



The Chosen

Chaim Potok

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It is the now-classic story of two fathers and two sons and the pressures on all of them to pursue the religion they share in the way that is best suited to each. And as the boys grow into young men, they discover in the other a lost spiritual brother, and a link to an unexplored world that neither had ever considered before. In effect, they exchange places, and find the peace that neither will ever retreat from again. . . .

The Chosen Details

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Mads says

This was required reading for my sophomore-year honors English class; upon reading chapter one, I prepared myself for great disappointment, firstly because the chapter was entirely about baseball (which although I've tried to enjoy I can't seem to get in to, I'm sorry to say), and secondly because it was so descriptive. It was hard to imagine me being interested in something so...flowery (in some time I'll post a review on another required reading, the oh-so-detailed Great Expectations, which hasn't improved for me even through chapter thirty-six).

Coming into the later chapters of *The Chosen*, I began to enjoy it a lot more. Not only was the storyline interesting and the characters likable, but its deeper meaning was insightful and reminded me of the events happening in the U. S. concerning Jews and the Holocaust—about Mr. Malter rallying for a Jewish state, about Reb Saunders opposing this movement, and most prominently sticking out in my mind, the quote from the Hasidic boy who told Reuven that "Hitler destroyed the Jewish body, but you destroy the Jewish soul" (paraphrased). It gave me a certain perspective that makes me regret not having read the book sooner.

This is one of those books that I love, but can't really explain why. With *Dune* it's easy: great story, great characters, it's got everything I've ever asked for. With *Harry Potter*, it's got great people, great creatures, great symbolism. With *The Hobbit* it gives you a fun story and lovable characters. But, like *The Chosen*, books like *The Invisible Man*, 1984, and *Fahrenheit 451* all leave me mind-boggled. I love those books. They make me think. They make me wonder. It's like the brief, fleeting moment in Algebra when you realize that you've got it! and it's all clicking into place: there are no words to describe how you feel when you realize, Hey, I understand what the author means by this, I see it's deeper meaning—all just before the feeling goes and you're left paralyzed by the knowledge that you've understood what it's all about, even if you don't understand it now quite as completely as in that moment, but instead of the movement of clicking into place it's like you've understood it all along. With these kinds of books, there's a supernatural element to them that entirely surpasses other novels, and your literary understanding is taken to new levels and into new lights.

These are the kinds of books I want to be reading for the rest of my life.

The Chosen is one of those books...and as much as I'm disliking Dickens at the moment, I'm glad I had that bit of required reading.

Emily says

I'm really struggling with how to review this book. It was beautifully written. The relationships between Danny and Reuven and between Reuven and his father were real and touching. I enjoyed learning about different systems of Jewish faith and the interactions (or lack thereof) between their communities. The historic insights into WWII and its aftermath, particularly the realization among American Jews of the extent of the Holocaust and the formation of the state of Israel, were fascinating.

But I was so distracted and disturbed by Reb Saunders's coldness toward his own son, his lack of willingness and/or ability to even talk to him outside of Talmudic discussion that it's difficult for me to get past it. His explanation toward the end of the book didn't really help. It was obvious that he loved his son and was

incredibly proud of him, and that he truly believed that he made the best choice he could at the time in how to raise his son with a soul, though he admitted when asking for forgiveness from Danny, "A wiser father...may have done differently. I am not...wise." My heart just ached for the pain and suffering he had put both himself and his son through. And I was especially disheartened that Danny said he may raise his own son in silence, too, "if I can't find another way." I don't understand the reasoning behind being cruel to your child (because this was definitely emotional abandonment and neglect, if not outright abuse) in order to teach him compassion. There are better ways to teach compassion, even to intellectual geniuses like Danny.

For more book reviews, visit my blog, [Build Enough Bookshelves](#).

Elisabeth says

My brother Matt suggested this book, and I'm very glad that I read it. (And glad that he was there to fill me in a little more on the history it brings up.) It is very well written, and enjoyable as well as educational. It helped me better understand the Jewish faith and branches of Judaism, the horror of WWII, what is unique about American Jews, and some of the conflict over the Israel as a Jewish state. Leaves you with a warm feeling and lots to think about. "The Talmud says that a person should do two things for himself. One is to acquire a teacher...[the other is to] choose a friend...two people who are true friends are like two bodies with one soul."

