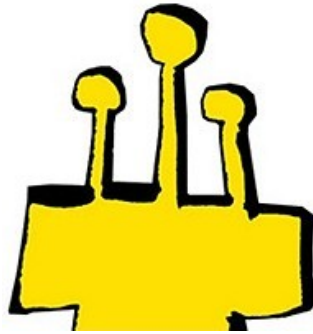


Witz

A NOVEL BY JOSHUA COHEN



Witz

Joshua Cohen

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Witz

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Witz Joshua Cohen

On Christmas Eve 1999, all the Jews in the world die in a strange, millennial plague, with the exception of the firstborn males, who are soon adopted by a cabal of powerful people in the American government. By the following Passover, however, only one is still alive: Benjamin Israelien; a kindly, innocent, ignorant man-child. As he finds himself transformed into an international superstar, Jewishness becomes all the rage: matzo-ball soup is in every bowl, sidelocks are hip; and the only truly Jewish Jew left is increasingly stigmatized for not being religious. Since his very existence exposes the illegitimacy of the newly converted, Israelien becomes the object of a worldwide hunt . . .

Meanwhile, in the not-too-distant future of our own, “real” world, another last Jew—the last living Holocaust survivor—sits alone in a snowbound Manhattan, providing a final melancholy witness to his experiences in the form of the punch lines to half-remembered jokes.

Witz Details

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Author : Joshua Cohen

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From Reader Review Witz for online ebook

Litteraria Pragensia says

What after all, Cohen seems to ask, is survival but a “living” by one’s wits – the paradoxical, accidental evasion of history, of reason, of the otherwise-determined course of events, by way of a caprice of language – and which, at a certain point, turns into a joke that goes on longer than it’s supposed to? ... Perhaps we expect the author to adopt some sort of moral standpoint, to construct a vista and point-of-view from which to cast a critical appraising eye backwards upon History, with its crimes and atrocities full-frontal or in three-quarter profile, exposed in all the verity of a graven image, like a Hollywood celebrity portrait of the “Shoahshowbusiness.” Instead the joke comes full circle. In this final afterlife of the book, the survivor Joseph “ben you don’t know me from Adam” Cohen comes face to face with his God and maker, his namesake, his “father” in a manner of speaking, the Author, Joshua Cohen: "...I didn’t recognise you funny you don’t look who thinks he’s a nothing also a Cohen it’s like this: my father was a Cohen and his father was a Cohen and his father before that was a Cohen it’s steady work" (817). Excerpted from Louis Armand's "Laughlines for the Shoahshowbusiness," Umelec Magazine (2012).

PR says

It's a stunning achievement, both writing and reading Witz. I will admit that I scanned and skimmed towards the end of the book in order to say that I had technically read the whole thing. So, full disclosure: it took me three years, nearly, to read this book technically, off and on. The front story is fairly straightforward; the digressive and interrogative nature of the text is what takes time. It's really beautiful, ultimately. I don't think I've read anything like it. I've read Ulysses, and Witz, I feel, asks much more of its reader. It was a totally different reading experience for me, where I quit trying to connect things or make meaning and just kind of floated along on ocean swells of words. It's like the ocean, yes. If you go in trying to prove something or best it, you're going to get subsumed. But by allowing it to take you where it will and enjoying what occurs to you as you read it, you'll probably have an okay time.

Ben says

A virtuosic book that is too much in love with its virtuosity. When reading for 5 - 10 pages I found it brilliant. Over 10 pages I found it tedious. The writing is so oversaturated that it was frequently sleep inducing.

Let's just say that it's a 21st century Jewish Gravity's Rainbow, except more difficult.

I'm roughly the same age as the author, from roughly the same area of New Jersey, and raised Jewish, so I was hoping this would give me some sort of authoritative stance on this book, but I'm not really sure what to make of it. Whatever I write could probably very easily be dismissed as projection.

Growing up I always felt somewhat envious (this isn't the right word) of Christians, as it seemed like their religion was much easier to grasp. I could flip on any televangelist and learn the basic tenets of Christianity

-- Jesus died for the sins of mankind and one must believe in him to be saved -- of course it's more complicated than that, but at least there seemed to be "positive" content.

Judaism always seemed very amorphous and difficult to grasp -- a bunch of ancient laws for nomadic desert dwellers which people have been arguing and interpreting and reinterpreting for thousands of years, a God one can't visualise or anthropomorphize -- plus the foreignness of prayers in Hebrew, the Yiddish sayings, German and Eastern European relatives. It always seemed less a question of belief than of tradition. We were practicing because "our people" were almost exterminated, not because we were worried about our souls or salvation or questions of right or wrong, like there was more "negative" than "positive" content to the religion.

Witz seems to embody all of this, or I think it does, or at least it stirred up a lot of thoughts and memories that I thought were long buried. A mess and a monster of a book, but not really an enjoyable read, and I don't know if I could really recommend it.

Scott Gates says

This checklist was inspired by my reading of *Witz*.

Checklist for Writers who Aspire to Write a Long, Difficult Novel

The Long, Difficult Novel (LDN) is a genre unto itself. And like any genre, there are certain features that should be present in any work that seeks to be included. Since loyal readers of this genre will expect to experience these qualities, I thought it would be helpful to put together a quick checklist to assist writers who aspire to write a Long, Difficult Novel.

(1) Make sure editors / peer reviewers stay out of your way. Don't let your spouse or friend read your initial drafts either. Your Novel should be unnecessarily Long, and receiving input from others will undoubtedly work against this, since the first thing they will recommend is that you shorten the Novel, make it more understandable, delete unnecessary tangents, and remove most of the sillier stuff. The LDN as a genre has not yet gained the acceptance it deserves, and so your Novel's unwieldy length and zaniness will not be seen as a virtue in and of itself.

(2) Make sure the prose is a real chore. This one's pretty easy. Just ensure that anyone picking up the work will have a difficult time making it through paragraphs. It helps if you (a) immerse the reader in arcane matters covered in great detail; (b) avoid explaining what's happening; (c) if you must explain what's happening, do so in the most oblique way possible; (d) when at all possible, use words that no one knows. Readers of LDNs value using their dictionaries almost as much as they value verbal confusion.

