

## **'No outlines': From dystopia to heterotopia in Howard Jacobson's *J***

**Ruth Gilbert**, University of Winchester

### **Abstract**

*This article suggests that a dystopian reading of Howard Jacobson's 2014 novel, *J*, is not necessarily the only way in which to reflect on both the inner and outer topographies of the narrative. In tilting the focus of enquiry, the article draws from Foucault's brief, but intriguing, thoughts on heterotopia. It suggests that this kind of heterotopian thinking potentially opens up a deconstructive questioning of terms such as utopia and dystopia. In particular, the article teases out some of the ways in which Jewishness intersects with these themes. The analysis focuses on the section towards the mid-point of *J* when the protagonists, Kevern and Ailinn, visit the capital city of a bleak new world. It is a profoundly dislocated and disconcerting space, described as 'a city seen through a sheet of scratched Perspex....it had no outlines'. Within this distorted setting, Jacobson presents a sustained exploration of Jewishness, an identity that is placed, simultaneously, at both the centre and the edges of the text.*

### **Keywords**

Howard Jacobson

*J*

Jewish

British fiction

utopia

dystopia

heterotopia

Foucault

In *J* (2014), Howard Jacobson places an interrogation of Jewishness within a distinctly dystopian framework. Jacobson's novel depicts a post-genocidal near future in which representations of the past are restricted and memory itself is prohibited. As one character explains, 'the past exists in order that we forget it' (Jacobson 2014: 19). In this dystopian landscape, Jewishness has apparently been wiped out in an annihilation known only as 'WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED' (Jacobson 2014: 6). Accordingly, the 'J' word is struck from the collective consciousness; indicated by the typological double strike across J within the text, and two fingers placed across the mouth in speech. This is, then, a struck through and stricken form of Jewishness. However, a redacted version of Jewishness remains under the surface of this reconfigured society. Operating as a repressed but pervasive presence, it becomes a trace that lingers within the collective amnesiac consciousness. As Terry Eagleton puts it in a review of the novel, 'J' is 'a letter which stands for a word neither the author nor his characters utter from one end of the book to another, yet which screams through the narrative like an eloquent silence' (Eagleton 2014).

The plot focuses on Kevern 'Coco' Cohen and Ailinn Solomons, two lost and isolated outsiders who find each other in Port Reuben, a coast of the country once known as Ludgvennok (Jacobson 2014: 9). As the narrative unfolds, it transpires that Kevern and Ailinn

are both in fact of Jewish origin and have been brought together in order to fulfil a radical plan to repopulate the Jewish people. Jewishness within this society has not, it turns out, been eradicated. It is, instead, under erasure. So, in a gesture of simultaneous forgetting and remembering, all citizens are given Jewish surnames as part of a State renaming initiative known as 'Operation Ishmael'. In this way, *J* depicts a world of spiralling distortions that somehow lead the characters within the novel, as well as its readers, towards an uneasy point of origin.

In *J*, as in other dystopian fictions, dystopia is a place; but it is also a mindset, a location of the self. It is this theme of location, and the way in which it also evokes a sense of dislocation, that I consider in the following discussion. The article thus begins with a consideration of the dystopian form and then suggests how dystopian tropes might be applied to thinking about the particularities of Jewishness. However, my discussion goes on to suggest that a dystopian reading of *J* is not necessarily the only way in which to reflect on both the inner and outer topographies of the novel. In tilting the focus of enquiry, I draw from Foucault's brief, but intriguing, thoughts on heterotopia. Foucault first touched on the idea of heterotopia in his 1966 preface to *Les Mots et les choses*. In 1967, in a lecture given to architects entitled 'Des Espaces Autres', and later published in 1984, he declared that, 'I am interested in certain [spaces] that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (Foucault 1984: 3). As I shall go on to suggest, this kind of heterotopian thinking potentially opens up a deconstructive questioning of terms such as utopia and dystopia. My contention is that a heterotopian approach is not necessarily opposed to exploring the dystopian elements of *J*. Instead it could be

considered as a Derridean supplement to such a reading (Derrida 1998). As Gregory Claeys has argued:

Within the context of dystopian literature, heterotopias represent a kind of haven for the protagonists, and are very often to be found in their memories, in their dreams, or in places which, for some reason, are out of the reach of the invigilation system which normally prevails in these societies. (2010: 18)

With this in mind, I shall go on to present a heterotopic reading of *J* which focuses more on the novel's exploration of those 'out of reach' places and less on its oppressive dystopian structures. These are not necessarily the kind of 'havens' that Claeys posits. They are, however, often just 'out of reach', indistinct and ultimately indecipherable. My suggestion is that such a reading, focused on memories, dreams and 'other spaces', perhaps offers a more expansive and nuanced approach to exploring the ways in which Jewishness is both distilled and filtered within and beyond this text. However, before I return to this Foucauldian conception of heterotopia, and the undecidability that it suggests, I shall first consider the dystopian ground of Jacobson's novel. In particular, I want to tease out some of the ways in which Jewishness intersects with dystopian thinking and to reflect on this aspect of the narrative.

