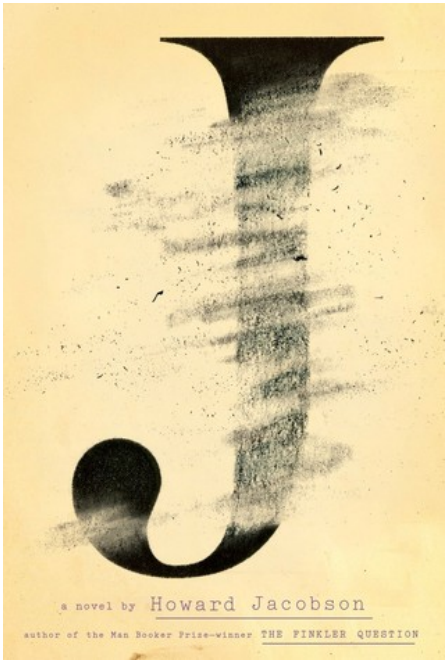

J

Howard Jacobson

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J Howard Jacobson
An alternate cover edition can be found here.

A profound, darkly comedic parable set in a future where collective memory has vanished following a historic catastrophe, and one young couple's love affair could have shattering consequences for the human race.

In a world where the past is a dangerous country, not to be talked about or visited, J is a love story of incomparable strangeness, both tender and terrifying. After the devastation of WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, all that should remain is peace and prosperity. Everyone knows his or her place; all actions are out in the open. But Esme Nussbaum has seen the distorted realities, the fissures that have only widened in the twenty-plus years since she was forced to resign from her position at the monitor of the Public Mood. Now, Esme finds something strange and special developing in a romance between Ailinn Solomons and Kevern Cohen. As this unusual pair's actions draw them into ever-increasing danger, Esme realizes she must do everything in her power to keep them together--whatever the cost.

With a sense of the dramatic sweep of Michael Ondaatje and the dystopian, literary sensibility of Margaret Atwood, Howard Jacobson's *J* is an astonishing feat of fiction. In this exquisitely written, beautifully playful and imaginative, and terribly heart-breaking work, Jacobson gathers his prodigious gifts for the crowning achievement of a remarkable career.

J Details

Date	:	Published October 14th 2014 by Hogarth (first published October 4th 2014)
ISBN	:	9780553419559
Author	:	Howard Jacobson
Format	:	Hardcover 342 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Literary Fiction, Abandoned, Contemporary

From Reader Review J for online ebook

Rebecca Foster says

A peculiar dystopia that posits a second racially or theologically inspired Holocaust. *J* marks an unusual turn for Jacobson; it has some of his trademark elements – odd names, humorous metaphors, and Semitic references – but still seems a strange departure after *The Finkler Question* and *Zoo Time*.

Jacobson never reveals precisely what happened (if it happened), but it seems a bit like another Holocaust in the 2010s: something no one ever thought could happen again, and certainly not here.“Beliefs kill.” “Violence quickly comes to look quite normal.” “We always think what we’re doing is humane, even when we’re secretly relishing the evil of it.” Chilling lines like these join some telling criticism of religion and society. This book is clearly meant as a commentary on the danger of hating and ostracizing the Other in one’s midst, but for the most part I did not find Jacobson’s dystopia very compelling or groundbreaking.

See my full review at The Bookbag.

Roger Brunyate says

What's in a Name? A Masterpiece!

It is the names you notice first: Ailinn Solomons, Kevern Cohen, Densdell Kroplik, Breoc Heilbron, Eoghan Rosenthal, and of course the vicar, Golvan Shlagman. All the inhabitants in Port Reuben (formerly Ludgvennock) combine Jewish surnames with Celtic or Anglo-Saxon given names. Odd, to say the least. Howard Jacobson is utterly masterly in the control he shows in this extraordinary novel. To this and other questions, he gives the answers only very slowly, but he deals less in revelations than a softly proliferating tissue of suggestion. The finest tendrils merely, the associations of a word or phrase, set off occasionally by the buried detonations of some sudden shock. This is a gossamer book, a gentle comedy that seduces its readers even as it lays the heaviest moral weight upon our shoulders.

[Stop reading here if you want to let Jacobson tell things in his own way. I shall try to add a little more with each paragraph, though avoiding actual plot spoilers. If you read on, feel free to stop at any time.]

It soon becomes clear that we are in a dystopian world. Post-apocalyptic, actually, though everybody is too polite to mention what the apocalypse was; all they say, always in capitals, is WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED. Some generations ago, clearly. And whatever is was, it also involved the collapse of the banking system and many of the mechanisms of government. If this is an Orwellian world, it is a gentle one, based upon willing compliance rather than enforcement. The phones make only local calls. The radio programs a steady diet of ballads and love songs. People believe in loving their neighbors and always saying sorry, though there are occasional outbursts of murder and sexual violence. Kevern (pronounced "key-vern") Cohen lives in a clifftop cottage and carves wooden lovespoons for tourists; Ailinn Solomons, his girlfriend, makes paper flowers. Among other things, this is a love story.

The J of the title is not the normal letter, but a J with two bars across it, a J that is censored or half-erased. Kevern's father would always put two fingers to his mouth, like a hand holding a non-existent cigarette, whenever a word beginning with J passed his lips, and Kevern does the same. Not that the real J-word is ever

mentioned, not once. Those people simply do not exist any more; only through folklore do we know what they looked like, or how they behaved. You could look it up, of course, but the use of reference libraries is discouraged, and anyway most of the books have pages missing.

J was short-listed for the 2014 Man Booker Prize, and would probably have won if Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* had not been at least equally extraordinary. Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*, which did win in 2010, shows him to be deeply concerned with Jewish matters: whether historically, or the place of Jews in society today, or the future of the state of Israel. But he approaches these topics in offbeat ways, as a humorist, avoiding the obvious hot buttons, and often viewing his people through the eyes of Gentiles. The leading character in *Finkler*, for example, is envious of Jews and wishes to become one; the most blatant pieces of anti-Semitism in that book come from the mouths of Jews themselves.

Although references to the Holocaust creep with increasing frequency into the present novel, Jacobson is very careful not to tuck it away in a specific place in time. It is not long-dead Germans in the 1940s he is indicting, but all of us. "We have been lulled by the great autocrat-driven genocides of the recent past into thinking that nothing of that enormity of madness can ever happen again -- not anywhere, least of all here." So, with chilling prescience, writes one of the disappeared. In Jacobson's world, "It can't happen here" has morphed into "It did happen here... or did it?" This is a society that accepts (more or less) its culpability, and tries to ensure (more or less) that it will never happen again. A society that has Made Amends. Dystopian or not, it is a society basking in the same smug complacency we see today. Reading Jacobson's novel, we smile with amused recognition—yet his implications are chilling.

In the last section of the novel, we learn of a project of restitution. Good, right? You find some surviving Jews and encourage them to build a community again. Yet the reason for it? Because people are happier having someone to hate.

