

The Finkler Question: A Novel

By Howard Jacobson

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"He should have seen it coming. His life had been one mishap after another. So he should have been prepared for this one..."

Julian Treslove, a professionally unspectacular and disappointed BBC worker, and Sam Finkler, a popular Jewish philosopher, writer and television personality, are old school friends. Despite a prickly relationship and very different lives, they've never quite lost touch with each other - or with their former teacher, Libor Sevick, a Czechoslovakian always more concerned with the wider world than with exam results.

Now, both Libor and Finkler are recently widowed, and with Treslove, his chequered and unsuccessful record with women rendering him an honorary third widower, they dine at Libor's grand, central London apartment.

It's a sweetly painful evening of reminiscence in which all three remove themselves to a time before they had loved and lost; a time before they had fathered children, before the devastation of separations, before they had prized anything greatly enough to fear the loss of it. Better, perhaps, to go through life without knowing happiness at all because that way you had less to mourn? Treslove finds he has tears enough for the unbearable sadness of both his friends' losses.

And it's that very evening, at exactly 11:30pm, as Treslove hesitates a moment outside the window of the oldest violin dealer in the country as he walks home, that he is attacked. After this, his whole sense of who and what he is will slowly and ineluctably change.

The Finkler Question is a scorching story of exclusion and belonging, justice and love, ageing, wisdom and humanity. Funny, furious, unflinching, this extraordinary novel shows one of our finest writers at his brilliant best.



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Editorial Review

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Product Description

Winner of the 2010 Man Booker Prize

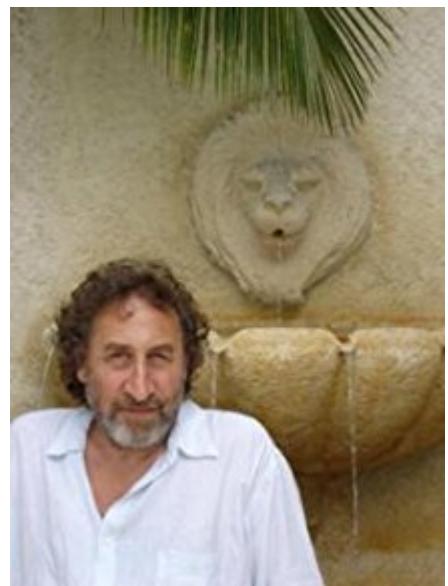
Julian Treslove, a professionally unspectacular former BBC radio producer, and Sam Finkler, a popular Jewish philosopher, writer, and television personality, are old school friends. Despite a prickly relationship and very different lives, they've never lost touch with each other, or with their former teacher, Libor Sevcik.

Dining together one night at Sevcik's apartment—the two Jewish widowers and the unmarried Gentile, Treslove—the men share a sweetly painful evening, reminiscing on a time before they had loved and lost, before they had prized anything greatly enough to fear the loss of it. But as Treslove makes his way home, he is attacked and mugged outside a violin dealer's window. Treslove is convinced the crime was a misdirected act of anti-Semitism, and in its aftermath, his whole sense of self will ineluctably change.

The Finkler Question is a funny, furious, unflinching novel of friendship and loss, exclusion and belonging, and the wisdom and humanity of maturity.

Amazon Exclusive: A Q&A with Author Howard Jacobson

Q: Has your life changed (in ways good and bad) since you were awarded the Man Booker last Tuesday?



A: Yes. Apart from having had no sleep and having lost my voice giving interviews around the world, I can think of no bad way it has changed. The good is almost incalculable. In practical terms, *The Finkler Question* has been riding high in the bestselling charts around the English speaking world and will be translated in countries that have never before shown much interest in my work. But the greater good cannot be measured in lists or numbers. The Man Booker prize feels like a vindication of what I do and have done for a quarter of

a century, casting a backward light on my earlier novels, introducing and part explaining them to readers who have not read me before.

I can best describe what I feel as a profound sensation of relief. From what? The usual: disappointment, frustration, bafflement, and the fear of being forever labelled 'an undervalued writer.' Whatever else, they cannot call me undervalued now.

Q: Your talents are largely comic and you've admitted to being ruffled by the lack of respect for comedy among the literary establishment. Do you think most novels lose their footing without a comedic hum? Which novelists do you most admire for their comedy?

