



Special Collections

Mordecai Richler

Biocritical Essay

by

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Two clusters of experience from Richler's boyhood, one actual, the other vicarious, have had a marked effect on his artistic psyche: his growing up in the Jewish community of Montreal during the 1930s and 1940s, of which he has stated, "that was my time, my place, and I have elected myself to get it right"; and his consciousness of the conflicts in Europe, particularly of the defense of Madrid, which made a strong impression on him as a boy of nine and later came to be used in his fiction as a metaphor for honour and heroism. The importance to him of these concurrent sets of experience is pointed up by their appearance again and again in various forms in his fiction and non-fiction. He focuses on both with equal intensity in his novels *The Acrobats* (1954) and *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955), both of which are considered "first novels", defined by George Woodcock as works that present "somewhat realistically the problems, aspirations, and agonies of a young writer".

A third-generation Canadian Jew, Richler was born on January 27, 1931, in Montreal, where his grandfather settled after venturing to Canada in 1904 to escape the Eastern European pogroms. Richler grew up in a self-contained world circumscribed by orthodoxy and by fear and ignorance of French and English Canadians. He attended Jewish parochial school, studied the Talmud and was expected to become a rabbi. At Baron Byng High School (the Fletcher's Field of his fiction), a Protestant school, he began to ease away from orthodoxy and to conceive of himself as both Jewish and Canadian, though this was not always an easy complementary conception of himself. "The minority man", he points out, quoting Norman Mailer, "grows up with a double-image of himself, his own and society's".

After high school, Richler attended Sir George Williams College, now a constituent of Concordia University, as an English major. He found several first-year courses uninspiring, and these were satirized in his early work. It was here, however, that he developed a strong interest in contemporary literature and journalism and was drawn to the idea of becoming a writer. Once he was sure he wanted to write, he abandoned college after

two years and left Canada for Europe which had attracted him since boyhood. He gives several reasons for this decision made when he was just nineteen: he was afraid of being enmeshed and devitalized by academic life; Europe offered the promise of excitement and adventure; he felt he could not write in a country culturally barren as he perceived Canada then to be; and he wanted the challenge of proving himself in major literary centres.

He spent two years in Europe, living mainly in Paris. Alone at first, he later became part of a circle of aspiring North American writers which included Allen Ginsberg, Terry Southern and Mavis Gallant, who had made similar literary pilgrimages to Paris. It was here that he began writing seriously and had his first significant piece published. A slight short story, "Shades of Darkness (Three Impressions)", appeared in *Points*, a Parisian little magazine for young writers. As the sub-title indicates, the story is really three separate impressions of three misfits. The work is an early illustration of Richler's credo that the writer has the moral responsibility to be the "loser's advocate".

Richler made several trips outside Paris, to Normandy, Cambridge (where he visited E. M. Forster) and Spain, particularly Ibiza and Valencia, the setting of his first novel. He remained in Spain, "rooted" for almost a year. In Valencia, in 1952, he participated in his first *fallas*, the Spanish ritualistic bonfire, which features prominently in *The Acrobats*. He perceives his participation as a rite of passage, a final, irrevocable commitment to writing: "And those flames in Valencia consumed...a host of personal devils....Gone with the flames went the guilt acquired by leaving college without a degree...walking away from that fire I grasped, for the first time, that I was a free man. I owed no apologies. My life was mine to spend as I pleased". It was here that he began *The Acrobats*.

Richler completed this novel in Paris and submitted it to a literary agent on his way back to Canada. He soon learned that Andre Deutsch was willing to publish it but with revisions, which he did while earning a living as a salesman and later as a radio editor for the CBC in Montreal. He revised the novel three times on the suggestion of his editors and agent, and after the third he told them: "I am no longer truly involved with *The Acrobats* and am wary of doing too much tampering....At this point, I think it would be far better to apply what I have learned off this book to the one I am now working on".