Tori (InToriLex) says

Find this and other Reviews at InToriLex

This was a disappointing read, sifting through it's confusing dialogue, and philosophy felt like work. I kept reading despite boredom because I was hoping I could glean enough about a dystopian society to make it worthwhile. Instead the plot takes a back seat to the authors need to overwrite. Everything was described a bit too much, way more telling than showing. When things did happen, the reaction to it was highlighted more than the thing, so nothing seemed to be happening at all. More than a few times things were described that seemed important but was never tied back in to the rest of the story.

> **"You fell in love and immediately thought about dying. Either because the person you had fallen for had a mind to kill you, or because he exceptionally didn't and then you dreaded being parted from him."**

There is some great writing here, but it trips over itself. I ignored the pretty prose out of annoyance, because this was a collection of ideas rather than a well thought out novel. Aileen and Kevern are not characters, but would be better described as point of views that converse. This doesn't deserve to be compared to *1984* and *Brave New World* because those novels were accessible, most readers won't be able to stomach this. This is a dystopian, but minus the creativity and detail necessary to make you care about the characters. The lack of

urgency couldn't be made up for with short violent passages describing WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED.

> **"They had death on them and whoever had death on him was outcast. Illogical because someone had to deal with the dead, the tasks they performed were indispensable and even sacred, but logic had nothing to do with defilement."**

It doesn't matter how great this book is to the people who understand it, if most people don't want to understand it at all. The plot could have been put into a book half this size, and it would have been more readable. I don't recommend this book to anyone but I finished it in hopes that the ending or some connection could make it work, it was a waste of time. If you enjoy philosophy, you could enjoy the intellectual banter here, but don't expect to enjoy it as a novel, because it just doesn't work in that respect.

I received this book from BloggingforBooks in exchange for a honest review.

Antonomasia says

A bizarrely, paradoxically, cosy dystopia. The tone of the writing is quite untypical for the setting. It’s definitely not free from horrors, but the central couple, Ailinn and Kevern, are sweet, strange, lonely people like characters from a Belle & Sebastian song, and their scenes have a similar feel.

It’s easy to understand this as Jacobson’s first venture into a new genre after writing more or less domestic comic novels. Its doesn't have the typical creeping menace of the post-apocalyptic, that itself a cliché; instead it feels more real and quotidian than the usual dystopia; this is what the routine of living in one might actually feel like. He seems to break the rules of speculative fiction by virtue of not knowing them, making something genuinely strange, though not entirely coherent. The illogical aspects contribute to the otherworldliness – which is a boon, having realised since I read the early chapters of J, that one of the reasons I don’t read more SF is that it often doesn’t feel different enough.

Whilst the skewed strangeness was very welcome, this (as can be deduced) c.2070s-80s Cornwall has in technological and social terms, so much in common with Britain of the 1960s-70s that it’s also a transparent exercise in a) something that’s easy for a 70+ year-old genre newbie to write, and b) freeing the novel from the complications of 21st century communications and surveillance - and climate change, which is never mentioned. I’m more than happy to hear about a world without the constant buzz of mobiles and the internet, but it’s a copout as regards writing a near-future dystopia in which infrastructures still exist. The characters have ‘utility phones’, which at first appear to be landlines, but at some points sound portable, like a basic calls-only mobile. At any rate, there is not a peep about hacking these or the network. Everyone seems to exist in a state of apathetic compliance as regards the state (aside from hoarding nostalgic items, which seems to be an offence frequently overlooked in the manner of illegal downloading in recent times) - and the valve for dissatisfaction is a volatile social life, in which pub fights and domestic violence are overwhelmingly common.

I often found the central story of *J* so sweet that I don’t like criticising the book. (For example, I was melted by the cuteness of this sentence: "See how small she is - she is more shawl than baby.") Most individual scenes work, and I’m in agreement with articles about Jacobson saying he writes relationships very well - but I don’t think this book and its premise hang together especially coherently. I read a few interviews with Jacobson when *J* was released, and don’t recall Georges Perec being mentioned as one of the inspirations.

Yet it's as if a writer with less imagination and skill had tried to combine the themes of *A Void* (missing letter as symbol for the Holocaust and the people absent from society because of it) and *W or A Memory of Childhood* (dystopia + nostalgia).

The basic premise, of a neo-Holocaust /Kristallnacht in UK cities later this decade, reminds me of a piece of work I produced for a school drama lesson when aged about 12 - a playlet set during a third world war *in which the aggressors were the Germans. Again.* The teacher was slightly disappointed because I was the sort of precocious kid who should have come up with a choice of country more perceptive of current events. But as I experienced a surfeit of documentaries and stories about the War [Second] at home - enough to put me off reading almost anything about it voluntarily between the ages of 16 and 30 - so that was what came out. Nothing wrong with the topic of international relations and war - just a somewhat outdated choice of protagonist. Although these days some EU countries argue that Germany throws its weight around.

The spectre of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism loom large for a Jewish writer born during WWII - and part of the point of *J* is simply a reminder that anti-Semitism hasn't completely gone away in Britain. He evidently sees disapproval of Israeli foreign policy as a potential lightning-rod for anti-Semitism. Certainly can't speak for everyone - and Jacobson must have heard more than enough to lead to the idea that there's an assumption British Jewish people agree with all of the country's actions. In direct personal experience I've never heard anyone condoning the bellicose policy meant here; in the media I see, anything to the contrary is usually the province of trolls below the line or very occasional guest columnists. Skinhead thugs, meanwhile, don't tend to care about Palestinians.

The authority figures in *J* continue to be anti-Semitic, and to consider that 'what happened if it happened' (the Voldemort-like name for the pogroms) was necessary. Even a civil servant who has a different view of the events sees the Jewish population as a scapegoat needed for society to function, rather than people and culture. (One gets the impression that this could be a bleak side of Jacobson's own philosophy, and no account is taken of contemporary philo-Semitism - the subject of two widely-reviewed books this year, by Joshua Ferris and Julie Burchill.) In the world of *J*, other, non-Jewish ethnic groups are given essentialist positive stereotypes by propaganda and state education, including Arabs. There may be so much concentration on attacks on Jewishness specifically, and references replicating 1930s events, that the book doesn't seem like a direct allegory for animosity towards peoples who are on the receiving end of the most widespread ill-feeling in contemporary Europe such as Muslims and Rom/a/ni - this seems like a missed opportunity given that the audience for literary fiction will contain liberals to whom Islamophobia is to an extent acceptable, where anti-Semitism really isn't - but it could still prompt discussion if readers chose. (Burchill's philo-semtism book apparently contains some negativity about muslims.) Jacobson, like the 2010s letter-writer Wolfie in his book, is an old man who wants to ensure the younger generation don't disregard his cautiousness, which descends from centuries of persecution rather than recent decades in which other groups, more visibly different and in terms of large numbers only recently present, have become the 'ultimate other', the 'bogeyman', whilst Jewish people have "become white". It seems unlikely that things would change quickly given the post 9/11 stance on Islam and the Middle East.

