

Son of a Smaller (Super) Hero

Ethnicity, Comic Books, and Secret Identity in Richler's Novels of Apprenticeship

"What's the, um, Golem?"

"A sort of Jewish Batman."

— Mordecai Richler, *St. Urbain's Horseman* (252)

In 1968, Mordecai Richler published an article on Ian Fleming's British super-spy James Bond in which he argues that the Bond saga is fundamentally anti-Semitic, despite the ostensible catholicity of its multi-ethnic pantheon of villains. This evil pantheon, Richler argues, is only superficially diverse. Bond villains, with their numerous physical deformities, their secret organizations, their lust for gold, and their projects of world domination, are actually coded versions of the Elders of Zion, the fictitious cabal whose forged *Protocols* constituted the ultimate anti-Semitic conspiracy fantasy of the early twentieth century. The Bond novels and films re-enact this paranoid fantasy from the perspective of a post-war England that is in decline as a world power and on the lookout for satisfying scapegoats and a license to kill.

The same year that he was excoriating Her Majesty's super-spy, Richler published a second essay on the subject of male fantasy figures and their connection to popular representations of Jewish ethnicity—this one on American superheroes. This essay's conclusions about the significance of male fantasy figures, however, invert his critique of Bond. The target of Richler's satiric pen in "The Great Comic Book Heroes" turns out not to be the spandex-clad heroes themselves (as we might expect), but rather Friedrich Wertheimer, a German Jew who changed his name to Dr. Fredrick Wertham when he moved to New York to practice forensic psychiatry in

the 1920s. Writing under the influence of Theodor Adorno's critique of the "culture industry," Wertham subsequently authored an influential study detailing the supposedly mind-rotting effects of comic books on children, portentously titled (after a horror comic of the same name) *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) (Jones 271-72). Wertham thus paradoxically became a spokesperson for the WASP family values of the 1950s that Richler abhors, as, for instance, when he characterizes the adventures of Batman and Robin (Bruce Wayne and "Dick" Grayson) as the "wish dream of two homosexuals living together" or warns mothers against allowing their daughters to fall prey to the Sapphic temptations of Wonder Woman (qtd. in Richler, "Great" 121). Richler's responses to this sort of "sexual McCarthyism" (121) are predictably tart and funny, but the point of his attack on Wertham's prurient homophobia is that it is complicit with the racism and xenophobia of twentieth-century world politics generally. Indeed, Richler views Wertham's attack on American comic books of the 1940s and 1950s not only as a perpetuation of these ideologies, but also as an attack on the very objects of popular culture that provided him with an incipient counter-discourse to the racisms of contemporary history in the first place.

"For my generation, born into the depression, beginning to encourage and count pubic hairs during World War II," Richler writes,

there was nothing quite like the comic books. While bigger, more mature men were . . . making atomic bombs, burning Jews and gassing Gypsies; [and] while General ("Old Blood and Guts") Patton was opening the Anglo-American service club in London saying, "The idea of these clubs could not be better because undoubtedly it is the destiny of the English and American people to rule the world" . . . we, the young, the hope of the world, were . . . being warped by Captain Marvel, The Human Torch, The Flash, Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, Hawkman, Plastic Man, Sub Mariner, and Batman and Robin. (120-21)

These costumed heroes were "[o]ur champions; our revenge figures against what seemed a gratuitously cruel adult world" (121), and also, "our golems": "[t]hey were invulnerable, all-conquering, whereas we were puny, miserable, and defeated" (128). Like other critical and popular revisionist histories that emphasize the Jewish context of superhero comics,¹ Richler reminds us that Superman was "the inspired creation of two Jewish boys, Jerome Siegal [sic] and Joe Schuster" (120), a genesis whose ethnic roots are encoded in the very details of the character's science fiction origin story as an alien orphan adopted by an American family. Indeed, Richler reads not only Superman but most of the superheroes of his youth as figures of Jewish fantasy, heroes "made of paltry stuff" (128)—but only on the surface:

The World's Mightiest Man, Powerful Champion of Justice, Captain Marvel was mere Billy Batson, newsboy, until he uttered the magic word, "Shazam!" The Flash is another case in point. "Faster than the streak of lightning in the sky . . . Swifter than the speed of light itself . . . Fleeter than the rapidity of thought . . . is *The Flash*, reincarnation of the winged Mercury . . . His speed is the dismay of scientists, the joy of the oppressed—And the open mouthed wonder of the multitudes!" Originally however he was as weak as you or I. A decidedly forlorn figure. He was Jay Garrick, "an unknown student at a mid-western university . . ." and, for my money, a Jew. (128)

