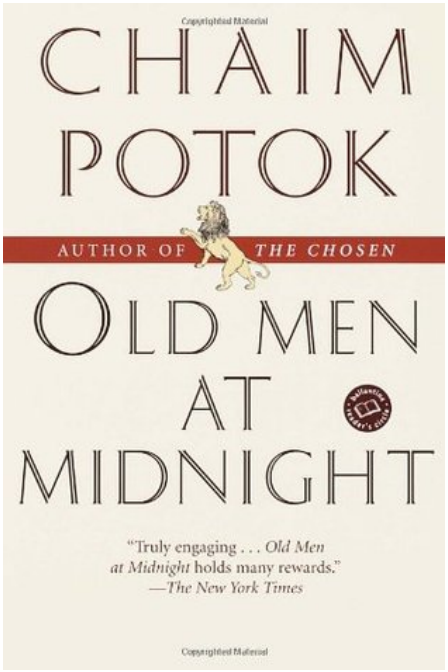

Old Men at Midnight

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From the celebrated author of **The Chosen** and **My Name Is Asher Lev**, a trilogy of related novellas about a woman whose life touches three very different men—stories that encompass some of the profoundest themes of the twentieth century.

Ilana Davita Dinn is the listener to whom three men relate their lives.

As a young girl, she offers English lessons to a teenage survivor of the camps. In “The Ark Builder,” he shares with her the story of his friendship with a proud old builder of synagogue arks, and what happened when the German army invaded their Polish town.

As a graduate student, she finds herself escorting a guest lecturer from the Soviet Union, and in “The War Doctor,” her sympathy moves him to put his painful past to paper recounting his experiences as a Soviet NKVD agent who was saved by an idealistic doctor during the Russian civil war, only to encounter him again during the terrifying period of the Kremlin doctors’ plot.

And, finally, we meet her in “The Trope Teacher,” in which a distinguished professor of military history, trying to write his memoirs, is distracted by his wife’s illness and by the arrival next door of a new neighbor, the famous writer I. D. (Ilana Davita) Chandal.

Poignant and profound, Chaim Potok’s newest fiction is a major addition to his remarkable—and remarkably loved—body of work.

From the Hardcover edition.

Old Men at Midnight Details

Date	:	Published July 30th 2002 by Ballantine Books (first published 2001)
ISBN	:	9780345439987
Author	:	Chaim Potok
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From Reader Review Old Men at Midnight for online ebook

Amy says

This is a really tough one for me to rate. Most of the book I had trouble with, but there were moments and ideas that resonated deeply, so by the end I knew it would be hard to forget-- and to write about.

Overall I think this was a book composed of about 6 different stories that Potok and his editor jammed together to force into a book. At times the forced nature seems very obvious. I assume they hoped to capitalize on the popularity of Davita's Harp (and that that book is one of his few not to have a sequel already) as Davita is the one character who shows up in each of the three sections of Old Men at Midnight. But she's basically a non-entity whose sole purpose is to patiently listen to long-winded men talk about their lives (which as a feminist makes me bristle deeply, as did the final protagonist's constant analysis of Davita's looks).

Each of the three sections deals with material that is very heavy and dark, especially if you are Jewish/are a Holocaust survivor descendant, as I am. The first story touches on how a young person adapts to life in the U.S. after being the sole survivor of the entire Jewish population of his hometown. For most of the book I wished that Potok had just written this story in depth, focusing on Davita and this survivor character, as this is a compelling and harrowing question to ponder. Instead, the story veered off into something less interesting (told in suddenly perfect English by the survivor) about an artist-caretaker of the synagogue in that town.

The second section chronicles the atrocities committed by a Jewish man who ends up in the Russian secret police/KGB for several decades. This is very hard to read and not something I would have chosen to spend time on had I known it was coming. I imagine the discomfort Jews feel reading about how we were endlessly the hated ones slated for murder in any decade of 20th century Europe is akin to what black people feel reading American history.

The third section's best part, in my opinion, was also it's briefest: liberating a Nazi death camp and meeting the Jewish victims and their German tormentors. I can only guess Potok didn't spend long on this as it would be so awful to write about, but again, it is extremely memorable and his treatment of it was powerful for the few pages he gave to it. I assume the final pages of the book were a dream by the main character, because if they were magical realism, I didn't get it and it seemed insulting to Davita.

Jim says

At the end of *Old Men at Midnight*—at least in the copy I read—the publishers include a short conversation with Daniel Walden during which he makes the following observation about Potok's style: "Some critics have written that they don't admire your so-called simple style. You have contended that your writing is a result of much rewriting and much revision and is deliberate" to which Potok adds:

> The style is simplicity for the sake of complexity. Whoever feels that it is a "simple style" has to look into it and find the right way. Of course the style has become over the years much more complex and much more simple.

