

# Waiting for "Barney" (Mordecai Richler's version)

by Beverly Akerman

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**The first novel by Mordecai Richler** I read was *Son of a Smaller Hero* in the late '70s. I was a McGill undergrad in an intro to CanLit class taught by a Caribbean member of the professoriate, the punchline to the course being: there's no such thing as Canadian literature because lit-*rah*-chure is universal, don't you know?! Though set in the same Mile End district as later works *Duddy Kravitz* and *St. Urbain's Horseman*, *Son of* is worlds away in sensibility — dark, angry, and bitter, unleavened by any of the renowned Richler ribaldry.

I'm pretty sure I acquired *St. Urbain*, *Joshua Then And Now*, and *Solomon Gursky was Here* through the Book-of-the-Month Club (something you won't often find a literary writer admitting), in the late '70s or early '80s. And while *Gursky* is, by some accounts, supposedly Richler's masterpiece, I had to force myself through while the other two I read with pleasure, and more than once. Here was a Montreal I could still see evidence of, if only in broad strokes. Sort of like those chalk outlines left over at crime scenes. It wasn't my Montreal but, in fact, my parents', especially my father's. But where my father was the good son — who stayed close to and cared for his parents, no matter their faults — Richler was the angry young man who flung himself across an ocean to drink, fuck and write himself into adulthood.

In retrospect, the Richlerian coming-of-age seems more like a romantic cliché, this swanning around, down and out in London and

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Paris...Ibiza, crossing paths with Papa Hemingway, et al. Reading about it again gave rise to a sort of melancholy, in the same way having missed coming of age at Woodstock makes me nostalgic for a more recent past I also managed to miss. Although Richler probably felt the same way over having been too young to serve in World War II...

**But there's a special place in my heart for Richler's tour de force of a novel, his grand finale, *Barney's Version*.** It has everything — humour, a whiff of mystery, poignancy, a suggested reading list for a literary illiterate like yours truly, the Falstaffian hero Barney Panofsky — cantankerous curmudgeon of good heart crossed with the insanely irresistible fax machine prankster, though I could have done without the soft shoe.

What I really loved about *Barney's Version*, though, was the stake through the heart of the shiksa goddess motif. Here was a novel in which all three of Barney's wives were Jewish women, even the third and favourite one, "Miriam, Miriam, my heart's desire..."

As a Jewish woman, what a relief to finally read a novel by a Jewish male writer of stature in which a Jewish man actually desired a *Jewish* woman! One he was wholeheartedly, head over heels in love with and mad with desire for. What a novelty, as *Quill & Quire's* reviewer James Grainger notes, amidst the "the parade of harpies, good-hearted floozies" that made up Richler's usual female universe. (Miriam may be wonderful but she hasn't, by a long shot, the dimensionality of Barney. But then again, who does?) And, of course, Jewish women aren't harridans only in Richler's universe, but in most Jewish men's work.

In fact, once this deep desire of mine was fulfilled by *Barney*, I finally became aware of how large a need it had been (in fact, I still wonder if meeting it was calculated, a marketing ploy). But even if Richler decided to toss his largest constituency a bone — since women buy and read most fiction, I'll wager the majority of even Richler's readers are also women — I forgave him. Because really, who could hold anything against Barney?

Grainger actually castigates Foran for failing to speculate on the reasons for Richler's way of writing women...and then repeats the identical error. But I have this theory...

Foran's biography clearly owes a tremendous debt to Michael Posner's *The Last Honest Man: Mordecai Richler*. In many places, Foran seems to have simply transformed the sliced and diced verbatim interviews Posner reports, into narrative prose.

**Foran, who in publicity shots appears to be cultivating a Mordecai-ian hairdo**, also takes pains to present his book as an unauthorized biography. To which I can only say: if this be unauthorized, one shudders to imagine the converse. Because, on comparing Posner and Foran, one becomes aware of the areas where the hagiography ends — which are, coincidentally, the points Foran conveniently overlooks. Some of them have to do with women, one being Mordecai's first wife, Cathy Boudreau. According to one of Posner's sources, a “friend, who requested anonymity” suggested that “Perhaps seeking a way out of his marriage...Richler...became impotent...’I think towards the end Mordecai was uninterested and withholding himself and out of need, I guess, she slept with some of his friends (Posner, p. 106.’” (With friends like that, as my mother might say, who needs enemies?)

