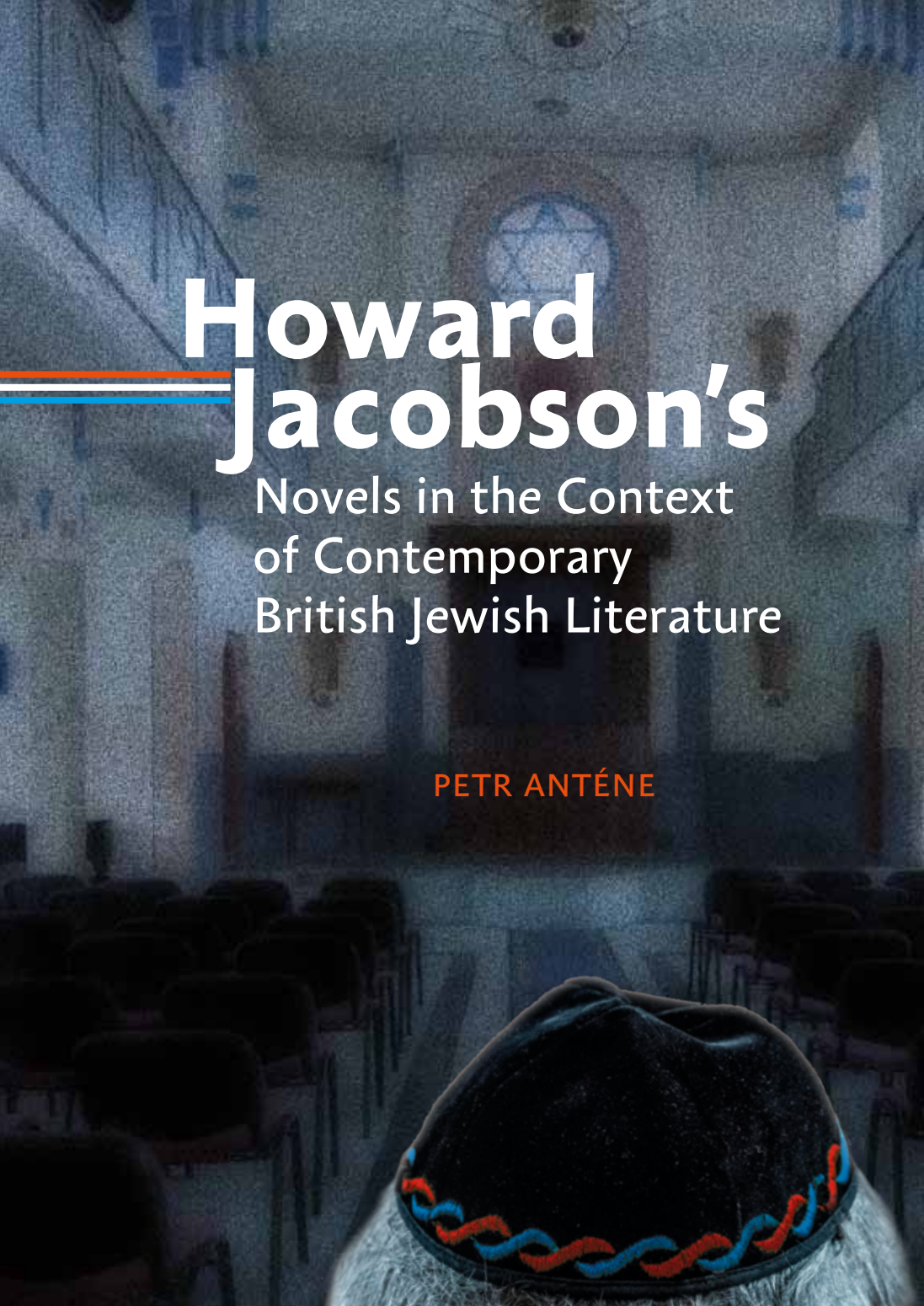
Howard Jacobson's

Novels in the Context of Contemporary British Jewish Literature

PETR ANTÉNE



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Novels in the Context of Contemporary British Jewish Literature

PETR ANTÉNE

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Introduction

[Jacobson] was such a foolish, uncommunicative, made-up name, a mere convenience for harassed immigration officials who couldn't get anything else out of the yammering escapees from the pogroms except that they were so-and-so and so-and-so son of Abraham or Isaac or Jacob. Even if you weren't family you had to stick together with people who had trodden that route (Howard Jacobson, *In the Land of Oz*, 231).