It's a good answer. I've never read anything by Potok before but I have real Aharon Appelfeld and feel, stylistically at least, there's common ground here and not just in subject matter. These are considered responses to difficult subjects made all the more difficult because of their seeming familiarity.

This book consists of three interlinked novellas. The common factor is a woman, Davita Dinn, born Ilana Davita Chandal, later to become the author I. D. Chandal. "Ilana," said the reviewer in *The New York Times Book Review* quoted at the start of the book, "is not the focus of the book, despite her appearances throughout it. Rather, we are meant to concentrate on the stories she elicits, listens to, and reads." In the central story, perhaps, as she's not an active participant but her presence is an important one in the first story and especially in, to my mind the best of the three, the final story. In *The Ark Builder* she's barely older than Noah, a seventeen-year-old Auschwitz survivor she's taken on as an English student; in *The War Doctor* she's at university; in *The Trope Teacher* she's been married and has had a successful career as a novelist and short story writer when she moves next door to and strikes up a friendship with a famous professor who, to get to know his new neighbour a little better, reads her latest collection of stories one of which involves a former colonel of the KGB recalling his years as an interrogator and torturer; we readers realise this is the man whose story is told in *The War Doctor* and must wonder if she's actually plagiarised his story.

All the stories involve Jews. All involve survivors. The boy, Noah, for example falls sick and Davita decides to visit him. This is the first time she meets his stepmother Sarah Polit who fills in a little of his backstory:

> Sarah Polit remained seated on the sofa, looking at the door. Then she turned to me.
> "Noah is the only one who survived."
> "The only one in his family? I am sorry."
> "The only Jew in the town."
> I felt cold to the bone.
> "Four thousand Jews, and he is the only survivor. My husband and I, we say to ourselves God saved him for a reason."

Kalman Sharfstein is a Jew who, by fluke it so often seems, goes from being a Jew conscripted into a labour battalion in the army of the Tsar to one of the most effective interrogators in the KGB having his name changed along the way to Leonid Shertov For the most part he's a willing participant, believes in the cause and is happy to leave his Jewishness behind but as time goes on he starts to question the wisdom of his superiors' commands; the catalyst comes when he learns that the doctor who saved his arm during the war has been arrested along with many of his peers on clearly trumped-up charges.

Benjamin Walter was also in the war. His unit in fact comes across one of the concentration camps and I was half-expecting Noah to make a cameo appearance—it might not have even been Auschwitz—but Benjamin's gone on the become a world-renowned expert on war and not just the Second World War. When Davita encounters him she's a very different woman, world wise and savvy, and she realises she has a way to help Benjamin find a way into the memoir she learns he's been struggling with. This, apparently, was the first of the three novellas; the other two came afterwards.

From what I've read of other people's reviews what they didn't like about the third story was what I did. What is perhaps missing is a fourth story showing how she got from the bright-eyed girl in the first two novellas to the slightly ambiguous character we meet in the third; it is a big jump. Those who've read the novel *Davida's Harp* I think will be especially disappointed by this third story.

I think each of these novellas works well enough on its own but brought together like this we look for connections that probably aren't really there but could easily have been and it might not have been a bad idea to rework these as a single novel but as he was in his seventies when this book was planned—he died the

year it was published at seventy-three—perhaps that would've been too much to hope for.

One problem I did have (but I think I can see why) is emotional distancing. I felt this especially with the KGB interrogator. He tells his story, accurately enough but a little dispassionately; Noah is too close to the war to be anything bar numb; Benjamin had clearly blocked certain memories. Davida asks him:

> "Did you really forget about your Mr. Zapiski?"
> "Oh, yes. Entirely."
> "And now you'll be able to sail right through to the end."
> "I've already written the end. It was the beginning I couldn't write."
> "The story you just told me is part of your beginning?"
> "It is the myself that predates what I am now. And having recalled Mr. Zapiski for my memoirs, it is my intention to put him out of mind again as quickly as possible."

We never find out what Davida's working on at the end. She has been a confessor but she's not a priest; she's a writer and everything we writers hear is grist to the mill. As she says, "Stories that keep me awake are my life's blood." When it seems like Leon will die without telling his stories she presses him to write them down. "Who needs stories of yet another Jew?" he asks. "I need them," she tells him. "Without stories there is nothing. Stories are the world's memory. The past is erased without stories."