More general is the book's debate on societal remembering and forgetting, learning from history or failing to. The continuing anti-Semitism didn't seem to fit logically with the country-wide enforced changing of all surnames to [Ashkenazi] Jewish ones which belonged to victims of the pogroms, and trying to erase difference so as to pre-empt unrest. Whilst there's some kind of irony there about changing one's surname to "pass", I'm not sure of the internal coherence. The use of names (or mascots) whilst more or less looking down on a culture seems more analogous to place-names associated with colonialism, whether it's First Nations city names in settler colonies, or maybe even names in Docklands that reference India. *J* is on the side of remembering, of not sweeping things under the carpet. The question of apologising and forgiving

(something which the *J* society perhaps does too much) was interesting and thought-provoking as I do lean towards the idea of this, and understanding, on an intellectual and societal level - (but in such a way that people don't have to live side by side with those who did them harm unless they are honestly comfortable with that).

The argument within the book for remembrance, and for multiculturalism, is present though bleak, simply that people need difference in order to define themselves and will go stir-crazy without it. There also may be some kind of satire around the topics of vintage fashions and collecting. By showing collecting and 'hoarding' of even small amounts of old stuff as highly questionable under the regime in *J*, is Jacobson questioning younger generations' minimalism and the decline of [certain types of] collections? But on the other hand, when Kevern and Ailinn go to London, the place is full of vintage markets and there is a huge trade in nostalgia - as in present reality, just a bit more black market.

Despite reservations about the coherence of this future world, I found Jacobson's central characters likeable and convincing, such that I wouldn't rule out reading him again - although he'd never much appealed to me on the basis of his newspaper columns.

Finally, I must tut at the Booker committee for including *J*; the novel isn't as bad as all that in my opinion - but there are references to a fictional media philosopher, Valerian Grossenberger who "changed the way we all think", "an old man now, but still possessed of silky powers of reasoning", transparently laudatory of Jacobson's University of the Arts colleague A.C. Grayling, also chair of the 2014 Booker. Perhaps it's my Puritan streak, but surely an ethicist worth his salt should exclude such a book rather than fall into nepotism.

Susan says

In this novel, author Howard Jacobsen has attempted to create a dystopian society which is both very different to the world we live in and yet strangely familiar. The storyline revolves around a romance – of sorts – between Kevern Cohen and Ailinn Solomons, who meet in the small, seaside town of Port Reuben. As the story progresses, we begin to learn about Kevern and his family. The parents who seem to live hoarding secrets; the forbidden words and memories which always go unvoiced – Kevern copies his father's voicing of the letter 'J' by putting two fingers to his lips and has varying rituals which must be followed before he leaves the house. Everything is aimed to protect himself and others against the unspoken, "what happened, before it happened."

As the novel unfolds, questions begin to arise. Why were Kevern and Ailinn thrown together and can their relationship flourish in the world they find themselves in. Why is a professor of art writing diary entries about Kevern and why is he, seemingly, always under suspicion? Ailinn was adopted, but even those characters who have a family – like Kevern – seem to have secrets abounding in their past. This is a society which is casually violent, especially against women, and Kevern seems to go against the norm.

To be honest, I have conflicted emotions about this novel. Yes, it is uncomfortable reading, but then good fiction should make you think and arouse emotions in you. However, the constant hinting at what had happened (if it happened) became rather wearing, the characters were not sympathetic and the relationship between Kevern and Ailinn difficult to feel strongly about. The ending did make up for a lack of engagement I felt with the characters, but overall I have to say that this did not work for me. I received a copy of this book from the publishers, via NetGalley, for review.

Gumble's Yard says

Dystopian novel set in an unnamed country where culture is overshadowed by a possible event in the past referred to mainly as “"what Happened if it happened". Although it is never really spelled out it is clear (to the reader perhaps more than to the characters) that this was a all-encompassing anti-Semitic massacre/mass expulsion of the Jews. Although the country is unnamed (albeit it seems Celtic of some form) the period is perhaps closer to our own with “what happened if it happened” following on from the Israeli/Palestinian tensions (again this is only via allusion rather than explicit) and fuelled by social media.

Really the narrative takes a second place to and facilitates a detailed (although never polemical or too literal) exploration of anti-Semitism.

In all ways a vastly superior book to The Finkler Question. The themes are clear – that humanity rests on the need to define itself by the “other” and to identify someone to blame for the world’s issues and that for Christians and Muslims, the Jews retain enough of the same characteristics and enough distinctives to be the ideal (in fact only really possible) such other.

Overall this is an excellent book – very well written, with the allusion and politics complementing rather than overwhelming the story and with much which is topical (Jacobsen might say that is because it is eternal) and thought provoking.

Blair says

Review originally published at Learn This Phrase.

Howard Jacobson won the Booker Prize in 2010 with The Finkler Question; *J* - described as both 'a dystopian novel like no other' and 'like no other novel Howard Jacobson has written', along with platitudes like 'thought-provoking and life-changing' - is on the longlist for this year's prize. When I read the premise of *J*, I assumed it would be a serious dystopia, especially since the blurb makes comparisons to Nineteen Eighty-Four and Brave New World. (Actually it says '*J* is a novel to be talked about in the same breath as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*', which almost put me off reading it at all - I hate it when pronouncements like that are forced on the reader, and this one seemed a particularly foolish and grand example since the books mentioned are generally regarded as classics.) But, while it matures into something approximating this by the final chapters, it actually starts as a much stranger and more light-hearted mixture than I was led me to believe. This threw me off a bit until quite a way into the book, although I suppose it shouldn't really have surprised me after the strong element of humour in *The Finkler Question*, and the author's reputation for comic writing. J is also an unconventional love story, with a blossoming relationship between two of the main characters, Kevern and Ailinn, forming the basis for the plot.

There is a sort of post-apocalyptic setting, but it's a subtle one. Society is altered in some ways that are minor, but odd enough to be disconcerting; in other ways not at all. It is mentioned more than once that 'the past is a foreign country', rarely discussed, an ethos enforced by Orwellian slogans (or perhaps the logical conclusion of 'keep calm and carry on' mania) such as 'yesterday is a lesson we can learn only by looking to tomorrow'. Consequently, much classic literature and music has been forgotten - or at least is not consumed

publicly - as with many, many things here, there is no explicit law against it, it just isn't done. There is some sort of taboo around the letter J, which is rarely used and which Kevern cannot pronounce without making a gesture - covering his lips with his fingers. Digital technology seems to have died out, so in some ways this feels like a historical novel or one about a remote part of the world isolated from modern society. (Although when the characters leave their home town, Port Reuben, and visit 'the capital', there's more of a typical dystopian vibe - city-dwellers are attired in colourful costumes that sound similar to the ones worn by the upper echelon of society in The Hunger Games (I'm basing this on the films, as I haven't read the books) and once-grand hotels limp onward in a state of dilapidation.) Love is championed above all things, and constant apology is encouraged, but adultery and violence within relationships are common for both genders. Above all of this looms the influence of an event only referred to as WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, a concept just as frustratingly opaque to the reader as it is for the characters. It has the significance of some apocalyptic disaster, yet the secrecy surrounding any discussion of it, not to mention the uncertainty about whether it even took place, makes it seem impossible that this could be the case.

