At a conference on ‘Jewish Identities and American Writing’, hosted by the Rothermere American Institute in 2001, Howard Jacobson gave a talk (which has never been published) in which he subjected the celebrated opening lines of Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) to a close reading that, he claimed, exposed its grammatical confusion and intellectual imprecision. He went on to juxtapose a sex scene from Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal* (2001) with one from his own novel *No More Mr Nice Guy*, in order to demonstrate the alleged superiority of the latter. Although delivered with characteristic wit and a certain knowing self-irony, Jacobson’s agenda was clear enough: he wanted publicly to lay to rest, once and for all, the label of ‘the English Philip Roth’, with its implicit suggestion that he could only ever hope to be a poor man’s substitute for the real thing, to show that far from being indebted to the great Jewish American novelists he could teach them a thing or two.

The comparisons with Roth had dogged Jacobson right from the start, but his response to them has undergone a remarkable evolution. Initially, Jacobson either distanced himself from Roth by reviving the old canard of Roth’s alleged Jewish self-hatred, announcing that ‘I don’t have Roth’s dislike of being Jewish’ (Hebert 1984: 13), or by denying that he had even read any Roth, a claim he repeated in some later interviews but which seems doubtful in the light of the testimony of Dave Williamson, a Canadian novelist. Williamson claims that when he visited Jacobson in 1983, shortly after the publication of *Coming From Behind*, he told him that ‘he counted Roth among his three favourite writers – Charles Dickens and Jane Austen were the other two’ (Williamson 2010: A.13). It was in fact to Austen that Jacobson turned in an attempt to rebrand himself, telling anyone
who would listen ‘I’m not the English Philip Roth, I’m the Jewish Jane Austen’ (Jacobson 2010i). Ironically, this itself became a mantra that interviewers and reviewers recited, so that instead of shedding the label of ‘the English Philip Roth’, it was joined to his rejoinder, as in Nicholas Lezard’s joke that Jacobson was ‘the love child of Roth and Jane Austen’ (Lezard 2010: 15).3

Although the Austen comment was clearly playful, it represented a serious desire on Jacobson’s part to emerge from the looming shadow of Roth. At times he expressed his frustration at his inability to do so, or at least at the tenacity of interviewers who brought up the subject, as Michael Posner did in 2007: ‘Let him be called the American Jacobson and see how he likes it. It’s a monkey on my back, actually’. However, he immediately added a caveat to his objection: ‘But if you’re going to be compared to anybody, they don’t get better than that’ (Posner 2007: R.3). In fact, this ambivalence was evident much earlier in Jacobson’s career. The first explicit reference to Roth in the fiction comes in Redback, when Forelock complains about ‘Jewish novelists . . . [w]ith their fucking hang-ups’, having ‘spent three-quarters of the day in court, listening to a defence lawyer reading . . . out extracts of Portnoy’s Complaint . . . asking . . . if I now considered myself depraved’ (Jacobson 1986: 186). This allusion seems to be mockingly affectionate, glancing both at the fact that Roth’s novel was banned for obscenity in Australia and, metafictionally, at the connection between Roth and Jacobson that had already become something of a critical cliché. The first notable mention of Roth in the non-fiction occurs when, in an otherwise excoriating review of Frank Muir’s The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose, Jacobson welcomes the inclusion of Roth as evidence of ‘some vigorous waiving of the criterion of harmlessness’ (Jacobson 1990: 65), a criterion informing what Jacobson argues is an overwhelmingly anodyne vision of comedy. In his own anything-but-anodyne study of comedy, Seriously Funny, Jacobson praises Roth, in passing, as ‘that most crafty and purposeful of cursers’ (Jacobson 1997: 119), as well as citing Sabbath’s Theater approvingly twice (82, 119).

Indeed, as Jacobson began to articulate a more nuanced response to Roth’s work, he differentiated between his earlier, comic works and the later, more sober novels, telling Posner that although he loved the former he felt saddened by Roth’s turn away from comedy: ‘I don’t hate the [late] books but I hate the assumption behind them – that suddenly you’re more serious because you’ve stopped joking’.
In due course, this qualified admiration became unequivocal. In 2011, he leapt to Roth’s defence in the controversy surrounding the award of the International Man Booker to him and the subsequent resignation in protest of Carmen Callil from the panel of judges, writing that ‘he is the author of some of the most wildly funny novels ever written, and for his comedy alone deserves to mop up every prize for fiction going’ (Jacobson 2011b: 38). This shift in attitude, perhaps consolidated by the award of his own Booker Prize in the previous year (which largely allayed Jacobson’s anxieties about his status as a novelist) was accompanied by an attempt to erase retrospectively his earlier resentment at being saddled with the reputation of being an inferior version of Roth. In an interview with Lori Harrison-Kahan in the same year, he claimed that he had ‘never objected to being compared to Philip Roth’, going on to call him ‘a towering presence’ and telling her that ‘[t]here is no better writer living’ (Harrison-Kahan 2011: 23). Since then, Jacobson has been fulsome in his praise of Roth. In 2012, he observed that ‘Roth has the best vocabulary of emotional tumult . . . of any writer living’ (Jacobson 2012c: 2); in 2013 he acclaimed Roth’s ‘mastery of English, not in despite of Jewish idiom but almost as though it were Jewish’ (Jacobson 2013e: 116). Finally, on the occasion of Roth’s death, in an interview on the BBC current affairs programme Newsnight, Jacobson delivered what was clearly a heartfelt panegyric, describing his prose as ‘powerfully alive, exultant and raging’ and concluding with the resounding claim that ‘[e]very one [of Roth’s books] is a little masterpiece’ (Jacobson 2018c). In his final words on Roth’s final day, Jacobson’s tribute seemed to amount almost to a statement of public penance for his earlier equivocations.

However, these equivocations need to be read not simply as an expression of professional rivalry but in the context of what Roth symbolises for Jacobson: namely, a writer who placed the challenges and stimulations, the joys and traumas, of ‘being Jewish’ in the post-war period at the centre of his work and at the same time triumphantly transcended the label of ‘Jewish writer’. In other words, Jacobson’s ambivalence towards and ultimate endorsement of Roth reflects his own struggles with how best to address his own Jewishness in his work. In a piece entitled ‘Jokes that save us from ourselves’, Jacobson made a rare reference to his personal experience of antisemitism growing up in Manchester: ‘I hated being called a Yid . . . But then I hated everything about being a child’ (Jacobson 1999c: 13).
The fact that he immediately follows his confession of having been a victim of racism with a self-satirical joke that seems designed to preempt any pity for his predicament and to undercut the very idea of victimhood suggests that he still feels uncomfortable discussing this history. In an interview with James O’Brien, Jacobson confessed to having felt that his ‘name stood for things . . . maybe for the ugliness I felt in me or the unsuitability I felt in me, that this was a grandiosity I did not deserve, to be a writer, a published writer, and to be a novelist’ (O’Brien 2019). Although he does name this ‘ugliness’, it seems clear enough that he is referring to Jewishness; to the fact that, because the surname Jacobson is unmistakably Jewish, Jacobson felt that it disqualified him from the profession he wanted to follow. In other words, Jacobson at some level had internalised the antisemitism to which he was subjected as a child, to the extent that he felt that being Jewish, or at any rate being conspicuously Jewish, was incompatible with the ‘grandiosity’ of being a ‘published writer’. As David Herman puts it, the great challenge for Jacobson in his early career was to ‘find a voice that [would] include both his father’s market stall in Manchester and the great, gentile tradition he studied with Leavis at Cambridge’ (Herman 2002: 28), a challenge that, as I argued in Chapter 1, he dramatises in the fiction itself.

In his non-fiction, Jacobson has insisted repeatedly on his credentials as ‘an old-fashioned English lit. man. Straight down the line’ (Lyall 2010), but in an interview in 2010 he refined this self-definition, referring to his practice of ‘try[ing] to write the sentences of a centralized, cosmopolitan English writer who has read all the great English writers’ (Jacobson 2010i). This subtle shift from the bullish certainty suggested by the phrase ‘[s]traight down the line’ to the careful qualification suggested by the verb ‘try’ and the phrase ‘cosmopolitan English writer’, in which the word ‘cosmopolitan’ might be read as code (as it often is) for ‘Jewish’, is significant and coincides with Jacobson’s softening towards Roth. Jacobson has always emphasised that his own upbringing was culturally, rather than religiously, Jewish: ‘we were Jewish-joke Jews, we were bagel Jews. We didn’t go to synagogue’ (Boylan 2011). As a young man, he has said, he ‘saw [him]self entirely as an Englishman who had happened, happily, to be born Jewish’ (Jacobson 2005e: 44). Yet he has also acknowledged that his early attempts to write fiction were hampered by the sense that he had to ‘demonstrate [his] remove from Jewishness in order to feel more English’ (Boylan 2011) and that the breakthrough for him came
when he discovered Jewishness as a subject: ‘I never thought when I was trying to write in my 20s and even in my 30s, that I was going to write about Jews. But I wasn’t getting anywhere not writing about Jews. I couldn’t write a page’ (Jacobson 2010i). The hyperbole of the claim that he ‘couldn’t write a page’ while he was ‘not writing about Jews’, and this comically negative description of an activity that is actually the absence of an activity, should not disguise the importance for Jacobson of realising that he could combine the tradition exemplified by Roth – what Henry Nagel refers to as ‘the self-conscious Jewish thing’ in The Making of Henry (Jacobson 2005a: 293) – with the Leavisite ‘great tradition’.

To combine these traditions was not to reconcile them, however, but rather to exploit the tensions between them. It is no coincidence in this context that Jacobson’s description in Roots Schmoots of what it was like to grow up Jewish in Manchester in the 1950s bears a striking resemblance to his definition of what makes a good comic novelist: ‘we countermanded ourselves, we faced in opposite directions, we were our own antithesis’ (Jacobson 1993a: 3). Later, he reinforces this sense of self-division with the paradoxical claim that ‘we [Jews] most are, when we most protest we’re not . . . ./And therefore we are most not, when we most protest we are’ (88). Whereas Jacobson’s early fiction dramatises the conflict inherent in being an Anglo-Jewish writer (the hyphen enacting the ambiguous relationship of the two categories which it both joins and separates), in his later fiction he becomes more interested, as Roth was from the start, in the tensions between competing versions of Jewishness. The great fault lines of these different Jewish identities are to be found in differing responses to the legacy of the Holocaust and to the tenacity of post-war antisemitism, and so it is no surprise that many of Jacobson’s later novels explore these issues in detail.

The Mighty Walzer (1999)

Jewishness has always been at the centre of Jacobson’s novels. For Sefton Goldberg, the protagonist of Jacobson’s first novel, Coming From Behind, it is an obsession, reflected in the narrative refrain – ‘Being Jewish’ – with which many of the novel’s sentences begin, and in the fact that at one point his friends ‘began to wonder if I had any other subject of conversation’ (Jacobson 1984: 6). Most of the protagonists of Jacobson’s subsequent novels have been Jewish, even if they
haven’t all been as preoccupied with what that might mean as Goldberg. Many of Jacobson’s novels have also been ostensibly autobiographical, or at least semi-autobiographical. *The Mighty Walzer*, however, is arguably the most Jewish and the most autobiographical of all his novels. It is also one of his best.

What makes a novel Jewish? In the context of male-authored, Anglophone post-war Jewish fiction, there are certain characteristic recurring themes: antisemitism; the Holocaust; the pursuit of the ‘shiksa’; the flight from family. If, as I have suggested elsewhere, post-war Jewish fiction is characterised by a preoccupation with, and interrogation of, the nature of Jewishness – and by a self-consciousness about its own status as Jewish fiction – then *The Mighty Walzer* is the self-consciously Jewish novel par excellence (see Brauner 2001: 34–37). Witness, for example, its deconstruction of the trope of the mollycoddled Jewish boy:

I’ve promised brevity so I won’t waste time on the usual psycho family biog stuff – the circumcision carried out by an aspen-leaf Mohel with delirium tremens and dirt beneath his fingernails; the bloody bandages; the mother’s guilt drying up the mother’s milk . . . the pledge to make it up to the boy and his putz, to be over-and-above solicitous to the boy, and over-and-above solicitous to his putz, for ever and ever Amen. Yes, I was fussed over. Yes, I was lovingly washed and exquisitely talcum’d and meticulously dried, as though the wound had never healed and never would heal. And yes, yes, I was – to employ the humiliating idiom of my mother’s side – held out over the lavatory come pee-pee time, confidentially squeezed and shaken and squeezed again like a hose-pipe during a hose-pipe ban. But that’s normal. What was exceptional was the number of women doing it. (Jacobson 1999a: 38)

Deploying the rhetorical figure of *occupatio*, the narrator/protagonist of the novel, Oliver Walzer, while promising to avoid ‘the usual psycho family biog stuff’, describes in detail the very elements of the familiar narrative that he is ostensibly discarding, representing the over-protective maternal instincts that define the archetype of the Jewish mother as a response to the trauma of circumcision. Walzer doesn’t specify where the ‘usual . . . stuff’ is to be found, but the prototype in post-war Jewish fiction of the suffocating Jewish mother is undoubtedly Sophie Portnoy and there are several details in the passage that allude to the novel in which she appears, Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The first of these is the word ‘psycho’ itself, which, if it is read as an abbreviation of ‘psychoanalytical’, invokes the ambivalent investment
in psychoanalysis of Roth’s novel, whose narrative is underpinned by therapeutic conventions (it is couched in the form of a monologue delivered by a patient in one of his therapy sessions), while at the same time comically satirising them. However, ‘psycho’ is also a slang term for ‘crazy’ (if used adjectively) and, if used as a noun, for ‘psychopath’ (as in the title of Alfred Hitchcock’s famous film). These meanings, although they echo Roth’s irreverent treatment of Freud to an extent, when taken in conjunction with the similarly snarky shorthand version of ‘biography’ and the dismissive tone of ‘usual . . . stuff’, suggest an impatience with the ways in which Roth’s innovations have hardened into clichés.

The description of the elaborate processes of washing and drying to which Walzer is treated (or subjected) recalls the rituals of ablution which Eve lavishes (or imposes) on Abel in The Very Model of a Man. Although Walzer interprets this compulsive cleansing as an attempt (futile, of course) to rehabilitate the victim of a violent act which itself might be interpreted as a sort of purification ritual – to restore the symbolic loss of manhood represented by the literal excision of the foreskin – it might be said, ironically, to compound this loss, since the excessive ‘fussing’ over the ‘putz’ is in itself arguably ‘humiliating’ and implicitly emasculating. The connection between the ‘psycho . . . stuff’ and the bloodshed of the bris is famously made by Freud, who interprets circumcision as a symbolic castration, and infamously reimagined by Roth in Portnoy’s Complaint, when Portnoy’s mother sits beside him, brandishing ‘a long bread knife . . . made of stainless steel’, with ‘little sawlike teeth’, urging him to eat up his dinner so that he can become ‘a man’ while the young boy is convinced that ‘there is an intention . . . to draw my blood’ (Roth 1969: 16). Similarly, Walzer’s reference to being ‘squeezed and shaken’ echoes Portnoy’s description of his mother ‘tickling my prickling’ in order to facilitate urination (Roth 1969: 133).

At the same time as paying homage to what is arguably the quintessential post-war Jewish novel, however, Walzer puts his own peculiar, subversive spin on its ‘family biog stuff’, firstly through the parodic tone of the litany of ignominy; secondly through the parochially English reference to hose-pipe bans; and finally through the revelation in the final line of the paragraph – a punchline rendering all that precedes it the set-up to a joke – that the indignities visited upon him are perpetrated not by the mythical Jewish mother, but rather by an unspecified ‘number of women’. These women, female relatives
of his mother, and their ancestors – aunts, great-aunts, great-great-aunts, grandmothers and great-grandmothers – become the objects of Walzer’s masturbatory fantasies, as he pastes their faces, cut out from family photographs, onto the provocatively posed bodies of women in Span, a soft-porn magazine bizarrely published by the US embassy in India.

Much like a sweet little girl playing with her cut-out dolls . . . I changed the outfits worn by the women I revered, got them to open their legs and show me the tops of their stockings, the lace on their pants, turned them round and bent them over . . . cut them into French maids, naughty nurses, leggy belles from St Trinian’s, cowgirls who couldn’t stay on their horses or keep their tushes in their chaperejos . . . And I did this even to my little Polish grandmother? Especially to my little Polish grandmother.