If you've read a lot about the war—and I've read far more than I ever would've expect to—there's not a lot new here but each novella has its moments. Perhaps I'm writing this too soon after finishing the book. Maybe I need to let it settle and then decide. It isn't a book I can see myself ever rereading though although *The Trope Teacher* probably deserves a second read.

Elizabeth says

Potok strikes again with another literary gift. I remain utterly enchanted and challenged by his stories.

Aram says

These are 3 loosely-linked novellas that I think have themes in common. I found the 2nd novella the most compelling.

I found it interesting to read Potok with a narrative set in The Shoah in the 3rd book. A subject he really has not delved into before. Looking at it from the POV of an observant American Jew serving in WW2 was a good choice. It was compelling.

For me this is good Potok, but not his best. But, for me, even good Potok is still some of the better American writing of 1960 - 2015.

John says

Years ago I loaned this book to one of my sons and just got it back the other day. I see that I added it to

GoodReads back in March 2008 and gave it 4 stars. Since this was just days after I joined GoodReads, I assume I first read this book before 2008. That I'd read it at all was not surprising to me since it is my book, and I consider it unlikely that I would have loaned it before I read it. What is surprising is that while reading it this time, I remembered nothing about it. Nothing. Since I'm 72 years old it doesn't disturb me too much when I find I've forgotten some things. But it does disturb me that I forgot everything about *Old Men at Midnight*, even with the second reading to jog my memory. Ah, well, things are what they are.

I love Chaim Potok's books. I have read all his novels and one of his non-fiction books, *The Gates of November*. I tried *Wanderings*, his other non-fiction book about the history of the Jews, and found it a bit too heavy for me. But that was a long time ago. Perhaps I'll try it again soon. I don't quite understand why Potok's prose is so appealing to me. His books seem to send out tendrils that wrap about me like bindweed in a flower bed. I was reading *Old Men at Midnight* during lunch today. After I finished the last page, I emerged from the story to see it was 4:30 p.m. and all my lunch had been eaten, by me I suppose.

Chaim Potok died July 23, 2002. I am struggling to forgive him for dying before writing the final book in what would have been an Asher Lev trilogy.

Nat says

"If he tells you stories, will you tell them to me?"

Full disclosure: I love the name Noah.

I like saying it, I like hearing it, and I like seeing it written on the page. The first story in **Old Men at Midnight** was like a love letter for the name Noah for the amount it was featured from page to page. I picked this book up at the library, upon turning around to face the library shelf it was on and randomly reaching out because I was familiar with the author's name and wanted to read his words for the longest time, only to flip to the first page and have the very first word jump out at me: *Noah*.

All following details were a bonus, like the fact that he's a sixteen-year-old survivor all on his own, living with his aunt and uncle in Brooklyn, under the tutelage of eighteen-year-old, Davita.

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>
> Ilana Davita Dinn is the listener to whom three men relate their lives.

Old Men at Midnight varies stylistically from what I usually reach for in my books, featuring writing style with minimal dialogue. But I was willing to take the plunge for Noah Stremin.

“Noah is the only one who survived.”
“The only one in his family? I am sorry.”
“ The only Jew in the town.”
I felt cold to the bone.
“Four thousand Jews, and he is the only survivor. My husband and I, we say to ourselves God saved him for a reason."

I felt instant compassion and connection to Noah. His story captures so much of the loss survivors never regain. *“You have pictures. I have nothing.”*

I realized about halfway through the story that though I was here for Noah, his character would only be present for "The Ark Builder," and I had two more men to get through. And following someone betraying his people to serve in the KGB in “The War Doctor,” or reading vulgar descriptions of women in “The Trope Teacher” didn't seem ideal. Like this:

“Close up, a woman small and dainty in stature, jeans tight, without the revealing curve of panties, he couldn't help noticing; sandals and thin ankles and bare toes; he felt the beat and drum of his blood.”

I'm perplexed as to why he seems to think this adds anything valuable to the book... And unfortunately this isn't the worst to come:

“She must have sensed his approach, for she straightened and turned. He noticed immediately the bony shoulders and small, firm breasts and the nipples beneath the blue jersey. She was not wearing a brassiere.”

This only made me think back to this post:

I got what I wanted from my Noah story, and it's best to leave it at that. I’m still on a mission to find as many books with characters named Noah (so far my list includes: TRC by Maggie Stiefvater, the Mara Dyer Series, I'll Give You the Sun by Jandy Nelson, and Turtles All the Way Down). If by chance you have any additional recommendations please let me know in the comments below.

Note: I’m an Amazon Affiliate. If you’re interested in buying ***Old Men at Midnight****, just click on the image below to go through my link. I’ll make a small commission!*

This review and more can be found on my blog.

