Jacobson’s interest in masculinity and mortality, and the relationship between them, has been evident from the start. In Shakespeare’s Magnanimity, his first book, Jacobson and his co-author Wilbur Sanders foregrounded the tension between ideas of virility and conscience, and the ways in which these tensions lead to the downfall and death of Shakespeare’s protagonists. In his fiction Jacobson explores these ideas through a series of comic anti-heroes who collude in their own cuckold and whose friendships parody the hypermasculine, homoerotic relationship of the male rivals in the novels of one of his literary heroes, D.H. Lawrence, particularly Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich in Women in Love. In his introduction to the 2008 Vintage Classics edition of that novel, Jacobson sets out implicitly both what he owes to Lawrence’s representation of masculinity and where he diverges from it: ‘comedy needs a cuckold . . . a done-to not a doer . . . But men in Lawrence are not able to release their self-importance or cede their masculinity in this way’ (Jacobson 2008f: viii). In Jacobson’s male protagonists, self-importance and the impulse to release it, the imperative to perform a version of heteronormative masculinity and the desire to cede this masculinity to other men – to become queer ‘done-tos’ – are in constant tension.

In so far as there can be said to be a critical consensus on any aspect of Jacobson’s work, it is that he is, as Bryan Cheyette puts it, ‘an aggressively masculine writer’ (Cheyette 1998a: xxxviii). As we have seen in the Introduction, for some critics this is a serious failing; for others, such as Michael Bywater, ‘[t]here has to be room in the library for books about men who think of nothing but sex and (good) books, and Jacobson is their laureate’ (Bywater 2004). At times, Jacobson himself has been complicit with this view. In a piece entitled
'Nights in white satin; nuns in red nighties', he claims that ‘[f]or the first forty or fifty years of your life there is only sex – the wanting, the waiting, the wondering, and then the greed for more’ (Jacobson 2017b: 228), leaving his readers in no doubt that the ‘sex’ to which he is referring is male heterosexual desire. This kind of desire is certainly not in short supply in his fiction, and is amplified and enabled by the conspicuous childlessness of most of his protagonists, whose appetites are consequently not blunted by the competing demands of filial ties and parental responsibilities.

Yet as we have already seen in Chapter 1, masculinity in Jacobson’s fiction is a complex construct, and by no means exclusively heteronormative. My own earlier work on Jacobson, particularly my discussion of Peeping Tom in Post-War Jewish Fiction, began to address the ambiguities of what it means to perform the act of ‘being men’ in his novels (Brauner 2001: 78–84), and Ruth Gilbert has also challenged the idea that they reproduce a conventional, reified version of masculinity, arguing instead that ‘far from presenting conformity to a normative heterosexuality, his novels often explore what could be described as the queer potential of Jewish male sexuality, especially in terms of masochistic erotic desire’ (Gilbert 2013: 107), demonstrating ‘an understanding of the complexity as well as the absurdity of the priapic Jewish man’ (Gilbert 2013: 110). Both what Gilbert calls ‘the queer potential’ of (not just Jewish) male sexuality and the ‘absurdity’ of the desiring male subject are in fact ubiquitous in Jacobson’s fiction.

They are also evident in some of his non-fiction. In an essay entitled ‘Why can’t a man be more like a woman?’, Jacobson writes that ‘[t]he idea of men getting in touch with their feminine side has always called out a ribald response from me’, before acknowledging ‘the presence of defensiveness in my scorn’, reflecting the possibility that he ‘would rather not get in touch with my feminine side because I fear how much of it there is’ (Jacobson 2003: 25). In a number of later pieces, this fear of his ‘feminine side’ becomes subtly transmuted into an implicit queerness. For example, in a column devoted to his nostalgia for hanging out with fellow ‘working men’, Jacobson describes how he caught himself ogling a group of manual labourers ‘a bit the way I imagine E.M. Forster must have stood gazing at the torsos of tram conductors and policemen’ (Jacobson 2008d: 34) and later in the same year he describes his response to being winked at by the comedian Russell Brand, confessing his ‘susceptibility’ to ‘the lewd comedy of its invitation’ (Jacobson 2008e: 38). If the fact that
Howard Jacobson identifies himself with E.M. Forster, whose homosexuality is a matter of record, and flirts with Brand, who has spoken of his desire to ‘be bisexual’ (albeit semi-facetiously in both cases) (Frost 2014), suggests that Jacobson’s understanding of male sexuality might be more complex than most of his critics have allowed, his accounts of his relationships with a number of other Jewish male authors confirm a queerness notably devoid of ‘defensiveness’ or ‘scorn’.

Discussing a dinner with Harold Pinter, Jacobson reports that ‘[h]is deep beautiful brown eyes swallowed me whole. I was in love. No other word for it’ (Jacobson 2012a: 319); in his introduction to Catch-22, he parodies the famous opening of that novel: ‘It was love at first sight. The first time I saw Joseph Heller I fell madly in love with him’ (Jacobson 2004a: v). In ‘American Buffalo’, he confesses that he was ‘completely smitten with the man [Mamet]’ (Jacobson 2017b: 213) and in an essay on the unnamed original model for the character of Libor Sevcik in The Finkler Question he declares that he ‘fell in love with this elderly man, who had just lost his wife’ (Jacobson 2010g: 8). Of course it is possible to read all these episodes as evidence of intense platonic admiration –something closer to hero-worship than erotic attraction – and of course I would not want to exclude this possibility, or downplay the power of such attachments. On the other hand, it would be perverse to dismiss the possibility that the ‘love’ Jacobson writes of at least partakes of sexual desire. This seems even clearer if we consider Jacobson’s description of a relationship with an unnamed Australian friend as characterised by ‘a brawling intensity . . . that drove us deep into each other’s lives . . . an insatiable curiosity, as though he wanted to be me and I wanted to be him’ (Jacobson 2010d: 6). He goes on to offer the following account of an alcohol-fuelled altercation with this friend: ‘Homoerotic, was it? Search me. But I recall a drunken wrestle . . . the upshot of which . . . was our crying into each other’s necks and agreeing that we “knew what it was like”’ (Jacobson 2010d: 6). The echo here of the famously homoerotic scene in which Birkin and Crich wrestle in Women in Love is surely deliberate and reinforces the sense that Jacobson’s use of the term is less equivocal than it might appear, as does the arch invitation to ‘[s]earch me’, followed by ‘But’. The ‘insatiable curiosity’ that the men feel for each other might be explained by their desire to be each other, but it is a short step from wanting to be another to wanting to have that other.

All of this is not to suggest that Jacobson is some sort of closet homosexual, but rather that his conception of what being a man
entails is rather more inclusive and open-ended than his reputation might suggest. Certainly, a close reading of the novels of his middle period reveals, as I will argue in the rest of this chapter, a conception of masculinity that is fluid, dynamic and ‘queer’ in the broadest sense of that term, as defined by David Halperin, to mean any sexual theory or practice that is ‘at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant’ (Halperin 1997: 62). This idea of masculinity is complicated further by the ways in which these novels situate it in relation to a more general exploration of sexual politics, and in conjunction with the spectre of mortality.

The Very Model of a Man (1992)

The Very Model of a Man is a pivotal book in Jacobson’s career. It straddles what might be thought of as the first two phases of Jacobson’s career, both chronologically (it was published six years after his previous novel, Redback, and six years before his next, No More Mr Nice Guy) and formally (it can be read both as the culmination of his exploration of anti-pastoral comedy and as the start of his mid-career investment in questions of male sexuality and mortality and the relationship between them). The lengthy hiatuses that preceded and succeeded its publication might be explained partly by the lukewarm reception that it and its predecessor received. However, this was also a period of personal and professional upheaval for Jacobson. It was during these years that he began a weekly column in the Independent, made two television series (accompanied by non-fiction books), one a personal meditation on Jewish identity and the other an idiosyncratic history of comedy, as well as numerous other broadcasting appearances, becoming something of a public intellectual in the process. This period also saw him lose his father, divorce his second wife, Rosalin (to whom The Very Model of a Man is dedicated) and meet the woman who was to become his third wife, the television producer Jenny de Yong. Ostensibly one of his least autobiographical novels, The Very Model of a Man actually explores a number of issues that had been and would continue to be of vital personal interest to Jacobson: the relationship between fathers and sons and between brothers; the role of the artist in a society in which there is a profound distrust of intellectuals; and the status of the Jew as historical scapegoat.

Its liminal position in Jacobson’s canon is illustrated nicely by the three epigraphs to the novel, all of which raise questions of exile,
Howard Jacobson

To the life about me, to the people who made up the world I knew, I could not attach my signature. I was as definitely outside their world as a cannibal is outside the bounds of civilized society . . . I should have been a clown . . . (Jacobson 1992: n.p.)

Miller’s identification with the figure of the clown as a symbolic outcast – a figure as threatening to social conventions as a cannibal, he suggests – and his use of the metaphor of the signature as a signifier of attachment (an ambiguous term, which denotes belonging here but also connotes ‘taking possession of’) are both particularly suggestive in the context of the narrative of Jacobson’s novel. For in The Very Model of a Man Cain is not simply the first murderer, he is also the first storyteller, the first artist, the first outcast and the first apostate.

Like the masses of Urbs-Ludus (whose name literally means city of play) in Pussy, ‘the people’ of Babel, where Cain washes up after being expelled from Eden, lacking a serious theology, and therefore humour . . . are always on the look-out for a joke’ (Jacobson 1992: 19). Rejecting comedy and satire – ‘the highest and most healthful form of play’ (170), according to the satirical poet Preplen, who befriends Cain, warning him of the dangers of ‘anti-Edenitism’ – in favour of lowlier forms of diversion, they have ‘abandoned themselves to a love of fancy, a childish play of the suppositional faculties, an orgy of wondering and marvelling which can be satisfied only by the continuous importation of alien jugglers and acrobats and impressionists and haruspicators and monologuists in metre’ (20). Instead of congregating to worship, ‘[c]rowds gathered . . . to be amazed by tumblers and troubadours, by balladiers and minstrels, clowns, contortionists, gleemen, joculators, caricaturists, interpreters of archives’ (22). From the Wildean aphorism that it is the humourless who most crave jokes to the extravagant Whitmanesque lists of popular entertainers, these laments for the cultural poverty of Babel paradoxically demonstrate a rich eloquence that belies Cain’s critique, since he himself gains a devoted following who come regularly to hear him tell his tale. For Cain, this is an existential necessity: as ‘one who was more a story than he was any other thing’, he is compelled to tell himself in the way that other men are compelled to
raise a family or an army’ (342). Telling and retelling his story is an act of self-authorship, a declaration of autonomy and hence a rehearsal, metaphorically as well as literally, of his rebellion against God.

Casting himself as the antagonist to God, whom he brands ‘The Mirthless One’ (139), and who, in an inverted echo of the serpent’s fatal temptation, ‘whisper[s] pastoral poetry in [Eve’s] ear’ (87), Cain vows ‘to plant comedy in my garden’ (189); to create a sceptical, subversive, anti-pastoral version of the quintessentially pastoral myth of the Garden of Eden. In one sense, this is a self-consciously literary enterprise: *The Very Model of a Man* invokes a number of earlier revisions of canonical biblical narratives by twentieth-century Jewish novelists, from Dan Jacobson’s *The Rape of Tamar* (1970) to Stefan Heym’s *The King David Report* (1973) to Joseph Heller’s *God Knows* (1984), as well as the reinvention of Cain as an anti-hero by Romantic and modernist poets such as Byron and Baudelaire, who are explicitly mentioned, anachronistically, in the novel. However, it is also a confessional narrative of sorts, dealing allegorically with the resentment – and, by extension, repressed fratricidal impulses – precipitated by the birth of Jacobson’s younger brother. In a podcast interview with James O’Brien, Jacobson describes the impact of the new arrival on his place in the family unit:

I’m this shy little boy, aged five or six. I’ve now got a brother, which is problematic, ’cause he’s very very pretty and people keep saying ‘Isn’t he beautiful?’, whereas all they’d ever said about me is ‘Isn’t he clever?’ (O’Brien 2019)

This dichotomy between beauty and intelligence is dramatised in *The Very Model of a Man* in terms of the opposition between Abel as the symbol of a pristine pastoral idyll and Cain as the incarnation of a corrupt anti-pastoral worldliness. Abel’s birth is heralded by celestial agitation – ‘the whole of heaven . . . seemed . . . in a pastoral flutter’ (Jacobson 1992: 1) – and his death is marked by the rising of ‘a great dust . . . as desolate as his altar’ (320). Whereas Abel is cherubic with blond curls and unblemished skin, Cain is saturnine, beetle-browed and beset by fungal growths all over his body: ‘He is cobwebbed . . . Primordial. Stagnant . . . *farsh tinkener, farfoylt . . . Mouldy*’ (151). The insertion here of Yiddish terms are another example of the playful use of anachronism in the novel, but also a signifier of Cain’s status in the novel as a precursor of the European Jews whose Yiddish culture was all but extinguished by the Nazis.
In Eden, Abel’s ablutions are performed, reverently, by his mother in an elaborate daily ceremony that borders on idolatry (182–83); in Babel, Cain undergoes a parodic inversion of this ritual, visiting the barber every day to have all his excrescences exfoliated. Yet there is at the heart of Abel’s transcendent allure a horrifying, inhuman void, a vacuum which threatens to absorb, but which is ultimately extinguished by, Cain. When Cain looks at Abel he sees ‘only a sort of pastoral absence, a soul out wandering in sparkling grasses’ (260) and when he engages him in fatal combat, it seems more like a prolonged embrace which his ‘delicate framework’ cannot withstand, his ethereal form ‘almost falling apart in my arms’ (318).

For Cain, ever the paradoxical equivocator, he is as much sinned against as sinning. In his version of events, his fate, and that of his brother, is predetermined: ‘labelled as a lost cause and earmarked for forfeiture’, Cain himself ‘was the sacrifice’ that Abel had promised God (258) and his homicide is also a kind of suicide, since Abel represents ‘a version of myself. An idealized version . . . Me wordless’ (184). In this context, the murder becomes an act of self-mutilation: in killing Abel ‘he has once and for all denied himself the other side of his great argument with life’ (286). If Cain figures his brother, ambivalently, as both doppelgänger and nemesis, alter ego and victim, his emphasis on the disparity between Abel’s wordlessness and his own volubility suggests another way of understanding the dynamic between them: Abel as the passive subject/object of Cain’s art.

That Cain is a portrait of an (if not the) artist is clear not just from his storytelling performances in Babel but from his role as the neologist of Eden; or, as Cain himself puts it, Adam’s ‘name-boy, his nomenclator, his onomatologist, his word-child’ (3). The very language he uses here to describe his linguistic facility also demonstrates that facility: if Abel is ‘wordless’ and Adam is similarly mute, diverting his artistic impulses into modelling – ‘I saw him fashioning a clay doll, a puppet, a marionette, a dummy, a golem in the image of himself, which it was his intention to sit upon his knee and animate’ (65) – Cain is blessed (and cursed) with a superabundant eloquence. Adam’s attempts to emulate his creator by creating, and attempting to animate, a model ‘in the image of himself’ are inherently blasphemous (since the creation of life from dust is the sole prerogative of Yahweh). However, the implicit analogy that Cain draws between Adam and the golem is doubly subversive, alluding both to the myth from Jewish folklore of the creature that defies its creator and to the English literary version of the myth,
Frankenstein, specifically to Adam’s rhetorical question to his maker from Milton’s Paradise Lost (1674) which serves as the epigraph to Mary Shelley’s novel: ‘Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/To mould me man?’ (2006: X, 743–44). In The Very Model of a Man, however, it is Cain, rather than Adam, who poses this question, implicitly, throughout the novel, challenging the moral authority of Yahweh and representing himself as an artistic rival to his creator.