(3) Disorient the reader, particularly in the first few sections. It's hard to keep up full-scale disorientation for the course of an entire Novel, since over time the reader will get used to your writing quirks and the way you present things, and eventually a picture of your vision will, alas, begin to emerge. Thus, it's crucial that the beginning of the Novel features intense disorientation to offset this inevitability. The reader of LDNs will expect to be confused and to have little idea of what's going on. This reader will look forward to finding out what's going on only by consulting a companion written by an academic. If this reader actually manages to understand the first few pages of your LDN, he/she will likely put the book down and say that this was not the kind of Novel they were expecting. Later on in your Novel, of course, the reader will expect to be

“rewarded” (*rewards* are a big part of the LDN genre) by being given several long sections in comprehensible English.

(4) Make sure that no plot arc is completed or tied up. This is one of the most important aspects of LDNs. LDN readers will feel cheated if they ever find out “what ultimately happens” to a given character or storyline. It’s *imperative* that you end things in an arbitrary way; the ending should be unsatisfying (which, paradoxically, will be satisfying to LDN readers) and should come out of nowhere. This is a longstanding tradition of the genre, and it’s in your best interest not to unsettle this.

(5) Pile on the absurdities. Maybe you think an idea you have is a little too goofy, daffy, silly, etc. Well, the LDN is a playing field in which to let such ideas run free. No idea is too absurd as long as you pile on the details (see following note) and make sure to put in some good wisecracks.

(6) Pile on the details. *Something* has to make this Novel 900+ pages. Details, as Dickens said, are the stuff of life. But of course you will not be filling your Novel with detailed characters and plot like Dickens did in his Long, Easy Novels. You have to make sure the details are somewhat excruciating to wade through, and preferably they are about things that are of interest to almost nobody. The ideal LDN reader expects his/her reading experience to be something of a trial, and a frenzied level of detail is a great way to satisfy this expectation.

(7) Make sure your LDN comes off as a kind of challenge. The way your Novel looks should say, “Sure, you’ve completed such and such LDN, but can you complete *this* one?” There is a strong correlation between the difficulty of completing an LDN and the LDN’s length and unpleasantness. I probably don’t have to spell this out to you: the Longer and more tedious (Difficult) your Novel is, the better. It will do a lot for your Novel’s reputation. One of the things your Novel will have to accomplish is to make sure that the majority of people who pick up the book don’t finish it. This is another one of the rewards LDN readers expect: inclusion within an exclusive literary minority.

(8) Keep your expectations realistic. You cannot expect the majority of even LDN readers (a grim, tough bunch) to spend the time necessary to “get” what it was you were trying so hard to obscure throughout the course of your Novel. Take heart: It does not matter if many of these readers did not understand much of what they read, skimmed large sections, had more fun reading essays about your LDN than reading the LDN itself, or forced themselves through the pages out of an irrational mixture of dour duty and inexplicable compulsion. Such readers likely got no more out of your Novel than the many who put it down after the first few chapters. But that does not matter. The important thing is that they finished it.

Yair Ben-Zvi says

It. Is. Done. Finishing this book leaves me with a feeling akin to a dream. For over a year, close to two, I've been reading this tome off and on. And, like similarly long and dense works like 'Gravity's Rainbow' or 'Ulysses', I've read a decent number of shorter, more accessible works, in the time it's taken me to finish this book once.

What does all that say? Well, that namely this book not only prides itself on allusive as well as stylistic density, but that it does all of this with a complete lack of apology or compromise towards the reader (in fact, according to one or more interviews with Joshua Cohen, his first draft was something like 4000 pages long with one passage in PHONETIC HEBREW).

But why? Is there a point? Is this just a 'Jewish Ulysses'? A Brooklyn Jewish writer's attempt at HIS Gravity's Rainbow or some such other high modernist and/or post modern literary opus?

Well, in this reader's opinion, it is those things, but really, only accidentally. Whereas there are moments or even long protracted sequences in GR or Ulysses where the narrative itself seems completely obfuscated by the author's density of language, here, in Witz, the plot is actually fairly, actually very, simple, and even linear. Read the back cover of this book and you will see a very succinct and concise summation of what (mostly) happens in the book. The plot here is not complicated. A to B to C with a few digressions here and there (sometimes flashbacks or postmodern tropes like the listing of objects or even a recipe) with an eventual break, a sudden change in setting and character, and that's it, the end, mind blowing apparently ensues, and we're left to wonder what we know about this, what was worth knowing about this, and how or what do we tell others of what we know about this.

But enough talking around the book, what about the book itself? Really, I liked it, a lot. Of all the words used in the reviews for this book I'd side with 'bold', 'ambitious', even, for the most part, 'brilliant'. Over the course of a ten year (!) writing period Cohen has constructed what will surely be an eternal work (so much as there are readers bold and simultaneously humble enough to tackle texts of this viciously intellectual level). His use of language is exactly half awesome and half maddening. The 'yiddishspeak' in question is for the most part a near unbearable ordeal to read through, especially over the course of 800+ pages. But within that ordeal there are passages that are so rich in poetry, so suffused with a Jewish wit that was, apparently still is, has always been, but may never be again, along with allusions to texts, people, and events that, I can admit went almost completely over my head (this book has to be read with a dictionary, several in fact, and with access to the internet or a person to explain every reference, maybe Cohen himself, not sure if he'd be up for that), that I found myself unable to not finish the book. I had to see where the writer was going with all of these ideas and what, if anything, he was going to 'say' about, what, EVERYTHING regarding Jews and Judaism, specifically it would seem, the Jews of Europe and America, essentially, those in the Diaspora, the Galut, the Exile, outside of the apparently chosen Land.

