Richler Rejuvenated

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Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang, Mordecai Richler. Illustrated by Fritz Wegner. McClelland and Stewart, 1975. 84 pp. $5.95 cloth.

Seeing that Mordecai Richler has intended his latest (no. 11 in the canon) book for a juvenile audience, the ideal person to provide a proper assessment would appear to be one of the New (Brand New) Critics. So here then is Louise, age 10 (academic qualifications: grade 5, clear standing; writing credits: numerous classroom stories and essays, and penmanship exercises):

> *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* is one of the best books I've read. It is mysterious and it holds a lot of suspense. You don't need to hear what I think about it. Just listen to the title. It almost draws you to reading it.

Thus, it would seem that Richler has thoroughly succeeded in his first attempt at writing for the youngsters; so any further comment is probably redundant. Nevertheless, here is what one of the Old Critics has to say.

When first learning some months ago that Mordecai Richler was bringing out a children's book one was naturally interested -- and apprehensive. Could a man who has spent the past two decades perfecting his Black Humour craftsmanship suddenly abandon his customary cynicism and enter a child's world of magic and delight? What could he bring to the children's literature genre that wouldn't be grossly unsuitable? Well, the kiddies do like *Mad* Magazine, don't they? Perhaps then something like that.

As it turns out, though, here is what *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* is really like. Jacob, who is six years of age (or, as he puts it, "two plus two plus two years old"), lives with his family -- two older brothers, two older sisters, and mother and father -- "in a rambling old house on Kingston Hill in England." The "Two-Two" nickname comes from the fact that Jacob feels obliged to say everything twice, so that the bigger people around him will have to pay some attention.

However, this word-repeating habit of his gets him into difficulty, eventually bringing about his meeting with the dreaded Hooded Fang. Believing that Jacob is mocking him, the greengrocer, Mr. Cooper, teases the lad in return, going to the extent of calling in a policeman and charging Jacob with "insulting behavior to a big person." In alarm, the boy dashes out of the shop and into Richmond Park, where he sinks to the grass, exhausted -- and dreams.

We soon find Jacob in court, where he is inadequately defended by the barrister Louis Loser. The result is that the judge, Mr. Justice Rough, to punish Jacob for his offensive conduct toward the greengrocer, sentences him to "two years, two months, two weeks, two days, two hours and two minutes in the darkest dungeons of the children's prison"--which is located on "Slimers' Isle", "A marshy island in the foggiest part of England, a place where the sun never shone." The island is surrounded by crocodiles and inhabited by "gray wolverines with yellow snaggle-teeth and millions of deathwatch beetles." And the warden, we discover, turns out to be the frightful-looking Hooded Fang. A onetime wrestler, The Hooded Fang had to leave his former profession because one day a child laughed at him; the news quickly spread and soon all the wrestling fans were treating The Hooded Fang with derision, thereby making it impossible for him to continue his career as the terrifying figure in the ring.

What follows next are The Hooded Fang's attempts to break Jacob's spirit (Jacob also finds the ex-wrestler amusing) and make him cringe in fear as do all the other youthful prisoners. Eventually, though, The Hooded Fang acknowledges defeat; however, Jacob must pay a terrible price for failing to be suitably impressed. The Hooded Fang announces: "Tuesday afternoon at two o'clock, *I'm going to feed you to not one,* but two hungry sharks. Ho, ho!"

What then? Will Jacob be able to escape this dire fate? (Actually The Hooded Fang is a kind-hearted fellow, who sneaks candies into Jacob's cell, but he seems determined to carry out this threat. After all, he does have his image around the prison to maintain.) Will Jacob be rescued in time by the leaders of Child Power, the Infamous Two -- also known as the intrepid Shapiro and the fearless O'Toole (in everyday life, Jacob's sister Emma and his brother Noah)?

