
Comic & Tragic Revelations in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*

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ABSTRACT:

*This research paper attempts to delineate and outline the comic & tragic revelations in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*. He is best known for writing comic novels that often revolve around the dilemmas of British Jewish characters. He has published his opening novel about 28 years ago and has written a total number of 15 books. He, furthermore, has weekly discourses in the British newspaper *The Independent*. Conceivably, for the reason that funniness is seldom coupled with the very literary Booker prize, Jacobson's accomplishment has flabbergasted to several. Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* is the first comic novel in the forty years history of the Booker prize, and Sir Andrew suggested that Jacobson had been overlooked in the past due to his wryly humorous take on the world. "Perhaps being entertaining disqualified him from being taken seriously in some people's eyes" (*The Telegraph*). *The Finkler Question* — Jacobson's eleventh novel — was published in the United States as a paperback original by Bloomsbury on the same day that the prize was announced. It is considered as an extraordinary Booker selection, in cooperation for the reason that it explore into the heart of the British Jewish episodes, to some extent that hardly any contemporary British novels endeavor to do, and for the reason that it is, on its veneer at least, consequently ebulliently very funny.*

Key Words: *Booker Prize winning novel, comic novel, contemporary issues, English fiction*

INTRODUCTION:

Howard Jacobson—one of the greatest existing writers in English—has been a great novelist and travel-writer as well. He has written a variety of marvelous and incredible novels and assortment of essays. As a novelist, he is an internationally acclaimed figure and extraordinary in that matter too. Like Katherine Mansfield, Chinua Achebe, R.K. Narayan, M.R. Anand, and others, he has written voluminously. His prolificacy is enormous and admirable. His numerous novels and non-fictional works, no doubt, can make the general readers wonderstruck. He is one of the most admired, esteemed and appreciated contemporary novelists these days. Jacobson two of the books have inspired television series also. *Roots Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews* (1993) is an exploration of his own Jewish background, and *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997) is an analysis of comedy and its functions. As well as making television programmes — Jacobson takes on the Turner, (Channel 4, 2000), and *Why the Novel Matters* (a South Bank Show Special, 2002), he has written a travel book about Australia, *In the Land of Oz* (1987). Jacobson's novels published in 1999, *The Mighty Walzer* (1999), set in the Jewish community in Manchester during the 1950s, won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic writing and the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize for Fiction in 2000. *Who's Sorry Now*

(2002) charts the life and many loves of protagonist Marvin Kreitman, the luggage baron of South London; *The Making of Henry* (2004) is a comic story of love, hope and disappointment.

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It won because it was the best book. You expect a book by Howard Jacobson to be very clever and very funny and it is both those things. But it is also, in a very interesting way, a very sad, melancholic book. It is comic, it is laughter, but it is laughter in the dark (*The Guardian*).

Motion agreed it is a comic novel but said it was much more. It was "absolutely a book for grownups, for people who understand that comedy and tragedy are linked" (*Guardian*). However, *The Finkler Question* should not, he said, be seen as something that was "relentlessly middle-brow, or easy-peasy" because it is comic. He further reveals:

It is much cleverer and more complicated and about much more difficult things than it immediately lets you know. Several people have used the word wise, and that's a good word (*The Guardian*).

Jacobson — writer and broadcaster — was born in Manchester, England in 1942. He was brought up in Prestwich and was educated at Stand Grammar School in Whitefield, and Downing College, Cambridge, where he studied under F. R. Leavis. He has lectured for three years at the University of Sydney before returning to teach at Selwyn College, Cambridge. His other several prestigious and esteemed novels include *The Mighty Walzer* (winner of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize), *Kalooki Nights* (long-listed for the Man Booker Prize) and, most recently, the highly acclaimed *The Act of Love*. He is best known for writing comic novels that often revolve around the dilemmas of British Jewish characters. He has published his opening novel about 28 years ago and has written a total number of 15 books. He, furthermore, has weekly discourses in the British newspaper *The Independent*. Conceivably, for the reason that funniness is seldom coupled with the very literary Booker prize, Jacobson's accomplishment has flabbergasted to several. He beat out several tough contenders, including Australian writer and two-time Booker winner Peter Carey whose novel *Parrot and Olivier in America* was predicted as the frontrunner by many. British writer Tom McCarthy was favored by British bookies for his novel *C*, a contemplation on time and technology.

Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* is a discovery of love, death, grief, friendship, and what it means to be Jewish in the contemporary London. *The Finkler Question* begins with Julian—a failed BBC producer—has just had dinner with two of his oldest friends. His old schoolmate, Sam Finkler, is now an irritatingly successful populariser of philosophy and so Jewish that Julian privately thinks of Jews as “Finklers” (therefore, among other things, the book's title). Their former teacher, Libor Sevcik, is solidly kosher too—and locked in an endless argument with Finkler about the State of Israel: Libor's for it, Finkler isn't.

During the way home, Julian is mugged by someone who, he later becomes convinced, used the words “you Jew” during the attack. So what if the attacker knows more than he does? What if he is—as he's perhaps always wanted to be—Jewish too? Before long, he's certainly giving it his best shot, brushing up on his Yiddish, wondering if it's too late to get circumcised and moving in with a woman called Hephzibah Weizenbaum.

As a consequence, *The Finkler Question* follows two old friends and their former teacher as they spend an evening reminiscing about old times at the latter's London apartment house. Sam Finkler is a well-known Jewish writer, philosopher and television celebrity although has in recent times lost his wife, his friend, Julian Treslove, ineffective both in his career and his love life. The setback with this hypothesis is that Julian is not Jewish. The unpleasant incident sends Julian into an identity catastrophe, causing him to be in awe if he might essentially be Jewish devoid of knowing it and leading him into an anecdote with a Jewish woman. For the duration of the intervening time, Sam and Libor, who are Jewish, are anguished for their recently dead wives and spend an enormous time in contention about the honorable standing of Israel.

Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* is an English Comic Novel. It is always shouting, “I am funny.” Jacobson has a weakness for breaking into one-line paragraphs, so as to nudge the punch line on us. The effect is bullying, and, worse, bathetic: we have probably already predicted the joke by the time we reach its italicization. There is a delicious quality of overstatement in P.G. Wodehouse that Jacobson may be searching for, but Wodehouse's exaggerations are sublime in part because they constitute a magical and separate universe that has its own laws and “codes.” Julian Treslove, the novel's sad-sack hero, a forty-nine-year-old nebbish Gentile, suffers from a “sense of loss,” which is that all he has really wanted, all along, is to be a Jew. There is a secondhand quality to Jacobson's portraiture: the outlines are garish rather than vivid. And Treslove's admiring stupidity constantly pushes the representation of Jews and Jewishness toward caricature. This vision, in which Jews are God-like, and non-Jews must inevitably become either God-lovers or God-haters, has the functional utility of interpreting anti-Semitism as a twisted form of love, while by the same token suggesting that philo-Semitism is a twisted form of hate.

Treslove, the protagonist, who is not Jewish, and on the other hand wants to be converted into so, Jacobson opens up world, which can occasionally give the impression closed off or unfathomable to outsiders. The veracity that Judaism is an ethnicity and way of life, with its own language and customs makes Treslove's desire look as if without a solution, like an Irishman deciding he would like to be Swiss. The Jewish characters in *The Finkler Question* could judiciously be illustrated as intimidating to Treslove's contribution with their society and his

assignment of fetching a Jewish man seems overwhelming. Treslove refers to Jews as “Finklers”, named after his boyhood friend, Sam Finkler, who seems unenthusiastic to bracket together himself in the company of the world that Treslove extremely wants to dwell in. As such, the title of the piece could be read as “The Jewish Question”, which is redolent both of the holocaust, the fall-out of which the Jewish group of people is accessible as still besieged to covenant with, nevertheless, moreover the question of what it means to be a Jew. He further writes:

‘Do you know anyone called Juno?’ Treslove asked.
‘J’know know Juno?’ Finkler replied, making inexplicable J noises between his teeth. Treslove didn’t get it.
‘J’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,’ 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.’ (16)

Treslove, perplexed in adore and itinerant pointless all the way through relationships and his job at the BBC is perchance moreover in fact deep, mutually to himself and in his management to the readers. He accordingly to a great extent wants to fit in, to “get it,” even when his lack of understanding keep him from appreciating what precisely is transpire just about him. Finkler, nevertheless, is a bourgeois English Jew, one who has been throughout the casual and overt anti-Semitism that can be initiated in Europe and the Americas even in the present day. Little by little, his ambush embarks on to take the outward appearance in his mind of an “atrocious”, and as the novel chill out, underprivileged Treslove initiates to question whether he is not in fact Jewish after all, something distinguish by the aggressor due to instinctive uniqueness, which he had not in the past recognised. He further says:

Wouldn’t it have made sense, if my father didn’t want me to know we were Jews, or for anyone else to know we were Jews for that matter, to have changed our name to the last Jewish one he could find? ...No one knew my family. We kept ourselves to ourselves. I have no uncles. My father had no brothers or sisters, my mother neither (25).

