It has been my intention to make the case here that Jacobson is an important figure in post-war British fiction who has been unjustly marginalised in academic discourse, partly because of persistent, unflattering comparisons with Philip Roth, partly because of his irreverent, iconoclastic comedy, and partly because of his polemical interventions into sensitive cultural and political debates. In spite of the critical vindication, increased readership and higher public profile that attended the Booker triumph of *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson remains at the time of writing a marginal figure in the academy. This is the first monograph to be devoted to him, but I don’t expect it to be the last: Jacobson is still writing, prolifically, and I expect his reputation to grow. Rather than presenting a conclusion that aims to provide a definitive judgement of Jacobson, then, or to revisit the themes I have addressed in the rest of the book, I want to sketch out two areas – two more versions of Jacobson, if you like – that I have, for reasons of space, only briefly touched on in this study, but to which future scholarship might attend in more detail.

**Jacobson as a Manchester writer**

Manchester University Press is the ideal publisher for this book, not simply because it fits perfectly into the ‘Contemporary British Novelists’ series but also because Jacobson is a Manchester author, born and bred, many of whose novels provide a rich social history of the city in the post-war period, in addition to their many other qualities. Jacobson himself has written extensively, at times rhapsodically, of the attributes that distinguish Manchester and the personal qualities to which these attributes give rise:
Something in the dampness of the climate; something in our flat vowels; something in our sense of the ridiculous; something in our practical rejection of the fanciful . . . something in our having become large before we were ever small; something in our leapfrogging the usual slow accretions of confidence and manners that make a society; something in the tempo of our commercial impatience; something in the very grass that grows here, persuades us . . . that life, no matter what we try to make of it, is more ludicrous than it is anything else. (Jacobson 2007a: 1)

In its incongruously lyrical celebration of pragmatism, this passage not only pays tribute to what Jacobson feels he owes to Manchester, but also recreates it in his own image: as a city with a ‘keen sense of the ridiculous’; one that is ambitious and impatient while at the same time self-deprecating, always attuned to the essential comedy of existence, in which life is ‘more ludicrous than . . . anything else’. This is a refrain to which Jacobson returns regularly in his non-fiction, describing the city as possessing an ‘energetic comic pessimism’ and ‘laconic mirth’ that made it feel like ‘a very Jewish city’ (Jacobson 2012b: 159.16); an ‘innate absurdism’ that breeds ‘mischief’ in its denizens, who ‘valu[e] the intellect so highly we have to laugh about it’ (Jacobson 2007e: 1), paradoxically priding himself on their lack of pride (‘[w]e are plain-speaking, sarcastic, self-denigrating, difficult buggers up there’) and becoming sentimental about their lack of sentimentality (‘Very Manchester, this unwillingness to whisper sweet nothings’) (Jacobson 2017b: 150).

Writing about the influence that Manchester had on L.S. Lowry, Jacobson claims that it ‘imbued him with the particular melancholy that seems to blow in off the Pennines’, and ‘locked him in a quarrel with himself that was a spur to art’ (Jacobson 2007a: 1). As is so often the case when an artist writes about another artist, Jacobson’s portrait of Lowry is clearly also a displaced self-portrait. Likewise with his tribute to Tony Wilson, the journalist, entrepreneur and driving force behind the ‘Madchester’ music scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s, whom he defines as embodying ‘the soul of Manchester’ in all his contradictions: ‘down to earth and dandified, of the people and rarified, all at once; sharp-tongued, honorable, hedonistic, more interested in art and conversation than celebrity and wealth’ (Jacobson 2017d). As ever, Jacobson’s fondness for paradox and incongruity – for the ‘contrarities’ of the comic novelist – are in evidence here, as are the values that he shares with Wilson, in particular the privileging of aesthetic merit (‘art’) over commercial success (‘wealth’).
In his fiction, Manchester and its environs are represented most prominently in *The Mighty Walzer*, *Kalooki Nights* and *The Making of Henry*, though it does also appear, more sparingly, elsewhere. For Bryan Cheyette, it is Jacobson’s ‘Mancunian Jewish voice’ ([Cheyette 2016](#)) – what he calls elsewhere ‘a form of Mancunian jazz or Yiddish jive’ ([Cheyette 1999: 9](#)) – that is at the heart of his best novels. In his review of *The Mighty Walzer* he claimed that ‘Jacobson has done for North Manchester what Dickens did for orphanhood in Victorian London’ ([Cheyette 1999: 9](#)), while he acclaimed *Shylock is My Name* as ‘both a return to Manchester and a return to literary form’, arguing that this was ‘no coincidence’ ([Cheyette 2016](#)). I don’t subscribe to Cheyette’s theory myself, but I do think that there is much more work to be done on what might be termed the ‘Manchester imaginary’ in Jacobson’s fiction, perhaps in conjunction with the work of fellow post-war Mancunian authors such as the novelist Anthony Burgess, or the playwright Jack Rosenthal, who also writes about growing up Jewish in Manchester.

