

# Mordecai Richler

*Nathalie Cooke and Norman Ravvin, Guest Editors*

**M**ordecai Richler's death in the summer of 2001 prompted an outpouring of appreciation for his writerly contributions. After all, how much more bland would our literary landscape be without the endearing curmudgeon who is Barney Panofsky, the fierce independence andchutzpah of Ephraim Gursky, or the set pieces that tempted Richler-the-writer towards the dessert table of extravagant description and away from the main course of plot? (Think of the Bar Mitzvah extravaganza in *Duddy Kravitz*). In the years immediately following his death, it seemed understandably difficult for commentators to separate the man from his work. During "The Richler Challenge," a conference hosted by McGill's Institute for the Study of Canada in 2004, speakers found themselves "missing" him, "remembering when," or laughing outright at Richler's wit and warmth.

Appreciation characterizes much of the commentary published soon after his death. Michael Posner's oral biography *The Last Honest Man* (2004) gathers comments about Richler from friends and colleagues, retaining their range and variety through direct quotation. The tone of Joel Yanofsky's 2003 *Mordecai & Me: An Appreciation of a Kind* is more mixed. Yanofsky, by his own admission removed from Richler's immediate circle, conveys his respect for Richler alongside efforts to resist a Montreal writer of an earlier generation.

Three further biographies are now available, by Charles Foran, M.G. Vassanji, and Reinhold Kramer. All of these express a need for reappraisal of Richler's legacy. What characterizes the impetus and tone of the new views of both the work and the man? In part, it is surely that Richler scholarship

and journalistic commentary are being taken up by individuals who are not part of Richler's immediate or extended circle, or even part of his generation. Kramer's book approaches Richler's life and work through the extensive collection of Richler papers at the University of Calgary Archives, while Foran makes impressive use of interviews with the Richler family.

More surprising still, perhaps, are recent efforts by young francophone scholars and writers who feel compelled to take a fresh look at an established writer and to reappraise Richler's role in the *Quebec* canon. Such willingness to go back to Richler with fresh eyes prompted the 2007 publication of *Un certain sens du ridicule* by Boréal Press. The collection includes translations by Dominique Fortier of a number of Richler's essays, selected by Quebec writer Nadine Bismuth, which address his childhood and his views on the writerly vocation.

Another form of reconsideration is enacted, literally, by way of visiting the neighbourhood in which Richler's Montreal fiction is set. Visitors familiar with Richler but not with the city of Montreal, or, alternatively, those familiar with the city but not with Richler, are drawn to tours of "Richler's Montreal." These are led by, among others, Montreal radio commentator and former John Abbott College instructor Stan Asher. Touring the "Main" places Richler at the scene of his upbringing, on the streets that supported Jewish daily life during the years before and directly after the Second World War. These tours highlight the intimacy with which Jewish writing in Canada is connected with Montreal, and, indirectly, with the city's Yiddish cultural institutions before and after World War Two. Although Yiddish publishing and journalism thrived in Montreal, the English-language book trade in Canada has always been a Toronto-based industry, even as major developments in literary and trade publishing have asserted themselves further afield since the 1960s. A consideration of Mordecai Richler's publishing history is exemplary: his career began in London with his first books; it was based in Toronto throughout his major creative period, with links to New York, through his work for the Book of the Month Club and his friendship with Robert Gottlieb, his editor at Simon & Schuster, and *The New Yorker*.