The Finkler Question is supplementary, a series of vignettes that investigate matters such as what it means to be a Jew, how can a Jew be an anti-Zionist devoid of being culpable of self-loathing, and why there can be such differences in estimation and point of view in the midst of those people who are repeatedly alienated by a common sacred, civilizing, and ethnic legacy. To his credit, Jacobson does leaven these weighty matters with a sardonic, satirical humor that serves as a connotation all the way through all of the characters exchange during the novel. Thus, *The Finkler Question* is quite a schematic novel, with the characters there primarily to embody the ideas that Jacobson wants to discuss. In a book never short of competing theories, plenty are put forward as to why Julian is so keen to be Jewish, but the main reason is surely just Jacobson’s desire to set up a bitterly comic contrast between him and all the real Jews who seem so keen not

to be. In the face of the belief that, its hypothesis of loss, *The Finkler Question* reveals Jacobson at his sharp finest, instantaneously Sir Andrew Motion, the chair of the Booker judges, comments that:

The Finkler Question is a marvelous book: very funny, of course, but also very clever, very sad and very subtle. It is all that it seems to be and much more than it seems to be. A completely worthy winner of this great prize (themanbookerprize.com).

Consequently, this is a sweltering chronicle of companionship and thrashing, segregation and belonging, and of the astuteness and compassion of mellowness. This is one of the incredible, funny, furious and unflinching novels. Sir Andrew further says:

It's either a very funny book with very sad bits in it, or a very sad book with very funny bits in it. It is a book about Jewishness but it is so much more than that. It is brilliant on male friendship in particular; very clever about how sometimes we don't like our friends. It is a profound, wise book and a very entertaining one (*The Telegraph*).

Definitely, there is a portentous connotation in *The Finkler Question* in the form of a growing number of anti-Semitic violence, more often than not offstage, that shatter the self-righteousness of characters that defy the perception of Jews like long-lasting sufferers. Jacobson divulges that such confrontations agonized him excessively, and that a number of the views in the dissonance of wiles and counterarguments in the novel make known his own stance. However, more often than not, he said, he sticks on the conception, as one of his characters says, that “as a Jew, I believe that every argument has a counterargument.” Jacobson in addition explores:

Once we accept there's a constant to-ing and fro-ing of understanding and misunderstanding, all is possible. Here's the wonder of the novel. The novel is the great fluid form in which all those possibilities flow in and flow out. Nothing is definite, nothing is finished, and nothing is determined (nytimes.com).

Jacobson's characters, in *The Finkler Question*, experience raw and real. They are delightfully multifarious and the woe faced by Libor disturbs the psyche for a long time following the novel ends. The tribulations faced by Judaism, continuing although ignored anti-Semitism along with mixed feelings over Zionism are revealed since each point of view, and the further human quandary stared by the characters, who battle jealousy, guilt, confusion and sorrow provide an extraordinarily human angle to these bigger issues. In *The Finkler Question* it's combined with his characteristically unsparing—but not unkindly—ruminations on love, ageing, death and grief.

CONCLUSION:

Jacobson also manages his customary—but not easy—trick of fusing all of the above with genuine comedy. And sentence by sentence, there are few writers who exhibit the same unawed respect for language or such a relentless commitment to re-examining even the most seemingly

unobjectionable of received wisdoms. Thus, Jacobson is mining his immediate milieu as a way of directly unearthing the deeper questions of family, society, belief, culture, relationships—the underlying nature of humanity. As a consequence, *The Finkler Question* is ultimately politically fatalistic in similar ways. Needless to say, this is a decisively male and modern version of Jewishness, much influenced by the historic pugilism of Philip Roth's weaker novels. It also appears to be Jacobson's preferred version of both Jewishness and Jewish comic fiction.

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