grady and James lay the dog in the trunk of Grady's car and the jacket on the back seat, and the professor tries to assure the student that everything will be fine. Although Grady encourages James to drink alcohol, as he wants him to relax and not to feel so guilty after the accident, he bears in mind that James had wanted to kill himself and he hopes to help him: "In my heart I believed that James Leer could still be saved."¹⁸ When in a dance club after the lecture, Terry, who is gay, shows interest in James, as he believes the attraction is mutual, Grady tries to stop him: "I think he was planning to off himself tonight. [...] Anyway, he's a mess.

15 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 367.

16 Ward, "Writing High."

17 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 52.

18 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 96.

He's a disaster. I don't think he needs sexual confusion thrown into the mix right this minute."¹⁹ While James had earlier asked Grady if Terry was gay, as Grady is uncertain about James's sexual orientation, he tries to prevent him from getting involved with Terry.

At the parking lot in front of the club, Grady and Terry have to confront an aggressive man who claims that Grady's car, a 1966 Ford Galaxie 500, is his own, which Grady realizes might be possible, as he got the car without proper documentation from an acquaintance who owed him some money but could not pay him back. Yardley is thus right to refer to "a small explosion of sub-plots" in the novel which "come together in ways no one except Michael Chabon would want to imagine, but we must be thankful that he did, for the results are uniformly if exhaustingly uproarious."²⁰ Eventually, Grady and Terry manage to get rid of the man, but before he leaves, he jumps on the hood and damages it. On the way to Grady's place, Grady and Terry make up a story about this character, calling him Vernon Hardapple. While this episode reminds Grady of his carefree friendship with Terry back when they used to see each other more often, he tries hard to avoid talking to the editor about his unfinished novel. As usual, he tries to release his anxiety by smoking marijuana which, however, combined with lack of regular eating habits, results in occasional spells of dizziness and bewilderment.

The next day, regardless of Grady's break-up with Emily, his father-in-law, Irv Warshaw, calls him to invite him to celebrate the Passover with the whole family. On the spur of the moment, Grady decides to accept the invitation and to take James with him. While before leaving town, Grady stops by Sara's house to explain to her Doctor Dee's death and the disappearance of the jacket, all that they talk about is their future and the baby so that Grady absent-mindedly forgets about the purpose of his visit. On the way to the Warshaws, Grady and James find out even more about each other. Grady, who lost his mother in infancy and his father, a veteran from Korean War, to suicide when he was only four years old, empathizes with James, who tells him that his mother, who used to work as a fry cook, is no longer alive. This passage thus transcends the satirical genre of the campus novel, which is not likely to deal with such serious topics as the transience of human life. After Grady and James arrive at the Warshaws, Irv notices the damaged hood of Grady's car. When Grady starts retelling the story about Vernon Hardapple, James immediately joins in and supplies other details to the story. Thus, both men share the passion for making up stories, relying on the resources of their imagination. Later on, Grady even finds out that he and James have a similar reading taste, as they both admire an obscure writer using the pseudonym of August Van Zorn whom Grady knew in person.

The Warshaws can hardly be characterized as a typical observant Jewish family, as their three children, including Emily, are adopted Koreans. In fact, their open-mindedness is the reason why the gentile Grady clings to them: "I got a strong feeling of satisfaction from sitting down to eat a mad meal of parsley, bones, hard-boiled eggs, crackers and salt water with a bunch of Jews, three of them Korean. [...] If nothing else in life, at least I'd fulfilled my earliest ambition simply to wander far afield, in spirit if not in space, from the place of my birth."²¹ Thus, while Chabon is

19 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 104.

20 Yardley, "The Paper Chase."

21 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 206.

a Jewish American writer and several critics have compared his writing style to Philip Roth,²² in this novel, he presents Jewish traditions and rituals from an outsider's point of view.

Ironically, it is eventually revealed that James is more of a Jew than Grady. When Mr. Leer arrives to pick James up together with his wife, it is revealed that contrary to what James had told Grady, his mother is still alive. Moreover, the Leers turn out to be well-off rather than working-class, as they tell Grady they live in Sewickley Heights, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Pennsylvania. Grady thus gradually realizes that James had made other people sympathize with him by means of a false autobiography, one that he also elaborated on in his novel: "I was still having a hard time abandoning my conception of James Leer as the working class boy damaged by grief for his dead mother, but I suppose that was only the situation of the hero of his *Love Parade*. How much of what he'd told me about himself would turn out to be the story of his novel's protagonist?"²³ While James has deliberately stylized himself into a person of a different social background and family history, this passage seems to warn the reader against making the wrong, but rather common assumption of identifying the protagonist of a piece of fiction with the author of the text.²⁴

