

Moving Kings: A Novel

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A propulsive, incendiary novel about faith, race, class, and what it means to have a home, from Joshua Cohen, "a major American writer" (The New York Times)

NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY VULTURE AND BOOKFORUM

One of the boldest voices of his generation, Joshua Cohen returns with *Moving Kings*, a powerful and provocative novel that interweaves, in profoundly intimate terms, the housing crisis in America's poor black and Hispanic neighborhoods with the world's oldest conflict, in the Middle East.

The year is 2015, and twenty-one-year-olds Yoav and Uri, veterans of the last Gaza War, have just completed their compulsory military service in the Israel Defense Forces. In keeping with national tradition, they take a year off for rest, recovery, and travel. They come to New York City and begin working for Yoav's distant cousin David King—a proud American patriot, Republican, and Jew, and the recently divorced proprietor of King's Moving Inc., a heavyweight in the tri-state area's moving and storage industries. Yoav and Uri now must struggle to become reacquainted with civilian life, but it's not easy to move beyond their traumatic pasts when their days are spent kicking down doors as eviction-movers in the ungentrified corners of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, throwing out delinquent tenants and seizing their possessions. And what starts off as a profitable if eerily familiar job—an "Occupation"—quickly turns violent when they encounter one homeowner seeking revenge.

Praise for *Moving Kings*

"A Jewish Sopranos . . . utterly engrossing, full of passionate sympathy . . . Cohen is an extraordinary prose stylist, surely one of the most prodigious at work in American fiction today."—James Wood, *The New Yorker*

"Brilliant . . . It feels master-planned to slowly unsettle your convictions, as the best novels do. . . . Cohen has a brain-on-fire intellect and a Balzac-grade enthusiasm for understanding varieties of experience."—*Los Angeles Times*

"*Moving Kings* is a lit fuse, a force let loose, a creeping flame heading for demolition, and Cohen himself is a master of argot and wit."—Cynthia Ozick

"A dazzling and poignant book."—Rachel Kushner

"Cohen's writing is filled with sharp turns of phrase and elegant rhythms. . . . The denouement is as vengeful as any Old Testament plot twist. . . . Cohen has become one of America's top young novelists."—*Time*

Joshua Cohen was born in 1980 in Atlantic City. He has written novels (*Book of Numbers*), short fiction (*Four New Messages*), and nonfiction for *The New York Times*, *Harper's Magazine*, *London Review of Books*, *The Forward*, *n+1*, and others. In 2017 he was named one of *Granta's* Best of Young American Novelists. He lives in New York City. David

(In Distraint)

Ye shall know them by their vehicles: those blue trucks that're always cutting you off on your way to the airport, sides emblazoned with grimy white crowns, dinged bumpers stickered got a problem with my driving? call 1-800-212-king!

Ye shall know them by their ads: on basic cable and drivetime radio, those billboards that're always blocking the signs and making you miss the airport turn, with their offers of free estimates over the phone and 100% money back guarantees.

Or maybe, like more than 180,000 other satisfied customers served in all five of the boroughs and three neighboring states since 1948, you know them as the Courtly Couriers[®], or the Royal Treatment Pros[®], or the Removalists with the Regal Touch-TM- whom you've let into your home, to move your most precious possessions to your new home, or else to one of their six 24-hour, security-monitored, climate-controlled storage facilities conveniently located throughout the New York Metropolitan Area.

Or maybe, whatever you know is wrong, because you've just been reading their online reviews.

King's Moving (David King, President, Spokesman, Container of Crises, Stresses, & the Distrainted) was a licensed, bonded, limited-liability insured large small business that specialized in-one guess-moving . . . 'n' storage . . . 'n' parking . . . 'n' towing . . . 'n' salvage . . . 'n' scrap, activities that demanded the bloodsweat of plus/minus 40 fulltime and 60 parttime employees, 50 vehicles, three lots, five garages, six 24-hour, security-monitored, climate-controlled storage facilities conveniently located throughout the New York Metropolitan Area-not to mention a headquarters in Jersey City, hard by the piers.

