MY NAME IS ASHER LEV
CHAIM POTOK

A novel of finely articulated tragic power... Little short of a work of genius.
—The New York Times Book Review
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My Name is Asher Lev  
By Chaim Potok

**Context**

Chaim Potok was born February 17, 1929 in New York City. He grew up in an Orthodox home and had a traditional Yeshiva education. From the age of sixteen, he began writing fiction. He went to an Orthodox College, Yeshiva University. While there, he undertook an intense study of literature. He began to see his literary interest as incompatible with Orthodox Judaism and began to practice a more moderate Conservative Judaism. He graduated college in 1950 and headed to the Jewish Theological Seminary, a Conservative institution. He was ordained as a Rabbi in 1954. Potok earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania in 1965.

*My Name is Asher Lev* deals with the same themes as Potok's *The Chosen*. Both books concern deeply talented individuals trying to reconcile their talents with the Jewish worlds in which they have been raised. In *The Chosen*, though, the protagonists talents are academic, not artistic.

Potok's writing, interesting in its own right, is made more fascinating by the close connection it has to his personal history. We cannot help but to see the protagonists of Potok's major works as foils for himself, individuals who, like him, are dealing with the conflicts that a prodigious talent presents to the worlds in which they have been raised.

**Plot Overview**

Asher Lev is a child with an extraordinary gift for painting. His father, Aryeh, is an emissary for the Rebbe, the leader of the Ladover Hasidic community. When he is younger, his uncle, His mother Rivkeh's brother, dies and it destroys her. Asher's mother becomes ill. She stays at home sick for a while after being released from the hospital. At this time, Asher spends much time with his father at his office and becomes entranced by the work his father is doing in Russia. Furthering Asher's fascination with Russia is recent immigrant, Yudel Krinsky, whom Aryeh helped bring to the US and whom Asher befriends. As Rivkeh's health improves, she decides that she wants to go to college. Aryeh asks the Rebbe for permission, which he grants.

Asher's early summers are spent in a bungalow colony. There, he has opportunity to grow closer with his mother. Aryeh's work with Russia intensifies. The entire community, Asher included seems obsessed with the Russians and their persecution of Jews. Asher begins visiting with Krinsky more and often returns home late, causing his mother great worry.
The Rebbe asks Asher's father to move to Vienna in order to better perform his work. Asher does not want to move to Vienna and makes this known to his parents, his uncle, and Krinsky. Asher begins drawing again. Asher's parents and teachers are concerned about him. Asher asks if he can live with his uncle. Asher's father begins to worry about his son's drawing. Asher draws a menacing looking picture of the Rebbe in his Chumash one day in class. The Mashpia calls him in to talk to him about how he is doing. Asher breaks down and expresses how distraught he is over the prospect of moving to Vienna. The Rebbe decides that Asher cannot be brought to Vienna. Aryeh moves to Vienna alone.

Rivkeh and Asher adjust to life at home together. His interest in art intensifies and she buys him oil paints. Asher begins to neglect his studies, rousing the concern and ire of his teachers and his father. Asher seems unfazed by the criticism heaped on him. His mother takes him to the museum and explains the paintings of crucifixions to him. Asher begins to sketch crucifixions and nudes. These arouse the ire of Aryeh, who discovers them when he returns home for Passover. When Aryeh leaves to go back to Europe, Asher resolves to improve his scholastic performance. The next summer, Rivkeh joins Aryeh in Europe and Asher stays with his Uncle Yitzchok.

Asher has a meeting with the Rebbe before his Bar Mitzvah. Jacob Kahn, a prominent artist, has been called to the Rebbe's office and introduces himself to Asher as Asher is leaving. The Rebbe has decided that Asher shall study art with Kahn. Kahn gives Asher an assignment and tells him to call him in two months. Asher calls Kahn and arranges to go to his studio for the first time. At this first meeting, Kahn introduces Asher to gallery owner Anna Schaeffer. He also berates Asher and tries to scare him out of becoming an artist. Asher is not deterred. Kahn takes Asher to see paintings of crucifixions. He brings a woman into the studio to model so Asher can paint nudes.

Asher's mother begins contemplating a move to Vienna. Asher, however, refuses to go along. Rivkeh finally decides to move to Vienna without him, so that she can be with her husband. Asher meets with the Rebbe to discuss this move and his developing artistic talent. Around this time, Asher learns that he will one day have his own show. Asher moves in with his Uncle Yitzchok.

Asher spends the summer with Jacob Kahn at his beach house in Provincetown. It is a joyous summer dedicated to painting. Asher maintains his religious observance while there. Toward the end, Jacob Kahn withdraws for a few days, in an awful mood.

Asher begins high school, but continues studying with Kahn on weekends. Kahn has a show opening that fall. Asher's uncle renovates the attic to give Asher more space to paint. Asher and Jacob begin to travel to some exhibitions together. Asher's parents return for Passover, and Asher and Aryeh fight. Asher's family pressures him to try moving to Vienna. He goes, gets sick, and comes back. He has his first art show and it is a moderate success. Asher is now in college. His parents return home after years in Europe.
It is awkward living with his parents again. Asher's parents are unhappy when he includes nudes in his next show. Asher tries to explain art to his father, but it is a miserable failure and they get frustrated with each other. Asher begins to plan a trip to Europe.

Asher goes to Florence and is enthralled by the artwork. He is particularly taken with Michelangelo's Pietà. He moves on to Rome and then Paris. He begins to experiment with alterations in the Pietà, alterations in the artistic form of the crucifix. He decides to move to Paris temporarily, gets an apartment, and sets up a studio.

In Paris he has time to reflect on his past, on his upbringing, on his community, and on his family. He realizes the pain his mother went through during his upbringing. He wants to express this in art—the only symbol he has at his disposal is the crucifixion. He makes two paintings of his mother that employ the crucifix.

At a major show in New York, Asher displays these paintings. His parents are horrified by the paintings, as is the general Ladover community. Asher has crossed a line. His parents become cold toward him as do all the Ladover who once supported him. The Rebbe calls Asher into his office and asks him to leave the community. Banished, Asher moves back to Paris.

**Character List**

**Asher Lev** - The protagonist and narrator of the book. The book traces Asher's development as a person and an artist. He is immensely gifted as an artist and, when younger, not in control of himself. He often seems detached from the world around him and generally spaced out. As he grows older, Asher becomes more in touch with himself and learns to channel his feelings into artwork. He is not a typical rebel in the sense that he does not want to rebel. He is simply drawn very strongly to produce art. As he gets older, he outgrows his teacher and becomes more reflective.

**Aryeh Lev** - Asher's father. A well respected, highly intelligent man. He is incredibly driven to work hard for the cause in which he believes. He has a strong sense of morality and is deeply committed to his religion. His son's misbehavior deeply disturbs and hurts him. Though he works with high-ranking government officials, he has a hard time relating to those, like Asher, whose value systems are different from his own.

**Rivkeh Lev** - Asher's mother. She is kind and supportive. Deeply disturbed by the death of her brother, she worries a lot and is, in some ways, a stereotypical "Jewish mother." She is intelligent, loving, and caring; she cares deeply for the two men in her life—Asher and Aryeh—and is troubled by their inability to get along.

**Jacob Kahn** - An old and famous artist. When younger, he abandoned the religion with which he grew up, in order to pursue his artwork. He is fully and completely an artist. He is temperamental, and he feels no moral attachments to anything but art and sees a great purpose in producing art and artists. He is blunt, though generally for a didactic purpose.
Uncle Yitzchok - Asher's uncle with whom he lives while his parents are in Europe. A wealthy, kind man, who has no distinct personality. He appreciates his nephew's talent in his manner as a layman.

Yudel Krinsky - A Ladover man, whom Aryeh Lev helped bring to America from Russia. He seems somewhat withdrawn, affected by years of internment in Siberia. He is patient with Asher, encouraging of his talent, and more tolerant than most in the community.

Mashpia - The man at Asher's school who is in charge of the spiritual development of the students. He is kind and committed to his community. He expresses concern for the well-being of his students and is genuinely interested in their personal development.

Uncle Yaakov - Lev's uncle, who dies when Lev is six years old. His death causes Lev's mother to become ill. He is often referenced by Lev's mother, who seems to carry on a relationship with her memories of him. He often seems to serve as an inspiration for Lev's mother.

Sheindl Rackover - The woman who helps out around the Lev household when Lev's mother is ill. She is often reprimanding Lev for not acting like the Ladover version of a "good" boy. Lev often seems to find his interactions with her annoying and frustrating.

Anna Schaeffer - An international socialite and gallery owner. She is interested in art and artists and even more interested in using them to make money.

Analysis of Major Characters

Asher Lev

Asher is a fascinating creature with two powerful and conflicting forces pulling him in opposite directions. The first is the community in which he is raised. The Ladover community is tight-knit and all encompassing. A person can live his entire life in this community without ever interacting with someone from the outside. Growing up, Asher's life is filled with religious indoctrination in school, at home, and from the people in his community with whom he interacts. He is inculcated with the values of the community and is taught to love God, Torah, and his fellow Jews. Furthermore, as an only child, he is raised to be particularly close to and dependent on his parents, who are, for Asher, at the center of this community.

Another equal, if not stronger, force plays a large role in Lev's life. From the time he is little, he has an intense desire to create art. When he is little, this manifests itself in innocuous doodling which turns into more structured drawing. As a boy, Lev is unable to control this desire and does not really understand it. Sometimes, he simply spaces out and draws. On one occasion, this desire leads him to steal; the strong influences in his life begin to come into conflict.
As an adolescent, Asher begins his study with Jacob Kahn. Kahn teaches him to channel his emotions into art. Asher begins to grow up and to gain some control over his gift. In these years, Asher balances his commitments to his community and to art. However, he never really thinks much about his commitment to religion and no serious conflict ever arises between the two. In many ways, he remains emotionally and intellectually immature.

As his period of time studying with Kahn comes to a close, Asher is at a crossroad. He has developed significantly as an artist, but is still a child. He leaves his home for Europe. There, free from his parents, he is finally able to understand his community better. He reflects on his upbringing and his parents and grows tremendously.

For the first time in his life, Asher faces serious internal conflict. He is tormented by his mother's anguish. His artistic impulse expresses her anguish in a painting that employs the crucifixion. He is faced with a dilemma—is he to display the painting and share his artistic vision with the world? If so, he will hurt his parents and his community. Asher, knowing the consequences will be dire, decides in favor of his artwork. Still, he is not fully resolved to his decision. *My Name is Asher Lev* concludes with Asher still, in many ways, unresolved. He was not fully comfortable with his decision to display his crucifixions, not comfortable with bringing pain to his parents. The book ends with him banished from a community, though he is not certain that he is ready to leave. He has by no means come to conclude that his artwork ought always to take precedence.

**Jacob Kahn**

Jacob Kahn grew up a religious Jew, but has long since left the faith. He went through a period of torment in his younger life as he was leaving the comfortable life he had always known in order to become an artist. We see Kahn as an old man, after an accomplished career. He has been a major figure in the history of art, the greatest sculptor of his generation. These accomplishments and previous life events inform the way he deals with Asher. He feels a special bond with Asher; after all, Asher is in the position Kahn once occupied himself—he is a gifted, young artist in a religious Jewish community. Kahn is thus drawn to consider Asher feelings—he wants to mold the young man into an artist, but he does not want him to have to undergo an experience as horrific as Kahn's on his way to becoming an artist.

