

## **HOWARD JACOBSON AND ANTI-SEMITISM**

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Last Sunday, for the first time in my life, I visited London's Jewish Museum in Camden. I took the bus from Kilburn, where I live. I'd read up about it on its website – how it was opened three years ago on a new site as an amalgamation of the Jewish Museum founded in 1932 in Woburn House in Bloomsbury, which moved to Camden in 1994 - and the Museum of the Jewish East End, then called The London Museum of Jewish Life, which was first established in 1983. Years of fundraising had allowed the considerable works on a new site which allowed the two to be combined.

The museum was therefore, as you would expect it to be, fresh in its physical aspect and curation. The staff, including the security guard who searched my bag, were all friendly. There was a small café, which I visited, before looking at a medieval example of a Mikveh, or ritual bath, which is used especially by women to cleanse themselves after the end of their period or the birth of a child. This one was discovered during excavations in 2001, and had been identified as belonging to a Crespin family living in London around the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century. Then I went up the stairs and looked round the museum's five rooms, which concern the history and practises of Jewish life in England from 1066 to the present, including one small gallery devoted to the Holocaust, and specifically to a British Jew who, by marrying a Dutch Jew in Holland, ended up being interned in several concentration camps but survived, and devoted the rest of his life to campaigning against racism.

That is one version of what I did last Sunday.

Here's another one.

The blonde, balancing vertiginously on her heels, pushed her hair out of her eyes as she fiddled with the map app on her phone. She was looking for the Jewish Museum on Albert Street, but the address struck her as odd. She rifled her memories of One million BC to the Tudors, which had formed the first year of her secondary school history education, and remembered. Wasn't Albert the King of England a long time

beforeX any Jews had arrived there? Unless ‘those feet in ancient times’ – Jewish feet, of course - actually *had* walked upon England’s mountains green’. And wasn’t Albert also the decidedly Gentile and German Consort of the Queen who had probably been reluctantly emancipating the Jews at the very time that this Camden street was being built and Ashkenazi were moving into London’s East End. Indeed he was. But wasn’t a Prince Albert also a male genital piercing? She checked the Urban Dictionary app on her phone. Yes, a Prince Albert was the name for a piercing which entered at the urethra and exited at the back of the glans penis. There were several photos which illustrated this on the corresponding Wikipedia page, which made her feel slightly sick. So – there it was. The connection was genital mutilation. The museum’s curators had obviously felt that this mediated reference to circumcision neutralised the otherwise decidedly Saxon connotations of the name – whether or not Victoria’s Prince had actually *had* the eponymous piercing, as a quick search on the Google app was not able to determine either way. Putting away her phone she walked til she found the right building and pushed at its door. It was heavy. High quality. And serious. Abandon humour, ye who enter here, was what it said. You do not visit a Jewish Museum in a frivolous spirit. There was, after all, a security guard.

She tried to recall. Did her bag get checked when she went to the *British* Museum?

Or the V and A? It didn’t. Therefore, on the basis either of bitter experience or as a precaution, this museum, with its vastly less valuable stock, was nervous. This reflection didn’t stop her looking at the guard, as he rifled amongst her phone, iPad, and Jacobson novels. Blonde. Broad. Slavic-accented. A Polish peasant, she decided. Or would have been a couple of generations ago. Perhaps he was working here to atone for whatever his family had done in the war. Or perhaps, despite his *farinaceous* order of good looks, he was in fact Jewish, and working in London in order to escape contemporary Polish anti-Semitism. *Was* post-Communist Poland anti-Semitic? She resisted the temptation to Google this. Either way, he was welcome. She looked back as she handed in her coat at the cloakroom. He smiled. She smiled. And suddenly it struck her. This moment, on Albert Street in Camden, was almost certainly the turning point of her life. She would look round the museum, their eyes would meet again when she was on her way out, and then he would call out before she had had her hand on the heavy door: ‘are you free at 5.00?’ Or better still, he wouldn’t be able to wait til then, and would come and find her, whilst she was engrossed in an explanation of Hanukah, and tell her that he would be able to explain it far better after

coffee, or that he wanted to learn about it from *her* over coffee, and over the coffee he would tell her what his grandparents had been doing during the war, and she would sympathise with whatever it was, and they would go on to produce dozens of half-Polish, possibly half-Jewish children. Though, could you be half-Jewish? Maybe you could amongst the liberals. Gay people married in liberal synagogues nowadays. And they, as a couple, would be ultra-liberal. She visited the café to give her time to think this through. She was interested in seeing what kind of food they sold. Bagels with salmon? Matzo? Wine? Borscht? Disappointingly, the range of coffees offered was such as could be found in any chain with a reward card. She settled for a cappuccino with apple *strudel*. Apfelstrudel, it should have been labelled. Or was that German but not Yiddish? Surely there couldn't be much difference in this case. It was probably a word – a thing - on which Gentile and Jewish Germans had common ground. She, who was half-German, enjoyed thinking this as she bit into it. She was pleased that the interior was dry and earthy. It made her think of the earth of Central Europe. In fact, the fields of Poland, which her future husband's ancestors had or had not been allowed to plough. She could see centuries of Gentile or Jewish afternoon Kaffee and Kuchen taken behind hand-made net curtains accompanied by cake tasting exactly like this - so it was perfect preparation for her marriage either way. She would know what his family liked. In fact, they would have this cake *at* the wedding. It would be their wedding cake, a great Babel tower of Apfelstrudel, or whatever the Yiddish for it was. And then they would retire, and she would finally find out – having carefully waited, out of respect for his family's Central European Catholic or Jewish sensibilities – whether or not he had a Prince Albert. Though could you have one if you were circumcised? Or was it more a question of whether you could you have one if you weren't? Where would the foreskin go once it was in? She glanced at the man who was sitting on the neighbouring table, and wondered if she could ask him. But even if he was uncircumcised, of which there was no guarantee, he may never have tried to pierce his penis. And he might interpret her enquiry as an oblique form of flirtation, not knowing that she was already promised to the security guard. So she ate her strudel – shtrudel – down to the last crumb, put away the iPad on which she had been noting down her observations, and entered the Jewish Museum.

That was what could be called a 'novelized' version of my visit. Since I presented it to you in a lecture, of which the default genre is factual, immediately after an account

which I expected you to take in good faith, I should perhaps specify that although the museum is on Albert Street and I am half-German and the security guard looked Slavic and had a nice smile, I did not speculate about our future married life or his or anyone else's genital piercings. I did eat Apfelstrudel, in the interests of research, having already conceived the idea of starting this lecture with a skit, and wanting some *realia* to give it flavour.

In a novel, the novelist has no responsibility to thus finely trace the line between fact and fiction. Which is why when we read *Zoo Time*, which is presented to us between hard covers with a dust jacket quoting *The Guardian* calling it 'A terrifying and ambitious *novel*', Jacobson does not need to tell us in precisely what ways he does and doesn't resemble his narrator protagonist Guy Ableman – the man who has written previous, popular, scabrous fiction with titles such as *Who Gives a Monkey's* (admittedly, more decorous than Jacobson's own *Coming from Behind*), who pushes the boundaries of the sexually acceptable and morally tasteful, who is Jewish and conscious of the fact, admires and in certain respects resembles Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Elizabeth Gaskell, deplores and/or mocks things such as, I quote, 'the crisis in publishing, the devaluation of the book as object, the disappearance of the word as the book's medium, library closures, Oxfam, Amazon, eBooks, iPads, [...] apps, Rihard and Judy, Facebooks, Formspring, Yelp, three-for-two, the graphic novel, Kindle, vampirism', and who is trying to write a novel about his attempts to seduce his mother-in-law.

One looks at the black and white author's photograph on the inside of the dust cover: his nose resembles Guy's, the nose with abundant, cunnilingus-assisting cartilage that his wife Zoe, or is it Chloe, nonetheless tells him to get surgically reduced. But those eyes – *are* they really the eyes of a man alight with lust for his mother in law? Does Jacobson even *have* a mother in law? Let alone one tall, slender, yet high-breasted, vivacious as an apple-orchard in a tornado, with red hair styled in a psychedelic frizz, with the need to have a tippie at precisely 6.00 o'clock pm, and who is now dead? With regard to his personal life, the mini-biography which follows the photograph tells us only that 'Howard Jacobson lives in London'.

So should this novel properly be called *The Mother-in-Law Joke*, given that Guy says that the joke of this, the proposed title of his next novel, is that it isn't a joke? X

We are at sea on the waves of fiction, without the landmarks of fact. The only things that are certain – without investigating beyond the novel into Jacobson's biography - are that he was a) able and b) willing to a) conceive, and b) publish, three hundred and seventy-three pages of the thoughts of such a man. Beyond that, *caveat lector*. Jacobson may have been taught English by F.R. Leavis at Downing College, Cambridge, but he's not too old to have heard of Barthes's death of the author, giving him the *authority* to skip around his fictions as ghostlike, and difficult to pin down, as you like. A look at his essays on Shakespeare in *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*, testifies that he is himself a careful and canny reader, who makes no rash or crude assumptions about authorial character or intent. He requires of us his readers that we be the same. This does not on the other hand entail that we make a default assumption of *distance* between the implied or real author of *Zoo Time*, and its protagonist. The novel asks merely that we take Guy Ableman as an emotional-cum-satirical proposition which may illuminate life to some degree – and that whilst *he* might be, as his wife Vanessa calls him, 'a solipsistic shit' - even when he is writing as Mishnah Grunewald, a female zookeeper – Howard Jacobson is not reducible to that epithet. Her mistake as a literary critic is that 'In her soul Vanessa didn't believe in fiction.' In her own attempts at fiction 'the heroine was Vanessa, the bad guy was Guy. Once you changed anything, Vanessa maintained, you lost the ring of truth.' 93

Admittedly, sometimes Jacobson the man gives us a clue. His first novel, *Coming from Behind*, is a campus comedy about a failing polytechnic that plans to merge facilities with a local football club. In 1985 Jacobson gave a BBC TV interview in which he acknowledged that the novel had been based on his experience teaching at Wolverhampton Polytechnic from 1974-1980, but that the episode of teaching in a football stadium was the only one in the novel which was based on a real incident. In any case, it is harder to distinguish the fictionality or facticity of emotions, such as fancying your mother in law, and attitudes, such as deploring the state of the publishing industry, than that of events.

His writing also demands that we be tolerant of exaggeration, the cartoonic, and understand the functions which it can serve.

To prepare the eye which would see the *realia* I would encounter at the Jewish Museum, I spent the bus ride from Camden rereading *The Finkler Question*. And this sensitised me in a particular way. The world separated itself into Jewish and Goy, the

present became inseparable from the past, the absurd grinned at me, words flourished their etymologies like real, or joke, bunches of flowers, consciousness intensified into self-consciousness, I tumbled into illeism – narration of myself in the third person - technology and its jargon seemed infantile, *Leitmotifs* glittered everywhere, penises protruded from unexpected places, intellectual ambition throbbed, and the smoke from the fire with which I was playing wafted whither it would.

At least, that's what I was aiming at.

Like George Eliot, Jacobson started writing fiction in his late thirties, by which time he had already written journalism and literary criticism. But unlike her the differences of tone between his non-fiction and fiction, and departures from verisimilitude in the latter, are enormous.

Here is the balance that can be found within a couple of sentences in 'Hamlet's Sanity' in *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*:

'Hamlet's public display of private grief is no better than the drunk no-grief-at-all of his mother. But it is no worse. A mature wisdom directs this scene: not a sad recognition of human frailties [...] we are not to doubt that Hamlet's sorrow is genuine because it is concealed'

His fictional worlds have more strongly coloured filters on them even than those of Jack Rosenthal, one of his obvious literary *comparanda*, being another Manchester Jew born a decade before him, who also wrote comically and satirically about English and Jewish life. But *his* characters are less often caricatures, and his incidents less often farcical, than is true of Jacobson. True, Maxie Glickman of *Kalooki Nights*, who is given a gala Kalooki night instead of a Bar-Mitzvah, is no less credible a character than Elliott Green of Rosenthal's *Bar Mitzvah Boy*, and the latter's socially-ambitious mother is no less of a caricature than Glickman's kalooki-playing *siren*-mother. But overall Rosenthal's fictional universes contain less lurid colours, less farce, less sex, noone like the Vanessa and Poppy, mother and daughter vamps of *Zoo Time*, or the antisemite Chloe of *Kalooki Nights*, who by way of oppressing her husband with Catholicism takes him to a **St** Cecilia's Day performance of Bach's **St** Matthew Passion in **St** Paul's Cathedral. She would, Maxie thinks, if she could, have sat him next to someone with St Vitus dance.

Jacobson's spirit of fun, which had seized me whilst I drafted my skit on my iPad in the museum café, left me abruptly once I entered the museum proper, and reentered what suddenly felt like an experience of non-fiction. I went through rooms with the following themes: 'Judaism: A Living Faith', 'History: a British Story', 'Holocaust Gallery', 'Living Community', and a temporary exhibition on English Jews and Football. But if I was not seeing with the eyes of a comic novelist, nor on the other hand was I being a brilliant, contentious, critical commentator, such as Jacobson the journalist. I was simply serious, open, and learning, which is to say I resembled none of Jacobson's fictional characters since he does not tend to create people like that. But there was *one* moment when the Jacobson the novelist reasserted himself. In the 'Living Faith' section, which explained Jewish practises and customs around the world, there was an interactive spinning wheel, to explain the components of a Seder meal. One turned this wheel in order to expose in one window a picture of a piece of food, such as 'bitter herbs', whilst in an adjacent window its symbolic explanation would appear – for example, the bitter times which Jews had been through. I thought instantly of the Seder which Treslove attends in *The Finkler Question*. Here he has all the symbolism of the meal explained to him, until they get to, quote, 'chicken and potatoes which as far as Treslove could tell symbolised nothing. He was pleased about that. Food that symbolised nothing was easier to digest.' Then, with perfect comic timing, Libor, his recently-widowed former teacher, comes over to him. 'The chicken symbolises the pleasure Jewish men take in having a team of women to cook it for them'.