In essence I've never read nor do I think I ever will read such a bloodlessly cruel yet infinitely understanding text of what it means to be Jewish. From any Jewish author, American, Israeli, of any European extraction, none of them has come close to this, all were, up until now, apparently poking or ice-skating on the surface of it (to borrow a term from Charles Bukowski describing Truman Capote). The pride, the loathing, the love, the hate, the brilliance, the idiocy, the ritual, the pageantry, the heritage, the meaninglessness, the humor, and so much else. But if I can say anything about this text, what it all means(!?) to me, it would read like this:

This is a book about humor and finding humor, like most humor is found, in the ridiculousness of life. And there is no place better for that humor to be found than in the story of the Jewish people. This isn't a 'warm' humor or a 'wink-wink' we're all in on it because we're a special and Chosen People kind of humor, no, it's simpler and a lot harder to bear than that. The humor, the joke, to me, is that even with everything that the Jewish people have been through be it expulsions, pogroms, inquisitions, holocausts, wars, oppression and abuses of all kinds...the destruction (twice) of our most holy temple, the loss and eventual reestablishment of our 'homeland'...we still find it in ourselves, as a people, to be crueller and infinitely more destructive to each other (our apparent 'own' our family) than any of our oppressors/enemies real and imagined could ever be in their wildest most disgusting imaginings. But then, who's more damaging than family? Who could be? Who would want to be? And yet, we're still around. And more than anything else, that's fucking hysterical to me.

David says

This book definitely has its own way of telling a story. More interesting than the story it tells, though, is how it tells it. It doesn't seem quite like stream of consciousness, but it sure is something like it. Trying to read this book is like trying to sip from a pressure washer. That said, as I read, oddly enough, I found myself being able to follow it better. Of course, it isn't a light read. Some portions really felt like hard work. The things Cohen makes language do are amazing. Not necessarily easy to approach, but definitely something to behold.

Josh says

i've decided to defend my actions in not finishing this book, even though no one is asking me to.

i picked up this book because i read a review of The Instructions by cohen, in which he made a lot of points i agreed with. the instructions was not a great book, although it had its moments, and it was worth the effort of reading, for sure. this book doesn't seem like it is.

I'm not going to give this a star rating, because i only read 15 pages, but i uh, did not enjoy myself. i read 5 pages, hoping the whole time it was a high-concept introduction, but it never stopped. i flipped ahead a couple times to figure out when it was going to pick up, and it didn't look promising. i came on goodreads and read some reviews, and even the people who liked it had to concede it was pretty self-indulgent and masturbatory. one review said the last 30 pages had no punctuation, and flipping there cemented it - i'm done, sad to say, since there are a lot of other things i'd like to read, and the holidays always bring an influx of new books my way. i'm cool with high concept, experimental stuff, but this just didn't hook me.

Ashley Crawford says

Damn you Joshua Cohen. You've cost me dearly. Not only in time I couldn't really afford (work suffered horrendously), but in the way you've twisted the world around me.

Expending the energy to tackle an 827 page book takes a leap of faith to be sure. It also takes a few strong nudges. When those nudges come in a trinity one has to take a deep breath and dive in. The triumvirate, all discovered in a morning, started with an excerpt on Ben (Notable American Women) Marcus' website, rapidly followed by noticing a rapturous blurb by Steve (Arc d'X) Erickson and then an intriguing interview by Blake (Scorch Atlas) Butler ([...]).

Marcus, Erickson and Butler are all heroes. They all wallow in language like words are the salt in the Dead Sea. But then a further google uncovered numerous comparisons with David Foster Wallace, Thomas Pynchon, Franz Kafka and James Joyce. Ahem.

And indeed, after several exhausting weeks, I can say that Joshua Cohen joins their ranks with enviable chutzpah. The essential story has been described elsewhere here, so no need to go into that. Suffice it to say I am not one of the Affiliated, but trust me, you don't need to be. Cohen essentially paints with words, creating vast canvases that embrace everything from surrealism to science fiction, from heart-wrenching heartbreak to heart-warming hilarity. Despite the sheer weirdness of structure, there is a clear-cut narrative here, albeit with a moment of cunnilingus that would make David Cronenberg blanch. Cohen has created an alternate universe richer than any in contemporary literature. Steve Erickson, in his blurb for the book, states that "the only question is whether Joshua Cohen's novel is the Ark or the Flood." My question back is, is it feasible

that it is both?

MJ Nicholls says

It's rare a writer gets their early, indulgent works published. My 800-page retelling of the William Wallace story written in Chaucerian Scots has sadly failed to ignite the literary landscape. Martin Amis wrote a 2000-page history of the Corn Laws and their famous Repeal in his late teens. Still unseen. Joshua Cohen isn't a writer who leaves much in the drawer. In fact, in completing *Witz* before his thirtieth birthday, he's blown his creative wad much too soon. Where next for this Jewish sprite with the biggest Joyce complex this side of upper Manhattan?

Let me state my position: *Witz* is an awful novel. It is a truly execrable work of literature, a shameful doorstopper written in a torturous voice, with horrible run-on sentences and huge blocks of freeform prose where plot, character, style and tone are gobbled up by a rapacious word monster drunk on language. When *Witz* impresses, and on every page, it has the skill to impress, it does so on the level of wordplay, and that's what it boils down to. It's a big book of neologisms and compound sentences and what happens when a writer barely out his nappies is let loose to indulge himself and get published.

I read this over a series of months and returning to it was always a pleasant surprise, otherwise I would've hurled it out a window in two minutes. The rhythm and cadence of his sentences is remarkable, as well as the tireless wordplay and invention. There are pages where the onslaught of this manic rabbinical narrator reaches a pitch of electrifying craziness. I was pulled with force into these sentences where absolutely nothing is possible to fathom, where complete opacity of action is the order. The problem with this: it lasts about two pages. Reading on hurts and the mind wanders. When I wasn't concentrating so hard my skull split in two, here is my experience reading this book:

- 1) Flicking forward and seeing how close I was to completing my allotment of thirty pages at a stretch.
- 2) Rubbing my fingers along the spine and stroking the slightly sticky cover.
- 3) Thinking about what I was going to say in this review, what I was currently working on or what I was going to eat later.
- 4) Spurring myself on by having erotic fantasies.
- 5) Switching positions for holding the book so it didn't bruise my hands or legs.