Alex says

There are a lot of Jewish people in Brooklyn. One of them is my wife, but most of them aren't. There are a bunch of Modern Orthodox Jews, and the US's largest population of Hasidic Jews, based famously in Williamsburg. They're both conservative; one major difference is that Hasidic Jews are anti-Israel, for complicated and dumb reasons. The Chosen is about a friendship between a Modern Orthodox Jew, Reuven Malter, and a Hasidic Jew named Danny Saunders. I only heard about Chaim Potok and this book recently, which surprised my wife; for her, The Chosen was a core high school text.

There's a lot of attention to analysis of the Talmud, a dizzying body of arcane arguments about religious details. Some bookish men from both traditions dedicate their lives to learning about this stuff, which seems like a shame; here are these perfectly good readers who are not reading Middlemarch. If you want to know more about all that, you'll love this book. I found it interesting, mostly.

The boys are footsoldiers in a larger debate / battle between opposing schools of Jewish belief,, deployed in a way by their fathers, who never meet face to face but are extremely aware of each other. They respect each other, but disagree vehemently. Danny's father, in a story so crazy it must be true, hasn't spoken to him since he was an infant; they discuss Talmud together but otherwise don't communicate at all. He's trying to teach him compassion. I suggested to my wife that we try this with our kid, and she was like "Good luck keeping your mouth shut for more than thirty seconds," which is a decent point.

It's a glimpse into a foreign and exotic world, even though it's like two neighborhoods away from me, and it's all interesting but it feels a little "young adult" to me. The story is written in simple language, and the message is overstated to make sure you don't miss anything. I don't think it's particularly great literature.

Greta says

"This is a man's world

But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing, not one little thing, without a woman or a girl

He's lost in the wilderness

He's lost in bitterness, he's lost lost"

(James Brown, of course)

This must have been by far one of the most solemn books I've ever read.

It's a poignant story about two teenagers who grow up in Jewish Orthodox families in Brooklyn, during the period between the end of the second world war and the creation of Israel.

The author explores their friendship, the relationships with their fathers, and the struggle between faith and secularity.

There are extensive passages about the study of the Talmud and orthodox scholarship.

Zionism is also a theme the book touches upon.

The story is told in a straightforward style, and in a sad tone throughout.

The book immerses the reader not only in a fundamentalist atmosphere, but also in a man's world, in which women are almost totally absent.

"You ought to get yourself a girl, it's a wonderful tonic for a suffering soul"

This was by far the best advice Reuven gave to his friend Danny.

7/10

Alisa says

Danny Saunders was raised in silence to save his soul. His father saw that his mind was so keen that his soul would be lost if there was not some awful tragedy to break his soul into a living space. So his father raised him in silence, never speaking to him until Danny learned to listen to that silence, to hear in the silence the cry of millions of his people as they were slaughtered, starved, beaten, and experimented upon by Hitler's army. It did not make Danny a rabbi, but it saved his soul in the end. It gave him the ears of a psychologist as he could listen to that silence.

As I read this, I kept thinking about how God has raised us in silence. We are only allowed communication with him in certain ways, through rituals, through scripture. All else is silence. In this silence, we long for a closer relationship. We suffer. We hold respect for God and the methods used for communication. And in that silence, we hear the suffering of the world, of each child that dies every five seconds of hunger. We hear that silence, and, I hope, it gives us a heart.

Katie Hanna says

I'm 23 years old and I've been reading for most of the time I've been alive.

In all those years of reading, I can recall openly sobbing on only two occasions.

The first time was in *Little Women*, when Beth March died.

And the second time was in *The Chosen*, when Reb Saunders said this:

"In the silence between us, he began to hear the world crying."

Mike says

At its core *The Chosen* is about the relationship between two Brooklyn boys Danny and Reuven, the world they grow up in, and their relationship with their fathers. Both are Jewish, but while they share the same faith, they belong to radically different portions of that faith. Danny is Hasidic. What's more he is the son of a Rebbe and expected to take up the mantle with the passing of his father. Reuven, on the other hand, is part of modern Orthodox Judaism and is the son of a Talmudic teacher.

