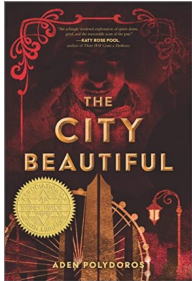




Lambda Sci-Fi

DC Area Gaylaxians



The City Beautiful
By Aden Polydoros
Discussed June 2022

Dramatis Personae

- Alter Rosen – Romanian immigrant; a volunteer at the tahara house; a press boy for the Idisher Kuryer; father died on voyage to America; mother and sisters still in Romania gathering passage money.
- Raizel Ackermann – Alter’s co-investigator; of anti-capitalist sympathies; works for the Arbeiter-Zeitung (a leftist German language workers’ newspaper).
- Yakov Kogan – Ukrainian immigrant; a dashing young man; one of Alter’s roommates (deceased; dybbuk).
- Frankie (Feivel Portnoy) – an ambitious young “assimilated” Lithuanian immigrant; a “jack of all trades” (including street fighter) and leader of a street gang of young pickpockets and thieves; Alter was associated with Frankie for a year when he first arrived in Chicago.
- Reb Meier – a disgraced rabbi; a Hassidic holy man.
- Mr. Katz – Polish immigrant; self-made wealthy meat-packing magnate; philanthropist with many dark secrets.
- Mr. Whitby – Frankie’s patron at the Whitechapel Club; a real estate speculator.
- Grigori Antonovich (“Tugarin Zmeyerovich”) – a Georgian pogromist and mass murderer.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you enjoy the book? What contributed to your enjoyment? Do you have any gripes with the book? If so, what are they?
2. If you came to the novel with preconceptions about the Columbian Exposition (“the White City”) and Gilded Era (19th Century) Chicago, how did the novel affect those preconceptions? If you came to the novel with little or no knowledge about the Exposition, will the novel affect your conception of the period?
3. Alter, Yakov, Frankie, Raizel, and Mr. Katz all reflect different relationships with 19th Century American culture and society. How did these characters affect your view of the different experiences of Eastern European Jewish immigrants during that period?

4. Polydoros includes LOTS of Yiddish terms throughout the novel – some explained when they were used, some not. How did this affect your enjoyment of the story? Did you find the Glossary helpful?
5. Alter was raised as a traditional, observant Eastern European Jew. What's your opinion of the way Polydoros depicts how Alter deals with his homosexuality?
6. Alter, Frankie, and Mr. Katz had very different experiences with homosexuality. How did this affect your enjoyment of the story and your conception of homosexuality during the time period?
7. How did you like the supernatural elements of the story (the dybbuk, spirit visions, etc.)? Do you think Polydoros effectively melded them into the historical elements of the story?
8. If the supernatural elements had been left out of the story, would it still have provided you with an enjoyable reading experience?
9. How did this novel affect your conception of pre-WWII anti-semitism?
10. Did anyone read the book as an audiobook? What was your experience with it?

Other Books About the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893

- *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* (2003), by Erik Larson (non-fiction).
- *American Gothic* (1974), Robert Bloch (fictionalized version of HH Holmes murders).
- *The Long Past and Other Stories* (2017), by Ginn Hale (Queer F&SF, alternate history).
- *Witch in the White City* (2021), by Nick Wisseman (fantasy-mystery).
- *Out of Place, Out of Time* (2021), by Amy Willer & Anton Galang (YA, time travel).
- *The Mouse With Wheels in His Head* (2013), by Gene Bradbury, illustrated by Victoria Wickell-Stewart (children's book, a "mouse-eye" view of the Fair).