These things aside, there isn't much hope summarising the plot, because this is a book of words and ideas. The blurb is the least helpful blurb I have ever read as nothing as cool as that happens in the book. Sadly. I am pleased I read *Witz* on the whole: I think it has a restless comic energy, a sprawling ambition to resurrect high-class modernism that is unprecedented. There is a lot to admire. As a novel: unreadable, no fun, indulgent, impossible, pretentious, ludicrous, outdated in its approach. I skipped the last 30-odd pages, written *sans* punctuation. Too much. It needs to lose 600 pages to be acceptable. At least the last thirty.

Still: it's been an experience, and I like novels that make me fight for their respect and love. Bring it on with *Witz II*, Josh.

Amanda says

How this night is different: in every possible way. I can't begin to articulate anything about this book, which knocked me on my ass (in a good way) so I'm letting two others do it for me, below. I will say that one of the most striking aspects is the language, which rolls with a biblical rhythm I couldn't help but speak aloud at points. And I loved the alien ship scene. An achievement, for sure, and a book that will stay with me.

Drew in Time Out: <http://newyork.timeout.com/arts-cultu...>

NYTimes: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/boo...>

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Let's get this out of the way real quick because you've heard it all already so damn many times :: not every book is for every reader. This book is not for everyone. This book is likely not for you. If you think this book is for you (or even if you think this book is not for you) please do first check in with hyper=talented reader and writer of uncontrolled prose, Herr MJ. Because most likely this novel will not be for you. You can read my Review too but it won't help much in deciding whether to read it or not. You have likely already decided whether you will read this or not. Most of you will have decided to not read it because you have never heard of it ; even though you've never decided you still have made a choice to quote some Canadians. At any rate, I'll quote some prose down below from this novel but do know that it is not exactly representational prose ; it is a bit more 'difficult'/dense than the rest but I'm grinding a small ax with it and you should ignore it. Let's get on with it.

The only useful thing I'm going to have to say here is of the classificatory stuff. Let's get this out of the way too -- this novel is "musical". That adjective is as informative as the "poetical prose" descriptor. Don't fall for it. But listen. How does one listen to music? And I mean music ; I very much do not mean "lyrics" or "songs" but music. When I say music I mean music, not popular culture products. I mean music. Do I have to spell this out? Bach Mozart Beethoven Stravinsky Schoenberg AddYourJazzHere Zappa. Notes. Black notes on white paper ; peculiar vibrations of air in a room or across a meadow. Vibrating strings and brass. (I do not mean Metal ; that's another question altogether).

What does "meaning" mean when you listen to music? What is indicative of the postmodern condition is perhaps that people don't even know what this can mean because they immediately go to lyric sheets or stage costumes, ie, things that are not music. What does 'musical meaning' mean? I know what it doesn't mean ; it doesn't mean translating music into non-musical forms, it does not mean articulating its meaning in a language. The meaning of music is of course itself articulated musically. Maybe call-and-response is a good metaphor/analogy here. Ant any rate, when you listen to music you attempt to understand it, if you attempt to understand it at all, *musically*.

Please do not reduce a novel to a moral, to a 'message', to a thesis. Please do not tell me that the Ninth is 'about' the brotherhood of man [sic], although it is that too.

And so back to that claim about how this novel is 'musical'. It's not melodic, which is maybe what we mean when we say Gass' prose is musical. It is not rhythmic, as we might say of Stein's. It is not harmonious as we might say of the late Joyce. So then what the * do you mean? It's 'musical' but it doesn't fall under any of the three primary features of music? *tf? I touched on this once in my Review of Larva: A Midsummer Night's

Babel. If you find the prose in this novel 'difficult', you are reading it wrong.

So this is what I don't get :: I get it that like me after a day's work etc etc a person is exhausted, mentally and emotionally and physically ; and resigning the convenience of Television, Said Person may want to pick=up a book..... to relax. And therefore naturally Said Person doesn't want to read something difficult, but something composed of conventional sentences, characters, plot. The thing I don't get is, Why do you want to go through all the work of following characters, projecting yourself into their inner=lives, etc etc etc, keeping the trail of a PLOT, etc etc etc it seems like an awful lot of mental and emotional work, when all Said Person wants to do is..... relax.

If you are working you're not reading.

There are a few other novels that are like this (many I'm sure). Top of the line of course is Miss MacIntosh My Darling, that legendary wall of text. The popular one is Danielewski's Only Revolutions (read it as music he told me when I confessed I'd given up without finishing it). "Read it as music". Don't try to "interpret". This should be an emancipatory claim. Don't try to convert X into Y ; that's something for the algebra classroom. Don't try to 'construct' character. Refuse to 'follow' the plot. Seriously, let the words do their own work. Don't allow the author to foist his demands upon you that you write your own damn novel! I mean, if you really want to (and why wouldn't you) read it again and take notes. Begin to annotate. Trace patterns. Take note of echoes and recurrences. Adore the familiar and shirk the un-.

How do you listen to ::

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WW4R...>

Prose is never poetry. Prose is never music. [music is the best!] But allow the metaphor to inform your listening.

In which an ax is ground (we'll take it to the kettle drum on another day)

So famously there's a chapter in Moore's Jerusalem which is Wakean. It is. But my claim is that it is very weak Wakese. It is a literalist schoolboy Wake-ism. It's funny and punny but misses the element of the syntax which best characterizes the Wakean sentence. In Witz we have a truer example of Wakese.

Jerusalem, beginning of 'Round the Bend' (884) --

Awake, Lucia gets up wi' the wry sing of de light. She is a puzzle, shore enearth, as all the Nurzis and the D'actors would affirm, but nibber a cross word these days, deepindig on her mendication and on every workin' grimpill's progress. Her arouse from drowse is like a Spring, a babbling book that gorgles up amidst the soils o' sleep, flishing and glattering, to mate the mournin' son.