Scissoring with the utmost care, I cut around the contours of her face, freeing her from the gross contingencies of Piccadilly or Cheetham Hill, then slowly, lovingly, I separated her from her body . . . Up on to six-inch heels I hoiked her, fishnetted, frilly-knickered, fingering a cane . . . down on a scarlet bed I laid her . . . [in] a gossamer negligé of ankle length, through which, with the help of my magnifying glass, I could just make out where the snatch should have been. (Jacobson 1999a: 47)

Once again, this passage recalls one of the most infamous episodes in Portnoy’s Complaint, when the protagonist, Alex Portnoy, uses a pair of ‘cotton panties’ purloined from his sister, along with one of her ‘soiled brassieres’, as masturbatory aids (Roth 1969: 20, 21), but here Jacobson ups the ante, adding to the taboo of desire for an immediate family member the additional transgression of gerontophilia. Moreover, he flaunts his perversity, eliciting outrage by confessing, or proudly proclaiming, that, far from regarding his grandmother as off-limits, she becomes the most favoured of his photo-collaged harem. Comparing his activities to the wholesome play of a ‘sweet little girl’ and insisting on his ‘reverence’ for the women whose images he defiles heightens the apparent incongruity between the platonic grandfilial love Walzer professes and the erotic objectification he practises. Yet for Walzer there is no conflict between the two. Instead, he represents the process of cutting and pasting as simultaneously tender and violent, elevating and degrading. On the one hand, the verbs Walzer uses to describe the contortions into which he arranges the bodies onto which he pastes his grandmother’s face (‘got them to . . . turned them round and bent them over . . . cut
them') suggest manipulation, coercion and mutilation. On the other hand, he represents his actions as solicitous, even liberating (‘with the utmost care... freeing her... lovingly’). The crude double entendres of ‘[s]cissoring’, ‘fingering’ and ‘laid’, juxtaposed with the luxurious trappings (the frilly knickers and gossamer negligé) of an exotic world far removed from the mundanity of life in Cheetham Hill; the use of slang Yiddish (‘tushes’) and Spanish (‘chaparejos’); the allusion to the notoriously smutty St. Trinian’s film series (inspired by Ronald Searle’s comic strip); the use of the comically awkward verb ‘hoiking’ and the skittish alliteration of ‘fishnetted, frilly-knickered, fingering’; all these details imbue the passage with a comic energy which does not quite disguise the disturbing fact that the young Walzer takes sexual pleasure in metaphorically decapitating his grandmother, fetishising her features in grotesque combinations, and projecting onto these hybrid creations an imaginary vagina. In common with many of Jacobson’s protagonists, Walzer both indicts himself for his crimes and seeks to extenuate them. There is certainly a strain of self-conscious performance, even self-satire, in his representation of his sexual politics (‘Misogyny, that was my bag. I wrote essays in which I affected to hate women, detailing their imperfections through the ages’, he writes of his undergraduate days [Jacobson 1999a: 144]), but also a sense of wanting to out-Portnoy Portnoy.

This intertextual engagement with Roth’s novel manifests itself not only in the hyperbolic nature of his masturbatory fervour – ‘bolting the lavatory door and making love to myself for sessions which I regarded as brutally foreshortened if they failed to exceed three hours’ (37) – but in his non-auto-erotic preferences. The girl with whom Walzer falls in love – the symbolically named Lorna Peachley (the first name suggesting melancholy, as in ‘forlorn’ and ‘love-lorn’, the surname containing the slang term for a desirable young woman, ‘peach’), whose ‘bodily mellifluousness’ (258) while playing ping-pong bewitches Walzer – bears more than a passing resemblance to the Gentile girls who gracefully glide across the ice, sending the young Portnoy into paroxysms of pleasure, ‘a state of desire beyond a hard-on’ (Roth 1969: 144, italics in original). The terms in which Walzer describes his visits to Lorna’s house – ‘Now I could be invited over to [Lorna’s] house... partly to give her parents... a closer squizz at a Jewish person’ (Jacobson 1999a: 237) – recall Portnoy’s comical anticipation of how he might greet the parents of his girlfriend Kay Campbell when he visits their home for Thanksgiving, to pre-empt their probable
How ard Jacobson curiosity: ‘Well, it sure is nice being here in Davenport, Mr and Mrs Campbell, what with my being Jewish and all’ (Roth 1969: 224).

The suspicion that Walzer may be projecting his sense of his own irrevocable otherness onto Lorna’s parents, just as Portnoy does with the Campbells, is confirmed by his mythologisation of Lorna and of the larger fantasy of assimilation which she represents. Later in the novel, when he befriends Robin Clarke, a fellow undergraduate at Cambridge, his thoughts immediately turn to this fantasy:

The goyishe friend – could this one be the goyishe friend? Whose sister I would marry in a little country church in Gloucestershire? Where we would raise horses and soft-voiced little goyishe children called Christopher and Amelia? . . . (Jacobson 1999a: 305, italics in original)

The invocation of the Gloucestershire church once again recalls Roth, this time The Counterlife, whose penultimate chapter is given the title of this county to symbolise all that is quintessentially English – which is to say (in the context of post-war Jewish fiction) pastoral, genteel and Gentile.

The other figure who reliably appears in the cast of archetypes of the post-war Jewish novel, alongside the shikse and the goyishe friend, is the shaygets, the obverse of the goyishe friend, a brutish, usually antisemitic Gentile young man, often to be found menacing local Jewish boys. In The Mighty Walzer, the shaygets makes his first appearance when Oliver’s family moves to an area of Manchester near a rough estate, so that ‘every time I went out a gang of prefab boys threw stones at me’ (17). When Oliver’s father dismisses his mother’s fears that he may lose an eye, remarking that they are ‘little kids’ who ‘can’t throw that hard’ (17), the mother responds with a rhetorical question: ‘When did you hear of a shaygets who couldn’t throw hard? (18).

Later in the novel, when Oliver dedicates himself to table tennis, he draws a distinction between the approach of the Jewish team he represents and that of their Gentile opponents:

When all’s said and done you are at liberty to marvel over the shayget’s power of shot because ultimately you value something else more – the right to be amused, the intelligence to register the vanity of all skill and striving at last. (151)

Here the physical force of the shaygets – the ‘power of shot’ – is contrasted with the reflective Jewish attitude towards competition, an attitude associated with ‘intelligence’, wit and an eschatological
resignation. Later, Walzer elaborates on this theme, eulogising the skills of the star player on his team, Phil Radic, in terms that represent table tennis as a metaphor for the art of the comic writer:

He made ping-pong witty. His sudden accelerations of racket-head speed were like explosions of satire . . . And he used all the expanses of the table in a sardonic manner, economically, pithily, finding angles you’d never have guessed were there, leaving his opponent flat footed and looking stupid. (210)

There is of course also an implicitly metafictional aspect to this passage, as Walzer himself is a table tennis player in the Radic mould – one who uses an edition of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in lieu of a bat when he first takes up the game – and the narrator and protagonist of a comic novel in which his own (over-)identification with table tennis is the source of much of the (self-)satire: ‘Ping-pong is airless and cramped and repetitive and self-absorbed, and so was I’ (17). As ever, Walzer is ambivalent about his enthusiasm for table tennis, and about the Jewishness with which he associates it. As the description above suggests, ping-pong for Walzer is everything that is antithetical to sport (which is, typically, an outdoors, expansive, other-directed activity), but consistent with the stereotype of Jewish men as ‘bent and bookish’ (323), and with his own sense of himself as a schlemiel ‘forever lost to seriousness and dignity’ (14) whose biography is ‘a history of embarrassments’ (36). As Jacobson put it in an essay published the year after *The Mighty Walzer*, table tennis, ‘with its ironies . . . and nervy claustrophobia’ is ‘the perfect parable of earthly vanity’, offering ‘more opportunities for self-punishment’ than any other sport (Jacobson 2000d: 32).

Consistent with Jacobson’s mantra that comic novels are invariably inconsistent – ‘at odds with [themselves]’ (Jacobson 1999d: 30) – Walzer at times seems to acquiesce in, or even embrace, the idea that table tennis is a game for losers, conceding, casually, that ‘[o]f course ping pong wasn’t sport’ (Jacobson 1999a: 181) while at other times he is a fervent advocate of the game, complaining that table tennis ‘suffers from too modest a conception of itself’ (254) and expressing great indignation when his headmaster overlooks his achievements in this arena:

What’s your problem, Mr Horsfield – isn’t the game at which I excel shaygets enough for you? Do you have to kick shit out of people before
you consider it sport here? Do you have to roll in mud and stick your face up someone’s arse? Is it too much for you to bear, you yiddenfeit, you anti-Semitic piece of crap, that we should be good at a game and win scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge? Well prepare to swallow more, shithead. Meet the master race. You’re looking at a double starred first and the next World Ping-Pong Champion. Won’t that be something for you to ignore in favour of how Albert Shaygets came last in the All Radcliffe fishing gala with an already dead mackerel measuring a quarter of an inch – we’re all proud of you, Albert, you dim-witted freckled little snub nose petseleh, you! (253)

This characteristically extravagant comic set-piece begins with a series of sardonic rhetorical questions aimed at the headmaster (whose name is a compound of two quintessential signifiers of pastoral England, ‘horse’ and ‘field’), which satirise the brutality and vulgarity of the sports traditionally valued at English grammar schools (principally rugby), and which culminate in an explosion of vitriol that juxtaposes English idiomatic insults (‘piece of crap’, ‘shithead’) with a Yiddish term of abuse (‘yiddenfeit’). Walzer then provocatively appropriates the term that the Nazis used to describe the alleged genetic superiority of Aryans – ‘the master race’ – to invert the racial hierarchy underpinning the National Socialist brand of antisemitism, suggesting that Jews are racially superior, rather than inferior, before adducing the evidence: his own history of intellectual eminence and prospective sporting excellence. Finally, he contrasts these achievements with the exaggerated inferiority of an imagined favourite of the headmaster: a pathetic figure whose mediocrity as an angler is matched by the paucity of his brain and the fragility of his appearance (the Yiddish term ‘petseleh’ literally means small, but in this context with the implication that Albert is the metaphorical runt of the litter). Again, there is an echo here, in Walzer’s animus, of Alex Portnoy’s characterisation of Gentile men as ‘half-dead, ice-cold shaygets pricks’ (Roth 1969: 152, italics in original), but the irony is that Albert is the antithesis of the stereotypical muscular, intimidating, self-satisfied shaygets, resembling more closely the antisemitic stereotype of the Jew as a sickly specimen of manhood, albeit with a ‘snub nose’ instead of the hooked nose of Nazi caricatures.

Like Portnoy, whose happiest memory of childhood is accompanying his father on a monthly pilgrimage to the public baths where older Jewish men of his generation go to relax, exposing their ‘meaty flanks and steaming torsos’ unselfconsciously while Alex’s father
‘coats [him] from head to toe with a thick lather of soap’ (Roth 1969: 49), Walzer reserves his admiration for, and feels most at ease with, the circle of Jewish comrades with whom he plays table tennis and enjoys ‘Tcheppehing’ – Aishky Mistofsky, Sheeny Waxman, Twink Starr, Louis Marks, Gershom Finkel and Phil Radic – as well as for the elder statesmen of the Akivah club – Phil Radic, Saul Yesner, Sid Mellick – who, when they are not playing ping-pong, are ‘out strangling the enemies of the Jewish people with their bare hands’ (Jacobson 1999a: 211). Nadia Valman observes, acutely, that ‘The Mighty Walzer thrums with nostalgia for the raw, unrestrained masculinity of the interwar generation of Jews, the sons of immigrants with a direct connection to peasant origins, and an uncomplicated, libidinous (though often thwarted) drive to prosper’ (Valman 2018: 358). Yet it is the fraternal solidarity between these older men and their avuncular friendship with Walzer, their younger teammate, protégé and rival, rather than their ‘peasant origins’ or ‘libidinous . . . drive to prosper’ that the novel celebrates. The heart of The Mighty Walzer lies in the affectionate portrait of these characters and in the bittersweet, detailed descriptions – by turns percussive, lyrical, nostalgic and geometrically precise – of the table tennis games which they play against each other and against rival teams from the ‘untamed Shaygetsshire’ (Jacobson 1999a: 149) of Greater Manchester.

After drifting apart for many years, in the final pages of the novel Walzer and his former ping-pong buddies are reunited at the Ninth World Veterans’ Table Tennis Championships in Manchester. There he discovers that Sheeny Waxman has become a successful contemporary art dealer – the ‘only serious competitor’ to Charles Saatchi, in his own words – and that his erstwhile hero, Phil Radic, is married to the great lost love of his life, Lorna Peachley. These encounters are among the most moving passages of Jacobson’s fiction, laced with the relish of reminiscence and the poignant tang of regret, but they are also overshadowed by the trauma of one of the group, Aishky, who is working in a factory that ‘resembled Belsen’ (380).

Like all Jews of their generation (the generation who grew up in the 1950s), Walzer and his peers are haunted by the (still relatively recent) events of the Holocaust. When Aishky loses two fingers in an accident for which he is blamed, precipitating ‘the end of the Akiva as a fighting ping pong force’ (180), he attributes his failure of concentration to having been preoccupied with thoughts of ‘[c]rimes against the Jewish people’ (179), namely the Nazi genocide. Later in the
novel, Walzer observes that Aishky ‘was all right so long as we could keep him away from death and the Holocaust’, adding as an afterthought: ‘aren’t we all all right so long as you can keep us away from death and the Holocaust?’ (384). Seven years later, Jacobson was to place these concerns at the centre of Kalooki Nights, another novel which is both rooted firmly in the semi-autobiographical context of Jacobson’s childhood in Manchester and at the same time engages in an intertextual dialogue with Philip Roth, and with American Jewish culture more broadly.

**Kalooki Nights (2006)**

If Jacobson’s early novels were concerned with Jacobson’s relationship with English literary culture, Kalooki Nights might be read as his most through-going attempt to explore the influence of American culture on his generation of British Jews. The novel is saturated with allusions to American culture, in particular Jewish American culture. Indeed, at one point the narrator of the novel, the cartoonist Max Glickman, collapses the distinction between the two, something Roth also does in The Facts. Retrospectively analysing his childhood infatuation with American comics, Glickman infers that ‘I recognised . . . something Jewish in them . . . [a] spirited immigrant johnny-come-lately razzamatazz . . . the antithesis to what the English expected of an illustrator of comics’ (Jacobson 2006a: 43). He goes on to speculate as to whether this ‘explain[s] the anti-American sentiment of the careful Gentile world in which I grew up?’:

> Was that why our teachers were always warning us off American movies and music and bubblegum, and would have confiscated my Superman comics had I brought them to school – because what they really didn’t like about America was its Jewishness? (43)

Roth himself is never mentioned by name in Kalooki Nights, but he is arguably the presiding spirit of the novel. When Glickman recalls that ‘it was the American Jewish boxers who really fired my father up’, perhaps because of the way in which ‘American Jews had made their escape from humility and trepidation more fully than my father believed we [i.e. English Jews] had, or ever would’ (35), it is tempting to see an implied analogy with those American Jewish authors, such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller and, of course, Philip Roth, whose works were much more frequently
To be found on the bookshelves of English Jews of Glickman Senior’s generation than those of their arguably less adventurous, certainly lesser-known, British Jewish contemporaries. Although Glickman Junior distances himself from the deference to American Jews expressed in this passage by emphasising the subjectivity of his father’s enthusiasm, it is clear elsewhere that he shares his father’s conviction that English Jews are more timorous than their American cousins, so that when his cartoons are rejected by the *New Yorker* he reflects that ‘I would have been better throwing in my lot with overt rudery and dysfunction . . . But I was an English Jew . . . and somehow English Jews have had all the rudery squeezed out of them’ (56).

Certainly, when Glickman confesses that he ‘cared for . . . [American Jewish cartoonists] without knowing them . . . because I . . . had denied them in my English Jewish heart’, it is difficult not to read this biographically, as an analogue for Jacobson’s own ambivalence towards Roth and the other canonical Jewish American novelists (58).

