**Jacobson, Dan (1929 – 2014)**

Molly Hall, University of Rhode Island

[](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/16/dan-jacobson#img-1)**Dan Jacobson at the Edinburgh International Book festival in 2005, taken by Murdo MacLeod Murdo**

(url: http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/

jun/16/dan-jacobson)

Dan Jacobson was a South African novelist, short story writer, essayist, critic, and translator who spent most of his adult life and the more productive years of his career in England. He was born in Johannesburg, South Africa March 7, 1929 to parents who had immigrated from Latvia and Lithuania to South Africa to avoid the persecution of the Jews and the poverty. His maternal grandfather, Hershel, a rabbi, had refused to move for fear of losing his family’s religion and culture. Hershel would be an object of great interest to Jacobson in his later life, so much so that in the absence of any trace of his grandfather’s history, he would travel to Lithuania in search of his story and write *Hershel’s Kingdom* (1998) about the slaughter of the Jewish Community there during World War II. Jacobson lived in a British-controlled former diamond mining area of South Africa from the age of four. There, he learned English at school, where he also learned of the cruelties of discrimination after an incident of peer bullying from which he never truly recovered. He writes about this incident in his autobiographical *Time and Time Again: Autobiographies* (1985), for which he won the J. R. Ackerly Prize for Autobiography. Despite not considering himself a practicing Jew, he agreed to attend Hebrew school and go to synagogue at his father’s behest and in solidarity with his globally diasporic Jewish brothers amidst the rise of Nazism.

After graduating college and working in an Israeli Kibbutz for a year, in 1948 he was hired to teach at a London Jewish school—then quickly fired for lack of orthodox knowledge. Marked as a Jew but never fully identifying as one, his search for a comfortable relationship with that culture and the scriptures followed him throughout his life, leading to such biblically themed works as *The Rape of Tamar* (1970)and *The Story of Stories: The Chosen People and its God* (1982). After marrying Margaret Pye, whom he had met in London, he returned to South Africa in the early 1950s. Jacobson then decided to become a writer in earnest and began by publishing short stories in magazines, followed by two novels based on his childhood in South Africa. His longer prose earned him the first of several visiting positions in academe that allowed him to continue writing. Moving from Stanford University to Syracuse to SUNY Buffalo in the 1970s, his itineracy continued for another decade until he settled in London as a lecturer, then Professor at the University of London in the 1980s, retiring in 1994, but continuing to write.

**Jacobson, taken by Chester Dent**

(url: http://literature.britishcouncil.org/dan-jacobson)

Much of his writing is set in South Africa and for the most part deals with themes of prejudice and racism. Though sometimes comedic, his writing is always didactic in content. *Evidence of Love* (1960) deals with a couple jailed for their interracial marriage; the critically acclaimed *The Beginners* (1966) explores the racially marked whiteness of Jews in South Africa; and *Electric Elephant* (1994) describes the changing land and culture of the South Africa of his childhood, which he experienced when returning as an adult. Although he is not known for his poetry, he won the Mary Elinore Smith Poetry Prize in 1986. Appropriately reflective of his dual national identification, he both received an honorary D. Litt. from the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in England in 2007. Jacobson passed away in London on June 12, 2014.

**Selected List of Works**

Novels

*The Trap* (1955)

*A Dance in the Sun* (1956)

*The Price of Diamonds* (1958)

*No Further West: California Visited* (1959)

*Evidence of Love* (1960)

*Time of Arrival* (1963)

*The Beginners: A Novel* (1966)

*The Rape of Tamar* (1970)

*The Boss* (1971)

*Inklings* (1973)

*The Wonder-Worker* (1973)

*The Confessions of Joseph Baisz* (1979)

*Hidden in the Heart* (1991)

*The God Fearer* (1992)

*All For Love* (2005)

*A Month in the Country* (2009)

Short Story Collections

*A Long Way from London* (1958)

*The Zulu and the Zeide: Short Stories* (1959)

*Through the Wilderness and Other Stories* (1968)

*The Story of Stories: The Chosen People and its God* (1982)

Essays

*Beggar My Neighbor* (1964)

*Adult Pleasures: Essays on Writers and Readers* (1989)

Autobiographical Writings

*Time and Time Again: Autobiographies* (1985)

Non-Fiction

*Her Story* (1987)

*The Electronic Elephant: A South African Journey* (1994)

*Hershel’s Kingdom* (1998)

Translation

Van Woerden, Henk (2000) *A Mouthful of Glass*

**Further Reading**

Gready, Paul (1994) “Dan Jacobson as Expatriate Writer: South Africa as Private Resource and

Half-Code and the Literature of Multiple Exposure,” *Research in African Literatures*,

25(4), 17-32.

Wade, Michael (1986) “White South African Literature After World War II: English,”

*European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Ed. Albert S. Gerard, Amsterdam,

Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 230-250.

Ydelman, Myra (1967) *Dan Jacobson: A Bibliography*, Johannesburg: U of the Witwatersrand.