Fine enough. Even "de light full"! But nothing particularly difficult. The syntax is standard English. Every word/phrase can be directly translated back into standard English and lose no meaning except for a single=layer of punning. Sure, your individual translations may differ as they always do, but it's not only possible, it's compulsory. You simply can't resist, as you read this, turning it into totally straight English. Slapping the pun off the surface, making it speak plainly, stop hiding your meaning! You tease I told you so! You can't hide from me! "Awake, Lucia gets up with the rising of daylight". Not much lost. And even if you

take note of the nod to The Wake, music in 'wry sing' and note the sunlight in 'de light' ; there's not much beyond that. Ambiguity goes out the window.

Witz, "Punchlines", beginning (last chapter) (p784) --

And this is where it all ends America with me Joseph ben you don't know him numbered much like God I don't need a last name with everyone now ignoring enough of these no more of these recreations no more redactions reinterpretations reinventions revisions these stories resorted then shuffled restored and then footnoted endnoted gorged upon gore how I'm tired London so tired I'm Amsterdamned Avenue dead soon enough tired it's funny like ha ha funny is here enough genug of these no more lives how I'm Big in Yisgadal Ben vyiskadah and the shemay of the gables rabah the East River canals like Venice the Ghettolocked Venezeia I imagined shy but cold in an irongray windyday [...]

I mean, so of course there's the lack of punctuation, a few Yiddish words, a few nonstandard compound words, but pretty much every word is pretty much standard English, very little punny or multi=valency. I call it Wakeese but you might feel more like the Molly stream-o-con, tempted by that initial "me". But I suspect that the SoC claim would fail if we start to ask about whose consciousness this is. That's probably not made clear in the quoted passage, but was my overwhelming impression. If it is a consciousness, it is not a single individual's. Again, the quoted selection may not overwhelm you with my claim, but you at least get a peek into how here is not standard English syntax, grammar. And much of the novel reads like a refusal to conform to English speech patterns, this final section taking it further to the extreme.

Again, music. Read the novel as music. Don't fight it. And of course don't read it if it's not for you. You probably get thousands of novels/year pub'd for you. But if this novel is for you delight in it ; but above all, relax, don't worry, have a homebrew.

[forgive any infelicitate mistypings]

Chelli says

One of the most over-blown, over-written, pretentious books I've ever read.

Jeffra Hays says

Oy vey you say. Another funny Holocaust book?

Now is the month of holidays, from the Jewish New Year through the Feast of Tabernacles and ending with Celebration of Torah. My (Orthodox) friend of forty years came to visit. I showed her a page from "Witz." She closed the book, fast. "There's a lot in there I wouldn't approve of," she said.

Yes, O WickedWitz.

Witz -- which means "joke" in Yiddish, and "son of" in its various forms (e.g. Horowitz, Ephraimovich).

Also Auschwitz.

A witz should be funny, no? “Witz,” by Joshua Cohen – JC hereafter -- (Dalkey Archive Press, 817pp) -- “Witz” is bleak, not funny, though it is based on a joke, perhaps the greatest joke ever told.

Who tells the greatest joke?

“A mensch (man) walks into a talent agent, ouch, a mensch walks into a talent agency, ouch, next time he should use the door. No seriously folks, a mensch walks into the office of a talent agent and sits down and says, no, listen up, I have this fantabulous new act...”

JC has Ben tell it while Ben is on tour in “Los Siegeles” (Vegas). Ben continues: “...it’s jokes like this, acrobats, juggling, magic, how I’m doing all of them just by living. Here and now, that’s the act, I’m it, that’s the joke, me...”

That is Ben’s version.

The classic version of the joke is never completed in the novel, at least not as stand-up. My summary: The performers enter, the presentation begins. The talent agent is treated to, is witness to, abominations, including but not limited to: fornication, sodomy, bestiality, evacuation of any and all bodily fluids via any convenient orifice, filth, cruelty, all of the above in various permutations or, what the (gehenna) hell, simultaneously. “And what do you call yourselves?” asks the agent. The answer is the punchline: “The Aristocrats.” *

*Treat yourself to the whole schmear –

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPQz4F...>

The art of this joke – any joke? -- is in the delivery. The stand-up comic shows his/her exquisitely sordid imagination, no limits allowed; anything that makes an audience cringe and laugh until tears drip and bellies ache is the goal.

The Yiddish expression “lacht mit yashtsherkes” comes to mind. Literally, “laugh with lizards,” laugh in sorrow, not joy.**

**Terrific laughing lizard cartoon, treat yourself --

<http://www.yiddishwit.com/gallery/liz...>

Now for the novel’s story, outrageously brief: Xmas Eve, 1999. Benjamin Israelien is born a man in his parents’ “kitschen” in “Joysey” with beard, eyeglasses, self-shedding foreskin. Ben (means “son”) is the first male child, #13 after 12 girls. That night, a mysterious plague kills all Jews, except firstborn males; these survivors are transported, for their own protection, to Ellis Island. Soon all die except Ben; He becomes Messiah and is carted around by a marketing cartel. Now everyone wants to be Affiliated. As the real thing, Ben-Messiah is forced to make appearances, but He wants to flee his “Orthodox” life. He escapes, is recaptured, escapes. He is not religious, bad for business. Ben’s life is in danger. JC follows Ben’s picaresque misadventures across the US, a visit with Doktor Froid extraterrestrial, back to Joysey, to Polandland, and back again, and again.

The art of “Witz” is in the delivery. JC’s prose has a breathless rhythm and endless associations, e.g. wombs, ovens, babies, bread, incineration. He can’t get the words out fast enough, such genius, so talented he is, “poo poo poo” --***

*** <http://www.pass.to/glossary/gloz3.htm>

-- another detail, another gag, just one more comparison, expression or pun in English, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian. Readers who do not understand words and idioms used by JC will lose much of the novel's humor, innuendo, heartbreak.

