

# AND THE SUN GOES DOWN

## *Richler's First Novel*

*George Bowering*

*One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.*

**I**N MORDECAI RICHLER'S FIRST NOVEL there is a Jewish American businessman who has changed his name from Lazarus to Larkin. That leaves no Lazarus to be raised from the dead; he will go about the process of mouldering along with nearly everyone else he meets in America and Valencia, the sad worn-out sacrificial portion of Spain, Europe, and the world that is the setting for *The Acrobats*.

In 1957, an interview with Richler appeared in the *Tamarack Review*, in which he referred to people "living in a time . . . when there is no agreement on values . . . there has been a collapse of absolute values, whether that value was Marx or God or Gold [All three treated disconsolately in the novel.] We are living in a time when superficially life seems meaningless, and we have to make value judgments all the time, it seems in relation to nothing." Richler is here talking about his problem, and the problem of André Bennett, the young Canadian painter acrobat adrift in the city of Valencia during fiesta time, April 1951, a decade and a half after the bell tolled for Robert Jordan, alone and dying on a mountain trail soon to be trod by Franco's fascists.

André sits at the cafe tables in the Lost Generation of his mind, stuck behind the wrong World War that he was too young to enter or understand, "so he came to Spain — Valencia, where the killing had started in a way and maybe they could explain it." But Ernest Hemingway is not there; neither is the Spain of Hemingway's books. Through the work of Hemingway, from the beginnings in the first short stories to *The Old Man and the Sea*, there is a growing

sense of commitment, not necessarily of man to cause, but of man to men. This is the painfully learned realization of the constantly aging Hemingway hero, that as the world of the twentieth century becomes more huge in its anti-human machinery, the people under the machines must reach out more generously to one another. "No man is an island" is the motto set to Hemingway's novel of the Spanish war, where the members of the Lost Generation find at least each other under the bombs of the twentieth century's least human machine — Fascism. In 1951 Spain, Richler's anti-hero demonstrates the disappointment in the notion that such a painfully made commitment was to be invalidated by the ensuing victory of the World War, and the subsequent transformation of men to smaller machines, servants to the master robot.

In fact, Richler sometimes seems to sacrifice his art to a love-hate attitude to Hemingway's works, especially to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In the beginning of *The Acrobats* there is a noticeable Hemingway influence, in the artificial dialogue, in the sentence order and length:

In the summer they would take us out in the boats, and we would jump overboard and swim. The water was very cool, and there was always the taste of salt in our mouths. The priests said it was evil because we all swam and played together and we were often naked. My father laughed at the priests. He said they had filthy minds. At night there was always dancing on the quays, especially when there was a good catch. That night there was only the noise of the shooting.

Sometimes André Bennett thinks, perhaps consciously, as if he were Frederic Henry:

*Love*, he thought. That is one of the words that is no longer any good. *Like courage, soul, beautiful, honour*, and so many others. Words that have become almost obscene because of hack writers.

Doubly sad for André, because at least Frederic Henry had a world war to blame. It is not only Richler who has Hemingway on the mind. At least part of the time André's resentment, his feeling of being trapped in the wrong disillusioning time, is turned against Hemingway's Spanish experience:

"As a matter of fact," André said, "I'm not really a painter at all. I came here to study life in its entirety. One day I hope to write a book about it. You know, like that *Who do the Bells Toll For*."

But this is Richler's first book, and as often happens in first books, the young author's literary ghosts are difficult to allay. So that later, when André is preparing in his drunkenness to poke his fist at the Nazi Kraus, Richler sees him through

the literary trick (Hemingway's word) that comes via Hemingway's "Up in Michigan" from the advice of Gertrude Stein:

André laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed. He laughed because Chaim was a useful man and he laughed because Kraus was a brute. He clutched the banister and doubled up laughing. He laughed because Ida was dead and he laughed because probably he did not love Toni. He laughed because he was drunk. He laughed and laughed. He laughed because he was feverish and he laughed because the doctors said he would go mad. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he laughed.