In amongst all this, the relationship that develops between Kevern and Ailinn is so dysfunctionally whimsical it feels as though it's straight out of some quirky-hipster-romance story - something like Q: A Love Story or The Girl With Glass Feet. With his paranoia, rather pathetic nature and morbid romanticism, Kevern definitely shares numerous traits with Julian, the protagonist of *The Finkler Question*, while Ailinn occasionally veers a little too close to MPDG territory. Sometimes, especially at the beginning, I felt like I was reading some kind of farcical comedy. Larger-than-life small-town characters have noisy affairs and brawl in the streets. Giving a member of the opposite sex a brutish kiss is a common practice, a disturbing expression of sexual aggression - but the fact that this act is still known as 'snogging' makes it read as amusing. Even murder has something colourful and comic about it and doesn't quite seem real. It is only later that these strangely, and sometimes uncomfortably, funny elements, converge and a darker, more serious narrative emerges. The story takes a new turn, focusing more heavily on the reasons why Kevern is being observed by an eccentric colleague (whose diary makes up part of the book), the secrets Ailinn's 'companion' - half housemate, half foster mother - may be hiding. Similarly, while I didn't feel that the relationship between Ailinn and Kevern ever quite transcended its twee foundations, it does become apparent as the story progresses that it has a greater significance than appearances suggest - which in itself makes it less annoying. This is a book in which threads really do come together slowly, but when they *do* come together, they make sense of so much.

J is, like *The Finkler Question*, essentially a novel about Jewishness; it is also, indirectly and abstractly, a novel about the Holocaust. This is not something that is made explicit at the start. Even going into the book knowing that this is the case, it is initially difficult to link the characters and their circumstances directly to these themes without feeling that you are clutching at straws, or shaping things to make them fit. It's especially disconcerting, if WHAT HAPPENED is the Holocaust or something like it, that the characters all have Jewish surnames - until you discover the reason for this. The humour and oddness of the first half of *J* work to obfuscate the real direction of the story in the same way that bland ballads, saying sorry, quaint and unnecessary jobs, sex and petty crime distract the population of Port Reuben from any public analysis, apportioning of blame or questioning of the past. This makes the eventual unfolding of the truth, achieved partly through explanation within the story and partly through gradual realisation on the part of the reader, all the more powerful.

There is something richer and more rewarding about *J* than much literary fiction - that element of light-heartedness also carries over into the language and wordplay - but it's still easy to read. It's a story you can (but don't have to) think about in order to read between the lines; the first half in particular could be read as a typical dystopian tale, and it may not mean the same thing to all readers. Its speculative aspect means that, although it discusses a lot of the themes typical of Booker nominees and novels by big-name authors of

literary fiction - identity, memory, the power of history etc - it does so in an entirely original fashion. In a time when bestseller charts and awards lists are still saturated with fiction about WWII and its aftermath to the point that you wonder what else can be said about the subject, this approach makes it far more memorable.

Having finished *J*, I am still not entirely convinced by the comparisons to Orwell and Huxley - but I am far closer to being convinced than I was at the start of the book. Although I don't think any novel is ever really 'life-changing', it is certainly thought-provoking, and enormously clever; it plays with the reader's perceptions and subverts them, not just for the sake of doing so, but in order to draw parallels with the story itself. I really enjoyed this book, but more than that, I was impressed by it. It's also much better than *The Finkler Question*, and would be a worthier Booker winner.

Emma Sea says

well-written, award-nominated, insightfully critical re the notion of the 'other' and the role of historical consciousness, and dull as dishwater.

Scott Rhee says

German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel once said, “We learn from history that we don’t learn from history,” which, besides being a clever bit of wordplay, is also profoundly true.

Those that believe that the Holocaust could never happen again---HERE and NOW---are clearly delusional and/or naively optimistic. A rising tide of Neo-Nazism in Europe, growing anti-semitic hostilities in the Middle East, the Islamic State a.k.a. ISIS: anyone with eyes and ears can see the same nationalism and racial hatred that bred the monsters of Germany in the 1930s.

It’s also naive to believe that Americans are immune to such problems. We are, after all a country that has borne such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, the Westboro Baptist Church, and the LAPD. Our history is replete with attempted genocide of indigenous peoples, slavery of blacks, and war-time internment camps for Japanese-Americans. Racial tensions did not disappear after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Today, on many city streets, small race wars continually play out between trigger-happy cops and angry black teens, with neither group willing to listen to the other.

Whether it’s black vs. white, straight vs. gay, conservative vs. liberal, Gentile vs. Jew, Christian vs. Muslim, it’s the same old hostilities playing out in the same old horrible ways.

Hegel was right. If we have learned nothing else from history, it’s that we have learned nothing from history.

This is why Howard Jacobson’s latest novel, “J”, is so apropos.

Jacobson’s novel envisions a future supposedly several generations removed from our present and yet near enough to be terrifyingly prescient.

In this future, the past is nonexistent. Nostalgia is illegal. Popular media is watered-down to sentimentalist pap. Certain topics are not to be discussed. Specific events in history never happened, according to official reports. It is like this to protect the populace from a horrific truth; an attempt to erase from the collective unconscious an event so bad that it is referred to as WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED.

The utopic peace is gradually unravelling, though. Neighborly resentments are creeping into the idyllic towns and villages. Suppressed hostilities and incidents of rage and violence are slowly on the rise. Murder---a crime thought to be virtually eliminated---has returned.

The average citizen is at a loss to understand what is happening. Kevern Cohen, a college professor and amateur carpenter, is one such citizen. He has just met and fallen in love with the woman of his dreams, Ailinn Solomons. He is also a minor suspect in the murder of another local woman. He has no idea that he is actually the subject of a government-sanctioned experiment.

Part “Truman Show” and part “1984”, “J” extrapolates a dystopic future wherein society faces the consequences of a regrettable decision made by its ancestors and tries to correct the mistakes of the past by implementing solutions which may be just as damaging and unsettling.

Hidden within plain sight in the novel is the future plight of the Jewish people. It’s not good. Nowhere in the novel does Jacobson ever use the words “Jew” or its variations or the word “holocaust”: perhaps the first clue. The second major clue lies in the title.

Whenever Kevern utters a word that starts with the letter “j”, he involuntarily puts his finger in front of his mouth, as if shushing himself. He doesn’t know why he does this. His father and mother always did it, and he learned the behavior from them, but he has never really questioned it. Intuitively, he knows it has something to do with WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, but he doesn’t want to examine it too fully. To do so is not only frightening, it’s also illegal. It doesn’t, however, stop Ailinn from investigating the strange behavioral tics of the man she loves. Of course, what they both discover is something that neither could have imagined.

Jacobson’s tightly-constructed novel unravels itself like a murder mystery. It’s a suspenseful and intriguing thriller and, at the same time, a brilliant speculative examination of irrational hatred on a global level. It is not implausible. Indeed, its plausibility is what makes it such an important book.

