Justly Forgotten or Unjustly Overlooked? Reconsidering Howard Jacobson's Coming from Behind

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Abstract

Howard Jacobson is a British Jewish writer, journalist and former professor of English literature who has authored sixteen novels, starting with his 1983 comic campus novel Coming from Behind*, as well as six works of non-fiction. In all his works, Jacobson communicates insights into a variety of cultural as well as social topics, often motivated by his own experience. While Jacobson received more credit as a writer after being awarded the Booker Prize for his eleventh novel* The Finkler Question *in 2010, this recognition does not seem to have initiated a significant interest in his early writing. This paper thus aims to re-evaluate Jacobson's first novel by contextualizing it within the author's oeuvre as well as in the tradition of the British campus novel. Devoting close attention to the portrayal of British Jewish identity, intertextuality, and the use of comic and satirical elements, this article seeks to answer the question to what degree Jacobson's debut novel laid foundations for his later fiction.*

Keywords

British Jewish literature, Howard Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, campus novel, comic novel

Born in Manchester in 1942, Howard Jacobson is a British Jewish writer and journalist who has authored sixteen novels and six works of non-fiction within which he shares various views on a variety of cultural as well as social topics. While the focus on intimate relationships between the sexes in Jacobson's fiction has caused many reviewers to label the author the British Philip Roth, Jacobson says he prefers to be considered the Jewish Jane Austen.[1] Yet, while Austen would always write from a female point of view and has been praised, among other things, for her subtle irony and satire, Jacobson has been characterized by Bryan Cheyette as "an aggressively masculine writer."[2] Still, Jacobson's association with Austen highlights his identification with the British literary tradition, which connects to his being a former professor of English literature. Besides being motivated by his personal experience, both Jacobson's fiction and nonfiction provide numerous direct as well as indirect references to canonized literary texts. These two influences are perhaps the most prominent in the case of his 1983 debut *Coming from Behind*, his contribution to the British campus novel inspired by his teaching job at a polytechnic institute in the 1970s.

While little critical attention had been devoted to Jacobson's early novels, the author's reception of the 2010 Booker Prize for his eleventh novel *The Finkler Question*, set at a time of rising antisemitism in contemporary Britain,[3] triggered an interesting discussion about the nature as well as quality of his writing. Several commentators have agreed on Jacobson being an essentially comic writer; for instance, John McKie labelled him the first comic novelist to win the prize since

1 See e.g. Ben Birnbaum, "Howard Jacobson: The Jewish Jane Austen," *Jewish Boston*, March 17, 2011, accessed May 16, 2019, https://www.jewishboston.com/howard-jacobson-the-jewish-jane-austen/.

2 Bryan Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), xxxviii.

3 See e.g. the 2003 volume *A New Antisemitism: Debating Judeophobia in 21st Century Britain*, edited by Paul Iganski and Barry Kosmin, including an essay by Jacobson himself.

Kingsley Amis in 1986,[4] and Mark Brown of the *Guardian* even called *The Finkler Question* "the first unashamedly comic novel to win the Man Booker prize in its 42–year history."[5] Comedy has traditionally been one of the typical features of Jacobson's works; for instance, the campus novel has been considered a comic and satirical genre highlighting the follies of academic life,[6] and Jacobson's interest in humour from a theoretical perspective is reflected in his book-length study *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997). At the same time, some commentators have stressed that *The Finkler Question* can hardly be classified as a comic novel; for example, Jonathan Foreman characterized it as "far too dark and serious in intent."[7] Indeed, such characterization may fit a novel that focuses on lifelong friendship of three men, two of whom are recently widowed Jews, and the way they help each other cope with hardships. By suggesting that usually no one is killed in a comic text, theoreticians of comedy such as Andrew Stott seem to confirm Foreman's view.[8] Yet, one could pose the question as to whether comedy and seriousness need to be conceived as mutually exclusive. The fact that Jacobson's first critical study *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*: *Four Tragic Heroes, Their Friends and Families* (1978) deals with the Bard's tragedies may be highlighted here to show that Jacobson's scholarly interests extend far beyond comedy, and Jacobson himself even suggested that comedy and tragedy should be seen in juxtaposition to each other: "The great comic artists are those who draw their comic inspiration from tragedy, from terror, so that comedy becomes a way of dealing with it, coping with it, facing it. Comedy is a very important part of the human intelligence, it's a way of understanding, it's a way of criticizing."[9] In this view, comedy and tragedy become inseparable aspects of representing the complexity of human experience.