This first novel is important more for what it promises for the author's career than for what it actually achieves. There is undeniably some appeal in its frank, intense, youthful perceptions, its evocation of mood, its portrayal of a few distinct characters, its energetic use of language; but it is a flawed novel. As Richler realized even as he sent off his revised manuscript to the publisher, the novel could have profited from further revisions which might have eliminated two main shortcomings: the subservience of character development to theme and the undigested influence of writers such as Dos Passos, Malraux and Hemingway.

The novel's protagonist, André Bennet, an Anglo-French Canadian, is a bewildered youth looking for absolutes in a world where it is difficult to distinguish right from wrong. He has come to Valencia, once the capital of the Loyalist Government, now a squalid town, because of his admiration for the heroic International Brigades, who, because of their dedication to their cause, epitomize for him honour and truth, virtues he finds lacking in his own age. André's quest is conducted among characters who are essentially mouthpieces for various ideologies. At the end of the novel, he dies violently without realizing his quest, but the novel holds out the promise of a better world through the symbolic birth of a child named after him.

The Acrobats, as several critics have shown, examines many themes that recur in later novels, such as the conflicts between races, generations and traditions, the search for proper values, and the paradox of liberation as both creative and destructive. Certain elements of form and tone that have become characteristic of Richler's later novels also appear here: the ambivalent protagonist through whose consciousness the novel is presented, ambiguous endings, set pieces of satire, suspenseful plotting, brilliant dramatic scenes, striking evocation of mood and setting, grotesque presentation of villains, and sympathetic portrayal of losers.

The Acrobats sold 2,000 copies in England and under 1,000 in the United States where it was published also. In Canada it sold just as poorly. Soon after its publication, Richler took up residence in London. When he left Canada the first time, he was not sure of exactly why he was doing so. In 1954, he was less uncertain: the poor Canadian reception of *The Acrobats* and the promise of publication in a literary metropolis pointed him in one obvious direction. Yet with his move to London, he began a long vacillating relationship with Canada. He found it necessary to return to Canada and to Montreal in particular sometimes more than twice a year. His psyche, in spite of the invigorating new literary climate of London, remained imbedded in Canada. Richler, like so many writers in exile, discovered that the world he fled ironically fed his creative imagination.

And the first novel he wrote in London shows this. *Son of a Smaller Hero* vividly recreates the Montreal community of Richler's youth and provides an incisive study of the growth of a sensitive, intense, Jewish youth, Noah Adler, in this environment. Though the novel focuses on Jewish society and Jewish characters, Richler is not preoccupied with ethnic issues. As in all his fiction set in Jewish communities and peopled by Jews, he looks beneath the racial to the human, and uses the Jewish world as a metaphor for human experience. The novel transcends time, place and race. It is at once Jewish, Canadian and universal.

The many evident parallels between Noah's life and Richler's obliged him to include a prefatory note disclaiming any autobiographical intention. This has to be heeded in this and other novels by Richler, who tends to draw heavily on his own experience in his realistic fiction. Nevertheless it is important to keep in mind that novels are works of the imagination and must be read as such. In *Son of a Smaller Hero*, the author has some difficulty, however, in keeping himself consistently apart from his creation. The absence of aesthetic distancing weakens Richler's otherwise perceptive study of Noah; he often appears to share Noah's occasional youthful posturing and assumption of moral superiority.

In his depiction of Noah's relationship with his Jewish society, Richler concentrates on two issues. The first is Noah's tormenting love-hate relationship with this community, which is felt throughout the novel from the opening chapter where he escapes, yet yearns for his home, to the last where he tells his grandfather, Melech, "I am going and I'm not going". The second is Noah's rejection of his grandfather's severe morality. He admires his grandfather's sense of responsibility to his family but questions his unswerving adherence to harsh laws and his stern, just and merciless God. In the last chapter, Noah, who fears he may become as severe as his grandfather, learns to accept what Melech will never allow, that compromise is possible without betrayal, and that flexibility and tolerance must supersede rigidity and censure in human relationships.

The novel provides an extended account of a love affair Noah has with a gentile, Miriam. Some critics consider this affair to be less important than the space allotted it since it emphasizes Miriam's function not as

a lover but as a member of the gentile community. And as such she serves simply to reveal to Noah that this community is no better than his own. Moreover, like Richler's other female characters, Miriam fails to come alive -- an observation that Richler, who has admitted having difficulty with portraying women, is not likely to contradict.