Richler's fascination with the ethnic subtexts of popular male fantasy in these 1968 essays provides a framework for my examination of the relationship between the superhero, the boy hero, and the anti-hero in two of Richler's earlier novels of apprenticeship, *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955) and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959). What interests me particularly is the apparent difference between the essays and the novels in their deployment of superhero tropes. The essays project an epic grudge match between empowered minoritarian superheroes and the villainous forces of twentieth-century history represented by the anti-Semitic James Bond and Dr. Wertham's comic strip double, the "boring" Rex Morgan, M.D. (129). By contrast, the novels examine the notion of heroic Jewish "revenge figures" more cautiously and more critically. In both of these *Bildungsromane* the superhero is ultimately not held up as an ego-ideal for its rebellious Jewish boy-heroes, but rather as a dangerous temptation. As such, it functions as a parodic comment on the insular version of heroic Jewish masculinity that becomes the main target of Richler's satire. This reversal is due to the fact that, unlike Richler's essay on comic books, which concerns the interventions of Jewish artists into the metanarratives of American mass culture, the novels concentrate on the issue of self-ghettoization in Jewish Montreal: what Richler, in *Son of a Smaller Hero*, satirizes as a form of imbrication behind "the walls . . . [of] habit and atavism" (14).

Richler's preferred model of Jewish identity is a form of cosmopolitanism towards which the novels gesture when they present the dilemma of male Jewish identity formation as a false choice between "tribalism" and "assimilation." As the hero attempts (often unsuccessfully) to navigate a path between the "ghetto" and the "world," maturation in these novels comes tacitly to be associated with the deconstruction of the tribalist/assimilationist binary and with the consequent adoption of a Jewish identity that subsumes ethnic, familial, and historical ties within a more mobile and worldly paradigm of identification.

In *Son of a Smaller Hero*, Richler presents the maturation of the protagonist, Noah Adler, as a process of escaping from the orthodox world of tradition represented by his grandfather, Melech Adler, and the Jewish ghetto of Montreal. The consequences of reaffirming an identity defined solely in terms of Jewish ethnicity and rooted in obeisance to “the past” are suggested by the destructive paths taken by Noah’s father and uncle, men of the previous generation, both of whom are parodies of the superhero as golem. Noah’s Uncle Shloime, for instance, rebels against Melech’s orthodox Jewish values, falling into a life of petty crime that ultimately leads to his torching of the patriarch’s business and his beating and robbing of the novel’s socialist business owner, a character who supplies a significant counter-voice to Melech’s “tribalism.” These symbolic crimes against contending father figures vividly suggest the predicament that Richler attributes to the children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants: locked in an angry rebellion against the traditionalism and rigidity of their parents, they are ultimately unable to break out of their pattern. Thus, Shloime’s attempt to convince his nephew Noah (Melech’s grandson) that they have “a lot in common” is marked by a rebelliousness that collapses back into an essentialist identification with ethnic roots:

“We’re both lone operators, eh? We both like *shiksas*—dames—and we both don’t give a damn about eating kosher and . . .”

“We’ve got nothing in common,” Noah said sharply.

“At least I admit what I am,” Shloime continued. “At least I don’t pretend to be a Goy . . .” (84)

Later, Shloime’s tribalist rebound is ironically confirmed when he rationalizes joining the army on the grounds of protecting Canada from “the commie menace,” and Noah is appalled by the way that his uncle’s speech reflects “an incongruous mixture of newspaper editorials, army lectures, and ghetto fear” (184). “Obviously,” Noah concludes, “Shloime had found his level. He was a fully adjusted member. Had Melech Adler abandoned love for the sake of righteousness and come to America to produce this dangerously small man? Was this boy the end-product of religious fanaticism?” (184).