The visual metaphor which one finds oneself reaching for is cartoon. Things are exaggerated for certain purposes, just as the two men stitched onto The London Jewish Bakers Union banner exhibited in the ground floor of the museum – both muscular, both handsome, standing on the motto 'Workers of the World, Unite' – are exaggerated for political purposes. Maxie Glickman, the narrator of *Kalooki Nights*, is a cartoonist who declares of his craft that 'I'm meant to concentrate only on what's salient', and, 'Caricature is a methodology for telling a greater truth—that's where I stand'. Occasionally he describes a character and then confesses that he has misdescribed him – of Manny Washinsky he says: 'I'm cartooning him. He didn't

have ear-locks to finger' – but he has thereby communicated something by a shorthand faster than realism's longhand.

Maxie even sees the energy and luridness of a certain kind of cartoon to be a Jewish characteristic. He describes first seeing imported American magazines, after being brought up in working-class Manchester on the 'low-mirth smudginess' of the 'meagerly illustrated, miserly minded *Beano*' as 'a brave new Technicolor world of momentous, universe-changing action and teeming metropolises', 'Superman, Batman, Captain Marvel, Dick Tracy', 'sculpted bodies, the messes of colour, the dynamic sense of movement'. In this he recognises 'something Jewish' 'Dodgy Ike Jewish, a bit genaivisheh in the knavish sense, full of spirit immigrant johnny-come-lately razzamatazz'.<sup>43</sup> And he embraces this, and sees in the anti-Americanism of his schoolteachers who prohibit such magazines, a degree anti-Semitism.

### **DRAWING AND JUDAISM**

And yet of course a Jew such as the Orthodox Selick Washinsky, Mannie's father, disapproves of cartoons as idolatrous, because he disapproves of all representations. Jews traditionally are, as Jacobson himself has said in non-fictional contexts, aniconic. They disapprove of icons; their creation is, as Maxie himself feels, godlike work. The cartoons which he draws, just like the story which he tells us, is therefore both Jewish and anti-Jewish.

But Jewishness is central to both qualities, as is demonstrated in both *Kalooki Nights* and *The Finkler Question*.

Even when characters reject Jewishness, in these novels, they and the novel concentrate on Jewishness.

So Maxie notes with satisfaction, when he hears his father denounce the Washinsky's as *farshimelt*: 'Significant, I always thought, that he, the great secularist and fist-fighter, the most Aryan Jew in Manchester, needed a Yiddish word to express his contempt' 37

This same father, like Maxie in his narration of the novel, always triples the word Jew whenever he encounters it: 'Jew, Jew, Jew. Why, why, why, as my father asked until the asking killed him, does everything always have to come back to Jew, Jew, Jew?'



Some readers may be tempted to echo him in this question. Why why why does it? If one is a Jew of a secular, Communist kind of the Jack ‘the Jew’ Glickman (the epithet not of his choosing), then neither of these novels are likely to be palatable. If, on the other hand, one is a Gentile whose ‘knowledge of Jews’ [as Maxie says of Christopher Christmas] extends not a bowshot beyond Anne Frank’s diary’, then one is at least likely to learn from Jacobson’s novels something about Jewish practices, terminology and self-reflexivity, just as one learns about at least the first two of these by going to the Jewish museum in Camden. When Jacobson’s characters use Yiddish words, the narrator nearly always explains them, just Libor explains the Seder to Treslove. ‘Farshimelt, meaning mouldy, mildewed’.

Yet there are a great number of Gentiles in Jacobson’s fiction who are not only interested in them but want to be them. Julian Treslove, who inexplicably and unverifiably thinks a mugger has called him a Jew and becomes the lover of Hephzibar Weizenbaum. Tyler Finkler, who converts to Judaism in order to marry Samuel Finkler. Mick the Sailor, who marries Shani Glickman. Dorothy the daughter of the fire-yekelte, who becomes the lover of Asher Waskinsky and a Hebraic scholar. Many of the rest of the Gentile characters are strident anti-Semites. The Gentile world itself, therefore, revolves around the Jewish, and the Jewish world revolves around the very heart of the Finkler Question: to what extent Jews should revolve around their own Jewishness, and to what extent their doing so has been responsible for anti-Semitism.

So Hephzibar Weizenbaum, when she has got to the stage of being afraid of the men who stand around Regent’s Park Mosque – London’s most liberal – also reaches the point of wondering whether the Jewish fear of anti-Semitism is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

‘Do we make it all up, this anti-Semitism? Is it a fire in us we need to feed? Could we possibly have called the Nazis down on us because we couldn’t exist without them?’