While growing up mere blocks from each other they do not cross paths until a baseball game brings them together... and then sends Reuven to the hospital when Danny slams a line drive into Reuven's face, breaking his glasses and sending glass into his eye. So, not the best foot for a relationship to get off on. Danny visits Reuven in the hospital and while Reuven is initially hostile to Danny his father convinces him to give Danny and chance and they begin to become friends.

The relationship between the two boys blossoms as they grow up. We discover Danny is brilliant, with a once in a generation mind who fears being trapped into the role of his people's Rebbe. His father only speaks to him when they discuss the Talmud and forbids him from reading world book such as Freud and Darwin. Reuven, while still very smart, is much more mathematically inclined than Danny. In spite of their differences they become great friends, spending many evenings and Sabbaths together. In the background WWII is coming to a close and the horrors of the Holocaust are being revealed.

This leads to the big clash in the book, Zionism. Immediately post-WWII, when the full horrors that had been visited on the Jews was made widely known there was a resurgence in Zionism, specifically a homeland in British Palestine. While many Jews were in favor of a return to their historic homeland, the more religious ones (such as Edah HaChareidis) thought that their could never be a Jewish state until the return of Messiah. Danny's father passionately felt this way while Reuven's father was an ardent Zionist. This matter was further complicated by Jewish terrorist attacks as well as attacks by Arabs and the British on Jewish neighborhoods and immigrants. It was a huge mess and naturally the boys are caught in the middle with Danny's father forbidding Danny from seeing or interacting with Reuven.

Potok's writing in conveying all the emotions Reuven experiences throughout the book is stupendous. We see him grow both as a person coming into his own as a man and his relationship with Danny. We see his

evolving attitude towards his own religion and how he chooses it to affect his life. Naturally Potok, an orthodox rabbi himself, treats all these conflicts with a deft and empathetic hand. There are no good guys or bad guys, just people trying to navigate the turbulent times they live in. Even the rather monstrous silent treatment Danny's father subjects him to comes from a place of love and compassion. The tragedy of the book is what circumstances people find themselves in through no fault of their own and how it affects their relationships with others. But such is the nature of life, so beautifully encapsulated by this novel.

Emilio Berra says

Essere figli. Essere padri

Questo bellissimo romanzo è la storia di un'amicizia fra due ragazzi. Vi è però molto di più : il rapporto di due figli coi rispettivi padri; il fronteggiarsi di due diverse concezioni e tradizioni pur all'interno della stessa religione ebraica...

Le vicende si svolgono a New York, nel quartiere dove gli ebrei immigrati dall'Europa hanno ricostituito le loro comunità.

Il periodo è compreso tra gli ultimi anni della Seconda Guerra Mondiale e i fatti successivi alla proclamazione dello Stato di Israele nel '48. Il momento storico è cruciale: l'olocausto in Europa; la comunità ebraica in America che si sente l'unica rimasta indenne, quindi responsabile di rappresentare anche chi non c'è più. Poi il Movimento sionista per la riedificazione di uno Stato ebraico in zona mediorientale, con il fronteggiarsi di due diverse posizioni: chi agisce a favore del progetto e chi vi si oppone per il timore, in caso di riuscita, di una gestione ormai non in linea con le tradizioni originarie ma protesa ad una mentalità sostanzialmente laica, 'americanizzata' .

La parte preponderante del libro, e comunque sempre presente, riguarda però l'aspetto relazionale/affettivo : Potok delinea grandi figure di padri, per i quali l'educazione dei figli è questione di rilevantissima importanza. Aleggja poi fra le pagine un grande senso di rispetto per le opinioni altrui e soprattutto per chi le esprime. Si vive con forti valori ("L'uomo deve colmare la sua vita di significato") ; c'è poi una tensione all'approfondimento capace di sorprendere chi mentalmente avesse già emesso giudizi stando alla superficie delle questioni. Lezioni di vita anche per chi, come noi, si sente distante da quel mondo rappresentato.

Il libro presenta una struttura a cui solo le opere grandissime possono aspirare : nulla di troppo, nulla di troppo poco. In più si respira un'atmosfera di accoglienza che consola e dà speranza : anche il dolore talvolta può essere un percorso necessario di crescita.