A: Comic is the cruelest word. Yes, I aspire to be funny. Jonathan Safran Foer has just said of me to the *L.A. Times* that "I don't know a funnier writer alive," and I take that to be a huge compliment. But I don't think of myself as a writer of comic novels, for the reason that comic novel suggests lightness or frolicsomeness, a holiday from the serious, and that's not how I see what I do. That one can be funny and deadly serious doesn't need to be argued, but there are those who think they demean the solemn act of reading when they laugh - Rabelais called them the agelasts - whereas, of course, laughter can be as profound an act of the intelligence as any other response.

Ian McEwan once said he hated comic novels: it is like being wrestled to the ground and tickled. I know exactly what he means. But that's not what you get with me. With me it's like being wrestled to the ground and stabbed in the heart.

The other reason I'm not comfortable with the term comic novel is that it's redundant. The novel began in comedy (Rabelais, Cervantes) and continues to owe an obligation to it. A novel that doesn't make you laugh at some level, or that doesn't invigorate in a way we associate with comedy, or whose language isn't alive to play and paradox and contradiction, isn't doing its job.

For me, some of the novelists who do remember their obligations to comedy are Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad (think *The Secret Agent*), Henry James (funnier than he's often given credit for), Joseph Roth, Kurt Vonnegut, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, Mario Vargas Llosa, Milan Kundera (sometimes), Steve Tesich (I know of no more bitterly funny novel than Karoo), and, if I may return the compliment, Jonathan Safran Foer (Alexander Perchov, the sometime narrator of *Everything Is Illuminated*, is an inspired comic creation). This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Q: Where do you write? What does the space look and feel like?

A: I write on a tiny open mezzanine floor in the loft apartment I share with my wife in Soho, London. Steel bookshelves rise from the lower floor and in order to access the top shelves I have to risk my life climbing ladders. Light floods in through large windows and when I look out I see the city of London, St Paul's Cathedral, the Gherkin, and many of the great financial institutions. So the space I occupy is airy, and the world I look out upon is vast. This is the best space I have ever worked in, partly because of the natural light, but also because I don't feel locked away. I have only to raise my eyes to see the busy breathing world. Certainly I have never been so prolific, nor looked forward more to going to my desk.

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Winner of the 2010 Man Booker Prize, Jacobson's wry, devastating novel examines the

complexities of identity and belonging, love, and grief through the lens of contemporary Judaism. Julian Treslove, a former BBC producer who works as a celebrity double, feels out of sync with his longtime friend and sometimes rival Sam Finkler, a popular author of philosophy-themed self-help books and a rabidly anti-Zionist Jewish scholar. The two have reconnected with their elderly professor, Libor Sevcik, following the deaths of Finkler and Libor's wives, leaving Treslove-the bachelor Gentile-even more out of the loop. But after Treslove is mugged-the crime has possible anti-Semitic overtones-he becomes obsessed with what it means to be Jewish, or "a Finkler." Jacobson brilliantly contrasts Treslove's search for a Jewish identity-through food, spurts of research, sex with Jewish women-with Finkler's thorny relationship with his Jewish heritage and fellow Jews. Libor, meanwhile, struggles to find his footing after his wife's death, the intense love he felt for her reminding Treslove of the belonging he so craves. Jacobson's prose is effortless-witty when it needs to be, heartbreaking where it counts-and the Jewish question becomes a metaphor without ever being overdone.

From [Booklist](#)

Julian Treslove is plagued by the notion that his life lacks substance. He has had only the most superficial relationships with women, two of whom bore him sons he has hardly seen, and his career is at an impasse, for he now makes his living as a celebrity double. He longs for the tangible lives of his best friends, both Jewish widowers. Middle-aged Sam Finkler is a wildly successful TV personality and author whose wife succumbed to cancer, while octogenarian Libor Sevick has lost the woman he was happily married to for more than 50 years. Julian becomes obsessed with the idea of becoming Jewish as a way to give his life meaning and embarks on a personal odyssey in which he learns Yiddish, takes a Jewish lover, and becomes involved with the Museum of Anglo-Jewish Culture. Jacobson uses Julian's transformation as a way of examining, often with a mordant wit reminiscent of comedian Larry David's, what it means to be Jewish. Winner of the 2010 Man Booker Prize, this novel also offers poignant insights into the indignities of aging, the competitiveness of male friendship, and the yearning to belong. --Joanne Wilkinson

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