Libor, meeting Emmy towards the end of *The Finkler Question* and his life, tells a world-weary Libor: ‘You might be surprised to learn how few people see the archetypal Jew every time they see him. Or even know that he’s a Jew. Or care. You are the anti-Semite, not they.’ This claim, which rings loudly on the bell of

verisimilitude, is met by a collapse back into self-referentiality ‘I would not be so quick to see the Jew in the Jew’ he said at last, ‘if the Jew in the Jew were not so quick to show himself.’ 259

‘Talking feverishly about being Jewish *was* being Jewish’ 332

And the people who stand in protest outside the opening of the Museum of Anglo-Jewish Life, include Jews.

And, since, as I have noted, *The Finkler Museum* itself serves as something of an armchair museum of Anglo-Jewish life, a protest against this museum is a protest against the novel itself, and the same kind of people are likely to object to it (though I would suggest that not all people who object to the novel are likely to object to a Jewish museum).

The first objection, within the novel, comes from Finkler. When Hephzibar tells him the project she is working on (it seems that there is no extent museum such as the one I visited) he tells her:

‘Everywhere you go now, every town, every shtetl, you find a Holocaust museum’  
216-7FQ

She responds that it is a museum of Anglo-Jewish culture, not a Holocaust museum.

‘Same old, same old’ ‘You’ll get to the Holocaust in the end, if only under the heading ‘British Attitudes To’ You’ll stick up photographs of the gas ovens, you mark my word. Jewish museums always do.’ Treslove chimes in: ‘Our museum won’t so much as mention the Holocaust’ 217FQ

It is largely in conversations such as this that the Holocaust Room of the Jewish Museum of this novel consists.

One could push the analogy further, if one had the Jacobsonian exuberance to do so: ‘The museum was housed in a high-Victorian Gothic mansion built on the design of a Rhineland fortress. It had pointed gables, mock castellations, fantasy chimneys and even a rampart’ 230FQ

The social novel is, arguably, a high-Victorian invention and form which Jacobson has acquired, and filled with his choice of content. As Jewish as possible.

So Hephzibar, Libor, and Treslove have a discussion of what tea to serve in the café, since: ‘the idea of serving specifically Jewish afternoon teas appealed to Treslove who had learned to call cakes *kuchen*, and crepes stuffed with cream or jam *blintzes*.’

231FQ

Fortunately for Jacobson, however, one cannot wrap ham around the door handles of a novel, nor stuff pig fat into its keyholes, nor graffiti swastikas onto it.

The Holocaust room of *Kalooki Nights* is far more extensive – more like a suite of rooms.

The first room is small and dimly lit. The 1940s of Maxie’s, and Jacobson’s, childhood, is two decades before the Holocaust became well known-of. Most adults want to put it behind them, apart from Tsedraiter Ike, who says of every Jewish trait that it was for this that the Nazis tried to kill them. Knowledge of the Holocaust passes furtively amongst schoolboys in semi-censored copies of books such as *The Scourge of the Swastika*, from which Manny Washinsky’s parents remove the illustrative photographs, and which they read, symbolically, in a disused Air Raid Shelter.

Max’s other friend Errol tells him that a Volkswagen travelling at exactly 15 mph shows a swastika in its logo 156, as he tries to but can’t quite see.

Many other rooms of the museum lead off this one, since whenever Manny hears the word Jew Jew Jew he hears the sound of a train and vice versa, the train to Auschwitz. Years later, when he is married to Gentile, he perceives his wife’s hand as ‘a vexed crisscross of Judaeophobia like the railway lines running in and out of Auschwitz’

The second room – a larger, lighter space, showcases the cartoons of Max’s mature work, a book-length cartoon called *Five Thousand Years of Bitterness*, which illustrates the various atrocities which have been perpetrated against Jews over the millennia, in which every anti-Semite wears a Hitler moustache, and Hitler himself is represented only as a moustache. It is a bringing of oppression out into the light of day.

The third room is again small and dark. It represents Mannie Washinsky's response to the Holocaust and various of its ramifications on his ultra-fromm family, of killing his parents by turning on the gas in their room. He had apparently been obsessed by the concentration camp guard who said that turning on the gas to the chambers had been 'no big deal'. He wanted to try this out for himself. But insofar as the novel allows us to come to any firm understanding of his motive, he is also punishing them for ruining of his brother Asher's life, by their reaction to his falling in love with the daughter of an Aryan German.

The fourth room is interactive. It functions more like an unofficial court, in which various people present themselves, and their attitudes of forgiveness or accusation of self or other can be put on trial.