In a sense, then, *Kalooki Nights* can be read as Jacobson’s attempt to emulate these Jewish American masters, or perhaps more accurately, to engage in a dialogue with them. Certainly, Jacobson’s semi-humorous claim that it is ‘the most Jewish novel that has ever been written by anybody, anywhere’ (Buckley 2006: 23) implicitly invites the very comparison with Roth that he spent much of his earlier career trying to avoid. Indeed, there are direct verbal echoes of Roth’s work, which relate to the novel’s self-conscious, at times self-parodic, obsession with all things Jewish. The terms in which Glickman’s father laments his son’s pathological Jewishness – ‘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?’ (Jacobson 2006a: 7) – recalls both Alex Portnoy’s outburst (‘Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews!’) and Henry Zuckerman’s diagnosis of his brother Nathan’s malaise in *The Counterlife*: ‘Jew Jew Jew . . . the poor bastard’s got Jew on the brain’ (Roth 1969: 76; 1987: 232). Furthermore, Glickman’s father’s vision of ‘a species of Judaism emptied of everything except its disputatiousness and liberality’ (Jacobson 2006a: 13) echoes Smilesburger’s lengthy disquisition on Jewishness in *Operation Shylock* (1993) that finishes with the assertion that the Jew ‘is a dispute, incarnate!’ (Roth 1993: 334, italics in original). Likewise, Max’s paradoxical pet project, which he describes as ‘imagining Jews without Jewishness’ (Jacobson 2006a: 68), has much in common
with Nathan Zuckerman’s ambition, in *The Counterlife*, to capture the quintessence of Jewishness: ‘A Jew without Jews, without Judaism . . . just the object itself, like a glass or an apple’ (Roth 1987: 328). Whether these Rothian echoes are self-conscious hardly matters; cumulatively, they place *Kalooki Nights* in an intertextual relationship with Roth’s work, demanding that we read the novel in the context of American Jewish fiction. In the novel’s uses of the Holocaust, however, Jacobson is arguably bolder than Roth or any of his contemporaries, interrogating the fetishisation of the Shoah in ways that move beyond his intertexts and anticipate the fiction of a younger generation of American Jewish authors, notably Shalom Auslander.\(^{15}\)

In *The Imaginary Jew* (1980), the French cultural critic and historian Alain Finkielkraut, whose father survived Auschwitz, wrote of the ‘intoxicating power to confuse myself with the martyrs’ (Finkielkraut 1994: 11) that he felt as a result of his heritage. He goes on to suggest that many European Jews of his generation claimed a dubious identification with the victims of the Holocaust, maintaining a ‘frantic masquerade’ in order to ‘appease bad conscience’ and ‘deny the gap between . . . our baby-boom comforts and the momentous, terrifying events of the recent past’ (21). Max Glickman’s description of ‘grow[ing] up in Crumpsall Park in the 1950s, somewhere between the ghettos and the greenery of North Manchester, with “extermination” in my vocabulary and the Nazis in my living room’ (Jacobson 2006a: 5) manifests both aspects of Finkielkraut’s analysis. To an extent, Glickman is accurately reporting the pervasive presence of the Holocaust for his generation of British Jews: the Nazis are metaphorically in his living room by virtue of the urgency and frequency with which the still-recent events of the Second World War are invoked in his family home. However, they are of course not physically present in his home – a fact with which the wording of the metaphor confronts us, and which is reinforced by the scare quotes around ‘extermination’ and the pointed use of the word ghettos (which, in this context, draws attention to the ironic disparity between the self-determined enclaves of Manchester’s Jewish community and the enforced herding and confinement of Jews in overcrowded, unsanitary slum conditions in Nazi-occupied Europe).\(^{16}\)

Later, Glickman explicitly considers both the truth and the absurdity of this juxtaposition between his own peaceful post-war existence and the wartime plight of European Jewry. As a child, Glickman colludes in the ‘masquerade’ that Finkielkraut describes, convincing
himself that the scale of destruction of the Jews ‘conferred a solemn destiny upon me. For it is not nothing to be one of the victims of the greatest crime in world history’ (5). At this point, the adult narrator Glickman intervenes, pointing out that

By any of the usual definitions of the word victim, of course, I wasn’t one. I had been born safely, at a lucky time and in an unthreatening part of the world, to parents who loved and protected me. I was a child of peace and refuge . . . But there was no refuge from the dead. For just as sinners pass on their accountability to generations not yet born, so do the sinned against. ‘Remember me,’ says Hamlet’s father’s ghost, and that’s Hamlet fucked. (5)

At first, it appears that the retrospective narration here is providing an ironic distance between its perspective and that of the naive young Max, intoxicated by his newly discovered power to confuse himself with the martyrs. However, the corrective that Glickman offers is a heavily qualified one: if he was not a ‘victim’ ‘by any usual definitions of that word’, then that implies that he was a victim if a more expansive definition is accepted. Similarly, Glickman complicates his initial confession that he was ‘a child of peace and refuge’ by claiming that ‘there was no refuge from the dead’ (5). His invocation of the Bible and Shakespeare at the conclusion of the passage, far from suggesting a maturity that separates him from his younger self, might be taken as evidence that he suffers from the same pretensions – the same weakness for portentous, archaic diction – as he did when, aged eleven, he proudly proclaimed ‘For it is not nothing to be one of the victims of the greatest crime in world history’. Is Glickman, then, claiming for himself the status of Holocaust victim, after the fact? And if so, was Bryan Cheyette right when, in his review of Kalooki Nights (Cheyette 2006), he claimed that ‘the novel, finally, is unable to keep the distinction between the living and the dead, between those who went through the Holocaust and those who “only thought they did”? The first question is implicitly answered by Glickman’s self-satirical description of the games he used to play with his childhood friend, Manny Washinsky: ‘When we weren’t refusing to divulge our names or religion to SS men, or choking to death on Zyklon B, Manny and I met in the Second World War air-raid shelter which had become our play space and discussed God’ (Jacobson 2006a: 19). The poor taste of the boys’ game is perhaps partially mitigated by their age, but just
as Jacobson heightens ambiguity in his earlier locution ‘the Nazis were in my living room’ by avoiding simile, so here, by presenting the pretence without explicitly identifying it as such, he simultaneously stresses both the earnestness of the game for those involved and its force as an allegorical reflection on the inappropriate appropriation of the Holocaust in other contexts. The answer to the second question is more complicated and may depend on the extent to which you think Glickman is a portrait of the artist. Once again, the example of Philip Roth may be instructive. Just as Roth invites readers to identify Nathan Zuckerman as a thinly veiled version of himself, while at the same time carefully distinguishing his authorial perspective from that of his creation, so Jacobson attributes to Glickman many aspects of his own biography but diverges from him in important respects, using him as both the vehicle and object of his satire at different times in the novel.¹⁷

Let’s return to the passage above. It doesn’t, after all, conclude with the quotation from *Hamlet*, or with the inversion of the quotation from Exodus that ‘the iniquity of the fathers [shall be visited] upon the children, and upon the children’s children’ (Exodus 34:7). It finishes with ‘that’s Hamlet fucked’, which, in its comical yoking of high culture and low, again recalls Roth and his description in *The Facts* of how he and his Jewish peers on the Masters programme at the University of Chicago in the 1950s used to refer to Isabel Archer as a ‘shiksa’, as a ‘defense against overrefinement’ (Roth 1989: 115, 123). It is also an implicit reference to Glickman’s unpublished magnum opus: a history, in the form of a graphic novel (‘think Dr Doom as drawn by Goya’), of the persecution of the Jews entitled *Five Thousand Years of Bitterness*, subtitled *The Fucking of the Jews* (Jacobson 2006a: 47, 166). The incongruity of the high seriousness of the title with the provocative irreverence of the subtitle – amplified by Glickman’s juxtaposition of the nemesis of the Fantastic Four from Marvel Comics with one of the most important figures in the canon of fine art – exemplifies Glickman’s ambivalence towards his own art and the Holocaust itself.

Towards the end of the novel, Glickman claims that ‘there are only two sorts of Jews, and I don’t mean those who went through the Holocaust and those who only thought they did. I mean Jews who see the funny side of things and those who don’t’ (421). In that pithy punchline to Glickman’s meditation on the relationship between those who went through the Holocaust and those who only thought
they did (‘that’s Hamlet fucked’) is an implicit recognition of both the necessity of maintaining that relationship and the absurdity of imagining that they have equal status as victims. The strength of the novel lies in its ability simultaneously to interrogate seriously the legacy of the Holocaust on a generation of Jews who were insulated from any direct contact with it, and comically to deconstruct that legacy, to parody the way in which the Holocaust has been fetishised.

In his 1927 essay, ‘Fetishism’, Freud pointed out that ‘the fetishist is able at one and the same time to believe in his fantasy and to recognise that it is nothing but a fantasy’ (Freud 1950b: 199). This accurately describes Glickman, who is both complicit in, and a satirist of, the fetishisation of the Holocaust, and Mendel, the camp inmate who self-consciously fetishises his Nazi abuser, Ilse Koch, fully understanding the perversity of his desires and the impossibility of fulfilling them, and whose story is interpolated into Glickman’s narrative without explanation. Whether Mendel is Glickman’s creation is not clear, but he is certainly an alter ego: his erotic fascination with Koch is shared by Glickman, and like Glickman he is a satirical artist ‘one part of [whom draws] . . . in order to spite the other half’ (Jacobson 2006a: 44), revelling in the ‘ambiguity of his situation’ (171). In a grotesque parody of Penelope’s tapestry in The Odyssey, Koch orders Mendel to draw a part of her body (which she exposes to him) each day and then to erase his day’s work, starting from scratch the following day.¹⁸ She also tells him that she expects him to maintain an erection while working, since ‘[n]o Jew dare look upon German womanhood limp’ (172), while at the same time promising that she will beat him each time his member rises. Drawing on the voyeuristic photographs that illustrate Russell’s The Scourge of the Swastika (1954), in which the young Glickman takes a prurient interest, and the titillating representation of Koch in the pornographic 1970s film Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS, Mendel’s narrative finishes with a revenge fantasy borrowed from ‘Master Race’, the best-known work by Bernard Krigstein, one of the American Jewish cartoonists whom Glickman admires, in which a Jewish camp survivor spots his former tormentor on the subway in New York and is pursued by him until he (the survivor) falls to his death on the rails.

Juxtaposed with this unsolicited, mock-schlock Holocaust narrative is the commission that Glickman is given by Francine Bryson-Smith, another dominatrix figure with a prurient interest in, and contempt for, Jewish men. Bryson-Smith hires Glickman to get
inside information from Manny Washinsky, his collaborator in the childhood games of pretending to be camp inmates, for a projected television drama based on Washinsky’s murder – by gassing – of his ultra-orthodox Jewish parents. Glickman’s ultimate rejection of Bryson-Smith represents his triumph not only over her unwholesome power, but over the seductive delusion that Manny’s homicide was somehow connected to the Holocaust and, by extension, the complacent conviction that the lives of his post-war generation of English Jews were determined by the experiences of European Jews during the Second World War. Neither Manny, who tells his lawyer that he turned the gas on in his parents’ home to ‘verify’ the claim made by Georg Renno, an SS officer, that ‘turning on the tap was no big deal’ (437), nor Bryson-Smith, who is determined to read Manny’s actions as ‘a statement about Jewish attitudes to Gentiles’ (431) that implicitly vindicates the Nazi genocide, can ‘keep the distinction between the living and the dead’, but Glickman arguably learns to do so.

Earlier in the novel, Glickman had commented on the contamination, post-Holocaust, of certain aspects of language:

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. (49)

These are not, of course, original observations. George Steiner has famously argued that the German language itself became corrupted by the euphemisms of Nazi bureaucracy (Steiner 1967b) and Norma Rosen, the American Jewish author, has claimed that, to ‘a mind engraved with the Holocaust, gas is always that gas’ (Rosen 1992: 22). Glickman’s is certainly a mind engraved with the Holocaust; one for whom, in his own words, ‘a train can never again be just a train’, because to his ears it makes the sound ‘Jew Jew, Jew Jew’ and is associated in his imagination with what he calls ‘The Auschwitz Express’ (Jacobson 2006a: 17). However, unlike Rosen, and Steiner – who claimed to be ‘a survivor’ even though he ‘happened not to be there when the names were called out’ (Steiner 1965) – Jacobson is alert to the danger of exaggerated self-pity, to the potential for melodrama of appropriating a Holocaust sensibility in a post-Holocaust era. The insertion of ‘German’ at the end of the litany of words that Glickman wishes to delete from ‘human vocabulary’ (perhaps a sly allusion to
Steiner), like the frivolous description of the cattle trucks that transported Jews to the death camps as the Auschwitz Express, and like the phrase ‘that’s Hamlet fucked’, is a punchline of sorts, a comical reminder of the limitations of imaginative sympathy with victims of the Holocaust, and of the danger of over-investing in such an impossible act of identification.

Much of the comic energy of the novel is, in fact, derived from and directed towards this temptation to indulge in a spurious identification with the Jews of wartime Europe. At the start of Kalooki Nights, Glickman relates how his Uncle Ike used to like to remark, ‘apropos anything Jewish’, ‘And for this . . . the Nazis tried to exterminate us’, to which his father used to like to respond: ‘Since when did any Nazi try to exterminate you, Ike? You personally? Had I thought the Nazis were after you I’d have told them where to find you years ago’ (Jacobson 2006a: 4). Towards the end of the novel, Glickman’s mother expresses similar scepticism at her son’s obsession with the Holocaust, in a telephone conversation:

‘You used to get Shani [Max’s sister] to pose for you in boots’ . . .
‘I wasn’t drawing Shani, I was drawing the boots.’
‘Yes, so that you could put her in a camp . . .’
‘I never put Shani in a camp. I drew the boots, that was it.’
‘And you put the boots in the camp. It’s the same thing. They were Shani’s boots.’
‘Ma, it’s what you do if you draw. You draw from life.’
‘Life I wouldn’t have minded. What you were drawing, Maxie, was death. Camps, camps, camps – where did you get all that stuff from? The only camp you ever went to was Butlin’s.’ (427)

Characteristically, Jacobson complicates these passages by inserting closing comic punchlines. In the case of the exchange between Ike and Glickman senior, what begins as a pedantic disagreement finishes as a provocative parody of one of the great taboos of Holocaust history: the informing on Jews by other Jews. In the dialogue between Max and his mother, the movement is from a serious discussion about Max’s morbid interest in the Holocaust to a play on the word ‘camp’ that emphasises once again the chasm between Glickman’s comfortable, English post-war life and the terrible suffering of European Jews. There is, however, a crucial distinction between Uncle Ike’s glib use of the first-person plural and Glickman’s imaginative recreation of camp life.
Unlike his childhood game of pretending to be a victim of the Nazis, Glickman’s dressing-up of his sister in the boots is an entirely self-conscious strategy, in the service of his art. Glickman’s fetishistic focus on the boots is both a metaphor for his larger fetishisation of the Holocaust itself and a self-reflexive attempt to satirise this fetishisation, in his own work and that of others. His use of the boot as a synecdoche for fascism invokes, and perhaps parodies, both Sylvia Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’ (itself notorious for its appropriation of the suffering of Jews, which has polarised critics ever since its publication) and ‘the distracted cartoons of ignominy and death’ (in Glickman’s own words) of the American Jewish artist and one-time collaborator with Philip Roth, Philip Guston, whose art is replete with menacing boots. At one point, Glickman observes that it was ‘hardly surprising’ that Jews of his parents’ generation, ‘too old to want to know the gory details, not old enough to know they had to’ (119), ‘warmed to Holocaust literature only slowly’ (117). He then describes a cartoon that he once drew, which consisted of

Two old Jews arguing. One with a bubble coming out of his mouth declaring ‘Never again’, the other with his fists in the air and an answering bubble, ‘If I have to hear you saying never again ever again . . .’ But I was unable to place it . . . Hard to get people to laugh at the Holocaust. (119)

Kalooki Nights audaciously exploits the tension between the desire of some Jews of Jacobson’s generation to know all the ‘gory details’, and the necessity of recognising that their own historical situation prevents them from ever doing so; it is an attempt to make people laugh not at the events of the Holocaust itself but at the attempt to fetishise them.

The Finkler Question (2010)

If Kalooki Nights was concerned with the fetishisation of the Holocaust, The Finkler Question is concerned with the fetishisation of Jewishness. In my first book, I devoted a chapter to a recurring trope in post-war Jewish fiction on both sides of the Atlantic that I described as ‘The Gentile who mistook himself for a Jew’. Discussing Arthur Miller’s Focus (1945), Bernard Malamud’s The Assistant (1957), Frederick Raphael’s Lindmann (1963), Emily Prager’s Eve’s Tattoo (1992) and Jonathan Wilson’s The Hiding Room (1995), I argued that in these novels Gentile protagonists ‘embrace Jewishness both as an escape from, and confirmation of, their own self-hatred’ (Brauner 2001: 73).
Although it was published fifteen years after the last of these novels, and apparently emerges from a very different context (the upsurge of antisemitism in the UK in the wake of the second intifada and the subsequent launch of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement), *The Finkler Question* conforms in almost every particular to the characteristics that I identified in my 2001 study.

