

MORDECAI: THE LIFE AND TIMES by Ken McGoogan
Reviewing a book by Charles Foran
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Yes, this is it, the definitive biography of Mordecai Richler, one of the greatest role-model writers this country has produced. It reads more like a literary work than a scholarly one, as if flowing naturally from an immersion so deep that no note-taking was required. Yet the book is so detailed, so exhaustive, so astute and authoritative, that one can't imagine there is anything more to add.

Biographer Charles Foran is a beautiful writer: a stylist. By 1948, he tells us, when Richler was a seventeen-year-old student at Sir George Williams University, already he was a "heat-seeking teenage journalist." Within three years, Richler would be in France, working on a first novel called *The Rotten People* -- "a screed cross-eyed with self-absorption and judgmental to the point of being hateful." A few years later, Foran tells us, Richler would be yearning to resume work on *St. Urbain's Horseman*, "a book he had been writing for too long in his head and not long enough in his study."

So the language sweeps us along. But let's be clear. This 727-page door-stopper is written for readers who have completed Richler 101. Those who haven't, and who might welcome a potted biography at this point, should refer to excellent biographies by Michael Posner and Reinhold Kramer.

Mordecai : The Life and Times is a tough-minded book worthy of its subject. It's a warts-and-all portrait of the artist as street-fighter: ruthless, committed, and lethal when cornered or simply rubbed the wrong way. Of course the Saidye Bronfman anecdote is here. At the Montreal premiere of the movie version of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, she speaks from on high: "Well, Mordecai, you've come a long way for a St. Urbain's street boy." Our hero responds: "And you've come a long way for a bootlegger's wife."

Afterwards, in Foran's telling, Mordecai's wife, the long-suffering Florence -- a Nora-Joyce figure but with brains and critical acumen -- admonishes her husband for speaking to an elderly person in such a manner. One imagines him taking another sip of whisky.

Anybody avid to encounter Richler the Impaler need wait no longer than the preface. Foran serves up a 1973 speech in which the author, sounding like some Old Testament prophet, excoriates a Jewish student conference in Niagara Falls. Calling the students "moral and intellectual primitives," he tells them: "Your Jewishness, unlike mine, is distorted, mean-minded, self-pitying, and licensed not by Hillel or Rabbi Akiba, but by urban ignorance. . . . I heard more anti-Gentile remarks here last night than I have anti-Semitic remarks in years passed in Gentile company." Never had he "stumbled among such yahoos before."

On occasion, the St. Urbain street scrapper had to take as good as he got. Poet Irving Layton, another combative Jewish Montrealer, called him "an establishment ass-kisser masquerading as a surly rebel," someone who had decided that "it's smart and profitable to retail family skeletons and to caricature Jews." And after Richler mocked novelist Austin Clarke in print, calling him "a minor-league Leroi Jones" and a "self-advertised black militant," Clarke wrote back privately, telling Richler he was bankrupt of ideas and imagination: "I was going to challenge you to a fight . . . and possibly kick

your little arse, but again, I have this advantage over you, I am not running out of ideas, baby. You dig it?"

Such anecdotes and vignettes, and they are many, turn up like entertaining signposts along the way. Foran understands that for Richler, writing was both a vocation and a profession. And he understands, too, the literary jungle through which his subject blazed a singular trail, writing screenplays and journalistic articles, landing grants, doing whatever it took.

After two decades abroad, and while comfortably ensconced in London with his wife and five children, Richler sees fellow expatriate Doris Lessing lose contact with the real-world material that nurtured her. Appalled to find her writing about aliens and other worlds, and terrified that similar transformation might befall him if he remains abroad, he takes his wife to a fancy dinner and tells her they are returning to Montreal. Where Florence had fondly imagined living out her days in London, now she saw "the childhood and even identities of the children also being subjected to the exigencies of his creative work."

Yet for Richler, renewed engagement with his home and native land was the only way to fly. Returning to Montreal gave rise to *Joshua Then and Now*, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, and *Barney's Version*. It also spawned *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!*, a scathing parody of Quebec language laws that set a new standard for button-pushing in Canadian polemical writing.

Fully aware that Richler detested "psychobilge," Foran proves fearless in probing his subject's psyche. In his later years, Richler became so bitterly alienated from his mother that he would no longer speak to her. Foran suggests that this, and also Richler's decades-long estrangement from his older brother, Avrum, derived from the same boyhood trauma.

In his late sixties, Foran tells us, Richler finally "delivered the news he thought his sibling needed to hear with a bluntness that was likely purposeful. 'I saw them fucking,' he said." He was referring to his mother and a boarder in their home. As a boy of twelve, Richler had expected eighteen-year-old Avrum to return home from university and put things right. Instead, mild-mannered Avrum had accepted the new regime. "Had a half-century of fitful, uneasy contact between the siblings," Foran asks, "been the result of that one unforgettable incident?"

In writing this book, Foran enjoyed unprecedented access to both the family and the archives of his subject, and it shows. He even turns up the Yiddish nicknames for Richler's high school teachers. Indeed, one of the surprises of the book is the authority with which Foran writes about Judiasm.

The biographer casts a discerning eye over Richler's various works. And he excels in serving up insider stories. Did you know that Doris Lessing had an affair with Ted Allen, and that Margaret Laurence followed George Lamming to London? Foran notes that Richler contrasted markedly with his writer-friend Norman Levine, a quiet, gentle man who "was not a natural hustler and fighter ready to defend and expand his turf."

This is a portrait of a dedicated artist who raged against the dying of the light. As I finished this book, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks.