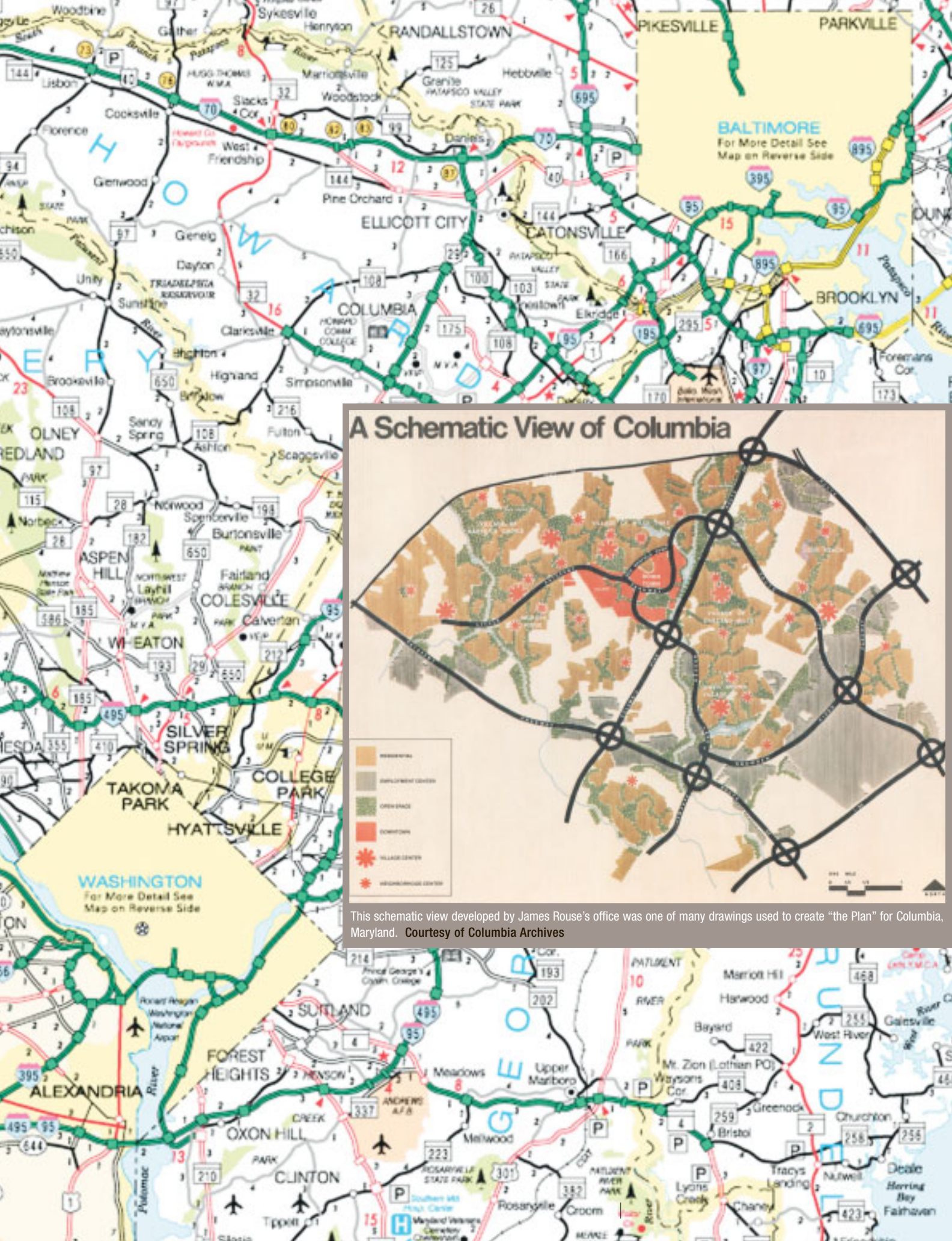


This schematic view developed by James Rouse's office was one of many drawings used to create "the Plan" for Columbia, Maryland. **Courtesy of Columbia Archives**

Maps and Legends

Michael Chabon

In 1969, when I was six years old, my parents took out a Veterans Administration loan and bought a three-bedroom house in an imaginary city called Columbia. As a pediatrician for the Public Health Service, my Brooklyn-born father was a veteran, of all things, of the United States Coast Guard (which had stationed him, no doubt wisely, in the coast-free state of Arizona). Ours was the first V.A. housing loan to be granted in Columbia, Maryland, and the event made the front page of the local paper. 1

