

Multiple Contexts: English and Jewish Aspects of Howard Jacobson's Novels

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A few years ago I was invited—along with many other Hungarian scholars working in the field of English studies—to contribute to the major endeavor nicknamed *HUHI, A Hungarian History of English Literature* with a short chapter on British Jewish poetry. In the previous years I had researched Jewish American fiction, struggling with the enormous amount of relevant and excellent texts, and I was surprised to see the meagre corpus that could be categorized as British Jewish literature, in spite of the numerous prominent British authors, such as Tom Stoppard or Harold Pinter, who came from Jewish families but did not address that heritage in their texts explicitly. I had to face what Efraim Sicher—quoting the British Jewish novelist, Brian Glanville—described as follows: “there were Anglo-Jewish writers but there was no Anglo-Jewish writing” (175). This statement, made in 1960, but still more or less valid in 2015, when *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction* came out, was confirmed on the occasion of Howard Jacobson's Booker Prize in 2010 by Giles Coren, who emphasized, surveying the history of the prize, that “only one Jewish man had ever been *nominated*, in forty years” (7). Accordingly, Jacobson's well-deserved award was considered by numerous critics as a milestone in the formation of British Jewish fiction. Acknowledging that the concept of British Jewish literature has been emerging and gaining mainstream significance only in the past couple of decades, mostly in line with the rise of multiculturalism, Petr Anténe's

monograph on its leading senior author, Howard Jacobson is a cutting-edge and gap-filling accomplishment, which deserves attention for multiple reasons.

Methodologically, *Howard Jacobson's Novels in the Context of Contemporary British Jewish Literature* is a conventional, reader-friendly monograph, which focuses on a single author in the double—British and Jewish—context that defines his work, and which fulfills the ambition to cover the entire scope of Jacobson's output in fiction. In that respect, it indeed was the first such work, to be followed by David Brauner's *Howard Jacobson* published in the *Contemporary British and Irish Writers* series of Manchester University Press just a year later, in 2020. As this quick succession as well as the planned special issue dedicated to Howard Jacobson in the magazine *European Judaism* indicate, Jacobson is one of the major English novelists; he has evidently reached the phase in his career when the worthy discussion of his work grows beyond the length allowed by sporadic reviews and studies in diverse journals, calling for a more substantial, monographic format. As Eastern and Central European scholars do their research on the periphery of English studies in less favorable circumstances than many of our colleagues closer to the great academic centers of the field, I find Anténe's pioneering achievement outstanding already on the level of its thematic choice.

Every single element of the book serves the purpose of guiding the reader through Jacobson's novels in the most lucid, informative, and efficient way possible. The reader's first encounter with the volume, its cover is a subtle visual representation of the duality emphasized in the title, with the picture showing the interior of a synagogue, the Jewish site of worship, and the head of a man entering the building. Contemporary details of the everyday scenery—especially the plastic chairs—make a realistic impression, while the blurred outlines in the scarce light suggest a painting rather than a photograph, reminding the spectator of the complicated relationship between “art” and “reality,” which is a major theme in Jacobson's novels. Besides, nothing else can be seen of the man in the center but his yarmulke on the top

of his grey hair. Thus, the protagonist of the cover remains completely hidden as an individual, with the only available information about him being that he is an aging, observant Jew (or at least a man respecting Jewish customs). Contemplating the image further, one can notice that the prayer house, which is supposed to be a communal center, is completely empty, except for its sole visitor just arriving, which, accompanied by the dark colors, results in a sinister atmosphere of abandonment, quite in harmony with the descriptions by Glanville and others about the lack of a lively Jewish (literary) community in the UK. Finally, the only colors of the cover are the British national colors: red and blue. So the entwined red and blue pattern decorating the black skullcap seems to symbolize the Jewish background to, and the formative British motifs of Jacobson's "head," that is, his thinking and writing.

The structure of the monograph follows a more or less chronological order with the novels organized into thematic units. Since autobiographic references are abundant in Jacobson's oeuvre, the first chapter reflects on books inspired by the author's experiences at the beginning of his career, when he taught at different colleges and universities in England and in Australia. Anténe has published extensively on campus novels and makes a good use of his expertise in the genre in the analysis of *Coming from Behind* (1983) and *Redback* (1986) in the first chapter.

Still in the same chapter, Anténe's reading of *Peeping Tom* (1984), which heavily relies on and describes an intellectual and emotional struggle with the bequest of Thomas Hardy, introduces the primary subject of the monograph—and a distinctive feature of Jacobson's novels—namely, the formative presence and influence of the English literary tradition in narratives that, a couple of exceptions aside, represent mostly Jewish themes and characters. The constant dilemma of a double identity, also pointed out on the back cover, is that the author "has often been characterized as the 'British Philip Roth,' although he himself prefers to be seen as the 'Jewish Jane Austen.'" The playful distinction—which also appears in many other

texts that briefly sum up Jacobson's work for marketing purposes or other practical reasons—addresses the question of canonization: distancing himself from Roth, his Jewish colleague, Jacobson insists that his works be primarily read within the English tradition. The gesture, however, ironically reinforces the similarity between him and Roth, as the latter also repeatedly placed himself within the American rather than the Jewish tradition. For example, Roth writes in his Introduction to a new edition of *Herzog* (1964) by Saul Bellow that “Bellow was indeed Columbus for people like me, the grandchildren of immigrants, who set out as American writers after him” (xiii). Yet irony so typical of both Roth and Jacobson as well as of Austen rather connects than separates the three of them. It is also ironic how Jacobson picks a female predecessor from a canon dominated by male authors, elegantly putting an emphasis on style as a more important shared feature than gender or family background and pointing out the controversial nature of all cheap analogies based on shared biographical features or themes, for they might arouse readers' interest but also hide the unique values of the individual writer.