Here, in one of JC's cheery-by-comparison passages, is Santa, in Ben's house on that Xmas Eve:

"The problem with this tradition has always been once he's gone down the chimney, how does he manage to get back up to the roof? If the devil Satan must fall, one might argue, then a saint like Santa must rise...He and with a silence that seems to twinkle returns to the den, if den it is, takes Benjamin by the hand...To take him slow, and gently as you'd expect, naked first in mitten fringed in tinsely poms, to lead Him to the stairs then up them, three at a time, and down the hall of shutdead doors to His room above the garage and its angelic ladder expected – forget it, you might as well stay a while, won't you, make yourself comfortable, my house is yours, there'll soon be beds empty enough; the two of them, Santa and son almost of equal size, stepping high, huge, and damn sleep loud into His room – and then Santa, holding a forefinger through the loose skein of yarn wool worn to his lips, slams the door bang behind them, though there's no one left alive to awake."

Months old, Ben finally has sex -- with his dead mother, Hanna, who is also an apparently living Mary, one of several Marys in the room, watching:

"He arches Himself, His elbows heave and ...melt into fingers...pursuing her with the gnashing of teeth – an application of the appearance of mourning, accomplished to titillate and hurt. With His tongue in one thought, His mind in another, He's sensing suffusion, an oozing of light from within...Glaciate and slow, hard as the earth His head immersed, misted, in the midst of what seems a soft sky dewy and glowing. He squints against that rising shine...dazzly motes, tears and their saline sting, dizzying and foreign, the dusting of sand, real sand...then, as if prepared, He opens His eyes wide inside: and there, inside her, is – Jerusalem ...valleyed entire in the genital of her womb... if I forget thee O Jerusalem let my righthand forget its cunting, let my tongue cleave to the Ruth of my mouth..."

Ben's tongue becomes

"...a relic, to be exhibited...eventually worldwide: paraded around from town to town, wherever pays, whether money or homage..."

A year after that first Xmas, we observe

"the yahrezeit, the Anniversay of Death (A.D., as it's respectfully, avoidingly, mentioned)..."

JC has an assortedly sordid imagination, but of course nothing he imagines is as nasty as human history. He takes us, along with eager tourists, to see the sights of Whateverwitz. The fictional horror is real.

"It's easier than ever to enter this city, this station, this stopover; everyone off – and they all have maps still handydandy with Selected Retail Outlets writ large. There are separate marked gates, each reserved for each and every kind of ingress or egress, rest assured; abandon all hope, but not humor..."

The following "humor" is dispersed throughout the last – or better, final chapter, "Punchlines," as told by the last Holocaust survivor:

"...When they were born, he was born, and when they came for the born, he went...When they were young,

he was young, and when they came for the young, he went...When they were, he was, and when they came, he went...When they were dead, he was dead, and when they came for the dead, he went..."

Back to that joke.

Who are The Aristocrats? My answer, (and not necessarily JC's) in fine Jewish humor tradition: Who isn't? The Nazis said, We are! and performed abominations. Dare I mention the abominations performed by, and on, the Chosen People, as told by Him Himself? The goyim believe they are, Muslims, Hindus, who doesn't? How about the humans, that sapiens Us? Who doesn't hook worms or poison stinkweed, exterminate those annoying roaches – if only you're fast enough – and all those tasty cows, chickens, herring, pigs (chas v' shalom)...I could get killed for this – who doesn't wish a wife here a brother-in-law there – they'll kill for this – less than best of luck? Pray for less, much less than best of luck.

Does God have a sordid imagination? Does He tell jokes?

"Witz" begins with this epigraph:

“ ”

---God

Was what God said deleted, or did He have nothing to say?

JC has plenty to say, poo poo poo. "Witz" is an extravaganza: long, difficult, always dark, at times a burden, often confusing, brimming – overflowing -- with JC's evident learning, talent, need to tell. Despite its witty satire reputation and disguise, it is moving, indeed heartwrenching, and memorable. Emes -- I'll never forget.

PR (Post Review)

A note on the cover:

What are those 3 things?

<http://hasoferet.com/cbh/2012/04/01/t...>

Alan says

At times I thought I'd forgotten how to read.

A representative (if shorter than most) paragraph:

"With everything shut, everything's perfect, as if nothing ever went soiled, gone spoiled, as it was and has been clean forever, without taint; she's talking to herself pure from the very beginning—all that's dull the life and the knifing made sharp upon the whetstone of her tongue, foods wrapped to keep in her skin, how she'd always served, never served herself, never been served herself, that's if you forget Wanda and how in her high mighty she daily does. Which is terrible, makes her feel what, slighting, mistaken, and ill. But now she opens a drawer and leaves it open to feel it, the sin."

—p.51

If you can read and comprehend the above easily and with pleasure, then this is the book for you. For the rest of us, perhaps, not so much. It took an astonishingly long time for me to finish this book, and I must admit

that I did not *like* it very much.

This is... a difficult work, an astounding experiment in service to a *deeply* bizarre hypothesis, pushing at—and often far beyond—the boundaries of readability. More William Burroughs than Michael Chabon, Witz is a thorny mass of nearly impenetrable prose—verbose and bereft of dialogue, full instead of neologisms, typos, neologisms masquerading as typos, alljammed words togethered, waterboarded syntax, Yiddish jargon both common and obscure, multilingual quotes in German, Latin, French and others, long lists like this one, massive multipage paragraphs, bad jokes and worse puns... a clear case of logorrhea run rampant. Witz contains perhaps its own best, if ambivalent, assessment, on p.234: "a universal, unread, unreadably total book yet to be cataloged as to the interest of its worthlessness." And yet... it's got something, an undeniable spark that kept me reading.

I'm going to include more examples from the text in this review, but that's all right. This is a book impossible to spoil. It is the thing entire that means what it does; its individual parts are just ingredients in the stew.