### **Dystopia and Jewishness**

It is perhaps not surprising that Jewish expression has, since the Holocaust, taken a distinctly dystopian turn. In this context, the submerged yet central focus on Jewishness within

Jacobson's dystopian framework makes sense. As the actress and cultural commentator Tracy-Ann Oberman has suggested:

There is something inherently Jewish about a dystopian novel. An intelligent appraisal, a vein of black humour, acknowledgement that the worst is possible and a deep neurosis that captures a Jewish sensibility. We Jews have seen the horror and the worst of humanity over the centuries. Perhaps we need to keep analysing it in order to understand it. (2014)

Oberman's point catches more than just cultural stereotypes about Jewish neurosis. Her piece in the *Jewish Chronicle* reflected on her choice of Jack Womak's *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (1993) for discussion in the BBC 4 radio programme, *A Good Read* (2014). As Oberman points out, Jewishness, either overtly or implicitly, is a theme in many grounding works of dystopian fiction, including George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Certainly, in the dystopian thread that runs through much post-war writing we can detect an ongoing Jewish interest in the genre. Recent novels such as Philip Roth's dystopian alternate history in *The Plot Against America* (2004), Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) and Joshua Cohen's *Witz* (2010), all embed Jewish themes into their imaginings of near future US dystopian environments in ways that attest to an enduring exploration of the relationship between Jewishness and dystopian concerns.

In *J* Jacobson writes within a British dystopian mode. Drawing from Huxley and Orwell he deftly applies principles of literary dystopianism to an examination of suppressed and sublimated Jewishness. Conforming to generic principles, *J* presents a grim, faintly

futuristic society characterized by state control, the distortion of history, and the repression of individual agency. It is, as many reviewers have observed, an exemplar of the form; with John Burnside in the *Guardian* going so far as to suggest that 'it may well come to be seen as the dystopian British novel of its times' (Burnside 2014). He goes on to add that 'this is because *J* so artfully mirrors the main features of our current "lifestyle", from the endless production of formulaic pop culture and the glorification of infantile consumption, to the avoidance of difficulty and a systemic contempt for privacy' (Burnside 2014). Making a similar point, Bharat Tandon writing in *TLS* asserts that dystopian fiction is 'a form whose aesthetic being and political force depend on the imaginary nightmare's plausible, traceable link back to the here and now' (Tandon 2014). In this mode, the imagined society of *J* is recognizable enough to allow readers some points of identification, yet different enough to create a subtle, yet disconcerting, sense of dissonance.

These dystopian aspects of the novel provide useful ways in which to read its narrative and thematic concerns. As it circles around issues of social engineering, eugenics and mass extermination Jacobson's novel is, in general, a warning about the pernicious effects of ideological totalitarianism and unchallenged social compliance. In more particular terms, the depiction of a post-genocidal society that evades and represses 'what happened', if it happened, evokes the claustrophobic atmosphere of post-war Eastern Europe, as well as the prevalence of Holocaust denial. As Matthew Specktor writes in the *New York Times*, '*J* is a Holocaust story of sorts'. He explains that:

The book turns on omission, and so the particulars of this monstrous occurrence are glimpsed only in pieces...but it's clear what Jacobson has in mind, which is infinitely

more pointed and more fungible than simple allegory...a very specific history shadows its every move. (Specktor 2014)

In a sense, the dystopian reverberations of 'what happened' are the inevitable outcome of fascistic utopianism. The brutal idealism that underscores fantasies of racial purification exemplifies the dialectical tension that exists between utopianism and its dystopian shadow. As Inspector Gutkind, the Stasi-like surveillance officer in *J* notes, recalling the words of his unashamedly antisemitic great grandfather:

How he admired the strength of his resolution, not compromised by passion but stiffened by it. How wonderful it must have been to know where the wrongness at the heart of life was to be located and what it looked like. Here were no abstractions...It was a kind of love. A hatred born of pure fascination. (Jacobson 2014: 113–14)

In this respect, some powerful collective fantasies, as well as fears, are never far from the surface of Jacobson's dystopian vision.