When Howard Jacobson (*1942), a British Jewish writer, journalist and former professor of English literature, was awarded the 2010 Booker Prize for his eleventh novel *The Finkler Question*, the event triggered an interesting discussion not only about the generic nature and quality of his writing, but also about British Jewish literature in general. While the significance of Jewish American literature has been undisputed at least since the latter half of the twentieth century, culminating with the Nobel Prize for Literature being awarded to Isaac Bashevis Singer and Saul Bellow in the 1970s, little attention had been paid to British writers of Jewish heritage, at least by the mainstream British media. After the 2010 Booker Prize ceremony, the *Guardian* even published an article entitled "Is Howard Jacobson the only person writing British Jewish novels?"[1] Scholarly work on the topic had also been rather scarce, one of the few key texts being Bryan Cheyette's anthology of British and Irish Jewish writing published in 1998, including an extract from Jacobson's second novel *Peeping Tom* (1984). In the introduction to the anthology, Cheyette writes that Anglo-Jewry was the only surviving European Jewish community after World War II and its literary culture was older than a century. At the same time, Cheyette stresses that major post-war writers of Jewish

[1] See Nicholas Lezard, "Is Howard Jacobson the only person writing British Jewish novels?" *Guardian*, October 15, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/15/howard-jacobson-british-jewish-novels

background, such as Harold Pinter (1930–2008) or Anita Brookner (1928–2016), did not deal with Jewish subject matter explicitly; while Pinter, the 2005 Nobel Prize Laureate, created a more general modernist aesthetic, Brookner, the recipient of the 1984 Booker Prize for her novel *Hotel du Lac*, largely avoided commenting on Jewish presence in English culture by setting her fiction on the Continent.[2] Similarly, David Brauner, author of a 2001 comparative study of post-war Jewish fiction in the UK and the US, mentions encountering numerous cases of disbelief in the existence of British Jewish writing.[3]

The lack of visibility of British Jewish literature, despite the post-war development of the UK towards a multicultural society, may be explained by the complexity of British Jewish experience throughout British history. Unlike the post-war immigrants who came mostly from former British colonies, Jews first arrived in the British Isles centuries ago, with William the Conqueror in 1066. All Jews were expelled from England, however, in 1290 and were not allowed to return until 1655. In a recent study of British Jewish writing, Ruth Gilbert summarizes various waves of Jewish migration to Britain from that point onwards, including the seventeenth century Sephardic resettlements, the Ashkenazi dispersals from Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, and the migrations of refugees from Nazi Europe.[4] However, as Linda Grant (*1951), another contemporary British Jewish novelist, writes, the Anglo-Jewry tended "not to draw attention to itself—to change your name, not to look too Jewy, to include an oath of allegiance

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2 See Bryan Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland: An Anthology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), xxvii, xiii, xxxii, xl. Jacobson himself made the following comment about Pinter: "What's unspoken in Pinter's plays is his Jewishness." See Howard Jacobson, *Whatever It Is, I Don't Like It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 318.

3 See David Brauner, *Post-War Jewish Fiction: Ambivalence, Self-Explanation and Transatlantic Connections* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), x.

4 See Ruth Gilbert, *Writing Jewish: Contemporary British-Jewish Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2–3.

to the Queen in Saturday services, to be decorous, unassertive."[5] Grant confirms that, due to these attempts at assimilation, British Jewish writers mostly did not write about specifically Jewish themes, and when some of them did, their production was considered incompatible with the majority's taste. Grant herself recalls that a reviewer for the *Telegraph* called her 2002 novel *Still Here* "too Jewish," which she cannot imagine happening in the US: "A remark like this in the *Washington Post* would bring down the wrath of Aipac.[6] Was Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* too Bangladeshi?"[7] The last quoted sentence suggests that even at a time of proclaimed multiculturalism, when a novel by a Bangladeshi-born British writer was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, there was still a lack of recognition for Jewish writing in Britain.