Such is the story of *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* -- a story that is "mysterious" with "a lot of suspense", as is rightly claimed by the youthful collaborator in this review. However, there are other elements in here as well (evidently missed by my colleague, who must be excused on the grounds of having a more pressing assignment to attend to: getting to bed on time). In essence, the book concerns the lot of the child in our society -- the relatively helpless position he or she is in because of psychological and physical dependence upon the adults. Hence Jacob's exploits represent wish-fulfilment (the secret, of course, of the adult best-seller), and hence Richler's tale is of natural appeal to the juvenile reader -- who also undoubtedly would be quite appreciative of this author's customary satiric detail. For example, here is what Jacob has to put up with in the courtroom scene: "' '. . . BIG PEOPLE ARE NEVER, NEVER WRONG. . . .If they punish you . . . it's . . . FOR YOUR OWN GOOD. . . . And it hurts them. . . . MORE THEN IT HURTS YOU. . . .' " And in the same episode: " 'Everything you have --' continued Mr. Justice Rough. '-- YOU OWE TO US,' chimed in the big people."

So what we have here is a satiric view of the adult world through child-like eyes. (Usually, in his adult fiction Richler seems jaded; on this occasion, though, he appears totally fresh -- in two senses, it might be added.) An adult world which can create such injustices as: "No-flow ketchup, guaranteed to stick in the bottle": "Jigsaw puzzles too complicated to solve"; and "major news stories concocted to break only when they could replace favorite television programs."

Other sinister adult practices originate with the toy saboteur Mr. Fox, who transfers vital parts around in model kits, exchanges wires in electric train and racing cars sets, replaces English-language model kit instructions with those written in Japanese, and switches the labels on chemistry set tubes ("That ought to make for an explosion or two," he cackled").

No doubt *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* has some significance or other in relation to Richler's grown-up books (which apparently is the case with Morley Callaghan's *Luke Baldwin's Vow* according to John Orange's convincing argument in *Canadian Children's Literature*, Vol. I, No. 1). For instance, one notices in his most "mature" novel (the novel, that is, containing the fullest expression to date of his fictional powers), *St. Urbain's Horseman*, that in the midst of all the social shambles one value remains steadfast for the protagonist Jacob Hersh. (Incidentally, could there be some symbolic connection between this middle-aged Jacob and the present six-year-old Jacob?) And this value is love for and love from one's family. Society at large may be emotionally adrift because of vainglorious striving, forlorn ego quests; nevertheless, family security is always there to fall back on. Jacob appears condemned to just go on being a commercial hack film director -- no Ingmar Bergman-like artistic self-fulfilment for him; yet he has gained one achievement in life: the love of wife Nancy and the little Hershes.

So it would seem that after twenty years of nihilistic satire Mordecai Richler has turned sentimentalist. (Of course, it could be maintained that Richler never really has been all-out Black Humorist, but rather an indignant reactionary moralist -- as is clearly conveyed by *Cocksure*.) And *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* appears to be following in this sentimental comedy vein. Obviously intended as light entertainment for the juvenile set, this book presents nothing reprehensible about Jacob's family (as might be the case with Jacob Hersh's family, the possibly objectionable member being Daddy himself). The young Jacob's only difficulty with them is that because of his diminutive stature he does not command much attention.

No indications of any overt, or even covert, cruelty appear in the story, just love and affection. Discovered eventually in Richmond Park, where he had been sleeping, Jacob obtains this response: "His father shook him awake. 'Jacob Two-Two,' he said beaming, 'thank God, you're safe.' " And even the greengrocer, Mr. Cooper, from whom Jacob had fled in fear, welcomes the boy back joyfully: " 'Don't tell me,' he said. 'You are Jacob Two-Two. You are two plus two plus two years old....And here, if you please, are two pounds of firm, red tomatoes.' "

Thus, *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* could be regarded as an extension of the values displayed in *St. Urbain's Horseman.* However, could it be that this latest book represents something more -- a new direction in Richler's development as an artist? The story closes with the boy's mother saying:" 'Jacob Two-Two, you are too much. You're a dreamer.' " And the author adds: "A dreamer? Maybe." Then "that night, after Jacob Two-Two had gone to bed, he was paid a visit by the fearless O'Toole, accompanied by the intrepid Shapiro. They brought him a child power uniform that was different from all the others. It contained a pair of Day-Glo blue jeans and a golden cape, but the *Child Power* emblem was emblazoned on the T-Shirt two times."