Angela M says

I wanted to give this more than three stars because I started out liking this a lot. I had the feeling from the beginning that there was something important about this story and I still feel that way. It was funny at times , sad at times , ominous most of the time .WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, seems to have happened , if it happened not too long ago from the present time in the story and that’s disconcerting at the very least .

I was intrigued about what it was and although, it's kind of ambiguous at times, we learn that something horrible had happened and while there is a vagueness to it , there is the an ever present feeling that a sort of

second holocaust has occurred. . Descriptions in between the chapters of story discuss horrific events: fires, beheadings, iron hooks and crowbars, “the frenzy to kill”. I thought - wow - this will be a profound commentary.

I also thought this was going to be a sweet love story between Kevern and Ailinn who seem to find something in each other as they struggle to come to terms with what their pasts were all about and who they are. Ailinn never knew her real parents and was adopted from an orphanage. She has this feeling, though that there is something at “her heels.” There are numerous Moby Dick references and I have to admit to never having read it, but it was understandable what she felt – this presence of something or someone after her. Kevern knows who his parents are and has discovered something about them that he finds disturbing. He too feels that “intrusiveness." We discover that they are right and that this relationship didn’t just happen on its own , but was made to happen.

I didn’t really feel that I knew a lot about these characters until later in the book, and for me it was too late to really feel anything for them. But I suppose, if I knew more about them earlier, I would have guessed the ending which wouldn’t have been such a bad thing. A little over half way through, it began to feel a bit disjointed to me and I began to lose interest. I made my way through to the end and I still think there is an important message here, but something just wasn’t there in the rendering of it for me. Maybe it’s me and I missed something. I wish I could better articulate what it is that makes me like this book but not love it in spite of how important I think the message is.

Thanks to Crown Publishing and Net Galley.

Ron Charles says

Howard Jacobson is getting harder to ignore. The 72-year-old British writer has been publishing witty novels for more than three decades and attracting the kind of critical acclaim earned by stars like Peter Carey and Margaret Atwood. But he remains stubbornly obscure in the United States. “The Finkler Question,” his cerebral satire about anti-Semitism, won the 2010 Booker Prize (he’d been longlisted twice before), and his new novel, “J,” was on the shortlist for this year’s prize. All that success abroad raises The Jacobson Question: Why are American readers so uninterested?

I have two possible answers, neither very satisfying:

1. People who buy literary fiction in this country tend to regard comic novels as though they’re mushrooms in the forest: possibly delicious, but not worth the risk. We’ll stick with this 800-page Bildungsroman, thank you very much.

2. There’s something troubling about Jacobson’s indeterminate comedy. We love our Jewish-mother jokes, but we’re deadly earnest about anti-Semitism, which is No Laughing Matter.

“J” is unlikely to change that reception. Although it’s the author’s most serious novel, it’s also his most

disquieting. In the bleak world that this story presents, wit and irony, along with jazz and literary fiction, have evaporated in the heat of a second Holocaust sometime in the 21st century. “Unpredictability unsettled people’s nerves,” Jacobson writes. The proscriptions against complex forms of art are not a matter of tyrannical law — nothing so crude as that in the enlightened future. Instead, “a compliant society meant that every section of it consented with gratitude — the gratitude of the providentially spared.”

For a dystopian novelist, Jacobson is coy about what disrupted modern civilization, and he has little interest in describing the intricacies of the current state. That vagueness, in fact, is the central theme of his story about a culture under “moral hypnosis,” determined never to remember: “The past exists in order that we forget it,” says an official at Ofnow, which monitors the public mood. “The overexamined life is not worth living.”

“J” plays out on Port Reuben, a small island of about 2,000 “rough-mannered men and wild women.” Except for a few trappings of modernity, they live largely without technology in a “prejudice-free workplace.” The people of Port Reuben refer to a long-ago cataclysm only as “What Happened, If It Happened.” They’re admonished to apologize constantly but never to admit blame because there were no victims and there were no perpetrators. Released from “a recriminatory past into an unimpeachable future,” they live in the grip of an anesthetized absurdity designed to keep What Happened, If It Happened from ever happening again, which it may not have. And to further dissipate any lingering sense of tribal allegiance and subsequent conflict, everyone has taken a new name under Operation Ishmael. “We’re all one big happy family now,” claims a government official.

As with George Orwell’s “1984,” at the heart of “J” is a love story. Kevern “Coco” Cohen was raised by frightened parents and has grown into a chronically apprehensive man. “He spoke in a whisper that drew even more attention to his oddness,” Jacobson writes. Now 40 with an “air of grumpy probity,” he never leaves the house without peering back in through the letterbox to make sure he’s left a little trap for any intruders. He supports himself as a woodworker, a maker of carved candlesticks and lovespoons. Once a week, he teaches a class in the department of Benign Visual Arts.

In the opening pages, a stranger introduces Kevern to a young woman named Ailinn Solomons, who makes paper flowers. Although Kevern “lacked the trick of intimacy” and Ailinn “smelled of fish,” they stumble into a fragile romance. We watch these two lonely people struggle to set aside their suspicions — of each other, of the world, of happiness — and fall in love.

This is all tender and charming: Kevern is the sort of bumbling lover who compliments his girlfriend on her big feet and then wonders why she reacts badly. “You are the strangest man,” Ailinn tells him.

“Then we make a good pair of crazies,” he answers.

But even as these misfits learn to accommodate each other in this dark world, their story is slowly poisoned by a patchwork of grim historical flashbacks, conspiratorial conversations and secret official documents. Kevern and Ailinn, we come to understand, have not fallen in love under Cupid’s influence; they’re the centerpiece of a vast, grotesque scheme.

Readers coming to this novel with any familiarity with Jacobson’s work will notice that one group of people (starts with “J”) is never mentioned (no, not “Jamaicans”). They are, however, acknowledged in a variety of increasingly ominous and finally tragic ways. In “The Finkler Question,” Jacobson vivisected a celebrity double obsessed with becoming Jewish. If it didn’t exactly work as a novel, it certainly worked as a riotous index of the permutations of anti-Semitism. “J” keeps the comedian’s slippery dexterity and jettisons the

humor. It sows anti-Semitism deep in the ground of a future world and then imagines the bizarre ways it might sprout up again.

Jacobson may be writing in the great tradition of dystopian literature, but he takes a clever swipe at “what these writers gloomily and even hysterically prophesied.” When Kevern visits the big city of Necropolis, there are no genetic horrors or scorched fields. Instead, “a quiet moroseness prevailed.” Jacobson has something darker and older in mind than our subjection to robot overlords. He’s exploring the perverse necessity of anti-Semitism in human culture. The real goal, he suggests, is not the final eradication of the Jews but the constant eradication of the Jews — a re-establishing of what one government official calls the “equipoise of hate.” Without them — the ultimate Other — what would the rest of us do with all our unfocused self-loathing and fury? It’s a conclusion of unfathomable pessimism, supported, unfortunately, by centuries of bloody data.

I fear I’ve made “J” sound polemic, but many readers are likely to wish Jacobson were, in fact, a little less elliptical. His characters move in such a fog for so long that the narrative momentum sometimes slows, and themes arise like faint aromas or partially noticed objects at the edge of your vision.

