

# Michael Chabon on the Film Adaptation of *Wonder Boys*

BY LARRY FLICK

“Being a life-long movie fan, there’s no way to fully describe the experience of sitting in a theater and seeing your name appear in the credits on the screen.” So says Michael Chabon after a screening of *Wonder Boys*, the Paramount Pictures adaptation of his famed 1995 book of the same name, “it’s totally cool... and it’s a little surreal.”

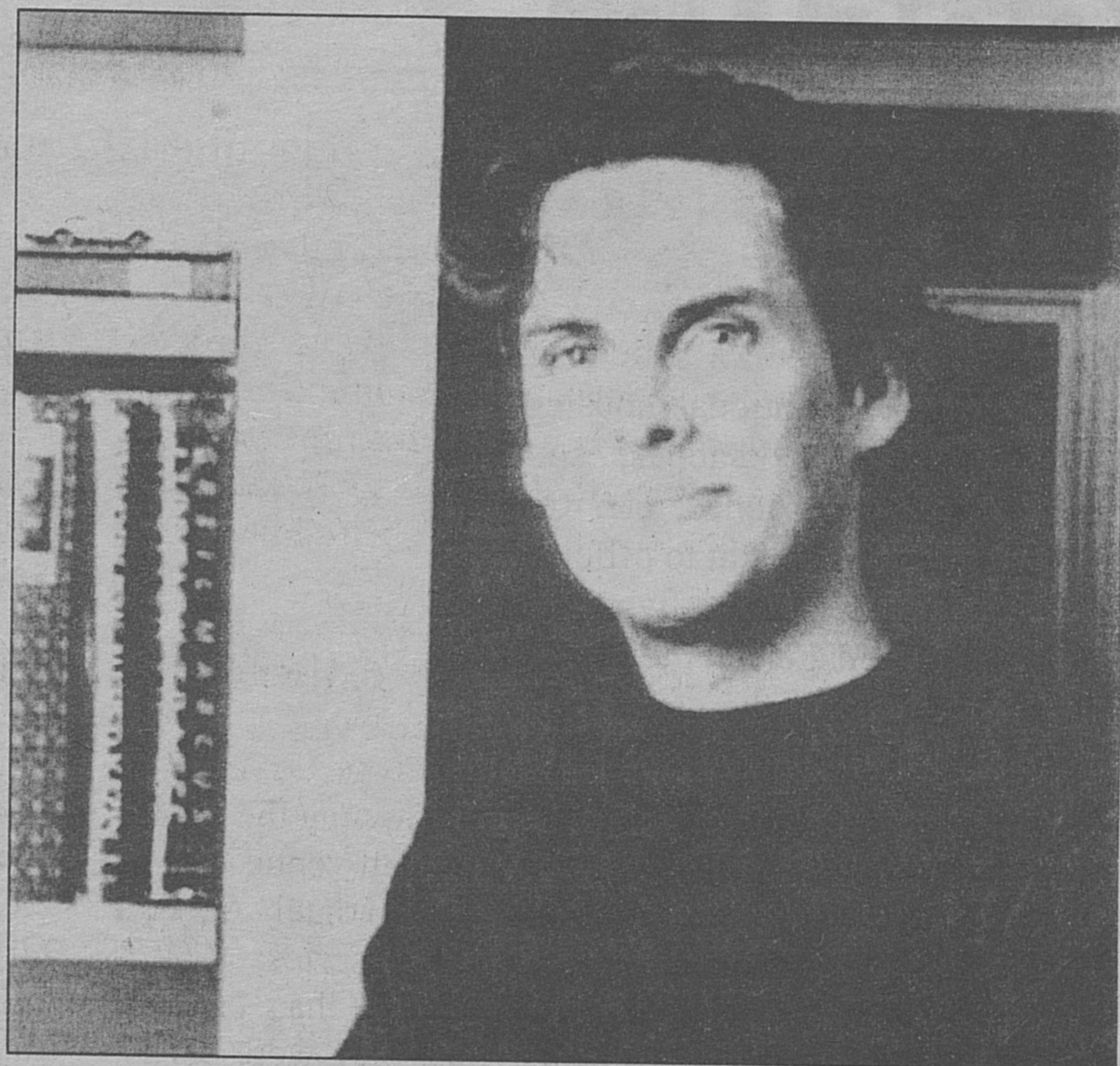
It’s also a rite of passage for the acclaimed writer, who has been inching toward a full transition from the printed page to the motion picture screen for several years now. There’s a splash of irony in the fact that the first adaptation of a Chabon novel also chronicles the fictional life transition of a writer of considerable note.