The following chapters study different aspects of Judaism in Jacobson's novels. Chapter 2 reads *The Very Model of a Man* (1992), a paraphrase of Cain's story from the Old Testament, as the author's not too successful attempt to break out from the box of comic novelist. Some of the main characters are also Jewish both in *No More Mr. Nice Guy* (1998) and *Who's Sorry Now?* (2002), although chapter 3—which examines these two novels—argues that Jacobson concentrated more on portraying complex female characters in plots revolving around upper middle class domestic affairs than on ethnic or religious aspects. Chapter 4 is devoted to Jacobson's books with probably the clearest focus on Jewish issues: *The Mighty Walzer* (1999) and *Kalooki Nights* (2006), culminating in an in-depth analysis of his greatest success, *The Finkler Question* (2010). In Anténe's reading, Jacobson emphasizes the importance of empathy and self-acceptance by portraying a trio of Jewish and non-Jewish friends in a time of rising antisemitism as the protagonists of *The Finkler Question*; thus, by displaying the complexity of

the Jewish theme from multiple, internal and external, and often conflicting points of view, the writer manages to turn his narrative into a lesson about identity in general.

The final three chapters of Anténe's book cover a wide range of subjects. Chapter 5 briefly sums up the ambivalent reception of *The Act of Love* (2008) and of *Zoo Time* (2012), which some critics deemed great but many considered to be only new variations on Jacobson's old themes of domestic crises combined with certain dilemmas related to literature as a profession. The lengthy penultimate chapter offers a somewhat heterogeneous combination of novels on diverse topics loosely connected by the concept of historical time: *J* (2014) is an SF placed in the near future; *Shylock Is My Name* (2016) is Jacobson's version of Shakespeare's highly problematic play, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596/1599), in which different time layers merge in the plot; whereas the provocative *Pussy* (2017) draws a sarcastic portrait of the American president Donald Trump—still active at the time of the novel's publication—in the form of a dystopic *roman à clef*. The closing chapter reflects on *The Making of Henry* (2004) and *Live a Little* (2014) as more intimate representations of Jacobson's characteristic topics: the Mancunian Jewish subculture and class divisions in British society. Studying gender roles within extended family networks and drawing parallels between the representation of memory in Jacobson's latest two novels and his previous books, Anténe argues that *The Making of Henry* and *Live a Little* are fruitful syntheses of numerous elements familiar from his oeuvre.

Rounded up by a neat Introduction and a Conclusion, Anténe's monograph gives a full and detailed overview of Jacobson's fiction. Its clear structure is among the volume's numerous merits, making it a very practical handbook for anyone teaching Jacobson. The Works Cited section not only demonstrates how well the author is acquainted with the appropriate primary and secondary sources, but it is also highly inspiring for further research in the field of British Jewish literature. I found Anténe's analysis of Jacobson in the context of various theories on humor, irony, and the comic especially impressive. His interpretation of the novels from the

aspect of the English-speaking tradition is also convincing, although I often felt that intertextual connections would deserve a lot more attention. To give just one example, *Kalooki Nights* shows significant similarities both with *Maus* (1980-1991) by Art Spiegelman—in respect of the “second-hand suffering” of second-generation Holocaust survivors—and with Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000)—by connecting the Holocaust with the cartoon industry—but the analysis does not make more references to the narratives that provide a rich intertextual context for the novel than Jacobson himself does in the epigraphs of his book’s chapters. Besides, the proportions of the chapters in Anténe’s monograph seem to be a little contingent a few times, especially towards the end, maybe not independently of the fact that five subchapters (1.1, 1.2, 4.3, 6.2, and 6.3) are rewritten versions of the author’s former papers. It is reasonable that Jacobson’s most acknowledged novel, *The Finkler Question* is discussed longer than some of his less successful books, still, I would have appreciated a bit more explanation of why his latest two novels deserve only two and a half pages apiece, while his first three novels are interpreted in eleven pages per book.

In spite of these minor deficiencies, *Howard Jacobson’s Novels in the Context of Contemporary British Jewish Literature* is a succinct, highly informative, and clearly organized introduction to Jacobson’s fiction. Beyond outlining the wider context of British Jewish fiction and convincingly reaffirming Jacobson’s leading position in it, the monograph offers versatile in-depth interpretations of each novel in a pleasant and lucid language, also referring to a number of exciting and relevant contexts ranging from the classics of English literature to various theories on humor, which motivates the reader to explore more.

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