But that’s all part of the amorphous menace that infects the world in “J.” It’s the nagging suspicion that Jacobson isn’t writing about the distant future.

This review first appeared in The Washington Post:
http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...

Vivienne says

I very much enjoyed Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* and so was quite excited when his latest was part of the 2014 Man Booker short-list. However, I was disappointed and then some. Certainly there are plenty of glowing reviews of the novel so I may be in the minority yet I felt no enthusiasm at all for it. I feel rather annoyed that critics go into hyper-praise mode when a mainstream writer branches out into genre fiction such as a dystopian future while constantly snubbing their noses at genre fiction.

I had issues with *The Road* over this and yet *The Road* was so much better than this novel. Even if McCarthy ignored the reason for the disaster at least there was tension and characters that one could feel for. Here the world-building was weak as was the characterisation. It was just boring. The publishers also deserve a slap on the wrist for stating on the dust jacket that this novel was going to rank with *Brave New World* and *Nineteen-Eight-Four*.

After reading it I came across a newspaper review that mentioned the fact that Jacobson was making much of the point that he was not going to use the word 'Jew' in his latest novel. Well, he stuck to that in technical terms and yet the novel was about as subtle as a brick on the nature of its unmentionable catastrophe. I am in agreement with one reviewer who did enjoy the novel but pointed out the premise of a dystopian novel needs to be believable to work and wrote: *"But on reflection is it really imaginable that Britain will have anti-Semitic pogroms within the next few years?"*.

J: a Novel was a flop with our Man Booker Shadowing Group and came last on every member's list.

Lisa Reads & Reviews says

I enjoyed this literary, speculative fiction novel--primarily for the courtship between Ailinn Solomons and Kevern Cohen. The humorous narrative bounces between the two characters, presenting insight into the potential complexity of relationships. Ailinn and Kevern's reactions are wonderfully human, twisted, confused, and painfully tortured by mutual need which evolves into love.

But can love survive the story which frames J: A Novel? That is the darker issue. Open to interpretation, of course, but I see the story as a statement on the Jewish Holocaust. (Hint- J: A Novel, and compulsion of character for a specific gesture every time he uttered a word that began with J.)

Over the years, opinions have circulated that crimes of the past should be forgotten. Would things be better if people pretended atrocities never occurred? How can hatred of one generation not be passed down to the next? In the novel, governing powers were able to put their citizens on equal ground. In a kinder and gentler Big Brother endeavor, citizens were renamed to sever ties with ancestry, heirlooms were limited, or removed, homes relocated--as if peace could be accomplished that way.

The novel explores the after effects of such a world, and finds the strategy flawed. Tribalism cannot be eliminated because people need other people to compare themselves to, and to hate. Indeed, history has shown us how politician will create an enemy as scapegoats, or to unite and manipulate the masses, etc. The novel seems to imply that a situation where people were made to be the same, even if it were done with good intentions, would not last. This struck me as a sort of a counter argument to the philosophy behind the song, "Imagine", by John Lennon.

I wish the story would have expanded on the history of the victim race of WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED. The problem, as I see it, is that the victims of what I assume was a genocide, were too one-dimensional. Flashbacks of a grandfather, for example, showed him to be fatalistic and paranoid--his people had been the objects of hatred before. What I want to know was who did the grandfather's race hate? Not just their oppressors, of course--that's too easy, and after the fact. In the time before the victims were first assaulted, since every race needs a race to which they feel superior, who did the victim race oppress?

Historically, no race or society is innocent or harmless. If given an opportunity, the oppressed will become the oppressor; the underdog will become a bully. Tribes give one another cause for retribution. Collective memories are vengeful and long. Hatred is passed through generations.

Underneath all our differences, humans are human--the good and the bad reside in every culture. So, the story felt a little one-sided and incomplete. I can't buy the argument that people go against one another simply due to some underlying need. People fight, then history is filled with anger and resentment, deserved or not, because no one likes to admit shortcomings or failings or the inhumane way humans operate.

Or maybe I've misinterpreted the whole thing. With literary novels, you never know. Could make for good discussions though, yes? J: A Novel takes effort to work through, and I'm certain interpretations will vary widely--which is why reading literary novels are so enjoyable.

** I was given a copy of this novel through NetGalley. **

Lolly K Dandeneau says

There was a lot of beautiful thinking in the novel. The allegory of the frog fits perfectly inside this story. Happy little frog, slowly being killed but so discreetly and happily that he doesn't even notice. Banned information, forbidden words and keepsakes, antiques that aren't allowed, a forgetting or 'letting go' of history seems to be the theme but I could be wrong. The story is certainly confusing at times and I felt I was lost at sea. What the heck did happen to get people to this point and I sometimes felt I was still looking for the shore that I never spotted. But for all the confusion and fluttering on the wind I seemed to do as a reader, there was still something about the novel I enjoyed. The review is hard for me because it's such a strange story and I am not used to it's type.
I particularly enjoyed the conversation Ailinn and Kevern have about her enjoying not feeling so 'invaded' during sex, what a wonderful word. Her enjoying that Kevern isn't making the production of it most men do with their 'do you feel that?!' What a believable, wonderful conversation between lovers.
There are little philosophies, I suppose I would call them, throughout the novel. In many ways I understand what the writer is expressing but I am not sure all readers will.
Excerpts I like:

"The same old graceless feet, carrying her through the same old graceless life."

"They dissolved, that was the best way of putting it, they gradually came apart like a cardboard box that had been left out in the rain."

"It was an affair of curiosity. She was inexperienced, but with a fierce sense of the ridiculous that made her courageous, and he was her schoolteacher."

"Would you understand me if I said I'd been culturally primed to do it?"

Thought provoking and strange, not everyone will get it, and though I am not sure I fully did, I enjoyed the reading.

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switterbug (Betsey) says

I work in a milieu of children, many who have a thought disorder. J is a book about a NATION with a mandatory thought disorder, (at least most of the citizens). The theme of J, which crops up frequently, is, WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, which would indicate a knowingness, but, for the most part, Jacobson's dystopian world, which takes place in the future (but still the 21st century), is constructed on a foundation of a kind of schizophrenic behavior, but complicit and fraught.

The denial-of-reality behavior reminds me of the line in the Matrix, "Did you take the red pill or the blue pill?" This is a nation who took the blue pill--they don't want to know the truth. What is the truth? Read it, and you will realize it, after many oblique twists and turns and drops in the rabbit hole. It is evident that some sinister annihilation of population occurred those several generations ago. But, who? And why? And, the tragedy is, anyone wanting to find out will need to be silenced.

In this strange new world, I was also reminded of Orwell's doublethink; the people in this story hold contradictory or paradoxical beliefs, and are at odds with themselves for questioning the societal norms, set by a standard called Project Ishmael, run by a monitoring group called Orfnow.

"The overexamined life is not worth living." There's an official monitoring of the public mood, to ensure that everyone is under "moral hypnosis."

"A compliant society meant that every section of it consented with gratitude -- the gratitude of the providentially spared."

