

ART MARKETEERS

I WANT TO APPLAUD MORDECAI RICHLER. Not for his fiction, which wins plenty of critical praise; nor for his acid essays, which are praiseworthy even if they are often off the mark: Canada is too short of shrewd political satirists these days to be altogether unhappy about its one effective cultural satirist being sometimes irritating. (Aren't satirists *supposed* to irritate?) I want to applaud the way he has championed openness in the shuttered houses of Art Awards. Two years ago, as head of the jury recommending the winners for the Governor-General's Prize, he released the names of the finalists: he tried to stir up a little enthusiasm; he tried to make the award a Public Event that would have some impact on authors' sales and reputations. For he knows, as Jack McClelland knows, and as other publicity-minded people know, that with no Hoopla there is no Coverage. And no Coverage means no impact: despite the fact that the Governor-General's Prize remains the most prestigious literary award this country has to offer.

We all acknowledge this "prestige" (some with a certain disparagement that doesn't conceal their recognition of it), yet somehow we don't pay attention to the award as it happens. We look back at the historical event, and tut-tut over why the committee of year X couldn't recognize the talent of writer Y. And with justification. But why don't we demand the openness? Why is it that the Vancouver *Sun*, for example, despite Mordecai Richler, didn't ever report the 1976 Governor-General's winners, reported only some of those for 1977, and spent most of its column inch announcing that one Quebec writer refused one award? Why? Because *that's what it thought newsworthy*. The award itself was not news; art was not news; the flamboyant gesture was news. The hoopla got the coverage, and a cultural confrontation was what the notice of the award communicated to the public at large. The art of the writers, and the perspicacity of the judges, and the cultural contributions of creativity were all ignored, and were thereby made to seem irrelevant. Without the attention that literary debate in a public forum attracts, art will still survive. But the importance that people could be attaching to literary endeavour in their culture won't be realized.

Unfortunately other things may be happening. When a hoopla machine gets going, it sometimes claims that publicity gimmicks *are* “public debate.” A great many authors — opening themselves in their books but unwilling to sacrifice their daily privacy, too — are wary of publicity, and this wariness may be one of the reasons that Governor-General’s and other prizes are kept subdued. The dignity of State ceremony is another value many would be unhappy to see pass. And a third argument runs something like this: aspiring young writers are delighted by reaching the finals of an awards competition, but mature and established writers are somehow diminished if they come out looking second-best. This interpretation undoubtedly relates to the anti-publicity argument; it particularly applies in a second-rate competition; and it derives both from a humane reaction to the indeterminables of personality and from an understandable abhorrence of notions of “competitiveness” in art. How does one, after all, “compare” Cohen with Kroetsch, or a historical treatise with a popular autobiography? But if as a literary community we actually do value the Governor-General’s Award, then being a “finalist” is surely an honour in itself, to be repeatedly, perhaps, enjoyed. And repeatedly recognized *as an achievement*, both by the literary community and by the public at large.

Such openness does not have to mean empty rhetoric or scandalmongering. Some magazines, in an endeavour I suppose to be “newsworthy,” choose deliberately to embark on anonymous gossip columns, or on a heavily slanted — contrived, postured — mixture of vendettas and vitriol. Such enterprises have neither objectivity nor satiric wit to give them merit. They begin by being corporate gimmicks; they end by being personally hurtful. And they serve neither “openness” nor art, for they justify instead only those who find art peripheral and petty.

Moreover, if openness need not live on rumour, nor need it suffer under a false democracy. It was openness, for example, that Malcolm Ross praiseworthily sought at the ill-fated but loudly-touted Calgary Novel Conference of a year ago. A year’s distance has not made his enterprise any the less praiseworthy, nor the hoopla of the conference Vote for the Best Canadian Novels any the less indefensible. Academy Awards that do not require voters to know all the works they vote on, or to share their understanding of the criteria they bring to bear in their judgment, or to ascertain whether dates of publication alter cases, or whether the shape of any voter’s own training or own course might alter cases, or whether they are affected by biases of region, sex, and subject, or whether the quality of translation might affect the judgment of any of the few French-language works that *did* manage to get on the list: awards like these are the same in Calgary as in Hollywood. Because good intentions are sometimes subverted by other kinds of interest is no reason to condemn the initial aspiration, but it is reason to resist accepting whatever accidental decisions result as either serious judgments or binding truths.

In fact we can go on from what that conference “decided,” and it is here that the false vote serves openness after all. If we reject the limiting, hierarchical order that the Calgary list of Greatest Books contrived, and examine instead the reasons why a particular hierarchy resulted from that particular vote, we might be closer to understanding more about the uneasy connection between reader and writer, between society and art. Why is it, for example, that so few Quebec writers *were* on the list? Why is it that contemporary Quebec writers are so ill-known outside Quebec, and Anglophone writers so little understood in it? Why has there been no concerted effort to produce better translations of badly translated works? To what extent is the General Reader in Canada still lodged in 1950’s realism and 1950’s expectations? To what extent does this state of affairs result from critics’ inadequacy, reviewers’ insufficiency, publishers’ delinquency? or from causes less theatrically breast-beating and more mundane? Open answers to questions like these might help further the causes of Canadian art, and get literary criticism beyond the stage where it thought defining works as classics was a way of making them so. F. R. Scott, in one of the essays of his Governor-General’s Award-winning volume *Essays on the Constitution*, writes that a “good play or novel may do more to free men’s minds from prejudice than new legislation. The expansion of the arts in Canada is a freeing of the imagination and the achieving of a sense of community not only within Canada but between Canada and the world.” There is a certain noble idealism about this aspiration. But it is such openness, such freedom, towards which art and those interested in art ought nonetheless incessantly to strive.

W.H.N.

VACATION

Cyril Dabydeen

A prawn memory by the seined sea
 water rising; we furl along
 roll with the waves —
 our clothes on

trade winds lashing
 shrimp our eyes skin crab
 we are one with the sea

breathing salt —
 our tongues raging scales of love.