The novel’s answer to these rhetorical questions is an emphatic “yes,” and Richler articulates this answer by presenting Shloime as a corrupt version of the Jewish superhero. Nicknamed “Kid Lightning” (21-22), and hanging out with a Jewish gang called “The Avengers” led by Lou “The Hook” Edelman (86, 58), Shloime is to some extent a parody of American Jewish gangsters like Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel and Meyer Lansky who operated in the 1920s and 1930s in New York. But Shloime’s criminal nickname is

also an allusion to the lightning-powered “Jewish” superheroes with whom Richler identified in his youth: newsboy Billy Batson who calls down a magic bolt of lightning by uttering the word “Shazam!” to transform himself into Captain Marvel, and Jay Garrick, The Flash, who could run “faster than the streak of lightning in the sky” (“Great” 128). Shloime’s petty gang, “The Avengers,” seems likewise to be a parodic assembly of Richler’s nostalgic superhero “revenge figures.” In this way, Richler anticipates his reclamation of the superhero for Jewish counter-culture in “The Great Comic Book Heroes,” but also warns of the potential slippage between the desire for counter-cultural “revenge” and the reactionary ethnic “fanaticism” of the “dangerously small man” (*Smaller Hero* 184).

Richler’s satire of the dangers of insularity is developed further in the novel’s presentation of Noah’s unhappy father, Wolf, whose story, like his brother Shloime’s, also contains overtones of superhero parody. Not a “superhero,” but the “smaller hero” of the novel’s title, Wolf Adler is Melech’s eldest and most obedient son whose hopes for success hinge on becoming a partner in his father’s salvage business. When Melech’s scrap yard burns down, Wolf becomes an iconic hero for the Jewish community, dying in the fire, apparently trying to rescue the box of parchment scrolls that Melech kept locked in his office. The myth spreads that “Wolf Adler died for the Torah” (142), but this is far from the truth. Wolf, a “smaller hero” indeed, has privately fantasized about murdering Melech and mistakenly believed that his father’s lock-box was filled with money, not Torah scrolls. “[T]he true story of Wolf’s death” must thus be covered up by the family lest the anti-Semites get hold of this seeming confirmation of the prejudice “that the Jews only care for money. That they’d even die for it” (190-91). Richler’s satiric treatment of Wolf is moderately gentler than his outright condemnation of Shloime because it is clear that Melech treats the former unfairly. Nonetheless, Wolf, too, is ultimately satirized and rejected as a model for Noah’s own maturation because, like Shloime’s adolescent revolt, Wolf’s Oedipal rebellions against the family patriarch remain impotent and self-destructive.

As before, Richler conveys Wolf’s failure to move beyond the world of traditionalism and filial piety demanded by the patriarch through ironic allusions to a comic book superhero—in this case, Batman and his hidden lair, the Bat Cave. Wolf, whose very name recalls the menacing creatures of the night upon which Bruce Wayne bases his superhero identity, is most at home in a domestic cave of his own, which Richler presents as a microcosm of the entrapping “Jewish ghetto.” Despite Wolf’s constant anxiety,

he was seldom nervous or afraid in the den. The den was his. . . . One wall of the den was completely taken up by his bookshelves. Here he kept his old copies of *Life*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Reader's Digest*, *True Crime*, and several volumes of scrapbooks. . . . Most of the drawers to his desk were locked. His diary he kept in the bottom drawer, which also had a false bottom where he kept his personal papers and letters. Except for prosaic entries, such as family birthdays, dates of operations and graduations, his diary was kept in a code of his own invention. (133-34)

Wolf's den with its *True Crime* pulps and its false-bottomed drawers and secret codes is, like Batman's Bat Cave, a space of male fantasy where powerless men project imaginary compensations. In fact, Wolf even appears to fantasize that he has a sort of "super power":

When he had to contend with the big drunken Irishmen who came into his office . . . or when he was about to ask his father for more pay, he had a trick of wiggling his ears and raising his eyebrows and making his glasses go up and down on his nose. That way, if the others took what he said in the wrong spirit, he could always reply that he had been joking. (33)

The contents of his encrypted diaries convey a similar wish for extraordinary abilities and heroic schemes. At one point he converts his daily walks into a project of imaginatively circumnavigating the globe (177); at another, he formulates "a project to build a bridge across the Atlantic" and "[a]n ideal society, with secret signals, had been planned" (179), ambitions which not only present hopeful possibilities, but also, perhaps, obliquely suggest the Zionism of his father, Melech, that Richler treats as an extension of "ghetto mentality." The novel's "smaller hero," in other words, is a parodic Batman who is not only trapped in the Bat Cave of his father's traditionalism, but who is also literally entombed in the earth beneath the rubble of his father's business. Once again, Richler suggests that narrowly imagined culture-heroes are not only to a large extent fabrications, but also represent a dangerous "dead end" for the maturation of his fictional protagonists.