All the directionless bar scenes of *The Acrobats* are like expatriate *The Sun Also Rises* scenes, but without even the desperate gaiety of the Jake Barnes crowd — rather with a soft and aimless self-hate. When André is invited into a tryst with Jessie, the wife of sad American tourist Larkin, he goes along, saying only, "Okay, I guess," and again, "Okay." Later, when Jessie tries to get his clothes off in the hotel room, he simply mopes around till her embarrassing husband appears, and it is too late.

THE ACROBATS OF THE NOVEL are also sad clowns, wearing sad faces under their sad faces of make-up. The world is a big-top where the same tired music grinds every day, and the variety act appears monotonously every afternoon, every night. In Valencia, it is festival time, the loud drunken blaze of colour and fire that comes every year to use up whatever small flames may still lick in the bellies of the citizens, inheritors of the worn earth tramped for centuries by armies of Araby, France, the Vatican, and latterly, Franco, and now the also defeated foreigners from two continents.

In Richer's eyes, the place where the killing began is still an ugly disaster area, where the centuries-shattered survivors pick their way among the rubble of each other. The wanderings of the foreigners take place among constant images of beggars, cripples, forced prostitutes taken by police for protection, not only the war-blighted of Spain, but of this focus of Europe and the world. This is the post-Hemingway world, the post-*For Whom the Bell Tolls* world, where the sermon from Donne takes on a grim cast. The language of Richer and his characters is also post-Hemingway, with all rapture gone, all romanticism sifted out. The (anti)hero's girl is not brave Maria in a sleeping bag, but the pregnant

prostitute, Toni, not the rebellious Pilar of the mountains, but the city-slum girl tired of revolution and war, who can say of Spain only:

“—pooh! There has always been poverty. You can do nothing, do you understand? Nothing! Why? Wh - - What is the use of talking? Kill and kill and kill. Me, I would rather live on my knees. Now I have said it!”

Almost all the people in the novel are tired and disappointed. André is a man in his twenties, a young artist, with little responsibility, but his disappointment is the largest. It is enough to bring him to his own miserable end. His disappointment is the largest, and the least understandable — it is a kind of symbolic disappointment, where the figure of the man stands head-bowed between the stories of the pre-war West, and the actual bomb-broken buildings of 1951.

The young artist's opposite number is the ex-Olympic athlete, Reinhold Kraus, the Nazi for whom the present Spain is another kind of disappointment. Fascism is not the success it had seemed to be after the Civil War in which Kraus had been Hitler's man there. Now the country is lax, disorderly, semitic, effeminite, undermined by the Communist underground.

In the triangle of André - Toni - Kraus there is a kind of allegory. In many instances Toni, the postwar girl of the bars and streets, speaks for war-weary Spain, expressing the desire to get out of the ideological war, and seeking means to survive. When André says that he is in Spain to find out what mid-century is all about, he knows that his attempts to make a loving relationship with Toni are infibulated by the guilt he carries about the abortion death of the Jewish girl he had slept with in college-Montreal recent past. For Kraus, Toni is important because she is carrying his child. At one point Kraus is seen writing in his diary, linking in his thoughts the rebirth of Nazism and the child of infiltration in Toni's womb. Eventually the two rivals meet on a bridge over the tired Spanish river, and worn-out old athlete kills worn-out young artist, and a group of impoverished postwar citizens descends on the loser, stripping him of his raiment, and hiding the naked body in a cave.

Barney Larkin is the disappointed Jewish American tourist, who began as a poor boy, got rich in a kind of mid-century American dream, and has now found out that riches have not made him charming and sought-after, especially not by his wife, Jessie. Jessie, a Gentile, married Barney (Lazarus) Larkin for his money, and in her disappointment, finds that money cannot buy back her time, or his virility.

Brooding behind all the personal disappointments is the failure of the social

revolution, the shock that came with the victory of tyranny and poverty. Though some revolutionaries like Guillermo still wander about Spain, in and out of Valencia, and André's life, they are bitter, as if regretting the failure of the revolution, not looking forward to its coming. Pepe and Mariá are seen at times in the novel. Pepe, the poor husband out of work, has seen the failure of the revolution, has still the simple faith to admire André's paintings — he has not been entirely embittered by the failure. He is married to the Catholic Mariá, who is at last pregnant after many disappointments. Pepe is a nickname for José, so they are Joseph and Mary, an example of Richler's early obvious attempts at symbolism. But Pepe is cynical about the chances for the child of Joseph and Mary:

“... Why should I be pleased, . . . If he is any good, they will get him like they got the others. And if he is going to be bad I do not want him.”