This challenge manifests itself most fundamentally in Cain’s appropriation of the power of naming for himself. In an essay in which he comically represents himself as a wandering Jew exiled from the ‘consolations of green’ because of his inability to name flora, Jacobson observes that when you ‘[n]ame a thing . . . you take away its mystery’ (Jacobson 2012a: 119). But for Cain, the prototype of the wandering Jew, literally exiled from the idyllic green world of Eden, naming offers not the consolation of nature but of art.

I named things to make them mine. By naming them I took a hand in their origination and commanded them to begin again in my mind. In this way I was at least associated with a sort of purity and could new-create the objects of my observation, even if I couldn’t new-create myself. (Jacobson 1992: 202)

Like Adam, Cain aspires to usurp God’s place as the creator of life, specifically the creator of himself. Whereas Adam attempts literally to create the model of a man whom he hopes to control, Cain’s strategy is to assert dominion over God’s creations by classifying them – and hence metaphorically to author himself. Yet the caveats and qualifications in this passage suggest that this project is at best a strategy of self-consolation, at worst a chimerical self-delusion: he is only able to take ‘a hand’ in bringing things into existence and to be ‘associated’ with ‘a sort of’ pure originality, rather than actually creating something new. While he is still part of the first family, under God’s direct supervision (a constant, claustrophobic surveillance, in Jacobson’s narrative), Cain’s naming, like his father’s puppetry, can only be a simulation of creation: an interpretation or revision of someone else’s text rather than an urtext.

Nonetheless, it represents an act of resistance, a gesture towards autonomy and self-determination. It is significant in this context that Eve eggs her son on, encouraging him, ‘in the face of my father’s obdurate tonguelessness . . . dysphonia . . . muteness . . . recalcitrance . . . obmutescence . . . to coin words’ (88, ellipses in original). Here
Cain demonstrates his lexical dexterity in the very act of proclaiming his father’s incapacity (also represented typographically in the series of ellipses) and in the near-pun between his own name and the verb ‘coin’. He also revels in his mother’s adoration during the ‘fabled years before [the] Abel’d years’ when she would acclaim him her ‘wonder boy, her prodigy, her little demi-god of language’ (88). Yet just as she favours her first-born over Adam, so she favours her second-born over her first-born, a betrayal that Cain represents as a failure of aesthetic taste as much as a moral failing: ‘She . . . made mawkish art of herself – sitting like a virgin with a baby at her breast and her eyes cast heavenwards, averted from the source of generation, modest, impregnable, fixed upon idea not matter’ (88, italics in original). There is an implicit critique here of the emphasis in Christian theology, and art, on the cult of the Virgin with its attendant pastoral, idealised view of humanity that denies its somatic, specifically its sexual, nature. Yet this anti-pastoral opposition to the sentimental image of virgin and child is complicated, if not compromised, by Cain’s own preference for delicate euphemism (‘the source of generation’). Moreover, there is something self-serving about Cain’s portrait of Eve’s self-portrait: representing Eve as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary implies that Abel is a prefiguration of the Christ-child, and that in turn implies that Cain’s killing of him is indeed more reverential sacrifice than jealous murder. In Cain’s narrative, Eve betrays Cain by transferring her affections from himself to Abel, Abel betrays his brother by slavishly following God’s egomaniacal demands for ever-more extravagant gestures of obeisance, and God himself betrays Cain by disingenuously allowing him to believe that he might please him, when in fact it is his inescapable destiny to transgress.

It is in the context of this perennial debate about whether free will is possible in a world created and governed by a deity who is both omnipotent and omniscient – who, as Cain puts it, is ‘jealous of those of whom [He] know[s] the beginning and the end’ (334) – that the third-person narrator situates Cain’s appropriation of the naming of God’s creations:

Nomenclature had been at the heart of God’s disagreement with His creatures from the start. He had foreseen evil as a problem . . . But He was not prepared for names to come between them, forgetting how essential to His idea of Himself was His Own. I AM WHAT I AM – Cain’s refusal to offer sacrifice was nothing other than an unwillingness to accept the obligations inherent in That Name. YOU ARE, Cain as good as told Him, WHAT YOU ARE NOT. (341)
According to this account, God, in spite of his omniscience, anticipated disobedience in the form of moral weakness but not philosophical dissent. By framing Cain’s rebellion in terms of an ontological challenge to the primacy of what Lacan (after Freud) calls the ‘Name of the Father’, the narrator, like Cain himself, removes his offence from the ethical to the metaphysical realm. Yet this argument relies on the paradoxical notion that God might not only fail to foresee how his creations might behave but also that he might ‘forget’ the sacrosanct nature of his own name. It also overlooks Cain’s own claim that God is the author of all the plots to defy him:

Fantastical fictions boiled in His brain. Stories of treachery, envy, malice, spite. A whole bubbling mythology of celestial insurrection and perfidy and disguise, all to posit the idea of a grand and almost worthy adversary. (10)

Both versions of God are blasphemous in their imputation of fallibility to the deity, but whereas the third-person narrator constructs a God whose weakness is an inability to foresee everything, Cain’s God not only foresees all possible forms of opposition but contrives them, out of a sort of mixture of ennui and paranoia. He becomes a voyeur, ‘a compulsive spectator’ at the mercy of his own ‘morbid’ narrative curiosity – an inclination to see how it would turn out precisely because it was bound to turn out badly’ (94, italics in original). To put it another way, Cain’s God is an author who sabotages himself, undoing his own work masochistically (but also sadistically): ‘Was there ever artist who hated his own artistry so feverishly? Or lover so intent on proving himself betrayed?’ (95). Inverting the biblical notion of God making man in his own image, Cain’s conceit produces a God made in Cain’s image, a deity whose self-loathing mirrors Cain’s own disgust at himself: ‘From the moment he had seen himself mirrored cruelly in stagnant water he had hated the fresh thumbprints of God, the rough stabs and gouges which he shared, a common disfigurement, with his father’ (35). Here Cain becomes a sort of anti-Narcissus, dismayed not only by his own appearance but by the way in which, he believes, it reveals the negligence of his maker.

In this scheme of things, Cain is implicitly elevated to the role of antagonist to the deity – ‘an almost worthy adversary’, to rival the great rebel Satan (whose name means adversary) of Paradise Lost – and at the same time demoted to the level of a pawn in a game of chess that God is playing against himself. Like Rosencrantz in Tom
Howard Jacobson

Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), who considers jumping overboard from the boat that is carrying them to their fateful end in England in order to ‘put a spoke in the wheel’ of the author of their destinies, before Guildenstern points out that this might indeed be what the author is ‘counting on’ (1973: 3.177), Cain must confront the possibility that even – or perhaps especially – when he is resisting God’s will most wilfully, he is actually simply complying with his grand plan. As Cain puts it: ‘Had I not known I was predictable to Him, I might not at last have said, So be it, have it Your own way, I will do what You always intended me to do’ (Jacobson 1992: 312). This notion of unconscious, inevitable complicity is implicitly reinforced by the fact that the third-person narrator’s interpretation of Cain’s resistance as being tantamount to a renaming of God himself – rebranding him as he who is what he is not – echoes Cain’s self-definition, which he cites earlier in the novel: ‘I Am What I Am Not’ (271). Cain’s romantic conception of himself as Yahweh’s antagonist is both reinforced and undermined by Preplen, who represents God’s divine punishment as a domestic squabble: ‘So you fell out! . . . He likes a little disagreement. It proves you’re listening . . . As long as you keep talking, Cain, as long as you keep talking . . . ’ (233; ellipses added). Preplen’s words invoke the predicament of King David, the narrator of Joseph Heller’s *God Knows* (1984), who begins the novel estranged from God and resolved that He ‘will have to make the first move if He wants to end this tension between us’ but soon becomes desperate to find a way to ‘to end this long silence between me and the heavens without sacrificing my dignity’ (Heller 1984: 51, 54). They also provide a moment of dramatic irony, since Cain finishes the novel ‘to all intents and purposes mute’, ‘no longer naming names’ and having ‘forgotten the word for God’ (Jacobson 1992: 342), intent only on building the tower with which Babel is synonymous: the Tower whose collapse is an allegory of the linguistic (as well as moral) limitations of mankind.

The power of naming, specifically, and of words – and the Word – generally, are, then, at the centre of the novel. If *Pussy* is a lament for a contemporary culture that has lost its reverence for words, *The Very Model of a Man* imagines an ancient culture in which words are worshipped. Yet it is also a culture in which betrayal is endemic, as suggested by the play on ‘naming names’ and the similar pun that Cain makes when reproaching his father for breaking his promise to allow him to name their new companions: ‘I thought you had given me
your word’ (5). The Fall itself is fundamentally a story of betrayal: the betrayal of Adam by Eve when she tempts him with the apple; the betrayal of God by his creations in violating his one prohibition; and God’s own betrayal of his creations through the very act of creating them in the foreknowledge that they will betray him (if you follow Cain’s argument that free will is illusory). In The Very Model of a Man this initial cycle of betrayal is perpetuated: Eve and God betray Adam through an intimacy that excludes him (like many married men in Jacobson’s fiction Adam is said to have ‘desired his wife only from the moment he became jealous of her’ (212)); Eve is betrayed by God when his angel, Saraquel, attempts to rape her; and as we have seen the story of Cain and Abel is also represented as a sequence of betrayals and self-betrayals.

Finally, Cain’s vocation as an artist necessarily implicates him in acts of betrayal and self-betrayal. As the third-person narrator observes, ‘the art he practises is confessional’ (19), and consequently entails the public rehearsal of private intimacies, the disclosure of confidences. Like many of Jacobson’s confessional narrators, Cain is driven by the paradoxical desire to incriminate and exculpate himself: ‘Like all obsessive autobiographers, on a public stage or in a private diary, he feels even more ill when he has disgorged himself than when he hasn’t, and he feels ill enough when he hasn’t’ (152). Disgusted and disillusioned with himself, he must disillusion his audiences by debunking their pastoral myths:

They request the story of the paradisal garden from him, only they want it told the way they want it believed. They have their own little clearings of paradisal verdancy front and back, and any assault upon the First Garden is implicitly a rudeness to theirs. (212)

Cain’s ‘conviction of worthlessness’, initially prompted by his ‘mother’s rejection’ of both himself and his father (55), is confirmed when he kills the thing he loves – for he does love Abel, with a ‘heaving love’, a ‘tenderness that scalds [his] eyes’ (184) – and by the punishment he receives for this crime. More perhaps than the fact of his exile, it is the indelible ‘brand’ with which he is scarred that stigmatises Cain. Musing with characteristically witty wordiness on this ‘shame of fatalism’ (285), Cain describes himself as ‘marked out, marked against, marked down, a man of mark, a man beside the mark . . ./ . . . a marked man’ (335, ellipses in original). Implicitly acknowledging the ambiguity of the mark – a signifier of his status
both as a sinner and a man protected by God – it is, above all, the fact of difference that isolates and alienates Cain not from others but from himself.

When Cain first arrives in Babel, rumours begin to circulate: that he intends to ‘lure away our artisans for the purposes of building a rival city’; that he ‘conceals a sulphurous tail beneath his gown’, ‘has horns that sprout whenever the moon is crescent’ and that ‘a monstrous fiery letter has been burnt into his flesh by a god he’s wronged, which smokes him awake the moment he lies down to sleep’ (25). This final detail recalls Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in which Hester Prynne is compelled by the Salem elders to sport a letter ‘A’ as a public mark of her adultery, a letter which is rumoured to be ‘red-hot with infernal fire’ (Hawthorne 2004: 102). Like Cain’s mark, Hester’s letter is in fact both stigma and mark of distinction (she decorates it elaborately, so that it comes to be seen as a signifier of her status as an artist), but whereas Hester’s ostracisation enables her to become a protofeminist freethinker, the mixture of awe, fear and hostility aroused by Cain’s mark makes of him a sort of protovictim of antisemitism. Preplen – himself an outsider from the land of Nod (close to Eden), whose murder is chillingly dismissed by the Babelites with the observation ‘given how fast they breed one less is hardly a catastrophe’ (Jacobson 1992: 324) – identifies the toxic mythology that grows up around Cain as a manifestation of what he calls ‘anti-Edenitism’ (29).

In this respect, *The Very Model of a Man* anticipates *J*, which similarly deals with the phenomenon of antisemitism allegorically, although in the case of the later novel by envisaging a dystopian future in which Jews have been expunged from the historical record, rather than a biblical prehistory before Jews existed. Yet *The Very Model of a Man* is also concerned with questions of narrative authority; like many other post-war novelisations of biblical narratives it ‘talks back’ to the scriptures, producing an unauthorised version of a canonical tale which represents itself as an attempt to set the record straight, or at least to provide an alternative perspective which in some way complicates and/or subverts the familiar one. *The Very Model of a Man* is not, finally, an attempt to rehabilitate Cain – he is too self-aware and too self-critical to try to inhabit the moral high ground – but it is an attempt to give him a voice, to reinstate him into a narrative from which he had been ‘expunged . . . Eclipsed. Occulted’ (89). In the process of doing this, Jacobson revisits many of the
themes of his earlier novels – anti-pastoral comedy, sexual rivalry, the (un)reliability of narrative, the ethics of autobiographical fiction – but he also creates his first fully rounded (hu)man character, the model for the men who were to follow.

No More Mr Nice Guy (1998)

In an interview to promote Pussy on the BBC Radio Four entertainment programme Loose Ends, Howard Jacobson told the broadcaster Clive Anderson that the subject of his next novel, and indeed of all his writing from now on, was to be ‘old men feeling melancholic and thinking about the grave’ (Anderson 2017). In doing so, Jacobson was invoking the two great lodestones of his career, Shakespeare and Philip Roth, alluding to Prospero’s vow, at the end of The Tempest, that ‘every third thought shall be my grave’ (V, i, 366), but also, by implication, Roth’s novel Sabbath’s Theater, whose epigraph is this line and whose protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, is a melancholy, death-haunted old man. Sabbath spends much of the novel loitering in graveyards, visiting the graves of lost loved ones and seeking out a hospitable resting place for himself, as well as conversing with the ghost of his long-deceased mother. He repeatedly contemplates suicide. Yet he is also, paradoxically, possessed of an insatiable appetite for life, for ‘More defeat! More disappointment! More deceit! . . . more cunt!’ (Roth 1995: 247).

Sabbath was clearly the prototype for the protagonist of No More Mr Nice Guy, Frank Ritz, even if his name seems to have been taken from the famous New York Times chief theatre reviewer, Frank Rich (like Rich, Ritz is a professional critic, but of television). Like Sabbath, Frank ‘has death daily in his eyes’ (Jacobson 1998a: 250); like Sabbath, Frank prides himself on his amorality (in such a way as to suggest, paradoxically, the sensibility of a moralist); and like Sabbath, Frank is an incorrigible ‘cunt-head’ (86), whose hypermasculinity is partly an attempt to conceal, or compensate for, a more ambiguous sexual identity. The novel begins with Ritz being expelled from his Eden – the study which houses all the ‘machinery indispensable to the smooth running of his life’ – for the sin of making too much noise (1). Mel, Frank’s wife, retreats into the garden to escape the constant ‘sizzle of static’ from Frank’s study, but when Frank ventures into her pastoral realm, he violates it, ‘ruin[ing] her garden for her’ (256). In another echo of Sabbath’s Theater, which opens with
Sabbath’s lover, Drenka, issuing him with an ultimatum – ‘Forswear fucking others or the affair is over’ (Roth 1995: 3) – Mel tells him to ‘Shut the fuck up or get the fuck out!’ (Jacobson 1998a: 2). For Frank, the conflict is about the incompatibility of ‘the ceaseless racket of a masculinist universe’ (3) with the sensibilities of women, who have turned themselves into ‘acoustic freaks’ with ‘micro-hearing’ (3) so refined that Mel is disturbed even by ‘the sound of him listening’ (3). Mel, who writes ‘feministical-erotic novels long hand’ (5), is suffering from an eating disorder, but Frank is suffering from something even more intractable: ‘a common compulsive disorder known as man’ (130).

*No More Mr Nice Guy* follows Frank’s picaresque adventures as he visits past haunts and lovers, hooks up with an overweight female comedian who bears more than a passing resemblance to Jo Brand, and explores his own masculinity.