Columbia is now the second-largest city in the state, I am told, but at the time we moved there, it was home to no more than a few thousand people — "pioneers," they called themselves. They were colonists of a dream, immigrants to a new land that as yet existed mostly on paper. More than four-fifths of Columbia's projected houses, office buildings, parks, pools, bike paths, elementary schools, and shopping centers had yet to be built; and the millennium of racial and economic harmony that Columbia promised to birth in its theoretical streets and cul-de-sacs was as far from parturition as ever. In the end, for all its promise and ambition, Columbia may have changed nothing but one little kid. Yet I believe that my parents' decision to move us into the midst of that unfinished, ongoing act of architectural and social imagination, altered the course of my life and made me into the writer that I am. 2

In the mid-1960s, a wealthy, stubborn, and pragmatic dreamer named James Rouse had, by stealth and acuity, acquired an enormous chunk of Maryland tobacco country lying along either side of the old Columbia Pike, between Baltimore and Washington. Rouse, often referred to as the inventor of the shopping mall (though there are competing claims to this distinction), was a man with grand ideas about the pernicious nature of the suburb, and the enduring importance of cities in human life. The City was a discredited idea in those days, burnt and poisoned and abandoned to rot, but James Rouse felt strongly that it could be reimagined, rebuilt, renewed. 3

He assembled a team of bright men—one of countless such teams of bright men in narrow neckties and short haircuts whose terrible optimism made the '60s such an admirable and disappointing time. These men, rolling up their sleeves, called themselves the Working Group. Like their patron, they were filled with sound and visionary ideas about zoning, green space, accessibility, and the public life of cities, as well as with enlightened notions of race, class, education, architecture, capitalism, and transit. Fate, fortune, and the headstrong inspiration of a theorist with very deep pockets had given them the opportunity to experiment on an enormous scale, and they seized it. Within a relatively short time, they had come up with the Plan. 4

(Opposite) ***Map Detail*** Courtesy of the Maryland Department of Transportation

Courtesy of the Rouse Co.

Glossary

acuity *n.* sharpness, as in a sharp mind

aesthetic *adj.* concerning the appreciation of beauty

arcane *adj.* secret; understood by only a few

calibrated *adj.* measured

cataclysm *n.* a sudden awful or violent event that shocks one

conjecture *n.* guess

cul-de-sac *n.* a street closed at one end

diverse *adj.* different from each other

forgery *n.* a faked or illegally copied document

incantatory *adj.* having the magical effect of chanted words

insulation *n.* a building material used between walls to limit heat and sound from passing between rooms

integration *n.* the joining of different racial or ethnic groups to live together as a community

Joseph Conrad's Marlow *n.* the main character in author Joseph Conrad's short story "Heart of Darkness"

nomenclature *n.* a system for naming things

parturition *n.* the act of being born or coming into existence

pediatrician *n.* a children's doctor

pernicious *adj.* very harmful

perpetual *adj.* continuous, not stopping

provisional *adj.* lasting for a short period of time, not permanent

rebar *n.* steel bars used in building homes

subcutaneous *adj.* below or underneath an outer layer

tangible *adj.* capable of being touched or felt

terra incognita *n.* an unknown or unexplored area or idea

utopian *adj.* perfect, ideal

Veteran's Administration housing loan *n.* a legal agreement allowing military veterans to buy homes by taking out loans, often at lower interest rates than borrowers would pay with other types of loans

zoning *n.* dividing a city or town into sections that have their own regulations, organization, and rules that builders must follow when constructing homes and other buildings

My earliest memories of Columbia are of the Plan. It was not merely the founding document and chief selling point of the Columbia Experiment. It was also the new town's most treasured possession, the tangible evidence of the goodness of Mr. Rouse's inspiration. The Plan, in both particulars and spirit, was on display for all to see, in a little building (one of Frank Gehry's first built works) called the Exhibit Center, down at the shore of the manmade lake that lay at the heart of both plan and town. This lake — it was called, with the studied, historicist whimsy that contributed so much authentic utopian atmosphere to the town, Lake Kittamaqundi—was tidy and still, rippled by the shining wakes of ducks. Beside it stood a modest high-rise, white and modernistic in good late-'60s Star Trek style, called the American City Building. Between this, Columbia's lone "skyscraper," and the Exhibit Center, stretched a landscaped open plaza, lined with benches and shrubbery, immaculate, and ornamented by a curious piece of sculpture called the People Tree, a tall dandelion of metal, whose gilded tufts were the stylized figures of human beings. Sculpture, benches, plaza, lake, tower: On a sunny afternoon in 1970 these things had an ideal aspect; they retained the unsullied, infinite perspective of the architect's drawings from which they had so recently sprung.