Above all, King's Moving was a family business. Family owned, family operated. Family, family, family . . . Take that into account, Your Honor . . .

It was summer, toward the weekend of a holiday week-Moving Day (last day of the month, first day of the month), followed by Independence Day-and David King was out in the Hamptons at a birthday party for America, to which he'd been invited as a member of the Empire Club, which had required attendees to donate upwards of \$4K for the privilege of drinking diluted booze and eating oversauced BBQ under the auspices of the New York State Republican Committee.

Inviting him to a party and then making him pay: that was class. That was how billionaires stayed billionaires.

And David, who'd resented even the toll to the Long Island Expressway, couldn't help but wonder whether he'd met \$4K worth of people yet-he couldn't help valuating everything: the people, the property, the Victorianized manse shadowing the pool. His phone was vibrating again in his pocket.

He canceled the call-he was working.

He was working by attending a party at which he didn't know anyone, or knew only that he recognized: names, faces, profiles.

It was work having to restrain himself from mentioning mergers he'd only read about, acquisitions that weren't his, a celebrity stranger's divorce/custody negotiations still ongoing-having to endure discussions of clean ocean and beach replenishment initiatives, when all he wanted to know was: daughter or wife? when all he wanted to know was: does anyone know where our host is? It was work pretending he blended, he mixed, pretending he wasn't sweating and had a second residence of his own and was a Hamptons vet and agreeing yes hasn't the Meadow Lane heliport gotten so crowded lately? and yes isn't Ray from Elite Landscapers just the best?

Because the fact remained that David had never been this far out on the Island before and not only couldn't he tell you which of the Hamptons he was in, he couldn't even tell you the number of Hamptons, or the differences between the Hamptons, or what made a Hampton a Hampton, singular, to begin with.

"Hope we're not keeping you?" a lady said.

David said, "Come again?"

"You keep checking your phone."

"I've got foreign business, never stops. It's already July 5th somewhere."

And he excused himself from that bezant of lawn and its assembly of skinny flagpole women flying dresses in red, white, and blue.

Ruth, his office manager, had been calling without leaving messages. Now she was gibberish txtng: sorry sorry bill sick have take bill jr bball practice.

And then: anyway not finding passcard.

David made his way among tents, buffet tables of chafing and carving and bars-the trick was to keep on the move.

Kids-put David around kids and he'd fantasize about having them and only then would he recall that he had a daughter, who was an adult now-the kids were having their faces smeared native with warpaint. They bounced around on a giant inflatable galleon, parried and thrust with balloon swords.

A breeze blew in with the dung of elephant rides.

He moved among servers who made \$8.75 an hour and so who made about 14 cents.

14.5833 cents, he did the figures in his head, for each minute it took them to carve him primerib or fix him a scotch or direct him and his menthols to a smoking area.

Conversations collected, as they were conducted, in circles. About stocks, about realestate, stocks. About renovations and how draining it was to open a house for the season. Apparently, to have two houses meant always neglecting one of them, at least. About alarm systems, sprinkler systems, sump pumps, white vs. black mold. About politics.

David's politics were aspirational, inferior: he was in favor of contacts, contracts, the right to not diet, and the right to jump lines at dessert stations.

David King was a man who if a longtime employee flaked on a commitment on short notice because her exhusband was too ill to take their son to a baseball practice that wasn't even hardball but actually softball, or if his primerib came closer to medium than to the already spineless concession that was medium rare, or if his Dewar's 18 turned out to be Dewar's 15 or 12 or God forbid came with an icecube or even just an extra splash of water, or if the line for the dessert station was moving so indecisively slowly that his icecream would melt before he got to the toppings he liked-it wasn't his fault that he was so decisive about his toppings-he'd scream, he'd have a conniption, and yet once he'd fudged his sundae with a cherry atop he had all the attention, all the guilty sated childlike attention, for being lectured by an Ivy League B student on the new model Gulfstreams (though David didn't have his own plane), the best sailing routes (though David didn't have his own boat), the best steeplechase courses (David didn't even have a pony), how New York State was the most regulated state in the union, the state with the highest taxes, the state with the highest energy costs, the highest fuel costs, the highest insurance premiums, and a convoluted body of tort law that made even the Nazi justice system seem unbiased and lenient, and how so and so was really the only candidate to bet on, so and so the only candidate who had real plans both for the Middle East and for midsized American businesses (our composited Ivy League B student apparently knew his audience)-the only candidate who was legitimately "Pro-Growth," and that was the line, or the jargon, that struck him, and brought to mind the image of a small modest neat building, like some fourfloor prewar walkup in the Village, which with every vote for a Republican grew taller by the floor, until it became this big shiny tower that clockhanded all of Manhattan, and then, by association, his mind flashed below his belt, which was on its last notch, and below his gut, which hung like a panting tongue over it, to his bloodless dick, which-as if his heart had betrayed the party platform, "Pro-Growth"-dangled limp and useless.