When all is said and done, Frank considers himself to be a Rabelaisian man. He drank, he fornicated, he pigged out, he belched, he farted, he slept, he rose on the arched dolphin back of his dick, ready to breast the wild waves of existence all over again. He was a force of nature, wasn’t he. He was the functions disporting themselves. (131)

The debt here to Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal study, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), in which the Russian critic represents Rabelais as the arch-advocate of a worldview in which the ‘grotesque body’ is celebrated, is made explicit when Frank quotes him to his wife directly after this passage. However, it is implicit throughout the novel, with its insistent emphasis on the (male) body as a site of humiliation and degradation but also, paradoxically, of an invigorating, subversive comic energy: what Bakhtin calls the ‘carnivalesque’ (Bakhtin 2009: *passim*). Although it is a third-person narrative, *No More Mr Nice Guy* is focalised through Frank, and it is clear that both the list of bodily functions and the lyrical metaphor of his phallus as a dolphin are representations of Frank’s self-image, articulated in his own language. Yet there is also an implied authorial irony at work here, puncturing both Frank’s intellectual pretensions and his man-of-the-people shtick. The redundant ‘When all is said and done’ at the start of the passage and the similarly superfluous ‘wasn’t he’, shorn of the question mark which would ordinarily accompany it, at the end of the penultimate sentence suggest self-conscious rhetorical performance rather than authentic self-revelation.
This slightly awkward self-consciousness tellingly manifests itself throughout the novel in the context of masculinity. It is evident in the very title of the novel – again, an apparent expression of Frank’s own resolution to be uncompromisingly true to his instincts, to be a ‘Rabelaisian man’ of unapologetic appetites, an uninhibited ‘force of nature’ – which presses into service a cliché which must be read ironically, if not parodically. Frank alternates between macho posturing and caricaturing himself as an emasculated victim of the very machismo to which he pays lip service. On the one hand, he ‘believes that he performs a near-Darwinian function in relation to women – he quarrels their vital spark into flame’ (Jacobson 1998a: 79) and on the other hand he imagines for himself an epitaph that proclaims that he ‘wasn’t man enough to give a woman a good thrashing’ (119). At times Frank’s masculinity is represented as predatory and patronising: ‘that’s what Frank thinks about all women – isn’t it? – that they exist for him . . . to fuck and pity’ (259). At other times it is represented as intrinsically ridiculous: ‘He was a man. Ignominy was his middle name’ (232). Similarly, his quest for sexual adventure is invariably absurd, resulting either in humiliation at the hands of the opposite sex – ‘the ynaf was making clowns of us’ (166) – or in self-abuse, ‘the universal comedy of wanking’ (179). Yet this apparent dichotomy is not as clear-cut as it may first appear. Just as the unanswered question ‘isn’t it?’ interpolated in the middle of the clause claiming to report what Frank thinks about women, introduces a note of ambiguity, so the term ‘ynaf’, a pet term for sex coined by the juvenile Frank and his peers by inverting an abbreviated version of ‘fanny’, is both a self-satirical expression of the boys’ adolescent humour and a satirical reification of the female other that they fear and desire.

At the centre of the novel (literally and metaphorically) is a lengthy debate on the ethics and semantics of his discourse on female genitalia between Frank and D., a feminist comedian whose confessional, sexually explicit stand-up routines the narrator, once again using free indirect discourse to represent Frank’s voice, characterises as consisting of telling ‘fat slag shagger stories on the stage which were of practical help, surprise surprise, to everyone but herself’ (162). D. begins by objecting to the objectifying language that Frank habitually uses to describe women.

‘Did you hear yourself just now? The cunt. The knish. You talk about women as if they were nothing but parts. The bit of what you fancy . . . A cunt belongs to someone, Frank.’
'Does it? I’m not sure it does. A cunt is leased to someone, I’ll accept that. I think a cunt belongs to nature, and a woman is but the steward of it . . . What you’re actually against is that when our sex looks at your sex we think of giving it one. It’s the impersonal mirth you don’t like.’

‘Mirth!’

‘Dead right. When we were kids we used to go on ynaf hunt . . . Where I come from, ynaf’s backward chat for fanny. Great name for a vagina, wouldn’t you agree? Ynaf. Wonderful to get your tongue around. Philosophical, to boot. It’s got why in it – the big question – and wine in it and naff in it, but mostly it’s got laugh in it.’

‘The laugh being mostly on whom, Frank?’ (165–66)

Arguably, it is the thoroughly dialogical (another term popularised by Bakhtin) nature of the novel that redeems it from charges of misogyny, although a less charitable view would be that incorporating criticism of Frank’s sexual politics is a way of having your cake and eating it. At any rate, these scenes between Frank and D. are the most vivid and best-written passages in the novel. There is little doubt that D. wins this argument: she is pithy and pointed while Frank becomes rather pompous and mystical (‘a cunt belongs to nature, and a woman is but the steward of it’). Frank’s celebration of the comical neologism hardly helps his cause, since he can’t resist inserting into it a sly reference to cunnilingus (‘Wonderful to get your tongue round’) and since, as D.’s final question suggests, it is unclear whether the joke is really on the inept, sex-crazed teenagers or on the objects of their desire, who are implicitly objectified and ridiculed through the very use of the term ‘ynaf’. At the same time, his deconstruction of the word is witty, if perhaps somewhat disingenuous (retrospectively attributing linguistic richness to crude schoolboy slang). It is also poignant, since it hints at the boys’ discomfort at talking explicitly about sex: ynaf is a code word, but it is also a euphemism, a strategy for comically deflating a potentially explosive topic. Moreover, Frank’s nostalgic pleasure in recalling the ‘ynaf hunt’ seems to derive more from the memory of the comradeship with his peers entailed by the ‘hunt’ than by any success in locating its quarry.

In this sense, the ‘ynaf hunt’ exemplifies a key aspect of Frank’s sexuality: that it is defined as much in terms of his relationships with other men as women. Frank’s first sexual adventures are shared with his best friend Kurt. Fellow ynaf hunters, they are supposed to be partners in crime, yet Kurt’s presence invariably sabotages Frank:
If Kurt’s fucking in the same room as he is, he can’t come. If Kurt’s fucking in the same house but in a different room he can come but the girl always spits him out. Kurt sours his sperm, that’s what it comes to. Kurt curdles him. (64)

Although this might appear at first to be a case of Frank feeling intimidated by a rival’s potency (akin, perhaps, to paruresis, a common social phobia that makes it difficult for men to urinate in the company of other men), there is another explanation, hinted at in the diction of the last two sentences above. The proximity of ‘curdle’ to ‘cuddle’ and the pun on ‘comes’ in ‘that’s what it comes to’, a phrase that separates two clauses in which, in terms of grammatical structure, Kurt is acting directly on Frank himself and his sperm; all of this gives the passage a pronounced homoerotic inflection. This is made more explicit in the later observation that Frank and Kurt ‘can’t pull . . . together, can’t share one, can’t start from an end each and meet in the middle’ (64). Once again, the sexual intimacy necessitated by the act of ‘shar[ing]’ a woman is heightened by the ambiguity of the phrases ‘pull . . . together’ (which, as well as denoting a scenario in which each of them hooks up with a girl, also connotes a process of bonding and of simultaneous, possibly mutual, masturbation) and ‘meet in the middle’ (which might involve not just sexual co-operation but communion). The pun on ‘pulling’ is revisited later, when the narrator observes that ‘[t]he point of all the pulling . . . the whole point of keife [a Yiddish term for female genitals] . . . was that it brought you together’ (94). Here the notion that the ynaf hunt is not so much a means to an end as an end that justifies the means – the means being male bonding – is made explicit.

After being fast friends in their youth, Kurt and Frank fall out after Frank has a fling with Kurt’s partner, Liz. After a long period of estrangement, Frank hunts down Liz, hoping for forgiveness. After trying the door and getting no answer, he climbs in through a window and makes his way to the bathroom, where he believes Liz is taking a shower. Instead of his old flame, however, he encounters his old friend, stepping out of the cubicle:

Perhaps because he is naked, perhaps because his face and his hair are wet and there is water glissading down his chest, washing every sort of advancement off him, Kurt looks the same to Frank today as he has looked in his memory throughout the last twenty years. A boy still . . . an Indian brave . . . Sabu, that’s who he has always looked like. (152–53)
The erotic frisson here is evident from the lingering, lyrical description of Kurt’s appearance and from the exotic comparisons with the Indian brave and Sabu Dastagir (known popularly by his first name), an Indian-born actor famous for his roles as a beautiful, scantily clad ‘native’ boy in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) and *Jungle Book* (1942). When Kurt – impressively impassive, since, the narrator claims, he ‘will never be astounded by any infamous act of violation’ that Frank commits – dismisses his old friend, Frank leaves in tears, ‘his leaping heart shot down as though by a deadly hunter’ (153). Is there an echo in that final word of the yndf hunting of their youth? And of Sabu’s most famous role as Mowgli, whose hunting skills are legendary? Regardless, the only plausible objective correlative for Frank’s fervid emotional state is an interest in Kurt that is not purely platonic. This interest becomes explicitly sexual in a dream that Frank recalls having on two occasions, though he’s ‘prepared to accept that he may have had it more than twice and wiped the memory’: a dream of ‘putting Kurt’s penis in his mouth’ (186). In spite of the implicit confession that he might be repressing consciousness of this dream because its content disturbs him, Frank goes on to rationalise it, trying to reconcile it with his heteronormative self-image by arguing that, since he and Kurt have ‘identical penises’ (186), his dream is actually auto-erotic rather than homoerotic: that ‘when Frank dreams of sucking Kurt’s penis, he is only dreaming of sucking his own’ (187). At this point, the narrator, unusually, diverges from Frank’s perspective, pointing out that this explanation ‘fails to honour . . . the immensity of the grief Frank experienced when he awoke from the dreams and found his mouth empty’ (187).

Like many of Jacobson’s protagonists, Frank believes, as he explains to D., that to have one’s (female) sexual partner coveted by a (male) friend is a ‘compliment’ to which the polite response is to share and share alike: ‘Be my guest, enjoy yourself . . . Here, look, I’ll even hold her legs apart so you can enter her in comfort’ (159). In the absence of any prospect of actually performing fellatio on his friend, the closest Frank is likely to come to sexual intimacy with Kurt is to put his penis where his has been. And if he can’t achieve this by inviting Kurt to share his lover, then Frank must share his, uninvited, as he does with Liz. In this context, it is significant that when Frank finds himself unsatisfied by an encounter with a prostitute, he begins to wonder if perhaps she might be ‘a man after all’ before dismissing the possibility on the basis that ‘[a] man would have a better idea of what
might be conducive to that big cock she’s been talking about . . . a
better idea of where another man’s balls hang out’ (125). Again, the
playful sexual pun on ‘hang out’ here disguises an anxiety over the
blurring of heterosexual and homoerotic desires.

When Frank is not casting himself as a gladiator in the arena of
sexual combat, constantly ‘in competition with the rest of . . . [his]
sex’ (258), he finds himself effeminised. When he visits a cafe in Tor-
quay with D. he is served a ‘camp cappuccino’ by the gay waiter, with
chocolate sprinkled (or so he convinces himself) in the shape of an
anus on the top (182). When he goes on a retreat to a monastery he
recalls the occasion when he is sexually humiliated by a former lover,
Clarice, who ‘got him to wear her pants’ and had ‘put lipstick on his
mouth’ before ‘us[ing] something’ on him with which she ‘draws
blood’ (244). At one point he even decides that ‘he wanted to be Mel
now’ (234), ostensibly in order to partake of her own sexual experi-
ence with Clarice but, given the fact that his abbreviation of Mel’s
name renders her gender ambiguous and his conviction that ‘[b]eauty
in a woman . . . has to have something of the boy in it’ (23), possibly
as the expression of more profound psychosexual urges. Again,
there is a parallel with Roth’s Sabbath here, who at one point pro-
claims himself to be his deceased lover, Drenka, and who shares
with her an androgynous female lover, just as Frank shares Clarice
with Mel.

The novel ends with Frank returning with his tail between his legs
to his marital home: ‘emptied of all noise’ (260), which, since noise
has been figured throughout the novel as an emblem of masculine
identity, signifies a symbolic castration. This is the final irony of the
novel: that, rather than becoming a hardened, ruthless alpha male, as
its title suggests he will, Frank finishes his journey of self-discovery
as quiet, quiescent, all his rebellious spirit quelled. In this respect, No
More Mr Nice Guy establishes a template that most of Jacobson’s mid-
dle-career fiction follows.


After the interval of the autobiographical comic novel The Mighty
Walzer, which I will discuss in the next chapter, Jacobson returned to
the themes of No More Mr Nice Guy in Who’s Sorry Now? On the face
of it, the novel is a sexual farce. It follows the fortunes of two best
friends, Marvin Kreitman and Charlie Merriweather, as they fall in
and out of love with each other’s wives and become embroiled in an increasingly complex love hexagon, involving Charlie’s sister-in-law, Dotty (with whom Kreitman is in love and whom Charlie propositions) and Nyman, a cycle courier who knocks down Kreitman at the start of the novel. Like No More Mr Nice Guy, however, the novel is fundamentally concerned with masculinity in crisis.

Like Frank Ritz, Kreitman has constructed himself as a hypermasculine, sexually voracious warrior, a man who ‘was in sexual competition with everybody, not only those he knew and had already challenged, but with men he had never seen and never would see’, a man determined to avoid being mired in the ‘cesspit of sameness’ that he associates with fidelity, a man for whom niceness is anathema (Jacobson 2002a: 126, 31). When Merriweather refers to his own sex life with his wife (also called Charlie, but nicknamed Chas)9 as ‘nice’, it’s like a red rag to a bull for Kreitman:

‘You mean tired sex.’
‘I mean nice sex. Same person, same place, same time – I like that. But that doesn’t mean I disapprove of your way. I just don’t have the balls.’
‘Fairy!’ (15–16)

The insult with which Kreitman concludes their dialogue is partly an in-joke, referring back to an earlier exchange between the men, conducted during the course of the same meal, one of their ritual weekly lunches at a Chinese restaurant in Soho:

‘Not the homo routine, Marvin.’
‘I can’t help it. I’m homophobic.’
‘You affect to be homophobic.’
‘Only because I’m a latent homosexual.’
‘You’re not a latent homosexual. And anyway, no homosexual would have you.’
‘That’s why I’m homophobic.’ (13)

What emerges from this Helleresque conversation is that Merriweather shares his friend’s conviction that sexual promiscuity is an index of heterosexual masculinity, a yardstick according to which he falls short, lacking ‘the balls’ of Kreitman, and that Kreitman has a propensity for identifying both himself and his friend as homosexuals, albeit in a spirit of self-conscious facetiousness. Later, the narrator expands on Kreitman’s self-parodic performance of anxiety about
his own sexuality, in the context of the conspicuous public displays of queer culture in Soho:

Genuinely bothered by gays, were they? No. Yes. No. Yes. No, not bothered exactly. More destabilised. How could they not be? . . . Of the two, Kreitman was more agitated by gayness . . . He felt seriously undermined by it. (17)

Once again, Jacobson uses a third-person narrator whose modus operandi is to paraphrase the thoughts of the protagonist closely, using focalisation and free indirect discourse, but whose point of view diverges from his at times, offering an implicitly ironic authorial perspective. Here this divergence appears to become more pronounced as the passage develops. The initial, off-hand question (‘Genuinely bothered by gays, were they?’) and the vacillating response to it (‘No. Yes. No. Yes.’) seem to represent Kreitman’s own reflections, following the fluctuations of his own consciousness. The careful clarification of his position (‘No, not bothered exactly. More destabilised’) might also accurately represent his interpretation of his feelings, but the rhetorical question that follows it (‘How could they not be?’) might suggest that there is something defensive, perhaps self-delusional, about this interpretation; that it is in fact a rationalisation. Finally, there is a sober assessment of the situation that seems to come from a source entirely external to Kreitman, which implies that the earlier use of the plural ‘they’ might have been disingenuous, and which concludes that Kreitman alone feels genuinely threatened by what he sees as a new paradigm, a world in which ‘Antony and Antony’ has displaced Antony and Cleopatra as ‘the great love story of our time’ (17). For Kreitman, the zeitgeist has rendered his own brand of masculinity redundant, leaving him ‘toiling at an activity no longer prized’ (17).