Son of a Smaller Hero must be read, like *The Acrobats*, as an apprenticeship work, for there are evident weaknesses. Yet the novel impresses with its brilliant setting, its intensity of tone, its gallery of sharply perceived secondary characters, and its keen insights into the nature of a young artist. The novel was well received in London. Walter Allen spoke highly of it, stating that with it "the Canadian novel emerges for the first time". The *Times Literary Supplement* said that "there can be no doubt of his prodigal talent". Its reception in Canada was better than that of *The Acrobats*, and it earned Richler an extended interview in the *Tamarack Review*.

A Choice of Enemies, published in 1957, three years after Richler moved to London, is the first novel to have that city as its setting. The London it depicts, however, is a narrow one, that of Canadian and American writers and directors who fled to England to escape McCarthy's witch-hunts in Hollywood. Richler, who was now beginning to supplement his income by writing the occasional script for film and television, became quite familiar with this émigré colony of film people.

The novel is largely *The Acrobats* rewritten three years later. There are parallels between the two novels in the narrative structure, the patterns of relationships among the protagonists, the nature and function of the secondary characters, the political ambiance, the juxtaposition of characters with contrasting ideologies, the protagonists' rejection of politics as the solution to man's problems, and their inability to establish what should be sanctioned or censured, a dilemma pointed up by the suggestive titles of both novels. *A Choice of Enemies* is an improvement on *The Acrobats*, however. Richler avoids some of the shortcomings of the earlier work: the impassioned tone is more modulated, characterization is subtler, derivative passages are all but eliminated, aesthetic distance is now evident, and the theme is not shouted at the reader. At the same time, Richler has not succeeded in ironing out all the wrinkles of *The Acrobats*. The narrative is occasionally melodramatic and contrived as a consequence of Richler's harnessing it to the political thesis; certain characters are wooden, again because of their overt subservience to the theme; and the unravelling of the narrative is still a bit awkward. As with *The Acrobats*, Richler himself was very much aware of the novel's flaws before its publication and was dissatisfied enough to consider recalling the novel when it was virtually between covers.

The protagonist of the novel, Norman Price, is a Canadian professor, who has sacrificed his secure job at an American university for his Marxist beliefs, and now makes a living as a scriptwriter and a popular novelist. Like André, he yearns for what he considers the political integrity of men like his father, who gave up his lucrative Montreal medical practice to fight and die in Spain as a member of the International Brigades. Norman's involvement with Sally, a young Canadian, and Ernst, a refugee from East Germany, makes him realize that bigotry is not exclusive to the left-wing. He eventually comes to believe, like the survivors of *The Acrobats*, that what is important is not political commitments or alliances but adherence to "small virtues", to the traditional spiritual values of honesty, goodness and honour in one's everyday relationships with one's fellow man.

Though it was favourably reviewed, the novel did not sell well. In recent years it has attracted appreciative

critical attention. Some critics have suggested that it marks the end of Richler's novitiate. It certainly is an improvement on Richler's first two novels, but he is still an apprentice here; and this is primarily because he too obviously manipulates narrative progression and character development to serve his thesis. This manipulation prevents Norman Price from becoming as scintillating a character as Duddy in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Richler's fourth novel, in which he takes care to allow theme to emerge organically from, rather than constrict, the natural evolution of narrative and protagonist.

Richler began working on *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) soon after the publication of *A Choice of Enemies*. He was at that time sharing a flat in Swiss Cottage with Ted Kotcheff, the Canadian film director, with whom he worked on such successful television plays as *Paid in Full* (1958) and *The Trouble with Benny* (1959). A Canada Council Fellowship enabled him in 1959 to free himself from scripting and devote his time to *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* which he completed while living in the south of France.

