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"Show me a novel that's not comic …;"
Howard Jacobson's The Finkler Question

Howard Jacobson's work is funny, but seriously funny. He claims that comic novels should be taken seriously and that the distinction between 'comic novelist' and 'literary novelist' is to be abolished altogether: "Show me a novel that's not comic and I'll show you a novel that's not doing its job," he starts suggesting his discussion of comic novels (Jacobson, 2010b).

In the same article, Jacobson admits that in a period of stand-up comedies some people might argue "that we are laughing too much." Jacobson believes that "we have created a false division between laughter and thought, between comedy and seriousness," but "the exhilaration" of the funniest novels also offers "whatever else it is we now think we want from literature" (2010b). Jacobson regrets the "fear of comedy in the novel today" (qtd. in Díaz Bild 2013, 90). In his novel, he links comedy with the concept of the perfect Jewish joke that "would never finish" (Jacobson 2012). Jacobson regards the Jewish joke above all as a strategy for survival. It looks, of necessity, to the future. It anticipates a woe before that woe is visited upon us. It gets in first with the criticism and the cruelty. If anybody is going to knock us around it won't be the Cossacks, it will be ourselves. So that while a Jewish joke appears to be the perfecting of self-denigration, it is actually the opposite. It is the fruit of a perpetual vigilance and in the process demonstrates an intelligence that is, because it has to be, unremitting. (Jacobson 2012)

The Finkler Question (2010) fathoms issues of Jewish self-images in London. Andrew Motion, the former poet Laureate and chairman of the judges who made Howard Jacobson the 2010 winner of the Man Booker Prize, described the novel as "very clever and very funny," but also "a very sad, melancholic book. It is comic, it is laughter – but it is laughter in the dark" (Lyall 2010). Lezard confirms this intertwined reading of the novel: "Although it's true that The Finkler Question has its moments of high comedy, it also has moments of heartbreaking sadness […] But if there's one thing that everyone can agree on, it's that The Finkler Question is about Jewishness" (Lezard 2010). Like all good comedy the novel neither denies that its humour evolves from the tragedy of centuries-old anti-Semitism nor that laughter appears to be the only way to embrace the complexities of all possible perspectives shaping the paradoxes of Jewish self-images in the British diaspora. Jacobson is a Jewish writer, but at the same time he has repeatedly insisted on standing firmly in the tradition of the English novel. Therefore, he suggested that The Finkler Question is not really about Jewishness, but love. Both approaches to his novel seem to be true.

1 See the title of his book Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime (1997) and his Channel Four TV series.
2 The Finkler Question (Jacobson 2010a) will hereafter be referred to as FQ.
3 For this complex term, see Gilbert (2013, 1-19), for Jacobson (8-9) and for Israel in FQ (90-92).
In the New York Times, Howard Jacobson described himself as "an English writer who happens to know about Jews and would like to write like Jane Austen, with a little bit of Yiddish" and he rejected to be called an exclusively humorous author:

'To me, being a comic novelist is obviously to be serious, too – what else is there to be comic about? […] But when I hear people call me a comic novelist, I want to scream, because they mean something different. I can call myself a comic novelist, though, because I know what I mean when I say it.' (Lyall 2010)

These are undoubtedly very useful hints to understand how humour in this novel could be approached. It speaks for his self-consciousness as a writer that Howard Jacobson does not tell us what he means when he calls himself a comic novelist, but falls short of being derogatory about his readers' concept of it. In line with this and perhaps part of an explanation, is his insistence on being rather called "the Jewish Jane Austen" than "the English Philip Roth" (Lyall 2010; see also Maslin 2010). Maslin is reminded of Philip Roth or Woody Allen. Jacobson represents male Jewish identity in sexual relationships with (mainly) Gentile women in a very similar fashion.

The wickedness of Jacobson's humour seems deeply rooted in colliding narrative perspectives that split self-images and turn them into self-delusions. This is true not just of an author who has the self-consciousness to take part in all of them and still avoid almost completely any biased point of view. He also takes into account the self-delusions of his readers who might think they recognize one particular obsession among the diverse positions and activities Jacobson's characters cling to while miserably failing. It is human failure and the weaknesses of human nature quite generally speaking which breed instances of wicked humour. This is abstract enough a statement to insist on Jacobson's humour being not about content or any specific truths, but about manners, neither good manners nor bad manners, as Lyall (2010) believes, but the manners that help Jacobson's characters to carry themselves through their lives. His representations of manners, however, – as is always the case in what Jacobson calls "serious" novels – are not meant to be realistic, but rather illusions created by the highly artistic use of narrative conventions. Presenting literary form in such a way that we learn something about the playfulness of social conventions, without ever recognizing more than their witty hypocrisy, became a manifestation of Englishness in the tradition of the novel of manners. In the realm of narrative art, it was Jane Austen who excelled in this highly artistic way of creating texts which escape a realistic representation of the world and embrace literary conventions. This seriousness of literary form presents to us the funny elegance of human nature that evolves from the sophisticated literary illusion of the everyday behaviour of people. It is this artistic tension between literary form and real life that might help the reader not to despair in our world, but rather give up on the self-delusions of literary characters. This tension allows the reader to trace the humour of the text, finding comic relief in the confrontation with the seriousness of human beings' fragile and futile existence. "If we are to be true to the form there will be only 'novels' and they will be effusive with wit and humour," as Jacobson explains in an article for the Guardian (2010b).