After a flurry of epigrams (including this one, attributed to God, and whose accuracy I cannot dispute: " "), Witz opens with an extended and rather surreal scene in a ruined synagogue, divorced from time and ambiguous as to locale. The story in a nutshell (though plot's not the point; the play with word's the thing): this is the Rapture of the Jews. Cohen even uses the word "rapture" at at least one point. All the Jews in the world die in one night—except the firstborn sons. Then they all die, too—except one, an unusual son indeed, he of the endlessly regrowing foreskin: Benjamin Israelien, born on Christmas Eve in the Thousand Cedars development in Noo Joysey.

Once Ben is born, the story revolves around Him. The disappearance of the Jews results in worldwide spasms of guilt and reaction, a popular wave of gentile Affiliation, when the goys realize they don't have the Jews to kick around anymore. There are elements of wish-fulfillment in this story, but this is not a Nazi tract—quite the contrary, in fact. America, in particular (the events are worldwide, but Cohen's almost always focused closely on our Western citadel), chooses to become, in essence, a new Jewish nation, converting enthusiastically and *en masse*, as if the yarmulke were the new hula-hoop...

Despite the average length of Cohen's sentences and paragraphs, sometimes he's most effective when most brief:

"Ben lies in His bedroom, and even sleeping aches."
—p.250

Although... perhaps this longer, more pensive extract from late in the book sheds some light as well:

"Pay attention. Important. How we live amidst the publicity of privation. Witness the unique willingness of our people to package the product of experience both collective and individual, only to market it—that experience of living through history, that experience of being forced to live against history (as simulacra not impelled by duress but by choice, it's been said, not compelled by oppression, torture or threat, but amazingly by elective affinity)—it becoming a matter of preference to engage such sensation, to become occupied by such strange infotainment, as virtualized in seemingly every medium to be just enough real that you'll come out of the commerce alive, and perhaps even willing to be upsold on an ever newer revelation, an even more intimate experience: that of your own life no longer yours, lived only between the deaths of your preference. Identify and die, deny thrice and survive, up to you."
—p.708

And Cohen occasionally rises to urban poetry:

"and then, another window, the madness that Manhattans the skyline: the assjawbone's teethview, the keyed edge view, the serrated knife horizon, hugely brute and crude, and then—occulted within its midst, jutting up from between the rises of scrapers left abandoned, to reap a whirlwind tenanted only by the sky, with their lights off, their sleek sides wounded with panes shattered or just missing..."
—p.363

It must have been nearly impossible to copyedit this book, given the number of intentional and consistent deviations from standard orthography (e.g., "menschs" instead of the more regular "mensches"), but there were also things that were just *wrong*. Cohen can't spell "stationery" or "dependent," for example, and—seriously, Josh—adding "eth" to everything ("The Last Supper," pp. 736-738) does not make it sound Elizabethan, just stupid!

However, the recurring use of the word "Palestein" is no mistake.

The book concludes with an extended stream-of-consciousness rant called "Punchlines," which indeed contains many recognizable punch lines from jokes in Yiddish vernacular and otherwise, told and retold from the stage and otherwise, page after page of nearly punctuation-free word salad which, if you've read this far, you'll just *have* to get through, or at least I did, at the very end ending with (or at least stopping with) this:

"it's like this: my father was a Cohen and his father was a Cohen and his father before that was a Cohen it's steady work."
—p.817

Greg says

Legitimacy and VirJohn

(I think this review might be a mess, I'll try to make it sound better soon)

A quick point before the review really starts.

"The mature reader approaches the piece of literature on its own terms, not vice versa" -- VirJohn

That was said here by someone who I discussed in a previous review. Apparently when pushed too much he couldn't help but call someone some names. They have been deleted though. John does not like to be told he is wrong. I will return to this point later.

The start of the review.

I did not like this book.

There were maybe a hundred pages out of the eight hundred and seventeen pages that I thought were awesome but generally my feelings were lukewarm towards the book. By the time the last hundred or so pages came around I grew fed up with the book and I wished it to be over without having to put in any of the work to read it myself. The final forty or so pages were written in a non-punctuated and very rarely the block of text broken by the interjection of a line of text and then a new paragraph starting. See the Molly Bloom section of *Ulysses*. Yes, yes I said having a lot of of a cadence than the beat-boxing alliterations and beat-poet ramblings of the last forty pages of *Witz*. To be fair I didn't give those pages much of a chance. I was tired. I was tired of the book. I didn't have anything to give. I read like an automaton. I was a poor reader. But the book was like a teacher deciding to teach a whole new lesson, never before covered on the last day of school when everyone is ready to just get the fuck out of dodge. You know? I was a poor reader though. An immature reader?

And we return to the top.

VirJohn's haughty words were stuck in my head as I slogged through the last couple of hundred pages of *Witz*. Of course, I thought, a mature reader deals with the book on it's own terms. Teenagers and poor readers whine that the book is too difficult or that it's boring to them because it isn't what they expected.

This book wasn't what I expected, but I thought I gave it a pretty decent shot and I thought I was fair to it, and I think I'm a fairly mature reader who can grasp the slightly non-obvious, so what went wrong? Well one is the possibility that this book just isn't that good. That it is a pastiche of Big Important Books (BIB) such as *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and (a not so big but still important book) *Slaughterhouse-Five*. And then probably some other books that I didn't catch the allusions to (for the record my favorite part of the book was when it went into a sort of a "In the Zone" section of *Gravity's Rainbow*). The problem with the book for me was that it was over-written. Anything that could be said in 10 words was said in a hundred words including some play on words, re-workings of what was said in dialect, in homonym, put biblically and re-said with some yiddish. Cohen has an amazing skill at writing some great lyrical prose, and his ear for language is superb but there comes a point in a big book where you want to step out of the jive and get into the meat of the book. Outside of the language though there is little to the book. The book can be very well summed up by the back-cover copy:

On Christmas Eve 1999, all the Jews in the world die in a strange, millennial plague, with the exception of the firstborn males, who are soon adopted by a cabal of powerful people in the American government. By the following Passover, however, only one is still alive: Benjamin Israelien; a kindly, innocent, ignorant man-child. As he finds himself transformed into an international superstar, Jewishness becomes all the rage: matzo-ball soup is in every bowl, sidelocks are hip; and the only truly Jewish Jew left is increasingly stigmatized for not being religious. Since his very existence exposes the illegitimacy of the newly converted, Israelien becomes the object of a worldwide hunt . . .