It is not surprising that this novel, which critics consider the best of his early work and one of his finest novels, should have as its setting Montreal of the 1950s, the world that haunts Richler's psyche. An unprecedented assurance and confidence here mark a new stage in his development. The narrative pace is livelier than in the previous novels. Dramatic scenes are exceptionally well done. Humour is organic and integrated, and is not simply relegated to set passages, though these, ubiquitous in Richler's novels, are here as well. Richler is now able to stand back and view his protagonist with commendable objectivity. He has stated outside the novel that he both admires and despises Duddy, a Jewish youth from the Montreal slums who claws his way to the top. This ambivalence is patently evident in the novel and imparts to it a vitalizing tension and enriching complexity. Some critics have criticized Richler's portrayal of Duddy as being too quaint; others believe that it is too detached and too critical. Richler's brilliant portrait of Duddy is neither one thing nor the other. He is aware of both the good and the bad in his protagonist and is neither his castigator nor his advocate. He invites the reader to look objectively at Duddy, though he may not, like the author, be able to affirm whether he admires or despises Duddy.

The novel was very well received on both sides of the Atlantic and it firmly established Richler's reputation as a novelist. There were accusations of Anti-Semitism by critics who misinterpreted his aesthetic distancing as cold, sardonic detachment, but these were sparse. Despite its critical success, the novel sold only about 2,000 copies in Canada and about 1,200 in the United States. Within ten years, however, it became an established high school and college text, with sales reaching 35,000 a year in Canada. In 1974, with Richler as scriptwriter, the novel was made into a film, with Ted Kotcheff directing. It was considered one of the more successful Canadian movies. In 1984, a musical version, entitled *Duddy*, with Richler once again as a scriptwriter, was staged at the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton. Though it established an attendance record for the theatre, plans for taking it across Canada and eventually to Broadway were temporarily scrapped because of unfavourable reviews.

Between the publication of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *St. Urbain's Horseman*, a span of twelve years, Richler, kept busy with screen scripts, produced just two slim volumes, *The Incomparable Atuk* and *Cocksure*, novels characterized by their fantastic plotting and sustained humour. He was spending much of his time writing film and television scripts. His financial dependence on scriptwriting grew after his marriage in 1960 to Florence Wood, a Canadian model living in London. Within a few years he had the additional responsibility of providing for five children. His many scripts of this period include *No Love for Johnnie* (1959), a study of a roguish British politician, *Life at the Top*, the sequel to John Braine's *Room at*

the Top, and *The Looking Glass War*, an adaptation of John Le Carré's novel.

Richler writes scripts reluctantly. He perceives scriptwriting as a means of making a livelihood and of buying time to work on his fiction. He considers it unworthy of the talents of truly dedicated novelists. "Like most novelists", he says, "I am conditioned to working for months on material I discuss with nobody". He considers making films, on the other hand, to be a group activity with numerous participants among whom the most lowly is the writer who adapts thrillers and best sellers. Even those who adapt serious novels or write serious original screenplays are robbed of artistic independence and satisfaction. In the case of the adapter, the work remains essentially the original novelist's; and no matter what positive contribution the writer of the original screenplay makes, film making "belongs more than anything to the writer-director". Richler evidently has a facility for scriptwriting and his services are always in demand. But his reiterated aversion to the hack work involved and his preference for concentrating on his novels make him reject most offers unless pressed into compromise by economic considerations.

The Incomparable Atuk (or *Stick Your Neck Out*, the title of the American edition), published four years after *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is a slight novel, but it is skilfully plotted and overflowing with zestful caricatures of the fraudulent and the affected, drawn from the social and cultural circles of Toronto of the 1950s, the setting of the novel. Richler was still living in London at the time he wrote this novel, and perhaps his farcical style illustrates his observation about North American writers exiled in Europe: when they wrote about North America, they settled "on a style that did not betray knowledge gaps of day to day experience". Richler utterly disregards the element of probability in formulating the central idea of the novel, which tells of the picaresque adventures of Atuk, an Eskimo poet, in Toronto. Initially, Atuk appears to be an artless individual whose innocence is used to point up the foibles of the Torontonians; but soon he is revealed to be equally corrupt and pretentious.