The novel centres on the friendship between three men: Julian Treslove, an erstwhile BBC radio producer who now earns his living as a celebrity lookalike (the joke being that he doesn’t resemble any particular celebrity); Sam Finkler, a media personality and author of a series of popular philosophy books; and Libor Sevcik, their old schoolteacher and a former Hollywood gossip columnist. Finkler and Sevcik are Jewish; Treslove is not. Yet he is obsessed with Jews and all things Jewish. The title of the novel alludes to Treslove’s idiosyncratic adoption, at school, of the word Finkler as a synonym, or substitute, for the word ‘Jew’.

Before he met Finkler, Treslove had never met a Jew... He supposed a Jew would be like the word Jew – small and dark and beetling. A secret person. But Finkler was almost orange and spilled out of his clothes... If this was what all Jews looked like, Treslove thought, then Finkler... was a better name for them than Jew. So that was what he called them privately – Finklers.

He would have liked to tell his friend this. It took away the stigma, he thought. The minute you talked about the *Finkler Question*, say, or the *Finklerish Conspiracy*, you sucked out the toxins. But he was never quite able to get around to explaining this to Finkler himself. (Jacobson 2010a: 17)

This passage illustrates nicely Treslove’s confused thinking about Jews. He is confounded when his initial assumption – *contra* Saussure – that there would be an inherent relationship between the signifier (the word ‘Jew’) and the signified (an actual Jew) proves to be unfounded. Yet he fails to recognise that the assumption itself is both subjective and inflected by antisemitic tropes: the word ‘Jew’ is small but no more necessarily dark or beetling than its near-homonym ‘dew’, for example, which has completely different connotations. The image of the Jew as a beetle invokes Nazi propaganda, in which Jews were routinely represented as vermin, as well as echoing Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ – which has often been read as an allegorical representation of antisemitism – in which Gregor Samsa, after being
transformed into an ‘ungeheures Ungeziefer’ (literally ‘monstrous vermin’, but often translated as beetle), is ostracised, confined and finally starved to death. Similarly, the idea of the Jew as ‘a secret person’ smacks of conspiracy theories about covert cabals of Jews secretly pulling all the levers of power, and of older suspicions that Jews who had converted to Christianity were continuing privately to practise their original religion. More specifically, it seems to anticipate a passage much later in the novel when, feeling like a ‘piggy in the middle’ as Finkler and Treslove’s Jewish partner argue, Treslove attributes his feeling of exclusion to his lack of fluency in ‘[t]he secret language of the Jews’ (177), a staple of antisemitic lore which is discussed in detail in Sander Gilman’s study *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (1990). Furthermore, Treslove’s revised hypothesis that Jews might instead typically resemble Finkler remains underpinned by the irrational idea that there is a uniform appearance shared by ‘all Jews’, an idea that is again consistent with Nazi racial theory but not with modern science. The second paragraph belatedly acknowledges the antisemitic history that forms the hinterland to Treslove’s cogitations, but only in order to make the claim that Treslove’s rebranding of Jews as Finklers might somehow neutralise this history, provide an antidote to its poison. The suggestion that Treslove ‘would have liked’ to share his thoughts on Jewishness with Finkler but ‘was never quite able to get around’ to it is of course a rationalisation: the reason that Treslove never actually confides in Finkler is that he senses, unconsciously, if not consciously, that his views are at best suspect, at worst offensive. The final irony of this passage lies in Treslove’s choice of Finkler as a representative Jew, since as an adult Finkler is accused of being a self-hating Jew after he becomes a leading light in a group of British Jews whose acronym ASH (an abbreviation of Ashamed Jews) refers to their desire to distance themselves from, and in some way atone for, the actions of Israel.21

On a conscious level, Treslove venerates Jews: ‘Jews, Treslove thought, admiringly. Jews and music. Jews and families. Jews and loyalties. (Finkler accepted)’ (94). The parenthetical caveat here refers to the fact that Finkler is a serial adulterer but of course if Finkler is Treslove’s archetypal Jew then he can hardly be exceptional. More fundamentally, philosemitism and antisemitism are two sides of the same coin: both insist on the essential otherness of the Jew. Treslove’s approbation of Jews easily slips into envy, from envy to over-identification,
and from over-identification to resentment. Treslove’s fantasy of becoming a Jew begins with the idle notion that his association with Finkler and Sevcik might confer on him the status of an honorary Jew, or even that their friendship might transform him, like the ‘human chameleon’ Zelig, in Woody Allen’s film, into a Jew of their own stamp: ‘Treslove . . . loved it when Libor linked his arm in the street, feeling it made a clever little wizened European Jew out of him’ (94). Once again, under the guise of a philosemitic fondness, and through Jacobson’s characteristic use of third-person narration that takes on the language and perspective of the character whose thoughts it is describing, Treslove has recourse to antisemitic stereotypes: to the notion that Jews are ‘clever’ and ‘little’ (the latter term suggesting condescension, as well as describing a physical attribute). It is this craving for intimate knowledge of Jewishness that motivates him to begin an affair with Tyler, Finkler’s wife, whom he mistakenly believes is Jewish – ‘[h]e had to discover what it would be like to penetrate the moist dark womanly mysteriousness of a Finkleress’ (75) – and later to embark on a relationship with Sevcik’s niece, Hephzibah Weizenbaum. Again, Treslove’s conviction that there is a peculiar difference that attaches to Jewish women – a difference that is both mystified and sexualised – exposes troubling prejudices beneath the surface of his desire. In this context, the nature of that desire – to penetrate – refers not just to the sexual act, but to a metaphysical desire to plumb the depths of what he feels to be a powerful otherness.

Both women understand that their fascination for Treslove has to do with his preoccupation with Jewishness. For Tyler Finkler, who dies of cancer before the action of the novel begins, this preoccupation is rooted in a homosocial friendship/rivalry that is a recurring feature of Jacobson’s work, as we have seen. In their first post-coital conversation, before Treslove tells her that she is ‘his first . . . Jewess’ and she disabuses him, she dismisses Treslove’s professions of love, telling him ‘[t]hat was Sam you were doing it to . . . doing him or doing him over, let’s not finesse here’ (76), and later assuring him that she ‘know[s] the bizarre way masculine friendship works’; that she is ‘a means for you two to work out your rivalry’ (117). Although Treslove denies to Tyler that she is the conduit through which he attains intimacy with Finkler, he does find himself wondering ‘whether following Finkler into his wife’s vagina was a pleasure in itself’ (78–79) and also ‘whether Finkler had, in effect, koshered his wife from the inside . . . so that he, Treslove, could believe he had as
good as had a Jewess’ (79). Here, the mask of philosemitism slips – whereas in the earlier passage expressing his abstract desire for a Jewish woman, the hypothetical object of desire was referred to as a ‘Finkleress’, Finkler’s wife here is simply a ‘Jewess’, rendered so in Treslove’s heated imagination by virtue of a perverse (and crude) process of sexual ‘koshering’, a paradoxical kind of purification by contamination. If the emphasis in these formulations on the female genitalia as the site of vicarious male intimacy and of male possession and usurpation reinforces Tyler’s theory that Treslove’s desire for her is a sublimated desire for her husband, then Treslove’s interest in Jewish male genitalia, specifically the ritual of circumcision, ‘a subject to which he frequently return[s]’ (195) during his relationship with Hephzibah, takes matters further.

Treslove first broaches the topic internally, vowing, in the euphoria of deciding to move in with Hephzibah, to ‘study . . . be circumcised . . . and make Finkler jokes’ (159) in order to entice her to marry him. Here Treslove invokes versions of cultural Jewishness that have gained popular currency – the ‘smart Jew’ and the ‘funny Jew’ – alongside the notion of the Jew as physically (and theologically) defined by the ritual of circumcision. Later, he asks Hephzibah explicitly if she is concerned by his uncircumcised state. She tells him that it is ‘immaterial’ to her, to which he responds, punningly, that it ‘isn’t exactly immaterial to me’, before embarking on extensive research on the topic, on the basis that he needs to understand its meaning ‘if he was ever to get to the bottom of who Finklers were and what they really wanted’ (199), and debating with Finkler Maimonides’ theory that the purpose of circumcision is to ‘limit sexual intercourse’ (201). Like Tyler before her, Hephzibah is more amused than alarmed at Treslove’s Jew-obsession, but in time she feels the ‘strain [of] being a representative of your people to a man who had decided to idealise them’ (227) and also begins to wonder if ‘his Jewish thing was really about . . . a search for some identity that came with more inwrought despondency than he could manufacture out of his own gene pool’, a desire to claim a part of ‘the whole fucking Jewish catastrophe?’ (224). This might be interpreted as ‘victim envy’, a phenomenon that has manifested itself in such disparate cases as Binjamin Wilkomirski’s appropriation of the identity of a Holocaust survivor and Rachel Dolezal’s impersonation of a black woman, but in Treslove’s case his over-identification with Jews is the product of a profound ambivalence both towards Jewishness and towards himself.22
The pivotal event in what is a characteristically uneventful novel occurs early on when, after an evening spent with Finkler and Sevcik at the latter’s house, Treslove, on his way home, pauses for a moment to look into the window of a music shop and is mugged. During the assault, his assailant shouts something at Treslove that he can’t quite make out, but that sounds like “You Jule”, or “You jewel” or “You Ju!” (33). Reflecting compulsively on the incident, Treslove becomes increasingly convinced that the words he heard were ‘You Jew’, denoting that his attacker had mistaken him for a Jew (though he never considers the possible significance of the fact that ‘Ju’, the first syllable of his name, and ‘Jew’ are homonyms).

Treslove’s conviction is reinforced by a sexual encounter with Kimberley, an American woman whom he meets while attending a Jane Austen-themed party, as a Colin Firth-as-Mr-Darcy lookalike (Jacobson has satirical fun with this scenario, but the multi-layered simulation – Finkler impersonating an actor who is impersonating a fictional character – also has existential implications). Although she mistakes him for Brad Pitt initially, ‘when she looked more closely into his face she had seen someone else’, or rather a series of alternative celebrities:

Dustin Hoffmann . . . Adam Sandler . . . Billy Crystal. He had stopped her there, but had she continued the list would in all likelihood . . . have included David Schwimmer, Jerry Seinfeld, Jerry Springer, Ben Stiller, David Duchovny, Kevin Kline, Jeff Goldblum, Woody Allen, Groucho fucking Marx . . .
Fucking Finklers every one. (72)

Quite apart from the evident absurdity of the idea that Treslove might be mistaken for all these different performers, given the radical difference in their ages and appearances, Treslove conveniently overlooks the fact that when Kimberley first guesses that he is supposed to be Brad Pitt, it was ‘the third time that evening that Treslove . . . had been taken for Brad Pitt’ (69). Moreover, the list of Jewish personalities that Treslove extrapolates from the initial trio of Hoffman, Sandler and Crystal is both ludicrously arbitrary and peculiarly pointed towards the tail end, as the last three names comprise an actor (Jeff Goldblum) arguably best known for his appearance in the David Cronenberg version of the horror film *The Fly* (1986), in which, like Gregor Samsa, the protagonist is transformed into a monstrous insect; a comedian (Groucho Marx) whose most famous aphorism is the self-hating adage that he would never want to belong to a club
that would admit him as a member; and another comic writer and actor (Woody Allen) whose films include *Zelig* (1983), a parable about assimilation and self-hatred in which the protagonist is a ‘human chameleon’ who takes on the appearance and attributes of other humans with whom he shares any proximity.

Towards the end of the novel Treslove is described in terms that might easily be applied to Allen’s anti-hero: he ‘looked like everyone and everybody but was in fact no one and nobody’, but whereas Leonard Zelig’s condition seems to be an allegory of the historical predicament of the ‘rootless cosmopolitan’ Jew – at home everywhere and nowhere, determined to fit in and yet defined, by that very compulsion, as inalienably alien, finally unassimilable – Treslove seeks to become Jewish in order to alleviate a maudlin, self-indulgent sense of existential ennui, the belief that, ‘for someone as indeterminate as he was’ life is ‘an absurd disgrace, to be exceeded in disgracefulness only by death’ (290). Paradoxically, then, Treslove might be said most closely to approach an authentic sense of Jewishness in his sense of dislocation, his inability to feel authentically anyone or anything.

To his Jewish friends, however, Treslove’s desire to rebrand himself as Jewish seems at best naive and sentimental, at worst opportunistic and presumptuous. At one point, Sevcik tells Treslove that his interest in Jewishness, and in his niece, is the result of his desire to access a kind of vicarious martyrdom, to ‘throw [himself] into the flames’ (244) as ‘a short cut to catastrophe’ (245), the first of these phrases suggesting a kind of martyrdom, as well as invoking the crematoria of the death camps. Later in the same conversation, after Treslove confides his suspicions that Hephzibah is cheating on him with Finkler, Sevcik tells him that his fears are rooted in the belief that ‘they can’t stop themselves because they are driven by an ungovernable sexual urge, Jew to Jew’ and that he is an antisemite, before implicitly absolving him of any blame by announcing that ‘we’re all anti-Semites’ (249). This exchange uncannily echoes a scene in Emily Prager’s *Eve’s Tattoo* (1992), another of those novels in which a Gentile mistakes herself for a Jew. In this case, Eve, a Gentile journalist who has the numbers of someone she believes to be a Jewish victim of the Holocaust inked onto her forearm, denounces her former Jewish lover and his new girlfriend (whom she presumes to be Jewish without any evidence) because of sexual jealousy and is then told by a sympathetic camp survivor that ‘all Christians are antisemites’ while he himself is what he calls an ‘anti-Hamite’, a hater of Christians (Prager 1992: 145).
Similarly, when Treslove tells Finkler that he thinks that his (Treslove’s) mugger might have been motivated by antisemitism, his old friend alleges that ‘there has always been some part of us you have wanted’ (Jacobson 2010a: 67), an awkwardly ambiguous formulation that begs a number of questions. Does ‘wanted’ mean ‘wished to possess’, ‘lacked’ or ‘desired’? Does ‘part’ refer to an abstraction – some notional essence of Jewishness – or, more concretely, to a specific body part, namely the circumcised penis with which Treslove is so obsessed? Certainly, Treslove fetishises Jewishness, not just erotically, but in the sense of investing it with magical powers and in the sense, to invoke Freud’s formulation again, that he is ‘able at one and the same time to believe in his fantasy and to recognise that it is nothing but a fantasy’ (Freud 1950b: 199).

Treslove cherishes his fantasy of living a Jewish life with Hephzibah, a fantasy in which ‘they would walk together to the lake . . . watch the herons, talk about Jews and Nature . . . and wait for Libor to join them’, whereupon the two men would ‘stroll together arm in arm . . . swapping anecdotes in a Yiddish in which Treslove would by then have become wonderfully proficient’ (Jacobson 2010a: 295). Yet the very terms in which he couches this pastoral vision reinforces the sense that Jews are alien to him. He imagines enjoying nature with Hephzibah but at the same time discussing with her the historical Jewish indifference to the charms of the natural world, puzzling over ‘why the Bible was light on natural description’ (295). Similarly, the scenario in which he converses fluently in Yiddish with Sevcik invokes again the idea of the secret language of the Jews. The final image that Treslove conjures up – ‘a demi-Eden’ in which he wanders, ‘a Jew on each arm and a Jew, of sorts, in the middle’ (295) – exemplifies perfectly the ambivalence of his fetishisation of Jewishness. Ostensibly a vision of perfect harmony, it is also tinged with melancholy, and not just because it recalls the famous closing lines of Milton’s Paradise Lost (1674) in which Adam and Eve, newly exiled from paradise, ‘hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow/Through Eden took their solitary way’ (2006: XII, 649–50). The fact that he refers to his two imaginary companions not by their names but generically, as Jews, and that he cannot imagine himself, even in this utopian version of the future, as any more than ‘a Jew, of sorts’, inhabiting a similarly qualified paradise, a ‘demi-Eden’, betrays his own awareness that his fantasy ‘is nothing but a fantasy’ and that he cannot bridge the gap between himself and his Jewish companions;
that he will not ‘ever get to the bottom of the things Finklers did and didn’t do’ (Jacobson 2010a: 40).