5

My parents, my younger brother, and I were shown those drawings, and many more, inside the Exhibit Center. There were projections and charts and explanatory diagrams. The famous Covenant—the common agreement of all Columbia's citizens and developers to abide by certain rather strict aesthetic guidelines in constructing and altering their homes—was explained. And there was a slide show, conducted in one of those long-vanished 1970s rooms, furnished only with carpeted cubes and painted the colors of a bag of candy corn. The slide show featured smiling children at play, families strolling along wooded paths, couples working their way in paddleboats across Kittamaqundi or its artificial sister, Wilde Lake. It was a bright, primary-colored world, but the children in it were assiduously black and white. Because that was an integral part of the Columbia idea: that here, in these fields where slaves had once picked tobacco, the noble and extravagant promises that had just been made to black people in the flush of the Civil Rights movement would, at last, be redeemed. That was, I intuited, part of the meaning of the symbol that was reproduced everywhere around us in the Exhibit Center: that we were all branches of the same family; that we shared common roots and aspirations.

6

Sitting atop a cube, watching the slide show, I was very much taken with the idea—the Idea—of Columbia, but it was as we were leaving the Exhibit Center that my fate was sealed: as we walked out, I was handed a map—a large, fold-out map, detailed and colorful, of the Working Group's dream.

7

The power of maps to fire the imagination is well known. And, as Joseph Conrad's Marlow observed, there is no map so seductive as the one, like the flag-colored schoolroom map of Africa that doomed him to his forlorn quest, marked by doubts and conjectures, by the romantic blank of unexplored territory. The map of Columbia I took home from that first visit was like that. The Plan dictated that the Town be divided into sub-units to be called Villages, each Village in turn divided into Neighborhoods. These Villages had all been laid out and named, and were present on and defined by the map. Many of the Neighborhoods, too, had been drawn in, along with streets and the network of bicycle paths that knit the town together. But there were large areas of the map that, apart from the Village name, were entirely empty, conjectural—nonexistent, in fact.

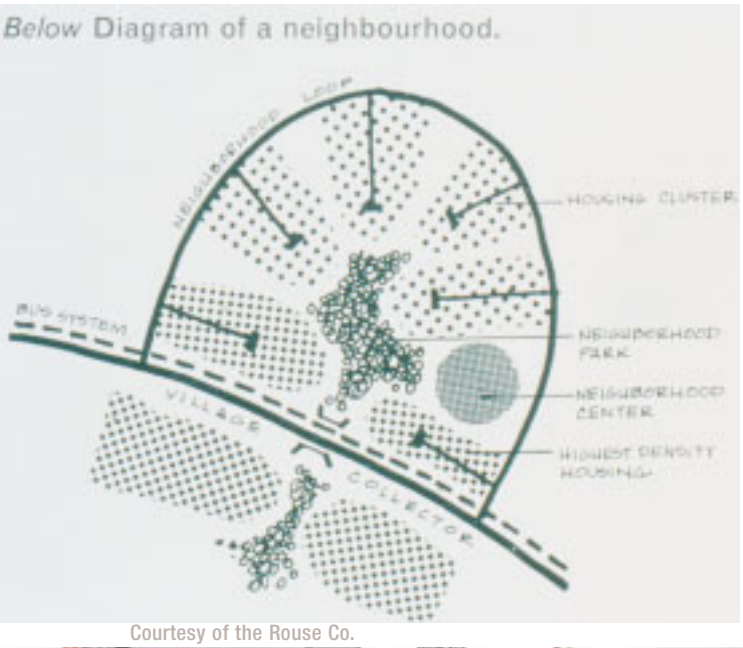
8

The names of Columbia! That many, if not most of them, were bizarre, unlikely, and even occasionally ridiculous, was a regular subject of discussion among Columbians and outsiders alike. In the Neighborhood called Phelps Luck, you could find streets with names that were anglo-whimsical and alliterative (Drystraw Drive, Margrave Mews, Luckpenny Lane); elliptical and puzzling, shorn of their suffixes, Zen (Blue Pool, Red Lake, Spiral Cut); or truly odd (Cloudleap Court, Roll Right Court, Newgrange Garth). It was rumored that the naming of Columbia's one thousand streets had been done by a single harried employee of the Rouse Company who, barred by some kind of arcane agreement from duplicating any of the street names in use in the surrounding counties of Baltimore and Anne Arundel, had turned in desperation from the exhausted lodes of flowers, trees, and U.S. presidents to the works of American writers and poets. The genius loci of Phelps Luck—did you guess?—was Robinson Jeffers.