So when Lyall suggests that Jacobson's "inner Roth did more than his inner Austen to win him" the Man Booker Prize for The Finkler Question, she avoids a crucial issue in discussing Jacobson's humour. Should one approach his concept of humour focusing on English literary traditions or Jewish ones? Jacobson responded to this by creating the quite unlikely allegory of a "Jewish Austen" (Lyall 2010).

Familiar concepts of English and Jewish humour will be compared to comic features Jacobson uses. Quite inevitably, these concepts of humour do not only inform
Jacobson's humour, but are also ridiculed by him. More significant is a narratological approach that allows for a thorough analysis of the changing internal focalizers that create diverse perspectives on Jewish self-images. These shifting perspectives of the focalizers manipulate our view on characters and help the narrator to avoid closure.4

Concentrating on focalization might also limit our view without defining the way focalization creates various types of self-images based on characters. Since the novel is about the question of what it means to be Jewish, the self-images created are those of Jews living in London – of three aging long-time friends and their wives and lovers, in particular. The anguish of these middle-aged men shows in their relationship to their wives and lovers as much as in their self-images as Jews and Gentiles. The three main characters are "a gentle fascinated by Jews, and his two Jewish friends, one a Zionist comfortable in London, and the other an anti-Zionist comfortable in his outrage," as Anthony Julius phrased it (2010a). The tensions and incongruities between various character-bound focalizations of Jewishness create humour.

Sam Finkler is a member of the ASHamed Jews, who are anti-Zionists coming close to anti-Semitism and self-hatred. They provide the reader with quite a few hilarious scenes in the novel, in the words of Jacobson: "People think they're parodies of Jews who happen to disapprove of Israel. But they're not. They're parodies of Jews who parade their disapproval of Israel" (Lyall 2010). Libor Sevick is of Czech origin. He is the least English character and has a strong sense of his Jewish and Zionist identity, the "whole Jewish geshеft. You think it's a short cut to catastrophe. And I'm not going to say you're wrong" (FQ, 244-45). In the narrative, he rarely becomes the focalizer and when he does, his humour is Jewish and he tries to characterize Treslove as a Gentile: "Those who can't wait to pitchfork us into the flames want to go down screaming by our side. It's one or the other" (245). He represents a self-image resulting from how other Jews (Sam Finkler) and Gentiles (Julian Treslove) see him as a Jew. This way Libor turns into a tragic-comical character.

As the plot unfolds, both Sam and Libor become widowers. On the level of the story, all three friends generate their self-image as characters through their relationships with women. They either try to escape who they are by falling in love with or being married to their respective opposite, either Jewish or Gentile, or they are thrown back to their original identity, without any chance of manipulating it. This is the case with Libor, who is a widower from the very beginning of the story.5

The main character is a Gentile, Julian Treslove. Walton suggests that readers might be quite puzzled by Jacobson's narrative twist: "As it turns out, though, they needn't worry. Julian Treslove may not be Jewish, but in most other respects he's a typical Jacobson protagonist." Even more so, "he's obsessed with Jews and Jewishness" (Walton 2010). The question arising from this narrative arrangement, of course, is whether the narrator is closer to the Jewish writer or the Gentile character.

The narrator often seems to disappear behind Treslove. The internal focalizer creates a self-image that the reader can hardly see as the Jewish self-image of a Gentile, but rather will believe to result from how the narrator perceives Gentiles seeing him.6

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5 For Libor's attempt to find a new partner and the funny generational problems that emerge from this, see Bayer's interpretation (2012, 178) of Jacobson: "Oh God, […] she will want me to be against fox hunting" (FQ, 36).
6 According to Bal (2009, 17), the implied (Jewish) author belongs to an older terminology coined by Booth (1961). Bal prefers the term "narrator." Her valid points are less important in the context of this novel because the Jewish identity of the author informs an essential issue of the novel. Bal criticized
As Diaz Bild explains, "Treslove, the Gentile, is merely reproducing what Jacobson believes others think of Jews" (2013, 94). Therefore, the latent tension between the narrator and the internal focalizer creates humorous statements based on mute assumptions the author does not have to accept responsibility for. The same could be said about Sam Finkler und Libor Sevick, who perceive Treslove the way they believe he sees them. While the latter tension is one between various self-images on the level of the story, the former Jewish self-image is constructed on the basis of how the narrator is believed to construct Treslove according to what he assumes others see him as. This tension is one between focalization and narration and makes visible what would remain invisible, the implied reader's stereotypes about what they believe to be Jewish. This implied reader, of course, might either be Jewish or Gentile. What both have most likely in common, however, is the belief that a Jewish author must show in the narrator's voice an assumption that is far from necessary in narratological terms.

