

SWING SHIFT: Novelists in the Nursery



ALAIN McLAUGHLIN

Carefully scripted: Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman juggle parenthood and professional writing careers.

Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, *Wonder Boys*, and several other acclaimed works of fiction.

"When we met, I was the one with a steady job. He was stuck on a book that he was never going to finish, and it looked like his career was in the toilet," Waldman says. "I assumed I was going to be supporting him, and he would take care of the children."

They didn't switch roles so much as meet each other halfway, developing a way to work together from home, split their household and family responsibilities 50-50, and remain the best of friends while cranking out novels.

Their well-calibrated partnership began inauspiciously in Los Angeles nine years ago, in the form of a blind date.

Waldman had been dumped by a Catholic boyfriend and was hunting for a nice Jewish guy. Her friend hooked her up with Michael Chabon, whose name was unfamiliar to her until she asked around. Rumor was that he was gay—and married.

"So I run out and buy *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* [Chabon's first novel] and say, 'Gay. And it's dedicated to his wife. Great. This is gonna be a fabulous, fabulous date.'"

When she saw him holding a bouquet of irises at her front door, she swears it was a case of love at first sight. He assured her that he was divorced and straight. Two weekends later, they were engaged.

Waldman wrote her first novel, *Nursery Crimes*, after she quit her highly charged job in Los Angeles as a federal public defender—a job that turned miserable after their first daughter was born and she found herself perpetually guilt-ridden and fatigued. "I'd spend all day with my clients, giving them everything emotionally, and I had nothing left for her," she recalled. "So I'd put in *The Lion King* every single day after work. At one point I realized I knew it all by heart—all of the dialogue, all of it—and I thought, 'Ah man, this sucks. I've got to quit my job.'"

She accepted a part-time teaching position at Loyola Law School and found herself spending much of her time in the uncomfortable role of mall-hopping, stay-at-home mom. "I had such a playground inferiority complex. The moms at the playground would say, 'Oh, I made the most wonderful rainbow pasta,' and I'd be like, 'Yeah, let me jot that down'—like I'm going to be putting food dye in the pasta water sometime in this millennium. It was a disaster."

Juliet Applebaum's voice came to Waldman in the summer of 1996 while she was supposed to be working on a law review article. Instead of writing about crack cocaine sentencing disparities, she sat in the law library and wove a mystery story about a lawyer who puts her career on the mommy track. She gave birth to a character who unravels murder plots while digging Play-Doh out of her toddler's defiant mouth and fretting about

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Who Dunit?

How one couple solves the mystery of raising a family while writing novels. By Sarah Lavender Smith

Berkeley attorney-turned-mystery-writer Ayelet Waldman has a black case at her feet, but it holds a breastpump, not legal briefs. It's 9:30 a.m.—time to lay four-month-old Ida-Rose down to play and get to work.

On an ordinary weekday morning in the Craftsman home she shares with her husband, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Michael Chabon, and their three children, Waldman gets up from the couch in the family room, kicks past the baby toys, and walks through the dining room to her small office. There, she busies herself writing the fourth installment in her "Mommy Track" mystery series or prepares for the class she teaches as an adjunct professor at U.C. Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law. She also carves

out time to work as a consultant for a drug-policy think tank. All that, and she manages to keep her work to about 20 hours a week so she has afternoons free with her kids.

This morning, however, she's answering questions about how she does it all. After a summer of readings and book signings for her second novel, *The Big Nap*, and a subsequent flurry of media coverage, Ayelet (pronounced I-YELL-it), 36, could easily come across as every modern mom's most feared enemy: the woman who somehow manages to achieve professional success and a happy home life and still has time left over for simply hanging out. In short, she makes the rest of us look like slugs.

But this woman with damp hair and little makeup, who decorates

her walls with kids' paintings and family photos, is decidedly not Martha Stewart's maternal equivalent. As she starts the interview, up goes her shirt, down go the flaps of her 38DD nursing bra, and the dual-action breastpump fills two bottles. The scene recalls the opening to *The Big Nap*, wherein the heroine, a sleuthing stay-at-home mom named Juliet Applebaum, is so sleep-deprived from nursing her nocturnal new baby that she greets a Fed-Ex delivery guy with her top off and bra open.