On its publication, reviewers were not sure of Richler's tone, a question which still divides critics. Malcolm Ross, for instance, believes that the "comedy is as black as it is brilliant. There is hard even cruel mockery in Richler's laughter". On the other hand, George Woodcock feels that "light satire is perhaps the best term to describe this amusing but insubstantial book". Others are unable to take a firm stand on the nature of Richler's intent. F. W. Watt, for example, wonders about Richler's depiction of his characters: "with what gravity does he offer it and do we receive it?". In his essays and articles of this period, Richler tends to criticize harshly the Canadian cultural scenes; it is likely that he is doing so here; but he is also having fun. He himself describes the novel as "a much gentler book [than *Cocksure*]. More of a spoof".

In an early observation on young British writers, Richler states that they "seem to be writing almost provincial undergraduate jokes in a very special context". To a large extent, this comment could be applied to *The Incomparable Atuk*, for Richler focuses on dated and regional matters here. While some Canadian reviewers responded to the novel as a *roman à clef*, an American critic, who enjoyed the novel, was nevertheless "mystified by what was obviously inside jokes to 'hip' Canadians". *The Incomparable Atuk* is essentially fun. Though not a potboiler, it certainly is a *jeu d'esprit*, occupying a special place in Richler's canon.

Cocksure had its origins in a short story entitled "Griffin, Shalinsky, and How They Settled the Jewish Question", published in 1958, in the *Tamarack Review* (revised and published in 1961, in *Maclean's*, as "It's

Harder to be Anybody"). Of its process of creation, Richler has stated: "Riding into my second year of *St. Urbain's Horseman*, disheartened by proliferating school bills, diminished savings and only fitful progress, I finally got stuck so badly that there was nothing for it but to shove the manuscript aside. I started another novel, a year's heat, which yielded *Cocksure*".

Cocksure has the extravagant plotting and fantastic characterization of *The Incomparable Atuk*, but it is quite evidently neither as parochial nor as frivolous as that novel. Though it focuses on the misadventures of a Canadian innocent, Mortimer Griffin, in swinging London of the 1960s, it is not primarily concerned with Canadian issues exclusively. The novel looks inclusively at the ubiquitous decline of spiritual values and moral responsibility in contemporary society at large. Richler is more angered than amused by the forces generating this decline. Consequently, the humour here is more militant, the imagery more grotesque and the language more ribald than in *The Incomparable Atuk*. The grotesquerie and ribaldry, which some interpreted as obscenity, were responsible for the mild sensation the novel occasioned on publication: W.H. Smith bookstores in Britain refused to stock it, and Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa banned it altogether.

Richler has mentioned that "the subject matter of *Cocksure* lent itself to savagery", and that the novel was written out of "disgust". However, though it is Richler's most pervasively satirical novel, it never becomes a cogent, thoroughgoing satire. In fact, many of the early reviewers felt that Richler succeeds more in entertaining than in vexing the world. The work has been described as "a stylish farce" whose "absurdities are never truly disturbing", as "smart-alecky stuff" that does not cut deeply, and as a "serio-comic novel" in which "Richler wears his jester's patches well". An important reason for this mixed critical response is Richler's ambivalent perception of Mortimer. He portrays him as feckless, bumbling and more naive than innocent; and he pokes fun at him. Yet Richler is clearly on Mortimer's side when he is up against his corrupt society.

Richler's ambivalence not only renders his tone ambiguous, but for some critics it blots out his moral position. Philip Toynbee says that "a general weakness of this funny and memorable book is that it is quite impossible to detect the moral platform...from which his darts are launched". Perhaps had Richler not whimsically abandoned his working title "It's Harder to be Anybody", his moral stance would have been less elusive. Of this stance, he has stated that in writing the novel he was trying to see how far he "could make a case for that easily and glibly dismissed middle-class, decent, bill-paying, honourable man".

