

8/26/01

Lot of good tomes

A prize-winning author recalls his favorite novels

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Writer Michael Chabon calls from his home in Berkeley, Calif., where he lives with his wife, Ayelet Waldman, and their two kids. She's a writer too, and their home — like the homes of most writers — is crammed full of books.

"My favorite books are the books I've re-read, that I would go back to and that I do go back to," says Chabon.

That's exactly how others feel about Chabon's novels. He shot to prominence with "The Mysteries of Pittsburgh," a debut novel with a central gay character that was so convincing, the handsome Chabon was named by Time as one of the country's top gay novelists — even though he's heterosexual.

Chabon followed that with the acclaimed "Wonder Boys," which was turned into an Oscar-winning movie last year starring Michael Douglas.

Chabon currently is basking in the success of his latest, "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay" (Picador).

The book, about two young immigrants in 1939 New York who create a Superman-like comic-book hero called the Escapist, is not only Chabon's most popular work, it earned him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

To mark its release in paperback, Chabon — now at work on a children's book — discussed some of the books that mean the most to him.

"The Phantom Tollbooth" by Norman Juster

"The single novel that I've read

the most? The record is probably still held by 'The Phantom Tollbooth,' which I must have read 11 or 12 times when I was a kid. I had read a children's biography of Daniel Beard [Daniel Carter Beard was involved in a precursor to the Boy Scouts called the Sons of Daniel Boone], and it said how, with his favorite books, he would prick his finger and sign his name in blood. So I did that with 'The Phantom Tollbooth' — I loved it so much that I signed my name in blood on the flyleaf."

"Love in the Time of Cholera" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

"The characters in 'Cholera' are so incredibly involving and feel so real. [Marquez] makes that time period that the novel is set in come so fully and vividly to life."

"Moby-Dick" by Herman Melville

"Melville was such an incredibly fantastic user of English — the echoes of Biblical language mixed with vernacular American language. I just love his prose — it completely delights me and gets me thinking about writing."

"The World According to Garp" by John Irving

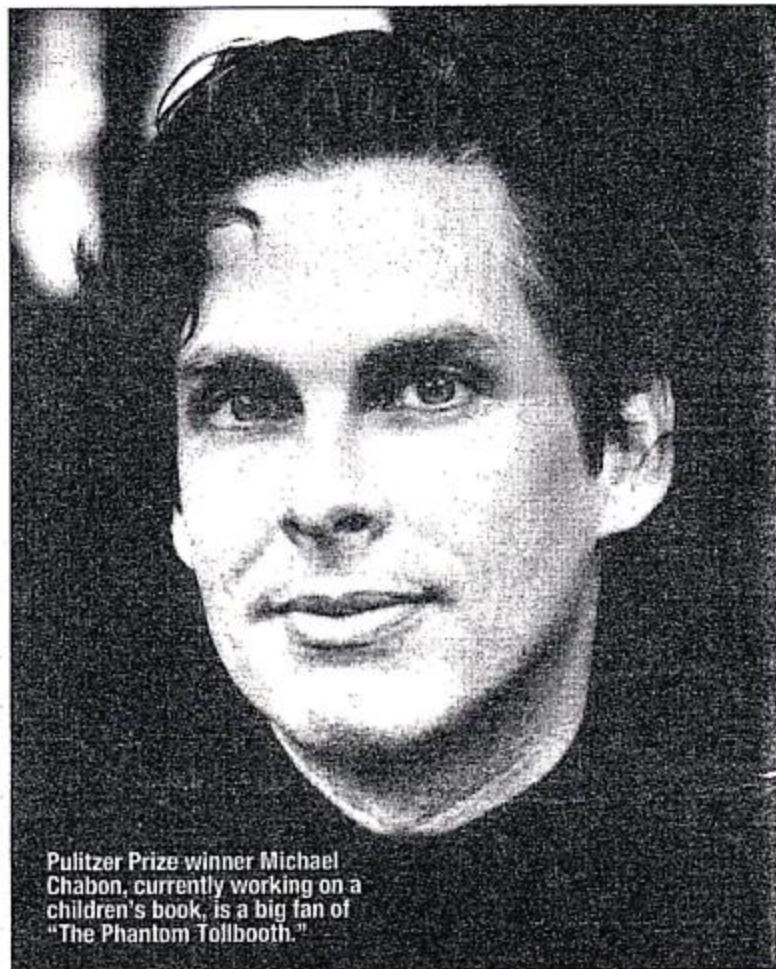
"The first literary novel that I remember reading was 'The World According to Garp.' It definitely played a role in inspiring me to become a writer."

"His Monkey Wife" by John Collier

"He's a pure pleasure to read. Very clever stories, cleverly plotted and also beautifully written. He had a very bitter view of human behavior, which is softened by his humor and beautiful language."

In the library with...

MICHAEL CHABON



Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon, currently working on a children's book, is a big fan of "The Phantom Tollbooth."

"Pale Fire" by Vladimir Nabokov

"'Pale Fire' is one of the most brilliantly constructed pieces of fiction ever, I think. It's in the form of a poem with commentary on the poem. And the commentary takes the form of an adventure story in a peculiar way. Even the index is part of the story."

"Rotten Island" by William Steig

"It's about this island that's home to all kinds of horrible monsters, and they love their life, in typical Steig fashion."

Then, one day, this horrible calamity befalls this dreadful island full of lava and acid and poison: A flower grows up in the middle of it.

The flower drives all of the monsters completely insane; they begin to fight each other and kill each other until finally there are none left. On the last page, all the flowers have grown and it's this beautiful flower-covered island.

It's sort of a happy ending, but you have this feeling of ambivalence about it, like maybe it was better before and aren't flowers kind of trite, really?"