Perhaps then this book is actually "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Child" type of story, with Jacob, as the Artist in question, achieving power, or at least worthwhile human significance, through the strength of his imagination. It might also be noted that he does have one advantage here over his namesake, Jacob, the film director. Young Jacob merely has to transform an essentially kindly, well-ordered world and make himself master of it, whereas Jacab Hersh has to contend with an Absurdist milieu. The boy inhabits a pastoral England, but middle-aged Jacob is part of a fallen world, a society based on tawdry dreams.

One could speculate further on the part that England has played in Richler's writing over the years. Evidently semi-autobiographical, his fiction up to now has displayed a rejection of the author's Montreal St. Urbain Street background in favor of a new identity in English media land, and the subsequent failure of his various protagonists, or alter egos, to find anything spiritually refreshing there. In contrast, though, to Richler's "serious" books, this children's story expresses the golden essence of the Albion escapist vision -- a Garden of Eden-like existence on Kingston Hill, the fictional home of Jacob and his family and the onetime real-life home of the Mordecai Richler family. (And a further autobiographical connection is that the names of the novelist's five children -- according to the book's dedication note -- are the same as those of Jacob and his brothers and sisters.)

Anyway, a fully developed discussion of how *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* relates to the rest of Richler's work belongs in some other study. What is of principal interest here is how this book is related to other Canadian children's literature.

A noted commentator in this field, Sheila A. Egoff, in her article "The Writing and Publishing of Canadian Children's Books in English" (in *Royal Commission on Book Publishing Background Papers,* 1972), states: "The didactic tradition was broken in England in the 1850's and after, when outstanding writers turned their talents to pleasing children rather than informing them... Canadian writers stood aloof from this change and particularly from the great stream of fantasy....While imaginative writing failed to find adherents in Canada, sentimentality did become a favorite theme....through the writings of Margaret Marshall Saunders (1891-1947), Nellie McClung (1873-1951), and L. M.

Montgomery (1874-1942)." And to jump ahead a number of years: "With the advent of the 1960's, children's books, particularly those written in the United States, began to take on a psychological and sociological cast.... While other English-speaking children, as seen through their books, are coping with ineffectual parents, no parents, one parent, being unhappy, tuning in, dropping out, brushing up against drugs, alcoholism, homosexuality, and racism -- Canadian children are still visiting a lighthouse, crossing the barrens, discovering a cache of Indian relics, escaping a murderer, catching a bank robber, or getting a pony for Christmas."

So then, how does Richler's children's book fit in with these traditions of sentimentality and adventure-story writing? Well, for one thing he evidently has revived the Saunders-McClung-Montgomery sentimental tale. However, *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* is not strictly speaking an adventure story, but rather a fantasy. Or at least a fantasy with a realistic context. Thus, Richler's achievement would appear to be to have finally brought some "imaginative writing" into Canadian children's literature, also to have caught up with recent U.S. developments, children's material with a "psychological...cast." (And more on Richler's true-to-life qualities shortly.)

Another way, though, of approaching Mordecai Richler's contribution to CanLit Junior is to relate it to the offerings of other contemporary authors who write primarily for the adults but who do occasionally bring out something for the youngsters. For example, the comic essayist Robert Thomas Allen, who in 1963 published *The Mystery of the Missing Emerald*; and a novelist of urban despair, Richard B. Wright, who actually started off as a children's writer with *Andrew Tolliver* in 1965. However, neither author appears to be extending his customary artistic preoccupations into juvenile literature with these catching-a-robber boys' adventure stories. None of Allen's characteristic humour is present in his book, and no signs of human futility occur in Wright's *Andrew Tolliver*. (Come to think of it, though, one is setting up an impossible criterion here. How could Richard B. Wright possibly insert some sort of existential malaise into a work intended for the youngsters? Well, yes, it probably could be done; but who would publish it -- and what kiddy would want to read such a concoction?)