If Richler links his mockery of the failed rebellions of Shloime and Wolf to a critique of insular forms of "heroic" Jewish masculinity, what alternative model of Jewish identity does the novel propose? Discovering this alternative is the theme of Noah's narrative, in which "freedom" is initially represented as a rebellion that amounts to assimilation, symbolized (as is often the case in Richler's works) by the protagonist's love affair with a "perfect" Gentile woman—the wife of Noah's English professor (49). The implications of this affair are underlined by an argument Noah has with her in which she asks him if he "worr[ies] about being a Jew" and accuses him of being the kind

of Jew “who turns all the way around and becomes an anti-Semite himself” (70). This accusation is often levelled at Richler as well, and Noah is indeed plagued by the sense that his rebellion is an unsatisfactory one: “[he] had renounced a world with which he had at least been familiar and no new world had as yet replaced it. He was hungering for an anger or a community or a tradition to which he could relate his experience” (64). Eventually, he feels that he has become a “stranger,” thinks nostalgically of his family, and feels “no longer proud to have been accepted by the *Goyim*” (97). But his father Wolf tells him bluntly that there is no going back, “You’re no longer a Jew and you’ll never become one. So what are you? A nothing . . .” (123). The challenge the novel dramatizes is Noah’s attempt to transform this “nothing” into the ground of a cosmopolitan identity that refuses the either/or logic of tribalism and assimilation. Noah repeatedly characterizes this possibility as the need to do more than simply say “No” to the riddle of ethnicity (179): “It’s not enough to rebel, he thought. To destroy. It is necessary to say yes to something” (29). Ultimately, this “yes” is represented in the novel by the great Richlerian panacea of “Europe,” for which Noah eventually departs; and unlike his affair with the professor’s wife, this mode of departure from his family connotes a more satisfying (though also more ambiguous) set of identifications:

“You are going from us?”

“I am going and I’m not going. I can no more leave you [Melech], my mother, or my father’s memory, than I can renounce myself. But I can refuse to take part in this. . . .” (203)

Predictably, Melech reads Noah’s choice as a form of assimilation: “Go, become a *Goy* . . . Go join, become my enemy” (203). But Noah leaves this climactic meeting between generations with one of the Torah scrolls inadvertently rescued by his father and inscribed in his grandfather’s hand, a gesture that reaffirms his commitment to a form of cosmopolitanism that does not renounce ethnic and family histories, even as its practitioner sets out for broader horizons.

Significantly, Noah’s transvaluation of what his grandfather perceives as assimilation into a form of rooted cosmopolitanism is inherent in Richler’s reading of the Jewish secret identities of “The Great Comic Book Heroes.” The progeny of Jewish creators as well as an alien who crash lands on earth only to be adopted by a kindly family from “Smallville,” USA and given the white-bread name “Clark Kent,” Superman has become the preeminent pop culture metaphor for Jewish assimilation. Anticipating comic historian Jules

Feiffer's observation that Superman is the "ultimate assimilationist fantasy" (qtd. in Hoberman and Shandler 166), Richler points out that Superman may be symbolically Jewish, but Clark Kent "is the archetypal middle-class Canadian WASP, superficially nice, self-effacing, but within whom burns a hate-ball, a would-be avenger with superhuman powers" ("Great" 123). At one level, then, the Superman/Clark Kent dual identity might be read simply as symbolic of "passing" or assimilation, since the hero's "true" identity must ever remain "secret." But Richler views this "assimilated" hero with his own brand of X-ray vision that brings the Jewish ethnicity of Superman's creators and the Jewish immigrant allegory of the character's story into the foreground, without entirely obliterating the glossy costumed surface. Indeed, Richler suggests that Superman's Jewishness was never really a "secret identity" at all. It was an open secret, especially given that these heroes were created at a time "when Jews were still thinly disguised as Gentiles on stage, in novels, and comic books" (128). The key word for Richler is "thinly." And under the inspection of Richler's X-Ray vision, the costume of assimilation is rendered even more transparent, revealing not simply a core of "Jewish" identity, but, as Richler says of Superman, "a universal hero" (123). Such a doubling of identity—which transforms the signifiers of assimilation into palimpsests to imagine something more fluid and complex—begins, in turn, to look very much like a representation of Richler's own brand of cosmopolitanism, which attempts to deconstruct either/or models of ethnic identity through an action of shuttling between the particular and the universal. Like Noah's departure for Europe, which sets the Torah scrolls in his pocket to flight at the end of *Son of a Smaller Hero*, such a shuttling rejects any form of "self-ghettoizing" identity politics in favour of the more worldly model of ethnic selfhood cultivated by Richler himself. Richler was a satirist and cosmopolitan exile whose ambivalent relationship to the Jewish community of Montreal as well as to his own status as a "Jewish writer" are well-documented (Ramraj 2). Thus, in his seminal study of Richler's "ambivalent vision," Victor Ramraj makes the striking claim that "[t]hrough these novels focus on the Jewish community, Richler is not preoccupied with ethnic issues" (1, 17). It is under the terms of Richler's ambivalent form of "rooted cosmopolitanism," I would argue, that one may best understand such a claim and assent to the argument that these novels "transcend time, place, and race, and become novels that are at once Jewish, Canadian, and universal" (17).