Like Frank Ritz, Marvin Kreitman presents himself as part of an endangered species: an anachronistically heteronormative man who must be punished for his unreconstructed desires. It is significant in this context that, like Ritz, Kreitman has recourse to nostalgic recollections of his childhood to bolster his fragile sense of masculinity, citing the halcyon days when he and his friends would ask each other ‘Cop any other, last night?’ as corroborating evidence that his desires have always been centred on the ‘other’ gender rather than his own (17). Yet this passage is immediately succeeded by a more recent memory: of fraternising with two German gay men in Hamburg, of whom the narrator observes: ‘He had found them handsome, found their neatness
transfixing, enjoyed the musky smell of them, got drunk and allowed his tongue to run away with him’ (17). Here, again, the diction is suggestive of feelings of which Kreitman may not be consciously aware, or may not want to acknowledge. The use of the adjective ‘transfixing’ and the visceral pleasure (the ‘musky smell of them’) that Kreitman seems to derive from the physical proximity of the gay men invests the episode with a homoerotic undercurrent, but it is the concluding phrase that is particularly arresting. Although it is being used primarily in the proverbial sense of saying something unintended, in this context it seems also to be a manifestation of the very phenomenon it describes, since there is surely an implied double entendre here.

Kreitman seems to hover on the edge of some sort of realisation when he asks himself, in the light of this drunken evening, ‘what it was about his masculinity that it shied so nervously . . . from masculinity in others’ (18), but the question is left unanswered. Similarly, when Kreitman goes to meet Chas Merriweather, at her gym, at the start of their affair, he is aware of being profoundly uneasy at having to undress in the locker room alongside other men – ‘Naked with one another, men were too naked. Kreitman found them frightening’ (200) – but does not pursue the implications of this gymnophobia. These implications are incipient in the very origins of the wife-swapping agreement that he and Charlie embark on at the end of their boozy lunch in Soho at the start of the novel.

Over the course of the lunch, Kreitman notices that his friend’s eye is roving – ravenously, indiscriminately – over the bodies of all the women who come into their orbit: ‘Tonight, by one of those queer reversals incident to an old intimacy, it was Charles Merriweather whose eye was squeaking loosely in its unprotected socket . . . “She’s gorgeous,” he said, meaning almost anyone’ (31, my italics). Once again, the word ‘queer’ here has a buried meaning, one which is reinforced when Kreitman reflects on ‘twenty years of veering from the straight and narrow’ (31, my italics) and when Charlie proclaims that ‘it is the women who are stopping us doing what we’d like to’ (50). In this context, it is difficult not to read the agreement of the men to ‘[e]xchange the women’ (50, italics in original) as a resolution to consummate their own relationship by proxy, particularly given the apparent instrumentality of the female lovers suggested by the formulation ‘the women’. This reading gains traction from the fact that just as they are on the verge of striking their deal, Kreitman is knocked out cold by a young, lycra-clad man, whose reckless speed and androgynous
appearance had prompted Kreitman to scream homophobic abuse at him earlier in the day. Regaining consciousness at hospital, Kreitman’s first words – ‘Is this where they are laid who tangle with a faggot?’ (52) – is again notable for the sexual puns on ‘laid’ and ‘tangle’.

The cyclist turns out to be an ersatz courier named Nyman, who only pretends to deliver packages but whose real ambition is ‘to go on television to show that I am exceptionally unexceptional’ (116). Priding himself on his amorphousness – ‘I do not have a self’ (113) he declares over dinner in the presence of the Kreitmans and the Merriweathers – Nyman nevertheless exerts a powerful attraction over the assembled company. Hazel, Kreitman’s wife, finds Nyman’s ‘gender-undemonstrative’ self-presentation intriguing; Chas Merriweather notes with interest ‘how pointedly he averts his eyes’ from hers; and Kreitman himself, as Hazel drily notes, spends ‘all night’ ‘trying to woo him’ (117). At one point the narrator observes, paradoxically, that ‘[w]hat everybody found personable about Nyman was his absence of personality’ (108), but for Kreitman, Nyman’s name, which he takes to be ‘an Anglicisation of Niemand . . . meaning Nobody’ (69), is symbolic not merely of an existential void but of a sexual ambiguity that he finds unnerving. When Kreitman realises that Hazel is sexually attracted to Nyman, he offers to impersonate Nyman in sexual role-play, telling her to ‘Call me Nyman. I am your husband’s enemy. Beg me to fuck you’ (120–21).

Recalling Fugelman’s insistence in Peeping Tom that his wife, Sharon, pretend that he is Rowland Fitzpiers while they make love, Kreitman’s invitation is notable, too, for the way he figures Nyman as Hazel’s ‘husband’s enemy’ rather than her lover, thus representing their (simulated) affair as primarily a transaction between the two men.

At first Nyman appears to be more a catalyst for the sexual restlessness of the two couples – a convenient narrative device – than a significant character in his own right, as is perhaps only appropriate for a man who aspires to disappear, and whose real name turns out, ironically, to be Norman (nearly a homonym for ‘normal’). After the dinner, with its ‘roundelay of [flirtatious] exchanges’ (113) involving everyone but Charlie, and a nocturnal game of croquet between Chas and Nyman, a series of events is set in motion which ends up with Charlie moving in with Hazel and Kreitman cohabiting with Chas. Yet Kreitman remains obsessed with Nyman. During their time together, Chas observes that the anger he expresses whenever Nyman’s name crops up is ‘over and above’ (258) the resentment he purports to feel at being knocked over by him. As she puts it: ‘The boy hardly merits
so much passion . . . I think he’s a pretext’ (258), her use of the word ‘passion’ again implying not merely the intensity of Kreitman’s feelings but that these feelings might be erotic in nature. Initially, Kreitman pretends not to understand what she is driving at but then he concedes that the source of his agitation is the fact that he ‘puts himself about as a faggot, and you assure me he isn’t’ (258). Their conversation eventually peters out, inconclusively, but the episode ends with Chas unable to dispel the feeling, as she is ‘lying listening to Kreitman’s body think, that even as it thought about her it sometimes thought, and sometimes thought too long, about Nyman as well. And she didn’t want to be a party to any of that stuff, whatever it was’ (259). Rather than naming the objective correlative for the intensity of Kreitman’s feelings towards Nyman, Chas, whose thoughts are being reported with the intimate knowledge often afforded to Jacobson’s third-person narrators, resorts to vague euphemisms (‘pretext’, ‘that stuff’), but the implication of her suspicion that Kreitman’s ‘body’ spends ‘too long’ thinking about Nyman is clear enough. Moreover, Kreitman himself has already admitted to Charlie, in a move which now appears as though it might have been a double bluff of sorts, that his aggressive homophobic rhetoric is a performance designed to disguise the fact that he is a ‘latent homosexual’ (13).

Taking up a significant section of the novel, the game of musical marriages nonetheless turns out to be temporary: when the music stops, the couples return to their former partners; or rather, the Merriweathers return to their ‘nice’ marriage and Kreitman resumes his role as Hazel’s estranged husband. Yet the spectre of Nyman returns to haunt Kreitman at the end of the novel, when he beats up Kreitman’s daughter, Juliet, who had befriended him. Hazel is clear where the responsibility for this lies: ‘You wound the boy up mercilessly . . . You ragged him and ragged him and at the same time you used him to get yourself hot’ (323). Like Chas’s earlier reference to Kreitman’s ‘passion’, the phrase ‘get yourself hot’ is ambiguous: it might suggest that Nyman served as a catalyst for Kreitman’s anger, but it seems also to hint that his teasing of the young man stoked his sexual appetite.

The novel ends with Kreitman being flogged by a dominatrix, feeling ‘alive in every fibre’ (326). This might be interpreted as a form of penance: a self-inflicted punishment to expiate his guilt for his infidelities, and for his ‘ragging’ of Nyman and the beating of his daughter that is its consequence (according to Hazel). Yet directly prior to this episode, Kreitman wanders the streets of Soho, returning to the
scene of his initial encounter with Nyman, his intentions opaque, even perhaps to himself. ‘Has he come looking for Nyman?’ asks the narrator; ‘Maybe he has, maybe he hasn’t’ (324). Recalling the uncertainty of the response to the question of whether ‘gays [genuinely] bothered’ him or not at the start of the novel, it leaves open the question not simply of whether or not Kreitman intends to seek out his nemesis, but what he intends to do if he finds him. In this context, Kreitman’s decision to hire a nameless, anonymous stranger to beat him seems to be a displacement of his taboo desires, or a masochistic punishment for harbouring them in the first instance, or both. Earlier in the novel, the narrator had observed that ‘Kreitman was a devotee of pain. A sexual insult to Marvin Kreitman was more rousing than any flattering come-on could ever be to men who like their pleasures straight’ (141). At the time, the phrase ‘devotee of pain’ seemed to signify an emotional masochism rather than a sexual fetish and the term ‘straight’ might have seemed to be a synonym for ‘straight-forward’ rather than ‘heterosexual’, but retrospectively it seems to be another coded reference to Kreitman’s transgressive queerness. What Kreitman fears more than anything else is not that he will be trapped in a world of conventional ‘niceness’ but rather that he will be exposed for his lack of ‘niceness’. Ultimately, Kreitman (whose name literally means ‘man of strife’ in German) is a man at war not with the opposite sex, nor with male rivals, but with himself. In her review of the novel, Alex Clark observes that Kreitman is ‘Jacobson’s most fretted-over creation, a character who can’t go two pages without another ruminative refinement, a tweaking here, a deepening there’ (Clark 2002), yet it is Kreitman’s fretting over himself that makes him a tragicomic figure, and arguably the most complex and memorable character in Jacobson’s oeuvre up to this point. If Kreitman appears at first sight to be a man undergoing a midlife crisis, he ends up desperately trying to fend off the demons not just of ageing but of his own sexuality. Similarly, a plot that has superficial similarities with bedroom farce turns out to be the scaffolding on which Jacobson erects a dark, complex meditation on masculinity, contemporary sexual politics and mortality.

**The Making of Henry (2004)**

The germ of Jacobson’s eighth novel might be found in ‘A little night reading’, an essay that he published in the same year as *Who’s Sorry
Now? In it, Jacobson spoke of his enthusiasm for the protagonist of John Berryman’s epic cycle of poems, *The Dream Songs*: ‘I want his minstrel hero Henry . . . for a hero of my own . . . I am haunted to near madness by the lines “There sat down, once, a thing on Henry’s heart/so heavy, if he had a hundred years/& more, and weeping, sleepless, in all them time/Henry could not make good”’ (Jacobson 2002b: 40). From these lines, Jacobson seems to have taken not just the name of his protagonist but the title of the novel, *The Making of Henry*, whose second word echoes the penultimate word from the passage that Jacobson quotes, and the sense of melancholy that afflicts him: like his namesake, Jacobson’s Henry Nagel has suffered what Berryman, referring to his Henry, described as ‘an irreversible loss’ (Berryman 1990: vi).

On the face of it, Henry Nagel also has much in common with Marvin Kreitman. Like Kreitman, Nagel regards himself as an embattled representative of a masculinity endangered by challenges to conventional ideas of gender and sexuality. As a lecturer at Pennine College, a fictional higher education institution in which the English Department is dominated by ‘bookwomen in whose name literature . . . [was] a sort of evidential documentation of persecution, or when not that, a palimpsest of resistance’ (Jacobson 2005a: 165), Nagel finds himself isolated, intellectually and ideologically, tolerated only because he serves ‘as a warning and a specimen . . . evidence of the life that roamed the planet, but which, due to . . . some incorrigible predisposition to male-centred humanism . . . is now extinct’ (179). The satirical comedy here, though initially aimed at the fashionable dogmas of the literary feminists, also functions at Nagel’s expense. If it might seem cruel of his female colleagues to regard Nagel as exemplifying an anachronistic idea of ‘male-centred humanism’, it should be said that the hat fits. As a retired sexagenarian living alone in an apartment (inherited from his father) in the affluent London suburb of St. John’s Wood, Nagel looks on aghast at the ‘men in their seventies and eighties even, parading arm in arm, braceletled and medallioned and shoulder-bagged – and these are the straight men’ (88). Like Kreitman, Nagel feels like a man out of time, superannuated, particularly in the context of contemporary sexual politics.

Like Kreitman, too, Nagel is a man ‘impelled . . . [by] disgust and embarrassment with himself’ (164), a shame and anxiety that revolves around his masculinity. These feelings originate with incidents in his childhood in which he is ridiculed for appearing effeminate by his
father and his best friend, Osmond (‘Hovis’) Belkin: ‘They devitalised him. They impugned his masculinity. They called him a girl’ (78). On one level, Nagel internalises this emasculating view of himself, as suggested by his observation that ‘[t]hat’s what happens when you give your life to teaching the literary history of girls. You become one’ (203). However, the context for this self-critique complicates this deterministic narrative: it is part of a confession that Nagel yearns to make but resists articulating out loud to the lately discovered love of his life, Moira. What Nagel wants to get off his chest is that, some years ago, out of ‘pique’ and ‘envy’ (204, 203) he had published a scathing review of a film directed by Belkin. Arguing that his erstwhile schoolmate’s work was ‘stage-bound, artificial, unctuous and self-pleasing’, Nagel had quoted Fanny Price’s explanation, to Edmund, of her rejection of Henry Crawford’s proposal of marriage in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (published in 1814): ‘I am persuaded that this director does not think as he ought on serious subjects’ (203). In retrospect, Nagel judges himself harshly not simply because he was ‘motivated by malice’ but because his appropriation of Austen had inflected his review with a tone of ‘primness’ (203). Yet he does not comment on the odd incongruity of paraphrasing Austen’s infamously strait-laced heroine’s judgement on the charming, witty, impulsive bad boy of *Mansfield Park* to deliver his own verdict on his contemporary.

One possible explanation for Nagel’s citation of Austen is suggested by the incident, later in the narrative, when he unexpectedly encounters a figure whom he initially mistakes for his old schoolfriend but who turns out in fact to be his son. Like Frank Ritz, the protagonist of *No More Mr Nice Guy*, Nagel is persistently pricked by the ‘deathful possibilities of the present’ (63). An inveterate ‘wanderer among graves’ (35) who regularly talks to the ghost of his father (an illusionist, fire-eater and origamist whose stage name was Uncle Izzi), Nagel, at the age of 64, has been exercised by the question of ‘[w]here best to be dead . . . for as long as he can remember (62)’. On this particular day, Nagel sets out ‘looking for somewhere to be buried’ (219) and ends up in Totter Down cemetery, where he has heard there is a marvellous yew tree. Having admired the yew, which appears to be ‘petrified with age, its bronzed bark twisted like Laocoon, pitted with barnacles as though it has been at sea for five hundred years, at its heart a whorled hollow, black and damp, resembling an entrance to the underworld’ (230), Nagel is about to make his way out of the cemetery when he spots a ‘ghostly’, familiar figure.
Instantly, Nagel is convinced that the ‘visitant’ is his ‘oldest and best friend, not seen for thirty or more years – Osmond “Hovis” Belkin, to the very tips of his soft smoker’s fingers’ (231). His ‘heart hammer[ing] in his chest’, Nagel subjects the man to a ‘wild embrace’, only to be greeted with a demurral, delivered with a ‘half-apologetic expression . . . meaning you are a bit of a girl, aren’t you, not knowing who you know and who you don’t’ (232). Abruptly, Nagel realises his mistake: he has accosted a young man, having forgotten that ‘Osmond is sixty or thereabouts and would not look now as he did when Henry last saw him’ (232). At this point, a ‘great depression’ suddenly takes hold of him: ‘It is as though half his life has been . . . peeled from him . . . like loose skin’ (232). A few moments later, Nagel understands that the young man is Osmond’s son, who introduces himself as Mel Belkin, which only heightens Nagel’s sense of disillusionment: ‘Henry is disappointed. What did he expect to hear? That Osmond had called his son Henry?’ (233).