Opinions on the quality and continuity of Jacobson's writing have also differed to a considerable degree. While Booker Prize chairman Sir Andrew Motion referred to "a particular pleasure in seeing somebody who is that good finally getting his just deserts,"[10] other reviewers voiced a clear-cut distinction between the quality of Jacobson's latest literary production and the rest of the author's oeuvre. Perhaps most strikingly, Jonathan Foreman claimed that "*The Finkler Question* and *Kalooki Nights* [published in 2006] are so superior to anything Jacobson has written before—richer, deeper, more important—that it is almost as if he has been awakened creatively by the threat posed to both Israel and the Jews by the efforts to delegitimize both."[11] Foreman thus asserts it is the concern with current anti-Semitism that adds value to Jacobson's writing. In any case, rather than attempting to comment on such claims, Jacobson seemed to simply enjoy the attention:

4 See e.g. John McKie, "The light-hearted too often leave award ceremonies light-handed," *Caledonian Mercury*, October 14, 2010, accessed May 16, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20130602032411/http://caledonianmercury.com/2010/10/14/the-light-hearted-too-often-leave-award-ceremonies-light-handed/001083.

5 Mark Brown, "Howard Jacobson wins Booker Prize 2010 for *The Finkler Question*," *Guardian*, October 12, 2010, accessed May 16, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/12/howard-jacobson-the-finkler-question-booker.

6 See e.g. Chris Baldick, "Campus novel," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30.

7 Jonathan Foreman, "The Howard Jacobson Question," *Commentary* 130.5 (2010): 46.

8 See Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

9 "Howard Jacobson – *Kalooki Nights,*" YouTube video, 4:04, "librarie mollat," August 24, 2012, accessed May 16, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSbPTwSQZqg.

10 As quoted in Brown, "Howard Jacobson wins Booker Prize."

11 Foreman, "The Howard Jacobson Question," 48.

"I was just sick of being called 'the overlooked underrated Howard Jacobson.' I could be called 'overrated' now, but I can live with that."[12] Be as it may, while Jacobson's sudden recognition may have helped find readers for the novels he wrote shortly before *The Finkler Question* or thereafter, it does not seem to have initiated a significant interest in his early writing.[13] This paper thus aims to re-evaluate *Coming from Behind* by contextualizing it in the author's oeuvre as well as in the tradition of the British campus novel. Devoting close attention to the portrayal of British Jewish identity, intertextuality, and the use of comic and satirical elements, it seeks to answer the question to what degree Jacobson's debut novel laid foundations for his later fiction.

At the end of its first chapter, *Coming from Behind* features an intertextual reference to Bradbury Lodge, a house in Hampstead where all the famous literary and academic figures gather, while instructors at provincial educational institutions are never invited.[14] As a debuting novelist, Jacobson could not have been as well-known as Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, the two major authors of British campus fiction alluded to in the aforementioned passage; however, like them, he drew upon his own personal and professional life experience in writing his first novel. In particular, Jacobson was born to non-Orthodox Jewish working-class parents in Manchester—England's second largest Jewish community, after London—and studied at Downing College, Cambridge, under F. R. Leavis, who even has a passing appearance in *Coming from Behind*. As an expert on British literature who is of Jewish background, in Bryan Cheyette's words Jacobson "sees himself as steeped in a culture that he also feels alienated from [which] neatly sums up the dilemma of many British-Jewish writers."[15] After his graduation, Jacobson lectured for three years at the University of Sydney and when he returned to Britain, he got a job at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, where he taught from 1974 to 1980. Jacobson has been married three times, most recently in 2008 at the age of sixty-six. He married his first wife Barbara in 1964 after his graduation from Cambridge at the age of twenty-two, and at the time his debut novel was published, he was already married to his second wife, Rosalin Sadler, whom *Coming from Behind* is dedicated to.