At times Treslove’s repressed recognition that he cannot move beyond seeing Jews as Jews manifests itself in his projection onto the Jewish other the perception of himself as an exotic other: the conviction that the Jews in his life had always seen him as a ‘curiosity’, ‘a bit of a barbarian’ (261) or even ‘a jest . . . [t]he real McGoy’ (260); a phrase that, in the context of dialectical Jewish/Gentile relations, recalls Alex Portnoy’s masturbatory fantasy figure, Thereal McCoy, in Portnoy’s Complaint (Roth 1969: 131). At other times, he fears that he is guilty of ‘play[ing] the Finkler’ in order to partake of their ‘proneness to disaster’ (80). Yet in spite of the novel’s pitiless, tragicomical exposure of Treslove’s delusions and prejudices, The Finkler Question finishes on a plangent note, with Hephzibah and Finkler saying Kaddish for Sevcik (‘[a]s a non-Jew Treslove was not permitted to recite the prayer for the dead’) and mourning at the same time for Treslove himself, from whom they have both become estranged, but whom, at the same time, they realise, they ‘never really knew’ (306, 307). The similarities and differences between this ending and that of Zadie Smith’s The Autograph Man (2002) are instructive. Smith’s novel also finishes with the saying of Kaddish, but in that case the protagonist, Alex Li-Tandem, a Chinese Jew, is practically frog-marched by his Jewish friends to a cemetery in order to say the prayer for his father, in contrast with the pointed exclusion of Treslove from the ritual at which the man whom he regarded as a surrogate father is mourned.

In her essay on The Finkler Question, Aída Bild argues that at the close of the novel ‘the threat of anti-Semitism has not disappeared, and yet, because comedy permeates the whole novel, we are not left with a sense of failure or despair, but with the feeling that life should be enjoyed, celebrated and affirmed’ (Bild 2013: 99), but this seems to me to misjudge the tone of the book. The comedy in The Finkler Question is dark rather than celebratory and it is difficult to reconcile the notion that ‘life should be enjoyed . . . and affirmed’ with the suicide of Sevcik, the most engaging character in the novel, who is ultimately unable to see the point of life after the death of his wife. This suicide casts a shadow over the whole novel, as does the sense of a new wave of antisemitism in England, and in this sense The Finkler Question anticipates what is undoubtedly Jacobson’s bleakest novel, J.
In common with most of Jacobson’s previous novels, nothing much happens in the way of incident in J, the second of Jacobson’s novels to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The novel centres on the relationship between two characters with odd-sounding names, Kevern Cohen and Ailinn Solomons, who live in Port Reuben, a small fishing village in what appears to be a near-future version of England. Their courtship is disturbed by the fact that Kevern falls under suspicion for the murder of a woman with whom he has a brief encounter shortly before her death, and by their increasing suspicions that their romantic involvement with each other is somehow being orchestrated by mysterious external forces. Eventually they get married and Ailinn becomes pregnant but the novel ends with Kevern committing suicide as an act of resistance to his conviction that he has been a pawn in a game of social engineering, a scheme to reintroduce Jews into a society that has apparently attempted to eliminate them.

If it resembles his previous fiction in its relative lack of action, in other respects J is atypical. It is one of Jacobson’s most postmodernist, most dialogical, most intertextual novels: a metafictional novel of texts-within-texts, multiple voices and literary allusions. Its self-consciousness about its own status as a dystopian novel is signalled by two apparently incidental details: the observation of Densdell Kroplik, the barber and amateur historian of the English fishing village in which most of the action of J takes place, that ‘[w]e’ve lived through the end of the world . . . This is the aftermath. This is the post-apocalypse’ (Jacobson 2014a: 214) and the narrator’s observation that as a schoolboy Kevern had ‘read descriptions of the capital city, the Necropolis’, written by ‘post-apocalyptic fantasists of a generation before’ (131–32). There are references to Borges and Larkin (201), to Shakespeare (the title of Book Four, ‘The Chimes at Midnight’, takes its name from Orson Welles’ screen adaptation of Shakespeare’s second tetralogy of history plays, which itself takes the quotation from 2 Henry IV (183), to Hitchcock’s The Birds (224) and of course to Philip Roth (the title of Chapter 7 of Book Two is ‘Nussbaum Unbound’, an allusion to Roth’s novel Zuckerman Unbound, which itself borrows from Shelley’s poem ‘Prometheus Unbound’, which in turn is a rewriting of Aeschylus’s play Prometheus Bound [223]). There are also allusions to canonical Holocaust fiction, most notably when Ailinn’s grandmother leaves Ailinn’s mother in a convent with a note...
saying that ‘she is more shawl than baby’ (266), invoking Cynthia Ozick’s story ‘The Shawl’, in which the shawl is used to conceal the presence of a baby and ultimately becomes a metonym for the child itself. However, the most pervasive allusions in J are to Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* (1851).

The pivotal event of J takes place before the narrative begins and its very existence is contested. Although it is only ever referred to, ambiguously, as ‘WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED’ (a phrase whose provisionality is at odds with the emphatic quality granted by its invariable capitalisation) and its nature is disclosed partially and elliptically, it gradually emerges from the cumulative details that a second holocaust of sorts has wiped out a significant percentage of the Jewish population of the United Kingdom. As a consequence, the government implements a programme called ‘Operation Ishmael’ which compels all citizens to take a Jewish surname (as well as similarly renaming places), in order to erase the stigma of difference and disable any lingering antisemitism. Ailinn’s favourite book is *Moby Dick* – one day she ‘wake[s] to the knowledge that [she is] the whale’ (70) – and the implicit analogy between Jews and the white whale is reinforced by the epigraph to Book Two: ‘All that most maddens and torments . . . all the subtle demonism of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick’ (153). When Kevern and Ailinn, on their return to Kevern’s cottage after a brief holiday in Necropolis, discover that his home has been broken into in their absence, Kevern observes that ‘Ahab’s been’ (166).

On the face of it, *Moby Dick*, a mid-nineteenth-century American novel set aboard a commercial whaling ship, is an odd intertext for an English dystopian novel set in a future period of the twenty-first century. Yet *Moby Dick* offers Jacobson more than an analogy for antisemitism in Ahab’s irrational, obsessive hatred of the whale; it also provides a model of formal audacity. *Moby Dick* is an extraordinarily heterogeneous book, consisting not just of the main narrative in which Ahab hunts down the whale but of essays on every conceivable aspect of whaling, episodes written in the form of playscripts, rhetorical set-pieces, dramatic monologues and philosophical debates.

The main narrative of J is similarly interspersed with reports on Kevern by Professor Edward Zermansky, a teacher of the ‘Benign Visual Arts’ at the Bethesda Academy, where Kevern takes classes (Jacobson 2014a: 29); excerpts from the diary and letters of Ailinn’s
grandmother, Rebecca, a Jew who marries a Christian minister to her parents’ dismay; and from an unpublished manuscript, ‘A Crazy Person’s History of Defilement, for Use in Schools’, authored by Kevern’s grandmother, as well as a number of other paratexts – fables, accounts of pogroms – whose provenance is unclear.

If $J$ is more complex, formally, than any of Jacobson’s earlier novels, and a move into uncharted territory, generically, as a novel set in a dystopian future, its central conceit – that a second holocaust has occurred and been erased from the historical record, as a result of which the letter J itself has become taboo – would not have been altogether unexpected to those familiar with his previous work. There is a moment, at the end of an interview with Tablet magazine, when Jacobson exclaims that it would be a good idea to ‘do it [explore the enigma of enduring antisemitism in England] the Philip Roth way, you know one of those good Roth novels in which he goes bad. The Plot against America. The Plot against England and set it forward – hey, you’ve given me an idea!’ (Jacobson 2010i). If this seems to mark the particular originary moment of the idea for $J$, its roots can be traced back to Jacobson’s earlier work. Henry Nagel, the protagonist of The Making of Henry, finds as a schoolboy that ‘Jew talk embarrassed him’ and inverts the letters of the noun to defuse its charge: ‘Wej talk was different. Back slang the fact of your being a Jew and you did something with it. Joking was fine. Otherwise leave it’ (Jacobson 2005a: 147). As an adult, Henry thinks that ‘every J should keep the J word somewhere about his person’ (294). In Kalooki Nights, the father of the protagonist, Max Glickman, having spent years ‘thinking up ways to make Jewishness less of a burden to Jews. $J/J = j’$, decides to ‘ditch the J-word as a denomination of suffering altogether’ (Jacobson 2006a: 7, 18). Embarking on The Act of Love, Jacobson told an interviewer, he ‘nearly set about writing the novel without using any word containing the letter “J”’ (Florence 2008). In The Finkler Question, as we have seen, the name Finkler itself is adopted as a sort of euphemism for ‘Jew’ by Treslove, in an attempt to remove the ‘stigma’ that he feels attaches to it. Additionally, Finkler becomes involved, and subsequently disillusioned, with a group of Jews critical of Israel who style themselves ASH (an abbreviation of Ashamed Jews), of whom the narrator observes that ‘it wasn’t the J word but the Z word [Zionist] of which they were ashamed’ (Jacobson 2010a: 137). Yet The Finkler Question also contains a grim prophecy that implicitly dissolves the distinction between the J-word and the Z-word and clearly
anticipates J: ‘He [Treslove] thought there would be no settling this [the ongoing problem of antisemitism] until there’d been another Holocaust’ (267).

Jacobson’s novel is not the first to imagine another version of the Holocaust – his namesake, Dan Jacobson, did so brilliantly in _The God-Fearer_ (1992), which takes place in a world in which the (implicitly) Jewish majority persecute the ‘Christer’ minority – and _J_ might also owe something to another work of alternative history by another British Jewish writer, George Steiner. Best known for his criticism, Steiner also published fiction and in his novel _The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H._ (1981), he imagines that Adolf Hitler has secretly survived the war and has been hiding in the jungle. After he is tracked down by Liebermann, a Nazi-hunter, he is put on trial then and there for genocide. In a rhetorical tour de force, which controversially echoed ideas that Steiner had mooted in his own work, Steiner’s Hitler argues that the implacable nature of the Jewish God provoked an inevitable backlash from Gentiles who resented being made to feel guilty as a result of their failure to satisfy Yahweh’s exacting moral standards. This argument is rehearsed – and deconstructed – in Jacobson’s essay ‘Will we ever be forgiven for the Holocaust?’, later released as an e-book, _When Will the Jews Be Forgiven for the Holocaust?_ (Jacobson 2013d and 2015a). However, it also underpins _J_ and appears, implicitly, in the form of one of the books that Esme gives Ailinn to educate her, albeit obliquely, about Jewish history: ‘It was her forbears’ austerity of conscience, according to one writer, that had always troubled humanity and explained the hostility they encountered wherever they went . . . [t]hey set too high a standard’ (Jacobson 2014a: 312). There is also perhaps an echo of Bryan Cheyette’s thesis in _Constructions of ‘The Jew’ in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945_ (1993) that the antisemitism of modernist figures such as Pound and Eliot originated in their ‘horror of becoming “semitically indistinct”’ and to ‘a repressed identification with “the Jew”’, respectively (Cheyette 1993: 272, 271). In order to ‘restore the country’s equipoise of hate’, argues Esme Nussbaum, the architect of a scheme to reintroduce Jews to Britain for that purpose, ‘[y]ou have to see a version of yourself – where you’ve come from or where you might, if you’re not careful, end up – before you can do the cheek-to-cheek of hate’ (Jacobson 2014a: 251). Nussbaum’s repurposing of the phrase ‘cheek-to-cheek’, ordinarily used in the context of amorous rather than hostile intimacy (as in the Fred
Astaire song from the musical *Top Hat*), emphasises the way in which the history of antisemitism has been bound up with profoundly ambivalent feelings on the part of its perpetrators.

In addition to these possible sources, there are also precedents for the scenario that Jacobson imagines in two of Philip Roth’s novels: *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. In the second chapter of the former, ‘Judea’, the fanatical militant Zionist settler Mordecai Lipman predicts that there will be ‘a second Holocaust’ in the United States if American Jews don’t emigrate to Israel, while in the following chapter, ‘Aloft’, Jimmy Ben-Joseph, a Jewish terrorist, hijacks an El-Al flight and demands the ‘immediate closing and dismantling of Yad Vashem’ (Israel’s Holocaust Remembrance Museum), insisting in his mini-manifesto, headed ‘FORGET REMEMBERING’: ‘Never must we utter the name “Nazi” again’ (Roth 1987: 169). For Jimmy, the continued survival of the Jewish people depends on its willingness to jettison the conventional pieties attending Holocaust remembrance, an idea that is also entertained in *Kalooki Nights*, whose narrator asks: ‘which is the true freedom – saying never again in the hope that never again, or never again saying never again?’ (Jacobson 2006a: 119). Jimmy’s conviction seems to have been borne out by the events that lie behind *J*, at least as interpreted by Zermansky, the author of regular secret reports on Kevern whose purpose appears to be to diagnose the extent to which his art, and temperament, demonstrate signs of his genetic Jewish inheritance, of which he is unaware. Zermansky is hardly the most reliable of commentators – he is pompous, self-regarding, officious and tedious – but his analysis of ‘WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED’ is notable for its echoes of the theories of Jimmy:

In the bad old days, ‘never forget’ was a guiding maxim . . . but this led first to wholesale neuroticism and impotence and then, as was surely inevitable, to the great falling-out, if there was one. Rather than go on perpetuating the neurasthenic concept of victimisation . . . the never-forgetters would have done better carving ‘I Forgive You’ on their stones. In return for which, we might have forgiven them. (Jacobson 2014a: 35)

It is also echoed, with dark irony, in one of Rebecca’s letters, in which she breezily dismisses her parents’ fears of another antisemitic conflagration by referring to her father as ‘honorary chair of the Never Again league’, to which her father responds by calling her ‘life president of the “It Couldn’t Happen Here Society”’ (207).
Jimmy Ben-Joseph’s perversion of the familiar mantra ‘Never again’ is echoed in the equally fanatical, rather lengthier manifesto issued by Moishe Pipik (Moses Bellybutton if translated into English), the comical Yiddish nickname given by the protagonist Roth to his impersonator in *Operation Shylock*. Whereas Jimmy believes that erasing all memory of the Holocaust is the only way to end ‘forty years’ of wandering ‘in the wilderness of our great grief’ (Roth 1987: 169), Pipik envisions another kind of redemptive reversal of history, advocating the adoption of a policy he calls Diasporism, in which Holocaust survivors would return to their wartime homes in Europe, reintegrating into the societies that had persecuted them in order to facilitate forgiveness and atonement. Jimmy is clearly unhinged and Pipik’s philosophy – exemplified by the ‘Anti-Semites Anonymous’ group, complete with twelve-step recovery programme – is certainly provocative, probably perverse and possibly absurd. Yet as thought experiments about the long-term consequences of the Holocaust and the troubling tenacity of antisemitism their views are valuable, a value that is enhanced rather than undermined by their strangeness.

Whereas this strangeness constitutes only one aspect of Roth’s Israel novels, it manifests itself in every aspect of *J*, beginning with its enigmatic title.³ It refers to the ‘J-word’, ‘Jew’, a word which never appears in the novel and yet whose absence is a kind of oppressive omnipresence, and to the self-censoring practice of Kevern’s father, who always ‘put two fingers across his mouth, like a tramp sucking a cigarette butt he’d found in a rubbish bin’ in order ‘to stifle the letter j before it left his lips’ (Jacobson 2014a: 6). This simile is appropriately ambiguous. On the one hand, the image of the tramp with the butt might suggest the savouring of a treat not easily accessed, the butt perhaps prompting memories of former times when cigarettes might have been more readily available. On the other hand, it might suggest desperation – a futile attempt to derive some satisfaction from bitter discarded fag-ends that have been recovered from rubbish – and the tramp might be sampling it furtively, shamefully, gingerly. This ambiguity extends to the way in which the censored version of the letter J is rendered in the novel: with two lines through it. This is a way of expressing typographically its taboo nature but paradoxically it draws attention to itself on the page, its novelty and conspicuousness implicit undermining the agenda promoted by Ofnow, the ‘non-statutory monitor of the public mood’, whose purpose is to keep everything as anodyne as possible (16). To facilitate
this pacific programme, it prohibits not only Jewishness but also other j-words such as jazz and jokes (in this context it is perhaps worth remembering that Jacobson is also a j-word), while promoting proverbial platitudes such as ‘THE OVEREXAMINED LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING’ and ‘YESTERDAY IS A LESSON WE CAN LEARN ONLY BY LOOKING TO TOMORROW’ (85, capitals in original). Banal though these statements are, they recall the insidious inversions of Big Brother’s slogans (‘War is Peace. Freedom Is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength’) from George Orwell’s 1984 (1949) and are designed to reinforce a collective amnesia that erases the horror of the second holocaust that appears to have taken place in the recent past. Just as the title of J invokes this censorship through the suppression of its missing letters, so the novel as a whole discloses the historical revisionism at its heart obliquely, by suggestion and association.

