

The Arts

Chaim Potok's Culture Clash

The author discusses the conflict between his Orthodox upbringing and his pursuit of writing

By Matthew Budman

On the telephone, Chaim Potok sounds something like David Lurie, the protagonist of Potok's *In the Beginning* — cryptic and a bit brusque and humorless.

But the man who has brought Orthodox Judaism alive for millions turns animated when discussing reactions to his books.

"I thought when I wrote *The Chosen* that it was just a Jewish story. It turns out to be a pretty universal story," Potok says of his first and best-known novel, which describes a young Orthodox man caught between his culture and his intellectual pursuits.

"It seems to be a universal experience — individuals growing up in one culture and encountering elements from another culture, and what happens as a result of that confrontation." That, Potok says, is the theme of his work.

The conflict that has marked

Books

Potok's life — he became a writer over the strenuous objections of his Orthodox parents and community — has proved fascinating to millions of readers who have learned of art, chassidism, communism and the Kabbalah while following the novelist's characters.

His latest book, the National

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Chaim Potok

Jewish Book Award-winning *The Gift of Asher Lev*, continues the story of *My Name Is Asher Lev*, his stunning 1972 novel about a gifted artist forced to choose between art and his Orthodox family and community. Potok made his own choice early, largely divorcing himself from the religious Jewish world. Though Potok's novels constitute the only vision of Orthodox Judaism many readers are likely to come across, the writer feels no responsibility toward that world.

"I feel a responsibility to my craft," he says. "I feel responsible to be as honest about it as I can and to be as honest to my own vision of it as I can. I don't think it's the task of a writer to do public relations on his subject. There are no saints in this world, or there are very few saints. They

make for very boring reading, most of them, and it's not the job of a writer — certainly I don't consider it my job — to write about saints, but about human beings."

Potok's warts-and-all portrayal of Orthodoxy is not particularly harsh but the religious community has taken serious offense at his writing.

"They generally dislike what it is that I do; in some parochial schools my books are banned," he says. "They object to being written about. They have the sense that anyone who writes about them is going to write about them negatively, since nobody has written about them positively at all.

"And then they are concerned about the fact that their own young people will read these novels and get a sense of what the young people in the novels are up against. I guess they don't like them to be exposed to these outside ideas. They also don't like the fact that the young people in the novels end with less than they started with, because their sense of confronting the outside world is to back away from it and ignore it."

Potok's writing continues to expand; he is returning to the short-story form, and his next novel is not about Jews, but rather Koreans.

At 62, he remains unsure of his place in modern literature. "I'd like to be somebody who wrote seriously about serious matters in a significant way that affected people's ideas about themselves and about the world that they live in," he says. ■