In *A Farewell to Arms*, those who oppose their humanity to the great machines of gods and men perish young. In *The Acrobats*, those characters who try to struggle for a cause that is perishing or is hiding within them, die (André, Guillermo), while the ones who accept defeat and disillusionment live on and pass to new times and places (Chaim, the wise and hounded Jew; Juanito, the gentleman turned pimp; Derek, the Civil War Republican poet become dissolute alcoholic and homosexual).

Pretty obviously, Richler intends in this first novel to show his own disillusionment in a postwar world he never made nor even had a hand in destroying. The form of the story shows that. While André Bennett, self-exiled young Canadian artist in Spain, is the character with whom the author most closely identifies, *The Acrobats* is not his story alone. The book is made up of shuffled scenes, the searching spotlights shift from acrobat to acrobat, lighting now Barney in his frightened New World foray into a blunt Spanish whorehouse, now André lying in his rat-infested room beside an unfinished painting of woe, now Kraus in his Nazi sex-problem, unable to cope with women or intellect. The lights probe all over Valencia in the present, but also into the past of Montreal and Madrid and Businessstown, U.S.A. The different people cross each other in different places, the whole acrobatic routine, and snippets of knowledge are exchanged with handholds. We watch not the performance of one man's life, but the tumbling pattern of the human condition. Each player hides his own version of guilt, secret from the rest. The recent past in each case haunts the present, and promises no good future — for any of the characters of the novel, for Spain, for mid-century World.

Doggedly, the Valencians burn their traditional exorcistic *fallas*, and Derek says of that futile diversion:

“Perhaps in all of us there is some evil, and we’re just too weak to burn it. So we build evil toys and dance around them. Later we burn them, hoping, perhaps, that it will help.”

**B**UT STILL WE RETURN to André. He is not the centre of the world, but his disillusionment and failure are special, of a particular kind. He is the only character whose experience does not include the war of the Thirties and Forties, except in the way he remembers, the child’s participation in wartime mottos and propaganda formulas. If somehow Toni represents Spain, André represents the postwar consciousness of the West.

Chaim, the Jewish bar-owner, is a kind of wandering Jew, and like Jung’s wise old man, he offers the wisest words on André’s problem. Chaim has been hounded from country to country, various ideologies at his heels, and fully understands that no “cause” holds the promise for (a) man’s salvation. It is curious to note that his name may be a pun. Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, said, “Within yourself lies salvation.” Chaim, the founder of Chaimism, says, “But there is no cause that saves us all. Salvation is personal.”

André realizes the hopelessness of the war-fraught twentieth-century causes:

Often it appeared to André that he belonged to the last generation of men, A generation not lost and not unfound but sought after zealously, sought after so that it might stand up and be counted, perjuring itself and humanity, sought after by the propagandists of a faltering revolution and the rear guard of a dying civilization. His intellectual leaders had proven either duds or counterfeits — standing up in the thirties to cheer the revolution hoarsely, and in the fifties sitting down again to write a shy, tinny, blushing yes to capitalistic democracy.

Nobody could quite believe again that he had grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in men shaken. There was going to be another war all right — their war. The old gods, newly cleaned and pressed, were being gleefully handed down to them.

But he is, despite his sophistication, a product of the middle of the twentieth century, and the inheritor of its debts. Chaim, a man who seems to have seen all generations, knows, that, “The fun will be for André’s and Toni’s generation. They will have to pay the unpaid bills of the past, account for the dishonesties, the vag-

rancies. . . .” But Chaim knows also (as André seems not to) that there is always a time after the wars; and now that it is fifteen years after the Spanish war, and six years after the World War, it is time to quit looking over one’s shoulder:

“It is that he knows and understands all the things that he is against but he still doesn’t know what he is *for*. André has the temperament of a priest, but none of the present churches will do. That makes it very difficult.”