J begins with a fable, entitled ‘Argument’, in which a wolf and a tarantula debate who is the more successful hunter. The wolf wins their wager but only by consuming all his proximate potential prey so that ultimately he has to eat his own family to survive, after which, he confesses, ‘I will have no option but to eat myself’ (vii). Initially enigmatic, when read retrospectively the wolf seems to represent the Gentile community in J, whose success in eradicating Jews has the unintended consequence of setting themselves against each other. The implication seems to be that without the Jews as scapegoats, on whom any festering resentments can be blamed, the Gentile world would gradually destroy itself, an idea which again echoes George Steiner, who, in In Bluebeard’s Castle, argued that the Holocaust ‘enacted a suicidal impulse in Western civilization’ (Steiner 1971: 46). In J Esme Nussbaum, ‘an intelligent and enthusiastic thirty-two-year-old researcher employed by Ofnow, the non-statutory monitor of the Public Mood’, produces a report detailing the ‘emergence of a new and vicious quarrelsomeness in the home, in the workplace, on our roads and even on the playing fields’ (17) and expresses her concern to her boss that ‘we will find ourselves repeating the mistakes that led to WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED . . . Only this time it will not be on others that we vent our anger and mistrust’ (18). It is as the result of her research that she sets up Kevern and Ailinn (whose confidante she becomes and with whom she supplies the letters of her Jewish convert grandmother, Rebecca), with the implicit aim of promoting a union which will lead to the re-establishment of a Jewish community that will act as a lightning-rod for the violent tendencies
of her countrymen. Although it is in one sense a reversal of the government’s prior policy of erasing (the perception of) racial difference by imposing Jewish names on all its citizens in order to forestall any recurrence of genocidal violence – a policy based on the rationale that ‘Blood needed to be thinned not thickened if there was to be none of that dense, overpopulated insalubriousness that had been the cause of discord’ (49) – it is, in another sense, simply the other side of the same coin of genetic engineering. Just as the terms ‘insalubriousness’ and ‘discord’ are euphemisms designed to gloss over the horrors of ‘WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED’ – itself the ne plus ultra of equivocation and vagueness – so Esme’s reference to ‘mistakes’ and ‘others’ implicates her in the bureaucratic evasion of responsibility for the campaign against the Jews.

Much later in the novel there is another fable, ‘The Allegory of the Frog’. This relates the tale of a frog who, after being ‘thrown into a pan of boiling water’, jumps out, exclaiming ‘What do you take me for? . . . Some kind of a schlemiel?’ (211). The next day, however, the frog is ‘lowered gently, even lovingly, into a pan of lukewarm water’ before gradually being boiled alive, all the while ‘blissfully unaware’ of his fate (211). Here the frog seems to represent the Jews of England, for whom the danger of impending extinction is masked by the incremental progress of the campaign against them, or perhaps it represents more specifically Kevern and Ailinn, who only gradually become aware of the way in which they are being manipulated by the state. It also seems to anticipate Zermansky’s (unwittingly) ironic tribute to ‘my fellow professionals . . . without whom the campaign to drive them [the Jews] from the face of the earth, to make of them vagabonds and fugitives, a pariah people cursed in every mouth, would not have been conducted in so civilised a manner’ (88), which in turn seems to echo Hannah Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil, as exemplified in Adolf Eichmann’s slavish bureaucratic implementation of genocidal policy.32

This campaign seems to have been characterised by certain landmark events that resemble some of the notorious events of the Nazi Holocaust. The title of Chapter 2, ‘Twitternacht’ (122), clearly echoes Kristallnacht, and is directly preceded by an untitled passage whose provenance is unclear, but which seems to be either a vision of a historical atrocity, or the memory of an eyewitness of ‘Twitternacht’. The passage begins with an unidentified ‘he’ hearing something that ‘sounded like singing’ and ‘smell[ing] burning’; he then sees a young
boy ‘falling from a high wall’ behind which flames illuminate a ‘charred sky’, accompanied by a chant whose final word he can’t make out: ‘Down with the enemies of –!’ (28). The sequel to this episode appears directly before Chapter 9:

Glass shatters . . . The smashing mania, the shattering of every window in the land. After all the fires, all the beheadings . . . the frenzy to kill has not abated. Only now it has become centralised . . . They were always going to be put aboard this train. There are some among their fellow passengers for whom the train is a relief now that they are finally on it. (122)

Taken together, these uncontextualised, unattributed texts hint at a familiar history. What begins as a series of pogroms, tolerated and possibly sponsored by the state, becomes a systematic, bureaucratically organised, genocidal programme. The account of the young boy falling from the tower of a keep recalls the notorious massacre at Clifford’s Tower in 1190, in which the Jews of York were trapped inside a tower, after initially seeking refuge there from a wave of antisemitic attacks. Besieged by a mob of townspeople abetted by soldiers, the Jews took their own lives, setting fire to the timber tower. The second passage begins by invoking Kristallnacht, which is so called because of the smashing of the glass of Jewish homes and businesses in Nazi Germany in 1938, and ends by making an implicit connection between the trains that transported Jews to the death camps during the Second World War and the trains on which these English Jews find themselves. On the one hand, there is a sense that these events are symbolic rather than specific: both episodes have a hallucinatory quality to them and are located neither chronologically nor geographically, and the ‘mania’ and ‘frenzy’ of the anonymous perpetrators, with their indistinct cries of bloodlust, seem redolent of murderous mobs in general. On the other hand, the references to trains, the shattering of glass, and the smell of burning bodies carry clear resonances of the Holocaust and the observation that the victims ‘were always going to be put aboard this train’ suggests that this is an inevitable process, the outcome of a predetermined historical pattern of cause and effect.

These tensions between ostensibly factual documents (journal entries, reports, letters, unpublished autobiographical manuscripts) and explicitly fictional parables – between the concrete and the abstract, the realistic and the fantastic, the familiar and the unfamiliar – are
what animate J and make its revelations seem, as in all the best fiction, both startling and inexorable. Just before the final volume of the novel (‘Book Three’) there is a text, written in the same fonts as the earlier accounts of the conflagration at the keep and of the events of Twitternacht, that is identified as having been taken ‘From an unwritten letter by Ailinn’s great-grandfather Wolfie Lestchinsky to his daughter Rebecca’ (292). Whether this implies that these earlier documents were also authored by Lestchinsky is unclear, but what is clear is that it contains a diagnosis, and prognosis, of antisemitism as a disease that cannot be eradicated but will always recur when the conditions are right:

What will it take? The same as it has always taken. The application of a spiritual calumny . . . to economic instability, inflamed nationalism, an unemployed and malleable populace . . . the pertinaciousness of old libels . . . (292)

Although this letter appears to have been composed mentally in response to Rebecca’s naive conviction that ‘[w]e have been accepted and are ready to join everybody else now’ (209), and in anticipation of the second holocaust in which he and his wife perish, it also functions as a prophecy of future eruptions of genocidal violence.

Much of the power of J derives from the way in which it mimics the stealthy progress of antisemitism itself and traces the similarly gradual progress of Kevern from a position of complacency, or at least resignation, to recognition, outrage and finally defiance. At the start of the novel, Kevern ‘was not happy, but he was as happy here in his unhappiness, he accepted, as he was ever going to be’ (11), a phrase whose caveats and qualifications make it almost self-cancelling. He is initially troubled by a sense of undefined, inherited difference – ‘it worried him that he might have sounded like his father, lisping and slithering in another language’ (7) – and later by his father’s transmission of his own mother’s mantra: ‘Disgust destroys you’ (62). Kevern’s internalised prejudice (his fears about ‘lisping and slithering’ echo antisemitic representations of Jews in authors such as Dickens and Disraeli), a species of self-disgust, is both echoed and challenged by his grandmother’s enigmatic warning: ‘Could it have been that she wasn’t a woman who felt disgust . . . but a woman who inspired it?’ (63).

As he discovers more about his past and about WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, an obscure feeling of alienation – that ‘the village of Port Reuben, in which his papers certified he’d been born, had
always been rejecting him like an organ it didn’t need’ (267) – crystals-
llises into a conviction of intractable otherness, a suspicion that ‘we
look like [vermin] to them’ (298).

Even as the language of the novel, and Kevern’s own understand-
ing of the poisonous legacy of antisemitism, become more explicit,
that word, along with ‘Holocaust’ and of course the J-word, remain
unspoken and unwritten. Instead, the horror of WHAT HAPPENED,
IF IT HAPPENED is suggested by the responses to it, from the emer-
gence of a black market in ‘souvenir passports of those who hadn’t
got away . . . belts and badges worn by the hate gangs of the time,
incitement posters, pennants, cartoons, signed confessions’ (131), to
Detective Inspector Gutkind’s denial that any atrocities took place: ‘If
there’d been a massacre where were the bodies? Where were the pits,
the evidence of funeral pyres and gallows, where the photograph-
 SHALLS or other recorded proof of burned-out houses, streets, entire
suburbs?’ (219). As these passages satirising the commodification
and fetishisation of Holocaust memorabilia and the sophistical argu-
ments of Holocaust ‘revisionists’, respectively, make clear, J, like all
dystopian fictions, offers an oblique commentary on contemporary
culture. At times this commentary becomes pointedly topical, as when
Rozenwyn Feigenblat, a librarian, tells Kevern that during WHAT
HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED ice-cream vans with the slogan ‘Leave
Now or Face Arrest’ were sent round the country (198), an episode
that clearly echoes the notorious advertising campaign of 2013 organ-
ised by Theresa May during her time as Home Secretary, in which
vans with the slogan ‘Go Home, or Face Arrest’ were sent to areas
with large immigrant communities.

Just as these threats signalled the gradual escalation of hostility
and presaged more violent measures, so the attempts of the contem-
porary regime to influence intellectual interests and to police popular
taste appear at first to be understated – ‘libraries put gentle obstacles
in the way of research’ (5) rather than burning books, jazz is not
‘banned exactly’ but rather ‘encouraged to fall into desuetude’ (13) –
but are symptomatic of more radical repression. As the novel pro-
ceeds, it emerges that, in the post-WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT
HAPPENED era, as Zermansky puts it, unaware of the Helleresque
irony, ‘[t]his is a free society, so long as you don’t plan to travel’ (85),
and that any ‘unambiguous depravity of taste [in art] has to be
reported’ (283), as Zermansky does with Kevern’s art and that of his
mother, which includes a sketch of ‘a child looking out of the barred
window of a train, figures huddled in fear’ (268). These measures recall, respectively, the restrictions on movement and the denunciation of ‘degenerate art’ in Nazi Germany, but the general atmosphere of paranoia and distrust, and the omnipresence of surveillance, with neighbours routinely spying and informing on one another, seems if anything more reminiscent of the German Democratic Republic.

Ultimately, as with so much of Jacobson’s work, ethical values are inextricable from, and manifested in, competing discourses. The banal platitudes and slippery linguistic evasions of the state – most conspicuous in WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED and the tortuous equivocations that attend any (non-)discussion of it, such as Esme Nussbaum’s assertion that ‘just as there is no blame to be apportioned, so there are no amends to be made, were amends appropriate and were there any way of making them’ (18) – are contrasted with the ‘complex, warring sentences’, the ‘paradox and bitterness and laceration’ and ‘endless disputation’ (305) associated by an anonymous senior official from Ofniow with Jewish art. As a modest Jewish artist himself – he specialises in carving wooden lovespoons but also paints and draws – Kevern refuses to make himself complicit in a ‘mission to repeat what should never be repeated’ (326), the implication being that repopulating the British isles with Jews would lead inevitably to (yet) another holocaust.35 In a self-conscious echo, and refutation, of the phrase that resounds throughout the novel, its narrator uses free indirect discourse to report Kevern’s conviction that ‘[w]hat happened didn’t always happen because you wanted it to, but what you made of it was your responsibility’ (327). It is the final irony of the novel – irony being another concept of which, according to Zermansky, the Jews ‘were overfond’ (32) – that its final act is one of singular self-extinction, with the aim of preventing mass murder.

**Shylock is My Name (2016)**

Like *J*, *Shylock is My Name* was something of a departure for Jacobson and at the same time a reprise of previous preoccupations. Jacobson’s first book was *Shakespeare’s Magnanimity*, a fact which is recalled by the dedication of *Shylock is My Name* to Wilbur Sanders, the co-author of that early scholarly work. Shakespeare’s influence on Jacobson’s fiction, too, has always been pervasive: his prose is crammed with Shakespearean references and allusions, to the extent that it sometimes feels compulsive, not so much a stylistic tic as a form of literary
compulsion. In this novel, for example, in addition to innumerable allusions to, and direct quotations from, *The Merchant of Venice*, there are quotations from *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Twelfth Night*. Furthermore, *Shylock is My Name* is not a conventional novel but more of a hybrid text: as Tim Martin put it in his review, it is ‘[p]art remake, part satire and part symposium’ (Martin 2016).

Yet, as Jacobson notes in the acknowledgements at the end of the novel, the origins of this novel were ‘like no other’ since it was commissioned as part of a series of rewritings of Shakespeare plays published by the Hogarth Press. The acknowledgements conclude with a list of the books Jacobson cites as having found ‘invaluable’ while revisiting *The Merchant of Venice*: these include another retelling of Shakespeare’s play by Arnold Wesker, a fellow British Jewish writer, and, right at the end of the list, Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*. The presence of Roth’s novel ought, in one sense, to be no surprise, since I have already noted its influence on other works by Jacobson. Yet it is surprising, on two grounds: firstly, because for Jacobson to acknowledge explicitly a debt to Roth in this way is, even in the context of the trajectory I traced at the start of this chapter, a remarkable rejection of his early-career refutations of the Roth connection; and secondly, because its presence highlights the absence of the Roth novel that one might have expected to see here, *Operation Shylock*.

The connections between *Operation Shylock* and Shakespeare’s play are not immediately obvious. Notwithstanding its title (which refers to a secret Mossad operation supposedly undertaken by the narrator, with the code words ‘Three thousand ducats’), Roth’s novel is certainly not in any sense a rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice* and in fact its central conceit – the doubling of the protagonist, Philip Roth, by an impersonator – owes more to *The Comedy of Errors* than to the later comedy. Yet there is a trial at the centre of the novel – that of John Demjanjuk, who was accused of being Ivan the Terrible, the notorious perpetrator of horrific war crimes at Treblinka – which provides an inverted echo of Shylock’s trial in *The Merchant of Venice*. Whereas in Shakespeare’s play a Jewish defendant is tried by a Christian state for seeking the death of one of its Christian citizens, in Roth’s novel a Jewish state tries a Christian man for allegedly participating in the mass murder of Jews. More importantly, the novel contains a lengthy lecture on the role of Shylock in the history of antisemitism, delivered by David Supposnik, a former Shin Bet agent.
turned antiquarian bookseller. Supposnik argues that ‘in the modern world, the Jew has been perpetually on trial’ and that ‘this trial which never ends, begins with the trial of Shylock’ (Roth 1993: 274); that representations of Shylock ‘as a wronged Jew rightfully vengeful’ constitute ‘a vulgar sentimental offense not only against the genuine abhorrence of the Jew that animated Shakespeare and his era but to the long illustrious chronicle of European Jew-baiting’ (275); and that the stage direction ‘Exit Jew’, after ‘Shylock has been robbed of his daughter, stripped of his wealth, and compelled to convert’, anticipates ‘the Hitlerian dream of a Judenrein Europe’ (276).

