

THE UNCERTAIN WORLD

Mordecai Richler

FREQUENTLY, I FEEL I'VE LOST something somewhere. Spontaneity maybe, or honest appetite. Now I'm harnessed to this ritual of being a writer, shaking out the morning mail for cheque-size envelopes — scanning the newspapers — breakfast — then downstairs to work. To try to work. This morning I'm breaking off on a novel I'm still attempting to finish after five years, shirking it by making a start on this piece.

If I get stuck, I can switch to a book review, already overdue.

If it turns out an especially sour, unyielding morning, I can return, in my mind's eye, to Paris, the innocent days, or recite a lecture to myself that begins: Your father had to be out at six every morning, driving to the junk yard in the sub-zero dark, through Montreal blizzards. You work at home, never at your desk before nine.

And then, if I'm not even up to a book review (*What do you mean, not up to it? It pays more for a day's work than your father ever earned, hustling scrap, in a week.*), I can stroll downtown. St. Catherine Street. Montreal's Main Stem, as the doyen of our gossip columnists has it. A time-consuming walk while I await, as the columnist recently put it, the Last Big Deadline In The Sky.

Pretending to browse for books by lesser novelists, I can surreptitiously check out the shops on stacks of the paperback edition of *Cocksure*.

Or I can take in a movie maybe.

Ego dividends. Possibly, I can pick a movie that I had been asked to write myself, but declined. Whatever the movie, it is quite likely I will know the director or the script writer, maybe even one of the stars.

Gee whiz.

Say the star, delicious, twinkly-eyed heroine, wronged in her cinema time by all the cads ever contracted to J. Arthur Rank, who turned to me between takes

one afternoon on a restaurant location in Bradford, indicating the crowd assembled since seven a.m., rehearsed — spun into action — shushed — spun into action and shushed again and again — only so that she, the camera tracking after, might sweep through them, making a poignant exit: turned to me, her smile entrancing, and said, “Aren’t they marvellous?”

“What?”

“The faces he chose.”

The director, she meant. “Oh.”

“Are they real people,” she then inquired softly, “or only extras?”

So there you have it. In London and New York, I skitter on the periphery of festooned circles, know plenty of inside stories. Bombshells. Like which Fabian cabinet minister is an insatiable pederast. How Jack Ruby came to die of cancer. What best-selling novel was really stitched together by a cunning editor. Which wrinkled Hollywood glamour queen is predisposed toward gang shags with hirsute Neapolitan waiters from the Mirabelle. Yes, yes, I’ll own up to it. I am, after eighteen years as a writer, not utterly unconnected or unknown, as witness the entry in the indispensable *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*.

Richler, Mordecai (1931—) Born in Montreal, he was educated at Sir George Williams College and spent two years abroad. Returning to Canada in 1952, he joined the staff of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He now lives in England, where he writes film scripts, novels, and short stories.

The key to Richler’s novels is — talent. Hard work. Canada Council grants. Favourable winds.

After eighteen years and six novels there is nothing I cherish so much as the first and most vulnerable book, *The Acrobats*, published in 1954, not only because it marked the first time my name appeared in a Canadian newspaper, a prescient Toronto columnist writing from London, “You’ve not heard of Mordecai Richler yet, but, look out, she’s a name to watch for”; but also because it was the one book I could write as a totally private act, with the deep, inner assurance that nobody would be such a damn fool as to publish it. That any editor would boot it back to me, a condescending rejection note enclosed, enabling me to quit Paris for Montreal, an honourable failure, and get down to the serious business of looking for a job. A real job.

Don’t blame me, but André Deutsch. To my astonishment (and I say this without false modesty), the novel was published in England and the U.S., and translated into five languages. Now, when somebody asked me what I did, I could

reply, without seeming fraudulent to myself, that I was indeed a writer. If I still tended to doubt it in the early hours of the morning, then *The Acrobats*, in shop windows here and there, was the proof I needed. My novel on display side by side with real ones. There is no publication as agonizing or charged with elation as the first.

Gradually, you assume that what you write will be published. After the first book, composing a novel is no longer self-indulgent, a conceit. It becomes, among other things, a living. Though to this day reviews can still sting or delight, it's sales, man — sales, that's the stuff — that buys you the time to get on with the next. Mind you, there are a number of critics whose esteem I prize, whose opprobrium can sear, but, for the most part, I, in common with other writers, have learned to read reviews like a market report. This one will help move the book, that one not.

Writing a book, as George Orwell has observed, is a horrible, exhausting struggle. "One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand." Something else. Each novel is a failure, or there would be no compulsion to begin afresh. Critics don't help. Speaking as somebody who fills that office on occasion, I must say that the critic's essential relationship is with the reader, not the writer. It is his duty to celebrate good books, eviscerate bad ones, lying ones.