**Jacobson as a transatlantic Jewish writer**

As I noted in the Introduction, there have been a number of articles comparing Jacobson with American Jewish writers and also some scholarship situating Jacobson’s work in the broader context of British Jewish writing, notably by Bryan Cheyette, Nadia Valman, Axel Stähler, Sue Vice and Ruth Gilbert. However, beyond my own article on *Kalooki Nights*, there has been little consideration of the way in which Jacobson’s fiction is involved in a constant negotiation between the British Jewish context in which he is working and the American Jewish culture against which he measures himself: the sense in which, in other words, he might be considered a transatlantic Jewish writer.

In his review of *The Mighty Walzer*, Cheyette saw Jacobson as occupying the vanguard of a new generation of British Jewish writers who were storming the citadel of the British literary-critical establishment: ‘By turning his past into fiction of the highest order, he has shown that those once excluded from English culture are now its custodians’ ([Cheyette 1999: 9](#)). Fourteen years later, Gilbert credited Jacobson with having ‘set the tone for a new generation of British-Jewish writers by confronting the interface between Jewishness and “Englishness” in his work’ ([Gilbert 2013: 9](#)). In their introduction to
a special edition of *European Judaism* on contemporary British Jewish writing, the editors, Axel Stähler and Sue Vice, recognise ‘a dazzling burst in the productivity of British Jewish literature’, ‘characterized by a new confidence’ (*Stähler and Vice* 2014: 3) and endorsed by a series of prestigious literary awards, most notably the Nobel Prize for Harold Pinter, the Orange Prize for Naomi Alderman and Linda Grant and of course Jacobson’s own Man Booker Prize (*Stähler and Vice* 2014). Yet they go on to register reservations about this new wave of British Jewish writing, noting that ‘doubts linger as to the reach and the resilience of this newfound expressiveness, and a sense remains of exclusion from the mainstream of British cultural life’ (*Stähler and Vice* 2014: 3).

These doubts, and the sense of ‘exclusion’ that is both a cause and a symptom of them, have hedged Jacobson’s work throughout his career. Natasha Walter opens her review of *Roots Schmoots* by asserting that ‘British Jews don’t have much of an identity’ (*Walter* 1993: 32). Twenty years later, in her book *Writing Jewish*, Ruth Gilbert makes much the same point: ‘Jews are a minority group, but they do not have the same presence in public consciousness as other immigrant communities in Britain’ (*Gilbert* 2013: 12). Jacobson himself has echoed these sentiments, referring to the Jews in Britain as ‘a respected and respectable, though marginalised community’ who ‘embarrass one another’ (*Jacobson* 2004b: 34). This ‘lowest of cultural profiles’, as Jacobson describes it, is invariably defined in opposition to the self-confidence of the American Jews, a comparison that Jacobson notes is ‘almost too painful to contemplate’, but feels compelled to return to again and again nonetheless (34).