Like her strongly autobiographical Juliet, Ayelet is a Harvard-trained criminal defense attorney who traded court dates for playdates. She never intended to leave litigation or to become a writer like her more famous husband, author of *The Amazing*

the extra pregnancy pounds stuck on her own diminutive frame. Waldman kept her writing a secret from Chabon for about three weeks. She had it built up in her mind that he and his first wife divorced because his ex was a writer and two writers couldn't get along. But when she showed him her draft, he liked what he read and encouraged her to keep going. She wrote her first two novels while her daughter Sophie was in preschool and baby Zeke napped and nursed. Her third, *A Playdate with Death*, comes out in June 2002, and she's working on the fourth, *Death Gets a Time Out*. What's more, Juliet

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Applebaum might land on TV. A team of producers, working on a pilot based on Waldman's mysteries, has struck a deal with CBS and Fox and a script is nearly complete.

To integrate family and career—particularly careers as self-absorbing as writing—Waldman and Chabon had to develop a system that looks as much like a successful job share as a marriage. It works for them, but wouldn't fit for everybody. Their weekdays look like this: Waldman carools Zeke, now 4, and Sophie, 7, to school, returns to their home in the Elmwood district, and works for three or four hours. A nanny watches Ida-Rose while Waldman works (which Waldman says she feels "incredibly embarrassed" about, since she didn't rely on a nanny when her first two children were younger). Chabon, meanwhile, sleeps upstairs and wakes sometime between 11 a.m. and noon. Over his breakfast and her lunch, they have what they call "story conference," during which they review each other's drafts and talk through whatever problems they're having with their work. Then Zeke and Sophie come home from school, and the family spends the afternoon together. Chabon cooks dinner, and after that, "Michael gets everyone to bed except the baby—I put the baby to bed—and then we have grownup time," says Waldman. "Then he goes to work at 10 o'clock, and I go to sleep. He

works from 10 until 3 a.m., which is why he sleeps until 11:30." Told of Waldman and Chabon's arrangement, a local couples' therapist labeled it "inspiring" and "a fairy tale." For modern families, "this is our fantasy ideal," says Leah Fisher, a specialist in work-life issues who co-directs the Center for Work and the Family and helps couples negotiate the kind of equal, collaborative relationship that Waldman and Chabon have. But, she cautions, "the fact that it sounds glorious doesn't mean it would be glorious for everyone." Not every couple could pursue similar careers, under the same roof, without turning competitive and getting sick of each other. Not every couple has a spouse able and willing to work a graveyard shift, or generates the kind of income that allows one member to work part time or not at all. Not every father is willing to be a stay-at-home dad; nor is every mother willing to share her role as the primary caregiver. "We spend a tremendous amount of time together," acknowledges Waldman, "more time than most people do, and more time than you'd expect would work. But it really does work incredibly well. I think the reason it works is there isn't any real stress about who's going to do what in the family. We have pretty clearly defined roles." Waldman makes doctor's appointments, pays bills, and maintains the family schedule (including Chabon's). Chabon cooks and helps clean the house. He also keeps a baby monitor on in his office while he's working at night, so he can give Ida-Rose a bottle or comfort the older kids if they wake.

Writing in the midst of the tag-team mayhem is hardest for Waldman, who struggles to shut out the constant distraction of the home. She has to force herself to sit down and write, she says, and is thinking about escaping to a local café in the mornings to work. "It's hard to disengage from the mornings," she says. "They're zoo-like, especially when I can hear the baby." Having children does cost her as a writer, because she can't completely immerse herself in her work. "It's not even a matter of time. That feeling of diving head-first into whatever you're writing and not surfacing—I can't do that. I always have to have an ear out. When the phone rings, I almost always answer because it could be one of the kids at school."