Shylock is My Name grapples with all these issues, but whereas Supposnik is convinced that Shakespeare harboured a ‘genuine abhorrence of the Jew’, Strulovitch imagines that Shakespeare might have had Jewish ancestry himself. Far from spreading what he calls ‘the ancient stain’ (Jacobson 2016a: 15) of antisemitism, and so ultimately facilitating the Holocaust, Strulovitch speculates that Shakespeare might have conjured up Shylock as a way of recuperating a Jewish heritage that the ‘Sh’ at the start of his own name might have both hinted at and occulted, and as a way of restoring a virtual Jewish presence to the otherwise ‘Judenfrei Elizabeth England’ (8), the deliberately anachronistic use of the Nazi term perhaps suggesting a rebuttal of Supposnik’s similarly ahistorical allegations. However, the main debt that Jacobson’s novel owes to Roth’s is arguably not thematic but structural: the doubling of ‘Philip Roth’ in Operation Shylock is mirrored in Shylock is My Name, in which Shylock and Strulovitch are doppelgängers, or at least secret sharers.

The connections between the two men are evident from the start: they meet in a cemetery, where they are both mourning Leahs – in Strulovitch’s case his mother, in Shylock’s his wife; they both have daughters who elope with Gentile men who are not gentlemen; they both become embroiled in a conflict with professional rivals which escalates into a feud and leads to a trial of sorts. Rather than slavishly following Shakespeare’s plot, Jacobson playfully subverts it. Instead of creating characters who correspond precisely to the dramatis personae of The Merchant of Venice, Jacobson conflates certain characters: for example D’Anton, Strulovitch’s antagonist, fulfils the role not just of Antonio but also Balthazar, faithful servant to Portia, while Gratan Howsome is an amalgamation of Lorenzo and Gratiano. In other cases, such as the extravagantly named wealthy heiress Anna Livia Plurabelle Cleopatra a Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever
Christine Shalcross (Plury, for short) who owns a ‘Porsche Carrera’ (22), the brand-name of the car that is a homophone for the heroine of *The Merchant of Venice*, characters in the novel are modern-day counterparts of their originals. Yet the relationship between Shylock and Strulovitch is more complex and ambiguous: rather than standing in for Shylock, Strulovitch co-exists with him. Whether Shylock is a ghost, a revenant, a version of the Wandering Jew, or a golem of sorts, born of Strulovitch’s imagination, is never entirely clear. Nor is it clear whether Strulovitch is doomed to reprise Shylock’s fate or overturn it: to redeem, rehabilitate, vindicate or deviate from his avatar, whose avatar he also is.

The heart of the novel is in the long conversations that Strulovitch and Shylock have about the nature of Jewishness, antisemitism, art and literature. These conversations sometimes invoke Roth explicitly, as when Shylock tells Strulovitch that he is reading to his dead wife from *Portnoy’s Complaint* since ‘she [Leah] is disposed to laugh’ (66) or when Shylock recommends that his friend read ‘the one where Roth lets the anti-circumcisionists have it with both barrels’, arguing that ‘it was conceived to refute the pastoral’ (135). When Strulovitch asks ‘What in God’s name does refuting the pastoral mean?’ Shylock responds with a question, albeit one without a question mark: ‘You ask me that! You who venture into your own garden as though it’s snake-infested’ (136). This exchange is slyly self-reflexive, of course, since much of Jacobson’s *oeuvre*, as I suggested in the first chapter, can be read as a comical refutation of the pastoral. It also initiates one of the key strands of the plot. Dismayed that his daughter has taken up (and taken off) with Gratan Howsome, a professional footballer and ‘hyper-possessive uneducated uber-goy’ (107), a shaygets who ‘couldn’t even think one thing at a time’ (206), Strulovitch decides that he will bless their union on condition that Howsome convert to Judaism, specifically that he undergo circumcision – and this corresponds to Shylock’s demand for the pound of flesh from Antonio in Shakespeare’s play.

Later, Strulovitch reflects on this conversation, asking himself ‘Were Roth and Shylock and the other Jewish sages right, was circumcision an act of the highest human responsibility, a badge not of backwardness but enlightenment?’ (144). Notwithstanding the irony of referring to Roth – for so long the scourge of, and the subject of condemnation by, the Jewish establishment – as a source of ancient wisdom and defender of the faith, in apposition with ‘other Jewish
sages’, it is Shylock’s intervention, and his invocation of Roth, which transforms the subject of circumcision from the punchline to a joke to the engine of a potentially tragic conflict. This shift in tone reflects the movement of the novel itself, which, like Shakespeare’s play, begins with gentle melancholy before lurching towards bitterness and finishing on a note of uneasy reconciliation.

Early in the novel, there a number of comical references to circumcision. In a satirical scene reminiscent of Jacobson’s first novels, Strulovitch, while an undergraduate at Oxford, ‘slaloming through the world’s religions’, encounters a psychiatrist ‘whose field of specialism was circumcision trauma within the family’ who informs him that the tendency of Jewish mothers to ‘mollycoddle their sons’ is the result of an attempt to ‘expiate’ their guilt at having allowed ‘blood to be spilled’ (13), recalling the passage from *The Mighty Walzer* that I discussed earlier in this chapter. On their honeymoon in Venice, Strulovitch tells his first wife, Ophelia-Jane, a ‘Jew-mad Christian’ (9) who had married him ‘to get close to the tragic experience of the Hebrews’ (10), a Jewish joke whose punchline invokes circumcision. However, the joke has serious consequences. It exposes the fact that, as is invariably the case, Ophelia-Jane’s philosemitism is simply another version of antisemitism: she implores Strulovitch to tell ‘no more jokes about your thing’, enunciating the word as though ‘it were an importunate advance from a foul-smelling stranger’ (12). Invoking one of the staples of medieval antisemitism – the myth of the *foetor Judaicus* – in this context implicitly connects circumcision with the history of Judeophobia. Later, Shylock reinforces the connection, suggesting that the practice of circumcision has contributed to the evolution of antisemitism: ‘they used to believe we bled like women, then they accused us of castrating Christian children . . . It’s a mix of ignorance and dread that goes back to circumcision. If we would do that to ourselves, what might we not do to them?’ (69). He also suggests the threat of forcible circumcision was implied in the words he uses in Shakespeare’s play to dictate the terms of his loan to Antonio: ‘it is salacious to talk of taking flesh from whatever part of him pleases him, as though it is a sexual act and my fleshly pleasure is contingent on it’ (150). Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Shylock becomes an astute critic of the play in which he appears, and his close reading of his own speech prompts Strulovitch to make explicit in his contract with Howsome and D’Anton the sexual subtext of *The Merchant of Venice*. 
Any contemporary rewriting of a Shakespeare play is also implicitly a (re)reading of its source, but *Shylock is My Name* also engages explicitly, and in detail, with a number of the most controversial features of Shakespeare’s play. For example, it features a compelling defence of Shylock’s infamous exclamation ‘My ducats, my daughter’, which has conventionally been interpreted as evidence that he is as distressed by the theft of the former as by the elopement of the latter: ‘in the outrage of loss, objects and people lose their delineation. The robbed commonly speak of violation, feeling the theft of things as keenly as an attack on their person’ (52–53). The word ‘violation’ is particularly resonant in the context of a play in which Shylock is stripped of all his rights, possessions and faith, and in the context of a novel in which Strulovitch, in revenge for what he sees as the violation of his daughter (she is only fifteen when Gratan begins an affair with her), threatens to violate Gratan’s person – and D’Anton’s, since he offers to forfeit his foreskin in lieu of Gratan’s if the latter fails to honour his contract with Strulovitch. The phrase ‘attack on their person’ also seems to allude to Antonio’s ambiguous expression of friendship for Bassanio (Barnaby in Jacobson’s novel), a line that is pointedly paraphrased in *Shylock is My Name*: ‘His purse, his person, his extremest means, lay all unlocked to his young friend’s occasions’ (132). The word ‘unlocked’, in turn, returns us to the idea of theft – to Shylock’s name, to his vain attempts to protect himself and his household, in locking his doors and attempting to lock away his daughter – and to the connection in the play between marriage rings as ‘objects’ that can be stolen, or traded, and as symbolic representations of female genitalia, whose ‘loss’ involves a violation of the person, or at least the prising open of something that has been sealed.45 Finally, Strulovitch’s sympathetic interpretation of lines that have conventionally been adduced as evidence of Shylock’s materialism complement Shylock’s own deconstruction of Lorenzo’s praise of Jessica:

She was not daughter to her father’s manners, she said, but Lorenzo, the rascal who pilfered her, along with those who conspired in her misappropriation, could not stop commenting on her difference from the man she was ashamed to call father, her gentler (for which read more Gentile) disposition . . . the fairness of her looks . . . and when all you can remark is difference then all you are aware of is similarity. (84)

Shylock’s use of ‘pilfered’ and ‘misappropriation’ might ostensibly seem to reinforce the notion that he is guilty of objectifying – and
commodifying – his own daughter, but in the context of the discussion above it might also suggest that it is Lorenzo and his co-conspirators who see her as a prize to be won (as Bassanio does of Portia), and who value her not for any personal qualities but as one of her father’s valuables. Furthermore, Shylock suggests, this value is likely to depreciate, or collapse altogether, because it is based on a superficial appreciation of her difference from her father which is expressed so insistently as to imply, paradoxically, that they will ‘never reconcile themselves to the fact that she was Jewish’ (84). To adapt a line from another Shakespeare play: Lorenzo doth protest too much.

It is this intricate, intertextual interplay which makes *Shylock is My Name* one of Jacobson’s most richly textured novels. There are penetrating discussions of many other episodes from Shakespeare’s play and the debates that they have inspired: for example Strulovitch cross-examines Shylock as to the status of Tubal’s report to Shylock of Jessica’s spending spree (‘Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, in one night four score ducats’ [201]): ‘Did you ever consider that Tubal might have lied to you?’ (202); ‘What if he conjured the monkey out of his own Jewish terrors?’ (203). However, the novel repeatedly returns to two related questions. Did Shylock intend his ‘merry jest’ in earnest from the outset? And, if he had been allowed to proceed, would he have actually murdered Antonio? Rather than providing definitive answers to these questions, Shylock explores their larger implications, gently chiding Strulovitch for seeking ‘an explanation for what cannot be explained’ (151) and posing his own, unsettling questions: ‘What is intention? Whatever his intention, would Abraham have gone on to kill Isaac?’ (178); ‘If you prick us do we not bleed, but if we prick back do we not shed blood?’ (182). The implications of drawing attention to the structural similarities between the trial scene and the *Akedah* are radical: rather than reviving the old canard of the Jew as Christ-killer, it frames the climactic scene in Shakespeare’s play in terms that align Shylock with the great patriarch and founder of monotheism, Abraham, and suggests that he is an instrument of divine agency, rather than a would-be deicide. However, it also recasts Antonio as an innocent child, a role that is at odds with Shylock’s argument that Antonio was a self-regarding masochist, ‘undeserving’ of ‘[t]he tragedy he had always sought out for himself’ (151). Similarly, the modification of one of the most famous lines from the play – from one of the most famous speeches in the canon – highlights a troubling double standard: that Shylock, and by extension
Jews in general, are granted humanity only while they are victims, not when they are aggressors. As Jacobson put it rather more pithily in *Roots Schmoots*, it is ‘an immutable truth [that] the only good Jew is a tragic Jew’ (Jacobson 1993a: 190).

It is at this juncture that *Shylock is My Name* recalls aspects of *The Finkler Question* and *J*: like these two novels, it is interested in the relationship between different modes of antisemitism, and between these different forms of Judeophobia and internalised antisemitism, or self-hatred. At one point, Shylock tells Strulovitch that whereas ‘[t]hey used to spit on me, now they tell me Jewish jokes’ (63), and when Strulovitch suggests that this represents progress, Shylock asks why ‘they can’t see a Jew without thinking they have to tell him a joke. Do they sing Suwanee every time they meet a black man?’ (63). Although he isn’t persuaded by Shylock’s argument at this stage of the novel, later Strulovitch comes to the conclusion that it was ‘[b]etter . . . when our enemies wore their loathing on their sleeves, called us misbelievers, infidels, inexcusable dogs, whipped us, kicked us, dishonoured, disempowered, dispossessed us, but at least didn’t deliver the final insult of accusing us of paranoia’ (119), his language echoing the insults that are thrown at Shylock in Shakespeare’s play. At the same time, Strulovitch can’t help wondering whether ‘he was turning into one of those Jews who saw insults to his Jewishness everywhere’, ‘conjuring [D’Anton] up out of the hatred we bear each other?’ (116). However, if Strulovitch really is imagining D’Anton, or at least projecting antisemitic beliefs onto him, then it might be that he is doing so out of the hatred he bears for himself rather than his antagonist. After all, although Strulovitch is ‘awed by Shylock’ he also finds ‘his all-round Jewish exactingness, exacting’ (199). After he proposes the establishment of a gallery devoted to British Jewish art, to be named after his parents, Morris and Leah Strulovitch, in the so-called Golden Triangle, an affluent area of Cheshire where the novel is set, he quickly regrets it, detecting ‘the stench of alien malevolence’ (recalling the *foetor Judaicus* again) which hangs about their names, ‘ready to run from such an incantation of evil’ (116).

Strulovitch’s ambivalence towards his own heritage becomes active self-hatred in his daughter, who, echoing Treslove in *The Finkler Question*, finds the word ‘Jew’ itself intrinsically unappealing – ‘It’s such a horrible little word . . . Jew. It sounds like a black beetle with spikes’ (187) – associating it with an image that recalls Kafka’s parable of self-hatred, *Metamorphosis*. According to Shylock, the insidious
inroads that antisemitism can make into the consciousnesses of Jews is reflected in the ambivalence that they feel towards him: ‘These Jews . . . They don’t know whether to cry for me, disown me or explain me. Just as they don’t know whether to explain or disown themselves’ (194). Shylock’s use of the third person plural, and his reference to ‘these Jews’, suggests that he, too, is ambivalent about his own ethnicity, but if he is not immune to the problems he identifies, his is nonetheless the most articulate analysis in the novel of Jewishness, in all its complexity and self-contradiction. It is he who pithily sums up the way in which those subjected to systematic oppression often internalise the views of their oppressors – ‘the victim ingests the views of his tormentor’ (68) – and who sees most clearly that philosemitism is simply one side of the coin on the other side of which is antisemitism, satirising the postmodernist valorisation of diasporism in the process:

Being a stranger is what we do . . . Citizens of everywhere and nowhere, dandified tramps subsisting wherever we can squeeze ourselves in, at the edges and in the crevices. Precarious but urbane, like flâneurs clinging to a rock face, expressing our marvellously creative marginality. (64)

Parroting some of the buzzwords of scholarship in the Anglophone academy over recent decades (‘flâneurs’, ‘marginality’), and deploying the paradoxes (‘Citizens of everywhere and nowhere’) and oxymorons (‘dandified tramps’) beloved of post-structuralists (but also, it should be said, of Jacobson himself), Shylock not only challenges the conventional pieties of contemporary critical discourse but also the preferences of his own author. It is Shylock, too, who helps Strulovitch engineer the ingenious reversal of the trial scene, thereby redeeming them both. After Strulovitch demands that Gratan Howsome return with his daughter from their elopement to Venice and that he undergo circumcision, under threat of persecution for having sexual relations with a minor, D’Anton pledges his ‘person . . . as surety for Gratan’s return within a fortnight’ (225). As this date approaches with no sign of the couple returning, Plury offers to host the event as an episode of The Kitchen Counsellor, her popular television series which is part cookery programme, part celebrity therapy session. At first, Shylock, acting on behalf of Strulovitch, demurs, observing laconically that ‘[c]ircumcision is not a culinary happening’ (237) but then agrees, perhaps implicitly recognising that, as John Gross points out in Shylock (1992), another of the sources that
appears in Jacobson’s acknowledgements at the end of the novel, ‘there are hints . . . of a cannibalistic impulse’, deriving from the charge that Jews ‘feasted on Christians’ (Gross 1994: 29) in Shylock’s insistence on claiming his pound of flesh in Shakespeare’s play.

The parts of the novel satirising contemporary celebrity culture – Jacobson takes aim at the extravagant wealth and cultural poverty of footballers and their wives, as well as at a motley crew of models, rappers and social media stars who inhabit the Golden Triangle – are somewhat heavy-handed and the tone of these sections jars with the profound philosophical discussions of Strulovitch and Shylock. Nonetheless, the great coup de théâtre of Shylock is My Name occurs in the grounds of the Old Belfry, the Belmont-lite estate where Plury (whose own flesh has been repeatedly removed and reshaped by the cosmetic surgeon’s knife, and whose father himself ‘had hated Jews’) holds court while Strulovitch prosecutes his case against D’Anton (Jacobson 2016a: 259). Just as Strulovitch and D’Anton are about to leave the premises to go to the clinic where D’Anton is due to be circumcised, Shylock intervenes, delivering his own version of Portia’s famous ‘The quality of mercy’ speech. When Plury commends him on his performance, confessing that she was ‘surprised by the eloquent expression of sentiments one normally hears from the pulpit by a man who scowls’, Shylock responds ‘You mean a Jew who scowls’ and proceeds to berate her for her ignorance of the fact that ‘Jesus was a Jewish thinker’ and that charity and mercy are Jewish concepts that Christianity ‘appropriated’, with ‘breath-taking insolence’, committing ‘an immemorial act of theft from which nothing but sorrow has ever flowed’ (270).