Daniel Beasley says

Loved this book!
I thoroughly enjoyed the first two novellas then made the mistake of reading reviews here disappointed with the thrid.
I enjoyed each of the novellas in its own right but the third most of all. It engaged me the most and I almost read it in one sitting.
To explain, some friends have caused me to become intrigued with Judaica and dredging up neglected memories was one of the overall themes of the book. Add to that the third novella's plot element (not a spoiler) of a dying spouse and the sense of the need to waste no time in communicating the past and this was a natural to draw me in.
Once again Potok doesn't disappoint. So glad my wife grabbed this from the library for me!

Teresa says

This was my eighth Potok book. His writing is brilliant in many ways, but while aspects of this book are quite compelling, several factors give it a low ranking among his works. I found the fluent story placed upon Noah's lips hard to accept, given his heretofore minimal knowledge of English. I had the same reaction when Benjamin made the instantaneous leap from a complete memory block to the flood of details that made up his story. I know Davita was a catalyst for stories, but these situations required quite a suspension of disbelief. Also, in the last story, I could have used a bit more directness in the explanation of the symbolism of Davita's changing appearance. It's probably my own shortcoming, but I had a hard time putting it all together. In any event, I found Benjamin's weird sexual obsession with Davita (and Potok's description of it), while his wife was very ill and he was supposed to be caring for her, to be completely inexplicable and downright creepy!

Lauren Albert says

I would probably give the last of the three stories a 3 although it gets stronger at the end. In each, a man (or a boy) tells Davita Dinn their stories. She is 18 in the first, a graduate student in the second, and a middle age writer in the third. She is changed by the stories she hears although it is not directly mentioned. I thought the strongest story was The War Doctor which is a searing autobiographical narrative by a Soviet agent who conducted torture sessions during interrogations. You see as the insanity builds under Lenin and Stalin until no one is safe--no matter how he or she has compromised their morals for their leaders. the hunters become the hunted.

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david says

This is Potok’s last contribution to us. It is not his best, but it is solid.

He starts with a young female, named Davita Dinn, who wrests different histories from three men. She is the conduit to the novellas in this triptych.

Each one is served up at a different time in her life, but she is essentially a silent trope of this gifted author. In other words, she is the device shared by the three unrelated men, in time and place, to express their personal monody.

It starts in the late forties and finishes in the mid 1990's. The locations cited include the United States, Russia, and Europe.

The first concerns a seventeen-year-old boy, a current immigrant to the States from Poland. The second deals with an ex-Soviet KGB operative who meets her at Columbia University in New York City where she currently works. The third involves an older man, a writer, juggling his unfinished memoir and his sickly wife. Davita, at this point, is an accomplished author.

Few authors can create a safe space, a palpable warmth on paper, that cradles your heart, while rocking you in a chair, by the hearth, on a cold and blistery white winter's night. Potok is one of them.

His words are as cozy to me as a snug and dearly needed hug.

Erin says

> "Who needs stories of yet another Jew?"
> "I need them. Without stories there is nothing. Stories are the world's memory. The past is erased without stories." - 74

> "Every story is some kind of explanation, which explains why I dislike stories ... I became a historian so I would not have to explain anything, only recount the evidence, the facts." - 251

There were things I loved and hated about this collection, and for me, a lot of it came down to the frame. Because the stories were linked the way they were, with someone bringing out stories from three very different men, they asked a lot of interesting questions about the act of remembering past trauma. What are we hoping to accomplish by remembering? When we look for meaning in trauma, do we warp our memories so they fit a narrative? *Is* there a narrative, or is there cruelty out there that is chaotic and inexplicable? What accountability do we have to the people we encourage to tell stories? What do you gain and lose by burying your past? I asked questions of the earlier two stories that I would not have asked if they had not been linked to the issues raised in the third.

That said, I own that I am very touchy right now about women's voices being suppressed by men's, and so it didn't sit well with me to see Davita, protagonist of a novel that shaped me in important ways, exist in a story where her only value is her ability to make men's voices heard. In one story, she is not even herself - she is warped through the lens of a character that dramatically cannot see her as she is (even to the point that his

physical perception of her is wrong). While I did appreciate learning more about the path she follows, for the kind of role her character played in this novel, I would have preferred an entirely new character.

Also, by using Davita as the framing device, Potok chose to frame the stories chronologically through her life, which I think weakened my reading experience. I'll admit that when I read the first two stories, I felt like Potok raised all these juicy issues and then did absolutely nothing with them. In the third, Potok started doing that work, but I would have liked to have a sense of what I should be gaining from these stories earlier in the reading experience.