Most of the story takes place in Port Reuben, one of many renamed towns, inhabited by people with renamed (and often ridiculous) surnames. "The past exists in order that we forget it." The central characters, Kevern "Coco" Cohen and his new lover, Ailinn Solomons, might seem paranoid to members of the monitoring group, but they feel something or someone at their heels. It is dangerous to seek too much knowledge. There exists very little technology (except phones for local calls); art, music, and history have been varnished and saturated with the dippy philosophy of annoying optimism. Anything too deep, dark, or knowing is either outlawed--or, if not outlawed legally, it is frowned upon. Yet, ironically, this society is ever the more bleak for not allowing any shadows or clouds to obscure the bright and sunny disposition of life. Even the library books have pages missing, if any suggestion of "J" history is suggested or revealed.

Suggestion, implication, intimation--this is how Jacobson slowly peels the layers of this story. The more WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED "folklore" is revealed, the more absurd this Orwellian-esque society becomes to the reader. And, not just absurd, but harrowing.

I hesitate to say any more about the book. Like Kevern's father, who would place two fingers in front of his mouth any time he uttered a word beginning with the letter J, I will keep mum about most of this story. It is more a book of ideas than a plot, but the plot in itself is stunning. It is both comical and tragic, chilling, ludicrous, and devastating. Jacobson keeps the humor and tragedy dancing in a delicate balance on the head of a pin.

If I have one complaint, it is that he was occasionally repetitive, and the story was strung out a bit sluggishly. However, these are small complaints for such a staggering story.

"We've lived through the end of the world," says a character. "This is the aftermath. This is the post-apocalypse."

Catherine says

My problem with this novel was the completely vague world it was set in.

I realise that was sort of the point. There are references to WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED (always capitalised) throughout the story, and the hints don't really start to make any sense until about 75% of the way through, but even then, the event that caused the dystopia the characters are living in is never clear. It's never explicitly stated, anywhere in the novel.

Even if we aren't supposed to know the point of origin, we could know more about the world. I don't know anything about the government, what country it's set in (presumably England - definitely somewhere with a

coastline - but there are many references to German words, so who really knows?), or what's really going on. It's only just a dystopia. There's a lot of vague philosophising on the part of Esme towards the end of the novel, and I honestly couldn't tell whether it made sense or if I was being a bit stupid, or what. I think I know WHAT HAPPENED, but I can't really tell you what the ramifications of it were, or why.

Though the novel does mostly follow Kevern and Ailinn, we see inside the heads of a lot of characters. In fact, the narrative is often interrupted by long and very detailed summaries of the lives of certain characters - usually ones that are related somewhat to one of the two main characters. It gets very wearing, though, when there's barely any plot to begin with, for what little there is of it to be constantly interrupted and pushed aside for too much information on characters I'm never going to be able to muster up much enthusiasm for.

And this is the bit where I sound really stupid, but Jacobson uses too many words that I just don't know. Sometimes I actually couldn't tell whether they were words that were just unusual and not heard often, or whether he'd actually made them up. I found it a little bit pretentious, if I'm honest. If you're novel is not accessible to the readers, then what's the point in publishing it?

This has been a fairly negative review, I realise. The novel could be engaging, and the mystery behind WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED kept me reading, but there was a whole lot frustration around that, too. I'm not sure I can say that I altogether enjoyed this novel.

Jenn says

This is a little bit of a difficult book to review, as it's one that explores the idea of collective guilt and collective forgetting, and therefore to mention even the most basic details of the plot would be to end up changing the way that you approach and read it. Jacobson has created a thoughtful and unsettling near future in *J*, one where a terrible event that changed everything is being atoned for by everyone - if they're even willing to accept that it happened at all. What is known and not known, and acknowledged and not acknowledged is a theme running through the novel, and while it takes a bit of work for the reader to finally piece everything together, as *J* heads for its quiet but deeply disturbing conclusion, it's worth it for the unfurling of the chilly realisations as the truth comes out.

I've never read a Howard Jacobson before, I will admit, but I'm a fan of dystopian fiction and decided that this might be an interesting place to start. Despite initially struggling a little with the lack of explanations at the beginning of *J*, the gorgeous, witty writing carried me through, and his intimately, brutally drawn characters kept me reading. For all that its subject matter is increasingly ugly, *J* is a beautifully written book, rich and evocative in its language. *J* is more a series of vignettes linked together, past and present interwoven with letters and government reports and shared memories, little pieces of a dark jigsaw puzzle that nobody wants to recall.

I absolutely loved the two main characters, Kevern and Ailinn; their awkwardly unfolding love affair felt realistically brittle and plausible, and I found myself rooting for them in this increasingly dark and tangled world. Jacobson pulls no punches, and it is Kevern and Ailinn who pull the reader through, providing a human heart for the rest of the novel to build around.

Part dystopian fiction, part love story, part murder mystery, part uncomfortable statement on today's current

affairs, *J* is a haunting, unsettling novel that takes a long hard look at humanity.

Krista says

This review will be spoilery. So far as dystopian government messaging goes, this is not the menace of *Big Brother is Watching You*, but as it constantly scrolls across the bottom of television screens, the attempt at control is the same:

> Smile at your neighbour, cherish your spouse, listen to ballads, go to musicals, use your telephone, converse, explain, listen, agree, apologise. Talk is better than silence, the sung word is better than the written, but nothing is better than love.

In Howard Jacobson's fascinating novel J, we are introduced to a near-future world where no one alive was actually witness to the event that formed their new reality; where the books that *are* available are heavily censored; where school children learn benign racial stereotypes (Arabs are generous! Afro-Caribbeans are good at sport and song! Asians are quietly industrious!); where people are discouraged from investigating history or family lineages; a world where, if people speak of the foundational event at all, call it WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED (or in private, as The Great Pissastrophe or Twitternacht; but only as meaningless phrases); a world where, after Operation Ishmael, everyone was forced to assume Celtic first names and Jewish last names. The average person has no clue as to why they live the way they do, are discouraged from asking questions, and are obliged to constantly apologise to one another for reasons they don't understand.

The government that maintains this civilisation isn't heavy-handed like Big Brother either: although everyone knows that they are not supposed to have heirlooms or old records, letters and books, it seems that everyone does (even a police detective enjoys his contraband Wagner). These records aren't banned exactly: *simply not played. Encouraged to fall into desuetude, like the word desuetude. Popular taste did what edict and proscription could never have done, and just as, when it came to books, the people chose rags-to-riches memoirs, cookbooks and romances, so, when it came to music, they chose ballads.* There aren't any middle of the night goon squads disappearing the dissidents, but for that matter, there aren't any dissidents. What the government does do is maintain its citizens' quarantine from the rest of the world (this is presumably Jacobson's native Britain): not allowing travel, internet, long distance phone calls, foreign news or mail. The country's capital, Necropolis, attempts to put a happy face on this culture-without-history with bunting festooned on the long-abandoned construction cranes and -- since black clothing had been banned long ago to prevent mourning over WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED -- the citizens all wear brightly coloured fabrics. Out in the countryside, however, all of this forgotten history and forced apologising is having a perverse effect: working at simple trades, the people are brimming with violence and unfocussed hostility: the men drinking and knocking down other men and women alike; the women sleeping around or at least grabbing any man they want for aggressive snogging; all frantic tongue and tooth.

