

Although not able to prove it conclusively, the book provides sufficient evidence to show that it was likely that antisemitism impeded his promotion in 1949 to deputy governor of the Bank of Canada and to governor or senior deputy governor in 1954, despite his excellent international reputation for intellectual brilliance and integrity. A disappointing aspect of Muirhead's presentation of this theme is that it is not placed within the framework of a discussion of antisemitism in Canadian life and in the civil service in particular. The book suggests that Rasminsky's background as a Jew facing widespread antisemitism in Canada, as well as his experience at the League of Nations during the Great Depression of the 1930s, were responsible for what it characterizes as his humanitarianism. However, it is very thin on the influence of Rasminsky's Jewish family background (for example, we learn almost nothing about his parents beyond their names). The book notes Rasminsky's commitment to Zionism in his adolescence (he became a member of the national executive of Canadian Young Judaea, a Zionist youth movement), and his active role in the Canadian Jewish community after his retirement in 1973. But there is no discussion of the extent to which Rasminsky's Jewish identity was based on religious, as compared with secular, influences.

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Posner, Michael. *The Last Honest Man: Mordecai Richler: An Oral Biography*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004. 369 pp.

Yanofsky, Joel. *Mordecai & Me: An Appreciation of a Kind*. Calgary: Red Deer Press, 2003. 336 pp.

Michael Posner's polyphonic oral biography of Mordecai Richler begins with Richler's explanation of his Hebrew given name (which other acquaintances refer to as Mordy, Morty, or Mutti). The chorus that follows includes numerous voices of friends and family members who offer varying points of view

on Richler's life and work. The cover photo of Richler in a rocking chair overlooking Lake Memphremagog calls to mind similar scenes in Denys Arcand's *The Barbarian Invasions* and highlights Richler's ambivalence towards his native Quebec. Like A.M. Klein in his symbolic rocking chair, Richler oscillates between being "at home" and "abroad" both in his native province and in cosmopolitan London and New York.

Richler's unhappy childhood was the result of his parents' failed marriage and his alienation from the strict Orthodoxy of his grandparents. But if Posner thinks Richler emerged from childhood as "the last honest man," one of his aunts demurs. Posner's portrait is filled with contradictory opinions, each one contributing to the understanding of Richler's life. Posner's editing is accomplished: he lets the voices speak for themselves and intersperses background information whenever necessary. In the midst of so many Jewish voices it is refreshing to hear Mavis Gallant's comments linking Richler to *First Statement*, the leftist review in which Irving Layton was published. Although Richler devoted considerable fictional space to A.M. Klein, the biographies give little sense of his relationship to Klein, Layton, or Leonard Cohen. We don't know, for instance, if Richler actually rebuked Cohen concerning his rejection of the Governor General's Award for political reasons.

Although William Weintraub and Ted Kotcheff are featured, it is unfortunate that Brian Moore's voice was unavailable. What we are left with is a man who abused his body through too much Macallan Scotch and too many Schimmelpenninck cigars, but who was a devoted husband and father of five (perhaps to compensate for the failure of his parents' marriage). Although Florence Richler forms part of the chorus, one wonders about the sacrifices she made in raising five children and in editing her husband's work. As well, the talented children have written their own versions of a privileged upbringing. In the end, however, Richler would have us return to his own writing instead of any writing about him.