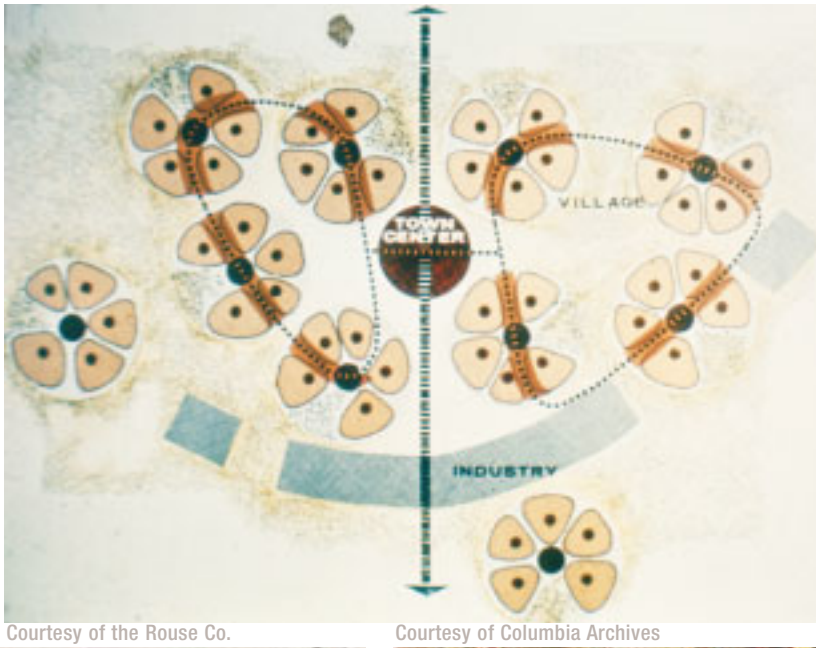
9

I spent hours poring over that map, long before my family ever moved into the house that

10



Courtesy of the Rouse Co.



Courtesy of the Rouse Co.

Courtesy of Columbia Archives

Courtesy of Columbia Archives

Courtesy of Columbia Archives

(top left) ***Neighborhood Diagram*** A conceptual diagram illustrating clusters of houses around a centralized park and neighborhood center.

(top right) ***Town Center Diagram*** A conceptual diagram of villages, formed from clusters of neighborhoods, grouped around Columbia's town center.

(bottom left) ***Phelps Luck neighborhood*** This 1969 map detail shows the names of the Columbia streets to which Chabon refers in his essay.

(bottom center) ***Map cover*** The cover of the folding map of Columbia featuring a picture of the People Tree sculpture.

(bottom right) ***Schools without rooms*** The enlightened notions of Rouse's "team of bright men" included the concept of open classrooms and racially diverse teachers.

Courtesy of Columbia Archives

Courtesy of Columbia Archives

Courtesy of Columbia Archives

Courtesy of Columbia Archives

we eventually bought, with that V.A. loan, at 5179 Eliots Oak Road, in the neighborhood of Longfellow, in the Village of Harper's Choice. To me the remarkable thing about those names was not their oddity but the simple fact that most of them referred to locations that did not exist. They were like magic spells, each one calibrated to call into being one particular stretch of blacktop, sidewalk, and lawn, and no other. In time—I witnessed it with my own eyes, month by month, year by year—the street demanded by the formula "Darkbush Terrace" or "Night Roost" would churn up out of the Maryland mud and clay, begin to sprout houses, trees, a tidy blue-and-white identifying sign. It was a powerful demonstration to me of the incantatory power of names and naming.

11 Eventually I tacked the map, considerably tattered and worn, to the wall of my room, on the second floor of our three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath pseudo-colonial tract house on Eliots Oak Road. In time the original map was joined, there, by a map of Walt Disney World's new Magic Kingdom, and by another of a world of my own devising, a world of horses and tall grass which I called Davoria. I studied the map of Columbia in the morning as I dressed for school (a school without classrooms, in which we were taught, both by racially diverse teachers and by the experience of simply looking around at the other faces in the room, that the battle for integration and civil rights was over, and that the good guys had won). I glanced up at the map at night as I lay in bed, reading *The Hobbit* or *The Book of Three* or a novel set in Oz. And sometimes I would give it a once over before I set out with my black and white friends for a foray into the hinterlands, to the borders of our town and our imaginations.

