

Jewish author Chaim Potok dies / 'The Chosen' was best-known novel

Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times

Published 4:00 am, Wednesday, July 24, 2002

Chaim Potok, an ordained rabbi and best-selling novelist whose fiction often probed the dueling personal and spiritual demands of Jewish faith versus those of secular American society, died Tuesday at his home in suburban Philadelphia.

He was 73, and had been diagnosed with cancer in 2000.

While steeped in the spiritual traditions of his Orthodox Jewish upbringing,

Potok drew liberally in his writing on the literary traditions and world views of many other cultures. In fact, it was his youthful encounter with two novels deeply rooted in issues of Roman Catholicism, Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited" and James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," that inspired him to write fiction himself.

Potok succinctly stated his view of literature's mind-expanding value in a 1997 interview with the Mars Hill Review. "Literature presents you with alternative mappings of the human experience," he said. "You see that the experiences of other people and other cultures are as rich, coherent, and troubled as your own experiences. They are as beset with suffering as yours. Literature is a kind of legitimate voyeurism through the keyhole of language where you really come to know other people's lives -- their anguish, their loves, their passions."

It was this ability to empathize and project himself into other cultures and historical circumstances, along with his formidable storytelling gifts, that helped Potok attract large international audiences of many different faiths. From his breakthrough and best-known novel, "The Chosen," published in 1967, through eight more novels, short stories, plays and children's fiction, Potok synthesized his broad range of learning and experience into works that bore a profound humanist stamp.

And while this secular quality upset some Jewish readers, many others applauded Potok's fearlessness and skill in exploring the internal fissures in modern Jewish life and belief. For many non-Jewish readers, his work provided a vivid introduction to Jewish life in the post-World War II period, to its daily joys and familial rites, alternately enriching and smothering.

These conflicts provide the central motif in "The Chosen," whose hero, Danny Saunders, discovers a rich, complex world beyond the confines of his Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in 1940s Brooklyn. Nominated for a National Book Award, it was made into an acclaimed 1981 film starring Rod Steiger as the rabbi father, Maximilian Schell and Robby Benson. A few years later it was adapted into a Broadway musical starring George Hearn and Gerald Hiken, with a book by Potok, music by Philip Springer and lyrics by Mitchell Bernard.

Born Feb. 17, 1929, in the East Bronx in New York City, Herman Harold Potok was the son of businessman Benjamin Max Potok and Mollie Friedman Potok, both Polish immigrants. He was fond of saying he grew up in a Hasidic world "without the beard and the earlocks." He later changed his first name to Chaim.

An excellent student, he received his bachelor's degree with highest honors in English literature from Yeshiva University in 1950. He was ordained a rabbi in 1954 at the Jewish Theological Seminary and in 1965 earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. He also served as an Army chaplain on the front lines during the Korean War, a life-altering experience that would later find its way into his fiction.

He addressed similar themes, on a very different scale, in his books for children and young adults, such as "The Tree of Here." Illustrated by Philadelphia Inquirer editorial cartoonist Tony Auth, the book follows the emotional journey of a small boy whose family is moving to a new home.

In other works aimed at young people, Potok addressed such universal subjects as bullies and the struggle of coping with parental divorce. Though some reviewers found Potok's children's fiction to be overly schematic and didactic, others praised its perceptive evocations of young peoples' fears and dreams.

In addition to his writing, Potok also was a painter -- creating works rich in symbolism in an expressionistic style -- and a humanities professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Potok met his future wife, Adena Sarah Mosevitzky, a psychiatric social worker, at a summer camp where both were working as counselors. The couple were married 44 years. In addition to her, he is survived by two daughters, Rena and Naama, and a son, Akiva.

Works by Chaim Potok:

Novels:

"The Chosen," 1967.

"The Promise," 1969.

"My Name Is Asher Lev," 1972.

"In the Beginning," 1975.

"The Book of Lights," 1981.

"Davita's Harp," 1985.

"The Gift of Asher Lev," 1990.

"I Am the Clay," 1992.

"Old Men at Midnight (3 novellas)," 2001.

Children's books:

"The Tree of Here," 1993.

"The Sky of Now," 1995.

"Zebra and Other Stories," 1998.

Other writings:

"Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews," 1978.

"Ethical Living for a Modern World, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, " 1985.

"Theo Tobiasse: Artist in Exile," 1986.

"The Gates of November: Chronicles of the Slepak Family," 1996.

"My First Seventy-nine Years" (co-writer of autobiography of Isaac Stern), 1999.

Source: Contemporary Authors.