So it is evidently to Richler's credit then that he has remained true to his artistic vision, turning in a genuinely creative performance, rather than hackishly reproducing some standard item for the young set. Still, this is not an entirely unique achievement, since we do have before us the example of the afore-mentioned *Luke Baldwin's Vow* by Morley Callaghan (first published in 1948 and reissued in 1974), another children's book that illustrated adult themes. What now then -- compare Richler's and Callaghan's creations to see which author has done better by the youngsters? Well, Callaghan is a very serious, very earnest writer, whereas Richler is sprightly and.... However, be that as it may, comparisons are supposedly odious, so let's just move ahead.

Now that *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* has been categorized in various ways, what exactly are its literary merits? As already stated, two readers (one juvenile, one adult) have enjoyed the book. But it must be admitted that the adult reader at least does have certain reservations. To put it bluntly, where does justifiable literary influence end and plagiarism begin? Louis Loser, the barrister defending Jacob Two-Two in court, seems curiously reminiscent of Morgenhall, the ineffectual barrister in John Mortimer's play *The Dock Brief*. Furthermore, when Jacob first meets Louis and sees how incompetent the courtroom defense will be, he responds with: " 'I have faith in you, Mr. Loser,' he said, his voice wobbly." The lawyer then replies:" 'In that event...we can't lose. Because if you have faith in me, I'm going to plead insanity on your behalf. You're nuts, my boy. Positively crackers.' " So we would appear then to have strayed into Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* territory.

Anyway, the kiddies probably wouldn't be aware of Richler's having studied up on his Mortimer and Heller, and no doubt would appreciate the literary enrichment, no matter how it got in there. However, there are other aspects of Richler's first children's book that might disconcert them. For instance, when Jacob is brought into court, the judge Mr. Justice Rough, says: " 'This is serious. Extremely serious. If you got away with it, it could only lead to more monstrous crimes, like hiding comics under your pillow or peeing without lifting the seat.' " "Peeing"? A proper term or even concept for a children's story? Mordecai Richler is not going to get himself the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval with language like that. Still, while we're on the subject, what exactly is the appropriate word? Tinkling?... Urinating? ... Unfortunately, L. M. Montgomery and the other giants in the children's lit field have set no precedents to lead us out of this impasse.

Of course, it could be argued that this use of a vulgarism is quite in keeping with the current trend toward realism in children's books, as noted by Sheila A. Egoff. Or possibly Richler is making use of a shock device, characteristic of his adult fiction. If so, can one then conclude that he is trying to establish himself as an *adult terrible* for a youth audience?

In any case, there's no point in going on and on about a mere one word in this book. A much more significant problem is the story itself. Certainly an agreeable enough fantasy; however, why did Mordecai Richler feel obliged to present it as a dream sequence? Do children really require a prosaic explanation to account for Jacob's extraordinary experiences with The Hooded Fang and the Slimers? (Perhaps, though, the author is basing his narrative strategy here upon that employed in the movie version of *The Wizard of Oz;* whereas he would have been better off to stick to what Frank L. Baum originally had in mind -- an actual visit to fantasy land for his Dorothy, rather than some kind of hallucination.)

Nevertheless, despite all the foregoing objections -- the use of an impolite six-letter word, possible copyright infringement, and the realistic undercutting of his fantasy material -- one would like to think that Mordecai Richler has created a Canadian children's literature classic. For this is a compellingly presented tale, replete with comic detail and story-line inventiveness.

Hopefully, *Jacob Two-Two Meets The Hooded Fang* does not represent some mere literary exercise for its author, a way of keeping himself in creative trim (and in money) while he gets ready to attempt another major adult novel. One would like to look forward to further children's stories from Mordecai Richler -- stories which, if he pays close heed to the above critical observations, will have to be entirely masterful.

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