Nagel’s visceral responses both to his initial belief that he has been reunited with his old friend (the hammering of his heart) and to the revelation that he is mistaken (the metaphor of his skin being flayed) are more consistent with the feelings one might have for a former lover than for a long-estranged friend towards whom one felt ambivalent. Likewise, although the narrator, mediating Nagel’s thoughts in the manner habitual to Jacobson’s third-person narratives, recognises the absurdity of Nagel harbouring hopes that Osmond might have named his son after him, the mere fact that he has contemplated such a possibility reinforces the impression that Belkin has assumed a disproportionate prominence in Nagel’s unconscious, if not conscious, emotional life. The incongruous intensity of Nagel’s emotions is highlighted by the reminder of that ambivalence suggested by his interpretation of Belkin Junior’s bemusement as a scornful comment on his own (lack of) masculinity – ‘you are a bit of a girl’ echoing Osmond’s insult to the youthful Nagel. Nagel is clearly moved partly by the chilling intimation of his own mortality but also, like Frank Ritz when he unexpectedly comes face to face with his long-estranged best friend from school, by the thrill of a long-repressed passion suddenly surfacing. Like Ritz’s response to seeing Kurt again, Nagel’s emotional eruption might seem at first to lack an objective correlative. Yet there is perhaps a hint of an explanation in the alacrity with which Nagel unconsciously revisits the role of ‘girl’ that Osmond had assigned him in their youth, and in the detailed,
poetic description of the yew tree – uncharacteristic for a writer who, like Nagel himself, is ‘[n]ot by nature a nature man’ (101) – with its ‘black, damp hollow’ that offers symbolic access to an ‘underworld’, which, in psychoanalytical terms, might be read as metaphors for queer desires. If this seems like an over-determined reading, consider the terms in which the narrator frames the friendship between Nagel and Belkin elsewhere.

During his time at Pennine College, Nagel adopts a Leavisite pedagogical approach inside the classroom, ‘obdurately’ offering a course called ‘Literature’s For Life’, whose title invokes the Lawrentian notion of life as ‘a religious entity with masculinist overtones’ (168), while his colleagues embrace ‘the frost of theory’ (101). Outside the classroom, Nagel specialises in bedding other men’s wives, on the basis that ‘if they’re attached that means someone other than him desires or has desired them, which confirms and vindicates, or at least seconds, his interest in them’ (99). The ironic tension between Nagel’s literary allegiance to Lawrence’s version of mystical masculinism and the manifestation of his own sexual desires in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls ‘triangulation’ (the sublimation of the desire for intimacy with another man through sexual relations with his female partner) complicates the distinctions that Jacobson makes between Lawrence’s self-important ‘doers’ and the comic cuckolded ‘done-tos’. Nagel is the cuckold, not the cuckold, and yet the fact that he confines his sexual activities to the wives of his colleagues because they have already been desired by these other men suggests that his ‘interest’ is as much in the men themselves as in their partners.

In this context, Nagel’s relationship with Moira appears to be transformative: with her, uniquely, he finds that he doesn’t require the ‘stimulus of sexual rivalry’ (274) to pique or sustain his desire. During the early part of the novel, Henry does in fact regard his next-door neighbour, Lachlan, as a potential rival, but by the end of the novel he finds himself indifferent to the fact that Lachlan shares his admiration for Moira: ‘She is wearing her hair up, the way Henry has noticed Lachlan particularly likes it . . . Once upon a time Lachlan’s liking it would have counted more than his own liking it . . . But not any more’ (297). Yet this doesn’t stop him fantasising about whether, had he caught sight of Henry ‘with his hand on Moira’s cleavage’, Belkin might have ‘have cast a dying man’s lascivious eye on Moira, one part defunct desire, three parts envy?’ (298). This is partly a revenge fantasy – in this scenario Henry imagines himself ‘healthful’ and Belkin
‘grey-skinned, wasting, hobbling on a stick’ (297) – but the imagined trajectory of Belkin’s ‘lascivious eye’, focusing on Nagel’s own hand on Moira’s body, again reinforces the sense that Nagel’s desires are bound up with the idea of himself as the object of the male gaze.

In fact, there is no possibility of Nagel inciting the desire or procuring the envy of his old friend, because Belkin is dead; and this knowledge, although Nagel feels that it ‘should be a liberation’ (299), instead fills him with melancholy, as it means that there is no opportunity to redress the sense of grievance that still gnaws at him. As young men, there had been no prospect of ‘borrowing any of Belkin’s wives’, since they were always elsewhere, ‘unavailable to the contamination of Henry’s curiosity’ (297), while for his part Belkin never showed any interest in Nagel’s partners: ‘Henry never came home to find his girlfriend of the hour in “Hovis” Belkin’s arms. Not once. Not ever. How strange was that?’ (298). From Nagel’s perverse perspective, Belkin’s loyalty is, paradoxically, a form of disloyalty: ‘Of all the ways there are of betraying your best friend, this, Henry reckons, is the hardest to forgive: not betraying him, sexually, at all’ (298). Once again, Jacobson uses the technique here of a third-person narrator who habitually appears to be closely aligned with the protagonist, but who, on occasions such as these, implicitly diverges from their worldview. This divergence is signalled, as ever, through subtle details. In the description of how Nagel never found Belkin in a compromising position with any of Nagel’s girlfriends the use of tautology (‘never . . . Not once. Not ever.’), followed by the rhetorical question (‘How strange was that?’), introduces a note of strain to Nagel’s professed incredulity. He seems to be protesting too much, attempting to invoke a tacit understanding that doesn’t exist, since, even in the 1960s, when, the narrator assures us, ‘sex overrode all other considerations’ (297), it seems at least an exaggeration if not entirely improbable that it would have been ‘strange’ not to surprise your best friend and your girlfriend in flagrante delicto. Similarly, the use of the phrase ‘Henry reckons’ might seem an inconsequential aside, but in the context of a novel in which the narrator usually paraphrases Nagel’s perceptions without explicitly attributing them to him, it draws attention to the subjectivity of his judgement and, by extension, implies an ironic distance from that judgement.

Nagel insists on interpreting Belkin’s indifference towards his love life as evidence not of him being ‘honourable or gay’ but of the fact that ‘he didn’t rate them [Nagel’s girlfriends]’ (298). But his feeling of
crushing disappointment, which anticipates the deflation he experiences when he realises that the man he encounters at the cemetery is not Belkin himself but his son, suggests that he feels it to be a rejection of him, a sexual slight more wounding than, but perhaps related to, the label ‘girl’. Nagel is indignant not because Belkin never showed any interest in the girls in whom he was interested, but because he never showed any interest in his sexuality. Dismissing him as a ‘girl’, Belkin excludes him from the arena of masculinity. Arguably, it is this childhood exclusion that leads to Nagel’s serial ‘wife-borrowing’ in later life. Rather than get involved in a relationship of his own, in which his partner (and therefore he himself) might again fail to excite the interest of other men, he prefers to confirm his (heteronormative) masculinity by appropriating other men’s partners, thereby ensuring that they share an (homoerotic) intimacy with him, albeit wittingly.

Although Nagel resembles a number of other Jacobson protagonists – notably Marvin Kreitman, Frank Ritz and Barney Fugelman – in his homosocial desires, the tone of *The Making of Henry* is quite different from the exuberance of *Peeping Tom*, the dyspepsia of *No More Mr Nice Guy* and the world-weariness of *Who’s Sorry Now?*. As its title suggests, *The Making of Henry* is essentially an optimistic book, with a redemptive narrative arc. The fact that Nagel is referred to throughout by his first name, Henry, as opposed to Kreitman in *Who’s Sorry Now?*, whose first name, Marvin, is rarely used, in itself suggests a sympathy with the character that is reinforced by the events of the novel. *Who’s Sorry Now?* begins with Kreitman being hospitalised after being knocked down by Nyman’s bike and finishes with him being whipped by a prostitute. *The Making of Henry* begins with Nagel, already suffering from the ‘irreversible loss’ of both his parents, struggling to come to terms with having been sacked from his job at Pennine College for writing a negative reference for a student. Unlike the protagonist of Berryman’s *Dream Songs*, however, he falls on his feet, through the unexpected inheritance of a ‘luxurious apartment’ where he lives more ‘graciously’ than ever before (3), and he begins gradually to rebuild his life. The novel ends with him in love, and happily cohabiting with, Moira, albeit not without the accompanying dread of it all going wrong and the persistent fear of mortality: he fears that he ‘can’t trust [her] not to leave him’ and that, if she doesn’t leave, she ‘will die on him’ (340, 339). Just as importantly, Nagel learns to treat Lachlan not as a rival but as a friend and
companion. The novel ends not with the two lovers together, but with Nagel comforting Lachlan for the loss of his beloved dog, Angus, who has just been run over in the street.

He [Lachlan] is wet, wet from the bone out, and smells of wretchedness and shock. All the more reason, Henry thinks, that I must hold on to him. Don’t ask him why, but Henry does something quite unexpected, for him, and very strange. He kisses the top of Lachlan’s head, where the hair is thinnest, and breathes him in. God breathed life into Adam’s dust-dry nostrils, Henry thinks, and now I know how Adam must have felt. (337)

The impulsive kiss, accompanied by the coy injunction not to ‘ask him why’, recalls Nagel’s homosocial history, but whereas earlier in the novel Nagel had sought intimacy with other men by proxy, through affairs with their partners, here he shows compassion for another man as a way of reciprocating his love for the woman who is his partner, ‘put[ting] his arms around Lachlan exactly as, a moment before, Moira enfolded him in hers’ (337). He even carries Angus – ‘that thing of piss and shit and undiscriminating love’ – back to Lachlan’s apartment, ‘because he knows Moira would expect no less of him’ (337). Confronting directly the two things that have haunted him throughout the novel – death and intimacy with another man – Nagel feels invigorated, like a man reborn, as the analogy with Adam suggests. This being Jacobson, the ending of the novel is ambivalent: as Nagel contemplates a future with Moira and their mutual friend Lachlan, he muses that it ‘[c]ould be hell’ or ‘the making of me’ (340). But the second possibility seems more likely, both because these are the final words of the novel and because they echo, and renew, the promise contained in its title.

**The Act of Love (2008)**

*The Act of Love* is both a reworking of one of the central themes of Jacobson’s prior fiction and a significant departure from his earlier work. Its narrator, Felix Quinn, is unusual, though not unique, in Jacobson’s oeuvre in two senses: he is not Jewish and he is a first-person narrator. The novel revolves around a love triangle that Felix himself constructs, believing that ‘*n*o *m*an has ever loved a woman and not imagined her in the arms of someone else’ and determined to ensure that he doesn’t simply have to imagine such a scenario (*Jacobson 2009a: 30,*
italics in original). In this respect, Quinn is following in the footsteps of many of his predecessors. Sefton Goldberg, the protagonist of *Coming From Behind*, is ‘shockingly vulnerable, when it came to women, to the opinions of other men’ (*Jacobson* 1984: 89); Barney Fugelman in *Peeping Tom* practically pushes his first wife into the arms of an old friend and facilitates the infidelity of his second wife. Fugelman also derives masochistic satisfaction from encouraging his partners to express their desire for other men (‘Do you want a younger man? . . . Say yes, I found myself hoping, say yes and make my days and nights perpetual torment’) and to relate their sexual experiences with other men in graphic detail (*Jacobson* 1985: 60, 252–53). Frank Ritz in *No More Mr Nice Guy* and Henry Nagel in *The Making of Henry* both find their sexual desire for women is enhanced, if not initially incited, by the interest of other men. There is a wife-swapping episode in *Kalooki Nights*. But it is Marvin Kreitman in *Who’s Sorry Now?* who most closely anticipates Quinn. Like Quinn, Kreitman is ‘a zealot of the minutiae of jealousy’, ‘an incorrigible sentimentalist of anguish’ who wants nothing more than to ‘suffer the sting of disregard’ and to ‘witness [his] own ignominy’, believing that ‘[w]here there was jealousy there was life’ (*Jacobson* 2002a: 292, 223, 158).

If Quinn is in some respects a typical Jacobson anti-hero, *The Act of Love* is, for the most part, an atypical Jacobson novel. More intricately plotted than most of his fiction, much of its power derives from skilful revelation of the unreliability of the narrator and a number of narrative twists that are consequent on this unreliability. Formally and tonally, too, it is uncharacteristic: in its claustrophobic, quasi-Gothic intensity, its blend of existential philosophy and erotic obsession, and its self-conscious literariness, it is much closer to what it refers to as ‘the murderously pornographic novels’ of Georges Bataille (*Jacobson* 2009a: 151) than to Jacobson’s habitual models such as Philip Roth and D.H. Lawrence.

At the start of the book there is an epigraph from Bataille – ‘love [is] the desire to live in fear of possible loss, with the beloved holding the lover on the very threshold of a swoon’ – alongside one from Dickens: ‘real love is . . . unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission’ (n.p.). Both these quotations, the first from *Erotism* (1957) and the second from *Great Expectations* (1861), represent love as intrinsically masochistic, whether in the sense of courting emotional pain or of rendering it inevitable through self-abasement. Felix Quinn partakes of both these strains of masochism but he is also an artist manqué.
Howard Jacobson (an antiquarian bookseller with literary pretensions), for whom ‘the great creative founding act was of the essence masochistic’ (Jacobson 2009a: 92). Referring to ‘God the immortal cuckold’, Quinn argues that many of the great novelists place themselves in a comparable predicament, since tragic heroines such as Tess, Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina and Molly Bloom all yield ‘to minutely observed seduction at the hands of unworthy men, and in the process [each] subjects her creator, who loves her better than any man could, to the torments of the damned’ (92). Yet if Marius, Quinn’s self-appointed nemesis – and the unworthy man who seduces Quinn’s wife, Marisa, according to Quinn’s narrative – is correct in claiming that ‘every artist is a sadist’ (178), then Quinn is in fact a sadomasochist.

The novel begins with a prologue that boasts perhaps the most arresting opening sentence to be found in Jacobson: ‘FOUR O CLOCK SUITED THEM ALL – THE WIFE, THE HUSBAND, THE LOVER’ (1, capitals in original). In the rest of the prologue Quinn describes himself, the Husband, as ‘Love’s flagellant’, a supplicant at the ‘altar of Eros’, ‘the one whom love consumes’ and Marius, the Lover, as a ‘heartbroken’ ‘cynic’ with ‘lost city of Atlantis eyes, blasted cheeks, a cruel, dried-up riverbed of a mouth’ (1). There is no description of the Wife, only an implicit reference to her as the ‘who’ or ‘what’ that is exchanged between the men at the ‘handover hour’ (2). Quinn’s overheated self-dramatisation – as the victim of forces beyond his control, a sacrifice to a higher power – is matched by his romantic representation of Marius as a Byronic figure, matching in almost every detail the definition of the type provided by Kingsley Amis: ‘lonely, melancholy . . . of . . . fine but ravaged countenance, dark and brooding in expression, of a cold or cynical veneer, above all, “enigmatic”, in possession of a sinister secret’ (Amis 1965: 36). It is clear from the outset that Marius is as much a projection of Quinn’s own fears and desires as anything else, but because Quinn’s construction of him is the only one we have, all we can do is guess and second-guess at the truth.

