

## IN THEIR WORDS

# The Trump Card

## Howard Jacobson takes on a new target

**BRITISH AUTHOR HOWARD JACOBSON** has a deep love for words and wordplay. In comedic novels such as *The Mighty Walzer* (1999) and the Man Booker Prize-winning *The Finkler Question* (2010), his characters revel in dialectic jousts and displays of deadpan irony. That's why he believes it was "an affront to writers everywhere" that a man with such a limited lexicon and lack of sophistication as Donald Trump should find his way to the White House.

But where Jacobson differs from his peers is that he is the first major writer to transform his indignation at Trump's

rise into a fully-fledged novel. "Usually, I'm a slow writer—I love feeling a thing grow," the 74-year-old novelist says on the phone from his London home. But as Jacobson began writing *Pussy*—a biting dystopian satire about a Trump-like figure who is championed by a populace every bit as puerile as he is—an unfamiliar sense of urgency gripped him.

"I just felt that every writer in the country would be on this, and I didn't want to be the last in the queue," says Jacobson. "I would go to the Groucho [a London private members' club that is a home away from home for the literary set], and there would be no writers

there; I'd be thinking, They're all at home writing about Trump."

That, in fact, they weren't, or at least have not yet produced the fruits of their labor, is something that continues to baffle Jacobson. "It shouldn't just be left to comedians, because that's a different type of satire," he says.

Jacobson's literary inspirations for *Pussy* sprang from 18th-century satirical novels such as Samuel Johnson's *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. His story's protagonist, Prince Fracassus, is the petulant heir to an opulent duchy who spends his days watching reality TV and fancies himself a modern-day version of the Roman emperor Nero. He latches on to a succession of dodgy mentors who only serve to comfort his own narrow-mindedness.

These include his Twitter coach, Caleb Hopsack, leader of the Ordinary People's Party, who is described as being "dressed like a stockbroker's idea of a gentleman farmer who enjoyed a tippie." Hopsack is clearly a thinly veiled version of Nigel Farage, the British Trump associate and former leader of the right-wing U.K. Independence Party; part of the fun of Jacobson's novel is divining which real-life politicians

provide the models for a rogues' gallery of unscrupulous opportunists.

Jacobson has never seen himself as a political novelist before now, but he says his priorities are changing as the world changes in unexpected and unwelcome ways. "I woke up the morning of Brexit, and to my astonishment there was an emptiness that I'd never felt about any national event or anything to do with politics before," he says.

Another reason why he rushed to finish *Pussy* was that he wanted to get it into bookstores before the American people saw reason and found a way to derail Trump's presidential bid. Jacobson believes the fact that Trump triumphed, and remains very much in charge of the world's most powerful nation, means that the novel has not turned out to be a look at what ills might beset us in the future. Instead, he says, it is "a dystopia now."

—TOBIAS GREY



**POISON PEN:** Jacobson says Trump's political elevation is "an affront to writers everywhere."



**PUSSY**  
By Howard Jacobson  
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