Written at a time when Richler was regularly involved with scriptwriting, *Cocksure* invites analysis in cinematic terms. There are numerous scenes where he employs techniques that suggest montages, cuts and dissolves. And the pervasive dialogue, which at times contributes incrementally to the narrative and at others explodes with appealing wit, could quite easily have been lifted from a film script. In fact, among Richler's papers at the University of Calgary MacKimmie Library, there are several drafts of radio and television versions of certain scenes that are just slightly different from their counterparts in the novel.

The critical reception of *Cocksure* -- published, like all subsequent Richler novels, simultaneously in Toronto, New York and London -- was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Anthony Burgess, for instance, a reader of the submitted typescript, stated: "I have no hesitation in praising it as a serious work of literary art -- in public if necessary". And he went on to do so in a review in *Life*. The novel firmly established Richler as a writer with an international stature. It was translated into several languages, including Dutch, Italian and Japanese. An

extract won the *Paris Review* Annual Prize for humour. In Canada, Richler was given the Governor General's Award for *Cocksure* and a collection of essays, *Hunting Tigers Under Glass*, published also in 1968.

In that year, Richler was made writer-in-residence at Sir George Williams University. *St. Urbain's Horseman* was still a major preoccupation, but he found time to issue a collection of previously published memoirs and stories about the St. Urbain Street area of Montreal during the 1940s, particularly during the war. There is a strong nostalgic tone in some of these pieces, but on the whole Richler retains an objective view of his vanishing past. Some of the short stories -- which in tone are similar to the bits of memoir -- have a young boy as narrator, and many of his experiences parallel Richler's. The narrator's parents, for instance, have an unhappy married life, details of which call to mind what Richler has mentioned about his own parents' marriage which ended in divorce when he was thirteen.

St. Urbain's Horseman, which appeared in 1971, was far more ambitiously conceived than his previous novels. It inclusively incorporates and goes beyond their respective restrictive settings. The protagonist, Jake Hersh, a Canadian currently living in London, is older than his predecessors and has far more varied experiences related to his roles as a family man, an artist and an individual conscious of his ethnic and national roots. Moreover, he is obsessed with reviewing his life, which occasions major flashbacks to his boyhood, youth and early manhood. Richler draws heavily on his own experiences for this novel; he has observed that Jake is closer to him than any of his other protagonists. There are many parallels between the details of their lives. Like Richler, Jake, for instance, spent his boyhood and adolescence in Montreal, admired the International Brigades, fled his stifling Jewish and Canadian environment for London where he intended to prove himself, made trips to Israel and Germany, married a gentile, has divorced parents, and returned in 1967 to Montreal for his father's funeral. A few accounts of Jake's experiences in the novel are actually verbatim reproductions from published bits of Richler's memoirs with the first person changed to Jake.

Jake's sensibility and beliefs also are similar to Richler's. Like his creator, he is apprehensive of aging, feels he belongs to a frivolous generation, is a socialist but distrusts professional liberals and the masses, is ambivalent towards Canada, strives to be a devoted family man, and celebrates "decency, tolerance, honour". Richler makes no conscious effort to hide the similarities. Despite this, *St. Urbain's Horseman* is a novel, not an autobiography. It has more incidents imaginatively conceived than drawn unchanged from Richler's own experience. It strictly maintains, unlike *Son of a Smaller Hero*, the double presence of author and protagonist.

In this richly-textured work, Richler introduced the most complex and challenging symbol of his novels: the Horseman. Critics have offered different interpretations of this elusive figure, perceiving him variously as Jake's conscience, as the "redeeming manhood for Jewish men", as "The redemptive deliverer" of the Jews, and as "a metaphor for the triumph of art". Each of these interpretations gives the Horseman a single, fixated meaning. However, Richler, who has stated that the novel "functions on several levels", evidently intends him as a symbol with multiple meanings, which vary in the three separate but contiguous spheres of the novel: the domestic and social, the racial and ethnical, the professional and artistic. In the first sphere, the Horseman is a false god, advocating dubious values; in the second, he is, when considered within the cyclical pattern of Jake's dreams and nightmares, part of Richler's ambitious attempt to create a myth for the contemporary Jew who, having "not gone like sheep to the slaughterhouse" in Auschwitz and being "too fastidious to punish Arab villages with napalm", did not "fit a mythology"; in the third, the Horseman represents the artist's desire for participation which is constantly in conflict with his inherent role of an observer.