Quinn first meets Marius at the funeral of a professor of literature for whose book collection Quinn had provided a valuation and whose widow, it turns out, had left him for Marius. Quinn immediately begins mythologising Marius, comparing him to both Hamlet and the Black Prince (Jacobson 2009a: 6–7); later, he will figure Marius as a creature who ‘arises glistening from the sea, shaking silver droplets from its torso, like Neptune’ (212). At the same time, Quinn
draws attention to the subjectivity of his representation of Marius, conceding that he is less concerned with the ‘reality of him’ than with the ‘archetypal role’ in which he casts him ‘in that book-fed theatre of riot and melodrama that was my sexual imagination’ (22). An avid consumer of European erotic literary fiction, Quinn self-consciously tries to emulate these models, rendering Marius ‘a character in a salacious fiction I wrote in imitation of all the salacious fiction I’d read’ (23), more specifically ‘the type of heartless English libertine the French love to fantasise about, like Sir Stephen in Story of O’ (27). These metafictional reflections assume an extra resonance for those who recognise that the prototype for Marius appears in Peeping Tom in the guise of Max Loveday, who ‘had been an academic, teaching French literature (Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, the text as lyrical surface – that sort of thing)’ before eloping with the wife of his professor, and then becoming disillusioned with the relationship (Jacobson 1985: 298–99). Like Loveday, Marius is a doctoral student who specialises in the nouveau roman before eloping with his supervisor’s wife. Whereas Loveday is a peripheral figure in Peeping Tom, Marius takes centre stage in The Act of Love.

The novel is divided into five sections – ‘Marius’, ‘Marisa’, ‘Marius and Marisa’, ‘The Wife, the Lover’ and ‘The Husband’ – but it is Marius who dominates the narrative. The prologue begins with Quinn’s romantic portrait of him as a saturnine cynic; the opening line of the main narrative is Quinn’s recollection of his first meeting with Marius (‘I first sighted Marius, long before I had any inkling I’d have use of him . . . at a country churchyard funeral in Shropshire’); and the novel ends with Quinn still speculating about Marius’s state of mind when the latter supposedly ‘helped himself to girls below the age of lawful taking’ (Jacobson 2009a: 308). In between, the narrative revolves around Quinn’s elaborate plot to bring Marius and Marisa together, hoping to become as intimate as possible with their own intimacy.

Why does Marius exert such a powerful hold on Quinn’s imagination? Quinn himself suggests that he ‘must have seen in him the pornographic complement to my as yet incompletely formed desires’ (6), yet the odd tense here ‘must have seen’ implies that he himself does not fully understand his own obsession. Partly, Marius seems to represent for Quinn a surrogate self, an alter ego whose sexual magnetism – the capacity to ‘persuade a woman to abandon herself . . . to unbridled lust’ – he envies (22). Yet Quinn’s description of Marius’s
‘lost city of Atlantis eyes’ and his vision of him emerging from the waves with his body ‘glistening’ with ‘silver drops’ – more reminiscent of Botticelli’s Venus than any conventional image of Neptune – hints at an infatuation that is romantic and erotic rather than empathetic. In other words, the sexual magnetism with which Quinn invests Marius may say more about his own sexuality than Marius’s.

Quinn is transfixed by Marius from the start, convinced even before he knows anything about him that he ‘would cross any boundary if there was gloomy mischief in it’ (7). However, it is only later, once he has decided that in order for him (Quinn) to ‘burn for her, Marisa had to burn for someone else’ (139), and once he fortuitously moves into their neighbourhood, that he identifies Marius as the man who ‘would bring both of us to our knees’ (140), a phrase that in this context suggests not just submission but the act of fellatio.

Is it any wonder that I made a grab for him? A vaguely troubling presence when I’d had no need for him, a distant figure agitating me at the margins of my masculinity, here suddenly he was, deranged and dangerous, an abstemious immoralist, a sadist at his wits’ end, and on my doorstep. Just the man to save my marriage. (140)

Whether Quinn’s rationalisations are intended primarily to convince himself, or an implied reader, is not clear, but at any rate they reveal more than he appears to be aware of. The passage begins with a question that is only rhetorical if one shares Quinn’s disdain for what he calls ‘the savourlessness of living as the sane live’ (136) and ends with a grammatically incomplete sentence that can only be read ironically. Although Quinn claims that Marius was ‘a distant figure agitating me at the margins of my masculinity’, it is Marisa, as ever, who appears to be marginalised here. The alacrity with which Quinn decides to ‘grab’ Marius, the projection of his own ‘deranged and dangerous’ state of mind onto him and the paradoxical label of ‘abstemious immoralist’, which invokes Andre Gide’s novel of taboo male desire, The Immoralist (1902), all suggest that Quinn’s ‘need’ of Marius has more to do with the way that he ‘agitate[s]’ his own masculinity than with any conviction that he might ‘save’ his marriage.

Once Quinn has hatched his plan, he beings to stalk Marius, ‘haunt[ing] the button shop’ above which he has his lodgings, ‘simply in order to be beneath him’, ‘getting the smell of him this way’ (31). Although the first of these formulations refers to geographical, rather than bodily, proximity and the second is being used metaphorically,
in the sense of a hunter obtaining the scent of his quarry, they both have sexual connotations, which are amplified through the fact of their juxtaposition. Indeed, they both anticipate moments later in the novel when these implied meanings become explicit. Before the ‘four o clock handover’ ritual has been established, Quinn finds that ‘the face which rose up before me [during intercourse with Marisa] was not another woman’s but another man’s – not someone I wanted to kiss more than I wanted to kiss Marisa, but someone I wanted Marisa to kiss more than I wanted her to kiss me’ (76). If the modifying clause after the hyphen seems like an unconvincing afterthought – the superego censoring the id – then this sense is only reinforced by Quinn’s less guarded admissions, once (he believes) the affair between Marius and Marisa has begun, that he wishes to ‘feel myself between them’ (220), or at least to be ‘alongside them in their bed’ (219). Similarly, the olfactory metaphor is picked up again when Quinn surreptitiously trails Marius as he searches for messages that Marisa has left for him in the Wallace Collection: messages that Quinn believes will lead to the consummation of the passion that he has been cultivating between Marius and Marisa.

On we went, from untouchable walls of pink-nippled Psyches and Ariadnes painted by the breast-besotted Greuze, through dense rooms of armour and ormolu, and out again into the indolent frivolities of Boucher, I never so far behind that I couldn’t inhale the heat of him, wondering what he was wondering, doubly tense for I was pursuing not only Marisa, I was pursuing his pursuit of her as well. (167)

The rococo setting of the Wallace Collection provides the perfect context for Quinn’s baroque prose here, his ekphrastic description of Greuze’s portraits of nubile young women and Boucher’s sensual scenes reflecting his own louche imagination. The ornate lyricism and sinuosity of this single-sentence paragraph, with its alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition and half-rhymes, is Jacobson at his best: it is both bewitching aesthetically and slyly revelatory of the character whose voice he is ventriloquising. The synaesthesia phrase ‘inhale the heat of him’ recalls the earlier metaphor of the predator tracking his prey but also invokes the idea of animals being ‘in heat’. As the doubling of ‘wondering . . . wondering’, ‘pursuing . . . pursuit’ suggests, here, as elsewhere, Quinn is not only projecting onto Marius his own feelings of arousal, he is aroused by imagining Marius’s arousal.
Quinn is too self-aware a narrator to pretend to be oblivious to the homoerotic nature of his narrative. At one point he announces that ‘I accept that I must ask myself, for someone else is sure to ask it if I don’t, whether I didn’t at some subterranean level – and maybe not all that subterranean – lust vicariously after Marius through my wife’ (175) before declaring that he ‘recognised in [him]self no ambition to lie with Marius’ (175). Yet the elaborate circumlocutions he employs here undermine the certainty he wants to convey, the pun on ‘lie’ alluding to Quinn’s disingenuousness, as well as to his taboo desires. This pun is invoked again later in the novel when Quinn recounts an episode in which, forgetting that it was ‘a Marius afternoon’ until he hears ‘a commanding, emasculating’ ring at the door, he ‘quietly lock[s] [him]self in’ to his office rather than following his usual practice of vacating the house to leave the lovers alone (219). At this point, Quinn pulls himself up short:

Though that’s how I remember it, there is one thing wrong with this account. I would not have forgotten it was a Marius afternoon . . . So I must assume I lied to myself in order to be closer to them. (219)

Finding a ‘queer comfort’ in his proximity to the lovers, Quinn begins regularly to secrete himself in his office, where he ‘pull[s] down the blind, lie[s] on the carpet at the time I calculated Marius would be lying himself beside Marisa, and remain[s] there for the duration of his visit’ (219). Soon he decides to relocate to a room adjoining the ‘adulterous bower’, where he ‘flatten[s] himself against the wall’ in an attempt ‘to feel, if nothing else, the vibration of their breathing’ (220). The crude self-abasement of the bodily contortions that Quinn inflicts on himself here contrast with the implications of romantic luxuriance of the archaic word ‘bower’, and of course the word ‘queer’ in the phrase ‘queer comfort’ is another of the sexual puns of which Quinn is so fond. Likewise, the details of diction in the block quotation above are telling: the modal verbs ‘would’ and ‘must’ suggest a movement from ambiguity to certainty but the odd formulation ‘I must assume I lied to myself” actually begs more questions than it answers. Can someone be capable of such self-delusion and also such awareness of the delusion? At what point does Quinn become aware of the inconsistency in his ‘account’? Is a narrator who lies to himself also likely to be lying to his readers, perhaps even about the fact that he has been lying to himself?

Even if Guy Ableman, the protagonist of *Zoo Time*, is right when he claims that there has ‘never in the history of literature been a good
narration that was reliable’ (Jacobson 2013a: 240), there are some narrators who are more unreliable than others. Barney Fugelman and Leon Forelock were unreliable narrators, but Felix Quinn’s unreliability is of a different order, woven into the fabric of the narrative to the extent that it becomes in a sense its subject.

In one sense, Quinn is disarmingly candid about the subjectivity of his version of events. He cautions early on in the novel that he ‘might have misread’ (Jacobson 2009a: 7) Marius and much later concedes that in fact ‘[m]uch of what I attributed to Marius was mine not his’ (208). Yet in spite, or perhaps because, of his apparent ingenuousness about his own disingenuousness, the revelations towards the end of the novel are likely to come as a shock. Firstly, we learn that the funeral that Quinn is attending (bringing the novel full circle) is not, as we have been led to believe, that of his wife, Marisa, but that of Marius. Secondly, it transpires that, far from heartlessly abandoning Elspeth (the wife of the professor with whose funeral the book begins) after growing tired of her, it was she who left him, a blow from which he never recovers. Finally, it seems likely that he never slept with Marisa at all: all the time that Quinn had been imagining their fevered couplings, they seem instead to have been offering each other platonic solace for the betrayals that they have suffered. It is only once these twists have been absorbed that the glaring inconsistencies, subterfuges and sleights of hand employed throughout the narrative are likely to be seen clearly.

Retrospectively, Quinn’s account of the relationship between Marius and Elspeth is particularly suspect. At one point he reports a conversation between the lovers, whose relationship has now soured, he tells us, as the younger man has grown weary of his age-withered companion. As Elspeth clings to his knees, reproaching him for his cruelty, Marius responds with icy disdain:

‘It doesn’t become you, Elspeth, to behave like this. Not at your age.’ Did he actually say those words or did he merely think them? It’s an unnecessary distinction. You cannot think those words in the presence of somebody who loves you without your face betraying them.

. . . ‘At my age! . . . How many times did I beg you . . . that if you were going to leave me, to leave when I was young enough at least to make provision for myself?’

. . . ‘You were never young enough to make provision for yourself,’ he might or might not have said.

. . . ‘I was happy enough.’
'Had you been happy enough –' But no, that he couldn't say. Instead, 'It doesn't fall to any man to be sure he'll love a woman forever, Elspeth.' (152)

In this episode, Quinn repeatedly draws attention to the speculative nature of his narrative. Firstly, he concedes that Marius might not have actually spoken out loud words that he has just attributed to him, before claiming that such details are inconsequential. He then expresses similar uncertainty about the status of another line of dialogue, adding the caveat that 'he might or might not have said' it. Finally, he goes further, interrupting one of Marius's sentences in order to withdraw it and substitute an alternative. What might seem on first reading like a scrupulous concern for fidelity – Quinn trying to ensure that he represents Marius fairly and accurately, neither extenuating anything nor setting down anything in malice – appears, retrospectively, as glaring evidence of his reckless disregard for the truth. In fact, this passage simply makes explicit a fundamental problem implicit throughout Quinn's narrative: namely, the knowledge he claims of the motivations of others and of events at which he is not present.

At times Quinn tries to pre-empt questions about the provenance and accuracy of his narrative through insouciant assurances – ‘I happen to know that Elspeth clung to his legs when he told her he was leaving’ (151) – or disarming admissions of the limits of his knowledge – ‘I have not been able to uncover categorical proof of why he left the university that employed him in a junior capacity not long after he’d eloped with Elspeth’ (185) – that paradoxically seem to suggest a concern for factual fidelity. Yet for most of the narrative he arrogates for himself an omniscience that is incompatible with his own role in the narrative. When he belatedly poses the question that is begged by this modus operandi – ‘How do I know what I know about Marius?’ (250) – his explanation is characteristically equivocal:

One: I used my eyes. Two: I used my intuition . . . Three: Marisa told me.
There will be some who wonder why, over time, Marisa chose to tell me so much of what Marius told her. My question is more fundamental: what did Marius himself intend by telling her so much?
Her destabilisation, is my answer.

. . . But this was only a theory. It was also possible that Marisa was unhappy because she and Marius were so in love that neither of them knew what to do about it. (250–51)
Once again, Quinn anticipates scepticism about the veracity of his narrative and attempts to foreclose it, before admitting to the hypothetical status of his claims. The fact that he offers three answers to the question of how he knows what he claims to about Marius might be read either as a forceful assertion of authority or as the opposite: a scattergun response that suggests that none of these explanations is, in itself, particularly persuasive. Rather than addressing the question of why Marisa would have chosen to divulge everything that Marius had told her to her (now estranged) husband, Quinn raises it only to evade it, displacing it with a question of his own concerning Marius’s reasons for confiding in Marisa, which he interprets as cynically self-interested. Finally, he backtracks, referring to his imputation of sinister motives to Marius as ‘only a theory’, before advancing another possibility, without acknowledging that there might be others still that he has not entertained such as (as turns out to be the case) that they have become close, platonic friends.

Like Humbert Humbert, whom (like Barney Fugelman before him) he invokes, Quinn simultaneously represents his sexual proclivities as exceptional and as representative of the unacknowledged, repressed desires of men everywhere. Quoting the narrator of Lolita, Quinn claims that ‘A great endeavour lures me on’: ‘to extend the great arm of brotherhood around the millions of husbands who would invite their wives to wrong them if they could only find the courage for it’ (38). At the same time, he insists that ‘[n]o one could have been further removed than I was from the breezy Disneyland of wife-swapping, cocktail nuts and ankle chains. No one’ (134). Both the hyperbole of the ‘million husbands’ and the redundant repetition of ‘No one’ give the impression of a man protesting too much, but perhaps more importantly they both exemplify the way in which – again, like Humbert Humbert – Quinn takes great pains to try to recruit the implied reader as an accomplice to his crimes. This strategy manifests itself variously, from the casual assumption of collaboration and consensus implied by the use of the first-person plural – ‘[w]e will assume the worst of Marius’s motives’ (21) – to the use of rhetorical questions that posit an analogy between the act of reading and the act of love: ‘Do we not . . . see people turning the pages of a book with a sensual expectation that reminds us of nothing so much as the act of undressing another person?’ (73). For Quinn, readers of fiction are his secret sharers, ‘eternal voyeur[s] of art’ (275) whose insatiable appetite for narrative revelation is akin to the betrayed husband’s
craving for ocular proof of his wife’s adultery: ‘Wherein lies the difference between the cuckold’s transports of uncertain wondering – tell me tell me tell me tell me – and the reader’s?’ (210). Again, the repetition of ‘tell me’ is nicely ambiguous, at once signifying rhetorical authority (implying that no difference can be adduced, no matter how thoroughly the question might be considered) and connoting self-doubt (does the insistence tip over into an exaggeration designed to disguise the flimsiness of the analogy?).

