

JOSHUA COHEN “ THE NETANYAHUS ” 2021

( 2022 PULITZER PRIZE )

the late 1950s, blending history, fiction, and humor. ***The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family*** is a 2021 novel by [Joshua Cohen](#). It was awarded the 2022 [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](#)

The book centers on a fictionalized account of [Harold Bloom](#)'s encounter with [Benzion Netanyahu](#) and his family, including his son, [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), at an upstate New York college

The novel's protagonist, Ruben Blum, is a historian at the fictional Corbin College in the fictional town of Corbindale, New York in the late 1950s. He is the first and only Jewish person at Corbin.

He finds himself perpetually navigating [microaggressions](#) of his department chair, Dr. Morse. One of the humiliating incidents involves making Blum portray Santa Claus at the college's Christmas party because “it'll free up the people who actually celebrate the holiday to enjoy themselves.”

Because he is Jewish, Dr. Morse involuntarily appointed Blum to the hiring committee for Benzion Netanyahu. The hiring committee assignment takes an unexpected twist when Benzion arrives unannounced at Blum's residence. Accompanied by his audacious wife and three children ([Yonatan](#), [Benjamin](#), and [Iddo](#)), the Netanyahus' visit shakes up Ruben's life, leaving him to navigate a whirlwind of events beyond his control.

Joshua Cohen has written a humorous book of speculative fiction about Benzion Netanyahu's job interview at the fictional Corbin College in western New York during the winter of 1959-60.

The book is patterned after his real-life visit to Cornell where he was hosted by Harold Bloom. Netanyahu brings his whole family with him including his wife and three kids, one of whom is his son Binyamin.

Much of the book has to do with his host, economic historian Ruben Blum, his family, and his identity as the only Jewish faculty member.

Because he is Jewish, he is chosen to host Netanyahu who is an expert on inquisition in Spain, a subject Blum knows little.

Blum comes from the family of an East European garment cutter, while his wife Edith comes from a German-Jewish family of a small factory owner.

The conflicts are obvious and their teen aged daughter pines for a nose job. Here we have all kinds of identity issues wrapped up into one family.

The Netanyahus overwhelm the Blums wreaking havoc with their home and breaking their color TV,

Ruben condescends to call the Netanyahu family the “Yahus.”

The book is serious when it discusses Netanyahu’s thesis that antisemitism in inquisition Spain was racialized.

It did not matter whether or not a Jew converted to Catholicism, it was their blood that kept them from being true Christians.

Thus, if Judaism was racialized  
the only solution for Jews was to have a state of their own.

The book is based on the Revisionist Zionist philosophy of Benzion Netanyahu. Netanyahu was Jabotinsky’s, the founder of Revisionist Zionism, representative in the United States until he died in 1940.

In reviewing Hillel Halkin’s biography of Jabotinsky, I learned that Jabotinsky and Netanyahu by implication understood that

- 1) there would be an inherent conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine,
- 2) Nazism was going to destroy European Jewry

3) The Labour-Zionist socialist model was not going to work in Israel.

Jabotinsky and Netanyahu were clear-eyed realists and

I believe the reader will learn much from the issues concerning the role of Jews in America, especially in a very non-Jewish community.

The novel follows Benzion Netanyahu on a short visit to the fictional Corbin College. He arrives on a snowy night with his wife Sara and children Yonatan, Benjamin (Bibi), and Iddo. The novel is fictional, but draws on Benzion's short visit to Cornell in 1959-60 for an interview for a professorship in the History Department. He was hosted by no less than literary critic Harold Bloom. A fictional character, Rubin Blum stands in for Bloom.

Benzion is the main and most fascinating character. He was a scholar of medieval Spain, a professor at tiny Dropsie College in Philadelphia (now part of the University of Pennsylvania) and the author of the more than 1,400 page *Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain*.

This novel delivers an insight into Jewish thinking, one that bears on Israeli military policy.

The traditional view of the Spanish Inquisition is that it persecuted Jewish converts who continued to practice Judaism in secret.

Benzion Netanyahu reads the record differently.

He says that Spanish Jews converted willingly to Catholicism to integrate into Spanish life.

The Inquisition, he writes, persecuted and burnt converted Jews at the stake on the grounds that they were racially impure –not because they practiced Judaism in secret.

In other words, the Spanish needed someone to hate.

The conclusion: Jews are destined to be hated.

It's not far from this to Benzion's politics. In the face of hard hate, the best strategy is to set up a state and establish a vigorous army for defense.

When foreigners criticize Israeli military action, there's no point in responding positively –they will hate Israel anyway.

You can't understand Bibi's campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon without grasping this perspective

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Turning from Benzion, the novel portrays Sara Netanyahu as an aggressive and offensive shrew who imposes her family on their host.

It portrays Yonatan Netanyahu, the hero of the Entebbe Raid of 1967, as a horny teen.

Bibi is a tumultuous pest  
and Iddo a diaper-filler.

This is quite the stereotype of the unpolished and in-your-face Israeli family.

It also engages a very serious, significant and even sinister notion, and that is the degrees and forms of anti-Semitism, from a thinly disguised Cornell in the 50s to the political establishment of a home state for Jewish people.

Joshua Cohen has written a hilariously biting novel of the college world in the US of the 1950s, a fictional recreation of the brief tenure of Benjamin Netanyahu's father Ben-Zion of a position in History at a very minor college in up-state New York, as reminisced by the late Harold Bloom (*The Anxiety of Influence*), here transmogrified into the over-confiding 'Ruben Blum'.

The true theme, though, is the ambiguity of the Zionist dream and the ambiguity displayed by the main characters towards Zionism itself. In one layer it presents itself as the saving ideology for the Jews but on the other hand it portrays the Jews with the same racist stereotypes that anti-Semites have used for centuries.

