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Novelist Chaim Potok

He operates with words

By MARILYN BETMAN

When young Chaim Potok informed his mother that he would like to write stories for a living, she replied, "You'll be a brain surgeon and you'll write stories on the side."

Since that time, Potok has been successfully operating on the brains of millions of Americans, but not with scalpel and suture. He has added a new dimension to the sphere of American and his tools are the conflicting cultures of the novel and traditional Judaism.

At a recent lecture for Shalom Zedek Cultural Commission, Potok presented an introspective interpretation of his novel, which include "The Chosen," "The Promise," "My Name is Asher Lev" and his latest, "The Beginning."

"All great novels are characterized by the image of the rebel," he said, "from Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn' to Hemingway's 'A Farewell to Arms'."

"I FEEL IN LOVE with the novel as a teen and had to cope with a personal conflict of my passion for the novel, where nothing is sacred, and the beauty of traditional Judaism."

Potok described a series of cultural conflicts that characterize each of his novels.

"We are brought up in a culture called Western Secular Humanism," he said, "and we feel the tension between the essential nature of traditional Judaism and modern paganism. This produces a core to core confrontation between the core of Jewish tradition and the core of Secular Humanism."

He cited another type of conflict as that of core to periphery, such as the conflict between the Maccabees and Hellenism.

"THEN THERE IS the periphery to periphery confrontation," he added, "typified by authors such as Philip Roth who are alienated from traditional Judaism."

Potok insists that his parents must have done a good job, because he did not fall victim to the alienation and self contempt that many contemporary Jewish authors have displayed.

"Growing up in the center of Jewish tradition," he said, "I grew to love the Bible which is the source of hope for the Jewish people."

As a young man growing up on the streets of New York he encountered individuals who hated him for being Jewish. This experience provided the theme for his latest novel, "The Beginning," which is a confrontation between two cores of conflict: things Jewish and anti-Semitism.

SINCE THE PRINTING of his novel, "My Name is Asher Lev," a controversy has raged as to why Potok selected the painting of the crucifix as a symbol of angst for a young Jewish artist.

"This is understandable," explained Potok, "because Jews tend to associate that painting with the flow of rivers of Jewish blood that it has included throughout the centuries."

"The point that I tried to make is that there is no motif that portrays the suffering and persecution of the Jewish people and, therefore, the young artist had to turn to the crucifix in order to express the torment that he felt for his mother."

A graduate of Yeshiva University, Potok received a Ph.D. in Philosophy from University of Pennsylvania and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He is currently doing research in Jerusalem and formulating ideas for a future novel. Most important, Potok describes himself as a writer and a rabbi self-fulfilled.



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Egg is also a talisman

Witch Watch by GABRIELLA

Recently this column dealt with talismans of all sorts. One talisman always believed to have powerful mana is the decorated egg which is a symbol of spring, rebirth and life, is important in the religions of many civilizations, both ancient and modern.

Long before Christianity adopted them as symbols of Easter, eggs were decorated by pagan peoples and exchanged as gifts of love in many countries.

Some of the most beautifully decorated eggs in the world are the traditional Ukrainian Easter eggs called pysanky. In the Ukraine, girls presented their sweethearts with these lovely "eggs." Each girl tried hard to make her egg the most beautiful in the village. Popular young men tried to outdo each other in the number of these beautiful talismans they received.

The preparation of these eggs is a fine art and is handed down from generation to generation.

A stylus called a kistka is used to apply heated beeswax to the shell of the raw egg. This tool is used as a pen, letting the

'Shiawassee Indians' retire after 25 years

A sewing group, formed of neighbors who called themselves the Shiawassee Indians, held its last meeting this month, after meeting regularly for more than 25 years.

The group met as much as two times a week to sew for the Michigan Cancer Foundation and is believed to be the longest-running group on record to serve in that capacity.

The name was appropriate because the original members were all residents of either Shiawassee or Indian streets in Southfield.

Alice Nowicki, a Southfield woman who is also an officer for MOMS (Mothers of Men in the Service) and once received a Girl Scout award for serving without having a daughter in the organization, was the leading light of the Shiawassee Indians for most of the time they were in existence.

"We sewed at a women's notice when the need arose," Mrs. Nowicki said, "and the group was always ready to help in emergencies." During the period the Indians were meeting twice a week, they were making special drawings for one patient who was being helped by the foundation.

Mrs. George Maier, Mrs. Virgil Paul, and Ann Thompson were among the original members of the group which had once risen to 39 in number.

Off and on through the years, four of their number worked in the foundation's Berkeley office as volunteers.

Over the years chairman of the group were Mrs. Glenn Levey, Mrs. William Harrison, and Mrs. Robert LaRue.

Diminishing numbers in the group and the retirement of Mrs. Nowicki, so is going to devote more time to MOMS now, caused the disbandment of the Shiawassee Indians.

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