At one point, Quinn recruits a waiter, Rafaele, who works at the restaurant where Marius and Marisa regularly dine, to spy on them and report back to him. When he becomes sickened by his task, telling Quinn that he ‘can take no more’ (191), Quinn replaces him with Ernesto, a widower who, according to Quinn, used to be ‘a vigorous man, muscular in a compact way and delicately browned by the sun’ but whose loss has given him a ‘crestfallen smile’ (193). Instructing him to ‘[b]reathe them in . . . and then hold your breath until you can breathe them out on me again’ (194), Quinn manipulates Ernesto, rendering him a surrogate not just for himself but for his readers:

Poor Ernesto. By getting him to watch Marisa’s every move I was showing her off to him . . . As an ever-wakeful witness to the progress of Marisa’s infidelity, he had become a sort of party to it, a parallel lover almost . . . but further, he had become a parallel cuckold as well. (195)

Eventually, Ernesto too demurs and rejects the role that Quinn has assigned him, telling him that he does not ‘want these sexual feelings for myself’ (197). In this episode, Jacobson dramatises the predicament of readers of the novel: is it possible to continue reading The Act of Love without collaborating with Quinn? It is this tension between Quinn’s desire to implicate the reader in his amoral worldview and the possibility of resisting such complicity offered by the internal inconsistencies, excesses and absurdities of the narrative voice that animate the novel, making it one of Jacobson’s most compelling but also queerest (in all senses of that word) works.

**Live a Little (2019)**

If The Act of Love is Jacobson’s most astringent meditation on masculinity, mortality and sexual politics, Live a Little is his most emollient, but it too is a queer, and queerly self-reflexive, book. It tells the story of two nonagenarian misfits: Beryl Dusinberry, a flamboyant,
grandiloquent, worldly widow given to referring to herself as the Princess Schweppessodawasser, struggling to recall and record her colourful past; and Shimi Carmelli, a reclusive, fastidious, dapper bachelor who entertains himself and a coterie of admiring widows through his performances in a Chinese restaurant as a cartomancer, in the guise of his own alter ego ‘Shimi the Great’ and who, as a sufferer from ‘selective morbid hyperthymesia’, is haunted by intrusive memories of shaming episodes from his past (Jacobson 2019a: 231, 17). The novel is divided into three sections: Book One alternates between the two protagonists, interweaving their present lives with flashbacks to historical episodes, which in Beryl’s case often take the form of entries in her journal d’amour, an alphabetically arranged record of all the loves and lovers of her life, or at least of those she can recall. Shimi and Beryl do not meet until halfway through the novel, in the final chapter of Book One. Book Two is devoted primarily to the representation of the unexpected, odd-couple friendship that develops between them; and Book Three is a brief coda, which confirms the flowering of their friendship into love. Through a series of beautifully written conversations, the novel traces the progress of their intimacy, from delicate negotiations and tentative arrangements, to mutual trust and support, and, finally, cohabitation and marriage. At the same time, it gradually discloses the tragic events from their past that have alienated them from themselves and others.

As ever with Jacobson, however, the strengths of Live a Little have little to do with its plot. It has an unusually memorable cast of secondary characters, most notably Beryl’s two carers, Euphoria and Nastya, and Beryl’s rival for the affections of Shimi, the Widow Wolfsheim. It is also a subtle double portrait of the artist: as an old man, and as an old woman. That Beryl sees herself in this light is implied by her identification with the ur-storyteller, Scheherazade:

What is she called, the Princess who has to go on talking to save her life? Sch . . . Schh . . . Schhh . . . you know who . . . She [Beryl] too has to go on talking to save her life. To her, a word gone is a day gone. And the more I misplace, the more use I have to make of those I can still lay my hands on. (9)

Juxtaposing allusions to a popular advertising campaign of the 1960s and 70s for Schweppes tonic water and to A Thousand and One Nights (1704), this passage is both comically incongruous and poignant, since Beryl resorts to the elliptical tagline of the Schweppes advert
(Schhh ... you know who ...) only because she cannot recall the name of the heroine of the Arabic collection of folkloric tales – because, in other words, she does not know who, or at least cannot name the one whom she knows she used to know. The shift from the third person to the first person suggests the proximity of the narrator’s perspective to Beryl’s – as is so often the case with Jacobson’s narratives, the narrative perspective in _Live a Little_ is often focalised through its protagonists, with frequent use of free indirect discourse and interior monologue – but it also hints that Beryl might be authoring her own narrative at this diegetic level. She is certainly an author at the metadiegetic level, as she is working throughout the novel on a journal recording her love life, written ‘in a conversational style consistent with her years as Head of English at some of the best girls’ schools in some of the best parts of the country’ (37). The journal is ostensibly written for her own satisfaction and as an attempt to shore up her lexicon and life against the ruins of old age: for Beryl the attenuation of the former signifies the attrition of the latter. However, like all authors Beryl craves readers, so she asks one of her carers, Euphoria, to read it, warning her not to ‘make the error of expecting happy endings’ (24), a statement that is imbued with dramatic irony, given that _Live a Little_ finishes on as upbeat a note as any of Jacobson’s books.

When she is not writing, or giving short shrift to her two MP sons, or giving peremptory instructions to Euphoria and her other carer, Nastya, Beryl spends her time stitching ‘death’ samplers, such as the one that finishes the first chapter of the novel:

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he was born without fuss and died without
fuss, slipping out of life like
An oyster down an open throat.
‘That wasn’t so difficult,’ he said,
and expired.
No one was listening
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(13)

Part Paul Simon (earlier in the chapter, the narrator observes that ‘[t]he Princess fears slippage . . . Slip Sliding Away’, the latter being the title of a famous Simon song), part Paul McCartney (the final line is reminiscent of the semi-refrain of ‘Eleanor Rigby’, ‘no one will hear . . . nobody came . . . no one was saved’), these mordant verses are as far from the pious platitudes normally associated with the form as could
be imagined. According to the narrator, Beryl is ‘a true artist, no matter that her subject matter is limited’ (21), a phrase that recalls Jane Austen’s famously self-deprecating description of the range of her art being confined to ‘two inches . . . of ivory’. Beryl’s artistic credentials are reinforced by the terms in which her rigorous aesthetic is couched: ‘despising indistinctness, [she] stitches with a merciless precision’ and ‘with the divine impatience of the artist, not to recover what’s been before it’s too late, but impetuously, not to lose the urgency of living in the present’ (181). If the imperious agitation suggested by the oxymoron ‘divine impatience’ is motivated by her proximity to death and the concomitant desire to live at least a little while she still has the opportunity, the pitiless pithiness of her work is an expression of her uncompromising temperament, and is reflected in the frankness of her interactions with all her interlocutors. For Beryl, there is no distinction between art and life, or rather, as she puts with a characteristically epigrammatic flourish: ‘[t]he art of life is to make art of life’ (181). She cultivates an aura of exotic mystery, inciting speculation of the sort that attends the protagonist of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925): ‘Could be a stage actress of another era is one guess. A feminist poet. A mistress of Ernest Hemingway. A once-famous traveller in Arabia. An heiress to the Nivea fortune. The illegitimate daughter of Pablo Picasso’ (Jacobson 2019a: 235). She is also a self-conscious performer who only ‘believe[s] things while [she’s] saying them’ and who rejects ‘the literalism of our times’, preferring ‘the past’s great masquerade of insincerity’ to what she calls the current ‘age of authenticity’ (78, 255, 256).

Shimi is also a performer and something of an artist manqué. As he ages, his gait slows not because of decrepitude but because he ‘decides to walk like an old man’ (159). As a young man he dabbles in phrenology, selling busts and other arcane ‘Items of Interest’, once submitting a bust ‘constructed out of odd Meccano parts, Lego bricks, jigsaw pieces, scraps of women’s underwear and titled *A Toy Importer Ponders The Aetiology of Bloomers*’ which ‘came close to being accepted for the Sensation show at the Royal Academy’ (92). At this point he ‘briefly wonder[s] if he oughtn’t to put his air of mannered torment to good use and become an artist full-time’ (92). As in the earlier passage in which Beryl’s artistry was discussed, the third-person narrative here is focalised through Shimi’s perspective. In a spirit of self-satire, Shimi punctures his own artistic pretensions, but if the words ‘air’ and ‘mannered’ suggest the inauthenticity that Beryl valorises, and
the title of Shimi’s bricolage seems parodic, the use of women’s underwear, far from being a facetious gesture, derives from the defining event of his life.

As a young boy Shimi tries on his mother’s underwear. On the face of it, this is an inconsequential, mildly amusing episode, but the way in which the narrator describes it – ‘[h]e climbed into his mother’s bloomers and tumbled into hell’ (31) – transforms it into a momentous, tragic event. The plosive /b/ in conjunction with the languorous /l/ enact phonetically the feelings of excitement and shame which Shimi simultaneously experiences; it is no coincidence that these sounds are recalled in the word ‘bricolage’. When his father discovers what he has done, he beats Shimi, but Shimi’s punishment of himself is much more damaging. He is never able to forgive himself for his violation of his mother’s privacy and his appropriation of her female identity, because of the way in which it becomes associated for him with the subsequent disintegration of his family: his mother’s illness and death; his father’s abandonment of him and his brother; and his estrangement from his brother.20 In this light, Shimi’s submission to the ‘Sensation’ exhibition is neither sensationalist nor exhibitionistic, but rather an attempt to sublimate his queer urges and process his trauma through art.

Although on one level Shimi understands that ‘nothing could have been more ridiculous than the sight of himself in his mother’s bloomers, from that moment on a sense of the ridiculous is not to be disassociated from abhorrence’ (207). The abhorrence that Shimi feels is inspired as much by his response to being discovered as by the crime itself: he is ashamed not only of his perversity but of his inability to make light of it, to ‘man up’ and ‘move on’, those twin mantras of the twenty-first century. Convinced that his brother, Ephraim, whom he suspects of informing on him, would have laughed off or charmed his way out of his predicament – ‘Shimi made a dismal felony out of what in Ephraim would have been an exuberance’ (48) – Shimi’s sense of himself is instead marred forever by the ignominy of having been exposed as effeminate, as unmanly. The irony is that Ephraim turns out to be queer himself: when he confides this to Shimi many years later, and Shimi seems incredulous, Ephraim tells him that ‘[y]ou don’t have to be a mother’s boy to be queer’ (146). This is in itself an ironic accusation, since the over-identification with his mother suggested by his misappropriation of her underwear leads to an inability to identify with her at all,
an emotional estrangement that renders him anything but a ‘mother’s boy’. If Shimi’s transvestism seems to exist in an appositional relation to his brother’s homosexuality, his queer masculinity is also defined in opposition to male authority figures. As a child, his shame at his cross-dressing is compounded by his father’s beating and by his own internalisation of what the beating implied: ‘He didn’t feel a man in the presence of his father’ (48). As a young man, when his uncle Raffi invites him to be the stock controller for his toy and games warehouse, he interprets Shimi’s diffidence as evidence that ‘[t]he boy lacked . . . [b]oyness’ (90), while Shimi himself ironically feels that he is trapped in a ‘boy-hell . . . where bed-wetters and fledgling masturbators sit with their heads in their hands while grinning devils in caps and bells roar ridicule in their ears’ (31). Paradoxically, this image suggests the possibility of redemption, recalling as it does the woodcuts of Erhard Schön which adorn the endpapers of Seriously Funny, where Jacobson argues that there is ‘beneficent relief [in] the laughter of the devils’ (Jacobson 1997: 240). As an old man, with no immediate family, Shimi projects his insecurities onto his physician, Dr Dauber, who has ‘one of those deep . . . testicular voices that proclaim inexpugnable manhood’ (Jacobson 2019a: 32). Shimi’s admiration for Dauber’s alpha-male presence is also, implicitly, an expression of a perceived deficiency of such characteristics on his own part. If as a boy he lacks ‘boyness’ then as a man he lacks manliness: the cojones that Dauber’s ‘testicular voice’ seems to bespeak. This psychological sense of impotence is exacerbated by physical symptoms, so that Shimi becomes paranoid about getting caught short. Like many old men, Shimi has urinary problems, but in his case he develops a paralysing neurosis about his condition so severe that it causes him either to absent himself without explanation from social engagements or to duck out of attending them in the first place. It is this neurosis which leads to the climactic event of the novel, which is also, paradoxically, an anti-climax.

Having agreed reluctantly to put on a performance of cartomancy at a charity event organised by one of his admirers, the Widow Wolfsheim, Shimi is so desperate to remain continent on the night that he overdoses on the medication prescribed by his doctor to help him control his bowels: ‘he has swallowed more pills than is recommended on the box, but then the box doesn’t know the stress he’s under’ (239). Combined with the unexpected sight of two women from his past seated together with the Widow Wolfsheim and Beryl,
the effects of the medication cause Shimi to faint. Just before he col-
apses, he tries in vain to steady himself:

He puts another hand out to keep himself upright, feels a surge of ter-
ror whose source he thinks is his bladder, notices his cuffs and is
pleased at least that they have not disgraced him perhaps if he can keep
them above the rising tide . . . and then crashes to the floor. (240–41,
ellipsis in original)

Shimi’s struggle to retain his balance and consciousness is couched in
terms which allude once again to what the narrator refers to early in the
novel as his ‘air of catastrophic masculinity’ (18). In addition to its pri-
mary, literal meaning, Shimi’s desperation to ‘keep himself upright’
suggests another kind of performance anxiety from that which has led
him to take too many pills. In this context, the focus on his cuffs also
has a symbolic significance. While preparing himself prior to the per-
formance, Shimi had paid particular attention to his cufflinks, trusting
that they would show his wrists to advantage: ‘His wrists are the part of
him he likes best. They are manly he thinks, not scrawny but strong,
and yet refined’ (239). Since a limp wrist is a stereotypical signifier of
effeminacy and queer male sexuality, Shimi’s pride in his ‘manly . . .
strong’ wrists suggests a desire to project a heteronormative self-image.

Ironically, the very anxiety that motivates Shimi to take such care
over his appearance and to go to such pains to ensure that he remains
in control of his bowels results in him swooning away in the manner
of fragile females in Georgian or Victorian fiction. If Shimi in this
episode assumes the role conventionally fulfilled by romantic hero-
ines, then Beryl behaves like the hero, rushing to his side, protecting
him and taking control of the situation: ‘It is the Princess . . . who is
the first to kneel by him, the Princess who cradles his head’ (241).
This image anticipates the tableau with which the novel ends, except
that in the latter case the gesture is reciprocated: ‘She takes hold of
his head. A gentle hand on each temple . . . Then he places a hand
first on one temple, then the other’ (280). Hopeful and touching
though this ending is, its optimism is qualified by the final page of
the novel, which features a mordant version of the sixth tarot card,
‘The Lovers’, depicting two skeletons in an amorous embrace, the
one on the right sporting a posie of roses on her skull. It is fitting that
the novel should finish both with a carpe diem – Shimi reminding
Beryl that, as she herself had assured him earlier in the novel, ‘it’s
never too late for anything’ (280) – and a memento mori, since the
book as a whole combines a rejection of morbidity with an unsentimental view of mortality.