**Rivkeh Lev**

Rivkeh Lev is a character dealing with her own torments. Her brother's early and tragic death has imbued her with a sense of urgency. She must complete his work and as quickly as possible. She is also a unique woman in the Ladover community, since she is one of the few permitted to attend college. Placed in a subservient role in society because of her sex, she has much to overcome to succeed. She is able to relate well to her son. She understands what it is like to have a strong desire burning inside and for that desire to conflict with the standards of the community. After all, her desire to complete her brother's work can never be fully realized. She will never be given the responsibilities in the Ladover community that he had, because she is a woman.

Rivkeh is also caught in the middle of the two men in her life. She understands, relates to, and loves them both, but they can hardly speak to each other. Balancing her commitments to the two
of them is incredibly difficult and drives her to tears on many occasions. Ultimately, she is more committed to her community and to her husband, driving her to move to Europe to work with him. There is a limit to how much deviation she can accept and will understand. This leads her to side against Asher after his display of the crucifixion pictures.

Themes, Symbols, Motifs

Themes

*The Conflict between Art and Religious Community*

*My Name is Asher Lev* is about Asher's development as an artist with a focus on the conflicts this raises for him with the religion with which he has been raised. When Asher is younger, this conflict is more external. His artistic impulse drives him to do certain things of which others in his community disapprove. The story explores how a younger Asher deals with impulses that he does not completely understand and with a community that often chastises him for succumbing to them.

As Asher grows, the conflict becomes more overt. He makes more conscious decisions about which trade-offs he wants to make. Toward the end of the book, the conflict becomes one not only of Asher's art, but of his need to express his feelings through it. The only way Asher knows of expressing his mother's pain is through a Christian symbol. Asher's art has led him to adopt a world that is antithetical to his Ladover society, to derive meaning from Christian symbols.

For much of the book, it looks like a balance can be found between religion and art. While Asher is on the fringes of the society in which he grew up, he is at the fringes of that society. However, at the explosive end of the book, these two worlds collide and Asher chooses the world of art over the community of his parents.

Motifs

*Travel*

Travel plays a central role in the book and appears in very different places. Early on, it is Asher's father who is traveling. He jets around America, working for the Rebbe. Later, he travels around Europe, sometimes accompanied by his wife, to fulfill his holy mission. He is impelled to travel because of his strong belief that in doing so, he is spreading God, Torah, and Truth. Asher, as he grows older, also begins to make travel a central part of the fulfillment of his life's mission. Jacob Kahn takes him traveling around the United States to attend art exhibitions. On these trips, Asher is exposed to a large variety of art he might not otherwise have seen and learns things critical to his development. Continuing in this vein, Asher feels the need to make a trip to Europe, to see large parts of the artistic heritage that were created and remain there.
Unfinished work

When Rivkeh's brother dies at the beginning of the book, she feels a terrible pain. The work that he set out to do for the Rebbe remains unfinished. She feels the need to go to college and study so that she can go out and finish the work he began. She cannot bear the thought of allowing his work not to be finished. Asher picks up on this idea at the end of the book. His first crucifixion is unfinished. He feels like he will be a fraud—a fraud to himself if he does not create another one that more fully expresses the feelings he is trying to convey. Both Asher and his mother are driven, at different times and in very different circumstances, to perform significant actions in order that something important to each of them not remain unfinished.

Symbols

Earlocks

Asher's payos, his earlocks, are an important symbol of how he feels about Judaism and art. The uncut tufts of hair growing from the side of his head above the ear are a distinctive feature of how he and most Ladover appear. They set him apart visually from the society of artists of which he wants to be a part. When he tucks them behind his ears, the first summer he spends in Provincetown, it shows confusion on his part. He wants to fit into the artistic world and is worried that the earlocks might prevent him from doing that. Yet, he does not have the conviction to simply chop them off. He still bears an attachment to them. The summer after his parents have returned from their years in Vienna, Asher is far more mature. A college student and a much more accomplished artist, he feels much more confident of himself and his decisions. He expresses his independence by cutting off his earlocks. He also expresses disregard for tradition and distance form his father. After all, Asher has noted that his father wore earlocks because his father did. For Asher, this is not sufficient reason to perpetuate the hairstyle.

The Rebbe

The Rebbe, the spiritual leader of the Ladover community, takes on an almost divine status. To the people in the Ladover community, he is an omniscient leader, to be listened to in all circumstances. He is a father to all, one whose permission needs to be asked before one deviates from the standard path. We see specific instances of this in his interactions with the Lev family. First, Rivkeh, because she is a woman, needs to ask the Rebbe's permission to go to college. Aryeh is highly respected and his travel seen as special because it is done in the service of the Rebbe. Finally, Asher's life path is severely influenced by the Rebbe. The Rebbe decides that Asher will study with Jacob Kahn, against the wishes of Asher's father. Even as Asher gets older, the Rebbe is able to tell him to study French and Russian. Still, the Rebbe knows his limits. He does not, for instance, tell Asher to stop painting. Nevertheless, the Rebbe appears as a dominating and all-knowing force in the Ladover community.

Asher's Mythic Ancestor

When Asher is little, he is told the story of his great-great-great-grandfather, a man who created immense wealth for himself and his employer and who, in middle age began to travel a lot. He
traveled, his parents told him, to spread the word of God and to comfort those in need. This man appears to Asher many times in dreams as a representative of his past, his history. As history is a vital part of Jewish life, this man becomes a symbol for Asher of the ways he is supposed to act. The man haunts him when he steps out of line. When Asher is away in Europe, he rediscovers his mythic ancestor and appropriates him for his own use. He imagines that his ancestor had unbalanced the world and was traveling in order to right the wrongs he had done. Asher finds a new way of connecting with his heritage, with his past. He imagines himself aligned with this man, as he, too, feels that he has unbalanced the world. Through his need to create art, Asher has created much tumult. He, too, hopes to correct the way he has left the world out of balance.

**Summary & Analysis**

**Chapter 1**

*Summary*

Asher Lev introduces himself to the reader as a painter mired in controversy. He is an observant Jew and an artist, and he has been painting crucifixions. He then begins to tell of his family history, detailing the lineage of his parents and finally arriving at himself, letting the reader know that he was "born with a gift." From the time Lev can remember, he drew. He recalls fond memories of his mother and his drawings from his early childhood. Lev's father traveled often on missions for the Rebbe, the leader of the Ladover Jewish community of which Lev's family was a prominent member.

When Lev was six years old, his uncle died, causing his mother to fall ill. She is hospitalized, but eventually returns home. Lev's uncle had, like Lev's father, worked for the Rebbe and was killed while on a mission for the Rebbe. When Lev's mother returns home, his father ceases his travel.

Lev's mother is home, sick and mentally unwell for quite some time. Lev is concerned for her and often attempts to comfort her with drawings. To help the family through this time, Mrs. Rackover begins to work in the Lev household. To keep Asher out of the way, his father often brought him to his office. There, Asher heard his father speaking in many languages with people from around the world and began to get a better sense of the work his father did, trying to help Ladover families come to America.

Many of Asher's conversations with his mother during this period of time center around his drawings. He would often draw the world as he saw it. She asks him if he draws pretty things and implores him to "make the world pretty." His responds that he does not want to make the world pretty and, from early on, distinguishes between a good drawing and a pretty one.

One day, Asher's Uncle Yitzchok comes for a visit. He chats with Asher, complimenting his drawing abilities and offers to buy one of his drawings. Asher agrees. Yitzchok takes the
painting out of Asher's room, but leaves it behind in the house, not interested in taking it with him. Asher's father returns the drawing to him. Asher is happy to have his artwork back, but disappointed that his uncle did not want to keep it.

Asher continues his obsessive drawing. One day, his father finds him drawing his sleeping mother. He tells him he would prefer that he not draw so much.

Before Passover, Asher and his father go down to a store owned by a Ladover in order to buy food that is kosher for Passover. Behind the counter is Reb Yudel Krinsky. Aryeh Lev introduces him to Asher as a man who just came over from Russia. Krinsky sings the praises of Aryeh Lev. Outside the store, Asher discovers that his father had helped the man come to America. Asher is fascinated by this man and mentions him to Mrs. Rackover upon his return home. Asher learns that he had lived in the bitter cold of Siberia. Later, in his room, he thinks about Krinsky and draws him.

Asher's mother begins to recover. She speaks of the work of her brother as incomplete and decides that she wants to begin college. Aryeh asks her to wait a few days before contacting the college so that he might ask the Rebbe's permission. Rivkeh responds outraged, "The Rebbe killed my brother." However, she assents to wait.

The Rebbe gives his permission for Rivkeh to begin college. Asher's father continues his travels. Asher begins his study in a Ladover Yeshiva, a school of Jewish learning.

Analysis

In the first pages, Lev talks to the reader as if the reader knows who he is. He references a controversy in which he has been involved, concerning his artwork. These few introductory remarks before the beginning of the narrative of Lev's life serve two purposes. First, they introduce two ideas central to the book—Lev's artwork and the tension in his relationship with Judaism. Second, this opening presents Lev as a man of importance and interest. By giving us some detail, but not all, the author creates an air of relevance and mystery about this character in order to draw the reader into the story and engage the reader's interest.

The personal history Lev gives at the beginning of the chapter has a ring of Jewish culture to it—the Ladover community from which Lev comes would have been extremely concerned with Lev's, or any Ladover's, personal history.

When Asher is in his father's office and asks about his father's speaking a strange language, his father tells him that it is French and that he learned it at the request of the Rebbe. This last bit should strike any modern reader as odd. The notion of doing things for the Rebbe, the religious, spiritual, and political leader of a group of Hasidic Jews, is quite common in Hasidic communities, even today. This cultural difference is highlighted throughout the book, with the many references that are made to people doing things at the request of the Rebbe or asking the Rebbe's permission to do things.
The discussions Lev has with his parents about art are meant to give us a glimpse into his personality and foreshadow his independence of thought. In one instance, he talks back to his father, telling him that, "a drawing is not foolishness." Especially in the community in which Asher is raised, such dissent at an early age would be extremely rare. His mother often asks him to draw a pretty world. From an early age, however, Asher draws the world as he sees it. This shows his willingness, even at an early age, to deviate from his mother's simplistic model of what art should be, to draw as he sees appropriate.

Furthermore, from an early age, Lev's art is the medium through which he relates to his world. He speaks of his memories of drawing certain things. When he retreats into his room alone, he draws. Drawing is set up as the young Asher's way of relating to and dealing with the world.

After meeting Yudel Krinsky in the supermarket, Asher asks his father, "is he one of us?" There is a clear dichotomy being set up between those who are Ladover and those who are not. This is only one indication of the extreme insularity of the Ladover community in which the Levs live. This insularity is combined with a feeling of extreme responsibility that each member of the community has for others. This is evidenced by Aryeh Lev's work in bringing Ladover Jews to America and suggested in his comment to Aher in this very same conversation that "we'll find other work for him (Krinsky) later." The Ladover community of this book is set up to take care of all of its members.