It should be added that part of Richler's legacy took shape in Vancouver, under the hand of George Woodcock, while he was editor of this journal. Woodcock's introduction to the 1965 McClelland & Stewart imprint of *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955) set the stage for the way critics and readers understood Richler. Richler, Woodcock wrote, "before he reached the age of thirty" was

among “the most important of the younger generation of Canadian fiction writers.” The novel under discussion was

in its narrowest sense, the account of an attempt by a Jewish youth in Montreal to escape from the mental bonds of the ghetto and, having passed through the feared and desired world of the *Goyim*, to realize his true self in the freedom which he believes exists beyond the invisible walls. Turning by turning, the vistas open. (vii)

Regardless of his years spent in London, the subject matter and outlook that motivated Richler’s work kept him at the forefront of Montrealers’ concerns. It might be argued, too, that the appearance and subsequent notoriety of the essays in Richler’s 1992 collection *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!: Requiem for a Divided Country* solidified the public’s perceptions of his importance for the broader cultural and political life of his city. The writer of fiction and memoir about a few streets in the old Jewish district, who allowed himself a chapter or two, for contrast, set in Westmount, established himself as a pundit, however idiosyncratic his stance, on the province’s culture, its identity and future. Many non-Jews in Quebec found Richler’s ascendancy to this role appalling. And still feel this way. And their strong feelings have not been stilled. Recent efforts to rename an intersection in the old Jewish neighbourhood Carré Richler had plenty of detractors, including the nationalist St. Jean Baptiste Society and city politicians. The corner of Fairmount and Clark, once a bagel and egg cream haven, will likely keep its familiar street names for some time yet.

But Jewish Canadians, especially those living in Montreal, saw in *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* their (and Richler’s own) vindication. The author, who had irked them in the 1950s and 1960s, portraying them as hard-bitten Yiddish-speaking rubes or suburban alrightniks, was now their champion in the face of Quebec nationalistic political pressures. In *Son of a Smaller Hero*, Richler seemed to be telling Montreal Jews that they would never be proper Canadians. With *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* he appeared to be administering a bear hug along with the guarantee that he would look out for their best interests.

How much does all of this matter to readers in Fredericton or Calgary or Vancouver? Rather little. Richler spoke to synagogue groups in the West in the 1970s, obviously angry and unwilling to put up with his audience’s questions about his views on Jews. He might call Edmonton the “boiler-room” of the country, but insults don’t travel far when the air is full of money. In some ways, Richler’s representativeness is specific to his hometown, and it is inevitably

linked to the cultural energies and industry of Toronto. His coronation in late career as a cultural icon arose distinctly from these centres. In western cities, a novel by Henry Kreisel or George Bowering is as likely to be found on a “One Book One City” program as one of Richler’s books.

Richler’s relationship with his Montreal constituency is unique, but certain contrasts with his compatriot Leonard Cohen are revealing. In mid-career, Cohen fashioned for himself a kind of logo, which has appeared on music albums and books, constructed of two rounded hearts placed to resemble a Star of David. The impossibility of such an emblem showing up within a country mile of Richler’s output illustrates his basic contrarian stance.

Whether these particularities have affected Richler’s reception in the academic field is difficult to say. His books are taught in Canadian literature courses; *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is sometimes made to stand in for the whole tradition of Jewish Canadian writing; he has been well-anthologized and translated abroad. Yet he has been lightly served by the Canadian scholarly community, where equally iconic figures such as Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence have received far more attentive canonizations. Explanations for these developments are teased out in the essays included here, as well as in the interview, visual, and bibliographic materials that can be found on *Canadian Literature*’s website. The essays included in this special issue are, for the most part, by young scholars, among whom are Canadian and European writers. A recurring theme is an examination of the conflicted relationships of Richler’s heroes with all forms of stable identity—whether as Jews, Quebecers, Canadians, even cosmopolitan intellectuals. Glenn Deer’s review essay takes stock of the most recent biographies, while Melina Baum Singer analyzes Richler’s reception in Canadian literary criticism. From Joseph Glass, Krzysztof Majer, and David Brauner we gain a unique view of Richler’s impact abroad, whether in Jerusalem, Lodz, or London. It does seem that change is afoot, partly motivated by Richler’s death and the associated ground-clearing and myth-making; in a strange way, he is ours now, open to interpretation, however measured and focused it may become, without the author’s capability to do as Richler always saw fit: answer back.