In between her third and fourth mysteries, Waldman wrote a novel separate from her "Mommy Track" series, to be published next year. The working title is *The Mandatory Minimum* and it has nothing in common with her Juliet Applebaum books. It's a serious work, about a mother-daughter relationship, and Waldman wrote it after losing a pregnancy to a genetic abnormality—"the worst thing that ever happened to me, certainly. I didn't have anything funny in me." In spite of her success as a mystery writer, Waldman is skeptical about her long-term prospects as a literary novelist. "It would be incredible to me, the ultimate fantasy, if I suddenly wrote a brilliant literary novel—but that's not going

to happen. That's not my style." If she were able to match her husband's critical and commercial success, would that inject some competition into their marriage? "No, he would be so happy; he'd just say, 'I told you so.' He takes me seriously as a writer and an artist in a way that I still can't manage." She laughs. "Being married to the perfect man sucks. You're always wrong when you fight." Mr. Perfect, 37, descends the stairs at 10:30 a.m. wearing running shorts and a shirt that says "So Many Books, So Little Time." Shoulder-length wavy locks hang from under his A's cap. He's swamped with a book tour, a screenplay, and a forthcoming

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young-adult book that involves baseball and Native Americans—but this morning he woke up early so he could take the baby to her pediatric checkup. "I love going to the doctor, especially when it's with the little baby and you get to weigh them," he says.

He has time, between mouthfuls of cereal, for just a couple of quick questions. How would he feel if Waldman branched out from genre fiction and became as successful in the literary world as he has been? "If she got chosen by Opfah and became the short, Jewish Amy Tan, that'd be great. If anything, what makes me feel badly is that she's working really hard with a publisher that she hired to get tour dates together for her book, and she has to do all this work herself, and it's all a struggle. Then my publisher calls me and says, 'Okay, we're flying you to here and we'll send you business class.' Those moments are painful, because in a way they remind me of my first marriage." The problems with his first marriage, he explains, had less to do with them both being writers than the fact that his career took off while hers didn't.

As to why he took Waldman seriously as a writer, given her self-doubt and inexperience in the field, he lauds the quality of her first book, *Nursery Crimes*. "I still take her much more seriously than she does." Waldman cuts in and says she blames her self-loathing on her unpopularity during junior high school. Chabon narrows his eyes, scrutinizing her across the kitchen table, and they share a laugh that sounds conspiratorial. "It goes back much farther than that," he says, "but let's not talk about your parents." Asked how he manages Pulitzer-grade productivity by working just five hours a night,

Chabon says that every couple of months he runs away on a short trip to write. "I go away because I can get so much done in a short period of time that it makes up for the fact that I'm not getting as much done [at home]." Waldman says she isn't jealous of his retreats but misses him and his cooking when he's gone. In the past, she took a couple of short trips by herself to write, "but how can you do that and breastfeed?" She might treat herself to a week away once the baby weans.

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While Chabon gets ready for little Rosie's appointment, Waldman muses about the days when she argued before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. She misses the excitement of being in court and of handling a huge caseload of clients, just as she sometimes misses the status and sense of self-worth that came with her paycheck. "I have a friend whose career has gone the way that I imagined my career would go, and I'm incredibly jealous of her, and she's trying to have a baby. It's like she's trying really hard to have what I have, and at the same time I sort of miss what she has. It's the eternal dilemma: None of us are ever satisfied."

But, she quickly backtracks, "I cannot stress enough that I'm really happy, and I feel like the reason I'm really happy is because I did kind of find my way through this morass. But it took me two years of depression trying to figure out how to do it." Waldman says writing about Applebaum's doubts and dilemmas has helped her through her own process. "That's what I write about. That's Juliet's thing, that feeling of insecurity, of having made this incredibly costly choice—costly emotionally, costly professionally—and feeling ambivalent about that choice. And it is ironic that in writing about it, I made a place for myself. I created a profession out of expressing these frustrations of not having a profession. It's kind of a delightful irony, but an irony nonetheless." ●

Sarah Lavender Smith is an East Bay stay-at-home mom whose career as a journalist was sabotaged by her three-year-old daughter and infant son.