In their struggle to survive and thrive on planet America, Michael Chabon suggests, some Black people have tried "terraforming," a grand strategy to change the atmosphere and environment to fit the needs of human physiology.

Others, however, have opted for "pantropy," a program to selectively alter individuals so that they can adapt more effectively to "harsh, unforgiving" realities.

In "Telegraph Avenue," Chabon, the author of "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay" and "The Yiddish Policemen's Union," rarely employs such high-falutin' concepts.

But terraforming and pantropy are the choices confronting his characters: Archy Stallings, an African-American, and Nate Jaffe, a Jew, co-owners of Brokeland Records, which is located "on the ragged fault where the urban plates of Berkeley and Oakland (California) subducted," may well be put out of business by Gibson Goode, the fifth richest Black man in America, who wants to build a megastore in their neighborhood.

Their wives, Gwen Shanks and Aviva Roth, partners in midwifery, have been threatened with legal action following a danger-filled delivery.

Wickedly funny

Set in 2004, the plot will thicken – and relationships will be further strained – when Archy’s father, a broken-down former actor in blaxploitation and Kung Fu films, arrives, carrying a secret dating back 30 years to the heyday of the Black Panthers, and teenager Titus Joyner, the son Archy never acknowledged, appears, strikes up a special friendship with 15-year-old Julius Jaffe, and joins the Jaffe household.

Saddled with a contrived plot and an ending that is not quite credible, "Telegraph Avenue" is not as compelling as Chabon’s best novels.

At its best, however, it is a beautifully written, wickedly funny, perceptive and poignant meditation on race, gender, class, and popular culture – and on human frailty and fragility – in 21st-century America.

**Terraforming to pantropy**

Archy, Chabon writes, "was tired of Brokeland, of black people, and of white people, and of all their schemes and grudges. …Most of all, he was tired of being a holdout, a sole survivor, the last coconut hanging on the last palm tree on the last little atoll in the pathway of the great wave of late-modern capitalism, waiting to be hammered flat."

If he could load his backpack with a hefty paycheck, a benefit’s package, and a paid vacation, and "move from being shiftless and cheating to merely the latter," Archy also muses, he might make a 50 percent gain in domestic peace.

Moving, at first almost imperceptibly, from terraforming to pantropy, Gwen learns to "stay fly. And do what you got to do." She begins to feel something resembling forgiveness for Archy, his father and his sons, and for the men "for whom he was the heir and testator, from the Middle Passage, to the Sleeper Cars of the Union Pacific, to the seat of a fixie back-alleying down Telegraph Avenue in the middle of the night."

**‘Common passion’**

"Telegraph Avenue" leaves Archy Stallings and Nate Jaffe with a financial backer, a cache of valuable "oldies," plans to start "a web site that will sell forty-year old chunks of vinyl on consignment to invisible Samoans," and a determination, at long last, to "get real and take shit seriously. At the same time."

Whether or not the new operation actually holds promise, Chabon reminds us that a fulfilling personal and
It is all about family, friends and lovers, living in neighborhoods “where common sorrow could be drowned in common passion” and collective action.

Try as he might, however, Chabon is not all that reassuring about the future of such neighborhoods, or, for that matter, about the efficacy of either terraforming or pantropy.

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