On the level of the story, Treslove is both a philosemite and an anti-Zionist. On the level of form and focalization, a Gentile internal focalizer (Treslove) is presented by a Jewish narrator, allowing for a more complex diasporic writing of what is invisible or unspeakable in Jewish self-images, projected by Jewish characters and hidden behind Treslove's sometimes foolish attempts to become a Jew. It is needless to say that this generates funny incongruities of perception and observation, as Finkler tells him when they have an argument about the subject:

'You can't be us. You shouldn't want to be us.' 'I don't want to be you.' 'Somewhere you do. I don't mean to be cruel but there has always been some part of us you have wanted.' 'Us? Since when were you and Libor us?' 'That's an insensitive question.' (FQ, 67)

Brauner explains this complex play of self-images and images of otherness in his wittily entitled chapter "The Gentile Who Mistook Himself for a Jew." In Brauner's assessment of Sartre's Anti-Semite and Jew (1946), "Jewishness holds sway: what matters is not whether you perceive yourself to be Jewish, but whether others – specifically anti-Semites – perceive you to be Jewish" (Brauner 2001, 50). In contrast to such a content-based view, the signifiers of Jewishness may be the representation of narrative form rather than any conclusive idea of Jewishness. This also creates a concept of humour that does not fall back on statements about Jewishness or anti-Semitism but rather comments on the form of their presentation, the focalization of Jewish identity.

Humour emerges from dialogues and comments whenever the internal seems to collide with the mute assumptions conveyed by what the reader believes to be a Jewish narrator representing the voice of the (implied) author. Therefore, Jacobson also insists on novels not following standards of religion, morality or political rectitude. He calls this "shrinkage:"

Thus a novel may be as offensive as it chooses or happens to be – so long, of course, as it is funny or, at the least, enlivening. It may be sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, anti-Semitic, masculinist, man-hating, misanthropic, etc. And the reader who complains of finding any of those unpalatable is describing his own nervous system, not the novel. (Jacobson 2010b)

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the concept of the "implied author" because it is "the result of the investigation of the meaning of a text, and not the source of that meaning" (17). The implied author of The Finkler Question remains the source of the meaning because the concept of the implied author helps to ridicule the investigation, i.e. the question of Jewish identity.


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Treslove represents the voice of the fool who utters unreasonable statements and who takes on "the role of speaking the unspeakable, of revealing through his [...] folly the folly that afflicts all humankind" (Palmer 1994, 48). Treslove turns into a belittled and humorous character by his desire to become someone else and the shrinkage of what he believes to be Jewish generates all the politically incorrect behaviour that ridicules him, particularly in his behaviour to women, both Gentile (Tyler Finkler) and Jewish (Hephzibah Weizenbaum).

Treslove "seems to have walked out of a Woody Allen film with his constant neuroticism, questioning reality, a tendency to overanalyze and overdramatize everyday life situations and fear of a pending catastrophe." This category of humour is "used for egotistical purposes to 'squelch' other people or attributes. Often, of course, the two processes converge, as in the 'ethnic stupidity' jokes" (FQ, 103-104). In Jacobson's novel such jokes could also be used to elaborate anti-Semitism on the level of the story, e.g. Gentiles cheering or attacking Jews, a fantasy Treslove pursues to gain his Jewish friends' recognition. Jacobson carefully avoids any such explicit episodes. His humour is built on assumptions and fantasies made about Jewishness or anti-Semitism that are revealed by incongruities between focalizer and narrator. This tension originates from Jacobson's recognition that although stories about life are serious there is no good reason not to laugh about them if you look at them from a detached and borrowed perspective, i.e. if you resort to another focalizer:

'Now more than ever I want you to be funny [...] now that you are in the toils and at any moment you're going to die and you are fed up with everything and everybody.' I feel the same with Woody Allen: 'Fine, it was easy before. Joke now.' It's never too serious to laugh. (Jacobs 2008)

Treslove believes to have been exposed to an attack by someone he heard calling him a "Jew." Ethnic discrimination is not turned against Jews, but against Treslove who thinks to have been mistaken for one (FQ, 10-11; 72). Ethnic stupidity jokes are thus avoided without denying their existence. Real things remain uncontrollable as Roth claims in Operation Shylock: "In the modern world, the Jew has perpetually been on trial; still today the Jew is on trial, in the person of the Israeli – and this modern trial of the Jew, this trial which never ends, begins with the trial of Shylock" (Roth 1993, 274). Jacobson's humour is also not limited to ridiculing Treslove, whose obsession with recognition (without ever actually converting) is far from routinely rejected by his Jewish friends and his Jewish girlfriend. Treslove has conversations exploiting the hidden anguish of not knowing when anti-Semitism will hit again, and he proudly parades his anti-Zionism at the same time. Focalization of characters is not about blaming anybody of anti-Semitism, but rather about scrutinizing its effect on those who can neither control nor predict its re-emergence.

When Treslove has an affair with Tyler, Sam Finkler's wife, this betrayal is not forgiven by Libor who learns about it after Tyler's death. It is not only the betrayal of a friend (FQ, 246-47). Treslove does not only claim Sam Finkler's Jewishness, but also undermines his friend's trust in society: "Probably more wrong of you to tell me than to do it. I don't want the burden of the knowledge" (FQ, 247). The meaning of sexual relationships is more sophisticated than this. Behind his back, the sexual rela-

8 I owe this poignant description to Anna Linetsky (Trier) who gave a talk on Jacobson at the University of Bamberg on June 12, 2013. I would like to thank her for suggestions and comments.
9 In Trials of the Diaspora, Julius distinguishes and studies in detail three different types of anti-Zionism: Anglo-Muslim, Anglo-Jewish, and Anglo-Christian (2010, 544-60).
tionship stands for a persistent feeling that he is not safe in the diaspora. Libor recognizes Treslove's mute intentions: "'Are you proud of it because you got one over on Sam?' [...] 'Not got one over, Libor. I hope not that. More having got into his world. Their world.' 'From which you'd felt excluded?" (FQ 247).