The journalist and humourist Giles Coren strongly praised the decision of the 2010 Booker Prize committee, claiming that "it is imperative for the future of the English novel" that Jacobson win it, as "only one Jewish man had ever even been *nominated*, in forty years." Coren goes on to argue that until very recently, "the appearance of a 'Jew' in the English novel has been a moment to blush and look away. If not actually a moneylender or corrupt businessman, he is always at least a teetotaller and a bore … and so Jewish novelists have tended to write about other things than Jewishness."[8]

Indeed, despite the marginalization of British Jewish writing, a historical survey of British literature illustrates that major writers have often peopled their texts with Jewish characters. Coren is right, however, that some of the most memorable portrayals across the centuries tend to be strikingly unrealistic and rather negative, as

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5 Linda Grant, "Identity and the British-Jewish novel," *New Statesman*, May 23, 2012, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/05/identity-and-british-jewish-novel

6 The American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

7 Grant, "Identity." *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2003.

8 Giles Coren qtd. in Merritt Moseley, "The Man Booker Prize for 2010," *Sewanee Review* 119, no. 3 (2011): 507–508. Coren may be referring to Adam Foulds whose novel *The Quickening Maze* was shortlisted for the prize in 2009.

illustrated by a series of villains including Barabas in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1590), Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), Fagin in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1839) or Svengali in du Maurier's *Trilby* (1895). As is often the case, the representatives of an ethnic or religious minority came to stand for the antagonists or objects of ridicule.[9] While there were occasional attempts at subverting these fictional representations of the Jews, such as Riah in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), these often resulted in the opposite extreme and therefore did not remain in the readers' memory. In his aptly named pivotal study *From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction* (1961), Edgar Rosenberg explains that "the Jew-villain might not be a realistic figure; but within the canons of comedy and melodrama he could give the illusory appearance of being a creature of flesh and blood. The purveyors of the immaculate Jew, on the other hand, produced not so much a character as a formula."[10] The most well-known example of a positively depicted Jewish character in literature on the British Isles is represented by the sensitive advertising agent Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922); however, this text belongs to the Irish rather than British literary tradition.

As a writer born in a working-class Jewish family in Manchester—England's second largest Jewish community, after London—Howard Jacobson inevitably reacts to the British Jewish experience as well as mainstream British literary history outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Although Jacobson does not identify as an Orthodox Jew, most of his writings reflect his strong sense of Jewish identity, as emphasized by the epigraph to this introductory chapter, taken from *In the Land of Oz* (1987), his travel book of Australia. Similarly, a section of Jacobson's later travelogue *Roots Schmoots* (1993) focuses on his attempt at reconnecting with his East European Jewish roots

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[9] Another well-known illustration of this tendency may be seen in the figure of the stage Irishman in English drama. See e.g. J. O. Bartley, "The Development of a Stock Character," *The Modern Language Review* 37, no. 4 (1942): 438–447.

[10] Edgar Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 69.

in Lithuania, the home country of his maternal ancestors. While up to 2019, Jacobson's oeuvre includes six works of non-fiction, dealing with his views on a variety of cultural and social topics, the core of his literary production is represented by sixteen novels, starting with his 1983 campus novel *Coming from Behind*. As a novelist, Jacobson has been labelled by reviewers as the "British Philip Roth," but he himself prefers to be considered the "Jewish Jane Austen."[11] Although there are several connections between Jacobson's writing as well as Roth's and Austen's oeuvre, both comparisons raise a number of significant questions which will be addressed in this monograph.

First, the phrase the "British Philip Roth" suggests a link between Jacobson and Roth based on the fact that both writers have established public identities as Jews, the former in the UK and the latter in the US, in Jacobson's case for instance by means of his weekly column for the *Independent*. Moreover, there is a perceived thematic similarity in Jacobson and Roth's works, although Jacobson mentioned he "feels more affectionately towards [his] characters than Roth does."[12] Still, Ruth Gilbert has observed that Jacobson's fiction "is populated by a series of hapless Jewish men who suffer repeated romantic and sexual humiliations at the hands of the heartless Aryan women whom they find unbearably cruel and magnetically irresistible,"[13] and a similar claim has repeatedly been made about Roth's writing, for example by Sam B. Girgus who writes that Roth "[tends] to focus sexual and ethnic tensions on the figure of the Gentile woman [...], thereby implying an unhappy pattern of escaping the boundaries of ethnic identity and determination as embodied in Jewish women only to find alienation and insecurity in the arms of a *shikse*."[14] Yet, this

[11] Mark Brown, "Howard Jacobson Wins Booker Prize 2010 for *The Finkler Question*," *Guardian*, October 12, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/12/howard-jacobson-the-finkler-question-booker

[12] Bob Goldfarb, "An Interview with Howard Jacobson," *Jewish Book Council*, August 31, 2011, https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/the-mighty-walzer

[13] Gilbert, *Writing Jewish*, 6.