As with the comparisons to Philip Roth, Jacobson’s attitude towards the larger culture of which Roth is a representative is ambivalent and inconsistent. On the one hand, he frankly expresses his envy of the influence Jews have exerted on American culture, arguing that ‘Malamud and Bellow and Roth made the American language Jewish’ and if ‘[y]ou write as a Jew in America . . . they get you’, whereas ‘in Britain you feel anomalous’ (*Pfeffer* 2013). These sentiments are echoed in *The Making of Henry*, in which the protagonist wonders if his girlfriend is ‘press[ing] American literature on him’ because on that side of the Atlantic ‘the Jews had taken on a version of the national identity . . . even shaped it . . . in their own image’, whereas in Britain Jews wanted only ‘to be left alone to notice nothing. And not be noticed noticing it’ (*2005a*: 146–47). On the other
hand, Jacobson has at times affected a crude anti-Americanism, claiming that ‘everything that comes from America seems to me a joke’ (Jacobson 2000e: 7). More specifically, he once wrote that ‘novel writing has never truly suited the American imagination’, suggesting that even the great American Jewish novelists have succumbed to ‘the temptation to allegorical religiosity’: ‘Saul Bellow is now beatific. And Philip Roth . . . is busy rewriting history featuring himself as hero’ (Jacobson 1999d: 30).

The ambivalence has been mutual, in the sense that most American reviewers have not been kind to Jacobson. Although British reviewers, as we have seen, often compared Jacobson unfavourably with Roth, at times they claimed that he was equal to his peers over the pond, J.K.L. Walker claiming that Sefton Goldberg was a match for ‘the sardonic self-excavating Jewish heroes of American comic fiction’ (Walker 1983: 34–35), while Nicholas Lezard praised the ‘rolling, full-on, querulous and combative tone’ that he found in Jacobson and in the best ‘Jewish writing that comes from America’ (Lezard 2010: 15). The tone of most American reviews of Jacobson’s work has been distinctly snippy, exemplified by Adam Gopnik’s variation on the familiar Roth trope: Jacobson, he wrote, ‘is famous as a sort of English Philip Roth (though often making one more grateful than ever for the American one)’ (Gopnik 2016), while acknowledging that Jacobson was at a disadvantage as a Jewish writer on the wrong side of the pond, lacking the cultural infrastructure that supported the post-war American Jewish greats: ‘A British Jew couldn’t begin a book, Augie March style, with “I am an Englishman, Manchester born”’ (Gopnik 2016).

Yet some younger writers – members of what is sometimes called the ‘third generation’ of American Jewish authors – have gone on record to express their admiration for Jacobson’s work. Jonathan Safran Foer put his own positive spin on the Roth analogy, removing its implication of provincial inferiority, by claiming that Jacobson’s ‘aims are higher than Roth’s, and energies even greater’ (Foer et al. 2007), while Shalom Auslander wrote a glowing review of Live a Little in which he said, vis-à-vis Jacobson, that ‘[s]ome writers just seem to get better the closer they get to the end – not because they’re worried about death, perhaps, but because they’ve finished worrying about it’ (Auslander 2019). If Jacobson himself has clearly been influenced by an older generation of American Jewish authors – Roth, Bellow,
Malamud – then it seems that he is, in turn, influencing a younger generation of American Jewish novelists.

It’s not clear, of course, how close to the end Jacobson is. What I call ‘late Jacobson’ in this book might well turn out to be ‘middle Jacobson’, necessitating a re-evaluation of the other phases of his career. From this vantage point, however, I would suggest that Jacobson has written five exceptional novels – The Very Model of a Man, The Mighty Walzer, Kalooki Nights, J and Live a Little – and several more that are not far behind: Peeping Tom, Who’s Sorry Now?, The Act of Love and The Finkler Question. Even if this were to be the end, his is an impressive, diverse body of work that I believe will stand the test of time.

Notes

1 Since then, there have been further successes, for example Charlotte Mendelson’s When We Were Bad was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in 2009; Francesca Segal’s The Innocents won the Costa Prize in 2012; Will Self’s Umbrella was shortlisted for Man Booker in 2012, as was Jacobson’s J two years later; and Naomi Alderman’s The Power was awarded the Baileys Prize in 2017.