

Petr Anténe: *Howard Jacobson's Novels in the Context of Contemporary British Jewish Literature*. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc, 2019. ISBN: 978-80-244-5651-5. 163 pp.

Howard Jacobson is one of the leading contemporary British writers, and perhaps more importantly, one of the very few representatives of British Jewish fiction that generally receives very little critical attention. While being compared to “British Philip Roth, Jacobson prefers to be called the “Jewish Jane Austen” (149), emphasizing his affinity to British cultural and literary heritage. Though the complexities of British Jewish identity are present in many of his novels, it is predominantly his renderings of class differences, (extra)marital relationships, sex, and humour that won Jacobson a wide readership. The majority of critical papers focus on the function and representation of Jewish identity, be it Andrzej Gasiorek: “Michael Chabon, Howard Jacobson, and Post-Holocaust Fiction” (2012), David Brauner: “Fetishizing the Holocaust: Comedy and Transatlantic Connections in Howard Jacobson’s “Kalloki Nights” (2014), Mike Witcombe: “A Comedy of Eruvs: (Re)Locating Jewish Identity in Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* and Howard Jacobson’s *J*” (2016), or Sarah Gracombe: “‘Precious Books’: Conversion, Nationality and the Novel, 1810–2010” (2020). With the exception of David Brauner, who focuses purely on Jacobson’s novel (and is included in Anténe’s reference list), the above-mentioned publications offer a comparative in-depth approach to modern representation of Jewish identity.

Petr Anténe’s volume represents a pioneering and complex insight into Jacobson’s work, encompassing the author’s cultural, literary as well as ethnic affinities. The rising recognition of Jacobson’s influence is further manifested in the recent publication of David Brauner’s comprehensive study: *Howard Jacobson* (2020), providing, similarly to Anténe’s publication, detailed readings of all Jacobson’s novels, focusing predominantly on the aspects of comedy, masculinity, and Jewishness.

In the Introduction to his monograph, Anténe outlines the specifics of British Jewish literature as well as reasons behind its invisibility, including the stereotypical and negative portrayals of Jewish characters in British literature, ranging from Barabas, Shylock, Fagin, to Svengali. While paraphrasing Ruth Gilbert, who encountered “numerous cases of disbelief in the existence of British Jewish writing” (6), Anténe does not mention significant writers of Jewish origin – besides Harold Pinter and Anita Brookner, who, however, avoid representing Jewishness – with the exception of Linda Grant, though Anténe, rather than introducing her work, quotes her critical essay “Identity and the British-Jewish Novel.” Proposing to analyse Jacobson’s oeuvre in chronological order, with the exceptions of chapters 5 and 7 that group earlier and later novels for sake of coherence, Anténe focuses on three major thematic fields: intimate relationships that evoke a comparison with Philip Roth, use of irony and British literary tradition in the vein of Jane Austen, and finally the function of humour that holds an especially significant position in the context of both British and Jewish literatures.

Jacobson is known not only as a novelist but also as a journalist and critic whose non-fiction is thematically connected to his major literary topics, yet Anténe limits his analysis to fiction only, allowing only for few references to the author's critical or journalistic work. While Jacobson's work has been often read as autobiographical, or semi-autobiographical, Anténe mentions the author's wish that his novels should not be read as stories of his own life and adds that the author "may have emphasized this distinction for the very reason that the similarities are indeed too striking not to be noticed" (12). Yet it remains unclear whether (and to what extent) Anténe intends to adopt the autobiographical perspective.

The opening chapter "University Settings and Intertextual Perspectives in the Novels of the 1980s" addresses a topic that is close to Anténe, who has devoted several studies to British campus novel. Analysing three books: *Coming from Behind*, Jacobson's debut that introduced the Jewish professor into the traditional British campus novel, *Peeping Tom*, and *Redback*, Anténe foregrounds the autobiographical details, namely Jacobson's personal and professional experience, which, however, does not feel disruptive, as the author is relatively less known in the Czech Republic. Each of the novels is analysed in a separate subchapter, discussing the contribution of Jacobson's novels to the British campus novel as well as the ethnic aspect, specifically the extent and importance of Jewishness for the protagonist and the genre in general.

In the second chapter entitled "Revisiting the Old Testament in *The Very Model of a Man*" Anténe analyses Jacobson's fourth and most experimental novel, which challenges the author's established reputation of a comic writer. This critical and for some irreverent rewriting of the story of Cain did not meet with critical acclaim, and as Anténe documents "looked like an oddity within the author's oeuvre" (50). While discussing the conflicted reception of the novel, when it comes to actual analysis, the chapter remains descriptive, retelling the plot in great detail, missing the opportunity of linking the book with other British biblical variations, not to mention the Jewish perspective of the classic story.