[14] Sam B. Girgus, "Philip Roth and Woody Allen: Freud and the Humor of the Repressed," in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner

general observation is valid only to a degree; while Jacobson's novels do focus on the intimate relationships between the sexes like Roth's, the male protagonists are not always Jews, and similarly, their love interests are not always non-Jewish women. On closer inspection, the novels thus provide a more complex portrayal of ethnic and gender relations as well as the interplay between bearers of Jewishness and Britishness. It is one of the aims of the present monograph to explore in detail these dynamics and its chronological development across Jacobson's oeuvre.

Second, the phrase "Jewish Jane Austen" highlights Jacobson's relation to the British rather than American literary tradition. Jacobson's identification as a British writer may stem from the author having studied English at Downing College, Cambridge, under F. R. Leavis, as well as from his academic career. While Jacobson's first published book was *Shakespeare's Magnanimity* (1978), a study of Shakespeare's tragedies co-authored with Wilbur Sanders, his fiction as well as nonfiction provides numerous direct as well as indirect references to the canon of British literature. A careful reading of these intertextual elements may thus reveal how Jacobson rewrites the British literary tradition, which is another of my aims in the following chapters.

Finally, Jacobson's being awarded the Booker Prize started a discussion about the generic nature of his writing. Several commentators agreed on Jacobson being an essentially comic writer; for instance, John McKie labelled him the first comic novelist to win the prize since Kingsley Amis in 1986,[15] and Mark Brown even called *The Finkler Question* "the first unashamedly comic novel to win the Man

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Ziv and Anat Zajdman (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 121. Jewish men's attraction to Gentile women was also analysed in Isaac Rosenfeld's 1949 essay "Adam and Eve on Delancey Street," which equates kashrut with the incest taboo. See Rosenfeld, "On the Horizon: Adam and Eve on Delancey Street," *Commentary*, October 1949, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/on-the-horizon-adam-and-eve-on-delancey-street/

[15] See John McKie, "The light-hearted too often leave award ceremonies light-handed," *Caledonian Mercury*, October 14, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20130602032411/http://caledonianmercury.com/2010/10/14/the-light-hearted-too-often-leave-award-ceremonies-light-handed/001083

Booker prize in its 42-year history."[16] Comedy has traditionally been one of the typical features of Jacobson's works; Jacobson's interest in humour from a theoretical perspective is even reflected in his book-length study *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997). At the same time, some commentators stressed that *The Finkler Question* can hardly be classified as a comic novel; for example, Jonathan Foreman characterized it as "far too dark and serious in intent."[17] While such a characterization may fit a novel that focuses on the lifelong friendship of three men and the way they help each other cope with hardships, one could pose the question whether comedy and seriousness need to be conceived as mutually exclusive. Jacobson himself suggested that comedy and tragedy should be seen in juxtaposition to each other: "The great comic artists are those who draw their comic inspiration from tragedy, from terror, so that comedy becomes a way of dealing with it, coping with it, facing it. Comedy is a very important part of the human intelligence, it's a way of understanding, it's a way of criticizing."[18] In this view, comedy and tragedy become inseparable aspects of representing the complexity of human experience.

Such a view has been considered typical of Jewish culture, where humour is said to have an important role in the Jewish quest for survival, and as Avner Ziv highlights, "it was a Jew, Sigmund Freud, who constructed the theory of humour as a defence mechanism to help cope with distress."[19] Ziv also emphasizes the prominence of Jewish interest in humour by pointing out that apart from Freud, two other major theoreticians of humour, Henri Bergson and Arthur Koestler, were Jewish,[20] which, however, does not mean that their

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16 Brown, "Howard Jacobson Wins Booker Prize 2010."