When Treslove learns that Tyler Finkler is not Jewish, he is disappointed: "'Well, your everything is a nothing,' she said. He was bitterly upset. 'Not a Jewess, Tyler?’" (FQ 77). Obviously, a relationship with his friend's Jewish wife was supposed to make him more Jewish. In a similar way, Tyler personifies Sam Finkler's wish not to be Jewish all the time. Therefore he never acknowledged her interest in Jewish culture: "He had at no time been sympathetic to Tyler's Jewish aspirations. He didn't need to be married to a Jew. He was Jew enough at least in his antecedence – for both of them" (FQ 271).

Finkler's Jewish identity is a precarious one. He marries Tyler and joins an anti-Zionist group of the name ASHamed Jews. It is only after his wife's death that Finkler's Jewishness becomes more self-assured and acknowledges anti-Semitism to be a threat no Jew may evade. Treslove's affair with Tyler develops more momentum only later in the novel when Treslove tells Libor about his relationship. Libor is deeply hurt and when he commits suicide the narrator suggests Treslove believes his disappointment to be one of the reasons for his dwindling wish to live: "If Finkler thought that was grandiose, what would he say if he ever found out that Treslove thought Libor had committed suicide because of what he knew about his and Tyler's adultery?" (FQ 285). Treslove's behaviour is not only about friendship and betrayal. Treslove, who entertains a relationship with a Jewish woman at the time he reveals his former affair with Tyler to Libor, is trespassing. The infidelity of his non-Jewish wife with a Gentile, Treslove, carries a vague sense of diasporic vulnerability.

Jacobson finds "God's laughter" in the self-denial and the unfulfilled desires of both Finkler and Treslove. It is the "laughter at the very idea that we can think our way out of the unthinkable. And the nearest we approach to it – in skepticism, in play, and yes, in cruelty – is the novel" (Jacobson 2010b).

This answer to the Jewish question is a cruel one, because a sense of anguish and threat never leaves Finkler. The narration's focalization shifts from Treslove to Sam Finkler towards the end of the novel. Finkler becomes more pessimistic than one would have expected, but he also turns against Treslove's anti-Zionism. The cruelty of the unthinkable, of anti-Semitism and what it means to Jewish life, emerges from Treslove's and Finkler's foolishness, but it is Sam Finkler's Jewishness that prevails.

The Jewish question, however, is answered in many ways, none of which being utterly convincing or conclusive. This is in line with definitions of Jewishness in studies about Jewish literature. David Brauner suggests that the Jewish experience is not only different from all other ethnic and religious identities, but also unique. He quotes George Steiner:

> Of course there is a Jewish question. Only cant or a self-deluding investment in normalcy could deny that. The political map, the plethora of ethnic-historical legacies, the patchwork of societies, faiths, communal identifications across our globe teems with unresolved conflicts, with religious-racial enmities, with non-negotiable claims to an empowering past, to sacred grounds. None the less, the Jewish condition differs. Irreducibly, maddeningly, it embodies what modern physics calls a 'singularity,' a construct

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10 See Lyall (2010): "Indeed, there is an ominous undercurrent in the book in the form of a growing number of anti-Semitic attacks, mostly offstage, that shatter the complacency of characters who resist the notion of Jews as perpetual victims. Mr. Jacobson says that such incidents worry him too."
or happening outside the norms, extraterritorial to probability and the findings of common reason. (Steiner 1998, 48, qtd. in Brauner 2001, 2)

Brauner favours Steiner's use of the phrase 'Jewish condition,' because it denotes either "an irrevocable existential state or a treatable malady" (2001, 2). Following Brauner, one could argue that it is the combination of this identifiable uniqueness and the ambiguity and multivalency of contradictory self-images of Jews in literature that create either an often stereotypical representation of Jewish life or the opportunity to represent Jewish identity as a perpetual construction of changing focalizations.

Geoffrey Hartman is helpful here. He "singles out the domination of the written word (a text-dependency)" that does not "split between letter and spirit, a distinctive humor that assuages the anguish of profanation" (Wirth-Nesher 1994, 4). Giving answers to what Jacobson calls the Finkler Question, Wirth-Nesher suggests that while "the categories themselves may be unstable and problematic, they are an inherent part of the reading process" (1994, 5; see Stähler 2007, 32). Reception shifts the emphasis from definitions of Jewishness to questions that are asked by readers about Jewish identity "with a view to how literary texts can open up the categories that critics too often would close down" (Valman 2012, 218-19). Comedy and Humour are Jacobson's main features to avoid closure and a formal definition of Jewishness: "I don't say comedy is the only means of challenging our routine sympathies and valuations. What, after all, are the interests of the comic novel? If it's written in the spirit of Cervantes then it has no interests, no predetermined direction, nothing to prove" (Jacobson 2010b).

Avoiding content-driven descriptions of Jewishness, Jacobson does not only discuss diverse categories of diasporic Jewishness, but also changes the perspectives on Jewish self-images. This way, Jacobson also mediates between literary conventions shaped by Britishness and those that belong to Jewish traditions. Critics have often acknowledged that Howard Jacobson is one of the few who "has decided to face head on the thorny question of Britishness in his fiction" (Cheyette 2003, 10). Cheyette explains that English national culture is too homogeneous and unchanging in its "idea of the past" to absorb "the Jewish past into a territorial Britishness" (8).