When James characterizes his parents as cold and after James's mother nags her son for wearing a coat that she had thrown into the garbage, Grady admits that "in truth they'd seemed far more concerned with my opinion of them than with the welfare of their son."²⁵ As James seems rather estranged from his parents, together with Terry, Grady decides to take James back to the college at night when his parents are asleep, leaving Doctor Dee's dead body in James's bed as a decoy. It is in James's parents' house that Grady notices a photo with the inscription ZION CLUB OF PITTSBURGH. When Grady asks James if he is Jewish, James responds: "Sort of. [...] I mean, yes I am, but my grandparents—they kind of, I don't know. Got rid of it, I guess."²⁶ Thus, just like the period details taken over from old films, the knowledge of Catholicism that James displays in his writing is derived from second-hand sources rather than first-hand experience. Nevertheless, after Terry reads James's novel, he concludes that James is really talented and decides to get it published. This piece of news will also be announced at the WordFest closing ceremony.

Besides a professional cooperation, a romantic relationship eventually develops between James and Terry. The next morning, a policeman stops by at Grady's house, looking for James, probably after James's parents reported the disappearance of their son and the discovery of Doctor Dee's corpse. When looking for James, Grady finds him in bed with Terry, as the two men had just spent their first night together. Grady observes that James "didn't seem particularly distressed or bewildered [...] on awakening to his first morning as a lover of men."²⁷ On the contrary, the young man who used to have suicidal thoughts appears rather even-tempered because of this self-

22 See Gorra, "Youth and Consequences," or Michiko Kakutani, "A Novel about a Novelist and His Messy Life," review of *Wonder Boys*, by Michael Chabon, *New York Times*, March 17, 1995, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/17/books/books-of-the-times-a-novel-about-a-novelist-and-his-messy-life.html>.

23 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 233.

24 Such a misreading was committed by many critics who labeled Chabon as a gay writer due to the protagonist of his debut novel being attracted to another male character.

25 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 243.

26 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 282.

27 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 290.

discovery. In addition, not only James, but also the more cynical Terry looks like he is in love. This realization makes Grady think about his own future with respect to personal life.

Before James leaves with the policeman, Grady wants to pick out Marilyn Monroe's jacket out of his car, only to find out that the car had disappeared overnight. As Grady assumes the car must have been taken by the man he calls Vernon, he sets out to find him and get the jacket back. Eventually, he manages to locate the man, whose real name turns out to be Walker. In the ensuing fight, Grady gets the jacket, but accidentally loses all but seven pages of the manuscript of his unfinished novel which happen to fly out of a car that he borrows for this trip from one of his students, when he is trying to escape from Walker. In fact, Grady never completes *Wonder Boys*, as he decides to leave this project.

By the time Grady arrives with the jacket at the college, Sara and Walter have had a crucial exchange and they are about to separate. However, Sara gets angry at Grady when she correctly recognizes he had smoked marijuana before his arrival at the college. After that, Grady experiences a strong spell of dizziness so that he is taken to hospital. When released from the hospital, he asks a nurse where can he see some newborn babies, and looking at them proves to be a transformative experience for him, as he realizes two essential things regarding Sara's pregnancy and his future: "First, that as I presently lived it, mine was not a life into which a baby ought responsibly to be introduced, and second, that when this pregnancy was terminated, my relationship with Sara would not survive the procedure."²⁸ Thus, Grady suddenly decides to change his lifestyle and commit to a serious relationship. When a few days later, Sara announces to him that she is keeping the baby and asks him if she can move in with him because she is leaving Walter, Grady agrees. After Walter makes sure Grady loses his job, Sara gets the position of dean of students at another college and arranges for Grady to be hired there as a part-time instructor, while he is working on a new novel.

In conclusion, the novel focuses on two characters, Grady and James, who become close friends after they realize how many things they have in common during a weekend they spend on unexpected travels on and off campus. First, they are both writers who enjoy fantasizing and making up stories, as evidenced not only in the creative writing class, but also when James spontaneously joins in the fabrication about Vernon Hardapple. Second, they both come from problematic family backgrounds. While Grady became an orphan at the age of four and was brought up by his grandmother, James is estranged from his parents as well as his privileged background. Whereas James tries to escape from reality by creating an alternative identity, Grady has been indulging in an irresponsible lifestyle of love affairs and excessive marijuana use for more than twenty years. Nevertheless, as the novel has the features of a double Bildungsroman, they both have to grow and change. While James achieves self-confidence by being recognized as a talented writer and coming to terms with his sexual orientation, Grady finally stops using marijuana and commits to a healthier and more responsible lifestyle through the role of a husband and father.

28 Chabon, *Wonder Boys*, 350.

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