Esme (an employee from Ofnow, the non-statutory monitor of the Public Mood), recognises that the hostility stems from a lack of a common enemy; the Other that was completely eradicated in WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED. It's said that people are culturally primed to hate the Other -- *I am who I am because I am not them* -- and Esme understands what their new society is missing:

> You have to see a version of yourself -- where you've come from or where you might, if you aren't careful, end up -- before you can do the cheek-to-cheek of hate. Family lineaments must be discerned. A reflection you cannot bear to see. An echo you cannot bear to hear. In other words, you must have chewed on the same bone of moral philosophy, subscribed to a similar spirituality and even, at some point in the not too distant past, have worshipped at the same shrines. It was difference where there was so much that was similar that accounted for the unique antipathy of which they were in search. And only one people with one set of prints fitted that bill.

Esme knows that the only release valve would be to discover and present to the hostile public the appropriate scapegoats; people who likely didn't even realise what they really were. Enter Ailinn Solomons and Kevern Cohen: two people who had always felt an otherness; always vaguely under threat. And although their meeting was engineered, their awkward and halting love story is touching and authentic (and the source of much of Jacobson's trademark brand of humour).

There's a quirk in *J* that occurs early: every time Kevern's father says a word that begins with a "j", he swipes two fingers across his mouth, a habit Kevern eventually picks up. As though there is something forbidden -- or at least frowned upon -- about words starting with "j", the reader will eventually realise that, although it's obvious that WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED must have been a second, more horrifically successful Holocaust, words like Jew and Jewish are never used. There are hints about people who had "double allegiances", and a crazy woman (her self-appellation) who tried to work out the links between blood and money and defilement as excuses for what had happened, and discovered letters from someone who refused to believe that "it could happen here", and the hints are enough to identify who the Other needs to be; the entire book an explanation, in its way, for why anti-Semitism hasn't been and won't be eradicated from our own world. Jacobson doesn't hold the Jewish people totally blameless for the hostility they inspire either -- there are a few stories about unpleasant personal interactions recovered from before, and it would seem that the trigger for WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED was a shocking attack that Israel made on the Palestinians (which, in the Twitter-obsessed world of before, led to angry, homicidal mobs outdoing the outmoded Nazis).

Jacobson totally hooked me with *J*: the dystopian world was revealed slowly in all of its idiosyncrasy, through shifting points of view, letters and diary entries; the characters were strong and distinct -- even the unlikeable ones were intriguing to meet; the dialogue was believable and often darkly funny; and there was an agreeable tension maintained throughout the plot. I cared about what happened and had tears in my eyes at the end. *J*, at its essence, does what 1984 and Brave New World did so well: create a fictional society in order to highlight a failing in our own, but while we can hope to avoid the totalitarianism of Big Brother and the triviality of the World State, Jacobson's message seems more fatalistic: the Jews will always be hated; it is, in fact, necessary. I enjoyed *J* much more than The Finkler Question, totally understand why it made it to the Man Booker Prize shortlist, but have reservations about the grim conclusions it makes; were SOMETHING TO HAPPEN, I don't personally feel culturally primed to pick up a rock and join the mob.

Maciek says

Howard Jacobson's latest novel left me scratching my head. Having never read Jacobson before I had no idea

what to expect - I only knew that he has previously won the Booker in 2010 for The Finkler Question.

In a short introductory blurb, *J* is described as "like no other novel Howard Jacobson has written", a dystopian novel "to be talked about in the same breath as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*" - which made me wonder if the person who wrote the blurb has read either of these books.

Both *1984* and Brave New World are classics of dystopian fiction, and rightly so - they're accomplished, engaging novels, and offer rich thematic background set against a developed universe - The World State based on Henry Ford's assembly line and consumerism and eugenics in *Brave New World*; Newspeak, constant surveillance by the Big Brother and perpetual warfare between superstates of Eurasia and Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Unfortunately, *J* pales in comparison. Jacobson's novel is set in the unspecified future, in a country which could be England but doesn't have to be - all we know of geographic details is that it has a coastline. In this society "the past is a dangerous country, which should not be talked about or visited" - as a result of a catastrophic event which has befell a specific group of people several decades ago, refereed to only as "WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED" - constantly in all caps. The event itself is never discussed in detail and clouded in mystery, with a large number of the population doubting that it actually happened - it's strongly implied that it was a massive pogrom, a second (or in this universe first) Holocaust - one chapter is titled "Twitternacht", a scary memory of brutal violence and broken shop windows surfaces at one point, and one character does not even dare to openly utter the letter "J". As a result of the attitude towards the past, society has fell into a kind of indifference towards its heritage - things are not openly banned, but rather forgotten and slowly fall out of fashion and memory. Most of technology seems to have disappeared, and so did contemporary music; it is in this world that we met our protagonists, Kevern Cohen and Ailinn Solomons. Although at first mistrustful of each other, they soon become linked with one another as if they were meant to be.

The problem I had with this novel is a common one - mainstream writers employing the dystopian novel for their purpose are always more likely to attract the press, attention and accolades than writers who write (often much better) genre dystopian fiction. Cormac McCarthy's The Road - a well-written but hardly illuminating and original novel - was a literary dystopia, which immediately attracted mainstream praise and was awarded the Pulitzer, although the author has written different and much more interesting and award-worthy novels. There's no chance that the same honor would be given to a writer such as Stephen King for his The Stand - which is a much more developed and more ambitious book, but bears the curse of being popular and having an engaging plot, as is often the case with popular novels. The case with Jacobson's *J* is almost identical - the constant forced ambiguity towards what is clearly a Holocaust allegory quickly grows tiring and uninteresting, and when focus is put on the two protagonists I couldn't make myself to sympathize with or even be interested in either of them. In the end, I simply didn't care what happened and if it happened, but will not be surprised if *J* will end up winning the Booker.

Bandit says

This was a book to like, love even. Booker prize nominee, tale of soft apocalypse in particular relation to Jews, theme that, although ever present, remains unspoken of, maybe as a stylistic gesture, maybe precisely because the apocalypse was so soft, it didn't ban so much as discouraged (but did it ever, even the letter J is

muted over, toned down and smudged, hence the cover), it promoted overt and incessant apologizing, forgetting the past and letting it go, creating for a bleak, dishwater dull life. Creating for a bleak dishwasher dull novel. I really tried to enjoy it, there is an undeniable subtle beauty of language here, it is an undeniably fascinating meditation of what it is to be belong to any persecuted or once persecuted minority, case for lost identity as a trade off for peace an so on, but despite all the quality ingredients, the total soup of it all just didn't quite taste right, too bland, consistency off, not exciting at all. It's a clever quiet story that's so busy being clever and quiet, it forgets to be good. And it's oh so slow. Enjoyment wise it's definitely more philosophy than fiction, though, of course, dystopian fiction is what was expected.