Sefton Goldberg, the protagonist of *Coming from Behind*, is a thirty-five-year-old divorced Cambridge graduate of non-Orthodox Jewish working-class background who, like Jacobson, has a degree in English literature. While his ex-wife never appears in the novel, the tension between Goldberg's working-class background and his current professional environment is reflected in a series of scenes with a comic effect. On the occasion of Sefton's graduation at Cambridge, his father Sam first hired a large limousine, planning to ostentatiously "[chauffeur] his son in style through the narrow streets of Cambridge," but ended up "knocking some of the finest minds in Europe off their bicycles."[16] Eventually, on the college lawn, Sam, who works as an illusionist in his free time, suddenly decided to perform one of his tricks, and happened to produce an egg from F. R. Leavis's ear before Sefton managed to introduce the two men to each other. Glyn Turton rightly refers to "the comic episode featuring one of the great cultural icons of the twentieth century as

12 As quoted in Birnbaum, "Howard Jacobson: The Jewish Jane Austen."

13 I have found only two critical articles dealing with *Coming from Behind*, both of which were published before 2010 and will be referred to later in this paper.

14 See Howard Jacobson, *Coming from Behind* (London: Vintage, 2003), 34.

15 Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing*, xl.

16 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 181–182.

magician's stooge" as an "absurd juxtaposition."[17] Consequently, due to the sharp contrast between the academics' reputations and Sam's uninformed treatment of them, Jacobson's use of humour in the novel may be aptly approached through the lenses of the incongruity theory embraced by various philosophers and psychologists. Summarizing and elaborating on this theory, John Morreall explains that laughter is caused by "a perception of something incongruous."[18] Morreall further adds that incongruity derives from situations when "some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations."[19] Accordingly, the comic effect in *Coming from Behind* stems from the striking gap between Cambridge as a seat of learning and respected tradition, represented by F. R. Leavis and his colleagues, and the way they are approached, whether deliberately or not, by clumsy yet confident Sam Goldberg.[20]

After the completion of his studies, Sefton remained in academia, moving further away from his working-class Jewish roots. First, he spent a few years lecturing in Australia and currently he works as an instructor at Wrottesley Polytechnic in the Midlands. The tension between the protagonist's family background and current profession is a recurrent theme in Jacobson's novels. For instance, the narrator of *The Mighty Walzer* (1999) also goes to Cambridge in spite of his working-class Jewish background and the protagonist's father in *The Making of Henry* (2004) is an upholsterer and free time illusionist. The protagonists of several Jacobson's novels work at universities, such as Karl Leon Forelock in *Redback* (1986), or contribute to scholarly journals, like Barney Fugleman in *Peeping Tom* (1984). Whereas not all main characters of Jacobson's novels are university professors, the author retains his interest in academia. For example, in his 1993 book *Roots Schmoots: Journeys among Jews*, a collection of essays in the form of a travelogue discussing his impressions of Jewish people living in the USA, Israel and Lithuania, Jacobson writes: "I'm still a sucker for universities. They remain holy places for me. No other institutions tease you with the same promise of books and company and eating away from home. The first thing I wonder about when I arrive in a new city is not what it's got in its museums and art galleries, but what its university is like."[21] Yet, as shown throughout this paper, Jacobson's interest in academia never leads him to idealize universities in his fiction.

Another common feature of Jacobson's novels is the open description of sexual liaisons, which may also be presented with comic undertones. *Coming from Behind* opens with a scene of Sefton, his academic gown and hood still on, having sexual intercourse with Lynne Shorthall, a married woman and his former student who has just stopped by in his office to say a last goodbye and thank you. The limited omniscient narrator mediates Sefton's refusal to admit to his nervousness regarding whether his office doors are locked as well as his lack of satisfaction with the female students he has affairs with at the polytechnic in comparison to his earlier stay in Australia: "At the

17 Glyn Turton, "Campus Fugit: Howard Jacobson's *Coming from Behind*," in *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Merritt Moseley (Chester: Chester Academic Press, 2007), 296.