Chabon, who also wrote the contemporary classic *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, (which, like *Wonder Boys*, has achieved cult-like status in the gay community) has created a fascinating cast of characters, some of whom are gay or are struggling to define their sexuality, that are immensely honest and likable. In a film aimed at a mainstream audience, this matter-of-fact portrayal of gay characters is a welcome change from Hollywood’s typical depiction. Here’s a film where the gay characters do not end up miserable, dead, or homicidal maniacs.

*Wonder Boys*’ key character, 50-year-old Grady Tripp, played with a sharp, often anti-hero edge by Michael Douglas, is a one-time “wonder boy” and darling of the literati, whose unfinished novel has been growing and metastasizing for years.

“Grady’s a man who, in so many ways, has never grown up,” Chabon says. “It takes seeing that spark of brilliance in someone else to force the revelation of his arrested development — and trigger a life-altering change.”

Enter James Leer, a brooding college student played with boyish flair by rising film star Tobey Maguire (*Ice Storm*, *The Cider House Rules*). On a fateful evening that includes a murdered dog and a stolen outfit once worn by Marilyn Monroe, Grady and James become inextricably tied into a



sea of quirky melodrama. Along the way, James also catches the eye of Grady’s flamboyant editor, Terry Crabtree (a sly, notably understated Robert Downey, Jr.) Ultimately, the richly textured, often startling story explores a wide range of relationships and sexuality — and it does so in a remarkably relaxed, adult manner.

“I’m pleased that the film followed the book’s lead in that it handled the character’s relationships and sexuality as no big deal,” Chabon says, referring to the screen adaptation by Steve Kloves (*Fabulous Baker Boys*, *Flesh & Bone*). “I didn’t want the fact that Terry Crabtree is gay, or that James turns out to be gay to be blown out of proportion. My intention was that their sexuality — as well as Grady’s and that of every other character in the story — be woven prominently into their lives, and not necessarily be the sole driving force for any of them. I was really pleased that the film remained true to that idea.”

This element of *Wonder Boys*, which was directed by Curtis Hanson (*L.A. Confidential*) and co-produced by Scott Rudin (*Sleepy Hollow*, *Angela’s Ashes*, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*) and Hanson, was not the only one that closely mirrored the novel. “There are several scenes, including the opening sequence, which are quite literal,” Chabon says. “At times, it was almost eerie to watch the movie. So much of what I saw and heard was exactly as I imagined in my mind.”

And he’s philosophical about his future in films. “It’s

an enticing business, but it’s only one facet of my career. I don’t see myself ever giving up writing books and articles.”

For Chabon, writing has always been his first passion. “I’ve always been fascinated by the power of words, and how you can use them to form powerful images.”

The writer first came into prominence when his acclaimed first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, hit the *New York Times* best-seller list in 1988. *Wonder Boys* was his second novel; it was honored by *Publisher’s Weekly* as one of the best books of 1995, and it was heralded by the *New York Times* as a Notable Book of 1995. Along the way, he has written two short story collections: *A Model World and Other Stories* (1992), and the recently published *Werewolves in Their Youth* (1999). He’s also contributed stories and articles to such magazines as the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *Playboy*, among others.

Chabon is putting the finishing touches on *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, a novel he’s been working on for four years. Rudin’s already bought the film rights to the book. Meanwhile, Jon Sherman, writer and director of the charming, overlooked independent feature *Breathing Room*, has completed a screen adaptation of *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, which he plans to direct. This will provide Hollywood — and mainstream film-goers, as a result — with yet another richly complex portrayal of a gay character. ▼

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