Jacobson is astute in observing the ways in which the relationship between utopia and dystopia, illumination and obfuscation, knowledge and understanding, is finely balanced. This is a realm in which the future is uncertain and the past is distorted, diluted and denied. In an 'unwritten letter', that we read towards the end of the narrative, a character from the period before 'what happened, if it happened' is prescient in anticipating the dangers ahead. 'What will it take' the letter writer asks, continuing with the rueful observation, 'the same as it has always taken':

We have been lulled by the great autocratic genocides of the recent past into thinking that nothing of that enormity of madness can ever happen again – not anywhere, least of all here. And it's true – nothing on that scale probably ever will. But lower down the order of horrors, and answering a more modest ambition, carnage can still be connived at – lesser bloodbaths, minor murders, butchery of more modest proportions. (Jacobson 2014: 292)

At one level, the letter is a straightforward warning. However, in the paradoxical terms of a text that repeatedly both tells and hides, exposes and evades, this 'unwritten' letter is read by us, the novel's readers; but it cannot, of course, be read by any characters that exist within the narrative itself. In this respect the letter might be described as a heterotopian space within a space.

In the final part of my discussion I want to develop a reconfigured focus on these, more heterotopian, aspects of the novel. This approach deconstructs some of the distinctions between illusion and disillusion, nowhere and nightmare, which tend to characterize the ways in which both messianic hopes and persecutory fears are figured within the imaginary landscapes of Jewishness. So, with this in mind, I shall first outline the principles of heterotopia and then, before applying this to a reading of Jacobson's text, suggest some of the ways in which these might inform an understanding of Jewish space and place.

### **Erufs of the imagination: Jewishness and Heterotopia**

As Lax points out, heterotopia is 'originally a medical term referring to a particular tissue that develops at another place than is usual. The tissue is not diseased or particularly dangerous but merely placed elsewhere, a dislocation' (Lax cited in Johnson 2012: 1–2). The dislocated condition, tissue out of place, resonates with some familiar Jewish thematic concerns relating to displacement. Foucault's thoughts on heterotopia extend this understanding of dislocation to incorporate a series of observations on 'other spaces' which, in a number of ways, might also be useful in thinking about Jewishness. He suggests that:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real Places -places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 1984: 3)

Foucault then outlines a somewhat unsystematic, yet evocative, set of principles. He considers, amongst other instances, heterotopias of crisis (such as the ritual separation of menstruating women and adolescents, boarding schools, honeymoons) and of deviation (such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals). He looks at the changing functions of some sites, exemplified by the cemetery (which, over time, has moved from the centre to the outskirts of settlements); and explores the ways in which a heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible (such as a

cinema, garden or Persian rug). He then considers heterotopias that encapsulate temporal discontinuity or accumulation, figured as 'slices of time' (such as museums, libraries and festivals). His fifth heterotopian principle is that 'heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (such as prisons, barracks, ritual baths and motel rooms). The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles, of illusion and compensation. Here Foucault considers brothels and colonies. The role of the former is 'to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space...as still more illusory' ; the role of the latter, the heterotopia of compensation, 'to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed, and jumbled' (Foucault 1984: 8). Finally, for Foucault, the heterotopia par excellence is the ship, 'a floating piece of space, a place without a place' that exists by itself, is closed in on itself and at the same time 'is given over to the infinity of the sea' (Foucault 1984: 9).

As a number of critics have pointed out, 'Foucault's heterotologies are frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent, incoherent' (Soja 1996: 162). Thus, when *J* is so clearly drawing from the fertile and perhaps more comprehensible ground of the literary dystopian form, why introduce these ambiguous and elusive heterotopian terms? As I shall go on to argue, the novel in general, and one section in particular, elicits a sense of the strange, abstract and disconcerting quality that characterizes heterotopian thinking. One reason for this is, I would argue, the way in which Jewishness functions, as a conceptual and emotional flicker, within this journey into an otherwise dystopian landscape. In their spectral absent presence, Jews are the ghosts in this particular dystopian machine.