Si tratta di un testo per certi aspetti sapienziale, da cui si esce arricchiti e maggiormente riconciliati con se stessi e con gli altri.

E' importante sapere che le vicende proseguono in un libro successivo almeno altrettanto bello : "La scelta di Rewen".

Poema says

The Jewish Talmud exhorts a man to do two things for himself. First, acquire a teacher. The other is to choose a friend.

Danny Saunders got the package deal when he made the acquaintance of Reuven Malter. Theirs is a Jonathan and David friendship, the two-bodies-with-one-soul type of friendship that happens rarely in a lifetime.

As the oldest son of the tzaddik (righteous leader) of a strict, Hasidic Jewish sect, Danny is the chosen. Upon the death of his father, he will be expected to step up as head of the dynasty. Thus his father, the brilliant but eccentric Reb Saunders, focuses his full attention upon the proper upbringing of his son.

But what is a proper upbringing for a genius? Listen to the agonizing dilemma of Danny's father:

"A man is born into this world with only a tiny spark of goodness in him. The spark is God, it is the soul; the rest is ugliness and evil, a shell. The spark must be guarded like a treasure, it must be nurtured, it must be fanned into flame. {Snip} Anything can be a shell....anything. Indifference, laziness, brutality, and genius. Yes, even a great mind can be a shell and choke the spark.

Reuven, the Master of the Universe blessed me with a brilliant son. And he cursed me with all the problems of raising him. Ah, what it is to have a brilliant son! Not a smart son, Reuven, but a brilliant son, a Daniel, a boy with a mind like a jewel. Ah, what a curse it is, what an anguish it is to have a Daniel, whose mind is like a pearl, like a sun. Reuven, when my Daniel was four years old, I saw him reading a story from a book. And I was frightened. he did not read the story, he swallowed it, as one swallows food or water. There was no soul in my four-year-old Daniel, there was only his mind. He was a mind in a body without a soul. It was a story in a Yiddish book about a poor Jew and his struggles to get to Eretz Yisroel before he died. Ah, how that man suffered! And my Daniel enjoyed the story, he enjoyed the last terrible page, because when he finished it he realized for the first time what a memory he had. He looked at me proudly and told me back the story from memory, and I cried inside my heart. I went away and cried to the Master of the Universe, 'What have you done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A heart I need for a son, a soul I need for a son, compassion I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, that I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!'

Reb Saunders makes a very unusual choice for his son. He chooses to raise him in silence. Except for weekly dialogue over the Talmud and Torah, no words pass between father and son. Though it seems cruel, it is the father's best hope that the suffering it creates will fan into flame that spark of a soul that lies within Danny.

Reuven becomes the counter-balance for Danny's relationship with his father. As a more liberal Jew, Reuven is able to bring a rational element into an otherwise emotionally volatile situation. Without their friendship, it is easy to see that Danny would crumple either from rage or simply from the heavy load of expectation he carries as a burden.

Ultimately, Reb Saunders can claim at least partial victory for his son's upbringing. Danny will break the multi-generational traditions of his ancestors; he will not step into the chosen role of Tzaddik. Rather, he will be a "tzaddik for the world", a different kind of a healer in his chosen field of psychology. But he will remain a practicing Jew, a man with a soul in whom the spark of life burns brightly.

I loved this book. It was fascinating to look behind the scenes at the traditions of the most orthodox sect of Judaism. The Jews have remained a people apart, separate from the nations. This story gives a glimpse of the challenges they incurred as a people group after WWII. The struggle was to keep their traditions intact, but at the same time to acclimate to their new home country of America. Rich, rich, rich. I have scouted out two others by the same author *The Promise*, which is a sequel to *The Chosen*, and *My Name is Asher Lev*, which some feel is Chaim Potok's best work.

Shayantani Das says

NEW YEAR RESOLUTION NUMBER 62: READ EVERYTHING WRITTEN BY CHAIM POTOK.

I think I might actually end up fulfilling this resolution (unlike most of the others), because “the chosen” was a masterpiece.

It's a poignant story about friendship, father-son relationship, about 2 Jew families on the other side of the Zionist movement and the reaction of American Jews to the horrors of holocaust. It's about two deeply religious boys, trying to strike a balance between modernity and their deep rooted traditions, it's about the influence parents have in shaping their children's belief system. In fact, Chaim Potok encompasses so many varied topics with in this novel, and he does so with great expertise.