André, walking around Valencia, the scene of dogged celebration of the past, the ancient peoples of Spain, is also haunted by his own past, his share, perhaps, of a world guilt. There is an implied connection between Kraus’ Nazi past and the guilt carried in André — he made a Montreal Jewish girl pregnant, and she died after her abortion; and when André went to see her family, the father told him to go away and leave them alone, ethnically. André hit the old man, knocking him down, carrying away with him that added guilt. At the point when he finishes telling this story to Toni, he finds himself looking into the Nazi eyes of Kraus. Now the dead girl stands or lies always between André and Toni. (As Nazi Kraus stands in the shadows, watching them.) Toni, the traditional prostitute looking for love, knows that André’s ability to love is smothered by guilt:

And she felt fear, because she loved him with a hopeless beautiful love, knowing — always knowing — that he could not love, that something ugly and bitter within him would always stifle any love he felt for her.

And it is André’s inability to love that is his grief and failure, because an inability to love is an inability to believe. Guillermo, his Communist friend, refuses to believe that André’s salvation is personal:

“I remember when you were ill,” he said, “when all you knew was despair, and all you did was drink. Do you know why, André? Not because of the girl and her father. That is only incidental. It is because you are without hope or reason or direction. You are *sín centimo*. If you are a humanist there is only one place for you. You must join us.”

André has at least the self-knowledge required to refute Guillermo’s solution. But that leaves him looking into a void:

I guess my crime is that I haven’t chosen, he thought. I wonder what my punishment will be. And who will be my judge?

Further, he knows that which Chaim suggests:

“It is the man who is unusual — the man who rises above the restrictions of his own class to assert himself as an individual and humanitarian. It’s pretty damn

elementary to be aware of social injustice and poetic truth and beauty, but to be capable of empathy, to understand the failings of a man — any man — even as you condemn him, well — Look, every human being is to be approached with a sense of wonder. The rest is crap, or incidental.”

Empathy — the quality of being able to feel another’s joy or woe; André knows that his great sin is in not being committed to anyone outside himself. He still hears the old man saying leave us alone. But André is not in love with himself. In fact he seeks his own destruction. He is disgusted by his own failure of commitment — it is with disgust towards his own failure that he allows himself to say to Guillermo, “Everything is a joke. It has to be.” And he feels uneasy before his father-figure when Chaim asks him what postwar youth believes in, and he replies with the facile formula, “I guess more than anything else we believe in not believing.”

However, André is more interesting than that. At least his is an odyssey, slow-moving as it may be. He is looking for a grail without knowing what a grail is. We see him trying to make some act of commitment, even if it is an unsavory sexual one with Barney Larkin’s wife, or a shameful drunken one in which he fecklessly punches Kraus and gets beaten up by that reluctant destroyer. Chaim at one point recognizes that in his wish to be committed, André carries at least the potentiality of his salvation. In fact, at one point Chaim speaks perhaps like an indulgent father who does not care to discourage his son:

“But I like you, André, because you are not bored. You are not intellectual and uncommitted. You are always taking part, even if not always intelligently. The earth is in your hands and you are dirty.”

It is not the truth, of course, but it is a recognition of André’s predilection toward goodness.

But in his search, André gets lugubriously drunk, glamourizes his situation somewhat by calling his drunkenness madness, and walks through the Valencia streets of sordid escape. On his way towards whatever he is approaching, he hears a drab and drunken hopeless Spanish song of patriotism, love, and religious faith:

*Por mi patria y por mi novia  
y mi Virgen de San Gil  
y mi rosario de cuentas  
yo me quisiera morir.*

— traditionally honourable things to die for (and we know by now that André is on his way to dying), but all three things already dead inside André. In his



pocket he has a thick wad of Chaim's money, money that promises to buy them escape, freedom in Paris, but he meets a mad whore, and throws the wealth on her bare belly, feeling a mysterious release as he does. This is one of the best realized scenes in the novel, largely because it is one of the few that cannot be well interpreted or understood, because the manipulating intellect of the author is not obvious; it is like most good parts of a novel — only the feelings respond, the wish to intervene, the shock of sympathy for Chaim, whose chances seem to flutter to the floor with his Spanish money.