Which brings me to the subject of Richler's mother. The book is quite detailed in the matter of even his parents' upbringing, particularly that of Lily (sometimes Leah) Rosenberg, Mordecai's mother.

Foran makes quite a song and dance of a 2,400 word letter Richler wrote his mother in 1976, a copy of which he kept in his archives. Florence never knew about the letter, which finishes with Mordecai explaining why he deviated so greatly from the biblical injunction “to honour our mother and father [;] I must point out that there were some things Moses had not yet heard of.” He then tells her he remembers, from his boyhood, that she had sex with one of her boarders in the bedroom Mordecai and his mother shared, “the two of you humping together only 12 feet from a boy of 12.” And please don't accuse me of being a spoiler: Foran announced the

contents of the letter — complete with the quotes I cite, in *The Globe and Mail*, on the publication of his book.

For me, the true tragedy at the centre of Mordecai — aside from his sad decline and untimely passing in his final illness, which in this account more than ever resembles an alcoholic beset by a tragedy of medical errors — is all his mother's. Maybe she was an embittered old woman. Maybe she was mentally ill. Maybe she had, as Mordecai wrote, humped her lover “only 12 feet from a boy of 12” (Would you really trust the accuracy of such a freighted, 33-year-old memory? Foran himself describes the great outcry within the Richler clan to Mordecai's assertion that his Richler grandfather struck his own — the grandfather's — children; even Mordecai's brother “wonders if [MR] had got this wrong...But [concludes the brother] whatever his other flaws, Mordecai Richler did not fabricate [p.707].”) And then there was the fact that this letter was among a set of papers that weren't to be made public until 20 years after his death...which to an outsider like myself makes the inclusion of this letter in the book an immoral act, despite the estate's waiving of the condition.

**Lily Rosenberg's sin was to be born female in the home of a revered Chassidic Rabbi more than a century ago**, and so be ineligible to follow in her father's footsteps the way a favoured son might, despite being otherwise capable or worthy. She was relegated to the position of errand runner to her exalted father, “a slave to her Judaism...submissive to her father who deprived her of higher learning she could obviously have enjoyed and mastered (p. 497),” according to a review Foran cites of her fictionalized biography, *The Errand Runner*. In fact, her father did the best he could for her in the sad times into which she had been born — Lily was married off to an unsuitable boy from a prosperous family, an attempt to assure her financial future. Instead, the marriage was ill-starred and poverty-stricken. And then, her father dead, Lily cared for her mother, bed ridden from a stroke that left her incontinent and at risk for gangrene, for seven long years. She eventually had her marriage annulled — making her sons bastards, according to Jewish law.

Who wouldn't be bitter, surviving such a scenario? (And here I include both Lily and her sons...)

I do recognize the above spin perhaps echoes the posthumous fate of Clara Charnofsky, the fictional Barney's first wife. I also feel, after having read Foran's book — and Lily Rosenberg's — a better understanding for the way Mordecai wrote women (for example, the mother who does a strip-tease for the bar mitzvah bochers in *Joshua Then and Now*, the mother who died of Alzheimer's, as Lily did, in *Barney's Version*). The story of Lily Rosenberg, the story of Mordecai Richler...these are novular in their own right.

One thing I think neither Posner nor Foran picked up on was that Duddy Kravitz was not the original I'd always thought he was.

In 2009, the writer and producer Budd Schulberg died. I must have read an obituary on him at the time, and put his seminal novel, made into a movie and even a highly successful musical — ***What Makes Sammy Run*** (1941) — onto my reading list.