In this respect, Jacobson's narrative can be read as a tacit contribution to the subtle yet persistent interest in other, shadow, spaces that can be observed in reading of recent British Jewish fiction. So, for example, in novels by writers such as by Naomi Alderman, Eva Harris, Adam Thirlwell and Jake Wallis Simons, we see the ways in which environments such as kosher kitchens, mikvahs, eruvs and synagogues, as well as less formal or systemized Jewish spaces and situations such as, for example, menorahs on roundabouts, black cabs and bagel shops, could all arguably be thought about in heterotopian terms. These Jewish sites, which are often perceptible, and yet also somehow abstruse, represent the kind of heterotopian pockets, that in Foucault's words, 'suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (Foucault 1984: 3).

An exploration of these kinds of Jewish places and spaces is a matter for a more sustained discussion elsewhere. To take, for now, the redolent example of eruv: as Hannah Ewence has noted, in an interesting discussion of the debates that took place about the construction of an eruv in North West London in 2003, 'eruv boundaries are typically discreet, even invisible to the uninformed' (Ewence 2010: 48). This symbolic enclosure allows Orthodox Jews to circumvent some of the restrictions placed on them by Sabbath laws 'by figuratively extending the boundaries of the home, transforming and incorporating previously "public" space into the domestic sphere'. An eruv thus demarcates a boundary that is both meaningful (in rather pragmatic ways for the Orthodox Jews whose lives are directly affected by its loosening of constraints), and entirely symbolic. The community is enveloped; it becomes a world within a world. Its boundaries, which are manifest only when brought into a particular focus, are predominantly internalized. So, here we have what might be termed an eruv of the imagination. It is, simultaneously, a figurative zone of

identification, 'a third space' (Soja 1996) and a 'gateless, wall-less ghetto' (Jelen et al. 2010: 3); in other words, a spectral symbol of Jewish heterotopianism.

### **Jewish Ghosts: *J* as a Heterotopian text**

These are nebulous concepts. In this way they lend themselves to a reflection on some of the more abstract and ambiguous aspects of Jacobson's mediation on Jewishness within the indeterminate spaces of *J*. With this in mind, I want, in the rest of this article, to suggest a reading of the section towards the mid-point of *J* when the protagonists, Kevern and Ailinn, visit the capital city of this bleak new world. It is a profoundly dislocated and disconcerting space, described as 'a city seen through a sheet of scratched Perspex....it had no outlines' (Jacobson 2014: 134). Within this distorted setting, Jacobson presents a sustained exploration of Jewishness, an identity that is placed, simultaneously, at both the centre and the edges of the text. Like an eruv, Jewishness here is situated on an unclear boundary between the visible and invisible, the known and unknown. Again, it is an intense absent presence that circumscribes the narrative.

The two main protagonists of *J* embody this sense of being located at the periphery of their environments, whilst also touching its core. Ailinn, who knows nothing of her biological family, is described as experiencing, each morning, 'a sort of species desolation, as though opening her eyes on a world in which no one of her sort existed' (Jacobson 2014: 69). She recalls a childhood sense of an unnamed 'thousand-year terror' (Jacobson 2014: 72), adding 'it feels like a sort of predestiny – as though I was born in flight' (Jacobson 2014: 72). Kevern, a character who Jacobson characterizes as someone who 'lived between the lines' (Jacobson 2014: 48) and who Ailinn describes as 'a hugger-mugger on a clifftop at the furthest extreme of the country' (Jacobson 2014: 137), lives in a state of obsessive

compulsive anxiety. Moreover, he recognizes the formless familiarity of Ailinn's terror, knowing that 'what he feared when he knelt to check his letterbox for the umpteenth time had no features' (Jacobson 2014: 72).

The couple visit the capital city, a place that Kevern's habitually cryptic father had always called the 'Necropolis', the land of the dead, warning his son not to go there because 'it will dismay and disappoint you' (Jacobson 2014:146–47). It does both. As Kevern and Ailinn approach this different/other space it suggests, as Foucault describes the heterotopic moment, 'an era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered' (Foucault 1984: 1). Passing by stalls selling contraband vintage clothes, they note that: 'The further they drove... the more the city began to resemble a medieval funfair or tourney, on either side of the road stalls and pavilions under flapping striped tarpaulin piled high with fancy dress' (Jacobson 2014: 127). Indeed the couple experience what is described as a kind of 'retinal hysteria' as they are assaulted by the jumbled parade of colours, styles and temporal moments on display. As they go further towards the centre of the city they find a more obviously degraded environment, consisting mainly of 'holes in the ground and cranes'. And, in an image that encapsulates the atmosphere of temporal and spatial inertia that seeps through this unsettling landscape, the couple see that 'in accordance with the city's musty festivity, the cranes were festooned with tattered bunting and faded decorations from Christmases or other festivals long past' (Jacobson 2014: 128). As Peter Johnson puts it, in an exploration of heterotopian principles, 'the space reflects and contests simultaneously' (Johnson 2012: 2), and this seems to be what happens in this journey to the Necropolis. It is a section that is aslant from the novel as a whole and yet, within this sense of jaded stasis, the Necropolis functions as a site of interrogation.

