Further Reading


Griffin, Susan, and Beverly Dahlen, Skirting the Subject: Pursuing Language in the Works of Adrienne Rich, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1993


Richler, Mordecai

Canadian, 1931–

Mordecai Richler has been a working essayist since the 1950s, appearing in virtually every major Canadian, British, and American journal. Over that time, he has written most often about politics and social customs, travel and sports, Jews and Gentiles. He has also regularly reviewed books. Throughout, the touchstone has been his growing up on Montreal’s largely Jewish and working-class St. Urbain Street, which has also been central to his fiction. His success as an essayist has frequently supported that fiction, which remains the work on which he clearly wishes his reputation to rest. But Richler writes essays not merely to make a living: the genre affords him the obvious pleasure of exercising his “sense of the ridiculous.”

Although Richler has appeared in journals like the New York Review of Books and the New Statesman, he has often written for larger audiences (in Playboy and Inside Sports, for example). Throughout, his voice has been that of a sane man in a world only intermittently sane. His ideal reader, although never surprised by human nonsense, is still astonished by its variety. Critics have sometimes complained that Richler’s work lacks enough of a moral center to be satiric; indeed, he is more likely to puncture the ridiculous than offer remedies. In Richler’s work there is no overarching political or religious
“Truth,” but simply the individual, doing his best by family and friends.

Richler’s style reflects the broad audience he has written for: it is readable, smart, and occasionally bawdy, a mix of learning and street talk. It is also funny. A review of Gay Talese’s *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* (1990) quotes an understandably breathless Talese on the life of the penis—“endlessly searching, sensing, expanding, probing, penetrating, throbbing, wilting, and wanting more.” To which Richler adds: “And not to quibble, but merely to introduce a personal note, in my case, it also pisses.” Discussing Canadian uneasiness that the world is always happening elsewhere, he notes that “the Canadian kid who wanted to be prime minister wasn’t thinking big” (“The October Crisis, or Issue Envy in Canada,” 1984).

Richler’s Jewishness is seldom absent from his work. His essays, however, do not deal in chicken soup *yiddishkeit* but in the absurdities of the comfortable Jewish middle class making its way in North America. He lets *The Encyclopedia of Jews in Sports,* for example, self-destruct simply by quoting the jacket copy (“A noteworthy contribution to mankind’s quest for knowledge”); he then suggests it may be a precursor to other bar mitzvah presents such as a “compilation of Famous Jewish Homosexuals, Professional and Amateur, Throughout History.” An essay on the Catskills (a resort area with a mostly Jewish clientele) characterizes one hotel as “a Disneyland with knishes,” then deftly recounts how a militant black civil rights singer (inexplicably booked into the “All Star Friday Nite Revue”) is asked to sing “Tzena Tzena,” a popular Hebrew folksong—which he does.

Richler’s writing about Jews, is, in fact, highly sympathetic—indeed, with a hair trigger look-out for anti-Semites. But like Philip Roth, he has not been especially popular with the pillars of the Jewish community: “‘Why,’ I was once asked … ‘does everybody adore Sholem Aleichem, but hate your guts?’” (“Hemingway Set His Own Hours,” 1990). For Richler, of course, Jewish ridiculousness is merely a subgenre of the much larger human variety. It just happens to be the kind he knows best.

Richler has also written much about Canadian politics. As Quebec has become ever more nationalistic, he has attacked its laws which sharply limit the public display of any language but French. For Richler, these laws do not protect French culture (as their defenders claim) but instead are merely spiteful and xenophobic. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* (1992) begins with a self-appointed language vigilante solemnly taking photographs of a restaurant menu written illegally in English. Elsewhere, Richler comments that “when thousands of flagwaving nationalists march through the street roaring ‘Le Québec aux Québécois!’ they do not have in mind anybody named Ginsburg. Or MacGregor, come to think of it.” Not surprisingly, Richer has himself become a target of Quebec nationalists, who see his attacks (especially in non-Canadian publications) as the typical arrogance and treachery of English Montreal. It is a very public debate, and quite a nasty one, with Richler characteristically dismissing one editorial denunciation of him as “the sort of letter many write in anger but have the wit not to mail” (*Oh Canada! Oh Quebed*).

Canadian nationalism fares little better, especially cultural nationalism. As English Canada has itself become increasingly fixed on expressing its own distinctiveness, Richler has criticized that expression as mere anti-Americanism, parochialism, or greed masquerading as love of country: “The nationalists [were]...determined to win through...
legislation, for the second-rate but homegrown writer, what talent alone had hitherto denied him: an audience, applause” (“Pourquoi Pas—A Letter from Ottawa,” 1984). Not for Richler is it ever enough to be “world famous in Canada” (“The October Crisis, or Issue Envy in Canada”).

Richler, to repeat, wishes his reputation to rest with his fiction, not his essays, most of which were written to deadlines. Nonetheless, as several collections show, his essays lose surprisingly little of their bite, even years after their targets have been forgotten. If those targets sometimes seem sent by Central Casting solely for his amusement and laceration, they are, Richler would no doubt remind us, not his invention but the world’s.

ARNOLD KELLER

Biography


Selected Writings

Essays and Related Prose
Hunting Tigers Under Glass: Essays and Reports, 1968
Shovelling Trouble, 1972
Notes on an Endangered Species and Others, 1974
The Great Comic Book Heroes and Other Essays, edited by Robert Fulford, 1978
Home Sweet Home: My Canadian Album, 1984
Broadsides: Reviews and Opinions, 1990
Oh Canada! Oh Quebec! Requiem for a Divided Country, 1992
This Year in Jerusalem, 1994

Bibliography


Further Reading

Craniford, Ada, Fiction and Fact in Mordecai Richler’s Novels, Lewiston, New York: Mellen Press, 1992
Darling, Michael, editor, Perspectives on Mordecai Richler, Toronto: ECW Press, 1986
Davidson, Arnold E., Mordecai Richler, New York: Ungar, 1983
McSweeney, Kerry, Mordecai Richler and His Works, Toronto: ECW Press, 1984
Ramraj, Victor J., Mordecai Richler, Boston: Twayne, 1983
Woodcock, George, Mordecai Richler, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970

Rodó, José Enrique

Uruguayan, 1871–1917

“Superbly irritating,” “insufferable,” “admirable,” “stimulating,” are some of the qualifiers offered by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes in his prologue to Ariel, the best known of José Enrique Rodó’s literary works and one of the most influential pieces in the field of the Latin American essay. Despite its brevity, it has had a lasting impact on the evolution of Latin American literature in general, and Latin American thought in particular.

Ariel may be irritating to some contemporary readers, for Rodó writes in a rhetorical fashion that defies the attention of today’s readers. This style is the culmination of