It was thought provoking and I'm glad I read it, but I didn't like this nearly as much as his other books. :) I guess it is greedy of me to want him to produce more than five well-executed novels that shape how I see the world.

Sondra says

I might have given this book a higher rating if it were written as one continuous novel rather than three separate “novelettes”. For me, the storytelling format in which three unrelated male narrators tell their stories to a female listener who, with the exception of “The Ark Builder”, seems to have little or no connection to the events in the narrators’ stories, was confusing and a little distracting. From the feminist perspective, the format of the female listener taking a passive role as the admiring “audience” or “spectator” to the daring exploits of her male counterparts seems a bit old-fashioned and misogynistic in this day and age.

That said, each of the three novelettes, taken on its own merits, is a compelling and worthwhile read. In particular the second section, “The War Doctor”, was so riveting I read it all the way through in one sitting, which is a rare accomplishment for me. It is clear reading these stories that the author has a very thorough knowledge of Jewish history *and* the military operations of both the first and second World Wars as played out in the European theater. I found it commendable that the author, as a rabbi and a trained scholar in Jewish history, did not focus *solely* on the Jewish experience during one of the darkest periods in human history, but depicted also the anguish and the extreme suffering of the soldiers of all races and nationalities who were forced to participate in the killing and maiming of fellow human beings.

The author is a gifted and accomplished writer who is equally at home describing a battlefield, a military hospital, a university campus, an upscale suburb in New Jersey (or is it upstate New York?), and a crowded post-war Brooklyn neighborhood. Unlike some authors who find it necessary to ramble on for many paragraphs when describing their settings, author Chaim Potok has the rare ability to choose words that enable him to describe each setting with maximum effect using a minimum of verbiage.

Jayme says

I loved this. Even the confusion and slight creepiness of the third story (which I still did enjoy, by the way) did not take away from the many beautiful and powerful moments.

One criticism first, then praise:

The only reason it was not 5 stars is precisely as mentioned above. Davita, seeming a real and whole person

in the first two stories, seems to have devolved into a disturbing creepy story-hoarder metaphor in the third, 'bloated' with stories even, obsessed with darkness. I don't at all understand her alternating appearance--the beautiful facade to elicit stories, the aged and obese (more realistic) figure to write them down--and that, along with the sparse but discomfiting sexual thoughts of Walter, and the much less metaphorical haunting that occurs, gave the third story a disconcerting spectral feel right there at the end. That wouldn't be such a problem by itself except it jars against the very historical, full-fleshed feeling of the other two stories.

That being said, the third story was still very powerful, particularly with the theme of the ram throughout. The most moving, difficult scene being the boy, practicing for his bar mitzvah four days before his death, sobbed because he saw himself--even the Jewish people as a whole--as the ram in the thicket.

The first story was slight, but very good. This one is told in Davita's voice, although we get absolutely nothing of her inner thoughts and feelings. She observes, and she listens. She tells us what street she's on and what the weather is like, but she does not tell us what she is thinking. I found this strange, and the story of the young boy, Noah (a Holocaust survivor, the only of his whole village) was painful...but, somehow (somehow!?) not in a hopeless way. I have read stories about less tragic and more insignificant events that were more bleak and hopeless that this book.

The War Doctor (the middle story) was the most riveting story by far. I knew very little about this era in Russia (WWI up through the 1950s) and the horrific aspects of the story are not there to be spectacle at all, they are just present because they are the truth.

It is a sorrow that none of the characters (except Noah, whose future we do not know) keep their faith. Davita (unclear, but does not seem at all religious by the end), Leonid Shertov (aka Kalman) and Benjamin Walter all grow up in homes of deep faith. All of them abandon that faith even as it exerts a tremendous power and influence on their lives and their thinking. A hard thing to read.

Anyhow, I definitely recommend this book. It builds gently and crescendoes and, although it ends on a sour not-quite-right note for me, it was still very, very worth it.

Antonie says

I'm going to sound pretentious here, but it's deceptively easy to read. It's broken into three stories, all involving the same character in one way or another, but all revolving around men who are coming to the end of some huge moment of their lives, coming to terms with the things they saw or did. You fly through the stories, and it's only after you're done that you realize how complex they are. It's one of those books I would probably read again immediately after finishing, just to make sure I can catch all the things I missed the first time.

Judy Cloe says

I thought I had read all of Chaim Potok's works of fiction, but recently discovered this one that was published in 2001. I am so glad I did because I enjoyed it as much as all the others. It is made up of 3 novellas. Each one is a Jewish man's story told to the same woman at various stages of her life. The main themes are the two world wars and how it affected each of the men. The stories are quite compelling and

very readable. If you liked Potok's earlier novels, you will like this one as well.