Within this heterotopian pocket, nestling within its dystopian jacket, Jacobson takes the opportunity to consider the genre of what we might loosely term speculative fiction, a form that encompasses both utopian and dystopian tendencies. So, contemplating the Necropolis, Kevern remembers the imagined futures that he had read about in his youth, works dominated either by the devastation of humanity or the triumph of technology:

At school he had read descriptions of the Necropolis written by post-apocalyptic fantasists of a generation before. Kevern couldn't remember what they were like, only that everything was like something else, as though what destroyed the city was not disease or overpopulation or an asteroid but a fatal outbreak of febrile fantasy-fiction metaphor.

He realizes that the Necropolis is different:

Nothing gleamed in the city Kevern looked out on. The people on the streets had not turned into walking computer screens, riding translucent vehicles that sped along on tracks of sun steel. But neither was it a wasteland that could at least quicken the heart with horror.

'There weren't any powerful similes to be made. Nothing was like anything.

(Jacobson 2014: 132–34)

It is within this landscape of endless dissimilarity that Kevern comes to long for connection; and it is Jewishness that slowly takes shape as the object of this yearning.

Chapter 9, 'The black market in memory', develops the theme of loss that is at the heart of the city and the heart of the book. It is a centre without a centre and a pivotal point in bringing this obscured Jewishness into view. Here Ailinn and Kevern struggle to locate themselves but come to understand the ways in which the edges of their identities are frayed by unnamed losses. 'We've all lost something'. Kevern observes (Jacobson 2014: 137) and this is, in a way, the leitmotif of the novel.

As they go further into the city they are taken by a taxi driver called Ranjay to a place 'where Cohens live'. Kevern begins to feel the unfamiliar draw of identification and potential connection: 'What if he was from here?', he wonders. 'Would he encounter people who looked like him on the streets?' (Jacobson 2014: 145). Ranjay tells him that he means 'real Cohens' (Jacobson 2014: 145) but Kevern's sense of expectation as he arrives in Cohentown gathers force. For a while, it is as if he remembers something that has been deeply buried about his own origins and he forgets that this name, Cohen, is no more than a recently imposed State construction.

This articulation of a discontinuous identification suggests a profound disjunction. In this way Cohentown produces a heterotopian mirror effect. As Foucault puts it: 'I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there' (Foucault 1984: 4). As he becomes increasingly desperate in his search for resemblance, Kevern also realizes the folly of his desire:

This was silly. There were countless Cohens in the world. There was no reason to suppose [that these] were *his* Cohens. But he fancied that he would know if he stood here long enough. Birds navigate vast distance. They must be able to tell when they are

getting close. They must feel a pounding in their hearts. Why shouldn't he, navigating time, feel the same? (Jacobson 2014: 147)

He continues his internal dialogue, exploring the possibility of belonging to something unnamed that, in this case, is defined only by its absence. Within the imagined space of Cohentown he begins to understand that the boundaries of identity might stretch beyond the individual and he explores the possibility of an innate identity:

You didn't begin and end with yourself. If his family had been there he would surely know it in whatever part of himself such things are known – at his fingertips, on his tongue, in his throat, in the throbbing of his temples. Ghosts. Of course there were ghosts. What was culture but ghosts? What was memory? What was self? But he knew the danger of indulging this. (Jacobson 2014: 148)

It is at this point, however, that his self-awakening drops into stark realism. He acknowledges that the name Cohen 'wasn't even his' (Jacobson 2014: 148) and the illusory moment of (re)connection is shattered.

Ranjay apologizes for bringing them to this place, a place that can perhaps be described as a heterotopia of illusion and compensation, saying, 'there is no one left from here. They went away a long time ago, before memory' (151). But Kevern has had, nevertheless, a spectral experience that resituates him. He is changed by this heterotopian journey into the Necropolis. When they return to Port Reuben, his hitherto double-locked, neurotically protected, house has been broken into. His boundaries are no longer intact.