Meanwhile, in the not-too-distant future of our own, "real" world, another last Jew—the last living Holocaust survivor—sits alone in a snowbound Manhattan, providing a final melancholy witness to his experiences in the form of the punch lines to half-remembered jokes

That is the book. That is the story. There is a little more thrown in to flush out the eight hundred pages. And the old man in the second paragraph doesn't appear till the "Molly Bloom section of the novel (like Molly

does in Joyce). So the story is about the last Jew wandering around the American Landscape of post-Christian converted to Judaism with a vengeance that goyim usually saves for pogroms or lynching 'others'.

The problem of legitimacy.

The former goyim though are met with a problem in the survivor of the last Jew. Now he is the messiah, but with no Jews left who is he saving? Goyim now realizes it's mistake and they all are going to back the winning horse. The Messiah is here to save, but whom does he save? The new Jews are not Jews as long as the Messiah in the form of the last Jew exists. Does that make sense? It's not that important if you don't get it, just nod along with me while I take the next step. Jews differ from their other Abrahamic monotheistic relatives because they have internal legitimacy for their religion. Jews don't go out to convert people. You are a Jew or you are not (yes there is some converting, but one generally doesn't see Evangelical Jews). Jews don't need the other to believe in what they believe in. There is no Paul to Saul, you know what I'm saying? Jews also have a tradition of dissent, the Old Testament is filled with people physically fighting God, yelling at him, arguing, trying to bargain with him, sitting down for a chat with him, seeing him and still disobeying him. Where is Jacob to ask Jesus or Allah if he is ready to throw down? The non-believer doesn't hurt the Jewish faith because the idea of questioning God is in the faith. That isn't to say there isn't going to be kvetching if a mensch decides not to believe, but it's not something that threatens the entire groundwork of a religions faith.

There are no books in the Judaica section of your Barnes and Noble about how to fight Atheists. Or how science has finally proven that Intelligent Design is right. Or how to talk to your Christian friend and sway him to the light of Adonai.

The non-believer presents a different problem to the legitimacy of the Christian though. Maybe not to all Christians but historically Christians aren't to tolerant with people who question the truth of their teachings. It's not just that I need to believe but I need everyone else to believe to strengthen my own belief. The other is a threat to my very metaphysical core. Threats like that must be neutralized.

I'm being a bit facetious, but this is the basic dichotomy created in *Witz* and the Evangelicalism at gunpoint the former goyim engage in.

Back to the top again.

Legitimacy and reading.

An easy way to read and be smart is to know going into a book what you should think about the book. If you know that *Ulysses* is the greatest novel of the 20th century and then read it as the greatest novel of the 20th century any failing on the part of the novel to convey the full literary greatestness of the 20th century is obviously a failing on your part. It's easy to hold this view and say that people like Harold Bloom and the mythical God like men and women who constructed the *Modern Library list of the Top 100 Novels Written in English between the years 1900 and 1998* can not be wrong. This way you can easily point out good books, and only read good books, and never have to worry that you are making a mistake in judging value. The only mistake is in your own skill, and that can be redeemed by stealing the thoughts of others and interjecting them into your head, clicking your heels three times and wishing them to be your own. Many a grad student has used this formula for lasting but mediocre success. Of course this method would make reading a novel like *Witz* impossible. How to judge it since it has yet to have any kind of seal attached to it.

Did Harold Bloom throw some lambs blood on to it so we will save it for the future and be passed over the death of forgetfulness? What to think. Am I not getting it because I am not a serious enough reader? Or is the book just not good? My head would explode with this kind of view to reading. I would be best to stick with the classics and every now and then maybe a very well received award-winner.

With this kind of view though your whole structure must be threatened when someone says they tried to read it and didn't like it. Or gave up on it and said it wasn't worth the time. Those heretics must be destroyed. They can not be right, for if someone has strongly read and still not found value in say *Ulysses* than the whole belief edifice crumbles and it becomes possible that the believer is not a strong reader but rather a talented parrot of accepted opinions. The latter can not be the case. The heretic will die for legitimacy to prevail.

And to return all the way to the top.

A mature reader doesn't expect a book to be written for him or herself. Neither does a child. A child fully accepts a book on its own terms. The book says A is for Apple; A is for Apple. It's simple. The book speaks and the child nods. It is the aging child, the teenager, the adult who want the book to fit into the framework they have in their head. They want an action book to be action filled. They don't want to be bored. They see something on the cover it better be pointing to something in the book that they have a desire to have represented to them. They find school books boring, it is part of their expectation. This changes over time. They learn to read. They learn the codes and signals. They learn how to read underlying signals. They build up a vocabulary of previous books read that they use to create, place and recreate the present work in relation to what has come previously into their hands. They learn what a novel is trying to 'say' but they don't become passive and meet a novel on it's own terms. They help to create the terms. They wrestle with the novel, they say fuck you to the author when the author is trying to get away with too much. They work with and against the author to help create the experience they have with the book. The mature reader neither accepts the book like a child nor forces the book to be as he or she wants it to be like a petulant adolescent, but a synthesize of the two with a lived lifetime of experience helping to guide them through the set of signs put in place by the author. This makes each book read an experience in itself, one similar but unique to anyone else's reading of the same book. It makes for the possibility of having a radically different experience with the same pages printed with the same words by reading them at different times during your life. It destroys the myth of inherent greatness for a work of literature and makes the greatness contingent on the reader: with some works striking a nerve with more readers than others, for inviting re-readings, and for opening the perspective of the reader into the world.

It allows for the reader to make up their own mind and not be shackled by conventional wisdom. It allows for readers to think for themselves, and not need others to speak for them.

And to return to *Witz* once again.

I don't know whose fault my reading of the book was. I think it was a little bit of his and a little bit of mine. We just didn't jive. I liked his language and would have loved it in a short novel, but for eight hundred pages it was too much for me.