For example, when Max and one his former wife Zoe do a tour of the concentration camp sites of Europe, they make a detour to Berlin, and encounter a couple of drunk German students in a pub, one of whom wants to kiss Max and representatively ask his forgiveness. 'Oh, oh...I am the Auschwitz German'.

Max's response has the novel on its side:

'I didn't want to hear any collective-guilt shit from their mouths. Didn't want them getting off on it. Didn't want them thinking they could be released from it in a bout of Pulsner-fuelled remorse. In my time, in my time, when I'm good and ready you'll be released, until then sweat, you fuckers'

He then insists that doesn't have the *right* to forgive them.

But, finally, at Zoe's insistence, he finally says he forgives them, for which Zoe, uncharacteristically, sobs in his arms 185

Holocaust-deniers are worse than these students, of course, because paradoxically implicit.

Maxie says:

'There is an intriguing contradiction in the position of those who question whether anything as terrible as Ilse Koch and her lampshades ever happened, in that they invariably let you know they wished it had'

Germans as a whole are not forgiven.

Maxie will not listen to Bach, because he wrote in German.

‘Warum? You are not, mein kleines Bruderlein, the one to ask that question. Just you go about the business of building Holocaust memorials and making reparation to your victims and leave the whys to us. Jew, Jew, Jew. Joke, joke, joke. Warum, warum, warum?’ 10KN

Dorothea’s German father, on the other hand, comes out rather better.

Being married to an Englishwoman he is interned in England along with German *Jews* during the war and becomes as ‘confirmed Judaeophile’ ‘free proficient in compassion’ 176

When he uses, along with his gentile working class wife, the word *Mitzvah* ‘he felt he’d made a small recompense for a wickedness of which it was not finally for him to say that he was entirely innocent’ 177

The fifth and final room is a memorial room.

It insists on the continued importance of remembrance. Not, perhaps, forever. But for a long time.

In one of the most famous passages in the novel, when Maxie is told by his mother that Manny has gassed his parents, he thinks:

‘You don’t say ‘gassed’ to Jews if you can help it. One of those words. They should be struck out of the human vocabulary for a while, while we regroup, not for ever, just for a thousand years or so – gassed, camp, extermination, concentration, experiment, march, train, rally, German. Words made unholy just as ground is made unholy.’

For now. As long as the museum, or the novel, stand.

In an interview with *The Jewish Chronicle* Jacobson said: "It was very important to me in *Kalooki Nights* to try and broach the whole business of the Holocaust. Not to re-evoke the Holocaust, but to think about the way we talk about it. Not because I think it's funny. Not because I feel we need to 'lighten up' - if anything, I felt we needed to go on darkening down."

By the end of the novel *The Finkler Question*, Sam Finkler has changed his perspective so much, and has fallen so much more into alignment with the novel as a whole, that he visits Hephzibar at her museum and tells her that he wouldn’t mind if it *were* a Holocaust museum.

But in that novel, the room running off the Holocaust room is the Zionist Room. Or rather, not running off it, but with a neatly maintained corridor running between.

One deduces the curatorial line taken in this room from various signs: the caricatured anti-Zionist ASHamed Jews, the condemnation of both anti-Semitism and settler belligerence on the part of the novel's most positive character, Hephzibar, and the chronicling of anti-Semitic attacks in response to Israeli actions happening in England at the time that the novel is set. After a displaced settler kills a Palestinian family of three in a bus, a brick is thrown through the window of Hephzibar's museum.

Yet the only violent incident in which a character in the novel is involved occurs when Finkler's anti-Zionist son attacks and is hurt by some Zionist Jews at Oxford University. The anti-anti-Zionist position is underlined by two particular grotesqueries:

The play *Sons of Abraham* 301, which Treslove, Finkler and Hephzibar go to, shows how atrocities against Jews through time finally led them to oppress others in Palestine: quote 'In the final seconds of the drama an aerial shot of a mass grave at Auschwitz was projected on to a gauze curtain, before dissolving into a photograph of the rubble of Gaza [...] It received a standing ovation'

The grotesque incident, concerns the webcam blog of Alvin Poliakov, epispasmist, who is trying to recreate a foreskin for himself by use of weights and pulleys, out of solidarity with the Palestinians. Quote, 'On the day Treslove decides he won't continue any longer with the blog, the dedication above Alvin Poliakov's penis, from which weights of assorted sizes and materials hang, reads: *The the mutilated of Shatile, Nebateya, Sabra, Gaza. Your struggle is my struggle.*' 269

The novel has no Palestinian characters.

Its politics seem to be as follows:

- First, People are divided into groups. This is not made explicit but underlies all the other points.

- Second, People should not criticise members of their own group in front of people outside it – so, ashamed Jews should not publically shame themselves in front of Gentiles

- Third, People should not espouse the causes of members of a different group, for example Jews or English Gentiles by wearing PLO headscarves.

