

**Shana Rosenblatt Mauer, *Mordecai Richler's Imperfect Search for Moral Values* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 240 pp., ISBN: 978-0228022023.**

Whither Mordecai Richler (1931–2001)? As the twentieth century recedes further into memory, and we gaze back at its writers, pondering whose books we'll keep on our bookshelves and syllabi, and whose we'll compost, Richler would seem to occupy a somewhat precarious position.

Without question, he remains a contender for the title of the most popular and canonical of twentieth-century Canadian Jewish writers. But in 2022 Richler's *shtik*, often mean-spirited satire that punches down as well as up, is the kind of thing that makes many readers, as well as scholars, wince. After #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the Tree of Life massacre, and recent Canadian reckonings with the country's history of violence against Indigenous people, how much space should we make for a writer routinely accused not only of "anti-Semitism" but also "racism, nihilism, elitism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-Canadian sentiments" (4)?

It is with a sense of these stakes—of whether or not, and how, we will read Richler in the twenty-first century—that Shana Rosenblatt Mauer, a scholar of modern Jewish literature trained and working in Israel, presents the first scholarly monograph on Richler's *oeuvre* to appear since the late 1980s. Mauer draws on a wide range of published material (if not directly, as far as I can tell, on the Mordecai Richler Fonds at the University of Calgary), including sources in French, and several major biographies of Richler published in the past two decades. As the title of her book, *Mordecai Richler's Imperfect Search for Moral Values*, indicates, Mauer aims not to minimize or defend the objectionable and distressing aspects of Richler's literary output but finally to demonstrate that "moral values are affirmed in Richler's fiction" (183).

Mauer's central argument is elaborated over six thematically organized chapters. The argument centers on "a recurring narrative feature" that casual readers of Richler's most popular novels likely have noticed (7). These novels' protagonists are Jewish men "living normative lives in ordinary circumstances" (26), and represent, as Mauer puts it, "ordinary Jewish values: family loyalty, the reaffirmation of the 'family man,' and an appreciation of Old World Jewish tradition" (46). Each novel also presents a double for the protagonist, a "hero figure" who is "larger-than-life, revered by the protagonist because they lead a fantastical existence governed by heroic ideals rather than legislated or culturally determined values" (7).

These hero figures include Jerry Dingleman, the Boy Wonder, in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), Joey Hersh in *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971), and Solomon Gursky in *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989). While tracking the ways that their characteristics

vary from book to book, Mauer summarizes the values that these characters espouse as “an idealized sense of justice, Jewish empowerment, rightful vengeance, a libidinous spirit, and an unapologetic quest for pleasure that is far removed from rabbinic stringency and Talmudic wariness” (47). These characters model “Jewish power” (57), disdain respectability, and earn the admiration of the novels’ protagonists with their “ever-ready willingness to defend Jewish dignity” (60). In the third chapter, Mauer compellingly reads these hero figures functioning as, and within the literary history of, messiah figures.

The novels’ protagonists live their regular lives while aspiring to follow these Jewish heroes’ examples. In Mauer’s view, this validates Richler’s claim “that his central concerns as a novelist were ‘with values, and with honour’” (161).

As convincingly as she makes the case that morality and values form the center of Richler’s novelistic project, Mauer acknowledges that his “values” are not, necessarily, sympathetic ones. She carefully considers the question of Richler’s treatment of female characters and feminism, finding ample evidence to demonstrate that his novels are “derisive of feminist beliefs,” and that they “resonate with the sexist views that are pervasive in Richler’s non-fiction writings” (103). She finds, likewise, that Richler frequently has recourse to “trite, comedic portraits of gay stereotypes” (115) and that “racism towards non-Jews is prominent in Richler’s fiction” (117). While contextualizing them in Richler’s novels and nonfiction as satires of “special pleading” (Richler’s term for what would later be called “political correctness”), Mauer describes these attitudes as “reductive and even stagnant,” “an anchor to which Richler’s imagination is moored” (99).

Mauer emphasizes the extent to which Richler’s final novel, *Barney’s Version* (1997), complicates the patterns established in his earlier work, and she offers several useful comparisons for Richler’s work (to the works of Saul Bellow and several Victorian novelists, for example). Mauer does not emphasize one connection that her research suggests, between Richler and Jewish neoconservatives in the United States: Isn’t Richler’s fiction, with its fascination with Jewish dignity and power, its lampooning of feminists and minorities, more or less aligned with the politics of Norman Podhoretz’s *Commentary* in the 1980s and 1990s? Can Richler’s Jewish heroes perhaps be described, like Ari ben Canaan in Leon Uris’s *Exodus* (1958) or Marshall Pearl in Mark Helprin’s *Refiner’s Fire* (1977), as the wish-fulfilment fantasies of Jewish political conservatives, that is, as manly men who are pro-Israel and fiercely Jewish, disdainful of the liberal masses and any constraints on their personal freedom?

Against those inclined to read Richler as an equal-opportunity satirist who lampoons all pieties and catches out any hypocrisy, as well as those who facetiously label his work self-hating or antisemitic, Mauer argues, on the basis of her careful readings,

that Richler's novels are profoundly committed to affirming a Jewish moral vision (notwithstanding a little wavering at the end of his career). This Jewish moral vision is one in which straight white men figure as the central subjects, gays and people of colour remain fodder for punchlines, and women can be only tools or stereotypes.

Mauer's book is a careful, deeply admirable work of literary scholarship, of great value to anyone who studies modern Jewish literature, and essential for scholars of Canadian Jewish Studies. It suggests the best current case for keeping Richler's novels on one's syllabus in the twenty-first century might be, simply, that they reflect one important facet of the late-twentieth-century Canadian Jewish community: its fundamental conservatism.

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