In what may be a self-conscious riposte to the much-quoted aphorism from Roth’s novel *Everyman* that ‘old age isn’t a battle; old age is a massacre’ (Roth 2006: 156), Beryl tells Shimi that ‘[a]ge is not a comedy. Which is not to say it’s a tragedy either’ (Jacobson 2019a: 227–28). When the two enter into a contract of friendship, one of the articles they agree on is that since ‘[e]ither of us might die at any time’, such an eventuality ought ‘not to be an occasion for guilt, remorse or even sadness on the part of the person left alive’ (175). This sanguine, wryly humorous attitude towards their own deaths is balanced by a recognition of the inconsolable finality of the bereavements that they have both suffered in the past. Garrulous on almost any other topic, Beryl can barely bring herself to say anything about the eventual death of her son Neville. She refers to it only by implication, using the word ‘After’ to describe the circumstances in which Ephraim, who had befriended Neville and ‘shown him love’, as Beryl puts it, ‘found [her] name in Neville’s papers’ (218), leading to the friendship between them that in turn leads to her meeting Shimi at his funeral. When Shimi asks for clarification, she becomes defensive, instructing him ‘not to scrutinise me, please, for evidence of grief or guilt’ (218). Paradoxically, her reticence suggests the presence of these emotions more powerfully than any articulation of them would have – and this sense of repressed feelings that are too exquisite to be spoken out loud is echoed in Shimi’s response to his mother’s death. Having pretended not to be there when his mother on her death-bed asked for him to comfort her, Shimi feels that he has added the injury of the abdication of filial duty to the insult of intruding on his mother’s privacy by trying on her knickers. At her funeral, Shimi is practically mute. When his father apologises for having ‘neglected’ his sons since the death of his wife, explaining that he ‘didn’t think you’d want to see the mess I’m in’, Shimi ‘thought about saying “Maybe we could have helped”’, but remains silent, leaving Ephraim to point this out (266). The funeral itself offers no consolation to the mourners:

No flowers. No relief from stone. No bells. No birds. No illusions of rebirth. Dead meant dead. Shimi thought he would die himself. The company of his father and his brother only increased his loneliness. (266)

The negative catalogue here emphasises the inability of the bereaved men to offer any solace to each other and their refusal to seek comfort...
in any of the conventional rites and rituals attending such occasions. Far from allowing him to share his grief, for Shimi the presence of his father and brother inhibits him from expressing any emotion.

Ephraim’s funeral allows Beryl and Shimi to grieve not only for his death but, retrospectively, for the loss of their family members with whom he is intimately connected in their imaginations. It also offers them a chance to atone for their historic failures of parental, fraternal and filial devotion, in the form of Tahan, Ephraim’s son. For both Beryl and Shimi, Tahan becomes a sort of surrogate son, facilitating and supplementing their unorthodox union, enabling them to grant forgiveness to each other, and to affirm each other’s queerness.

For Shimi his exploration of cross-dressing is an enduring source of shame, an indelible stain on his character. However, for Beryl, to whom he finally confides the secrets that he has never shared with anyone else, it confirms her admiration for him as ‘the only adult male I’ve ever met who doesn’t doubt he’s half the time ridiculous’ (274), as she puts it in her final journal entry, a phrase that recalls Shimi’s vision of ‘boy-hell’, with the devils’ roars of ridicule ringing in his ears. The qualities that make Shimi feel ridiculous and emasculated – an impostor playing the role of a respectable gentleman – are the very qualities that endear him to Beryl, because for Beryl heteronormative men take themselves too seriously and are hopelessly deluded, simultaneously insensitive to, and intimidated by, the women in their lives. She instructs Euphoria to read her ‘annals’, containing details of ‘the manner in which they [her lovers] failed as men’ (24), so that she should not have inflated expectations of her husband, or of any other men. For Beryl, men are pathetic in both senses of that word: at once pitifully inadequate, paralysed by self-fulfilling fears of their own impotence (‘there isn’t a man out there who can candidly and fearlessly meet a woman’s gaze . . . Will I be up to it, they’re thinking . . . Will I be man enough?’ [55]), and poignantly doomed, left ‘moribund’ (27) and ‘weightless’ (121) by modernity, ‘this last hundred years [being] the worst ever for men’ (55). Beryl encapsulates the concerns of Jacobson’s middle-period fiction here: the sense that the perennial male anxiety about being ‘up to it’, in the sense of sexual performance as well as in the larger sense of measuring up to social expectations of what ‘being men’ entails, is precipitated by, and in turn amplifies, the fear of mortality (to be ‘moribund’ is to anticipate death itself). Yet in this late novel this vicious circle is broken, partly because the nature of sexual politics for two people in their nineties towards the
end of the second decade of the millennium are not what they were for middle-aged people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and partly because Beryl’s own unorthodox experience of her own role as a woman have shaped her unconventional views on gender roles more generally.

If Beryl’s sympathy for Shimi’s insecurity about his masculinity is enabled by her own sense of ‘how cruel it was for a man to have to be a man’ (57), as one of her journal entries has it, it is extended into empathy by her own insecurities about her femininity, or more particularly her maternity. Although Beryl proudly reminds anyone who will listen that she was once given an award as ‘Mother of the Year’, she also professes not to recall the names of most of her sons and to be indifferent to their fortunes. Whereas Shimi transforms what might have been a comical event – being punished for trying on his mother’s knickers – into a tragedy, Beryl’s facetious presentation of her absence of maternal feelings disguises the real tragedy in her life: the death of her first husband in the Second World War and her subsequent inability to care for their young son. After her bereavement, Beryl moves in with her father’s sister, Enid, a ‘village schoolteacher’ in ‘Brontë country’ (214). Listless and depressed, she only ‘feel[s] [her]self’ while ‘wheeling the pram’ on the moors, ‘discordant among the forms of nature’ (215), recalling Barney Fugelman in Peeping Tom roaming the Cornish moorland, revelling in his own status as a blot on the landscape. Desperate to feel love for her son, Neville, what she feels is ‘more piercing than love’, a grief at ‘what she couldn’t feel’ that paradoxically engenders ‘a greater anguish at her heart’ than if she had ‘loved him to distraction’ (215). When Enid tells her that she is ‘not a fit mother’ (215), Beryl, rather than seeking to defend herself, accepts her aunt’s judgement and asks her to bring Neville up in her stead. Explaining his own decision to remove himself from ‘the charmed circle of the family’, Shimi likewise claims that he was ‘not fit’ (208) to be a son to his parents or a brother to his brother. Just as Shimi blames himself for his mother’s death – and for failing to console her on her death-bed – so Beryl blames herself for the eventual suicide of Neville.

If Shimi’s disavowal of his role as a son and brother parallels Beryl’s rejection of her role as a mother, there is also an analogy between Beryl’s abandonment of Neville and the decision of Shimi’s father, Manolo, to abscond after the funeral of his wife. Just as Beryl feels unable to reconcile herself to the death of her husband while she has
to bring up their son, Manolo can’t face looking after his sons after
the death of their mother. Just as Beryl entrusts the care of Neville to
her aunt, so Manolo leaves Shimi and Ephraim in the hands of his
late wife’s sister, Aunty Iona. It is this shared experience – of aban-
doning and being abandoned – that brings Shimi and Beryl together,
just as it is their shared grief for Ephraim and their shared love for
Ephraim’s son that consolidates their alliance, transforming it into a
queer romance. Beryl claims to have been ‘more of a man than any of
my men were’ (11) and to have become ‘accustomed to the half-com-
pany of men lacking the acuity or the patience to keep up’ (81) – this
phrase another double entendre, of course – but in Shimi she recog-
nises a different model of masculinity to which she is more respon-
sive. Whereas Ephraim had accused Shimi of being a ‘mummy’s
boy’, Beryl tells Shimi that his mother ‘made an unexpected man of
you’. When Shimi attempts to unpack and undo the compliment – ‘Made
no man of me, is that what you’re saying?’ – Beryl responds by assert-
ing that ‘[t]here’s more than one way to be a man’ (229).

As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, this emphasis on
what it is to be a man – on the different ways in which masculinity
can be constructed and deconstructed – is a perennial preoccupation
in Jacobson’s work, and in Live a Little, his most recent novel at the
time of writing, there is a sense of the author taking stock of his oeu-
vre. This is a novel about memory – Shimi is a man who remembers
everything that he wishes to forget and Beryl is a woman who is for-
getting more and more of what she wants to remember – and in that
sense it recalls the plot of Zoo Time, which turns on the fading mem-
ory that signifies the pre-senility of Poppy, as well as the concerns of
Kalooki Nights, which I have read as a novel about the psychological
perils of fetishising the Holocaust, and those of J, which dramatises
the dangers of historical amnesia. Seen in this context, Live a Little
echoes the ambivalence towards memory expressed by Ailinn, one of
the protagonists of J: ‘What you don’t remember might as well not
have happened. Remember everything and you have no future’
(Jacobson 2014a: 51). It is also a novel that bears the traces of some of
Jacobson’s early work. The keen sense of sexual humiliation that
dogs Shimi recalls the comic misadventures of the protagonists of
Jacobson’s first three novels, but here it is darkened by the shadow of
mortality, as it is for the protagonist of The Making of Henry, who, like
Shimi, feels emasculated by his father. Like Henry Nagel, ultimately
Shimi learns that, as Jacobson put it in an essay entitled ‘The shame
that outlives us all’, ‘Life is full of humiliations to all but the most insensate, but life petering out like every other, just giving in to the brute fact of non-life, is the keenest humiliation of all’ (2017b: 109).

There are other echoes of Jacobson’s early work in Live a Little. At one point Beryl tells Shimi that Ephraim ‘bore the mark of Cain’ (Jacobson 2019a: 202), recalling The Very Model of a Man. The narrator says of Beryl that she ‘had that English belief in the moral and physical beneficence of running brooks and drystone walls, no matter that there was barely a healthy person in the country’ (126), an echo of the comic anti-pastoralism of Peeping Tom. Shimi claims that at the moment of his birth ‘a tarantula scamper[ed] over the bedclothes’, an ominous portent that invokes the redback spider after which Jacobson’s third novel is named, and the poisonous spider that almost acts as Cupid for Guy Ableman and Poppy in Zoo Time. There is even an arch reference to one of Beryl’s former lovers, a novelist named ‘Howie “Houdini” Somebody’, who shares with her creator not just his first name but also his jealousy of other comic novelists. Howie becomes ‘infuriated’ by Beryl’s laughter ‘when it was occasioned by words he hadn’t written’ (97, italics in original), just as Jacobson (comically) records his unhappiness at his wife’s mirth while reading a novel by Philip Roth: ‘it’s understood that I would rather she didn’t laugh at another man’s prose’ (2012a: 293).21

As we shall see in the following chapter, Roth is a key figure in the latter half of Jacobson’s career in particular, and so it should come as no surprise that there are other references to his work in Live a Little. Nastya’s comic malapropisms (‘not by long chalks’, ‘liberal hog-washes’) owe a debt to Drenka’s merry mangling of English idioms in Roth’s Sabbath’s Theater. At one point Shimi tells Beryl that ‘[w]e’re all fictions’ (248), echoing Nathan Zuckerman’s claim in Philip Roth’s The Counterlife that ‘[w]e are all each other’s authors . . . all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else’ (Roth 1987: 164). Beryl agrees, shifting the metaphor from writing to performance, telling Shimi that he is ‘entirely theatrical’ (Jacobson 2019a: 254), and that they are ‘both actors’, ‘stuck with the parts we learnt to play a long time ago’ (255), once again echoing Zuckerman, who tells his lover, Maria, that ‘[t]here is no you . . . any more than there is a me . . . only this way that we have established over the months of performing together . . . routinely trotting out the old, old act’ (Roth 1987: 300). As in Roth’s novel, there is a metafictional aspect to this discourse, an aspect that is highlighted by Beryl’s
assertion that Shimi is ‘as much a comic construct as I am’ (254). More important in the context of Live a Little, however, is the way in which this deconstruction of the idea of an essential, stable self amplifies the novel’s interrogation of conventional gender roles and heteronormative sexuality. Like much of Jacobson’s fiction, Live a Little is, in its understated way (an understatement that is perhaps parodied in its title), a much more subversive book than it first appears. The subject matter itself is audacious. As Shalom Auslander observed in his review of the novel: ‘The elderly are invisible in our world, like the poor and the homeless, and perhaps for similar reasons: we don’t want to be reminded of how fleeting and precarious it all is’ (Auslander 2019). There is more to the quiet radicalism of Live a Little than this, however. In its insistence on the possibility of romance in old age, on the fluidity of gender identities, and on the rejection of conventional family structures, it has much in common with the more radical trends in recent theory.22

Notes

1 Although the chronology of the Genesis narrative suggests that Cain and Abel are born after Adam and Eve have already been banished from the Garden of Eden, in The Very Model of a Man Cain is repeatedly referred to as an ‘Edenite’ by the inhabitants of Babel. Jacobson does not deal directly with the story of the Fall; instead, the narrative revolves around what might be seen as the second fall – Cain’s murder of Abel – although it defers giving an account of the event until near the end of the novel.

2 In his review of the novel, Bryan Cheyette pointed out that ‘Jacobson’s rehabilitation of Cain is in a literary tradition that goes back to the Romantic poets, who identified with Cain as an outsider’ (Cheyette 1992: 38), and this tradition is acknowledged explicitly within the pages of the novel when its third-person narrator observes: ‘Long before Byron and Baudelaire adopted Cain as a hero of romantic, anti-bourgeois méchan-ceté, giving him, as it were, a gammy leg and an inclination to opiates, others saw the cultic possibilities in a figure who, it could be argued, was the victim and not the initiator of the first act of violent irrationality between man and God, and who was therefore the murderer not so much of a brother as of a falsehood’ (Jacobson 1992: 32).

3 One of Jacobson’s favourite anecdotes is his account of how, at the age of four, he was sent to his grandparents – ‘banished from my mother’s sight for a week’ – because he had measles (sometimes it’s chicken pox), and on his return he is greeted by the sight of his mother holding his new brother aloft, ‘triumphantly, as though he were the FA Cup’
Being men

(sometimes it’s the World Cup). In one version of the story, he goes on to say that ‘over the next 10 years . . . I pretended to love him and when no one was looking tried to kill him’ (Jacobson 2010e: 44).

There is, once again, an autobiographical element to the representation of the father–son relationship in The Very Model of a Man. In the novel, Cain describes how Adam ‘became a conjuror and juggler’, ‘practis[ing] legerdemain’ (Jacobson 1992: 3) to compensate for his lack of verbal eloquence, a lack that is accentuated by his son’s articulacy, and Jacobson’s own father was a keen magician.

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locate fucking at the centre of their lives . . . and each is sustained by a heroically unconventional woman’ (Thompson 2008: 37).

Robbe-Grillet is mentioned again briefly in Peeping Tom (see Jacobson 1985: 340–41) but is more prominent in The Act of Love, in which there is a detailed discussion of the relative merits of two of his novels: Jealousy and The Voyeur (Jacobson 2009a: 215–17).

There is perhaps an echo here of the chapter titles of the Peter Greenaway film, The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover (1989), which, for all the obvious differences between them, is, like The Act of Love, a baroque tale of adultery, jealousy and revenge.

Shimi’s performances seem to be based on those of Jacobson’s father, of whom Jacobson said: ‘you would see him at Manchester’s Chinese restaurants going from table to table performing magic’ (Wintle 2013: 9).

The phrase occurs in a letter dated 16–17 December 1816 from the author to her cousin, J. Edward Austen, in which she asks, rhetorically: ‘What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and glow? – How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?’ (Austen 2009: 198).

Extravagant rumours – that he is a bootlegger, a murderer, a German spy and a nephew of Von Hindenburg, the German president during the years of the Weimar Republic – swirl around Gatsby throughout the novel.

The origins of this episode might be located in a review Jacobson wrote of a novel by the Australian writer Frank Moorhouse in which he quotes from a passage in which the protagonist pilfers ‘some dresses and a corset’ from a store of his great-grandmother’s effects (Jacobson 1988: 46) and in an essay on women’s underwear that Jacobson published in 2000, in which he recalls the ‘liberation that came with my first purchase of Le Slip, a slinky black nothing with no sides to speak of’, which he compares favourably with the ‘hideous’ ‘bloomers of our grandmothers’, with their ‘limp elastic’ and ‘grimy trimmings’ (Jacobson 2000c: 16).

There is also an echo of Jacobson’s observation in Seriously Funny that ‘whoever doubts the sexual potency of laughter [should] remember what it is like to have a woman he loves laugh at another man’s jokes’ (Jacobson 1997: 19) and a further sly reference to Jacobson’s own literary preferences and pretensions when Beryl invites Howie to give a talk to her sixth-form girls on ‘the Novel and the Feelings (from Jane Austen to Him)” (Jacobson 2019a: 97).

I am thinking here particularly of queer theory and transgender studies.