Chapter 2

Summary

Asher begins his studies at the Ladover Yeshiva. He is aware that his teachers are particularly looking out for him since they know that his father is away often, traveling for the Rebbe. He stops drawing; and when queried as to why by his mother, Asher responds that drawing is "from the sitra achra (other side), like Stalin."

Summers were spent at a Hasidic Bungalow Colony in the Berkshires, giving Asher time to spend with his mother. His mother became more organized and concerned with time. When Asher returns home late from school one day, she is frantically worried. Asher's father spends much of his time travelling and reading news about Russian Jews. When he is caught in snow and cannot return home one night, she is terrified. She is reminded of her brother's death, travelling for the Rebbe.

One summer Friday in 1952, Aryeh Lev returned to his family's bungalow in the Berkshires from a trip to Washington. He reveals that a number of Jewish writers, who had been taken prisoner, were killed by the Russians. He is noticeably disturbed.

Asher's fascination with Russia continues. He asks his mother about Yudel Krinsky and Siberia. He reads in a Ladover magazine about the Rebbe's father teaching Judaism in Russia against the will of the ruling authorities.
Six Jewish doctors are arrested in Russia, charged with plotting to kill Russian military leaders. Aryeh Lev is distraught at the news. Later in school, Asher attends a special assembly where the children are told of the event, the evils of the Russians and their hatred for Torah and Jews.

On the way home from school, Asher stops in Yudel Krinsky's stationary store. While buying a notebook and pencil, he asks Krinsky about Russia and discusses the Jewish doctors with him. When Asher returns home late, Mrs. Rackover asks where she should tell his mother he had been. Asher responds that he does not care.

The next day, Asher returns to Krinsky's store to talk to him some more. His mother confronts him about his visits with Krinsky. Asher confesses that he did not tell her he was going because he was scared she would not approve. She tells him he may continue going to Krinsky after school, but must return home immediately after he leaves the store.

Aryeh Lev plans a trip to Washington for a Monday, but falls ill over the weekend. His wife nurses him back to health. Monday morning, Asher asks how his father is. His mother responds that he left a half hour ago, as God wanted him to go to Washington.

Asher's visits to Krinsky's store become more frequent. One day, in a snowstorm, he returns home particularly late. His mother is frightened and asks him if he has any idea what it is like to wait. Her state is exacerbated by the fact that Aryeh is in Detroit travelling for the Rebbe. The next day, she apologizes to Asher for losing her temper. He asks her whether his father's plane will be able to land today. She responds that if God wants it to land, it will land.

**Analysis**

It is important to consider the perspective from which we view the events any book. *My Name is Asher Lev* is written from the perspective of Asher Lev. As such, we are presented with events as Asher experienced them and as he remembers them. This becomes evident, especially in the early chapters where Asher is quite young and events are presented as a young child would see them. This comes through particularly in the scene at the beginning of this chapter where Asher overhears his parents talking about writers who were shot in Russia. The reader only learns about the events as Asher does, first by listening in on the conversation of his parents; then, slightly more information is presented through the simplistic explanation given Asher by his mother when he questions her about the conversation he overheard. There is no advanced talk to political circumstances, attempted negotiations, and the like. Rather, we hear only of the things that a small child would hear about and comprehend—Jewish writers were killed by bad Russians.

After hearing this conversation between his parents, Asher confronts his mother about his father's travels. He asks why he has to travel, and she responds, "because his father traveled for the Rebbe's father." Two important features of Ladover society present themselves here. First, family is central to a Ladover's life. Just as the Rebbe was born into his position, so too is a Rebbe's emissary born into his position. Social mobility within the Ladover community is virtually non-existent. Second, the power that the Rebbe exerts over people is evident. Asher's father derives meaning in life from working for the Rebbe. It is a great honor to work for the
Rebbe. The Rebbe is nearly deified; to be in his service is only a step short of being in the service of God.

Potok introduces many small details in order to convey the pervasiveness of the Ladover community. Of particular note in this chapter is a scene where Asher reports of reading an article about the Rebbe in a Ladover magazine that was prepared particularly for youth. The modern reader will see such a magazine as smacking of propaganda, material given to children to reinforce an entire worldview, centered on Ladover Jewish observance and the Rebbe. This pervasiveness finds a different expression in the assembly held in Asher's school to discuss the Russian persecution of Jewish doctors. The children are shown the evil of those who are not Jewish, further reinforcing the good and holiness of the Ladover community and the evil of the other. In giving the children a common evil enemy, it further unites them in a feeling of moral superiority toward the life they live and the community of which they are a part.

When Asher visits Krinsky's stationary store, Krinsky calls him "the son of Reb Aryeh Lev." This further highlights the central role family plays in shaping one's identity and position within the Ladover community.

In the later part of the chapter, Aryeh Lev takes two trips: one to Washington and one to Detroit. In each instance, natural phenomena, sickness in the first case, a snowstorm in the second, create potential complications for the trip. Each time, Rivkeh makes a comment to the effect that if the Ribbono shel Olom (Master of the Universe, God) wants the natural phenomenon to interfere, then it will. If he wants it not to interfere, then it won't. This shows us the extent to which God is implicated as a player in everyday affairs in the world of Ladover Hasidim, in the world in which Asher is raised.

Chapters 3–4

Summary

Chapter 3

Aryeh Lev gets a call early in the week, telling him that Stalin is dying. The news becomes known officially a day later. By the end of the week, Stalin is dead. Asher's parents seem to think that this will bode well for Jews in Russia. Yudel Krinsky, however, tells Asher that Stalin's death will not quell Russian anti-Semitism, which is spread far wider than just one man.

Asher's mother tells him that the Rebbe may ask the Lev family to move to Vienna in order for Aryeh to better perform his work. Asher falls ill for a few days and dreams of his Uncle Yitzchok, Krinsky, and his "mythic ancestor." When he finally gets better, he discusses the matter of the move with Yudel Krinsky, his father, and his Uncle Yitzchok, making clear that he does not want to go.
In the midst of a lesson one day, Asher begins to draw—disconnected dots, turning into lines. When the class is done, he gazes down at the page—he had drawn the deceased Stalin, lying in his coffin.

Chapter 4

Asher's father confronts him about his renewed interest in drawing. Asher's mother is more supportive, but explains to Asher that his father is worried about his performance in school.

Asher visits Krinsky and talks about his impending move and desire not to go. He then goes to his Uncle Yitzchok's store and asks if he can live with him, instead of going to Vienna with his parents.

Asher refuses to go with his parents to have passport photos taken. His parents become increasingly frustrated by his refusal to move. His art seems to be one of the main forces driving him to want to stay. His mother asks how he feels when he draws. His father tells Asher that he worries his artistic gift is from the other side.

Passover is particularly difficult for Asher. His uncle tells him he will not let him live with him and that he needs to grow up. He speaks with Krinsky and realizes that when he moves, he will lose him. Everyone seems to be upset at him, and Mrs. Rackover becomes fairly harsh in her terms of criticism.

Asher tells his father that he does not like it that he is away so much. Asher's mother and father talk to Asher about the importance of not leaving work incomplete. This is why Rivkeh is studying at the University and why Aryeh needs to move to Vienna.

One Friday night, Asher awakens from a tumultuous dream and feels the need to look at one of his drawings. He turns on the light, looks at it, and turns the light off again. Only then does he realize that he has violated a prohibition of the Sabbath by turning on the light. Asher agrees to get a passport.

Analysis

Asher's sickness in this chapter is coupled with an interesting narrative technique. Asher's thoughts are presented as Asher experiences them. Just as he is unsure what he is dreaming and what is really happening, so too is the reader unsure. The jumbled thought and the dream-like state allow what is really on Asher's mind to come out. There is a Freudian element here, as the dream is used as a vehicle to enter Asher's deeper thoughts, to see what is really troubling him. Things that are, or have been, important to him—his uncle, his art, Yudel Krinsky—come out in this sequence. The sickness gives Asher a chance to consolidate his feelings and gives the author an opportunity to present more of Asher's character to the reader.

At the end of the chapter Asher begins to draw again. Drawing is a mode of expression that is important to Asher. When younger, he used it when he did not have any other way to deal with how he was feeling. This chapter has brought about a major change for Asher—the thought that
he will be leaving his home town to move to Vienna. Further, Stalin's death is a big deal for the boy so obsessed with Russia. The news has carried with it a severe emotional shock to Asher. He deals with it the only way he knows how, by creating art.

Asher's mother takes a different view toward Asher's drawing then when he was little. At the beginning of the chapter, she comments that one of his drawings is very good, even though she concedes that it is not pretty. In earlier chapters, she had focused more on whether Asher's drawings were "pretty." This shift in attitude demonstrates a development in Asher's mother's character. Her own tragedy, in the loss of her brother, has given her a greater sense of the varieties of experience in the world. She now has the resources to appreciate Asher's need to depict the world in accord with the way he sees it.

Asher's father, on the other hand, still sees Asher's drawings as foolishness. He has not grown closer to his son. As the book develops, this dichotomy is something important to look out for. Asher's mother develops with him and stays relatively closer to him, while Asher's father becomes more and more distant.

Another example of perspective comes up in this chapter. In Asher's defiance of his parents desire to move to Vienna, he creates a hubbub in he community. Of this, however, we see only a few examples. First, Asher's mother, responding to his complaint that no one listens to him, tells him that there would be no problem if no one were listening. In fact, however, everyone is. Second, when Asher goes to visit Krinsky during the intermediate days of Passover, Krinsky tells him that he is a major topic of conversation. As readers, we never see the full-blown arguments and discussions. Instead, we hear only little snippets, like Asher. This major event for the adults in the book, this conversation between them is something that, because we are seeing the world through a child's eyes, we never witness.

**Chapter 5**

**Summary**

Asher is brought to a pediatrician and an eye doctor, but they find nothing wrong with him. The following day in class, Asher spaces out, only to be interrupted by one of his classmates who, horrified, is screaming at him. The teacher comes over and looks in Asher's Chumash (the book containing the Torah, the five books of Moses). He scolds Asher severely and asks what his father would think of this. Asher looks down into his book to see that he has drawn a picture of the Rebbe across one of the pages of his Chumash. He does not remember having drawn the picture, but it is there. His picture makes the Rebbe look evil and threatening.

After school, Asher goes to Krinsky's store. He tells him about the drawing he made in school. Krinsky is suitably reprimanding, but in a gentler way. Krinsky tells Asher to help him sort the oil colors that have come into the store. Asher asks about oil paints and discovers that he would not have enough money to buy the paints, brushes, and canvas necessary to paint with them. Dismayed, he leaves.
Asher returns home late and in a daze. His mother is frenzied, but he is unaffected. The mashpia, the man in charge of spiritual development at Asher's school, calls both his parents and requests Asher to meet him the following morning.

The mashpia treats Asher gently, noticing that Asher seems to feel sick. He talks to Asher about his family's past and the importance of the Jewish nation. He acknowledges the importance of Asher's artistic gift, but emphasizes to him the importance of the greater community. The mashpia questions Asher about the drawing and believes him that it was not done purposefully. Throughout this conversation, Asher's mind is wandering and he is only half paying attention. When the mashpia brings up Asher's family's impending move to Vienna, Asher breaks down. The mashpia comforts him and then gives him a pencil and notebook. He asks Asher to make him a drawing. The mashpia leaves the room and Asher sits there, drawing many pictures of scenes from around the Ladover community. The pictures are generally cheerful and reverent. Asher leaves the notebook behind in the office, but is disgusted with himself. He feels like the pictures are lies.