Richler's presentation of Shloime and Wolf as parodies of the Jewish superhero in *Son of a Smaller Hero* anticipates the reading of ethnicity,

superheroes, and secret identities that I have just been tracing. They are parodies precisely because they are unable to imagine a type of Jewish “Superman” who would soar beyond the ghetto to become a “universal hero.” Shloime’s “Kid Lightning” identity, in particular, is a grotesque version of Richler’s superhero fantasy, for “The Flash,” the comic book character he parodies, is, even more than Superman, Richler’s ultimate example of the cosmopolitan Jew. “With *The Flash*,” Richler writes, “we are on the brink of a new, a liberated era. Jay Garrick is Jewish, but Reform. Semi-assimilated. In the opening frame, lovely Joan (significantly blonde) won’t date him, because he is only a scrub on the university football team while Bull Tyson is already a captain. . . . Jay, naturally, is intellectually inclined. . . . [He] spends most of the time in the lab with his professor” (“Great” 129). Moreover, The Flash’s origin story suggests an allegory for the process of cosmopolitan transformation that Noah eventually undergoes. After an experiment with hard water in the college laboratory goes wrong, Jay Garrick collapses: “He lies between life and death for weeks,” (129) caught, like Noah, between extremes that Richler’s texts allegorize as “tradition” and “assimilation.” But in the end, Jay wakes up, “endowed with superhuman powers . . . [able to] walk, talk, run, and think swifter than thought. . . . He will probably be able to outrace a bullet!” (129). This attainment of “superhuman powers” of speed, movement, and thought, Richler implies, is an apt metaphor for the “liberated era” of “semi-assimilat[ion]” that Jay Garrick represents and that Noah’s narrative of maturation towards cosmopolitan mobility dramatizes.

Richler’s comic-book deconstruction of ethnic identity is developed further in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, but here the case is more complicated because unlike *Son of a Smaller Hero*, *Duddy Kravitz* is not as straightforward. As J. A. Wainwright has shown, Richler’s attitude to Duddy is frequently sympathetic, and the novel is careful to demonstrate why Duddy cannot be dismissed simply as a “*pusherke*,” a “little Jew-boy on the make,” “a busy, conniving little yid” (244, 280). Whatever moral failings he might have, the novel clearly shows that they are shaped by and against the dominant values of his corrupt environment: an environment defined not only by his father’s petty criminality, but also by the pervasive anti-Semitism of the city and the ruthlessness of the capitalist world. Nonetheless, as the many debates this novel has engendered attest,² it remains the case that Duddy’s ascent through a series of underhanded schemes and betrayals, from meagre beginnings in Montreal’s Jewish community to success as the wealthy owner of lakefront properties in Sainte Agathe, remains an

“apprenticeship to a perverted myth” (McGregor 133). In effect, the heavily satirized Shloime and Wolf plots of *Son of a Smaller Hero* move into the foreground in *Duddy Kravitz*, as do their associations with superhero comics and the Jewish ghetto’s construction of parodic culture-heroes—though with significant expansions and complications.