At the same time, we see André's growing haze of what he feels is insanity, and it wars for his mind against his desperation to be committed to anything, as long as the man can make an act, a gesture that is not escape or evasion. Once again it is a confrontation with Kraus that seems to give him that chance. And once again Kraus pummels his antagonist, finally picks him up and hurls him off the bridge they meet on. André lies smashed on the rocks below, and in his last conscious thoughts, is trying to be committed at least to his own death:

He felt a lump in his throat but only dimly, as consciousness was slipping from him. He was sobbing. *No. No. All I ask is that I know what's going on. That's all. Never mind the cigarette. Just knowing. Or feeling.*

But at the moment that Kraus threw André from the bridge, the big final *falla* was exploding, so that we are reminded that André's way out is as much an evasion and a mollification as the Spanish indigent's yearly dazzlement.

SOME CRITICS have pointed out (and correctly, to a certain extent) that the people we meet in *The Acrobats* are stock characters. André is the young aesthete, lost and in exile, searching for meaning in a confused world. Toni is the innocent prostitute, the traditional wry comment on a whole society that has sold its innocence for quick, mortal and illusory rewards. Chaim is the perennial wise old wandering Jew and father figure to those who have lost all their own fathers. Barney is the rich boorish American abroad, hiding secret fears of his own sexual inability behind an aggressive social manner. And so on.

Probably more to the point is that in this first novel, Richler has not yet, as he has in his later books, submerged the techniques of writing below the surface of the story as we are allowed a look at it. A reader notices this in the first few

pages, in which André is introduced to the Americans. The scene-setting conversations around the sidewalk tables of Valencia are filled with obvious attempts to show that the writer is not simply reporting dialogue. Someone says something; then someone lights a cigarette; then someone says something. Or:

Derek lit a cigarette. He tossed his head back with studied abandon and blew a big puff of smoke into the still air. I shouldn't have come back, he thought. It was wrong.

Or "Jessie smiled brightly," then said something. "Jessie puckered up her cherry lips impatiently," then said something. "Jessie applauded," then said something.

On the other hand, or perhaps still with the too-obtrusive first hand, when Richler attempts some impressionistic writing, he is usually clumsy. An exception is in the scene of André's death, but this may be because few people are prepared to offer their knowledge in criticism of an experience they have not come away from yet. But when Richler offers an "impressionistic" picture of the festival streets, his plan is so obvious as to render the familiar techniques inadequate to the goal, the pen of the writer scratching in the ear.

Much more authentic and accomplished are the lyrical catalogues, of André's childhood experiences, of the political evils of mid-century, or of the sordid Valencia streets. Once Jessie loses her way in the backstreets of the Valencia markets, where:

The heat was redolent of rancid food, children with soiled underwear, uncovered garbage, venereal diseases, sweat and boils, pimpled adolescents with one leg and a stump for another, remedies exchanged across washing lines, cheats, cross-eyed whores, dirty persons, and no privacy.

Richler has a very good reporter's eye, and an equally good ear, especially for the individual rhythms and accents of speech. The wise, kindly, ironic Chaim is very well realized — Richler's best moments come when he gets Chaim's speech down, or the dialogue of any of his characters, American or Spanish, Nazi or Jew. Conversely, he is weakest, usually, when he goes after interior monologue; there he tends to go maudlin or hokey, sometimes unconvincingly clichéd.

Another point for Richler is his ability to take a basically negative character and to draw a sympathetic picture of him, as of the bourgeois Barney. This is a feat that Arthur Koestler rightly said should be accomplished by the good novelist. Critics will say, and have said, that Richler's characters are portrayed to be "undeserving of compassion" (Nathan Cohen in the *Tamarack Review*, Winter 1958), but I believe that the young Richler scored a coup in this novel, in arous-

ing compassion for characters who would superficially seem to be the enemy — Barney and Kraus the best examples. In this way, Richler speaks not to the smug liberal intelligence, but to the compassionate human being who may be lurking behind that mask. No author who speaks that way can hope to write an “accomplished” novel. But the book reaches at least determinedly beyond accomplishment toward the place where a man is forced to ask himself where he is, and how he feels. And there the sun also rises again.

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