Telegraph Avenue

by Michael Chabon



About the Book

As the summer of 2004 draws to a close, Archy Stallings and Nat Jaffe are still hanging in there --- longtime friends, bandmates, and co-regents of Brokeland Records, a kingdom of used vinyl located in the borderlands of Berkeley and Oakland. Their wives, Gwen Shanks and Aviva Roth-Jaffe, are the Berkeley Birth Partners, two semi-legendary midwives who have welcomed more than a thousand newly minted citizens into the dented utopia at whose heart --- half tavern, half temple --- stands Brokeland.

When ex?NFL quarterback Gibson Goode, the fifth-richest black man in America, announces plans to build his latest Dogpile megastore on a nearby stretch of Telegraph Avenue, Nat and Archy fear it means certain doom for their vulnerable little enterprise. Meanwhile, Aviva and Gwen also find themselves caught up in a battle for their professional existence, one that tests the limits of their friendship. Adding another layer of complication to the couples' already tangled lives is the surprise appearance of Titus Joyner, the teenage son Archy has never acknowledged and the love of fifteen-year-old Julius Jaffe's life.

An intimate epic, a NorCal MIDDLEMARCH set to the funky beat of classic vinyl soul-jazz and pulsing with a virtuosic, pyrotechnical style all its own, TELEGRAPH AVENUE is the great American novel we've been waiting for. Generous, imaginative, funny, moving, thrilling, humane, triumphant, it is Michael Chabon's most dazzling book yet.

Discussion Guide

1. There are many different variations on father-and-son relationships --- both real and makeshift --- explored in the novel. What might the author be trying to convey through these complicated liaisons?

2. The majority of the characters in the novel are members of some minority group --- African American, Jewish, Asian. Would you say that TELEGRAPH AVENUE is fundamentally a novel about race?

3. Like her husband, Archy, Gwen is African American, but of a decidedly different social class, upbringing, and education. How do these differences affect her marriage, as well as her position in this close-knit Oakland community --- both in her own view and in the view of others?

4. TELEGRAPH AVENUE, the real-life Bay Area street at the center of the story, is described as ?the ragged fault where the urban plates of Berkeley and Oakland subducted.? How do the conflicting cultures of upper-middle-class Berkeley and working-class Oakland clash in the novel?

5. Why do Archy and Nat see the imminent arrival of ex-NFL quarterback Gibson Goode?s mega-mall as a threat not only to their record shop, but to the community at large?

6. As the legendary Berkeley Birth Partners, Gwen Shanks and Aviva Roth-Jaffe have worked together for many years, and their husbands are business partners as well. Beyond their professional lives, what sense do you get of the friendship between these two women? How does the crisis that confronts their business bring out the best and/or worst in their pairing?

7. When a home birth goes awry, the midwife Gwen goes ballistic when faced with criticism from an obstetrician at the hospital. The emotional outburst severely jeopardizes her career. Do you think she is justified in her reaction, or should she have tempered her response?

8. TELEGRAPH AVENUE is set during the summer of 2004 in Oakland, California. Do this time and place have special bearing on the events of the novel, or could the story take place in a different or more ambiguous setting?

9. An intriguing ?character? in the novel is Fifty-Eight, the African grey parrot that belongs to Cochise Jones. What does its name mean and what do you think the bird might symbolize or represent?

10. Some of the characters in the novel seem to be holding onto the past, as evidenced by their love of vinyl records and 1970s ?Blaxploitation? martial arts films. How do you think this attachment to the past affects the characters? grasp on their present realities?

11. Archy Stallings makes some questionable choices in his dealings with his wife, Gwen, his son, Titus, his partner, Nat, and his business rival, Gibson Goode. Do you find him a sympathetic character?

12. How would you assess the relationship between Julius and Titus? Is it a genuine friendship for both of them?

13. To what extent are the characters in this novel in control of their own destinies, and how much does the inevitability of uncontrollable change come into play?

14. The novel is filled with colorful, eccentric characters. Which did you feel were the most arresting? The most real? Why?

Author Bio

Michael Chabon is the bestselling and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of many books, including THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER & CLAY, THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION, GENTLEMEN OF THE ROAD, TELEGRAPH AVENUE, MOONGLOW, POPS and the picture book THE ASTONISHING SECRET OF AWESOME MAN. He is the editor, with Ayelet Waldman, of KINGDOMS OF OLIVE AND ASH: Writers Confront the Occupation and FIGHT OF THE CENTURY: Writers Reflect on 100 Years of Landmark ACLU Cases.

Telegraph Avenue

by Michael Chabon

Publication Date: September 10, 2013
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 496 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 006149335X
ISBN-13: 9780061493355