Taking Wolf’s place as a parodic culture-hero is “the legendary” Jerry Dingleman (24), a local Jewish hustler who has “made his name” (24), growing up to become an infamous gangster and dope-smuggler known as “The Boy Wonder” (10). For Duddy’s father Max (who plays the role of Dingleman’s sycophantic bard), the story of how the Boy Wonder parlays the twenty-five cents he makes from the sale of discarded streetcar transfers into a fortune and a criminal empire is not just a crystallization of the community’s “fears and hopes” (26); it is also a legend of heroic Jewish vengeance against a larger anti-Semitic culture by “a God-fearing man” who “didn’t smoke or drive his car or place bets on the Sabbath” (25, 131). The novel, however, presents him as a grotesque parody of the heroic community ideal, for rather than receiving superpowers like Richler’s fleet-footed Flash, the “Boy Wonder had been struck by polio” in his twenties, and now “[h]is legs were twisted and useless” (131). Moreover, like Shloime “Kid Lightning” Adler (whose criminal misadventures are echoed by his own), the “Boy Wonder” has a diminutive nickname that undercuts the stature of his legend. Dingleman’s name may be that of a superhero, but it is an allusion to Batman’s kid sidekick, Robin. If Wolf and his Wolf’s Den were *Son of a Smaller Hero*’s parodic answers to Batman and the Bat Cave, *Duddy Kravitz*’s “Boy Wonder” legend brings the novels’ use of the Batman myth to parody dubious culture-heroes full circle: no matter how far the “twisted” culture-hero’s “nerve” (25) might take him in the eyes of the community, his criminality dooms him never to rise above the status of morally-stunted sidekick in the eyes of the satirist.

Max Kravitz’s naïve hero-worship of the Boy Wonder legend forms the backdrop of Duddy’s upbringing. It is therefore not surprising that, unlike Noah, in *Son of a Smaller Hero*, Duddy apprentices himself to the parodic culture-hero’s example (63), and he eventually succeeds in taking his place within the symbolic economy of St. Urbain Street’s legendary figures (318-19). As a delinquent schoolboy, Duddy leads a gang called “The Warriors” (50) and postures as a “big hero” (12), even calling himself “The Avenger” (15) when tormenting his English teacher with prank phone calls, one of which inadvertently leads to the death of the man’s wife. Richler also

explicitly links Duddy's development as a Boy-Wonder-in-training to comic book superheroes by having one of Duddy's earliest schemes be his rental of "contraband" American comic books during wartime, when these sought-after items were in short supply (55)—a situation that Richler later remembers in "The Great Comic Book Heroes" as a "flourish[ing] . . . street corner black market in *Detective* and *Action* comics" (126; see also *The Street* 61). The parodic nature of Duddy's development as a comic book mogul is made explicit, too, for Duddy soon begins dealing in pornographic comic strip parodies like "*Dick Tracy's Night Out . . . Lil Abner gets Daisy Mae, Terry and the Dragon Lady, Blondie plays strip poker, Gasoline Alley Gang Bang, and more*"—a "venture [that] was the first of Duddy's to end in disaster" (55-56). In addition to their broad satirical overtones, some of these details suggest that Richler has modeled Duddy on the false-hero Shloime Adler from the previous novel, even going so far as to give Duddy an alias that is the same as that of Shloime's gang, "The Avengers." The name is appropriate, for Duddy is Richler's most fully-developed comic book "revenge figure"—a revenge figure whose ambition, like Dingleman's, reflects obedience to the precepts of a "ghettoized" ethnicity and, like Shloime's and Wolf's, is rigidly circumscribed by the values of a severe Jewish patriarch.

In Duddy's case, the rooting of his "heroism" in a traditional concept of ethnicity is signified by his veneration of his grandfather Simcha's slogan, "A man without land is nobody" (49). This kernel of patriarchal "wisdom" feeds Duddy's dream of owning land in Sainte Agathe, where he plans to build "a whole town," complete with a synagogue and a farm for his grandfather (311). More importantly, it also guides Duddy's pursuit of selfhood, a process which is directly bound up in the realization of this dream. Becoming "a somebody," for Duddy, is identical with owning land in accordance with his grandfather's dictum and with replacing the Boy Wonder as the culture hero of St. Urbain Street's Jewish ghetto (62-63, 315). Richler satirizes this goal as too narrow, underlining the culture-hero's ruthlessness in part through the grandfather's refusal of the proffered farm and withdrawal of his blessing once he discovers that Duddy has come by this land dishonestly. But Richler undercuts the patriarch's moral authority as well. Ironically, it is the corrupt Boy Wonder who provides a direct critique of his insular values, telling Duddy that his grandfather never wanted a farm in the first place because, for "old men" like him, "[s]itting in their dark cramped ghetto corners," the land was only ever a pastoral fantasy: in actuality, those men "want to die