When I first published, in 1954, it was commonly assumed that to commit a film script was to sell out (Daniel Fuchs, Christopher Isherwood, Irwin Shaw), and that the good and dedicated life was in academe. Now, the inverse seems to be the Canadian case. The creative young yearn to be in films, journeymen retire to the universities. *Seems to be the case*, because, happily, there are exceptions.

All of us tend to romanticize the world we nearly chose. In my case, academe, where, like all good spellers on tenure, I would own a Ph.D. Instead of having to bring home the meat, I would only be obliged to stamp it, rejecting this shoulder of beef as Hank James derivative, that side of pork as sub-Jimmy Joyce. I saw myself no longer a perplexed free-lancer with an unpredictable income, balancing this magazine assignment, that film job, against the time it would buy me. No sir. Sipping Tio Pepe in the faculty club, snug in my leather wing-backed chair, in the cherished company of other disinterested scholars, speculating on the significance of the comparable Frederick Philip Grove, I would not, given the assurance of a monthly cheque, chat about anything so coarse as money.

— Why don't you, um, write a novel yourself this summer, Professor Richler?

— Well, Dr. Lemming, like you, I have too much respect for the tradition to sully it with my own feeble scribblings.

— Quite.

— Just so.

Alas, academe, like girls, whisky, and literature, promised better than it paid. I now realize, after riding the academic gravy train for a season, that vaudeville hasn't disappeared or been killed by TV, but merely retired to smaller circuits, among them, the universities. Take the poets, for instance. Applying for Canada Council grants today, they no longer catalogue their publications (the accomplishments of obsolete linear man), but, instead, like TV actors on the make, they list their personal appearances, the campuses where they have read aloud. Wowsy at Simon Fraser U., hotsy at Carleton. Working wrinkles out of the act in the stix, with a headliner coming up in the veritable Palace of the campus circuit, the U. of T.

If stand-up comics now employ batteries of gag writers because national TV exposure means they can only use their material once, then professors, playing to a new house every season, can peddle the same one-liners year after year, improving only on timing and delivery. For promos, they publish. Bringing out journals necessary to no known audience, but essential to their advancement.

Put plainly, these days everybody's in show business, all trades are riddled with impurities. And so, after a most enjoyable (and salaried) year in academe — a reverse sabbatical, if you like — I now return, refreshed, to the uncertain world of the free-lance writer, where nobody, as James Thurber once wrote, sits at anybody else's feet unless he's been knocked there.

Why do you write?

Doctors are seldom asked why they practice, shoemakers how come they cobble, or baseball players why they don't drive a coal truck instead, but again and again writers, like house-breakers, are asked why they do it.

Orwell, as might be expected, supplies the most honest answer in his essay, *Why I Write*.

"1. Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc. etc." To this I would add egoism informed by imagination, style, and a desire to be known, yes, *but only on your own conditions*.

Nobody is more embittered than the neglected writer and, obviously, allowed a certain recognition, I am a happier and more generous man than I would otherwise be. But nothing I have done to win this recognition appalls me, has gone against my nature. I fervently believe that all a writer should send into the marketplace to be judged is his own work; the rest should remain private. I deplore the

writer as a personality, however large and undoubted the talent, as is the case with Norman Mailer. I also do not believe in special licence for the so-called artistic temperament. After all, basically, my problems, as I grudgingly come within spitting distance of middle age, are the same as anybody else's. Easier maybe. I can bend my anxieties to subversive uses. Making stories of them. When I'm not writing, I'm a husband and a father of five. Worried about air pollution. The population explosion. My sons' report cards.

"2. Aesthetic enthusiasm. Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement." The agonies involved in creating a novel, the unsatisfying draft that follows unsatisfying draft, the scenes you never get right, are redeemed by those rare and memorable days when, seemingly without reason, everything falls right. Bonus days. Blessed days when, drawing on sources unsuspected, you pluck ideas and prose out of your skull that you never thought yourself capable of.

Such, such are the real joys.

Unfortunately, I have never been able to sustain such flights for a novel's length. So the passages that flow are balanced with those which were forced in the hothouse. Of all the novels I've written, it is *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Cocksure*, which come closest to my intentions and therefore give me the most pleasure. I should add that I'm still lumbered with the characters and ideas, the social concerns, I first attempted in *The Acrobats*. Every serious writer has one theme, many variations to play on it.

Like any serious writer, I desperately want to write one novel that will last, something that will make me remembered after death, and so I am compelled to keep trying.

"3. Historical impulse. Desire to see things as they are . . ."

No matter how long I continue to live abroad, I do feel forever rooted in St. Urbain Street. This was my time, my place, and I have elected myself to get it exactly right.

"4. Political purpose — using the word 'political' in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after."

Not an overlarge consideration in my work, though I would say that any serious writer is a moralist, and only incidentally an entertainer.