The tensions between tradition and modern American life are a frequent theme in any immigrant literature. Yet Chaim Potok explores this theme in an unusual and distinctive manner, focusing on the ways in which different Jewish communities react to modernization. He uses complementary and contrasting pairs of characters like Danny Saunder and Reuven Malter (and their fathers) to study the different ways of balancing Jewish observance with life in twentieth-century America.

Danny Saunder belongs to the Hasidic sect whereas Reuven is an orthodox Jew. At first glance, they seem as different to the reader as they seem to each other. But despite Danny and Reuven's religious differences, each must deal with the fact that, by virtue of his birth, he belongs to the Jewish tradition. As Jews, both Reuven and Danny must deal with religious commitments and responsibilities that most children their age do not have to encounter. Both share an intense competitive drive and a fervent intellectual passion. This forges a friendship between them, which develops through out the novel.

Reuven and Danny's friendship is like a breath of fresh air. They play a mutually beneficial role in each other's life. Danny is interested in science and the humanities, while Reuven's strength is in mathematics. Hence, they complement each other: Each teaches and is taught by the other and their relationship is delightful to the eyes! It is so refreshing to read about a set of friends, not bickering or gossiping and actually doing something constructive. If only more people were like them!

Both the characters have vastly different relationship with their father. While Reuven and David Malter have an open and free relationship built on mutual love and respect, Reb Saunders comes across as a tyrant. The only time when he speaks to his son is while teaching him. Like Reuven, I think it's a very crappy method of teaching one to look into their soul. But, since even me and my dad can spend weeks not talking to each other when we are mad, I think I understand.

Again, David and Reb Saunders come across as poles apart. They share different views about the Zionist

movement, about science and religion, and they frequently come into conflict. Still, as the novel progresses, one again sees beyond the superficial appearances to realize how similar they are. The message that, people are not always how they initially appear and we cannot dismiss that which we do not understand, resonate through out the novel.

In *The Chosen*, personal developments are intricately related to historic events. The first third of the novel unfolds during the Allied offensive in World War II, the middle third deals with the American Jewish community's response to the Holocaust, and the final third is concerned with the Zionist movement to create a Jewish state in Palestine. These events are not merely backdrop for the novel, but contribute significantly to its plot and thematic content.

Okay, confession time!

My reason for immensely liking the novel might be briefly personal. The story of two adolescents trying to reconcile the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing God within events of random, senseless suffering, struck a chord with me. I could greatly empathize with the struggle that the world's Jews—and the characters in the novel—faced in the wake of the Holocaust. Chaim Potok raised several questions, which I myself have pondered countless times.

When does thinking for oneself become disrespecting traditions and deep rooted beliefs?

What is the worth of religious ceremonies and rules?

And, most importantly

If God existed, how could he let this happen?

If you have ever asked yourself those questions, you would love this novel!

If you haven't (lucky you!) you would still love it.

Highest possible recommendation and 5 twinkling stars.

Jim Fonseca says

The book jacket tells us that this was the first book (published 1967) that introduced Jewish culture to a wide American audience.

The story centers around two boys growing up in the Jewish neighborhood of Williamsburg in Brooklyn in New York City of the 1940's. The main character is a high-school aged boy who lost his mother years ago and is raised by his father, a teacher at a Jewish school, and a housekeeper. They are devout Orthodox Jews.

Due to a baseball injury, he makes friends with another devout Jewish boy who is a Hasidic Jew, destined to inherit his father's position as a rebbe (tzaddik). The boy is so exceptional – the main character's father says

he has a mind that is seen once in a generation -- that the father encourages him to befriend the boy. Both boys are exceptional scholars. In addition to going to school from 6 am to 6 pm and then coming home to do hours of homework they manage to read 3 or 4 books of outside reading each week. The Hasidic rebbe raises his son "in silence" – never talking to him outside the context of Torah lessons.

