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PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

*The Chosen*

Born in 1929, Chaim Potok grew up and was educated in New York. After being ordained as a rabbi, he took a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, and worked as a chaplain with the US Forces in Korea from 1955–57. His novels *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *In the Beginning*, *The Book of Lights*, *My Name is Asher Lev*, *The Gift of Asher Lev* and *I am The Clay*, have all been published by Penguin. He is also the author of *Wanderings*, a history of the Jews; of a children's book, *The Tree of Here*; and of three plays, *Out of the Depths*, *Sins of the Father* and *The Play of Lights*. He died in 2002.

Shalom Auslander is the author of *Beware of God: Stories* and *Foreskin's Lament*. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *Guardian*, among others, and he is a regular contributor to Public Radio International's 'This American Life'.



CHAIM POTOK

*The Chosen*

*with an Introduction by Shalom Auslander*



PENGUIN BOOKS

## PENGUIN CLASSICS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

First published in the USA by Simon & Schuster Inc. 1966

First published in Great Britain by William Heinemann Ltd 1967

Published in Penguin Classics 2009

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Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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978-0-14-1-01077-6

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## Introduction

Dear God, I hated this book. I hated this book more than I hated Shakespeare, and I really hated Shakespeare. The only work I hated more than Shakespeare's was the Old Testament, and I hated this book even more than I hated the Old Testament.

Not that I had ever read it, of course. In grade school, they told me it was about Judaism. So I didn't read it. In middle school, they told it was about the Holocaust. So I didn't read it. In high school, they told me it was about Zionism. Didn't read it.

Not having read a book doesn't preclude a teenager from hating it, though, and *The Chosen* went to the top of my *Things I'd Give to a Person I Despise if They Were Going Away to a Desert Island* list (second-place was any album by Shlomo "The Singing Rabbi" Carlbach; third-place was my mother). Still, I managed to pull good grades – it's easy to impress the elders with your impression of a book when they've already impressed upon you what they want your impression to be. *The Chosen* is a book about how important Judaism is to blah blah blah. *The Chosen* examines how the tragedy of the Holocaust effects yadda yadda yadda. In *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok examines the importance of the Jewish State to the development of a something something something.

Of course when I finally did read *The Chosen* – I was older, writing for a living, and, frankly, looking for an example of Jewish-American literature to mock – I discovered that it wasn't actually about any of things. It wasn't about theology or genocide or geographically forbidding lands promised to nomadic peoples by belligerent socio-pathic deities. I can understand why my teachers would have wanted it to be, though, for those are far easier subjects compared to what

Chaim Potok

*The Chosen* is actually about. They are subjects that are divorced from us, apart from us. We may care about them, but they are not actually who we are. They aren't mirrors, they are discussions. And people, in my experience, would much rather have a discussion than look in the mirror (see: the internet). But *The Chosen*, while ostensibly following the friendship of Reuven and Danny, is primarily about fathers. And about sons. And about fathers and sons.

Which is much, much worse.

What are our responsibilities, Potok asks – to ourselves, our parents, our children? What do we need from each other? Is love that's conditional really love? That Reb Saunders is a Reb matters only in the specifics of the issues which complicate the more crucial father/son relationship; but what we are witnessing in this book is two friends trying to individuate, trying to discover who they want to be, how they can relate to their fathers and their pasts while still pressing on with their futures.

No wonder Rabbi A, who assigned it in fifth grade and was known to hit his children, said it was about Judaism. No wonder Mr B, who assigned it in seventh grade and who communicated with his son in mostly adjuratory terms, insisted it was about the Holocaust. No wonder Rabbi C, who assigned it in high school and whose son was rebelling at the non-kosher pizza stand down the road, explained that it was about Zionism.

Mirrors aren't easy, but that's what books are for. If you don't like it, go to the movies. Hell, the rest of the world is.

*The Chosen* is a mirror. It may discuss issues of the world, but only insofar as they effect these fragile, essential father/son relationships. Regardless of every other issue of the day you will find in this book, what it is ultimately about is the messy, imperfect, sometimes painful but potentially beautiful and redemptive relationship between the young man making his way through the world and the older man who brought him into it. Watching these two friends navigate their journeys, alone and with one another, is the pleasure, and pain, involved in this book.

If that is the difficult mirror into which you have the courage to peer, turn the page. *How do we relate to one another? What are our responsibilities – to ourselves, our parents, our children?*

*The Chosen*

If not, I suggest you pick up a different book. Maybe one about  
Judaism.

Or the Holocaust.

Or Zionism.

Shalom Auslander, 2009