This multiple symbolic function of the *Horseman*, together with the involved narrative, the skilful structural use of layers of flashbacks, the extensive gallery of memorable secondary characters (including a middle-aged Duddy Kravitz), and the penetrating portrait of a troubled, ambivalent protagonist, makes this novel a very dense work and has encouraged several critics to consider it Richler's best novel. It was awarded the Governor General's Literary Prize for 1971.

The publication of *St. Urbain's Horseman* marked the end of one phase in Richler's life. He began making preparations to return to Canada. In 1972 he took up residence in Montreal and has lived there ever since. His reasons for returning were as mixed as his reasons for leaving eighteen years earlier. They involved, as he has mentioned on different occasions, a certain nostalgia for the seasons, the Laurentians, and hockey; an odd fascination with Montreal; a realization that Canada was no longer a cultural backwater; an acknowledgement that Canada in recent years has been kind to him as a novelist; and a need to return to the wellsprings of his creative imagination.

Richler took nine years to publish his next novel, *Joshua Then and Now* (1980). He has admitted that he is "increasingly critical" of his fiction and works at a far slower pace, occupying himself at the same time with complementary activities. He was Visiting Professor at Carleton University for two years, teaching courses in journalism and literature. He wrote numerous reports and essays and several film and television scripts including that of a television play, *The Bells of Hell* (1974), and of the movie *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, that earned him nomination for an Academy Award in 1975. He was also appointed to the Editorial Board of the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1976. The following year, *Images in Spain*, a volume of photographs by Peter Christopher, appeared, for which Richler provided an extended foreword. Earlier, in 1975, he had published his first, and so far only, children's novel, *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*, which further underscores Richler's artistic versatility. The novel is about the wish fulfilment of an incompetent child, who dreams of performing heroic deeds for which he earns the respect of his family. It was praised by reviewers, and won the first annual Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award in 1976.

Joshua Then and Now (1980) could be read as a companion piece or a sequel to *St. Urbain's Horseman*. The protagonist, Joshua Shapiro, is similar in temperament and sensibility to Jake Hersh. Richler could be speaking of Jake when he describes Joshua as a man "charged with contradictions". Though Joshua is not as intensely introspective as Jake, he is like him neurotically insecure in his social and family life; he adheres to traditional moral values, yet has a perceptible streak of malice in him; he is sympathetic yet sardonic; he has nightmares about his gentile wife's infidelity; he is tormented by fear of real and imagined Nazi butchers; and he is obsessively conscious of his mortality. Both Joshua and Jake were born in Montreal and lived in similar domestic and communal environments, though particulars differ. Both developed artistic interests -- Jake as film director and Joshua as a journalist and occasional historian of the International Brigades. Both fled their constricting homeland for Paris, Spain and London. And in both novels there are numerous flashbacks to the protagonists' childhood and youth in Montreal and their early manhood in Europe. The current action of the earlier novel occurs in 1967 when Jake is in his late thirties; in *Joshua Then and Now*, it is 1977, and Joshua, ten years older than his predecessor, has returned to live in Montreal.

Of the great abundance of fascinating characters and absorbing episodes in this involved book, one reviewer said that "a more parsimonious novelist might have spread [them] over several novels". To give shape to all

this material, Richler employs an intricate pattern of flashbacks. While the flashbacks in *St. Urbain's Horseman* adhere more or less to a straightforward chronology, in *Joshua Then and Now* rapid and constant shifts back and forth among several time sequences occur. This structure, over which Richler said he had laboured for a long time (and which a few reviewers found "dizzying"), serves several purposes. It allows Richler effectively to create -- what is now an established characteristic of his novels -- suspense, of which the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer says: "I have seldom seen it used more skilfully". More important, the structure complements Richler's portrayal of Joshua as a man obsessed with what he once was and what he is now. The flashbacks are not randomly thrown together but are informed by the organizing principle of contrast between past and present. And Richler uses this contrast to accentuate his main themes: man's mortality and ephemerality, the ironical reversal of fortune occasioned by the passage of time, and the constricting hold past incidents can have on the individual and his need to exorcize himself of such a possessive past.