Whereas Posner's *The Last Honest Man* presents multiple voices, Joel Yanofsky offers a monologue in *Mordecai & Me*. Near the end of his "appreciation of a kind," Yanofsky refers to Posner's work, but the two would-be biographers don't meet. "The notion of the two of us sitting across from each other, secretly trying to figure out who has a better fix on Richler, who is doing a better, more definitive job of exploiting his memory, is too unsettling to contemplate. Besides, everyone I have finally got [sic] around to talking to about Richler seems to have already talked to Posner. 'He's really digging hard,' William Weintraub told me." (p. 306) Yanofsky does manage to sit across from Richler on a few occasions, and the result is an engaging, charming, and breezy appreciation of the writer's life. Indeed, the breeziness of Yanofsky's prose breeds its own kind of oral biography: a double-edged pen makes *Mordecai & Me* an appreciation of Yanofsky's obsessions as much as an unauthorized biography of Richler. Richler's would-be *Doppelgänger*, Yanofsky shadows his subject. If Richler is a master of transitions, his acolyte is no slouch in that department either, shifting abruptly between subject and subject in pacing that rivals that of Posner's multi-vocal account. The "Prologue" opens with a sentence or two about Richler's first novel, *The Acrobats*, and then switches to Yanofsky's own writing life of a half-million words: "Still, compiled, organized, edited, and, no doubt, self-published, all those words would fill a fairly long shelf dedicated to the literary life – to the variety of ways writers write and readers read." (p. 7)

Those commas form part of the stylistics and rhetoric of breeze, for it is as important to analyze Yanofsky's prose as it is to question his pronouncements on Richler's novels, characters, and plots. Despite his anti-poetic prejudices, there is something almost neo-classical in Yanofsky's balanced and symmetrical style, as if he were nurtured on the poetry of Pope. Consider the opening paragraph of his first chapter: "It is in the nature of what I do—reviewing books, particularly for newspapers—that what I write disappears as soon as it's read. Or, more likely,

disappears without ever being read. In the houses of friends and even family, I've seen my byline lining a kitty litter box or stacked next to a basket of kindling set to go into the fireplace. Even I can't find most of my tear sheets. Whatever perceptive or witty opinions I must have offered up over the last two decades – and in all that time, in all those words, there must have been some – are curled up into the back of desk drawers or went out with the recycling long ago.” (p. 12) Yanofsky's confessional (an eighteenth-century mode combined with a twenty-first-century dream analysis) vacillates between the self-deprecatory and self-congratulatory, even as his larger project veers between Richler's higher-brow and Yanofsky's middle-brow Montreal. The key word in the quoted passage is “or,” a democratic co-ordinate that expands choices. With his sleight of hand and mouth, Yanofsky telescopes his verbiage, even as he talks about the very disappearance of those words. His opening dashes – further expanding and qualifying his thoughts – are paralleled by the dashes and parallel phrases at the paragraph's end.

The proliferation of co-ordinates highlights the importance of the ampersand in *Mordecai & Me*, where it serves to join the two subjects of Yanofsky's book. The younger writer confesses that his meetings with Richler were strained and not illuminating. Accordingly, *Mordecai & Me* is often more about “Me” than about Richler, a solipsistic approach that is at once easy to take and hard to swallow. Again, Yanofsky confesses that his natural inclination is to talk about himself, and in the words of another writer, he is “malignantly self-absorbed.” (p. 19) With tongue in cheek, Yanofsky has it both ways – the egotistical sublime and the ridiculous. We are made privy to his nocturnal habits including his dreams and discussions with his wife. These sit-com and soap-opera clips are entertaining but shed no light on Richler.

Opening platitudes, such as “Writers should haunt us” (p. 24) and “Writers can be as unrealistic as children” (p. 26), are good attention grabbers, but who says that writers should

haunt us or that they are unrealistic? Since Yanofsky admits to being wrong about Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, how seriously should we take his value judgments on Richler's individual novels?

Yanofsky has a decidedly anti-academic bias; he calls it a "running gag" (p. 131); professors of literature might refer to it as a motif. No sooner does he dismiss academics than he misspells "aficionado" and "cacophony." (p. 78) One might rephrase Yanofsky's motto, "Life is short; scholarship is long-winded," as "*Mordecai & Me* is long; freelancing is breezy." Although *Mordecai & Me* is fun to breeze through, it would be difficult for a writer in an academic journal to endorse it. Despite being wrong much of the time, Yanofsky is witty and perceptive. His words do not deserve to line kitty litter boxes.

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