18 John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 10.

19 Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 10.

20 While one may argue the scene could also be interpreted through the lenses of the superiority theory of humour, suggesting that humour stems from the readers' feeling superior to Sam Goldberg, such a reading would be inconsistent with my analysis of Jacobson's use of humour throughout the novel. For more on the superiority, incongruity and relief theory, see Morreal, *Comic Relief*, 4–23.

21 Howard Jacobson, *Roots Schmoots: Journeys among Jews* (London: Penguin, 1993), 191.

Polytechnic Wrottesley, you took pretty well whatever was thrown at you; whereas when Sefton was a young man teaching first at the Coryapundy Swamp Institute of Technology and then at the University of Wooloomoolloo, New South Wales, he could afford to be as pernickety as a sultan."[22] The very beginning of the novel reveals that Sefton regrets being stuck at a provincial place that is second-rate in all respects, which makes him try hard to look for better opportunities. Yet, while his colleagues are "astounded by the number of positions he found, in these austere times, to apply for,"[23] he has not been able to secure a job at a more prestigious institution.

The difference in society's view of universities and polytechnics is also reflected in Ian Carter's 1990 study of the British campus novel *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, which completely omits all fictional accounts of institutions of higher education without university status, arguing that only universities "are seen as culture's ultimate refuge."[24] For Carter, *Coming from Behind* is thus worth considering even if only for its marginal comments on Cambridge and Sydney universities. While the British government finally removed the divide between the polytechnics and universities in 1992, even Jacobson's essay on his early teaching experience published in 2017 confirms the completely negative characterization of polytechnics: "If there is one word that sumps up the depressed spirit of the 1970s—provincial, grim, strike-bound, maimed, undernourished, unpoetical—it's 'polytechnic.'"[25] Consequently, the sharp contrast between Sefton's ambitious plans for social mobility and his current bitter dissatisfaction may exemplify another illustration of the incongruity theory of humour in *Coming from Behind*, as the opposition is exaggerated to such a degree to defy the readers' expectations. In this case, the comic effect stems from the way Jacobson portrays the striking gap between Sefton's career aspirations, represented by a Cambridge degree, and his current job at a provincial academic institution where he is neither well-paid nor respected.

Besides being dissatisfied with his career, Sefton identifies as a Jew and is aware that this fact marks him as an outsider from the English majority's point of view. In the opening scene, he imagines that Lynne's husband would think of him as a "goatish Jew, […] demoniacally lecherous" and one that has "done a disservice"[26] to a gentile from the Midlands. Few other characters of Jewish background appear in the novel, but one is rather important for Sefton's lack of satisfaction with his professional life. Sefton is envious of his only Jewish friend Godfrey Jelley, an Oxford graduate who became a media celebrity and even published a book of interviews on spiritual themes with actors and actresses. In fact, even Sefton's seeming friendship with Peter Potter, a colleague at Wrottesley who comes from Nottinghamshire and has a working-class background, is characterised by competition in their professional achievements, as each of them hopes to find a better job as soon as possible. While the protagonists' jealousy of their friends' success is another common theme in Jacobson's novels, in *The Finkler Question*, the main characters' rivalries in their personal and professional lives become less significant, as they have known each other for decades and consequently learned to value their friendship.

22 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 8.

23 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 12.

24 Ian Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*: *British University Fiction in the Post-War Years* (London: Routledge, 1990), 12.

25 Howard Jacobson, *The Dog's Last Walk (and Other Pieces)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 61.

26 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 11.