Chapter 3, "Sex, Class and the Erasure of Jewishness in *No More Mr Nice Guy* and *Who's Sorry Now?*", explores predominantly the lives of prosperous middle-aged (Jewish) protagonists who did not stay in academia yet work in a similarly specific environment: the publishing industry, and who identify as members of the British upper-middle-class society rather than the Jewish community. While the ethnic identity of the protagonists is backgrounded and proclaimed irrelevant, the main focus is placed on the sexual adventures of the married characters and British social concerns. Unfortunately, Anténe does not explore the effect or significance of such dismissal. He simply states: "While Frank Ritz is simply a non-observant Jew, Kreitman has embraced Englishness rather than Jewishness for most of his life in order to distance himself from his father" (69). What, however, Anténe suggests at the end of the chapter is that the backgrounding of the characters' Jewishness did not contribute to Jacobson's reputation of a British Jewish novelist, though he does not discuss whether Jacobson wished to gain such reputation.

The ethnic aspect of Jacobson's writing is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 entitled "Variations on Jewish themes". Disrupting the chronological approach for the sake of clarity, Anténe discusses two earlier novels together with Jacobson's

most valued book *The Finkler Question*, for which he was awarded a Booker Prize in 2010. Still, when analysing the first novel *The Mighty Walzer*, the depiction of significance and manifestations of Jewishness is brief. Anténe chiefly relies on interviews with Jacobson and apart from a short example of Jewish humour, devotes most of his attention to British concerns and highlights the Manchester setting rather than ethnicity. The Jewish themes are more fully explored in the two following subchapters concerning *Kalloki Nights* and *Finkler Question*, where Anténe discusses not only the relations between Jews and non-Jews but also provides a more global context of the late 20th century world.

In the next chapter “Lives in and beyond Fiction in *The Act of Love* and *Zoo Time*,” Anténe turned his attention from Jewish identities in Britain to more subtle psychological studies in the vein of Henry James and featured references to Anglophone and European writers. As Anténe observes, the novels do not even seem to employ humour in the same way as previous volumes. Rather than reading them as sceptical satires on the status of novelists, Anténe offers an alternative reading, focusing on the “overcoming of failures in personal as well as professional lives” (115).

The closing chapter “Imagining the Future, Reimagining the Past” thematically departs from the ethnic or class concerns and focuses on current pressing issues, especially concerning contemporary Britain and America. The first featured novel *Shylock Is My Name* is Jacobson’s contribution to the Hogarth Shakespeare project, transplanting major motifs of intolerance, anti-Semitism, and revenge into contemporary Britain. Anténe places it into the context of another Shylock variation, namely the play *Shylock* by Arnold Wesker. In his detailed analysis of Jacobson’s novel, Anténe not only discusses the form and narrative strategies but provides the cultural and political context of 21st century Britain, highlighting both the originality and topicality of Jacobson’s version that functions not only as a revision but also a sequel to Shakespeare’s original. The most controversial as well as most inspiring is a subchapter discussing *Pussy*, a political satire commenting on American politics with a European twist in the vein of Jonathan Swift. While offering a seething satire of the American president and the general political atmosphere, as Anténe notes, the readers are equally confronted with “problematic features of contemporary American liberalism” (143). This subchapter would benefit from a more detailed discussion on the forms of current political fiction (see e.g., Johannes Wally’s analysis of linguistic and literary devices of modern satires). The last and the shortest chapter (covering only 4 pages) is devoted to Jacobson’s most recent novel *Live a Little* grouped with an earlier work *The Making of Henry*, where the author returns to his previous preoccupations, namely the fear and simultaneous desire for intimacy and life failures, yet this time in connection with ageing and death, while still maintaining an affirmative ending.

After the six detailed and largely chronological chapters that did not provide any summaries or observations leading to the author’s findings, the Conclusion seems a bit too abrupt and brief (covering over two pages), especially as it merely repeats the information that was already discussed in the Introduction and partially in the individual chapters and remains rather general and vague. While the thorough and at times descriptive readings make the study more accessible

even to readers not familiar with Jacobson's work, the volume could benefit from a fuller and more coherent theoretical and cultural background rather than brief references dispersed within the text.

To focus on contemporary British novel and humour in combination with the complexity of Jewish identity is not an easy task, yet Anténe managed to produce a monograph that can offer its readers, be it academics, students or even public, thorough content-based analyses of Jacobson's novels in the context of current world affairs.

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