Jacobson claims to be a "Jewish Jane Austen" (Lyall 2010) because he tries to achieve exactly that, to accommodate the Jewish past in a British context in a similar way Austen tried to accommodate a female view in a male society, thus ridiculing femininity with the distance of the narrator's voice and establishing it as a social category. And yet:

> It would be mortifying to the feelings of many ladies, could they be made to understand how little the heart of a man is affected by what is costly or new in their attire. [...] Woman is fine for her own satisfaction alone. No man will admire her the more, no woman will like her the better for it. Neatness and fashion are enough for the former, and a something of shabbiness or impropriety will be most endearing to the latter. – But not one of these grave reflections troubled the tranquility of Catherine. (Austen 1932, 73-74)

Benedict points out that the narrator in Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* (1818) burlesques "the rationalistic moralism of conventional discourse" (2009, 351) and reveals that fashionable dress is "a part of female cultural competition," "clothes are designed less to make women attractive to men than to triumph over rival women: they are part of a female semiotic system" (352). Austen uses the incongruity between the plural focalization of "women" and the judgment of the narrator to authenticate
femininity. In a similar fashion, the character's focalization of Treslove presents self-images of Jews perceived by a Gentile. Stereotypes are ridiculed by the narrator's bemused voice.

Treslove thinks that his heart is breaking with love for Jewish Hephzibah. Finally, he makes up for the disappointment he experienced with Tyler: "Tyler Finkler, not a Finkler! Therefore the deep dark mysteriousness of a Finkler woman was still, strictly speaking – and this was a strict concept or it was nothing – unknown to him" (FQ, 78). Treslove loves Hephzibah's Jewish humour: "when had poor Tyler ever done what Hephzibah had just done with language?" (FQ, 158). Treslove wants to understand Jewish humour, when Hephzibah uses a metaphor to describe Treslove's unadmitted willingness to fall in love with her: "I saw it when I first clapped eyes on you. You were waiting for the roof to fall in.' He went to kiss her. 'And it did,' he said with exaggerated courtliness. She pushed him away. 'I'm the roof now!'" (FQ, 158). On the one hand, Treslove is convinced that a "Jewess was a woman who made even punctuation funny" (FQ, 158). On the other hand, Treslove cannot work out how Hephzibah uses Jewish humour: "Was it hyperbole or was it understatement? Was it self-mockery or mockery of him? He decided it was tone. Finklers did tone" (FQ, 159).

Whether Hephzibah's humour fits conventions of British or Jewish humour is not the question, but how these clichés work with Treslove. Hephzibah changes the meaning of a metaphor to make it macabre belonging to "a literature of the absurd which, by degree if not kind, stands distinctly apart from any European writing" (Ziv and Zajdman 1993, 4). Ziv proposes that black humour may have its true origins in "the shtetl tradition of the schleimel and the schlimazel" (4). Treslove does not understand that Hephzibah plays with the idea of love being a deadly danger for Treslove. His love for her is as dangerous as a collapsing roof. The ambiguity of this macabre joke is more informed by gender and British humour than Jewish black humour, because "the Jewish joke always has a therapeutic effect: it ridicules suffering and tension" (Hochwald 1996, vii).

What Treslove hopes to discover in Jewish humour appears to be witty in a general sense, rather than being particularly Jewish. The internal does not only tell us about Treslove's inner thoughts but the Jewish narrator's voice ridicules him at the same time. Treslove's expectations are ridiculously blown out of proportion and remind the reader of Jacobson's statement: "Hyperbole is the soul of comedy. Minimalism is its enemy. Freed from the fetters of those who would make us smaller than we are, we glory in the sensation of too-muchness we have regained" (Jacobson 2010b). While this "sensation of too-muchness" is a hope that does not come true for Treslove, it redeems the Jewish protagonists in Jacobson's novel. In contrast, Treslove is funny in his futile attempts to imitate his understanding of what it means to be Jewish: "The Jews were a hyperbolic people. Had he been hyperbolic enough?" (FQ, 128).

Jokes based on ambiguities and puns can also be found with Sam Finkler, for example when he uses the sound of /dʒu:/ to confuse Treslove:

'Do you know anyone called Juno?' Treslove asked. 'You know Juno?' Finkler replied, making inexplicable J noises between his teeth. Treslove didn't get it. 'You know Juno? Is that what you're asking me? Treslove still didn't get it. So Finkler wrote it down. D'Jew know Jewno? Treslove shrugged. 'Is that supposed to be funny? 'It is to me,'

11 Since the external narrator is always present in Jane Austen's novels, the character is always double.

12 S.B. Cohen explains that the self-critical jokes of Jewish humour are "a major source of their salvation. In laughing at their tragic conditions, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from those conditions" (1987, 108-109).
Finkler said, ‘But please yourself’ ‘Is it funny for a Jew to write the word Jew? Is that what's funny?’ ‘Forget it,’ Finkler said. ‘You wouldn't understand.’ ‘Why wouldn't I understand? If I wrote Non-Jew don't know what Jew know I'd be able to tell you what's funny about it.’ ‘There's nothing funny about it.’ ‘Exactly. Non-Jews don't find it hilarious to see the word Non-Jew. We aren't amazed by the written fact of our identity.’ ‘And d’Jew know why that is?’ Finkler asked. ‘Go fuck yourself,’ Treslove told him. ‘And that's Non-Jew humour, is it?’ (FQ 16-17)