Although Sefton is not particularly close to his colleagues, all of them gather at a dinner party at Peter's and his wife's towards the end of the novel. The only female faculty member is the extravagant feminist Cora Peck who teaches creative writing and whose own experimental work on "excrement, introspection, and physical decay as a metaphor for spiritual disablement"[27] is, to Sefton's disbelief, going to get published in a new series of the best modern young writers. Cora gets on well with Walter Sickert Fledwhite, a gay structuralist who might translate her works into French. In contrast, Sefton often argues with Fledwhite and, due to F. R. Leavis' influence, remains a proponent of traditional liberal humanism who "[disapproves] of structuralists without ever bothering to find out what they did."[28] While some readers may be in favour of less traditional approaches to literary interpretation, the protagonists of Jacobson's later novels embrace Sefton's view. A rejection of literary theory is voiced as recently as in the 2004 novel *The Making of Henry*, where the protagonist recalls having taught a university course called Literature for Life, criticizing his colleagues who "were shedding the lot, both Literature *and* Life, in favour of the frost of theory."[29]

The head of the literature department at Wrottesley is Charles Wenlock, an old-fashioned traditional aesthete who surprises Sefton by a change in his personal life as he leaves his wife for one of his mature students. Charles' behaviour is strongly disapproved of by Peter, who may have a modern taste in literature, but not necessarily a modern view of social issues. However, in spite of their professional and personal disagreements, all the lecturers in English literature are perceived as a homogenous group and increasingly marginalized by the management of the provincial polytechnic, which embraces a strictly utilitarian view of higher education. Sefton thus takes for granted that he, like all of his colleagues, would immediately escape from it if only they could, which makes him envious of Cora, whose publishing contract includes a writing fellowship in London. For the time being, Sefton continues to send out his CV to other universities and is trying to find a publisher for his book on failure.

The polytechnic's disregard for English literature as an obsolete field of study is reflected first in the department's being renamed as the Department of Twentieth-Century Studies, which Charles Wenlock keeps absentmindedly forgetting about. Eventually, the literature lecturers are informed their department is going to be rehoused in the south stand of the football ground, as theirs is the only department that does not need any special equipment and the polytechnic's director, Gerald Sidewinder, has connections with the local football club, Wrottesley Ramblers. While readers may consider moving the former department of literature into a football ground another illustration of the incongruity theory of humour employed in the novel, Glyn Turton explains that "this apparently fanciful development is actually patterned on a similar arrangement between Wolverhampton Polytechnic, where Jacobson once taught, and the Wolverhampton Wanderers football club."[30] To Sefton, this development is all the more unpleasant, as in his urban Jewish experience, "nature—that's to say birds, trees, flowers, and country walks—and football—that's to say beer, bikies, mud, and physical pain" are the two "most un-Jewish [things] he could

27 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 32.

28 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 226.

29 Howard Jacobson, *The Making of Henry* (London: Vintage, 2005), 101.

30 Glyn Turton, "Campus Fugit," 298.

think of."[31] A teacher of canonical English literature who has lived in England for the most of his life, Sefton is neither attracted to living in the English countryside nor interested in the English national game of football.

Yet, it is Sefton who is requested by Sidewinder to write a review of *Scoring*, a novel by Kevin Dainty, the captain of Wrottesley Ramblers. While Sefton is asked for the review because he teaches the long novel, he is expected to show "some expert enthusiasm"[32] which would help Dainty's nomination to the polytechnic's Board of Governors. The novel thus voices a criticism of Sidewinder, who prioritizes his own power and profit along that of his close associate over all educational or collegial concerns. In contrast, the text provides such a limited characterization of Dainty that even his sudden unexpected death while hang-gliding with Sidewinder does not belong among the most memorable subplots of the novel; moreover, the event is only reported to Sefton by Sidewinder. As a campus novel, *Coming from Behind* focuses primarily on the academics' follies and the administrators' machinations, and the death of a completely marginal character towards the end of the text serves only to provide an opportunity for Sefton's public appearance at the twinning ceremony of the polytechnic and the football club, as Sidewinder asks him to make a speech about Dainty's talent. The passages devoted to the portrayal of death in *Coming from Behind* strikingly differ from the more extensive treatment of the same theme in *The Finkler Question*, a text which is not limited by any generic conventions. The difference is clear from the very first chapter of *The Finkler Question*, which includes the sentence: "It is terrible to lose a woman you have loved, but it is no less a loss to have no woman to take into your arms and cradle before tragedy strikes."[33] The view of serious male and female relationships as shields against tragedy is also incompatible with the predominant comic and satirical tone in *Coming from Behind*, where Sefton has brief love affairs with his students rather than a stable romantic relationship.

