



Coming From Behind

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Sefton Goldberg: mid-thirties, English teacher at Wrottesley Poly in the West Midlands; small, sweaty, lustful, defiantly unappreciative of beer, nature and organised games; gnawingly aware of being an urban Jew islanded in a sea of country-loving Anglo-Saxons. Obsessed by failure - morbidly, in his own case, gloatingly, in that of his contemporaries - so much so that he plans to write a bestseller on the subject.

In the meantime he is uncomfortably aware of advancing years and atrophying achievement, and no amount of lofty rationalisation can disguise the triumph of friends and colleagues, not only from Cambridge days but even within the despised walls of the Poly itself, or sweeten the bitter pill of another's success...

From the winner of the Man Booker Prize 2010.

Coming From Behind Details

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Author : Howard Jacobson

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From Reader Review Coming From Behind for online ebook

Jerrymel George says

Howard Jacobson is an exceptionally witty writer and Coming from Behind cements that fact. In Sefton Goldberg, we have the quintessential underachiever, who can only scoff at his peers' achievements or lack thereof. Its the humour that holds the novel together rather than the plot. The novel does lose steam towards the end, as is the case with his other creations. Read if you are a Jacobson fan.

Debbie Windley says

I have re-read this 20 odd years after my first introduction to Howard Jacobson. Its still funny altho this time around I was aware of its self consciousness and would guess that Jacobson would probably not be too keen on re-reading it himself.

What was very new about the experience this time was that I am now a lecturer in what was once a northern polytechnic now up-graded to a Metropolitan Uni. Although we are 26 years on from when this was first published the themes remain much the same. The twinning of the poly with the local football team had me howling with laughter and recognition, as my institution has virtually established a faculty at a renowned sporting ground and is still extracating itself from financial deals supposedly of mutual benefit.

The renaming of departments to sound 'relevant' and less 'elitist' rang resounding bells; surely it can't be long before we too have a Dept of Modern Languages for Business and one for Twentieth Century Studies. Generalisation reigns supreme and knowledge for any sake but commerce, industries and the professions would now appear to be something we cannot afford.

So the book which first turned me on to Jacobson's hilarious struggle to maintain composure in a Goyisher world hasn't dated too badly. His more recent books have become far more visceral the language sharper with less need to show off than this first novel seemed to require.

Art says

Howard Jacobson's first Novel. Very humorous, scandalous. Reports from Jacobson's personal life suggest that it is very biographical.

James M says

A failing university plans to merge with a local football club, while a Jewish teacher craves literary success.

Michael Braccia says

Wonderfully un-PC and very funny. You will discover on the first page of chapter one why Sefton Goldberg is 'as blind as a school photographer' and why he is concerned about 'the little metal nipple on his Yale lock'. To find out, you just have to read this book. The novel might offend a few minorities except those brilliant people I know who are both part of a minority group AND have a great sense of humour. However, what I admire about Jacobson is that he is prepared (and brave enough) to be critical of everyone if necessary, including his main character and himself. As an ex-college lecturer I could relate to many of the incidents. Parking my car in someone else's space at Dudley College for starters! (I'll never forget it).

I like the way that Jacobson veers from sometimes embarrassingly straightforward language to the subtleties of a great writer. Sefton Goldberg had 'known' a local librarian and ex-student, Jacqueline, in the past and he described their previous encounter. I would like to add 'so to speak' after 'declared their regard'.

'They had declared their regard for one another at a party just before she left the Polytechnic.'

Sefton, the main character, is obviously intellectual, but internally had a great skill for putting himself down. His relatively sheltered upbringing restricts his knowledge of the way 'normal' people behave, but as the novel develops we start to realise just how normal he is, albeit paranoid about his Jewishness. You can't help but warm to Sefton for this. The inadequacies and lack of confidence of a young college lecturer are described beautifully by Howard Jacobson.

Hopefully avoiding spoilers (this bit won't make sense until you read the book), but I'm sure you will take the journey with Sefton wondering to the very end whether he will ever discover the level of Cora's 'special expertise'. It wasn't like that at Dudley College or, indeed, Wolverhampton University which I think is the inspiration for Wrottesley Polytechnic. 'Wolves Uni' (the name I gave it as a student) wasn't a university at the time the novel was written, but a Polytechnic.

Howard Jacobson's novels need to be read.

Michael Braccia

Rael says

Very funny

Michael Moseley says

Quite an odd book that should have not suggested for the book club if I had known about the opening sex scheme which I would have to discuss with my mothering law. A look at the internal politics of a 70's politics. Not a book from the same author as a Mann booker prize winner. I did not find it funny.
