

Chicago Tribune May 6, 1990

## THE GIFT OF ASHER LEV

By Chaim Potok

Alfred A. Knopf. 370 pp.

It is sometimes difficult, says a critic in response to artist Asher Lev's latest Paris show, to find the distinction between establishing an individual style and repeating oneself. He might be speaking to Chaim Potok about this sequel to the superb 1972 novel, *My Name Is Asher Lev*.

Potok has marginal success with sequels. The power of his 1967 debut novel, *The Chosen*, stemmed largely from its appealing artlessness, the author's refusal to obtrude on his story of the passion for ideas and deep-rooted decency of his characters. Its sequel two years later, *The Promise*, while also a trenchant book, seemed marred by Potok's new self-consciousness as a novelist, his effort to not only tell his tale but to sound like a writer. His third novel, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, was even better than *The Chosen*. But *The Gift of Asher Lev* is a weaker sequel than *The Promise*.

In the earlier book, covering Asher's boyhood and adolescence, Asher's plight was an enhanced version of Conservative rabbi Potok's own. Asher could not solve the conflict between his artistic calling and the values of Hebraic tradition. Like *The Chosen's* Danny Saunders, Asher was a Hasidic Jew torn between his secular and religious sides. An artist born into a community of Ladover Hasidim (based on the Lubavitcher sect of Brooklyn's Crown Heights), Asher lives in a world that considers art at best a worthless vanity and, at worst, a blasphemy from the satanic *sitra achra*, the Other Side.

Unlike Roth's or Malamud's Jewish protagonists, Potok's have no wish to join the mainstream culture. They feel passionately bound to their orthodox identities. Asher's was an insoluble conflict. Ultimately, the Ladover's rebbe, its spiritual and political leader, exiled Asher to France.

When *The Gift of Asher Lev* opens, 20 years have passed. Asher has married Devorah, whose parents perished to the Nazis. They live in Southern France with their daughter Rocheleh, 11, and son Avrumel, 5. Asher is now a world-renown painter pursued by art collectors, admirers and museums. He views the late Picasso as a peer. France suits Asher well. But a call comes from Brooklyn. Asher's beloved Uncle Yitzchok has died.

Back for the funeral among his parents and former neighbors, Asher almost immediately longs to return to France. "We came for my uncle's funeral, not mine," he tells Devorah. Like his latest art show, his homecoming feels like a fatal repetition. "It's a kind of death to keep repeating yourself and your life over and over again," he insists.

But events conspire against him. Devorah, whose own parents were murdered when she was four, begins making Asher's parents her own. And oddly, Uncle Yitzchok, whose chain of thriving jewelry stores help finance Ladover schools, had become an art collector. Having bought one of Asher's paintings only to see its value more than double in a year, Yitzchok decided "there's more to art than meets the eye" (an oxymoron no stranger than Billy Nye's "Wagner's music is better than it sounds"). His will makes Asher trustee of his enormously valuable collection. Asher can do with it what he wishes, provided the profits go to the Ladovers.

The rebbe and Asher's father urge him to keep his family in Brooklyn. Gradually, Asher comes to believe he knows the real reason. The rebbe, 89, needs a successor for his worldwide movement. Asher's father seems likeliest, but his own advanced years dictate the need for a clear successor to him as well. They must want Avrumel, his son, Asher suspects, "You want me to give him up so the Ladover will be assured of continuity and leadership deep into the next century."

The material for a gripping story is all there. Potok populates this narrow segment of American society with a rich variety of characters, and Asher has not one but several conflicts.

There is, in fact, much about the book to admire. As usual, Potok excels at capturing the visual details and concrete elements of his settings. He tries more earnestly than before to portray not only the severity but also the joy and song of the Hasidic environment, including even a Hasidic rock band. Most importantly, Potok's is still a world of intense meanings; ideas and behavior matter deeply to his characters, so that even a mild rudeness becomes portentous. Potok's is a sensibility more akin to the Victorians than to many of his anesthetized contemporaries.

Unfortunately, however, Potok's early strength is absent. Never a masterful stylist, here he often narrates what should be shown and describes many things too inconsequential to relate. From page to page he seems indifferent as to what verb tense he'll employ, and he uses some words (e.g., "glacial") with no regard whatsoever for their meaning. At times, he recreates perfectly the syntax of Hasidic English: "'They're repaving this whole section of the parkway,' the driver said. 'Months they're working on it. New trees also they'll put in.'" But often his dialogue, like his narration, is airy as puff pastry.

Worse still, Potok never mines the conflicts Asher faces, neither as artist, Jew, nor father. Despite international acclaim, Asher fears he may have lost his creative vision. Artists slash ears off and stick shotguns in their mouths over such things, but Asher says and does little that reflects artistic agony. Surrounded by neighbors who consider him an embarrassment, who taunt him as an impious sinner, Asher remains torpid in their--his own--sanctimonious world. Even expected to give up his son, whose own characterization is so one-dimensional that Potok must indulge in sentimentality to give it any life at all, Asher merely utters a line about how he had hoped to see the boy grow up in his own home.

As Asher sleepwalks through these pages, so too does the plot wander despite some resolutions forming toward the end. The world of the Hasidim is always intriguing to observe, and Potok has knowledgeable insights to share about art, but Asher Lev casts far less spell in this revisit than he did two decades ago.