While Cheyette suggests that *Coming from Behind* and its successor *Peeping Tom* are "not strictly 'Jewish' novels" but rather "'anti-Gentile novels' in which [Jacobson's] protagonists define themselves as the opposite of English gentility,"[34] some passages in Jacobson's debut highlight Sefton's strong sense of his Jewish identity. Admittedly, Sefton does not consider himself a devout Jew. Also, Sefton may be angry with his working-class father, who needs to be explained to that getting a degree from Cambridge does not necessarily entail getting a job at Cambridge. At the same time, reflecting on his life experience from Cambridge onwards, Sefton concludes that "he was used to gentiles making him uncomfortable. One way or another they all did."[35] Occasionally, he even wonders whether he had made the right life decision: "Sometimes Sefton wished he hadn't gone to Cambridge but had stayed instead in the hard bosom of his people."[36] Similarly, Jacobson himself commented on his feeling inadequate at Cambridge due to his Jewish heritage: "My moral

31 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 58.

32 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 138.

33 Howard Jacobson, *The Finkler Question* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 7.

34 Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing*, xxxix.

35 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 41.

36 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 99.

tutor alienated me by thinking that if my name wasn't Finkleburger it was Grubenstein."[37] Like the author, Sefton considers himself an outsider within the English academia. The portrayal of British Jewish identity in *Coming from Behind* provides a completely new theme for the British campus novel in spite of being largely limited to the protagonist. In Jacobson's later novels, such as *The Finkler Question*, the transition from one protagonist towards a focus on a group of equally psychologically developed characters allows for a more varied portrayal of British Jewish identity, including the view of Israel of British Jews.

Leaving aside Sefton's Jewishness, his lack of a sense of belonging in the academic environment makes him similar to the protagonist of Kingsley Amis' seminal campus novel *Lucky Jim* (1954), a copy of which is mentioned to be lying on a desk in Sefton's office;[38] some reviewers even called *Coming from Behind* a Jewish version of *Lucky Jim*, updated for the 1980s.[39] Moreover, like Amis' Jim Dixon, in the final scene of the novel, Sefton has a public speech which he wants to use as an opportunity for self-expression. Standing in front of the whole academic community and thousands of football fans at the twinning ceremony, Sefton tears Kevin Dainty's lousy novel into two halves in imitation of his father's most popular party trick. This gesture suggests both a defiance of the polytechnic's administration and a mental return to his roots. Yet, during the twinning ceremony, no one pays attention to what Sefton says or does on the stage; as Andrew Monnickendam observes, "the humanities might have a voice, but no one wants to listen, no one, at least, in the world that the humanities was supposed to be twinned with."[40] Instead, all onlookers watch Fledwhite who, despite attempting to attack Sefton, at the very moment happens to cause Sidewinder to fall down "under a hail of eggs and tomatoes and zucchini."[41] Regardless of his missing the intended target, Fledwhite's use of vegetables as a means of attack is in line with the conventions of the comic campus novel, which contrasts sharply with the report of a violent anti-Semitic hate crime against a twenty-two-year-old Jewish man described in *The Finkler Question*. As *Coming from Behind* stays within the campus novel subgenre, the unjust job market remains the worst misfortune an academic of Jewish working-class background may reasonably complain about.

While Sefton's book on failure does not seem to spark any interest among publishers, towards the end of the novel, he is invited for an interview at Cambridge where he may receive a Disraeli Fellowship at Holy Christ Hall that he had apparently applied for at some point. At first, Sefton panics, as he does not even remember what he wrote in his application. As the fellowship is named after the first Jewish Prime Minister, Sefton speculates whether it is open only to Jews, which makes him wonder: "Where were the other candidates going to come from? This was England, not America."[42] After Sefton arrives at Cambridge to be interviewed, he finds out that none of the other six candidates are Jewish, but, to his shock, they include two of his former students and Fledwhite.

37 Jacobson, *The Dog's Last Walk*, 19.

38 See Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 223.

39 See e.g. Ivan Gold, "Barney the Obscure," review of *Peeping Tom*, by Howard Jacobson, *New York Times*, August 25, 1985, 7007012.