17 Jonathan Foreman, "The Howard Jacobson Question," *Commentary* 130, no. 5 (2010): 46.

18 "Howard Jacobson – *Kalooki Nights,*" YouTube video, 4:04, "librarie mollat," August 24, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSbPTwSQZqg.

19 Avner Ziv, "Preface," in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor,* ed. Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman (Westwood: Greenwood Press, 1993), vii.

20 See Ziv, "Preface," viii.

theories apply exclusively to Jewish humour. My aim in this book is to examine to what degree the comic elements in Jacobson's writing are consistent with the tradition of Jewish as well as English humour, which Anthony Easthope defined as the condensed use of irony, exposure of self-deception, and a tendency towards fantasy and excess.[21] Applying the theories on humour in general as well as Jewish and English humour in particular should reveal to what degree Jacobson's employment of the comic universal is based on either of the two traditions.

As I attempt to focus on the gradual development of the outlined features, I will analyse Jacobson's novels predominantly in chronological order. Although in an essay from his 2017 collection *The Dog's Last Walk*, Jacobson writes he does not wish his protagonists to be equated with him,[22] he may have emphasized this distinction for the very reason that the similarities are indeed too striking not to be noticed. In addition, there are significant thematic overlaps between Jacobson's fiction and nonfiction. While a detailed study of Jacobson's nonfiction falls beyond the scope of this project, the author's essays and journalism will be occasionally referred to throughout the text in order to shed more light on the themes of his novels.

The first chapter covers Jacobson's three novels of the 1980s which share a significant amount of thematic features. Both *Coming from Behind* (1983) and *Peeping Tom* (1984) feature male Jewish protagonists who find it hard to fit within their predominantly English academic environment. In contrast, the main character of *Redback* (1986) is portrayed as a lower-class Englishman without a Jewish background and the foreign surrounding he has to make sense of is Australia.

The second chapter focuses on *The Very Model of a Man* (1992), Jacobson's rewrite of the Cain and Abel story of the Old Testament.

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21 See Anthony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 163. Although I am aware there are significant distinctions between Englishness and Britishness, the terms are often conflated in the writing on which this study focuses.

22 See Howard Jacobson, *The Dog's Last Walk (and Other Pieces)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 159.

It aims to reconsider an early text seemingly untypical of the author's writing by recontextualizing it within his oeuvre.

The third chapter focuses on *No More Mr Nice Guy* (1998) and *Who's Sorry Now?* (2002), two novels of the late 1990s and early 2000s which leave the academic community, introduced in *Coming from Behind* and *Redback*, for the social world of the English upper middle classes, featuring only limited references to Jewishness.

The fourth chapter deals with three novels that reflect Jacobson's interest in wider Jewish themes which up to that point had been more prominent in his nonfiction than fiction.

The Mighty Walzer (1999) is admittedly Jacobson's most autobiographical novel inspired by his early life in a Jewish enclave of Manchester. *Kalooki Nights* (2006) exchanges the author's traditional English references for American ones and is also Jacobson's first novel to refer extensively to the Holocaust. Finally, *The Finkler Question* (2010) deals with British Jewish people's perception of Israel, but surprisingly features a non-Jewish protagonist.

The fifth chapter focuses on two novels in which there is little to no sense of the protagonists' Jewishness. In both cases, the main characters' professions relate to book production and sales. While *The Act of Love* (2008) is an intricate novel of adultery whose protagonist is an antiquarian English man, the narrator of *Zoo Time* (2012) is a writer who considers his Jewish heritage a rather marginal part of his identity.

The sixth chapter shows a further diversification of Jacobson's works, dealing with *J* (2014), a dystopian novel, *Shylock Is My Name* (2016),[23] an updated novelistic version of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Pussy* (2017), a brief satire of Donald Trump.

Finally, the seventh chapter analyses Jacobson's most recent novel *Live a Little* (2019) by comparing it to the author's earlier text *The Making of Henry* (2004), as both of them deal with aging, although

[23] As of 2019, *The Finkler Question* and *Shylock Is My Name* remain the only novels by Jacobson available in Czech translations, published in 2012 and 2016 respectively.

the protagonist of the latter is only about sixty years old and the two main characters of the former are in their nineties.