On this last point Libor says the following, with the novel's implicit approval:

‘Fine, if you were a Palestinian [...] a Palestinian had a right under all the laws of grievance to his aggression. But on an Englishman it only ever denoted that greed for someone else's cause, wedded to a nostalgia for simplicities that never were, that was bound to make a refugee from the horrors of leftism shudder’

- Fourth, People should not criticise members of another group which members of their own group have, historically, oppressed. Therefore at the talk on Red Lion Square, when a Gentile lady in the audience criticises Israel, Finkler tells her: ‘How dare you? [...] By what twisted sophistication of argument do you harry people with violence off your land and then think yourself entitled to make high-minded stipulations as to where they may go now you are rid of them and how they may provide for their future welfare?’

- Fifth, Museums (and, it might be added, novels) may not be entirely apolitical, but they are not centres of power and should not be held responsible for the actions of those centres. So when Treslove belatedly turns up for the launch of the Jewish Museum and finds the Gaza-related protest outside, he protests: ‘It's a museum not an embassy’.

Thus cut back to principles, the novel sounds entirely serious. But of course, like the other novels, it makes many of its most plangent and loaded gambits humourously.

Jacobson is a strong believer in the idea that the world presents many things at which one either laughs or cries, and he chooses to laugh.

In an interview with *The Jewish Chronicle* he said: "I still think Philip Roth is the most wonderful writer but he has essentially stopped being funny. He is perfectly within his rights to have stop being funny, but I feel: ‘Now more than ever I want you to be funny... now that you are in the toils and at any moment you're going to die and

you are fed up with everything and everybody.' I feel the same with Woody Allen: 'Fine, it was easy before. Joke now.' It's never too serious to laugh."

And in common with many people he sees humour as a peculiarly Jewish trait:

Libor tells Finkler, with regard to the many Hollywood beauties he had slept with or who wanted to sleep with him: 'Not because I'm handsome did they want me, you understand, but because I made them laugh. The more beautiful the woman, the more she needs to laugh. That's why Jewish guys have always done so well. But for me they were easy to resist. Because I had Malkie who was more beautiful than all of them. And who made *me* laugh' 51FQ

Jacobson thinks that this humour has a particular role to play with regard to the Holocaust in particular:

'I do want to change the language in which we go on thinking about this. We can't all go on being Primo Levi. We've no business trying to be. Comedy is one way to change the discourse. I believe in taking up the challenge of Hamlet in that wonderful scene, holding the skull of Yorick and confronting him: 'You were a jester'.

So, his Mishnah Grunewald, an early girlfriend of Guy Ableman's, turns to tending monkeys to escape the tales of atrocities which she heard in her family. Monkeys – monkeying around – so obviously funny that Guy novelises her life as *Who Gives a Monkeys*, inside a novel which very clearly *does* give a monkeys.

But Jacobson goes further, ventriloquising Gentiles making Holocaust jokes. One of Zoe's in *Kalooki Nights* concerns how many Jews can be fitted in the ashtray of a Volkswagen. The tastelessness leaves humour gasping. If anything one wants to be sick. But this in itself demonstrates a point. Thus far and no further can humour go.

Jacobson here is both the things that Guy thinks of making his next fictional narrator: 'a comedian *and* a comedian manque'

And whenever humour is left behind entirely in a comic novel the reader pays attention, as when Maxie, high on IDF comments that after the 6 days' war 'We took no shit. And people who take no shit don't have to go round making jokes about



themselves. Jokes are the refuge of the *Untermenschen*.' 'We're a country, we're a nation again. We don't do funny and we don't do fucked' 167

However, **by no means all of the humour in** Jacobson's writing is connected to serious topics.

A lot comes from the reader's sympathetic recognition of the small irritations of life which are usually unvoiced.

Chloe's mother always announces that she is going to say goodnight. Then she says that she is going to go up the little wooden hill to Bedfordshire. We may not know or have been irritated by anyone who does this, but it is very easy to imagine being thus irritated if we did, and on the mother's part, as ever, an attempt at humour which falls flat presents its own form of amusement.

Another subject which is frequently – I will go further, and say invariably – treated with humour is sex. The most passionate affair in the three novels which I am discussing, Asher's with Dorothy, is never described in sexual terms.

And not only is there no solemn sex, there is hardly any explicit sex at all.

It is as with anti-Semitic attacks past present and to come. They are much discussed, much felt, but not directly seen.

'One of the great sperm-chuckers of yesteryear' 80, such as Normal Mailer, he is not, and knows that he isn't.