It was distressing-to others, but not to himself, who didn't notice-how he'd change. How he'd let himself be lectured, talked down to. How he'd become, in certain situations, not servile exactly, but docile, tamed. A Jew. And so he'd always wind up thanking his interlocutor for the condescension, for the aeronautical, nautical, equestrian, or civic education. Just like after he'd shout at Ruth, he'd apologize and give her a raise, just like he'd always overtip his servers-even tipping them at an event like this, where accepting gratuities would get them in trouble.

David's normal social calendar had him visiting precincts, firehouses, and school auditoria.

cultivating such notable personalities as: Port Authority commissioner, State Assembly member, City Council member, Borough president, Borough Board member, Community Board member, the executive of the Teamsters Locals 560 and 831, and of the DOB, DCP, DOT, and DSNY. This occasion, however, was mayoral and beyond—it was congressional and beyond—the developers, the financiers, the waspiest machers, robust with exemptions, strong in abatements. The people who ran the energy companies, not the people who ran the fuel distribution depots and waste disposal services. The bankers who drove the interest rates and generals who earned medals, not the retired cops who drove the armored cars and former hacks who owned medallions. Mingling with this class had gotten him awkward, apprehensive. With his side of the mouth talking, his talking hands, checking his fly with sticky fingers.

All his struggles were in his face. All his personas in combat: king, commoner, selfmade, incomplete. The booze and red meat and dairy. The pills ostensibly for bloodpressure and the pills ostensibly for cholesterol and the pills he wasn't sure what they did: for anxiety. He didn't swear by anything, just swallowed it. He never knew what to say, or knew but got his audiences crossed, got lost in the game, playing against type when he should've been playing to type, playing to when he should've been playing against. Golf with racquet sports enthusiasts and racquet sports with golfers. With a Belgian diplomat he'd discussed the chance of rain. With the CEO of a cosmetics firm he'd discussed how most people think the Iranians are Arabs. It didn't help that most people here considered it obnoxious to mention, or to be pressured into mentioning, what they did for a living, which was who they were for a living, so that actors and actresses and uniformed military personnel aside, the only presences here whose identities were in any way legible to him were the servers, so he bantered with them, about why he was refusing to support an increase in the minimum wage, and whether or not they'd seen the host of the party, and then he'd tuck singles into their pockets and tell them to tell him if they heard anything. What he was, then, was local color, just out of his locale. They probably thought he was physically tough. They probably thought he was in with the mob.

David edged his way around the crowd, which pressed in around the dancefloor, at the center of which a professional couple of professional dancers swung and hopped and twirled. Keys, guitar, bass, and drums were locked into a jazz that turned the whole world into an elevator, the horn section rose and riffed. Makeshift baffles to either side of the bandstand held massive eagle art for raffle. The band became a drumroll, which became clapping, as the emcee made a quip about being black and then introduced the candidate.

David was already out-by the beach, an open balmy vista. Bright water, bright sand. Given the winds, it took many changes of stance, many deli matches, to light his kingsized Newport. Then he hefted his phone and dialed Ruth.

"Hello?"

"Ruthie."

"David-hello? Are you driving?"

"Just talk. What's the issue?"

"I can barely-if you're driving, put up the window."

"I'm outside-there's no window outside." He cupped the phone, "What's up?"

"I told you. I can't go."

"Can't or won't?"