By covering the aforementioned texts and themes, I aim to fill in the gap resulting from the lack of a sustained study of Jacobson's oeuvre. Considering Jacobson being such a prolific writer, the lack of a critical survey of his works is perhaps surprising. It may be explained to a degree by the view that a definitive monograph of a novelist who is still actively writing is not feasible, such a project would not be unusual, however, especially after the author was awarded the Booker Prize. While the 1986 review of *Coming from Behind* in *Shofar* situated Jacobson alongside his contemporary Clive Sinclair (1948–2018),[24] later research puts Jacobson at the beginning of the current renaissance of British Jewish writing; for instance, Gilbert suggests Jacobson "has arguably set the tone for a new generation of British-Jewish writers by confronting the interface between Jewishness and Englishness in his work."[25] While admittedly limited in its primary focus, this book aims to contribute to the scholarly discussion of contemporary British Jewish fiction.

[24] See Joseph Cohen, review of *Coming from Behind*, by Howard Jacobson, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 4, no. 3 (1986): 42–44.

[25] Gilbert, *Writing Jewish*, 26.

1 University Settings and Intertextual Perspectives in the Novels of the 1980s

As *Coming from Behind* (1983), Jacobson's debut novel which he got published relatively late, at the age of forty-one, reflects the author's early professional experience in academia, the same could be said about its successors, *Peeping Tom* (1984) and *Redback* (1986). This chapter starts with a brief overview of possible autobiographical features. After completing his studies at Cambridge, Jacobson taught for three years at the University of Sydney from 1965 on, then briefly at Selwyn College, Cambridge, and finally at Wolverhampton Polytechnic from 1974 to 1980. To fill out the most important data in the author's biography, it should also be mentioned that Jacobson has been married three times, most recently in 2008 at the age of sixty-six. He married his first wife Barbara in 1964 after his graduation from Cambridge at the age of twenty-two, while at the time his debut novel was published, he was already married to his second wife, Rosalin Sadler, whom *Coming from Behind* is dedicated to. With Rosalin, who comes from Australia, he later undertook a journey across this continent in the mid-1980s.

By setting his early novels on university campuses, Jacobson enriched the genre of the British campus novel, established in the 1950s, with a protagonist of Jewish background. In Jacobson's novels of the 1980s, intertextuality is established as a significant element, illustrating the author's knowledge of the canon of English literature and his expertise as a literary critic. At the same time, as the protagonists of *Coming from Behind* and *Peeping Tom* are academics or literary critics of a working-class Jewish background, the texts highlight the uncomfortable position of Jews among Gentiles. *Redback* is an exception in not providing a Jewish protagonist,

however, its Australian setting also highlights affinities with the author's life, drawing on Jacobson's teaching stay at the University of Sydney as well as his later trip into the country, which also applies to the travelogue *In the Land of Oz* (1987).

The present chapter is divided into three subchapters that will analyse the given novels separately in chronological order, as their intertextual references vary significantly. The traditional classification of the campus novel as a comic and satirical genre, highlighting the follies of academic life,[26] seems to confirm Jacobson's reputation as a comic writer. At the same time, the university setting may prove somewhat limiting in comparison with Jacobson's later novels. Devoting close attention to the portrayal of British Jewish identity, intertextuality, and the use of comic and satirical elements, the chapter as a whole seeks to answer the question as to what degree Jacobson's early novels laid the foundations for his later fiction.

1.1 *Coming from Behind* as a British Jewish Campus Novel[27]

At the end of its first chapter, *Coming from Behind* features an intertextual reference to Bradbury Lodge, a house in Hampstead where all the famous literary and academic figures gather, while instructors at provincial educational institutions are never invited.[28] As a debuting novelist, Jacobson could not have been as well-known as Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, the two major authors of British campus fiction alluded to in the aforementioned passage. Like them, he drew upon his own personal and professional life experience in writing

[26] See e.g. Chris Baldick, "Campus Novel," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33.

[27] This subchapter draws on my earlier article "Justly Forgotten or Unjustly Overlooked? Reconsidering Howard Jacobson's *Coming from Behind*," *American and British Studies Annual* 12 (2019): 155–165.

[28] See Howard Jacobson, *Coming from Behind* (London: Vintage, 2003), 34. Hereafter cited in the text as *CB*.