Asher returns home very late to a once again frantic mother. He tells her he has been at the museum. The next day, Asher stops by Yudel Krinsky's shop after school. When Krinsky is not looking, Asher steals some oil paints and brushes. He does, however, purchase canvas before heading home. Asher's father scolds him for his irresponsibility and calls his drawing "foolishness." Asher begins to spend his afternoons in the museum only when his father is away travelling.

Asher feels remorseful and returns the paints. Over the summer, his mother tells him what has been going on in terms of the family's move to Vienna. In light of Asher's condition, the Rebbe had decided he could not go to Vienna. Originally, Asher's parents had decided to go to Vienna and leave Asher with his Uncle Yitzchok. But, seeing the burden Asher was, they decided it would be best if Rivkeh stayed with him. Asher and his mother send Aryeh off to Vienna alone.

**Analysis**

Asher's trip to the doctor at the beginning of the chapter brings up two recurrent themes of the book. First, Asher writes that the Doctor told him it would be good for his soul to visit the museum. Then, Asher tells us that the doctor substituted the Hebrew word, neshomoh for soul. This highlights the different languages spoken by Asher as he is writing the book, and the world in which he grew up. Second, this reinforces how pervasively Jewish Asher's early Ladover world was. Everyone with whom he interacts, even his doctor, speak the language of his Jewish community.

The drawing of the Rebbe that Asher makes in his Chumash is laden with symbolism. First, the Chumash and the Rebbe are two of the most important elements of the Ladover world. The Chumash, the Torah, is its most important book, and the Rebbe is its most important leader. Asher takes these two and puts them together in a way that desecrates both. Symbolically, his art is attacking his Jewish world. The incident itself shows how attached Asher is to his artwork and the hold that art has over him. It is as if art is the most natural thing for him to do and he does it unconsciously, without trying. Finally, the picture provides a glimpse into Asher's unconscious.
Asher is unhappy with the Rebbe for asking his father to move to Vienna. In demonizing the Rebbe through art, Asher expresses his anger.

The pictures that Asher draws for the Mashpia leave him with a feeling of self-contempt. He has drawn the world the way he thinks the mashpia wants to see it. It is a world filled with happiness and positive portrayals of Ladover life. This is the world his mother implored him to paint when he was younger. He has never seen the world through such false lenses. Depicting the world in this way, and worse, using his gift to create lies, is perhaps the most troubling thing Asher could do to himself.

Notice that Asher is much happier with the picture he unconsciously drew in class, then with those he purposely drew in the mashpia's office. This shows us how confused Asher is at this stage in his life. He has not yet learned to be comfortable with his gift and his self, to full channel his feelings into his artwork.

Asher's continual late returns home are a way of showing how distant from the world around him he is becoming. He is completely wrapped up in himself and, so, unaware of what he is doing, when he is doing it, and that it has an effect on those who love him.

Asher's theft is another significant expression of his passion for art. In order to experiment artistically, he is driven to steal. He is, however, not without remorse. In order to assuage a guilty conscience, Asher buys a canvas board.

**Chapters 6 and 7**

**Summary**

**Chapter 6**

Asher misses his father and recollects many memories of him. He and his mother commiserate about this. Alone in the house together, they begin to talk more—she speaks more of her deceased brother, Yaakov. Asher begins to notice the immense amount of work his mother is doing, such as reading volumes of books and writing lengthy papers. The work generally focuses on Russia.

Toward the end of December, Rivkeh buys Asher oil paints. He takes to them immediately and spends a lot of time painting with them. Aryeh writes to Rivkeh asking how Asher is doing in school. Rivkeh asks Asher what she should write back. He responds that he does not care and thinks about the painting he is working on.

Asher's teacher scolds him in class for drawing rather than studying. He tells him he is an embarrassment to his father. The mashpia calls Asher into his office to talk about his problems in school. Uncle Yitzchok receives a letter from Aryeh and comes to talk to Asher about his lack of interest in learning. Asher's mother tells him that everyone is upset with him because a boy his
age should be learning Torah and he is not learning Torah. Yudel Krinsky tells Asher that everyone knows that while his father is off bringing Torah to Jews all over Europe, Asher does not study Torah. Asher muses that drawing needs all his energy. He has no energy left for the Torah, since it must all be devoted to his artwork.

Asher and his mother visit the art museum together. He shows her some of the paintings that intrigue him and which he does not understand. He shows her nudes and she says she thinks it is against the Torah to paint them. Outside, she explains to him about the paintings of the crucifixion that they saw and tells him a little about Jesus. The next week, Asher goes back to the museum and sketches some of the paintings of Jesus.

Asher's father returns home for Passover and finds some of Asher's sketches of Jesus and of nudes. He is enraged. He questions his son's commitment to Judaism and tells him that such things are for the goyim (gentiles). Asher hears his father screaming at his mother and asks her about it. She says that he left her with the responsibility of raising him and she has, in some ways, failed. Asher's father explodes one morning at breakfast as Asher, ignoring his request, uses his fork to draw. Aryeh tells Asher that he must learn to control his desire to produce art.

When Aryeh returns to Europe, Asher decides to focus more on his study of Bible and Talmud in an attempt to appease him. Asher's marks improve and the adults are pleased. That summer Asher and his mother stay at the bungalow colony. The following summer Rivkeh goes to Vienna and Asher stays with his Uncle Yitzchok.

Chapter 7

Asher studies with the Mashpia to prepare for the meeting he will have with the Rebbe before he becomes a Bar Mitzvah, a fully fledged member of Jewish society, obligated in all the laws. Asher goes to the Rebbe's office and has a conversation with the Rebbe's right hand man as he waits. The Rebbe calls Asher into his office and gives him his blessing. He tells Asher that he should live life for the sake of God.

Asher leaves the Rebbe's office to discover a drawing of his face sitting on the chair in the waiting room that he had occupied. The drawing is signed, "Jacob Kahn, 1–10–56." Asher draws a picture of Jacob Kahn, signs it, affixes the date in the Jewish calendar, 26 Tevet 5716, and leaves the drawing on the chair Kahn had occupied.

As Asher leaves the building, Kahn comes outside and introduces himself. He tells Asher that the Rebbe is very clever—in designating Kahn to teach Asher, he is hoping Asher will not completely depart from the faith. Kahn explains that he is not a Torah observant Jew, but he has great respect for the Rebbe. Kahn asks Asher if he has seen has paintings in the museum. Asher responds that he has, but has not understood them. Kahn warns Asher that he is "entering the world of the goyim." Kahn tells Asher to study Picasso's Guernia and to call him in March.

Asher returns home, elated, and tells his parents what has transpired. His father is unhappy, but his mother responds that the Rebbe has decided that this is the best path. Asher sees his father as becoming detached from him, unable to deal with the path he will take. Asher goes weekly to the
Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan and studies *Guernica* religiously. In the middle of March, he calls Jacob Kahn.

**Analysis**

Asher records the exact date—December 26, 1953—that he first uses oil paints. Other things that happen are not given specific dates in the book. This is to demonstrate the immense significance the event holds in his mind. It stands out as something he remembers vividly, as opposed to many of the other memories that are sometimes hazy and never placed at such a precise moment.

Potok's use of Asher as a narrative is particularly useful in the scene where Rivkeh interrupts Asher while he is painting to ask about his father's letter concerning school. Being inside Asher's head, the reader learns much about what Asher is thinking about the painting. Just as Asher, the reader barely notices Rivkeh Lev asking her question. The reader experiences Rivkeh as an annoyance, interrupting an important discovery about painting that Asher is making.

The community in which Asher lives is very tight knit—everyone knows everything that goes on. In this chapter, Asher encounters this in the form of many people talking to him about his studies. The litany of people that encounter Asher about his lack of interest in studying serves to emphasize how monolithic the Ladover community is. It also shows the extent to which this community is uniformly opposed to that which is so precious to Asher.

Asher muses that his father, in his absence, is more a part of his life now than when he was at home, since everyone is asking about his studies. Aryeh, being the one to have all these people talk to Asher, is portrayed as the paradigm of Ladover society. His ideals are aligned with those of the community and consequently opposed to Asher's. Not surprisingly, Asher begins to equate mainstream Ladover society with his father, seeing his father in his interactions with those from the community who would try to get him to give up art for Torah.

Chapter 7 is a major turning point in the life of Asher Lev. His interest in art has now been sanctioned by his community, and the Rebbe approves of his continued artistic work and development. For most Ladover boys his age, the major milestone is becoming a Bar Mitzvah, a fully participatory member of the Jewish community. For Asher, this is not paramount. His Bar Mitzvah celebration is an afterthought. He does not seem particularly excited or affected in any way by the change in his status from a minor to one who can participate fully in Jewish ritual. Rather, he is focused far more on the opportunity he will have to grow as an artist. This privileging of the artistic event over the religious one gives us an insight into Asher's character and foreshadows his future development, where art takes precedence over conformity to the standards of his Ladover community.

The power of the Rebbe is fully expressed in Chapter 7. He, not Aryeh, gets to decide what is the best path for Asher. The rest of the community accepts and reveres his decision, even if they do not understand it.
Chapter 8

Summary

Asher calls Jacob Kahn in the middle of March. Kahn is satisfied that he has sufficiently studied Guernica and they agree to meet the following Sunday. Kahn tells Asher to study the story of the Massacre of the Innocents from the New Testament and the painting of the story by Guido Reni. He emphasizes to Asher that he is asking him to read from "The bible of the goyim."

Asher does as he is told, but feels particularly uncomfortable about reading the New Testament. He wonders what his father and the Rebbe his think. His mother brings him a book called The Art Spirit that one of the professors in the art department at her university recommended he read.

The book says that a great artist needs to free himself completely from all the traditional influence people. Rivkeh asks Asher what he thinks about this passage of the book. He responds that he does not feel that he needs to free himself in that manner.

Asher stays up late mulling over art the night before he is to meet with Jacob Kahn for the first time. He forgets to study for his algebra test the next day.

Kahn greets Asher warmly and immediately introduces him to Anna Schaeffer, a gallery owner. Anna questions Asher about his life, his family, and his beliefs. When he tells her that he thinks man's purpose is to sanctify the world, she tells him that he should not become a professional artist. He shows her his artwork and she is amazed by it. She cannot get over the fact that this Hasidic boy has such a prodigious talent.

Kahn berates Asher. He tells him that he can use his skill to create pretty things for which he is commissioned; he does not need to torture himself by becoming an artist, by entering Kahn's world. Anna chastises Jacob for being so discouraging. He replies that he wants to frighten Asher, for him to return home and be a model Jew.

Jacob then lauds Asher. He tells him he will not be able to teach him much about how to see, but will show him about composition and tension. Asher's work now, he says, has too much love. He will spend five years training Asher and hopes that at the end he "will be ready for Anna." Ana takes her leave and tells Asher that he will one day make himself famous and both of them rich.

Asher tells Jacob that he feels responsible to the Jews. Jacob tells him that as an artist, he is responsible to no one, only to art.

