

Manhood for AFOLs: Michael Chabon's views on LEGO

Roy T. Cook

Michael Chabon, winner of the *Pulitzer*, *Hugo*, *O. Henry*, and *Nebula* awards and author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*¹, recently published a new collection of essays. Since many of us in the LEGO community, myself included, are involved in more than one pastime located well within the geekosphere, I suspect that many of you (like me) are already aware of Chabon as the literary apologist for mainstream comics. As a result, you might have picked up a copy of Chabon's newest tome from your local Books-In-A-Box or Opus-Online retailer. Others, however, might be wondering why you should care about Michael Chabon – or, at least, why you should care vis-à-vis your role as an *Adult Fan Of LEGO*. The answer is this: In *Manhood for Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and Son*², Chabon follows in the footsteps of Douglas Coupland in bringing his literary and critical skills to bear on the brick. Only one of the essays in *Manhood for Amateurs* deals directly with LEGO, but this essay alone (one of over three dozen) makes the volume necessary reading for the informed LEGO fan – not because you will agree with it, and, as we shall see, not because I agree with it – but because it is a significant contribution to debates about the nature and role of LEGO as a medium.

In the seventh essay in the volume – “To The LEGOLand Station”³ – Chabon briefly relates, and reflects on, his own experiences with LEGO bricks (we shall not here repeat his use of the misnomer ‘Legos’): First, there was the six color palette, the “limited repertoire of shapes and the absolute, even cruel, set of axioms that governed they could and couldn’t be arranged”⁴ that characterized his own childhood exposure to LEGO in the 1960s. After suffering what the cognoscenti call a ‘Dark Age’, Chabon returned to LEGO through the experiences he had building more contemporary sets – in particular, licensed sets – with his children, an experience he describes as having “far more in common with puzzle-solving, a process of moving

¹ 2001, Picador Press, ISBN 978-0312282998 0.

² 2009, Harper Collins, ISBN 978-0061490187.

³ *Manhood for Amateurs*, p. 51 – 57. A version of the essay originally appeared in Chabon's monthly column in *Details* magazine (as did versions of many of the other pieces in *Manhood for Amateurs*).

⁴ *Manhood for Amateurs*, p. 53.

incrementally toward an ideal, pre-established, and above all, a *provided* solution.”⁵ Apparently viewing this emphasis on building official models as depicted on the box-front as the sole credo of the current incarnation⁶ of the toy, Chabon reports that he “resented the authoritarian nature of the new LEGO.”⁷ The third stage of this evolution is when he observes his children (eventually) disassembling their official sets and recombining them, resulting in models of impressive complexity and creativity. Chabon characterizes this final, creative revolution as a rebellion, on the part of his children, against the “realism” and “quirks and limitations” of the LEGO system.”⁸ Thus, Chabon characterizes his children’s passage through these stages as a sort of transgressive rejection of LEGO’s “structure of control and implied obedience to the norms of the instruction manual”⁹.

Consumer’s confusing modern-day LEGO sets with more traditional model kits is a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has ever heard a frustrated parent ask a LEGO employee what brand of glue works best on the models. Further, most of us will be familiar with another species of parent who is under the impression that their offspring are amongst the small handful of savants to discover that LEGO bricks can be used to build something other than what is depicted on the box art. Both reactions betray a grave misunderstanding of the intended purpose of the product – a misunderstanding manifest in Chabon’s failure to grant that the passage from building-as-rote-instruction to building-as-original-creation is a transition that was, and is, intended, encouraged, and accounted for in the design of the system. LEGO has always encouraged creative

⁵ *Manhood for Amateurs*, p. 55.

⁶ Should this be “inABSation”? Or perhaps “embrickment”?

⁷ *Manhood for Amateurs*, p. 55. Chabon goes on to compare this imagined authoritarian aspect of LEGO with the “subtext of orthodoxy” found in the film *Toy Story* (1995, Walt Disney/Pixar). In the film, the ‘good’ Andy plays with his toys ‘correctly’ – that is, as the manufacturer intended, while the ‘bad’ Sid – clearly the more creative of the two – is demonized for his creativity, since he does not play with his toys in the ‘right’ manner. This reading of *Toy Story* is interesting, but the parallel between Andy and LEGO, as demonstrated above, doesn’t hold.

⁸ *Manhood for Amateurs*, p. 56. This same paragraph continues the attack on the minifig begun on p. 52. On page 52 he implicitly lays at least part of the blame for his teenage disinterest in LEGO at the feet of the newly introduced minifig, characterizing these early variants, with their lack of either facial features or articulated joints, as having “something of the nightmarish, something maimed, about them.” (p. 52) He similarly criticizes the “fundamental silliness” of modern day versions, and cites their lack of realism as one of their failures. In doing so, Chabon seem to be missing the fact that much of the charm of minifigs lies in their cartoonish qualities and in the fact that they are “abstract, minimal, pure in form and design” (p. 53). This last quotation is not from anything Chabon says about the minifig, of course, but is from an earlier passage where he is lamenting the fact that these very qualities – now lost, of course – are what made the LEGO of his childhood so special.

⁹ *Manhood for Amateurs*, p. 55.

recombination and innovative construction with its building blocks, and has put immense effort into designing elements that allow for novel utilizations (some often completely unforeseen by LEGO designers themselves). To characterize the creative design of novel models as due solely to the transformative creative powers of one's children and their radical play practices, and to give none of the credit to LEGO and to the ingenuity in both vision and execution that the company has shown over the decades, might be excusable (if annoying) in a proud parent, but is far less so in a cultural critic.

Nevertheless, the debate raised in Chabon's short essay is an important one, and one that many Adult Fans of LEGO will be familiar with: Does the massive increase in colors (Chabon reports feeling a "tiny spasm of moral revulsion"¹⁰ when picking up a teal or lilac LEGO brick) and shapes constitute an improvement, in that it gives creators (whether adults or children) more resources with which to carry out their creative projects, or is it regressive, eliminating many of the challenges which creators need to overcome or circumvent – challenges which, when overcome, result in superior creations? Chabon's essay, flawed or not, clearly favors the latter answer. The question is an old one, dating back to discussions of medium specificity¹¹ instigated by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*¹² (originally published in 1766). I have argued elsewhere that one natural way to understand adherence to various forms of 'purism' in LEGO building is as a consequence of something like this idea – restricting oneself to unmodified, official LEGO parts places limitations that the creators must struggle against, in the process creating meaning (or some other aesthetically valuable commodity). I will neither defend this view, nor attempt to answer the larger question regarding the explosion of LEGO element molds and hues, here. Instead, I encourage you to read Chabon's essay (and all of the other excellent essays in the volume), and then begin to argue amongst yourselves!

¹⁰ *Manhood for Amateurs*, p. 51. Note the emphasis on 'moral' revulsion here. This is clearly not an objection to these particular colors, but to the inclusion of new colors *tout court*.

¹¹ The *medium specificity thesis* involves the idea that each art form has its own methods, tools, limitations, forms of expression, etc., and, further, that one important aspect of creating valuable art (in an aesthetic, not monetary, sense) within a particular medium is through manipulating these tools and forms in order to circumvent these limitations. For a good discussion, see Noël Carroll's "The Specificity of Media in the Arts", *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, 1985, pp. 5 – 20.

¹² 1984, John Hopkins University Press, ISBN 978-0801831393.