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## Michael Chabon weaves swashbuckling yarn about pair of rogues

Julie Foster

Sunday, October 28, 2007

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### Gentlemen of the Road

#### A Tale of Adventure

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**By Michael Chabon**
**BALLANTINE BOOKS; 204 PAGES;  
\$21.95**

I admit it. This is not a book I thought I would enjoy.

But Michael Chabon's short new novel, "Gentlemen of the Road: A Tale of Adventure," reeled me in. Within a few pages I was happily tangled in his net of finely filigreed language, seduced by an old-school-style swashbuckling quest complete with outlandish characters, and well, the smell of exotic places.

"He sat cross-legged on a carpet that smelled like rutting sheep, in the cramped gloom of a circular dog tent constructed, as far as he could tell, from equal quantities of rancid felt, dung smoke and the acrid shadow cast by a naphtha lamp."

And Chabon fesses up as well. The Berkeley Pulitzer Prize winner admits to readers that they've caught him in the act of doing what many of his characters have done in earlier stories - going off in search of adventure. Set in A.D. 950 in the Kingdom of Arran, in the Caucasus Mountains between the Black and Caspian seas, it is the story of two gallavanders, Zelikman, a skinny Frank and a physician of sorts, and Amram, an Abyssinian of large proportions, who travel the Silk Road plying their various skills, including swords for hire, doctoring, horse thievery and scam artistry. The unlikely pair become embroiled in a coup in the medieval Jewish realm of Khazaria, home of the red-haired Jews, when they take up with Filaq, heir to the throne of the deposed king of the Khazars, and set out to make things right.

"I am not overly encumbered by principle, as you know," Zelikman says. "I am a gentleman of the road, an apostate from the faith of my fathers, a renegade, a brigand, a hired blade, a thief, but on this one small principle of economy, damn you, and damn that troublemaking little stripling, and damn every one of those men out there, living men, in full possession, for the most part, of all their limbs and humors, I have to hold firm: if we can only save them one man at a time, then by God we must only *kill* them one man at a time."

And of course flowery language demands a wickedly engaging cast of rogues and heroes. Readers are introduced to drunken Norsemen, rampaging armies, an elephant decked out in gilt-embroidered purple strips and silken panels, the "people of the felt walls, burners of dung fires, sworn to the solitary god of the clear blue sky" and the luscious ladies of Princess Celestial Hind's doss-house.

The princess was "a slave who claimed to originate among a wandering eastern people skilled at chiromancy called the Atsingani, a claim that Amram rather doubted since he

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had never heard of the Atsingani and he could not believe that any race that produced such fine-looking women could long escape the notice of the world." And if the language, exotic locations and a cast of brigands are not enough to seduce a reader, the illustrations by Gary Gianni will do the trick. Gianni graduated from the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts in 1976. He's worked as a courtroom illustrator, has illustrated numerous children's books and recently began a regular stint as the illustrator of the comic strip Prince Valiant.

"Gentlemen of the Road" is laced with surprises and humor, both of which keep nudging the 21st century bibliophile along the path of this improbable journey. And though the novel was serialized in the New York Times Magazine, it contains new material by the author. Chabon writes in an afterword that when he was writing the book he was tempted to title it "Jews With Swords," but says he felt readers might have a hard time circumnavigating an image of "Woody Allen backing toward the nearest exit behind a barrage of wisecracks and a wavering rapier," rather than a memory of "dueling Arabized courtiers at Muslim Granada, or even, say ... the memory of some ancient warrior Jew, like Bar Kochba or Judah Maccabee, famed for his prowess at arms."

And what's more funny than the unexpected? Chabon gently chides the reader to engage in some self-reflection. He writes, "Look at yourself, right now: sitting in your seat on a jet airplane, let's say, in your unearthly orange polyester and neoprene shoes, listening to digital music, crawling across the sky from Charlotte to Las Vegas, and hoping to lose yourself - your home, your certainties, the borders and barriers of your life - by means of a bundle of wood pulp, sewn and glued and stained with blobs of pigment and resin. *People with Books*. What, in 2007, could be more incongruous than that? It makes me want to laugh."

*Julie Foster also reviews books for Publishers Weekly and is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.*

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