in the same suffocating way they lived, bent over a last or a cutting table or a freezing junk yard shack” (313). Thus, whereas *Son of a Smaller Hero* ends with Noah embarking on a quest for a new ground of Jewish identity, thereby confirming his status as a cosmopolitan revision of the Biblical Noah, *Duddy Kravitz* ends with Duddy as a parodic Moses who, despite his heroic stature, finds the narrative of homecoming elusive. Not only does Duddy’s grandfather repudiate him, but also “Moses, [Duddy] recalled from *Bible Comics*, died without ever reaching the Promised Land” (212). Like the Boy Wonder, in other words, Duddy becomes a powerless comic book hero too. That he finds his parodic identity mirrored in the cartoonish patriarchs of *Bible Comics* is Richler’s darkly humorous reproach to the culture-hero’s limitations. In the end, Duddy has been so intent on *becoming* a local legend that he remains blind to what Richler elsewhere presents as the superhero medium’s potential to act as a form of pop culture epistemology, by providing metaphors for imagining new ways of becoming “a somebody”—or, like Noah in *Son of a Smaller Hero*, a cosmopolitan “nobody.”

The critique of ethnic insularity via a parody of Jewish superheros that one finds in the novels of apprenticeship is a significant *leitmotif* in Richler’s oeuvre, one that reappears dramatically, for instance, in Richler’s depiction of misplaced idolatry in *St. Urbain’s Horseman*. In this later novel, the Jewish protagonist, Jake Hersh, gradually becomes disillusioned with the globe-trotting heroics of his Nazi-hunting cousin Joey Hersh, the titular “avenging Horseman” (31) of St. Urbain Street whose aggressive defence of Israel symbolizes “the possibility of the Jews becoming assertive and heroic, shedding their image as a people who accept unprotestingly persecution and exploitation as their lot,” even as “his craving for vengeance . . . makes him cruel and exploitative” in turn, marking him as a “false god in the ethical sphere of the novel” (Ramraj 102-3, 100, 104). The morally ambiguous Horseman flits through Jake’s dreams in images of romance tinged with threat, “bronzed as a lifeguard, trousers buckled tight against a flat stomach . . . [e]xhorting the men, mocking them, demanding vengeance” (64-65); he is characterized variously as “a knight returned from a foreign crusade” (119), a fighter “in boxing trunks” and a cowboy “drawing a gun menacingly” (127). Most significant, however, is Jake’s mythopoeic identification of the Horseman as an embodiment of the Golem, a “body without a soul . . . made by Rabbi Judah Ben Bezalel in the sixteenth century to defend the Jews of Prague from a pogrom and [who] . . . still wanders the world, turning up whenever a defender is most needed” (252-53). The Golem is, in other words,

“[a] sort of Jewish Batman” (252)—a pop culture gloss on Jewish folklore that confirms not only the Horseman’s superhero pedigree, but also his kinship with the satirically portrayed “Kid Lightning” and “Boy Wonder” figures of the earlier novels as well. The Horseman’s ambiguous demise—at the hands of either the Nazi Doctor Mengele or a community of Jews living in Paraguay—carries the force of the satirist’s judgment on “golems” and “revenge figures” whose moral compass cannot navigate beyond the limits of the ethnic enclave.

Jake himself, meanwhile, follows an ironic trajectory of development reminiscent of Duddy Kravitz’s, for, like Duddy, Jake reveres, questions, and recuperates the dream of superheroic Jewish masculinity over the course of the narrative, ultimately appearing to adopt the fallen Horseman’s identity as “Jewish Batman,” a transformation reminiscent of the way that Duddy comes to supplant the legendary status of the gangster named for Batman’s own apprentice, the Boy Wonder. Suppressing his intuition that the mythic Horseman might only be “a graven image” (434) or “distorting mirror” in which “we each took the self-justifying image we required of him” (433), Jake ultimately appears to surrender to what Ramraj aptly calls “the nightmare of horsemanship” (105), dreaming that “he was the Horseman now. It was Jake who was St. Urbain’s rider on the white stallion. Come to extract the gold fillings from the triangular cleft between Mengele’s upper front teeth with pliers” (435). Significantly, the “nightmare” (435) culminates in Jake’s retreat to his “attic aerie”—a secret lair protected by “booby traps” (3) that recalls Wolf Adler’s den—where he implicitly writes himself into the Horseman’s legendary history (436). Within the context of Richler’s superhero poetics, such a conclusion does more than simply affirm Ramraj’s suggestion that the Horseman is Jake’s “alter ego” (93); it suggests that Jake Hersh is, in effect, the Horseman’s analeptic secret identity.