Certainly, this is one of the most prominent scenes in the novel. A Gentile and a Jew negotiate different senses of humour. While Treslove does not get the Jewish part of it, he also fails to get the British one, the pun. Treslove's internal character focalization presents Treslove's view on things most of the time, but the narrator's voice never entirely abandons a Jewish perspective that is closer to Finkler's, who ridicules Treslove for his cluelessness. Treslove cannot step into the diasporic perspective of Sam Finkler. On the basis of this "particular socio-historical condition called 'marginality'" Jewish humour became the "capacity that allows the placement of oneself in the other's position, to look at oneself critically, and to take all serious matters lightly" (Roekeleine 2002, 106). Finkler perceives Jews as existing mainly in the eyes and writings of others. Treslove fails to be accepted by his Jewish friends and this experience keeps repeating itself.

He feels alienated by Finkler's behaviour. Focalization slightly changes between a narrator who comments on Treslove's reaction and Treslove's emotional response as represented by the internal voicing of the fear of not being taken seriously by Jews:

What Treslove did was exclusion, not jealousy. And though they were related, they were not the same. Jealousy would have made him angry with Hephzibah, it might even have amused him; but all he felt was lonely and rejected. It was like being a child among adults; not unloved but unlistened to. At best humoured. He wasn't the real McCoy, that was what it came to. Not only wasn't he a Jew, he was a jest to Jews. The real McGoy. (FQ 260)

Treslove is by no means ignored by Finkler and usually even encouraged, but he is left with a feeling of exclusion nevertheless. The pun on "The real McCoy" uses the American version of the expression (the Scottish one would rather be "the real Mackay") to resonate with the Jewish word for a gentile. While puns belong to British humour, the "Mc," as in "McDonald," might belittle the status of the goy from the diasporic perspective of Jewish humour. Avner Ziv distinguishes Jewish jokes that express "self-deprecation and masochistic self-hatred" from "numerous jokes that on the face of it are Jewish assertions of superiority that deride Gentiles as being stupid (goyischeh kop) and frequently inebriated (shikker is the goy)" (Ziv and Zajdman 1993, 34).

This episode is followed by one Treslove tells about eating tongue with horseradish. His Jewish friends warn him not to burn himself, although it is not hot at all. Treslove sees this as exclusion. He is everybody, "McGoy," to them. Treslove is hurt and wishes his friends would react in a non-discriminatory way to him. However, his thoughts as represented in the focalization make it clear that he is discriminatory himself and feels excluded when it becomes obvious in many places of the novel that he is not:

13 Because of the diasporic character of Jewish humour, the phrase "humor amongst Jews" has been suggested (Roekeleine 2002, 106).

14 Cf. Fergusson: "the real thing; something completely authentic, as in now that's the real McCoy! The phrase the real McCoy is the US version of the real Mackay, of Scottish origin, which dates from the later 19th century" (1994, 172).
'You might not like that, it's tongue, not everybody can cope with tongue.' Not everybody? Did they become everybody the minute they clapped eyes on him? No harm was meant, he knew. Quite the opposite. [...] But it wore him down. It wouldn't stop. There was never a time when they opened the door to him and said Julian, how nice to see you, come in, we have nothing in the way of food or other secrets of our culture to test you with today and are no more conscious of your being a Gentile than you are of our being Jews. He was always a curiosity to them. Always a bit of a barbarian who had to be placated with beads and mirrors. He charged himself with ingratitude and humourlessness. Each time he fell into a pet he promised he would learn to do better. But he never did. They wouldn't let him. Wouldn't let him in. (FQ, 261)

On the surface, this conveys an exaggerated sense of self-pity and self-righteousness. The focalization makes it quite a complex construction of humorous self-images. Humour is generated by the incongruity between Treslove's hope for recognition by his Jewish friends and his inability not to see the Other in them. The narrator's voice is Jewish. Therefore, the incongruity between Treslove's thoughts, as represented by internal focalization and the narrator's implicitly Jewish focalization describing them, is not only very funny but also presents a Jewish self-image. This self-image represents what the narrator imagines Gentiles see in Jews. The difference could also be described in Füger's terminology as the tension between "autophonic" focalization (focalization using Treslove's voice) and "allophonic" focalization (using the Jewish narrator's voice) (Jahn 1997, 463).

The humour in Treslove's thoughts works both ways. On the story level, this is a humorous narration of a Gentile's self-image and his image of Jews. The narrative form makes it a Jew's self-image and his image of Gentiles. The tension between form and content or between "autophonic" and "allophonic" focalization creates the incongruities of a multi-layered humour that does not match any clichés about either British or Jewish humour, but is certainly quite funny.