Returning to the connection between the theft and (mis)appropriation of things and people, Shylock’s majestic but enraged rejoinder to Plury’s presumptuous compliment emphasises that the insult that Portia’s role as deus ex machina in The Merchant of Venice adds to the injury of the appropriation of Shylock’s possessions is the theologically and ethically spurious claim that this theft is done in the name of a Christian notion of mercy. The two further reversals that follow – the revelation that D’Anton could not be circumcised because he already had been as an infant, and the return of Beatrice to the family home, ‘unharmed’ and ‘unbetrothed’ (277) – seem, like the fifth act of Shakespeare’s play, somewhat anti-climactic. Jacobson’s novel ends with the two Jewish protagonists, Shylock and his double, Strulovitch, having claimed the moral high ground from their Christian antagonists. Just
as Shylock pulls the rug out from under Plury’s feet by pleading for mercy on behalf of his enemy, so Strulovitch confounds D’Anton’s expectations by donating to his rival the painting he had wanted to secure for Barnaby, ‘Love’s First Lesson’, by the British Jewish artist Solomon J. Solomon. Strulovitch explains in a letter to D’Anton that he is doing this as a ‘mark of [his] good grace’ (276), the phrase perhaps suggesting a subtle reciprocal appropriation, since ‘grace’ is a Christian theological concept. In spite of its flaws, Shylock is My Name also represents a triumph of sorts for Jacobson: the fulfilment of his great ambition as a novelist to enter the canon of English literature not as an interloper or an imitator – a ‘Jewish Jane Austen’ or an ‘English Philip Roth’ – but as an author who can trade wits, and match magnanimity, with the greatest English writer of them all.

Notes

1 The analogy had become so commonplace by the start of the twenty-first century that a kind of metadiscourse began to grow up around it, so that, rather than making the comparison directly, reviewers and critics would comment on the fact that other reviewers had made it, before adding their own contribution to the canon. For example, Tim Souster comments that ‘Howard Jacobson is often compared to Philip Roth’ and goes on to claim that ‘Jacobson’s prose crackles with intelligence and exuberance . . . in a way that recalls early Roth’ (Souster 2008: 20) and Allison Pearson concludes her summary of the Roth comparisons by observing that ‘[l]ike Roth, Jacobson has made versions of himself his subject, gnawing his own entrails’ (Pearson 2003: 1).

2 In 2006 he told Rosenthal that ‘[w]hen people said I was like Philip Roth I had never read Philip Roth’, attributing this to his Cambridge education: ‘I disapproved of Philip Roth. Leavisites didn’t read modern writers’ (Rosenthal 2006: 20). In 2010, he reiterated that ‘[w]hen my first novel came out and people said he’s like Philip Roth, I hadn’t read any Philip Roth then’ (Jacobson 2010i).

3 If such a coupling seems absurd even on the metaphorical level, it is worth noting in passing that David Greenham makes a persuasive case for the affinities between Austen’s novel Emma (1815) and Roth’s Sabbath’s Theater (see Greenham 2005).

4 For an account of the controversy, see Flood 2011.

5 Notwithstanding Jacobson’s own claim that Kalooki Nights is ‘the most Jewish book ever written’ (Buckley 2006: 23), it is not necessarily even the most Jewish book that he has written, allowing of course for the fact that such judgements are necessarily subjective.
For a detailed exploration of the relationship between comedy and psychoanalysis in Roth’s novel, see Brauner 2010.

There is also, perhaps, an echo of the famous opening of J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*: ‘If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth’ (Salinger 1964: 1).

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), where he claims that ‘[w]hen our children come to hear of ritual circumcision, they think of castration’ (Freud 2001: 177).

There is perhaps another echo of Roth’s *The Counterlife* here, in which Nathan Zuckerman’s Gentile partner is named Maria Freshfield.

Another Yiddish term, which Walzer translates as ‘[v]erbal lumberjacking’ (53).

Jacobson himself confirmed that *The Mighty Walzer* is in part a love-letter to his father when he told Lynn Barber that, growing up, he had ‘wished I was Martin Amis and had a novelist for a father instead of a market trader. So that novel [*The Mighty Walzer*] was partly an act of atonement’ (Barber 2012: 22).

Waxman seems to be at least partly based on Frank Cohen, a childhood friend of Jacobson’s who has made a fortune dealing in contemporary art and is often referred to as ‘the Saatchi of the North’. Jacobson has interviewed Cohen twice: for *The Guardian* in 2003 and for *The Telegraph* in 2012.

Writing of his childhood in Newark, Roth emphasises that among his group of friends ‘[it] would have seemed to us strange not to be Jewish’ but that at the same time through the ‘intense adolescent camaraderie’ of these Jewish schoolmates, particularly their shared love of baseball, they ‘were deepening [their] Americanness’ (Roth 1989: 31, italics in original).

Jacobson discussed the question of Superman’s Jewishness at length in an article in *The Times* that appeared the year before *Kalooki Nights* (Jacobson 2005c).

Like Philip Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* (1979, later collected in *Zuckerman Bound* [1985]), Auslander’s novel *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012) explores the premise that Anne Frank (or someone impersonating her) might have survived the Holocaust, but in its iconoclastic treatment of the Holocaust and victim envy it seems to owe more to *Kalooki Nights*.

These issues were raised implicitly in Jacobson’s first novel, *Coming From Behind*, in the following passage:

> It is pretty well established now that the Gestapo was never fully operational in Manchester in the 1950s. But that did not prevent Sefton Goldberg’s early years from seeming every bit as fraught as
Anne Frank’s. The faintest rustle in the porch used to be enough to throw the Goldberg household into scenes of such unforgettable terrifying confusion that even now, whenever his doorbell rang, Sefton Goldberg wanted to throw himself under a table and wait with thumping heart, just as he did then, for his mother to peer through infinitesimally parted curtains . . . and assure him that the coast was clear. What she feared was not the secret police but something far worse – prying neighbours . . . (Jacobson 1984: 160)

In this context, Andrzej Gasiorek’s insistence on the distinction between the implied authorial point of view and that of Glickman himself – ‘the novelist displays a psychological penetration that is at odds with the aesthetic that Glickman promotes in his defense of satire and also systematically exposes Glickman’s emotional obtuseness’ (Gasiorek 2012: 893) – is valid, but doesn’t quite do justice to the nuanced relationship between author and protagonist.

There is also perhaps a reference here to ‘The Perforated Sheet’, the opening section of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1983), in which the narrator’s grandfather is exposed to different parts of his future wife’s body, under the pretext of attending to her in his capacity as a physician, so that he is incited, incrementally, to construct a mental image of her body without ever being allowed to see it in full.

Once again, Jacobson’s novel anticipates Auslander’s *Hope*, in which a friend of the protagonist’s mother’s finally exposes the latter’s claims to be a camp survivor: ‘I know your mother, said Mrs Rosengarten. We went to Camp Sackamanoff together. Up in the Catskills. The food was awful, young man, but it was a far cry from Auschwitz’ (Auslander 2012: 79).

Guston provided comic illustrations for a special edition of Roth’s novella *The Breast* (1975).

This is the most controversial aspect of the novel, with a number of critics objecting to what they saw as a denunciation of British Jews who criticise Israel, while Jacobson himself insisted that the object of his satire was not Jewish criticism of Israel per se but the conspicuous display of such criticism as a badge of honour. I agree with Ruth Gilbert, who argues that ‘the novel presents a robust satire of self-serving, anti-Zionism, but . . . moves beyond caricature of such easy targets, to develop a nuanced debate about issues of entitlement, public identification, belonging and attachment’ (Gilbert 2013: 92).

See Anne Karpf 2017 for a discussion of these cases and the more sinister manifestation of ‘victim envy’ in the ‘Me Too’ era.

This recalls an episode earlier in the novel when Sevcik remembers a conversation with his late wife, Malkie, whose parents are landlords of a block of ‘run-down flats in Willesden’. When Libor labels the tenants ‘human vermin’ when they call Malkie a ‘dirty money-grubbing Jew’
(210–11), she responds by telling him: ‘You are the anti-Semite, not they. You’re the one who sees the Jew in the Jew. And cannot bear to look’ (215).

24 Jacobson acknowledged in an interview with John Walsh that Port Reuben is a ‘thinly disguised version’ of Port Isaac in Cornwall (Walsh 2015: 94).

25 In her excellent article on the novel, however, Ruth Gilbert offers ‘a heterotopic reading of J which focuses more on the novel’s exploration of [what Gregory Claeys has referred to as] “out of reach” places and less on its oppressive dystopian structures’ (Gilbert 2016: 10). Focusing on the representation of Necropolis, Gilbert suggests that it is ‘a profoundly dislocated and disconcerting space’ whose lack of clear ‘outlines’ mirrors the way in which Jewishness itself is ‘placed, simultaneously, at both the centre and the edges of the text’ (Gilbert 2016: 9).

26 The title of the operation presumably alludes to the famous opening line of Moby Dick, ‘Call me Ishmael’, an ambiguous imperative that may indicate that this name is an alias. This renaming project might also be an allusion to another famous dystopian novel for which Jacobson has expressed admiration, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), in which the regime of Gilead also renames people and places for political purposes.

27 This recalls Jacobson musing in Roots Schmoots on ‘why Jews think it’s so funny to say, “I’m Jewish”’, before concluding that ‘the comedy . . . must reside in the release, in the act of saying the unsayable’ (Jacobson 1993a: 81).

28 In In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture (1971), Steiner claims that ‘the Jew became, as it were, the “bad conscience” of Western history’ (Steiner 1971: 45), a view that is amplified by the narrator of Steiner’s story, ‘Cake’, who observes that ‘[b]y their unending misery, the Jews have put mankind in the wrong. Their presence is a reproach’ (Steiner 1996: 219).

29 In this piece, Jacobson observes, sardonically, that ‘[f]or foisting the lie of the 6 million upon the world, Jews are accused of compounding the wickedness that was the just cause of Holocaust – had it only happened – in the first place’ (Jacobson 2013d: 22). The phrase ‘had it only happened’, used here to satirise the double-think of Holocaust deniers, anticipates the chilling formulation at the heart of J.

30 This is another literary reference – to Sinclair Lewis’s novel It Can’t Happen Here (1935), which, like Philip Roth’s The Plot against America (2004), explores a scenario in which a populist demagogue becomes US president and establishes an authoritarian, quasi-fascist regime.

31 In choosing a single letter of the alphabet as the title of the novel, Jacobson is placing it in the tradition of other postmodernist texts, notably Thomas Pynchon’s V (1963), John Berger’s G (1972) and Tom McCarthy’s C (2010). Given the stigma attached to the letter, however, Jacobson might
also have had in mind the ‘A’ of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), an association that is reinforced by the proximity of that novel, historically and canonically, to *Moby Dick* (1851), J’s most significant intertext.

This has become an over-used and widely misunderstood idea, but Judith Butler summarises Arendt’s position lucidly: ‘if a crime against humanity had become in some sense “banal” it was precisely because it was committed in a daily way, systematically, without being adequately named and opposed. In a sense, by calling a crime against humanity “banal”, she was trying to point to the way in which the crime had become for the criminals accepted, routinised, and implemented without moral revulsion and political indignation and resistance’ (Butler 2011).

There is also a reference in *J* to the other infamous blood libel case in medieval England, in which eighteen Jews were executed for the supposed ritual murder of a boy who became known as ‘Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln’. In *J*, Kevern and Ailinn visit Ashbrittle Cathedral, where they find a grave with the inscription ‘Little St. Alured of Ashbrittle, killed by –’ (120).

See Freedland 2016 and Bloom 2016.

Kevern’s conviction that antisemitism is ineradicable echoes Libor’s in *The Finkler Question*: ‘These things [Jew-hating etc.] didn’t go away. There was nowhere for them to go. They were indestructible, non-biodegradable. They waited in the great rubbish tip that was the human heart’ (154).

When Shylock talks to his deceased wife Leah at her graveside and imagines her answering him, he encourages her by echoing Hamlet’s exclamation to his father’s ghost, ‘Well said, old mole’ (16) and later, in conversation with the other protagonist of the novel, Simon Strulovitch, he tells him that ‘[t]here’s nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so’ (134), one of Hamlet’s rejoinders to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Strulovitch reflects that ‘[t]he universe decreed that fathers should love their daughters not wisely but too well’, adapting Othello’s infamous claim about the nature of his feelings for Desdemona; the narrator refers at one point to Strulovitch allowing the smell of ‘goats and monkeys’ (138) into his house, echoing Othello’s non sequitur in conversation with Ludovico; later Plurabelle says of Strulovitch’s daughter, Beatrice (named after the heroine of *Much Ado About Nothing*), that she ‘love[s] her despite her father the thick-lips’ (197), borrowing Iago’s racist epithet for Othello to describe Strulovitch.

When Strulovitch fears that he has been duped by D’Anton, Shylock sees him mouthing ‘I will do such things’ and supplies the bathetic sequel ‘What they are, yet I know not’, quoting the mad old king vowing revenge on his daughters. (195)

The final words of the novel are Malvolio’s valedictory vow of vengeance, here imagined by Strulovitch as the unspoken sentiments of his daughter, Beatrice. The ambiguity of this ending is perhaps heightened by the knowledge that Jacobson once observed that ‘Malvolio suffers a greater
humiliation than he deserves and I, for one, always hope he succeeds in taking his sworn revenge’ (Jacobson 2012d: 41).

The other novels in the series are: Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* (2016), a rewriting of *The Tempest*; Tracy Chevalier’s *New Boy* (2017), a rewriting of *Othello*; Jo Nesbo’s *Macbeth* (2018); Edward St. Aubyn’s *Dunbar* (2017), a rewriting of *King Lear*; Anne Tyler’s *Vinegar Girl* (2016), a rewriting of *The Taming of the Shrew*; and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Gap of Time* (2015), a rewriting of *The Winter’s Tale*.

Whereas Shylock resents Antonio for lending money gratis, thereby lowering the rates of interest that he can charge, Strulovitch and D’Anton are both art collectors, and Strulovitch owns a painting which D’Anton has promised to secure for his friend, Barnaby, so that he can present it to his amour, Plury.

What is clear is that Shylock shares Strulovitch’s consciousness in some way, so for example when the former asks the latter ‘How many jungle Jews do you know?’ and the narrator reports that ‘Offhand, Strulovitch could only think of Johnny Weismuller’ (51), Shylock immediately dismisses the thought, asserting that ‘Tarzan . . . wasn’t one of us’ (51–52) even though Strulovitch has not said anything aloud.

What Shylock has in mind is one of the most frequently cited passages from Roth’s work, from the final section of *The Counterlife*: ‘circumcision gives the lie to the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory, the appealing idyll of living “naturally,” unencumbered by man-made ritual’ (Roth 1987: 327).

A pseudo-scientific term for the belief that Jewish bodies emitted a foul odour.

Hence the slang term ‘clam’ (sometimes ‘bearded clam’), a euphemism for the vagina in the United States.

The irony of Shylock’s analogy is that the song was written by the Jewish composer, George Gershwin, and popularised by Al Jolson, a Jewish singer now notorious for his performances in blackface.

Strulovitch’s abortive plan for the museum of British Jewish art recalls Hephzibah Weizenbaum’s project of establishing a museum of Anglo-Jewish culture in *The Finkler Question*.

The origin of this part of the novel might be found in a piece that Jacobson published in 2000 in which he noted that “[i]n recent years a species of celebrity aristocracy has grown up here [in Cheshire], causing a measure of discontent to native Mancunians’ (Jacobson 2000d: 32). It is not clear whether Jacobson is indulging in hyperbole or revealing his ignorance of the economics of contemporary football when he makes Gratan Howsome – the recipient of a princely salary – an employee not of any Premier League club but of Stockport County, who had fallen out of the football league by the time of the publication of *Shylock is My Name* and whose players are unlikely to be found living in the ‘Golden Triangle’.