The origins of *Joshua Then and Now* and certain parallels between Joshua's and Richler's experiences inevitably invite consideration of the closeness of the author and his protagonist. *Joshua Then and Now* originated with Richler's return to Spain in 1976 after an absence of twenty-five years to write an introductory essay for *Images of Spain*. Richler was accompanied by his wife, a fact which reminds the reader that *Joshua Then and Now* is fictional though based in parts on Richler's experiences. After two weeks in Spain, during which time he revisited Ibiza where, like Joshua, he had lived for a short time in his youth, Richler produced not a travel piece but a very long essay about what Ibiza had once meant to him. For *Images of Spain*, Richler wrote a separate introduction which, though it says much about the geography, history and customs, is essentially dry, for Richler's more personal responses and his more meaningful visit to Ibiza were removed for inclusion in what was to become *Joshua Then and Now*. He rewrote the longer, personal essay as a memoir of his experiences in Ibiza and London, and later revised this memoir, transforming it into a work written in the first person which was "teetering between a memoir and a novel", and eventually into its present novel form where the third person replaces the first person. But elements of the memoir are clearly evident, as Richler himself mentions: "I remember, as Joshua does in my novel,...coming on this picture of Franco striding through shelled Madrid -- a conqueror. I don't know quite what it meant to me at that time. I don't pretend that I was politically conscious at the age of 8 or 9, but for some reason it did move me".

The novel was extensively and favourably reviewed in Canada, Britain and the United States. Some reviewers, however, found it uncomfortably familiar. One, otherwise positive, said, "It's as if a rich and unusual body of fictional material had become a kind of prison for a writer who is condemned to repeat himself ever more vehemently and inflexibly". Richler is currently working on a novel partially set in the North West Territories, which is a new setting for him. Perhaps in this new novel we shall see him, like Joshua, liberating himself from a possessive past.

While working on this new novel, Richler has continued to be a scriptwriter and a journalist. He wrote the script for the movie of *Joshua Then and Now* (1984), and published two books, an anthology *The Best of Modern Humour* (1983) and *Home Sweet Home* (1984), a selection of previously published journalistic essays and reports. Richler takes himself very seriously as a journalist, and no introduction to his work should ignore this aspect of his writing. While he dismisses scriptwriting as a means of buying time for his novels and as a form not worthy of the serious novelist, journalism is another matter. "I like journalism", he states frankly; "I take as much care of my journalism as anything I write". He is a prolific journalist, with about four hundred pieces published in both popular and prestigious journals and magazines in Canada, the United

States and Britain. His work has appeared since the 1950s in publications such as *Punch*, *New Statesman*, *Commentary*, *Kenyon Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Saturday Night*, *Canadian Literature*, *Playboy*, *Life* and *Weekend Magazine*. Not unexpectedly for one who has written so much and in such a range of publications, his journalism is uneven in quality. Some articles are written simply to startle or to be controversial, some are repetitive and self-plagiarizing, some are hasty opinions evidently written to be discarded and forgotten, and some are very serious, written with great deliberation over matter and style. Richler himself has selected and edited the pieces important to him in five collections: *Hunting Tigers Under Glass* (1968), *The Street* (1969), *Shovelling Trouble* (1972), *Notes on an Endangered Species and Others* (1974) and *Home Sweet Home* (1984).

Mordecai Richler has described himself as a serious novelist and affirms that any serious writer is essentially a moralist. But to come to his work for homilies and axioms is to be disappointed. His novels conclude with no formulated wisdom. Though he celebrates the traditional virtues, what concerns him is his protagonists' *process* of discovering the validity of these virtues in a more or less amoral, contemporary society, and their conflicting desire both to protest against this society and to accommodate themselves to it. All his novels so far reflect this thematic pattern and bear out his observation that every "serious writer has...one theme, many variations to play on it".

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