The internal or character focalization presents both a Gentile's identification with Jews and a Jewish perspective on Gentiles. This alternating focalization avoids any definition or commitment to Jewish identity. While Treslove suspects his Jewish friends of having an exclusive and well defined understanding of themselves, it becomes obvious that the main character, Sam Finkler, does not live up to this cliché. Finkler keeps turning against his own Jewishness through denial and meets Libor's disappointed comments about Jewish self-hatred:

The comedic Jewish intonation was meant as a further irritant to Finkler. Libor knew that Finkler hated Jewishisms. Mauscheln, he called it, the hated secret language of the Jews, the Yiddishising that drove German Jews mad in the days when they thought the Germans would love them the more for playing down their Jewishness. The lost provincial over-expressiveness of his father.

'I don't have friends who are anti-Semites,' Finkler said.

Libor screwed up his face until he resembled a medieval devil. All he lacked were the horns. 'Yes, you do. The Jewish ones.'

'Oh, here we go, here we go. Any Jew who isn't your kind of Jew is an anti-Semite. It's a nonsense, Libor, to talk of Jewish anti-Semites. It's more than a nonsense, it's a wickedness.'

'Don't get kochedik with me for speaking the truth. How can it be a nonsense when we invented anti-Semitism?'

'I know how this goes, Libor. Out of our own self-hatred.'

'You think there's no such thing? What do you say to St Paul, itching with a Jewishness he couldn't scratch away until he'd turned half the world against it?' (FQ, 45)
The narrator's voice changes from character focalization close to Libor's thoughts to a direct quotation of the dialogue between Sam Finkler and Libor. This way the reader knows where the narrator's sympathies are. The narrator's comment on the futile and dangerous self-denial of German Jews disqualifies Finkler's view. This is supported by the fact that Libor seems to take the part of the more critical and passionate voice speaking out for Jewish self-esteem in the dialogue and warning against Jewish self-hatred. There are several comic effects in this passage although or rather because it is about a serious topic. Libor takes on a "comedic Jewish intonation" staging a stereotypical Jewish self-image of "Yiddishising" that intentionally emphasizes differences and is meant to provoke Finkler.

Jacobson does not present Libor as Yiddish at face value, but speaks of "Yiddishising," indicating that the narrator labels Libor giving him the authenticity of by-gone times. Jacobson's humour uses hyperbole and stereotypes when he describes Libor as "a medieval devil." Libor wants to convince Finkler that Jews' self-hatred eventually turns against them and interprets Christianity as a result of Paul's Jewish self-hatred. The narrator shows an angry Libor and sympathizes with his cause to make Finkler believe in himself and to develop Jewish self-esteem.15

One of the main purposes of Jacobson's novel is to take on the hideous and self-righteous ways his fellow Englishmen allow themselves in fits of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism when they talk about Israel. Instead of ridiculing and satirizing the Gentile majority that has increasingly been accepting anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic ideas, Jacobson creates Finkler, who suffers from fits of Jewish self-hatred, and Treslove, who wants to become a Jew but sees no reason to abandon his anti-Israel clichés. The incongruities between these two focalizers show that anti-Zionism is the new form of anti-Semitism (cf. Julius 2010b, 584).

The narrator's voice in the novel is that of Libor who condemns Finkler's Jewish self-hatred and self-denial. In the same way that Libor is the Jewish antagonist to Finkler, Tyler is the Gentile antagonist to Treslove. Neither Tyler nor Libor are the main characters in the novel, but they represent attitudes and ideas Jacobson wants to proliferate. When Finkler declares on Desert Island Discs that although his Jewishness has always been immeasurably important to him, "on the matter of Palestine I am profoundly ashamed," it is not only Tyler who wonders what the connection is. She reveals the hypocritical reasoning behind Finkler's confession: "Profoundly self-important you mean. [...] How could you? [...] A convenient entity your conscience. There when you need it, not when you don't. Well, I'm ashamed of your public display of shame and I'm not even Jewish" (FQ, 113). Tyler sees through her husband's shame. She recognizes it to be a ritual he uses to please himself.

Díaz Bild shows how Jacobson manages to explain why some people believe that "nothing good could come out of Israel, whose inhabitants are compared to the Nazis, whereas Gaza is likened to the Warsaw Ghetto" (FQ, 91). Díaz Bild explains that Jacobson sees much of the comic anger in The Finkler Question resulting not so much from the political position of the anti-Zionists [...] but from their attitude of shame: 'What annoys me about it is not the politics, but the idea that what's happening somewhere else is about them. [...] It's the vanity of it; it's the egotism. It's the wear-
ing their hearts on their sleeves. It's this carnival of conscience that I make fun of in the book.' (Díaz Bild 2013, 93)

Jacobson could be called a comic genius, but in his novel it is anti-Israeli Sam Finkler who tries to explain how his "comic genius" (FQ, 138) results from perpetually renegotiating himself: "Born a Jew on Monday, he had signed up to be an ASHamed Jew by Wednesday and was seen chanting 'We are all Hezbollah' outside the Israeli Embassy on the following Saturday" (FQ, 139). The narrator leaves no doubt that he has a different concept of comic genius than Sam Finkler and the journalist who interviews the ASHamed Jew.

Treslove's anti-Zionism quite openly presents itself as anti-Semitism, in Julius's assessment, "most 'anti-Semites' are now 'anti-Zionists'" (2010b, 585). Treslove voices what Jacobson perceives others think of Jews. According to Jacobson, this became obvious with the Six-Day War in 1967: "As long as the world thought that Israel was going to be defeated and destroyed everyone was on the side of 'poor little Israel'. But things changed the moment Israel won: 'Israel winning became a problem. And Israel winning big became a bigger problem.'" (Díaz Bild 95; see also Jacobson 2010c). Jacobson's humour serves a very serious purpose. It tells English Jews what they have known all along, but find more and more difficult to communicate to some of their fellow Jews and many more Gentiles: "All the unsayable things, all the things they know they can't say about Jews in a post-Holocaust liberal society, they can say again now. Israel has desacralized the subject. It's a space in which everything is allowed again" (Judah and Glancy 2015).