12 Our Neighborhood of Longfellow was relatively complete, with fresh-rolled sod lawns and spindly little foal-legged trees, but just beyond its edges my friends and I could ride our bikes clear off the edge of the Known World, into that unexplored blank of bulldozed clay and ribboned stakes where, one day, houses and lives would blossom. We would climb down the lattices of rebar into newly dug basements, dank and clammy and furred with ends of tree roots. We rolled giant spools of telephone cable down earthen mounds, and collected like arrowheads bent nails and spent missile shells of grout. The skeletons of houses, their nervous systems, their subcutaneous layers of insulation, were revealed to us as we watched them growing from the inside out. Later I might come to know the house's eventual occupants, and visit them, and stand in their kitchen thinking, I saw your house being born.

13 In a sense, the ongoing work of my hometown and the business of my childhood coincided perfectly; for as my family subsequently moved to the even newer, rawer Village of Long Reach, and then proceeded to fall very rapidly apart, Columbia and I both struggled to fill in the empty places, to feel our way outward into the mysterious gaps and undiscovered corners of the world. In the course of my years in Columbia, I encountered things not called for by the members of the Working Group, things that were not on the map. There were strange, uncharted territories of race and sex and nagging human unhappiness. And there was the vast, unsuspected cataclysm of my parents' divorce, that redrew so many boundaries, and created, with the proverbial stroke of the pen, vast new areas of confusion and dismay. And then one day I left Columbia, and discovered the bitter truth about race relations, and for a while I was inclined to view the lessons I had been taught with a certain amount of rueful anger. I felt that I had been lied to, that the map I had been handed was a forgery. And after all, I would hear it said from time to time, Columbia had failed in its grand experiment. It had become a garden-variety suburb in the Baltimore-Washington Corridor; there was crime there, and racial unrest.

14 The judgments of Columbia's critics may or may not be accurate, but it seems to me, looking back at the city of my and James Rouse's dreams from 30 years on, that just because you have stopped believing in something you once were promised does not mean that the promise itself was a lie. Childhood, at its best, is a perpetual adventure, in the truest sense of that overtaxed word: a setting forth into trackless lands that might have come to existence the instant before you first laid eyes on them. How fortunate I was to be handed, at such an early age, a map to steer by, however provisional, a map furthermore ornamented with a complex nomenclature of allusions drawn from the poems, novels and stories of mysterious men named Faulkner, Hemingway, Frost, Hawthorne, and Fitzgerald! Those names, that adventure, are with me still, every time I sit down at the keyboard to sail off, clutching some dubious map or other, into terra incognita.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Michael Chabon

Michael Chabon won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay,* which charts the adventures of two cousins who arrive in New York in the 1930s and get into the comic book business. Chabon's other published work includes *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh,* a novel, (1988) and *Wonder Boys,* a novel, (1995) as well as two collections of short stories, *A Model World and Other Stories,* (1990) and *Werewolves In Their Youth* (1999). His writing has appeared in several magazines and in a number of anthologies, among them *Prize Stories 1999: The O Henry Awards.* Much of his writing can also be found on his Web site, www.michaelchabon.com.

A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, Chabon subsequently enrolled in the master of fine arts writing program at the University of California, Irvine. Chabon submitted the manuscript of a novel as his MFA thesis, and it was published as *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh. The New Yorker* magazine called *Mysteries* "a nearly perfect example of the promising first novel," and reviewers compared Chabon to such writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald and J.D. Salinger. His next novel, *Wonder Boys,* was a bestseller, and became a movie starring Michael Douglas.

Chabon claims that his luxuriant imagination stems in part from his high level of childhood exposure to comic books, which were brought to him by his father.

Echoing many critics, Saul Austerlitz wrote: "Michael Chabon is one of the most enjoyable, in addition to being one of the most acclaimed, writers to emerge in American fiction in the past decade…."

Chabon lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife, Ayelet Waldman, and their children.

(opposite top left) ***Known World*** Columbia children at play in the afternoon sun.

(opposite top right) ***A pseudo-colonial tract house*** One of the many architectural styles for homes built in Columbia.

(opposite bottom) ***Longfellow neighborhood*** This map and inset detail show the area of Chabon's first home in Columbia.