The multiple affairs of his male protagonists, Maxie, Treslove, Finkler, Libor, and Guy serve in large part to provide comedy – or to laugh at the cock-ups in life at which one would otherwise cry.

Think of Treslove's encounter with the American Kimberley at the Jane Austen party, at which he thinks she mistakes him for a Jew despite the fact that he is a Gentile impersonating Colin Firth, and which ends up with her ontop of him, blonde curls bouncing and American monotooth gleaming, in her hotel room on the Haymarket.

Or Finkler, caught twice by chance by Treslove's son, once looking for prostitutes, once dining his vertiginously-chested mistress in a grand hotel in Eastbourne

Or Guy's fling with a literary admirer called Philippa, which provides a fillip during the Adelaide Writers Festival.

All these men have strong, cartoonish preferences. Max for antisemites whose names have diaryses, Treslove for women so thin you could cut yourself on them, and Guy for redheads.

And as we might expect, his preoccupations with sex and humour are not always kept separate from his preoccupation with Judaism, even with the Holocaust.

Part of Maxie's sexual awakening occurs when he sees the illustration of *The Scourge of the Swastika* which is a photo of naked female prisoners on parade in a concentration camp.

As the ladies of the Chipping Norton point out to Guy, his books are very male. *Zoo Time*, in which they appear, more than most.

Unfortunately for them they point say this without recognising the double entendre of the 'He stroke she' which they recommend instead of 'he' as a gender-neutral pronoun. Nor are they aware that this scene is being narrated under a chapter heading which *is* that double-edged phrase.

So it seems too late at the end of *Zoo Time* when Guy comes to the perception that his wife and mother-in-law had talents and care for him, and that women experience very much the same problems as men and vice versa.

And I think it's fair to say that about this he doesn't care.

He consciously stands, or wishes to stand, in a tradition of what he called 'bad boys' books in an article on the subject for the Guardian last October.

Perhaps part of the reason is that the Jewish prohibition on representation means that whenever he writes at all he feels that he is doing something sacriligious, and why it is the case, as he says, that so much Jewish art is so scabrous

It is not that he has lost all his early Leavisite sense of the potential of literature to guide and uplift and inspire 'reverence for life'

But he thinks that writers such as Kafka, Rabelais, Sade, Miller, Celine, Roth, Conrad, and he himself serve a particular function which others don't

And which he summarises, with reference to Roth: "For a pure sense of being tumultuously alive, you can't beat the nasty side of existence."

If it's an energised refusal of redemption you're after, then sex gone wrong takes some beating.'

So –a sense of life. And if it goes a bit far, then so does much literature.

'If George Eliot can be prolix in her moralising some times, and Lawrence over-insistent in his erotic sermonising, why can't these novels of drastic elixirs and lecherous tonics occasionally over-prescribe their poisons?'

At least one is as unlikely to be mugged by someone carrying any of these, he asserts, as by someone carrying *Middlemarch*.

And at least it offers one relief: if it satisfies readers wearied with having to mind their language and their manners, that relief is only a small part of the pleasure.

Because, he contends, 'Patriarchy and misogyny are no more terms that belong to criticism of the novel than are, say, baldness or shortness of stature. A novelist might be a misogynist if he chooses. Ditto a misanthropist. Ditto a hater of straights or gays. Ditto an antisemite'

Just think about this. 'Ditto an antisemite' We have here an echo of Oscar Wilde's preface to the second edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written, that is all' Or, they give you a sense of life, or they don't. Or alternatively, they try to confront the truth, or they don't.

Guy, he says 'is divided in his soul, a nice boy longing to lead a disorderly life, a tame novelist longing to be a feral one, a man who lives in his head longing to write with his bowels. The novel observes that people can't stomach much any more

they would rather hear Anne Frank aver that "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart" than read Primo Levi's gathering despair or the survivor Jean Améry refusing forgiveness and redemption. "Nothing has healed," he wrote towards the end of his life.

because there is a part of us that values truth above illusion, we grab at that bitter comedy for dear life.'

*Kalooki Nights* ends with Dorothy telling Maxie: 'My life's just a life. It's your lives that are ruined'

*The Finkler Question* ends: 'There are no limits to Finkler's mourning'

*Zoo Time* ends up with Guy picking up the manuscript pages suddenly dropped by the homeless person in Soho who had been writing his novel for years, and seeing which was written on them. 'what he had to say was forceful, incontestable, not to say beautiful, in its clairvoyance' End quote

Each page is identical. Each has Os laid out in a symmetric pattern over 12 lines.

Guy's novel ends with an applauding of clairvoyance, of the work of a man with no illusions. And with little comfort to offer.

Unlike the homeless person and more than Guy Jacobson offers acuity and wit, certainly. An insight into modern English Jewish lives, if that is what you want. But not comfort.

Thank you.

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