Judah and Glancy see the main difficulty all British Jews face in times of growing anti-Zionism in interpreting the potential consequences for them:

Jacobson had dared to take one massive bet on what the English really thought of the Jews: an impossible mixture of love and hate, repulsion and fascination, envy and deep, if extremely, minutely subtle, racial otherness. They were even more surprised when the non-Jews enjoyed the novel so much they awarded him the Booker Prize. (Judah and Glancy 2015)

When Treslove and Finkler watch a Jewish play together that indulges in anti-Semitism, time has come for Finkler to define himself as a Jew rather than an ashamed Jew. He rejects Treslove's understanding that he could have written this play. Suggesting to Sam Finkler that he is "an ASHamed Jew" and therefore "had to like it," Treslove patronizes not only his friend, but thoroughly misunderstands Sam Finkler: "It was written for you. Could have been written by you. I've heard you speak it" (FQ, 252). Finkler is not amused:

Not those words have you ever heard me speak. I don't do Nazi analogies. The Nazis were the Nazis. Anyway, did you hear me say I didn't like it? I loved it. I only wished there'd been more singing and dancing. It lacked a show-stopper like 'Springtime for Hitler,' that's my only complaint. I couldn't tap my feet. Put it this way, did you see anyone going out humming the Wagner? (FQ, 252)

Treslove neither gets the joke nor the message. He does not want to acknowledge this to be a "taste issue [...] in the musical sense" (FQ, 252), not only revealing once again that he has no sense of humour, neither English nor Jewish, but also takes the issue too seriously to see that it has become a matter of survival for Finkler.

Jacobson does not produce lengthy explanations here, but has Finkler leave the place, not without having wished for "a show-stopper like 'Springtime for Hitler'." Mel Brooks's highly acclaimed film and musical The Producers is a perfect example
of Jewish humour and what Finkler is commenting on when he speaks out against Treslove. According to Patricia Erens the film's story is "an exercise in Jewish self-deprecation" (1984, 267). Erens quotes John Simon who ironically observed, "not all anti-Semites are Jews" and continues what defines humour in The Producers:

Self-deprecation has long been an element in Jewish humor, perhaps a defense mechanism to soften the blows leveled against the Jews by the Gentile world. In a sense the Jew is saying, 'Your opinions don't count. We have our own insults and certainly these hurt less than those which come from the outside world.' (Erens 1984, 268)

Comparisons between Jewish and Gentile jokes have been made as early as Freud who believed that, by making jokes about themselves, Jews were more in control of themselves and their faults: "When one thinks back to the classic subject in Jewish humor, the Shlemiel, the little man, the outsider, there is always some redeeming aspect which proves engaging" (Erans 1984, 268).

Finkler understands this type of joke when he visits the play with Treslove. The play is not funny, but 'Springtime for Hitler' is because it uses dark Jewish humour to ridicule the unspeakable horrors of Nazi Germany. Finkler is not even "a Shlemiel, or more properly a Shnook (a timid Shlemiel; a passive, ineffectual type), a nobody trying to become a somebody" (268) like Bloom in The Producers.16 In this scene Finkler takes on the part of a critic of Jewish humour because he wants to exclude Treslove and stand in for his Jewishness: "[H]e hadn't escaped what was oppressive about Judaism by joining a Jewish group that gathered to talk feverishly about the oppressiveness of being Jewish. Talking feverishly about being Jewish was being Jewish" (FQ, 275).

Jacobson answers the Jewish question with Jewish humour and the form of the "perfect Jewish joke" that never finishes and always responds to the diasporic danger of anti-Semitism and prosecution. Jacobson neither tells specific stories nor does he use any obvious rhetorical features such as hyperbole, but rather relies on a specific form of perceiving oneself as a Jew in the eyes of others and how one perceives others seeing oneself. Consequently, Jacobson achieves humour and comedy mainly by shifting focalization. Avoiding Jewish self-images based on how one sees oneself, Jewishness becomes a detached and humorous representation of what others perceive. The Finkler Question does not deny the dangers of diasporic life and therefore its narrator does not deny being Jewish. Nevertheless, Jacobson sees himself in the tradition of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and many other English writers when he makes a statement about literature that holds true for his Jewish novel, too: "Comedy is a human invention to deal with the sadness of life. It's our greatest achievement. Forget the pyramids. Comedy" (Tracy 2011). Although Jacobson has his characters joking about the never-ending "whole Jewish gesheft" (FQ, 244) he tries to get away from it and writes an English novel of manners.

16 The play Finkler finds without taste matches Nick Cohen's criticism of playwrights who write for the National Theatre whose politics are "a faintly hypocritical and unforgivably shallow version of liberal-leftism" (2010). What Cohen appreciates about Jacobson is that he exposes mediocre art where the positions taken are "fashionable rather than thoughtful, a conscience is no substitute for art" (Cohen 2010).
Works Cited