When it emerges that Ailinn is, in fact Jewish, and so too is he, he is not surprised: 'he had always known *really*. At some level, below consciousness, beyond cognition, he had always known *somewhere*' (Jacobson 2014: 296). The project of repopulation has been led by a character called Esme Nussbaum who realizes that with 'just one single man and one single woman, subject to rigorous authentication and in reasonable health, and it could all begin again' (Jacobson 2014: 263). Seeing herself as a modern Noah (Jacobson 2014: 253), Esme sets about identifying suitable candidates and this leads her to Ailinn and Kevern. The process of cultural reshaping also takes her into a consideration of deeply rooted antisemitic discourse. It forces her to consider not only how to define Jewish identity but to ask exactly what the purpose of such renewal would be. Her conclusion, as it acknowledges that otherness is necessary in order to sustain a sense of self, is both philosophical and pragmatic. 'What we have lost', she concludes, is a 'long-ingested, cultural antagonism' (Jacobson 2014: 233) and she realizes that '*we are who we are because we are not them*' (Jacobson 2014: 234). This statement, which becomes a repeated refrain, creates a sombre rhythm within the narrative. Socially, culturally and ontologically, Jewishness is figured as an essential irritant, an inoculative trace. On one level, the novel suggests, it is the other that defines the boundaries of the self. However, in terms of the spiralling heterotopianism, that subtends and surfaces throughout the narrative, perhaps Jewishness cannot be absorbed so clearly into a self/other binary.

Kevern and Ailinn consider their destinies as carriers of this difference with a mixture of resigned caution and despair. When Esme says to Ailinn that 'identity is nothing but illusion', Ailinn picks up the double bind of this interpretation: 'If it's an illusion', she says 'why has it caused so much misery?' (Jacobson 2014: 315). In the end, Kevern cannot accept '*the future*' (Jacobson 2014: 324) and choosing 'an emptiness of our deciding', he goes to

the edge of the cliffs and plunges into ‘the great mouth’ of the sea. Again, Foucault’s closing words on heterotopia resonate. He describes the boat as ‘a floating piece of space’ that ‘exists by itself...is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea’ (Foucault 1984: 9).

In this way the narrative ends on a melancholy and heterotopian note. The journey to the Necropolis had marked, for the two dislocated protagonists of *J*, a textual twist into and away from Jewishness. By the end of the novel, the dystopian imagining of a Jewish vanishing point has been reconfigured. Kevern and Ailinn have, in a sense, been encircled by a heterotopian eruv all along. Jewishness was wound around the edges of this dystopian narrative but, like the eruv wire, it could only really be seen by those who already knew it was there.

This work seems to be a long way from Jacobson’s earlier far more explicit and often confrontational explorations of what it means to be Jewish in contemporary Britain. In *Kalooki Nights* (2007), for example, the word ‘Jew’ was deployed with ferocious excess. It was, as Jacobson noted, with irony, ‘the most Jewish novel that has ever been written by anybody’ (Jacobson 2006). In Jacobson’s next novel, *The Finkler Question* (2010), although Jewishness was the focus of extreme and even obsessive interest, the joke was that it could not quite be spoken. Jews were figured, in the terms of the non-Jewish philo-semitic protagonist, Julian Treslove, as ‘*Finklers*’, a term that he considered useful as ‘it took away the stigma...sucked out the toxins’ (Jacobson 2010: 17). In *J* Jacobson presents Jewishness in a yet more oblique manner. This might reflect a shift in Jacobson’s authorial inclinations. Perhaps, also, it suggests something about the increasingly complex figurations of Jewishness that circulate within the contemporary world. However, as I have suggested, in not naming Jewishness, *J* opens the way to a subtle and affecting exploration of diffuse

identifications, cultural shadows and heterotopian ghosts. In these ways, *J* is, I would argue, a British Jewish novel for our times.

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## Contributor details

### Biography

Ruth Gilbert is Reader in English Literature at the University of Winchester. She has published a number of articles on contemporary British Jewish writing and is author of *Writing Jewish: Contemporary British Jewish Literature* (Palgrave, 2013). She is co-convenor of BJ:CC (British Jewish: Contemporary Cultures) network.

### Contact:

Dr Ruth Gilbert

Reader in English literature

Faculty of Arts

University of Winchester

Winchester

Hampshire

UK

SO22 4NR

E-mail: [ruth.gilbert@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.gilbert@winchester.ac.uk)