

WRITING JACOB TWO-TWO

Mordecai Richler

WRITING ABOUT WRITING is something I find excruciating, embarrassing, even dangerous, and so I usually beg off such an assignment, pleading a slipped disc, other commitments, or falling back on my favourite A. J. Liebling anecdote.

The late A. J. Liebling, a superb stylist, was once sent a batch of how-to-write books for review. He promptly returned them to the editor with a note saying the only way to write was well and how you did it was your own damn business.

O, I agree, and how I agree, but I have also, alas, agreed to write something for this special issue of *Canadian Literature* on the writing of books for children, and what follows is to honour that commitment.

I have five children who, when they were very young, were told again and again it was too early for them to read *Cocksure*. Or even *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Well then, one of them asked, not unreasonably, isn't there anything of yours we are not too young to read? The short answer was no, but I also promised that one day I would write something that would be just for them; and that's how I came to write *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang*. The book was meant to be family fun, with certain built-in family jokes. It began, innocently enough, as a bedtime tale told to amuse our youngest child, Jacob, and as it made him (and even the others) giggle I started to write it down.

To backtrack briefly.

As a child, I never read children's books myself, but cut my intellectual teeth on *Superman*, *Captain Marvel*, and *The Batman*, moving on from there to Ellery Queen and Perry Mason, and finally, at the age of twelve or thereabouts, to the first novel that I ever read, *All Quiet On The Western Front*. So my experience of children's books, such as it is, came to me from reading aloud to our children, an office that is usually filled by my wife. In reading aloud to them

I was somewhat shocked to discover that a few classics old and modern, and the incomparable Dr. Seuss, aside, most children's books were awfully boring or insufferably didactic or sometimes both. These dreary, ill-written books were conceived for profit or to teach the kids racial tolerance, hygiene, or other knee-jerk liberal responses. In Canada, tiresome Eskimo or Indian legends seemed to be the rule. In contemporary children's stories parents were never hungover or short-tempered and the kids were generally adorable. I decided if I ever got round to writing a book for my kids its intention would be to amuse. Pure fun, not instruction, is what I had in mind.

But I resisted sitting down to *Jacob Two-Two* for more than a year, because I also have a prejudice against children's books, too many of which are written by third-rate writers for children already old enough to enjoy at least some adult books. Say, Mark Twain, some Dickens, certainly *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, and our own Farley Mowat on the north. Put simply, I think bright children beyond the age of twelve are ready for the real stuff, properly selected. Presented with it, they will respond or are already beyond the pale, destined to be *Reader's Digest* subscribers no matter what you do.

So *Jacob* was to be for the younger child, our Jacob actually, who was not yet ready for adult books. Writing it, really, was not very different than writing an adult novel, which is to say it was largely hard work, and, as is usually the case with me, went through many drafts. I did not worry overmuch about vocabulary, my feeling being that if a child didn't understand a word he could look it up in a dictionary. On the other hand, I did feel a rape scene might be inappropriate. I wrote it, first of all, for my own pleasure (and in fulfilment of a rash promise). Of course, I hoped, as I always do, that it would appeal to a large audience, but that is never a consideration in the actual writing.

Something else.

I have no special attitude towards children as a breed. They are, after all, merely little people, some of them obnoxious, many more stupid, and a few, a cherished few, absolutely enchanting.

The success of *Jacob Two-Two* has surprised, even embarrassed me. It was immediately accepted for publication in England and Canada and, after something like seven rejections in the U.S.A., was finally taken on there by my adult book publisher, Knopf. It has come out in a Bantam edition and will soon be a Puffin. It has been translated into several languages. Christopher Plummer has done a delightful recording of the story and there has also been a film version, which may be released one of these days. The Children's Theatre in Toronto is to present a musical adaptation this autumn. Most delightful of all, hardly a week goes by when I don't get a batch of letters from children in Canada or the United States. They want to know if it's a true story or just something I made up out of my own head. My favourite letter, one I keep pinned to a board on my

office wall, is from a boy who begins by saying, "I really liked your book *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fag*."

Ironically, I suppose, *Jacob Two-Two*, in hard cover, has already outsold even my most successful adult novel, *St. Urbain's Horseman*. Maybe I missed my true vocation.

PERCY

Dennis Lee

I

Percy was a pixie,
A pixie of renown.
He played his little pixie pipe
All around the town.

He played a pixie hornpipe
He played a pixie lay
And people came from blocks around
To hear the pixie play.

For Percy played it roundabout
And Percy played it square
And Percy played the rhythms
That were dancing in the air.

But Percy had a problem
And here is what it was:
He loved his sweet old mother, but
She looked like Santa Claus.

Her beard was overwhelming.
Her belly was a sight.
And Percy wondered why this was,
As any pixie might,

For other little pixies never
Had to shave their mother,
Nor wrap her in a table-cloth
When visitors came over.