Asher tells Jacob that he will not be able to return the following Sunday because his father will be home for Passover. Asher goes back to Brooklyn. His mother is frantic since no one has heard from his father in a while. He is in Russia, Asher says. Aryeh will not return for Passover; that Sunday, Asher goes back to see Jacob.
**Analysis**

In Kahn's interactions with Asher, he is constantly emphasizing the ways in which Asher, by beginning to study art formally, is interacting with a different world. In their initial phone conversation, Kahn emphasizes to Asher that he does not keep Kosher. Further, when he asks Asher to read the story of the massacre of the innocents, he emphasizes that it is in "The bible of the goyim." These are just some of the many ways Jacob tries to get Asher to understand the gravity of the difference between the worlds in which they live. Jacob wants to make sure that Asher knows what he is getting himself into.

Kahn constantly tells Asher that he should return to the world he knows, the Hasidic world of Brooklyn. Along the way, we get a hint that Kahn has gone through a torturous process to become an artist, much like the process he expects Asher to undergo. He identifies with Asher and wants to make sure that Asher really wants to be an artist enough to justify the pain he will put himself through. Since Asher has no way of knowing how painful a process becoming an artist will be, cannot know what it will do to his relationship with his family and community, he is not fully equipped to make this decision.

We see how Kahn's motivations play into his interactions with Asher. It is also interesting to consider the author's motivations. By introducing Kahn in an adversarial role, Potok accomplishes two important objectives. First, he gives us a glimpse into Kahn's past, shows us that Kahn came from a religious background and left it in order to be an artist. Second, this is a way for Potok to convey the extent of Asher's commitment to art. As a thirteen-year-old boy, he ought to be frightened by what Anna and Jacob are telling him. Yet, he stays, driven by his need to create art.

Rivkeh makes a real effort to help her son and to understand and support him even if this involves exposing him to things that might be "dangerous." In this chapter, she brings him the book *The Art Spirit*, even though she knows that it says that all great artists need to break free from their nation. Unlike her husband she recognizes that it is better to raise issues and deal with them, even if it is uncomfortable. She tries to engage Asher about her concerns and discuss them.

The reader might notice that the day Asher meets Kahn for the first time, on a Sunday, he also goes to school. It is not uncommon for Jewish schools to be open on Sunday, particularly in Hasidic communities. In such communities, Saturday, not Sunday, is the Sabbath. By treating Sunday as a normal day, they specifically aim to resist the Christian influence, to specifically not act on Sunday as Christians would.
Chapter 9

Summary

Aryeh writes about a week after Passover to let his family know that he is all right. He asks Rivkeh to join him in Europe for the summer. Asher stays with his Uncle Yitzchok and goes to Jacob Kahn's studio two to three times per week.

Kahn tells Asher that there are two ways to paint the world—as a geometric design or as a flower. Kahn sees the world organized through geometric structures and this is what he paints, and only rarely will he portray it as beautiful. He sees the world as an awful place and his artwork gives him a way to express his feelings in a lasting, material form. He sees Asher painting a peer who has been picking on him. He chastises Asher for not putting his true hatred into the picture. He tells him to stop being afraid and to use his art to express what he is really feeling.

In mid-July, Kahn takes Asher to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Kahn shows Asher many crucifixions in order to show him developments in artistic techniques. Asher dreams of crucifixions that night and tells Jacob the next day that he does not want to see any more of them. Kahn screams at him, telling him that if he wants to "paint Rabbis," he should leave. If he wants to be an artist, he will have to master the history of art, which will include crucifixions and naked women.

One day Kahn brings a model into the studio. Asher is, at first, hesitant to draw her in the nude. Kahn cajoles him a little and, though concerned the Rebbe and his Mashpia would not approve of such paintings, Asher assents. He spends the rest of the day working on painting the human form. Kahn is very pleased with the progress he makes in this limited period. She begins posing for him weekly and his mastery of the nude form continues. Asher begins going to the studio almost daily. He learns a lot about different artistic movements simply by overhearing Kahn talk with other artists.

At the beginning of September, Asher's parents return from Vienna. His father tells him that he is still unhappy with his decision to paint so much. His mother asks Asher if he would mind moving in with Uncle Yitzchok for a year so she could live in Europe with Aryeh. Rivkeh begins pressuring Asher to decide whether it would be all right for her to leave. This weighs on his mind and affects his artwork. He tells her he does not want her to move. Finally, she tells Asher that his father needs her and she will go to live with him.

The classmate whom Asher despises sticks two insulting poems on his desk on successive days. In retaliation, Asher draws scenes of Hell from Michelangelo's The Last Judgement, and he replaces the faces in the original with drawings of this student's face and leaves the pictures for him. The student is suitably shaken and stops bothering Asher.

Asher has a meeting with the Rebbe to discuss his mother's move and his artwork. The Rebbe tells him the move is for the best and warns him to be careful in the world of the "Other Side" into which he is entering. Asher finds out he will one day have his own show in Anna Schaeffer's
Analysis

The image of Asher painting without a shirt is another way Potok demonstrates the effects of painting on Asher's relationship with religion. As his uncle tells him, painting in that mode of dress is not strictly in accord with the way a Ladover is expected to conduct himself. His uncle's requirement that he wear his ritual fringes in the house imbues the two places Asher paints with added significance. In Kahn's studio, Asher can paint bareback, freeing himself from anything that might bind him. In his uncle's home, though allowed to paint, Asher is constricted, literally and metaphorically, by the ritual fringes he is forced to wear. Kahn's studio becomes a place free of religion and open to all artistic expression. Brooklyn, bubbling with religious activity however, is not a place where Asher is truly free to create.

The painting Asher tries to make of his mother carries a great significance. As Jacob Kahn tells him, Asher is confused and it shows itself in his painting. Asher's artwork has always given a glimpse into his inner mental life. Here, his artwork makes it clear that he is confused and emotionally in turmoil. There has always been a certain unconscious quality to Asher's painting. He is never quite completely aware of what he is doing. He is not self-consciously painting what he does—his intellectual and emotional development lag far behind his artistic development. This incongruence comes out particularly clearly in this episode. Asher does not know how to deal with his emotions. He both loves his mother and is angry with her for wanting to leave him. He is excited and scared in the face of his potential freedom. He feels betrayed by her, even though he knows she has always supported him. Though an artistic genius, emotionally Asher is very much a teenager. No wonder he cannot resolve his conflicting feelings.

The events at the very end of the chapter may seem, at first glance, disconnected. Asher meets with the Rebbe; he visits Anna Schaeffer's studio and is later told he will have his own show there; his mother packs up and departs for Europe; and he goes to his uncle's house. In these seemingly disjointed happenings however, a theme develops. Asher is growing up and becoming more independent. The Rebbe acknowledges this in deciding that Rivkeh should move to Europe and in his warnings to Asher about the "Other Side." The art world deems that Asher will be soon ready to stand on his own—to have his own show. The protective world of Asher's youth is receding. Asher is to live without his parents for the first time in his life. Further, notice the placement of all of these events right at the end of Book 2. With these developments, Asher closes a chapter in his life and is set for new and different adventures.

Chapter 10

Summary

Asher spends the summer with Jacob Kahn at his house by the beach in Cape Cod. He enjoys the natural surroundings and spends much time talking with Kahn. Kahn tells him that artists need
time to relax and reflect. Asher begins to have a greater understanding of the depictions of nature in artwork with which he is acquainted. One day Kahn watches Asher praying. Afterward, Kahn tells him that, though he used to, he no longer has the ability to pray.

Asher and Jacob paint near the sand dunes. Jacob teaches Asher methods of Cezanne and the Impressionists. They discuss the two-dimensional nature of the canvas and the importance of not trying to treat it as a three dimensional field.

In the afternoons, Kahn teaches Asher to swim in the ocean. Lounging by the beach reminds Asher of the time he spent with his mother, at the beach near the lake in the Berkshires. Afternoons, they paint alone—Kahn in his studio and Asher in his attic room or outside. They spend evenings in Town. Everyone along the street seems to know Jacob. He takes Asher to galleries and explains art to him in detail.

One day, in town, an artist approaches Jacob and Asher. He asks Kahn if he has seen his latest exhibit. He then tells Kahn that most of the money in the art world will be coming from Tokyo in the next decade. He says that he is contemplating a move to Japan in the near future. When the man leaves them, Jacob tells Asher that the man is a whore and tells him never to become one. Asher says that he will not. Jacob replies that he is already on his way. Jacob notices that Asher has tucked his payos, his earlocks, behind his ears, not because of some belief, but because he is ashamed of them and scared people will judge him for them. Kahn tells him that a good artist will not care what he looks like and will care only about the quality of his art.

On the Sabbath, Asher prays, reads the Torah and studies about Hasidic thought and the Hasidic way of life. Jacob sits by the beach and paints. On Tisha Ba'av, Asher fasts and reads the book of Lamentations that is traditionally read on that day. Tanya Kahn approaches him and asks when he will eat. She says he looks emaciated and tells him of her brother, who was very religious and who was killed by the Nazis. She remarks that, "it did not do him much good to be so religious." Jacob comes out and he and Asher take a walk by the beach. Asher tells him he is fasting to mourn the destruction of the Temple and the six million Jews who perished in the holocaust. Jacob comments that fasting does not mean anything to him, as he cannot relate to it personally. He tells Asher he is happy that he has not given up the things that are important to him.

Kahn gets into a bad mood and will not come out of his room. Anna comes to visit, as do four other painters. Three days later, he and Asher are painting again. Toward the end of the summer, Asher and Kahn go to a number of galleries. Kahn talks about the way he, Picasso, and others revolutionized the world of art. At the end of the summer, a truck comes to pick up the work they have produced. Asher heads back to New York and his artistic summer in paradise comes to a close.

Analysis

This chapter ushers in an entirely new situation for Asher. He has never lived outside of a Hasidic home before. The summer spent at Cape Cod with the Kahns is his first extended encounter with the secular world. Also, the house on Cape Cod is a new venue for Asher to paint. It provides him a unique opportunity to focus all of his energies on painting in a
completely supportive environment. Even when he was going to Kahn's studio in Manhattan, he had to go home at night, either to his parents or his Uncle Yaakov. In neither place was he totally free—his painting angers his father; his Uncle Yaakov, while more accepting, still insisted that Asher wear his ritual fringes while painting. At Kahn's beach house, Asher has an entire summer without anyone telling him how to behave, with no one forcing him to do anything that will interfere with his painting.

Interestingly, Asher has no real religious conflicts in this environment. He nonchalantly describes how he had his own food and cooked for himself in order to observe the dietary laws, that he observes the Sabbath, and that he fasts on the ninth of Av. At no time does Asher seem to consider deviating in any significant way from the prescriptions of Orthodox Judaism. Even though no one is directly forcing him to observe the laws, Asher is still very strongly tied to them. He believes in them as he always has and unflinchingly performs the actions to which his community has made him accustomed. It does not even occur to him to question the beliefs or attachments bestowed upon him by his community. Intellectually, he is still a child. Kahn recognizes this when, one day, Asher tucks his payos behind his ears when they go into town. Jacob knows that he has done this, not out of any belief, but because he is scared to appear too different. Jacob recognizes that Asher, in the only act that even hints at disobeying the law, is not acting out of any belief or intellectual struggle. Asher simply does not undergo such struggles at this point.