Richler’s ambivalent appreciation of Jewish culture-heroes, and his novels’ implicit endorsement of eccentric, anti-essentialist forms of Jewish identity that he finds modeled in the superhero “fantasy figures” of the 1940s and 1950s, ultimately court the accusation that Richler’s cosmopolitanism is a cosmopolitanism of the imagination only—a cosmopolitanism, in other words, of the deracinated artist. *Son of a Smaller Hero* ends with Noah’s symbolically-loaded departure, but gives little sense of what a rooted cosmopolitanism would look like in practice. *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is even less forthcoming, presenting the cosmopolitan alternative to Duddy’s ironic “success story” almost entirely by implication. Its minor

representatives are Duddy's Uncle Benjy, who urges his nephew to murder the "brute" within and become a "*mensh*" (280), and Duddy's schoolyard acquaintance, Hersh, who rejects the path of becoming "the apogee of the Jewish bourgeois dream" (a doctor or a lawyer) and who succeeds in "purging [him]self of the ghetto mentality" (225) by becoming an artist and following Noah Adler into voluntary European exile. These novels, in other words, tend to privilege metaphors and artist heroes whose voluntaristic models of cosmopolitan identity formation may in some sense be as much "fantasy figures" as Richler's boyhood superheroes. The bleaker subject of how material and historical forces might limit the freedom of cosmopolitan self-invention is one that the novels often veer away from confronting. To the inevitable question "What about Germany?" the novels tend to offer what amounts to a liberal evasion epitomized by Noah's rather Olympian universalism: "The important thing is not that they burned Jews but that they burned men" (*Smaller Hero* 70). Their superhero poetics of a cosmopolitan Jewish identity that attempts a flight beyond conventional notions of ethnicity might therefore seem overly idealistic and, in a derogatory sense, "comic bookish."

Nonetheless, Richler's turn to the comic book trope of superheroes to narrate the development of young Jewish men is itself instructive. For, although Richler's male protagonists often fall significantly short of "heroism" and are reduced to parodies of the golems and culture-heroes they aspire to become, Richler's hybridization of the *Bildungsroman* with the pop culture grammar of superheroics suggests that masculine identity formation in ethnic minority cultures can often only be fully grasped through the rubric of hyperbolic heroic struggle—a "superheroism" to which the conventions of comic book melodrama and cinematic male fantasy are ideally suited. Noticing that his sons have become "crazy about James Bond movies" and that "they identify with 007" without realizing that "they have been cast as the villains of the dramas," Richler observes (paraphrasing Norman Mailer), that "[t]he minority man . . . grows up with a double image of himself, his own and society's" ("Bond" 55). This double image is perhaps why Richler's novels of development are rife with comic book subtext, why the identity of his protagonists is so often troubled by the spectre of a second, "secret identity," and why the novels feel crowded with invisible battles that pit nascent Jewish superheroes against the James Bonds and Fredrick Werthams of the dominant culture, even as Richler remains vigilant that his more cosmopolitan heroes do not end up becoming simply "revenge figures."

NOTES

- 1 Richler's account of superheroes as Jewish "revenge figures" anticipates Jeff Salamon's contention that Superman is a version of Max Nordeau's fin-de-siècle Zionist fantasy of Jewish Supermen, the *Muskelfjuden* (Hoberman and Shandler 166), as well as Gerard Jones' defence of Superman against Wertham's charge that the last son of Krypton is a racial supremacist who should have "S.S." emblazoned upon his uniform. "Wertham would have said that the Jews of comics were just playing at fascism for profit, but the men themselves knew: theirs were the fantasies of *real* Jews, the daydreams of kids who'd been made to pay personally, by Russian pogroms and Irish fists, for their Jewishness" (274). The Jewish progeny of superhero comics as well as the motif of the Jewish superhero as golem also feature prominently in Michael Chabon's novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000).
- 2 For useful interventions into conflicting readings of the novel by Warren Tallman and A. R. Bevan, see Ferns 77-82. For an important defence of Duddy Kravitz see Wainwright 56-73.

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