"I'm not feeling so hot."

"I thought it was Bill, I thought Bill Jr. Now you're ditzing up your excuses."

"No excuses."

"You seriously don't have it in you to just stock a fridge, bring over the kitchenware and like a blanket or whatever?"

"I've got a son with a playoff game and an exhusband stubborn and vomiting."

"It's just the basics, Ruthie."

"Better you let Paul take care of it."

"Paul's not domestic, he's not even housebroken. And anyway he already did me enough of a favor with the furniture, when he moved out the Bengalis."

"Bangladeshis."

"They leave it decent? You were supposed to clean."

"I'm standing in my exhusband's house, standing in my exhusband's vomit, and feeling woozy myself."

"This is a you and your Bills' problem, but you've made it a you and me problem. And you're fucking over my cousin."

"Fuck you, David. I'm going."

"You mean you're going out there now?"

"I mean I'm pressing the red and hanging up on you."

This was what happened when you relied on an office manager still entangled with her ex, or when you used to screw your office manager still entangled with her ex—the sands kept shifting, the loyalties got kinked like kelp and baited tackle. A barge floated by, laden with fireworks, and David flicked his cig in its direction as if hoping for a gust that would carry the butt ass over ember out over the water and ignite a fuse.

He stomped back through the party (grabbing a bourboned punch), crunched the clamshell drive to the front of the property (leaving his glass in the grass). A valet took his ticket and smirked, "What kind car? Bentley or Rolls?"

David said, "You know what kind. A van, cabron. A Plymouth Estupido."

Two men were approaching, but just as they were about to take the slate steps for the manse, one paused: "Holy shit-holy shit-David King, is that you? David King The Moving King Will Move Your Mothertrucking Everything?"

The man, swimfit in a slimcut suit, loosened necktie toweled around his neck, pumped David's hand: "That was classic. Just a total classic."

He said to his companion, "I was clerking down in DC, but I was always coming back to New York to visit Peg," and then he said to David, "My wife."

The man broke the shake to rub his forehead, go wistful: "Anyway, she'd be going to sleep early, Peg would, she was still doing the morning show then, WFAN, so I'd be up late at night alone, just me and my briefs and Channel J—you know Channel J? Was it only in the city? Public access. Madness. 1-900 partylines, psychic chatshows, neighborhood forums you called into with bulletins that advised about blizzards or where your polls were. None of it exists anymore. You had this one commercial where a family's sitting around a table, mother and daughter talking about their day with the father sitting up at the head on a throne, and the movers come in and just pick him up and take him away and they do it so slick, nobody notices—that was great. That was your own family, David? I always had the feeling. How are they?"

Other Books

Blood-Stained Kings, Tom Willock's first book, Green River Rising, earned the kind of reviews that are rarely accorded to most so-called literary thrillers. This remarkable debut was hailed for its rich, powerful writing as well as its dramatic, page-turning suspense. The New York Times Book Review called it "beautifully vivid" and "triumphantly realized," while People called it "as fine a thriller as one could ask for." The author's much-anticipated second novel is as powerful and ambitious as its predecessor. Set in New Orleans and the rural South, it is the story of a chain of cataclysmic events let loose by the murder of Clarence Jefferson, a legendary lawman who has gathered a cache of evidence that could imprison corrupt politicians in five states. His last act, it appears, was to handpick two people as the unlucky heirs of his potentially explosive evidence files. The pair must either dispose of them as fast as they can or—at considerable risk to themselves—deliver the files to the authorities. Lenna Parillaud and Dr. Cicero Grimes, Jefferson's "beneficiaries," have never met. Lenna, a millionaire businesswoman, has been racked by grief and rage over

the loss of her daughter. Dr. Grimes is a clinically depressed psychiatrist. Though both have burdens enough of their own, they are swept up into this story of Southern violence, passion, and vengeance, the likes of which perhaps only the readers of Willocks's previous novel can imagine. Compared by critics to Norman Mailer, James Ellroy, Stephen Hunter, and Andrew Vachss, Willocks offers a unique amalgam of gritty realism and something more—a depth and intensity that is seldom achieved in popular fiction.

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