We follow the two boys through various troubles. World War II enters into the story. As the boy recovers from his sports injury to his eye in the hospital, he listens to radio news about the D-Day landing. The war ends in 1945, news of the horrors of the Holocaust is absorbed by the community, and shortly after (1947) Israel is founded. The main character's father becomes a fund-raiser and a political advocate supporting the establishment of the Jewish state. This causes a rift between the boys because some members of the Hassidic community thought it was blasphemy to re-establish Israel prior to the coming of the Messiah.

Interspersed with the plot, the book gives us details of other differences between Orthodox Jews and Hasidic Jews. The latter culture grew out of the Eastern European Jewish tradition (Ashkenazi) after the mass atrocities committed by Cossacks against the Jews, known as the Chmielnicki uprising. This took place in Poland in the 1600's.

The community was so devastated (100,000 killed) that its faith was impacted. False messiahs and mysticism appeared (which generated the Kabbalah). Non-sensical scholarship (pilpul, which reminds me of 'how many angels on the head of a pin' in the Christian tradition) was pursued by some. The tzaddiks evolved – rebbes of inherited position who are so revered that their followers want to touch them. Another permutation of the faith was gematria – assigning numerical values to letters and words in the Torah and searching for multiple meanings through what outsiders would call numerology.

We follow the boys as they mature, and they don't necessarily fall into the paths expected of them.

This is a good read. The author does a good job of interspersing the cultural and historical details into the narrative so that it remains a novel, not a sociological text. (I should add that many of the words I've used in this review have alternate spellings from those used in the edition I read.)

photo of Chasidim in Williamsburg from vosizneias.com

Radhika says

i was litterally ganna shoot myself when reading this boook. i couldnt evn stand it so i decided to buy the audio version on itunes and that was even worse and cost me like 20 dolllaa. i wass like heylllll nawww im not reading dissss but den i did cuzz i kinda had too. its about a jewish nerd who gets hit in the eye when the rivalryy jewish team hits him. they dont like eachother or something i dont know. it was all downhill from there. ysaaaaa heardd???

Tiffany Reisz says

Ever since I saw the movie "A Stranger Among Us" about a New York cop (Melanie Griffith) who has to go undercover in Brooklyn's Hasidic Jewish community to solve a murder, I have been fascinated with the

Hasidim. In "The Chosen," Reuven, an observant Jewish boy becomes best friends with Danny, a Hasidic Jewish boy, during WW2. Theirs is a beautiful odd friendship in their community and comes under considerable strain by the differing viewpoints of their fathers. One is a Zionist, fighting for the creation Israel, and the other is avowedly anti-Zionist, thinking it blasphemy to bring about the creation of a Jewish Homeland without the Messiah's return first. Meanwhile the two boys just want to find their paths in life, do well in college, and have better relationships with their fathers. There's not a lot of "Plot" in the book. Not that sort of book. But it's a beautiful character-driven story where you can't help but turn every page faster and faster because you care so much about both boys and want to see them find happiness. A wonderful snapshot of a moment in time now long gone but should never be forgotten. If your heart doesn't break with Reuven's father's the moment he learns that the number of dead Jewish people in Europe is 6 million, you should have your heart checked. I'm so glad I picked this book up. Watching the 1981 film this week starring Robby Benson as Danny.

L'Chaim!

Paul says

Well, I just finished this book last night and I must say I was deeply moved by the whole experience. I remembered there was a reason I liked it so much back in high school. I love the relationship between the two main characters, Danny and Reuven. They've reminded me that there are definite friendships that I cherish highly, and that true friends are hard to come by. But when they do, you know in your heart that you will never leave them for the rest of your life. I guess after reading this, it's made me sit back and just realize that I do cherish and love my friends and that without them, I wouldn't be able to get through this life.

I really like the parts of the book where it focuses on the relationship between the two boys and their respective fathers. You can tell each father loves his son immensely, but in different ways. I also like re-learning all the things about the Jewish community, at least as much as Chaim Potok talks about. Not being Jewish, I've found a lot of the history that I didn't know about and the Jewish customs so very intriguing. I've definitely been enlightened by this book, which I consider a good thing. Mr. Potok's writing is very direct as well as descriptive, and he has such a great way of writing. And there were one or two chapters that I was so moved by his writing, that I did indeed become a little teary-eyed.

I highly recommend this book, especially if you want to reaffirm what true friendship means to you.