Well, in 2010, I finally read it...hmm, I thought, why does this Sammy Glick person seem so familiar? Because Duddy Kravitz was an updated, menchified Sammy Glick. From the 1959 *New York Times* review of MR's book by Florence Crowther (no relation):

*“The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz is really the revved-up odyssey of a young man from the squalor of St. Urbain Street to the...stylish residential heights of Montreal's Outrement. The young man is Duddy Kravitz, a Sammy Glick by any other name, but a broken-field runner rather than one with his eye on the long distance crown.*

*“Like Sammy, Duddy is bound to escape from the poverty and humiliation of his boyhood. But unlike Sammy, once Duddy has outgrown his childhood peculations...his urge is for the honorable, the legitimate, the man-to-man enterprise...”*

In fact, Duddy is even referred to as Sammy Glick in the novel (on p. 165 of the version in Google Books—again, sharpening my appreciation for an e-reader...). Which underlined a thought that

had occurred to me a couple of years back, on perusal of Irene Nemirovsky's *David Golder* (which I couldn't even bring myself to read, it sounded so horrific): you can never go wrong making your Jewish character a son-of-a-bitch.

**But perhaps one of the most impressive lessons I learned from Foran's book was the invisibility of women as writers in the era of Mordecai Richler** (a defect somewhat repaired in Linda Leith's new book, *Writing in the Time of Nationalism*, which rescues from obscurity the names of woman writers of the Richler era).

Foran does his best to keep women's names in the narrative, but other than the occasional editor and agent, and despite Florence's primacy as Mordecai's first and best critic, women are pretty much absent in the creative sense — other than as wives, lovers, babysitters. Oh, Foran does mention Mavis Gallant, Doris Lessing, and Margaret Atwood, but mostly in passing; it seems as though he's worked hard to get them in at all (and if you want a real eye-popping view of what it was like to be a woman even in professional society of several decades past, please read Stephen Kimber's book *Not Guilty*, about politician and serial sexual predator Gerald Regan).

Pining for Barney, I went to the book launch for *Mordecai: The Life & Times*, the first launch I'd been at where the author declined to read from his book — and at \$40 a pop, he should have! Before the proceedings actually got underway, Marvin Rotrand, a member of the Montreal's civic government, circulated a petition among the paltry, grey-headed crowd (a number of young people were there, but only because they were buddies of Foran's daughter, who attends a local university. A couple of them I spoke to: Americans who had never heard of Mordecai Richler). Rotrand has a petition going to “request that the City of Montreal make an appropriate gesture to commemorate the contribution of Mordecai Richler in naming a street, a public place or building in his honour.” It has garnered 2,000 signatures. Meantime, a petition demanding Quebec's premier resign has collected nearly 150 times as many names...

Foran and Rotrand joked about the possible canonization of Mordecai, riffing on Saint André Bessette, the former Brother André, who had recently been canonized. Which set me to thinking of an appropriate commemoration that might have Mr. Richler rolling in his grave — with laughter. St. Joseph's Oratory is the shrine built through Brother André's devotion, the largest church in Canada, and one of Montreal's major tourist draws. Our jolly comrades of Quebec sovereignty and archetypal Richlerian foes, the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, have episodically agitated to change the name of the street, Queen Mary Road, where the Oratory is located. I think it might be time to give in to the SSJB's demands in exchange for one of our own: why not rename the Oratory in honour of the late lamented Mordecai Richler, the most successful writer Montreal ever — now and probably ever — and St. Urbain's true horseman?

Foran is a strong writer and his book is a wonderful achievement, bringing a glimpse of so much of Montreal literary and social history — particularly, but not exclusively, Montreal's Jewish history — to life. The prose is lively and powerful and moves at a great clip. I was sorry to finish it, moved to tears repeatedly while reading the last chapters, which is a remarkable feat, especially in biography. Foran's book fittingly — and to the chagrin of Richler's political foes — seeks to praise Richler, not to bury him, unlike some of MR's literary fellow-travellers (see ELAN's RAEV program, for example).

But even after reading it, I haven't had my fill; I am still waiting for Barney. In so-doing, I know I am really waiting for a version of Mordecai. I'm waiting for a version of my father, for a version of Montreal's late, lamented past, to reappear. And in this, I know, I am really, *pace* Beckett, waiting for Godot. Unfortunately, I know something else — spoiler alert! — that despite our devotion to it, the past, like Godot, never comes.