Jacob often talks to Asher about his personal view of religious matters. He lets Asher know that prayer and fasting carry no personal significance for him. Asher never really responds to these types of comments. We never see him react to Kahn's telling him that he once prayed but it lost meaning for him, or that fasting never made him feel holier. In telling him these things, Kahn seems to be trying to get Asher to think more critically about his own religious views. Asher does not seem able to appreciate what Kahn is saying, and he does not even seem to realize the implications that Kahn's experience could have for his own. He does not know how to respond to what Kahn says about religion.

Chapter 11

Summary

Asher begins study at the Ladover High School. He is surprised to discover that he has been enrolled in a French class. He questions the registrar about this and is told that the Rebbe explicitly requested that he study French throughout high school.

Asher prays for his parents and for Jacob Kahn on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. About three weeks later at Simchat Torah, a celebration of the Bible, Asher sees Jacob Kahn at the edge of a crowd among those watching the Ladover dancing in the streets. Asher pulls him into the celebration and they dance together with a Torah scroll.
Asher continues going to Kahn's studio on Sundays. In late October, Kahn has a show opening. Asher notices a sculpture depicted himself and Kahn. Anna marvels at what a success the show has been, but Jacob is unhappy. Jacob is sad that he does not have the resolve to simply stop having shows all together. Anna and Asher share a few words and she tells him that a very prominent family bought the sculpture of the heads of himself and Kahn. Asher feels a bit odd, knowing that his likeness will grace this family's home.

Asher's uncle decides to renovate the attic in order to give him a bigger space in which to live and work. To show his gratitude, Asher paints a portrait of their family for Chanukah. In January, Kahn takes Asher to a Van Gogh exhibit in Philadelphia. A month later, Asher discovers that Kahn had made a sculpture of the two of them dancing with a Torah. Kahn comes to a big Ladover celebration around the end of February. Kahn pulls Asher aside to tell him he will have to go to Europe for a month.

Asher's parents return at the end of March and stay at Uncle Yitzchok's house. There is tension between Asher and Aryeh. Yitzchok tries to talk to Aryeh, but it does no help. Rivkeh asks Asher to move to Vienna with them. He replies that his father will try to take away his art from him.

Kahn and Asher talk about his father's anger with him. Kahn says that he and his father have two different natures. He tells Asher to become a great artist; only in that way will he justify what he is doing to those who are close to him.

Asher's family mounts increasing pressure on him to move to Vienna. He relents. Jacob tells him that he needs to learn to think and act for himself. Asher gets sick in Vienna and is sent back home. He spends the rest of the summer with his uncle and then with Kahn in Provincetown.

The registrar of Asher's High School and the Rebbe's assistant both tell Asher he will study Russian in college. He refuses. The Rebbe speaks with him personally and tells him it might one day help him to travel to Russia to see art. He assents.

Asher visit's Anna's gallery with Kahn. She tells him that he will have a show in the spring. Yudel Krinsky, his Uncle, and his Mother are happy and proud. Kahn insists that Asher show his paintings of nudes. The show is a moderate success. The Rebbe's assistant comes, but leaves after seeing what is there.

Asher's parents decide not to return that summer and he spends the summer in Provincetown. His next show is the following spring. The following summer, Rivkeh and Aryeh return to Brooklyn.

**Analysis**

The Rebbe's power rears its head again at the beginning of this chapter. He decides that Asher should learn French and that is the end of it. The registrar enforces this decision at the High School and Asher accepts it. Interestingly, the Rebbe informs Asher of his decision, not by telling him, but by letting the Registrar tell him when he inquires as to why he is scheduled to take French. This is the way the Rebbe operates. When he decided that Asher should learn with Jacob Kahn, a similar event transpired. Rather than directly informing Asher of his decision, the
Rebbe invited Kahn to his office the same night Asher came to speak with him and had Kahn approach Asher after his meeting with the Rebbe. In orchestrating these ways of delivering his decisions, the Rebbe creates an aura of inaccessibility about him. The aura also helps him seem as a more powerful leader, as he is able to control a veritable army of men to deliver his messages.

When Asher goes to Vienna, he becomes ill. In describing the scene, Potok does not simply rely on saying that Asher is ill, though. He uses language very carefully in writing this section in order to convey Asher's illness.

Metaphor plays a large role in the writing of this section. Asher says not that he gets on a plane to go back to America, but rather, "a man with a beard led me gently into a silver bird and sat with me through the clouds." The use of metaphor, such as the silver bird, for an airplane, helps preserve the dream-like quality of the scene. We can imagine a very sick Asher, half awake and half asleep, perceiving an airplane as a large bird.

The placement of detail further conveys the dreaminess of the scene. When it comes to events in the outside world, Asher provides only the barest of details. The details of his internal world are sharp and vivid though, for example his detailed memory of Yudel Krinsky telling him that Vienna hates Jews. By giving Asher a greater consciousness of his inner mental life and a reduced awareness of the world around him, Potok conveys the sense that Asher is ill, unable to fully perceive his surroundings.

The end of this chapter finds Asher caught between different ideas of what constitutes success. There is Anna's vision of success-getting rich through shows. Jacob's, slightly different, involves progressing as an artist and being recognized for it. These ideals collide with his community's vision of commitment to Torah and piety. This conflict comes out at two places-first, Asher hesitates over whether to show the nudes in his show; he relents when Jacob tells him they are important to his development, even though he knows the effect they will have on the Ladover in the audience. Second, Anna serves non-kosher food at the opening. The world of art into which Asher is entering insists on its acceptance of his standard of success when it conflicts with the Ladover ideal.

Chapter 12

Summary

Asher notices that his parents have developed a collection of shared memories and experiences of which he is not a part. The years living away from each other have produced a remarkable distance. Asher's father was highly successful in Europe and has become one of the most powerful and well-respected men in the Ladover community. As Asher sees it, this has given him the self-confidence not to be threatened by Asher's artwork. Asher's word no longer enrages him.
Rivkeh asks Asher if there will be nudes in his next show—if so, his father will not come. She talks to him about a young girl they are looking at for him to marry. Asher just laughs, as he is not even close to ready for that. A few months later, Rivkeh again asks Asher if there will be nudes at his show and Asher replies again that he does not know.

Aryeh asks Asher about the Russian and French he has been learning. Asher tells him that it has been useful because many interesting art books have been written in French or Russian. Aryeh does not like this response. He asks Asher whether he will be able to join his parents in the Berkshires that summer. Asher responds that he will need to paint, since he will be having a show the following January.

Aryeh tries to talk to Asher about Art. Asher tries to explain that he paints his feelings. Aryeh says that sometimes, feelings should be concealed. Asher talks to Jacob about his father. Jacob tells him that his father simply cannot understand art, so he should not continually allow it to frustrate him. Many great men, he says, do not have an aesthetic sense.

Asher and Jacob go to Chicago to see a Matisse exhibit. When Asher returns, his father is upset that he did not tell him he was going to Chicago, as he might have wanted Asher to deliver something for him. On subsequent trips, Asher's father gives him letters, which are collected from him by people who meet him as he steps off his flight.

Asher tells his mother he will be in Provincetown for the summer and she asks if he can spend two weeks in the Berkshires. Asher asks whether his father will let him paint, since he needs all of his time for painting. Asher spends the entire summer in Provincetown and comes back without payos. His father seems relieved that he still has his beard and wears his ritual fringes. Rivkeh asks about the nudes again and Asher says that he might have to include them in the show.

When Anna and Jacob come to pick up the paintings for the show, Asher hesitates over letting them take the nudes, but allows them to. The show was, by the standards of the art world, a remarkable success. A previously harsh critic comments that Asher has surpassed Kahn. But Asher's parents do not attend.

That Friday night, Asher's mother asks if he will have another show soon. This starts Aryeh on a tirade and he tells Asher that it is hurtful to have people with whom he works ask him why his son paints naked women. Asher tries to explain that there is a difference between naked women and nudes.

Later that week, Aryeh asks Asher to explain to him articles that were written about his show; Asher tries to get him to understand the language of art, but to no avail. Eventually, they both give up. Asher does not see Jacob Kahn for a long while. Asher begins to plan a trip to Europe. Jacob Kahn had told him that, "Florence is a gift."
**Analysis**

When Asher's father mentions to Asher that trips to Chicago are expensive, Asher replies that he has plenty of money. This is the first reference Asher makes to the wealth he has accumulated through his shows. Unlike Anna, who after each show has made some reference to the financial success it has brought, Asher has been seemingly unconcerned with the monetary effects of his art. His lifestyle has not significantly changed, he still lives with his family, and he does not buy flashy cars or anything of that sort. His core commitment is to his art. He does not use his money to satisfy materialistic urges, he does not seem to have materialistic urges. To engage in such behavior would be to act in a way the Ladover community, his parents, would find inappropriate; Asher seems to save such acts of rebellion only for his artistic advancement.

In this chapter, Asher finally grows to understand how completely different he and his father are. At the beginning of the chapter, he does not realize this and is frustrated by his father's inability to relate to what he does when he paints. Kahn tells Asher that his father simply has an "aesthetic blindness." Asher does not realize the extent of this, though, until his father actually makes an effort to understand art. Asher spends many days trying to explain it to him. In the end, though, he has no way of relating to art, since it does not fit within his conceptual scheme. At this point, Asher realizes that his father simply will not, cannot understand his world.

At the end of the chapter, Asher decides to travel to Europe. Approximately the last page of the chapter starts and ends with the sentence, "Florence is a gift, Jacob Kahn had said." In between the two occurrences of this sentence, however, Asher talks to his parents about his plans to travel. This structure allows Potok to convey a difference between Asher's motivations for his trip and his parents' understanding of the trip. Asher wants to travel to Europe because Kahn has spoken highly of it, particularly of Florence. Asher wants to go to Florence to see the mostly Christian artwork. Jacob's father, however, sees in this a way of connecting with his son. As soon as Asher tells him of his intentions, Aryeh begins excitedly talking about the things important to him. He will give Asher the names of people, presumably Ladover and Orthodox Jews whom he ought to visit while there. He will also tell Asher where he can find kosher food. Though Asher's father sees Asher's interest in Europe as a way of connecting to his son, he is sadly mistaken. He neither understands why Asher is traveling, nor does he appreciate the things that Asher wishes to find in Europe.

**Chapter 13**

**Summary**

Asher enjoys the beauty of Florence and the many artistic treasures to be found within. He eats with an old woman, whose name he received from his father. He is particularly struck by Michelangelo's *Pietà* and the doors of the baptistery, by Ghiberti. He studies both of these, sketching them often. He comments that the *Pietà* struck a chord deep within him, though he could relate it only to his own experiences. He wonders how a devout Christian reacts to the *Pietà*. 
Asher is approached by a Ladover man in Florence and asked to bring a package to Rome. He is met in Rome by a man who asks him to come visit the yeshiva there if he has time; it is the yeshiva that Aryeh helped build. On his last day in Rome, Asher calls the man and安排s to visit the yeshiva. He learns that the yeshiva has grown tremendously over the past five years thanks to the work of his father. On his flight to Paris, Asher continues drawing the Pieta, but now he is experimenting with it, altering it slightly.

Asher's mythic ancestor reappears in his dreams that first night in Paris, this time a very forceful creature. In the morning, Asher heads to a kosher restaurant about which his father had told him and draws another version of the Pietà, further altered. Asher arranges to meet Avraham Cutler, the head of the yeshiva Aryeh had built in Paris. They stop at Montmartre to see Picasso's old studio on the way to the Yeshiva. Cutler invites Asher to live and eat at the yeshiva. He responds that he has a room. Eating dinner at the yeshiva that evening, Asher meets many people who seem to know and revere his father.

Asher writes his parents to tell them he wants to remain in Europe. They respond giving their blessing; his mother writes, telling him she wishes he would come home, but understands his need to stay. Asher rents an apartment in the neighborhood of the yeshiva and converts one room into a studio. Asher contacts Anna to let her know he is all right and living in Paris.

The months go by, Asher paints, and begins to think about his home, his family, and his community. He recalls his mythic ancestor, who had made the nobleman for whom he worked rich. His parents had spoken of the slaughtering of Jews this nobleman and other goyim behaved. But, thought Asher, if the Jew had made him rich, he may also be culpable. Perhaps his mythic ancestor was horrified at what he had wrought and spent the rest of his days traveling to rectify what he had done. Asher wonders whether his artistic journey is serving a similar purpose for him.

Asher thinks about his grandfather, his father, and finally his mother. He begins to get a glimpse of the pain she felt through the death of her brother, and the fights between Asher and his father. He is driven to paint his mother in order to give expression to these feelings of pain. He makes one painting, but feels it is incomplete. He then makes another, which he feels is much better. The paintings are crucifixions. Anna Schaeffer visits Asher in Paris and takes his work back to the U.S. for an upcoming show. In January, five days before the opening, Asher returns to New York.

Analysis

Alone in Paris, Asher is filled with memories of his past. Here, he begins to think about the things people have said to him and begins to have a greater understanding of them. For years, Asher has been painting and living in a world without really reflecting on it. For years, he did not really understand what was going on with the people he loved, what effect he was having on their lives. Now, in his solitude, he begins to understand the pain his mother experienced when he was younger. He understands that it must have been extremely difficult for her living in a household, in the midst of the conflict between himself and his father. These moments of
reflection are immensely important for Asher. He is becoming an individual more aware of the implications of his actions, more attuned to the influence his work has on others.

The scene in which Asher thinks back to his mythic ancestor is one of true literary achievement. Potok ties together a number of ideas he has been developing throughout the book. Asher employs the image of his mythic ancestor, carrying with it a Jewish and family history central to Asher's upbringing, to understand his own journey. The language Potok uses is immensely terse, and much is implied but not said. Asher thinks, "Had a dream-haunted Jew spent the rest of his life sculpting form out of the horror of his private night?" This is a well-formulated thought that conveys the parallel between his life and his grandfathers. Potok does not spend many pages on the development of this thought, but gives it to us fully formed. The paragraph in which this metaphor is written is written with this intensity throughout. The thoughts presented are meant to overpower the reader in much the same way that Lev, thinking them, is overpowered.

Asher feels that the first painting of his mother is incomplete. He thinks back and remembers his mother asking him, "can you understand what it means for something to be incomplete?" At this moment, he finally understands. This episode comes in the midst of a chapter where Asher is coming to grips with his past. This is yet another significant discovery he has made about his past—it helps him to feel like he understands his mother's pain better. This discovery helps him produce better artwork.

Chapter 14

Summary

So as not to worry his parents too much, Asher does not tell them details about his travel plans. He returns home to an empty house, but calls the Rebbe's assistant to find out that they are at the University of Chicago for a couple of days. The next morning, his parents call to let him know they will be arriving later in the day. He walks around the streets of his community and runs into Yudel Krinsky. They go inside Krinsky's shop and chat, just like old times. He stops into his Uncle Yitzchok's store to say hello. Yitzchok greets him warmly and asks if he can come to the show. He says he will come if there are no nudes. Asher assures him that there won't be. Asher feels uneasy, because he is certain Yitzchok will be disturbed by the crucifixions.

Asher calls Anna. She tells him that most of the work in the show will be sold by the time it opens. He arranges to meet her at the studio at three o'clock. Asher naps and dreams of his mythic ancestor once again. He awakens and rides into Manhattan. Asher asks Anna about the crucifixions. She says they will be the climax of the show. He tells her he is worried they will hurt people, and that that art does that sometimes and he should not trouble himself with concern.

Asher returns home and sees his parents. They are happy to see him and tell him about the projects in which they will be involved, bringing Judaism to college campuses. Asher's mother asks whether his father will be able to attend the show. As her answers that he is displaying no nudes, so he can come. Asher imagines his parents in the gallery, coming to the end of the
exhibition and seeing the paintings. He then imagines his mythic ancestor and feels a kinship with him.

Asher goes to visit an ailing Jacob Kahn, who has warm words of praise for him and for himself. Talking about Asher, he says that he "sculpted a David….a breathing David." Asher speaks with Tanya for a moment and leaves, wishing Jacob better health.

Asher passes the Sabbath nervous in anticipation. His father discusses with him his life as a painter, taking a more interested and understanding tone. He reveals that a major Manhattan museum bought two of his paintings that week. He tells them they will see the paintings at the show.

The next day, Asher goes to the gallery early and sees how everything is hung. He is troubled by the crucifixions and cannot bear to look at them. Anna introduces Asher to many of her big customers who have come in for the show. The mobs begin to pour in and seem to love the show. Asher's parents arrive; he introduces them to Anna and begins to take them around. They arrive at the end and see the Crucifixion paintings and they are horrified. They storm out of the show and tell him he has crossed a line—they are too angry for further words.

Everything in the community has changed. People, including his parents, barely talk to him and are extremely cold. The Rebbe, still the infinitely wise man, understands all sides of the dispute. He understands that Asher has used the crucifix because of its centrality to the Western artistic tradition. He also understands that the Ladover laymen do not, cannot, and will not understand this. In such an emotionally charged environment, rife with misunderstanding, the Rebbe recognizes that a resolution will not be reached. So, he sends Asher away, tells him he must leave the community. Asher books a flight to Paris the next day. He leaves behind parents, torn and hurt by the son they do not understand.

**Analysis**

After Asher tells his mother that there will be no nudes in the show, he imagines them seeing the crucifixions. He then sees his mythic ancestor, who tells him that they "will walk together now…for our [their] separate deeds that unbalanced the world." Asher has reconciled himself to showing the crucifixions to his family. However, he knows that they will cause a great disturbance and publicly displaying these pictures will "unbalance the world." His ancestor appears at this particular moment, because by now, Asher has decided to go ahead with showing the paintings to his parents. Ironically, it is now that he is able to fully connect with his past. Only as he is about to significantly hurt his parents does Asher feel a true bond with his family. Just as Asher has used appropriated others' artistic symbols to convey his emotion, he has appropriated his family history for his own use, altering it, changing the story of his father's great-great-grandfather to attribute new motivations to him. In both instances, he has taken someone else's symbol, such as the crucifixion, along with his family and his mythic ancestors, and altered it for his own purposes.

The depiction of Asher's family in a crucifix is a major achievement for Asher. Asher knows that the painting of his family using the motif of the crucifixion will bring his parents tremendous
pain. He has come a long way to understand the type of pain his mother has gone through. His way of expressing this awareness, though, is through producing a painting that depicts this pain. That is why he creates the painting. Steeped in the artistic tradition, the crucifixion means a great deal to him: it is the ultimate symbol of suffering. So, it is natural that Asher would use this symbol to convey the pain his mother has felt. Of course, though, those not steeped in the artistic tradition would not attach the same meaning to the Crucifixion as Asher does. The Ladover community, and particularly Asher's father, has very different associations with the crucifixion. For them, the crucifix is the symbol of a religion and a culture that has persecuted Jews and attempted to destroy Judaism for millennia. For Asher's father, it represents the cause of his father's death, his father having been killed by an ax-toting, Russian peasant the night before Easter. Still, Asher feels that his message needs to be expressed and allows the painting to be displayed.

In displaying the painting, he prioritizes his artistic world above his Jewish world. Only those for whom the crucifix carries the connotations that it does for Asher, that is those who are part of the art community, will understand the message Asher is conveying. Asher is hanging the painting for them. The Ladover community does not understand the language of paint with which Asher speaks; thus, instead of understanding the powerful emotions he is trying to convey, they are angered and hurt.

Asher, in coming to understand his mother's pain and to paint it, causes her more pain. He recognizes the problem with this, but offers no resolution. He muses that Kahn once told him he can justify the pain he is causing by becoming a great artist. But, he realizes, that only causes more pain, so then he will have to become a greater artist still.

**Important Quotations Explained**

1.) I put five tubes of oil color, a bottle of turpentine, and a bottle of linseed oil into my coat pockets. I slipped two bristle brushes into my loose-leaf notebook. Before I left the store I bought a small canvas board; I had enough money for that.

   This is the episode in Chapter 5 where Asher steals paint from Krinsky's store. It shows us the power of Asher's urge to create art. It causes him to commit an action that he has been trained to revile. Asher is more complex and soon the conflict between his art and his community sets in. Even before he leaves the store, he feels guilty and buys a canvas. When he later tries to use the paints, he feels too guilty at having stolen them, confesses his sin, and returns the merchandise.

2.) I saw a folded piece of paper on the chair I had occupied earlier. I stopped and picked it up and unfolded it. It was a pencil drawing, a photographic likeness of my face made with an exquisite economy of line and without light and shade. The lower right-hand corner of the drawing contained a signature: Jacob Kahn. Below the signature was the date: 1–10–56.
This event takes place in Chapter 7, immediately after Asher has had his pre-Bar Mitzvah meeting with the Rebbe. Asher returns to the waiting room and discovers this drawing. A new world begins to open before his eyes. The date, 1–10–56, and the form in which it is written are indelibly burned in his memory. The date is significant as it is the secular date, as it represents Asher's first real interaction with the secular world. This even marks a turning point in Asher's life. Kahn introduces himself to Asher and arranges to begin teaching him. This marks the end of Asher's days as a directionless amateur and the beginning of his development into an artistic genius.

3.) Away from my world, alone in an apartment that offered me neither memories nor roots, I began to find old and distant memories of my own, long buried by pain and time and slowly brought to the surface now…. Now I would have to paint the street that could not be seen.

Removed from the familiar and comforting world of his childhood, Asher is forced to reach back into the recesses of his mind. This quotation, from Chapter 13 after Asher has moved into his own apartment in Paris, represents a turning point in Asher's relationship to his past. He finally begins to reflect on his past and on his relationship to his parents, his family, and his community. He begins to see himself as situated within that community in a unique way, but still as a part of it. These memories, he says he will paint. What comes out of the painting of these reflections are his crucifixions—his crowning achievements—but also the paintings that separate him from his community and reduce it permanently to his memories.

4.) I saw my mythic ancestor. Come with me, my precious Asher. You and I will walk together through the centuries, each of us for our separate deeds that unbalanced the world.

This is what happens to Asher after he tells his mother that she and his father should come to his show. He has reconciled himself to showing them the crucifixion paintings he has made of his family. This quote represents the way Asher has reconciled the matter to himself. He knows that his act will "unbalance the world." Yet, he sees this act as one that brings him closer to his mythic ancestor, a great man, whom Asher imagines to have also "unbalanced the world." Asher sees himself as something of a mythic figure. He sees his display of art as carrying with it great significance as he expects to "walk…through the centuries."

