

## Book Reviews

### Rogues' tale

|By Joseph Wilson

**GENTLEMEN OF THE ROAD** by Michael Chabon (Anchor), 224 pages, \$17.95 paper.

Rating: NNN

This slim volume, a swashbuckling adventure by Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon, first appeared in serial form in the New York Times Magazine last year.

Check out this gloriously bound version, though, if only for its superbly detailed black-and-white pen drawings by comic book artist Gary Gianni.

The tightly plotted tale set in Central Asia in 950 AD focuses on two drifters with a penchant for stealing horses and swindling drunks.

When they're reluctantly pulled into the politics of a coup in the kingdom of Arran (modern-day Azerbaijan), they end up being saddled with the care of a deposed prince.

Naturally, the two mercenaries turn out to have barely concealed hearts of gold and lend both their moral and physical support to the good guys. The story reads like a lost manuscript by Rudyard Kipling or H. Rider Haggard; there's a clunky, Victorian feel to the writing.

Chabon gradually fills in the backgrounds of the leading rogues – Amram, a “giant African,” and a rail-thin, white-haired Frank named Zelikman. But the real meat of the story is in the fight scenes and archetypical characters, including the evil uncle king and the soothsayer in the tower.

We've come to expect more from Chabon (The Amazing Adventures Of Kavalier & Clay, The Yiddish Policemen's Union) than fairy tales. In the afterward, he explains his decision to set this story in the ancient kingdom of the Khazars, a Central Asian people who embraced Judaism. The original title, Jews With Swords, would have suited the book to a T.

You can easily read it in one sitting, but then check out the article in the New York Times Magazine (<http://tinyurl.com/2lxn6r>) for Chabon's answers to readers' questions about this fascinating little-known slice of Jewish history.