40 Andrew Monnickendam, "The Comic Academic Novel," *BELLS* 2 (1989): 169.

41 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 241.

42 Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, 201.

Moreover, the Director of Studies present at the interview is Helen Burns, a former student of Sefton's who he had sex with in Australia and, as John Sutherland points out, a "namesake of the saintly pupil in *Jane Eyre*."[43] The novel thus depicts the academia as an extremely small and interconnected social world, rather isolated from both the majority of society and the Jewish minority. While the self-important professor Woolfardisworthy who conducts the interview does not even bother to remember Sefton's surname, due to a series of coincidences, Goldberg eventually gets the fellowship rather than Fledwhite, as the committee are not welcoming toward a structuralist. As Glyn Turton notes, Sefton "comes from behind to win the Disraeli fellowship, and escape from Wrottesley, thus ensuring for himself—and the novel—a climax which is also a withdrawal."[44] Sefton thus manages to escape from Wrottesley in a rather surprising way.

While the somewhat improbable ending may again be reminiscent of *Lucky Jim*, unlike Jim, who gets a non-academic job in London, Sefton stays in academia. Yet, the fact that Cambridge may accidentally choose to accommodate someone of his views does not necessitate that Sefton, a man of Jewish background without a Ph.D. at the time of his job interview, will be happy and satisfied there. While Sefton Goldberg briefly reappears in Jacobson's third novel *Redback*, in which he is described as "a world authority on shy girls in Dickens,"[45] even such a proof of professional recognition does not reveal much about the character's personal satisfaction. Moreover, unlike Amis, Jacobson does not provide a love interest for the protagonist, as there is no other major female character than Cora Peck and no mutual attraction is felt between her and Sefton. Jacobson's debut thus limits all interaction between Sefton and the female characters to an unhappy marriage that is never referred to in detail and a series of short-term relationships. For all of these reasons, *Coming from Behind* closes with a more ambivalent ending than *Lucky Jim*, laying the ground for the complexity of Jacobson's later novels.

In conclusion, as a campus novel set in a literature department, *Coming from Behind* includes direct as well as indirect references not only to earlier campus novels, but also to canonized texts in the English literary tradition, thus establishing one of the typical features of Jacobson's oeuvre. Besides satirizing the strictly utilitarian view of higher education, *Coming from Behind* takes a stance on the issue of literary analysis, arguing for the traditional liberal humanist approach, a position which does not significantly differ from the view of literary scholarship expressed in Jacobson's later works. Although Jacobson's subsequent novels are not exclusively set in academia, their protagonists resemble Sefton Goldberg, as they are usually of working-class Jewish background and their higher education enables them to profit from social mobility. However, as a satire of the competitive world of academia featuring a protagonist against a set of adversaries over a relatively short period of time, *Coming from Behind* does not provide the portrayal of lasting friendship between Sefton and the other male characters, a feature which becomes crucial in Jacobson's later novels. Indeed, there seems to be a significant shift between *Coming from Behind* as a comic novel representative of the early stage of Jacobson's writing and *The Finkler Question* as an exemplary novel of his later

43 John Sutherland, "Howard's End," review of *Redback*, by Howard Jacobson, *Coming from Behind*, by Howard Jacobson, and *Peeping Tom*, by Howard Jacobson, *London Review of Books* 8.16 (1986): 13.

44 Turton, "Campus Fugit," 306.

45 Howard Jacobson, *Redback* (London: Black Swan, 1987), 135.

phase, with one difference stemming simply from the transition from one protagonist towards a focus on a group of equally psychologically developed characters. With this development *The Finkler Question* features a more nuanced portrayal of interactions among people, often over a long period of time, within which the hardships involved make the main characters realize the value of friendship and human connection. Similarly, while the protagonist's Jewish identity in *Coming from Behind* presents a completely new element in the British campus novel, Jacobson's subsequent novels include a more extensive portrayal of a British Jewish sense of belonging. Nevertheless, this comparison is not necessarily the only measurement of quality, as *Coming from Behind* remains worth reading not only as an extraordinary campus novel, but also as a useful introduction into the author's oeuvre.

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