5.) Wherever I travel now, there is always someone who knows your name. 'Are you the father of Asher Lev, the painter?' they ask me. It's a very strange feeling. Asher Lev, the painter.

Aryeh says this to Asher as they are talking over the Sabbath. This quote shows us where Aryeh has come in his relationship to Asher. It is in the midst of a longer dialogue in which Aryeh is asking Asher about his life as an artist and seems
genuinely interested and affectionate. Still, he has not been able to reconcile him-106self fully to Asher's choice of life. It still seems "strange" to him. This quote also shows the reversal that has taken place in their roles. Throughout the book, Aryeh has been in the spotlight—everyone has called Asher, "the son of Reb Aryeh Lev." Now, however, Aryeh is finally encountering people to whom he is the father of artist Asher Lev.

**Key Facts**

**full title** · My Name is Asher Lev

**author** · Chaim Potok

**type of work** · Novel

**genre** · Bildungsroman

**language** · English

**time and place written** · Early 1970s, America

**date of first publication** · 1972

**publisher** · Alfred A. Knopf

**narrator** · Asher Lev

**point of view** · Asher Lev, in his mid-twenties, writes his recollections of his life and development up to that point. We see the world through Lev's eyes.

**tone** · Since Asher is writing the book, he is very understanding to himself and sympathetic to the way he felt. Mostly, he is trying to explain how he has developed and give a voice to why he has acted as he did.

**tense** · Past

**settings (time)** · 1943–mid 1970s

**settings (place)** · Brooklyn, Manhattan, Florence, Rome, Paris

**protagonist** · Asher Lev
major conflict · Asher Lev has an intense desire to paint. This often comes into conflict with the Ladover Hasidic community in which he has been raised.

rising action · Asher studies art with the non-observant Jacob Kahn, Asher moves to Paris to study there, Asher paints a picture of his mother in a crucifixion scene.

climax · Asher's parents see his crucifix paintings

falling action · Asher's parents distance themselves, Rebbe asks Asher to leave the community

themes · The conflict between art and community

motifs · Travel, unfinished work

symbols · Earlocks, the Rebbe, Asher's mythic ancestor

foreshadowing · On the plane to Paris, Asher alters the Pietà. This foreshadows his later artistic creation in which he further alters the form of the crucifixion, using it to depict his family.

Study Questions and Essay Topics

1.) Compare and contrast the way Asher's parents relate to him.

*My Name is Asher Lev* focuses heavily on the clash between cultures and the coming of age of a boy caught between two opposed traditions. This conflict is further conveyed in the mixed usage of language from both worlds. For example, at the very beginning of the book there is a paragraph beginning, "Often on Shabbos or festivals…." Here, the colloquial Yiddish word, "Shabbos" for the Sabbath is juxtaposed with the English word, "festivals," for the holidays. In Lev's household, the word "festivals would not have been used. This juxtaposition makes clear the change Lev has undergone and the continued cultural conflict in which he is mired. After all, he has forsaken only some, but not all of the Hebrew or Yiddish expressions for English ones.

2.) Asher's father is distant from Asher. He has a very different sense of the world, does not particularly approve of art, and wishes his son were not an artist. He does not understand what someone could see in art. Even when he tries late in the book to understand, it only leads to frustration for him and Asher, as they are unable to communicate.
3.) Asher's mother, in contrast, is more supportive. Rivkeh has had a broader range of emotional experience and seems to be a more mature character than Aryeh. She engages Asher's interest in art, by bringing him to museum. She also buys him art supplies, even though she knows it will anger Aryeh, and brings him a book about the spirit of the artist.

4.) Discuss the conflict Asher faces between art and religion.

5.) When Asher is younger, this conflict is more external—his artistic impulse drives him to do certain things of which others in his community disapprove. One notable example of this is the episode when Asher draws a picture of the Rebbe in his Chumash. Further, Asher's artistic impulses cause him to steal oil paints from Krinsky's store.

6.) When Asher is older, the conflict becomes more internal. He becomes more aware of what is at stake and has to consciously make decisions about what is more important. The most significant example of this is his decision to display the crucifixion. In doing so, he consciously chooses to hurt his family and community in order to remain true to his art and share his artistic vision.

7.) How does the use of language contribute to the ideas presented in *My Name is Asher Lev*?

**Suggested Essay Topics**

Who plays the largest role in Asher's life and development?

What is the significance of Asher's "mythic ancestor"?

Why does Asher Lev remain an Observant Jew?

Discuss the significance of Asher's lengthy stay in Europe.

Why does Potok choose to set *My Name is Asher Lev* in a Hasidic community?
MY NAME IS ASHER LEV

Novel by Chaim Potok, 1972

*My Name Is Asher Lev*, Chaim Potok's third novel, is a story of the search for truth and of a way to communicate that truth. It is a story of the search for meaning and balance in a world that contains suffering. In the novel Potok continued to work in the bildungsroman tradition, with the main character choosing his place in the world as he matures from childhood to adulthood. As in his earlier work *The Chosen*, Potok's main character must confront Jewish tradition and make meaning of it in his own life.

As a young boy with a gift for drawing, Asher Lev is driven to his art in the face of his father's disdain: "He seemed awed and angry and confused and dejected, all at the same time." The boy struggles with his internal desire to draw what he sees, what he remembers, what he feels in the face of his community's fear that his gift is from the "Other Side" (that is, from the Gentiles) rather than from Ribono Shel Olom (from Judaism). In Asher's journey to fulfill the promise of his gift, he connects to the journeys of his family. It is in this connection that he discovers that his art must speak the truth if it is to bring balance to a world with suffering.

Throughout his life Asher had heard stories of how his father's great-great-grandfather had transformed the estates of a Russian nobleman into a source of immense wealth. The nobleman, however, had persecuted his serfs and once burned down an entire village. Asher realizes that his ancestor's later travels had to do with atonement for an ability that led to suffering. His father's father, too, traveled, as does his own father. In coming to understand these journeys as methods of atonement, Asher finds his own meaning: "Now the man who had once been the child asked it again and wondered if the giving and the goodness and the journeys of that mythic ancestor might have been acts born in the memories of screams and burning flesh. A balance had to be given the world; the demonic had to be reshaped into meaning … Traditions are born by the power of an initial thrust that hurls acts and ideas across centuries." And so Asher reshapes the anguish and torment of his people into art: "No one says you have to paint ultimate anguish and torment. But if you are driven to paint it, you have no other way." Yet to paint this suffering, this torment, Asher must journey into another tradition to find the aesthetic mold necessary to convey the pain. This mold is the crucifix he has been studying for much of his life. The master of the universe whispers to him through the leaves of the trees: "Now journey with me, my Asher. Paint the anguish of all the world. Let people see the pain. But create your own molds and your own play of forms for the pain. We must give a balance to the universe."

The themes of balance and truth and journey in *My Name Is Asher Lev* are played out in the context of a post-Holocaust world. Although his mother wants him to paint pretty pictures, Asher cannot because he realizes that the world is not pretty; rather, it contains suffering, a suffering he must depict, a truth he must paint. When there is silence, where there is a fear of the truth, agony persists. Asher learns this from the Russian émigré Yudel Krinsky, who had been imprisoned in Siberia. The image of his cold, his suffering, is of interest to the young Asher. "Did Stalin send
many people to Siberia?” Asher asks. When Yudel replies that he sent millions, Asher wants to know what the world did for this inhumanity. "Absolutely nothing," Yudel responds. It is this nothing, this silence, that Asher cannot allow in his own life, in his art. Risking everything, he must paint the truth. He must bring balance to the world, for such suffering has no meaning if it is kept quiet, if it is not communicated, not set out for all to see.

Once again, in *My Name Is Asher Lev*, Potok explores issues of confronting the past, confronting cultures, and understanding the self and others. It is as if Potok were saying to the readers of his work, "Journey with me."

—Jan M. Osborn
Biography: POTOK, Chaim

Nationality: American.

Born: Herman Harold Potok, New York City, 17 February 1929.


Family: Married Adena Sarah Mosevitzky in 1958; two daughters and one son.

Military Service: United States Army chaplain in Korea, 1956-57.


Address: c/o Alfred Knopf Inc., 201 E. 50th Street, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.

**PUBLICATION**

**Novels**


*The Promise* (sequel to *The Chosen*). 1969.


*In the Beginning*. 1975.


Other

Jewish Ethics (pamphlet series; 14 vols.). 1964-69.


Zebra and Other Stories. 1998.


Film Adaptation:

The Chosen, 1982.

Bibliography:


Critical Studies:


* * *

Chaim Potok, born in 1929 to Hasidic Jewish parents who had emigrated to the United States from Poland, began writing fiction when he was 16 years old. His early novels are of the bildungsroman tradition, with the stories exploring the development of a person from childhood to maturity and with particular emphasis on the character becoming conscious of his or her role in the world. Potok's conception of himself as a writer at the age of 16 evokes the very core of a bildungsroman novel. In a 1995 interview Potok told the author Laura Chavkin that his father had wanted him to teach Talmud and was not happy about his decision to become a writer. Potok did, however, follow this path, and he lists his most significant literary influences as James Joyce, Evelyn Waugh, and Thomas Mann, authors he describes as taking him to worlds he never knew existed, authors making him conscious of language and its potential beauty in telling stories.

Potok earned a B.A. in English literature and went on to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1954 he was ordained as a rabbi and the following year served as a chaplain for the U.S. Army in Korea. Potok has described his service in Korea as a pivotal life experience: "Crucial, fundamental, pivotal. It was a transforming experience. I was not the same person coming out of the army and Korea as I was going in." He went on to say that the experience reshaped his model of himself and of his place in the world.

This reshaping of the self after confrontation with another culture is a central theme in Potok's fiction. For example, in Potok's best-known work, The Chosen, both the narrator, Reuven Malter, and his enemy-then-friend, Danny Saunders, are confronted with cultural elements (although both are from Jewish homes) that cause them to question and be transformed. While the transformation is not without pain, it gives meaning to their lives. In My Name Is Asher Lev the main character is confronted with his artistic gift and must learn to paint the truth by using motifs from his own as well as other religions, regardless of the pain this may bring to those he loves. It is this search for personal meaning within a tradition that gives the novels their richness and lasting significance. Potok has acknowledged the religious tradition in his novels: "There is in my work a very strong religious foreground and background."
History provides a background in Potok's fiction as well. World War II and the Holocaust are ever present in *The Chosen*, with the war, the ultimate defeat of Hitler, the realization of the murder of six million Jews, and the establishment of a Jewish state providing a larger context for the lives of the boys. Jewish history and the Holocaust also provide a subtle background for the suffering in *My Name Is Asher Lev*. The world remaining silent in the face of such slaughter is a concept the young Asher internalizes and eventually works through as he comes to realize that he cannot remain silent about suffering and be true to his art or his humanity.

Potok's fiction explores the importance of family, of Jewish tradition, of cultures coming together, of discovering truth and transforming the self as a consequence of experience. His bildungsroman novels present questions of humanity as the young protagonists mature in post-World War II America.

—Jan M. Osborn
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