Jacob Two-Two and the Satisfactions of Paranoia

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"Once there was a boy named Jacob Two-Two." At first glance, that "once" in the opening sentence of *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* seems like a miscalculation. The story happens in a time and a place quite unlike the "once" of fairy tales, that mysterious world in which impossible things are a matter of fact. *Jacob Two-Two* is certainly no fairy tale.

It is not even much of a fantasy. The novel contains no unusual beasts, no magical objects or mystical rituals. Its settings include department stores and prisons, its artifacts television and electronic bleepers – things not usually found in worlds of fantasy. And while there is a slightly unusual device that makes fog in *Jacob Two-Two*, there are none of the wildly impossible machines we demand from science fiction. Furthermore, and what is most surprising, the novel offers none of those impossible leaps from time to time or place to place that we expect of dream-worlds.

Nevertheless, once Jacob begins his dream (for, as Richler insists, a dream it clearly is), things happen that do not accord with our usual sense of reality – not so much things that are impossible as things that stretch possibility.

In fact, the distinguishing quality of Jacob's dream-world is that it exaggerates reality. While cruel judges and intolerant juries do exist, they rarely act with the intense malevolence of Jacob's judge and jury – nor seem so funny in their malevolence. And while children like to believe that grownups have it in for them, not all grownups do, at least not to the degree they do in Jacob's dream. *Jacob Two-Two* is more like what we call satire than what we normally expect of fantasy; it depicts evil in an exaggerated way, so that things that are merely bad tendencies in reality are magnified into unqualified traits, and become laughable in the process.

But if *Jacob Two-Two* were only satire, it could not allow its hero the tremendous victory he achieves. In a satire, Jacob would inevitably rot in prison for eternity, in order to confirm the prejudice, accepted by Jacob and expressed by the judge, that ". . . in this court, as in life, little people are considered guilty, unless they can prove themselves innocent, which is just short of impossible."[1] The satiric intensity of statements like that one – and the book contains many – depends on everything forever remaining just as horrible as it is; since the point is to show how corrupt things are,

corrupt they must always remain. But things do get better for Jacob Two-Two. Much better.

In fact, Jacob seems to get everything he wants from the experiences the novel describes. His cynical interpretation of reality may be confirmed by the horrid judges and dark prisons he encounters; he is treated badly simply because he is young. But eventually, his genius is recognized, and not in spite of his youth, but because of it.

It seems, then, that the world described in *Jacob Two-Two* is neither like our own nor very consistent in the ways in which it is unlike our own. To some extent it is a satiric nightmare, a comical depiction of a world that is ugly, corrupt, and designed to hurt children. But it is also a wish-fulfillment, a depiction of how things ought to be. It is both satire and utopia, both worse than the real world and better than it.

The apparent inconsistencies of this world may be explained by the circumstances of its creation. In the first two chapters of the novel, Jacob confronts real situations in his normal life; but after Jacob "rubbed his eyes" (p. 12) at the end of the second chapter, he has fallen asleep. At the end of the book, Jacob's mother says to him, "You're a dreamer" (p. 84), and while the author adds a "maybe," there is little doubt that he has been dreaming. John Parr suggests this is "a significant problem with the novel . . . why did Richler feel obliged to present it as a dream sequence?"[2]

He had a good reason for doing so; in insisting that Jacob is dreaming, Richler demands that we see the relationship between the dream and the reality. According to Eleanor Cameron, ". . . any child reading a fantasy today would feel enormously cheated to be told at the end of the story that the whole thing was nothing but a dream, unless the paradox of dream as reality is an inextricable part of the whole conception."[3]

In fact, the oddities of the world Jacob dreams are directly related to the particulars of his life in the real world. In the real world, he is told by his older brother that at school ". . . they had punishment cells . . . dark and gloomy, with double-locked doors, and that naughty boys ultimately had to appear before a judge" (p. 8). In his dream, he is placed in such a cell and appears before such a judge. In the real world, the grocer says, "I demand justice. This exasperating little boy . . . must be charged with insulting behaviour to a big person" (p. 11). In his dream he is charged with just that.

Of course, as Richler is careful to point out, the grocer is "only teasing." But significantly, Jacob is not amused. The dream Jacob bases on his experience with the grocer tells us how Jacob himself understood the experience – it is Jacob's version of reality, and given the way it ends, it appears to perform a positive function for him; it certainly makes him a hero. Apparently *Jacob Two-Two* is one of those fantasies in which, as Eleanor Cameron suggests, "waking dreams of children are realized."[4]

But since the world he dreams is so ugly, we might wonder how such

ugliness could possibly satisfy anybody's perception of reality. A closer look at its characteristics should reveal what the dream offers, both for Jacob and for young readers of the novel.

Within Jacob's dream, grownups are unreasonably cruel to children, and take it for granted that they have a right to be so. The very existence of a judge who deals strictly with "girls who grow out of their shoes too soon" (p. 22) and of a prison for the punishment of such crimes, confirms that unreasonable cruelty. There is no logic in being punished for what you cannot help, or in being punished so extravagantly. And since that is true, there is no need to feel guilty. The nastier the judge and the crueller the punishment, the freer Jacob can feel of responsibility for his inadequacies. Ironically, the dream world gets more satisfying as it gets uglier.

Furthermore, grownups act this way in Jacob's dream world for no good reason. They simply assume their right to do so. It is the way of the world to be nasty to children. The jury members spout their typically grownup aphorisms with an ease that comes with great familiarity, and the only purpose of the goods made on Slimers' Isle is to make children miserable: "Jigsaw puzzles too complicated to solve . . . . Ping-Pong tables with a net bound to collapse the first time it was struck by a ball" (pp. 52-53) and so on; "in a word, anything to torment little people" (p. 54). But the nastier these grownups are, the more ridiculous they become. They are, in fact, not terrible but "funny" (p. 36), as the child points out when he sees through the deception of The Hooded Fang. The sneaky trick Jacob's dream plays on grownups is to exaggerate the bad tendencies of adults until they become too ridiculous to be respected, or even to be hated. They become figures of fun; that is why *Jacob Two-Two* is such a funny novel, and why some grownups, who may recognize their own behaviour in the exaggerated madness of the grownups in the novel, fail to see the humour.

But despite their laughability, Jacob's imaginary grownups do have a motive for their cruelty, and it makes them even more satisfying for Jacob and for children who read the novel. They secretly know, and do not dare admit, that children are, in fact, superior to grownups. That is why they spend all their time and effort keeping children in their place. If the world were not so beautifully designed to keep children in their place, then grownups would have to bow to the superiority of children and give up the power they enjoy but do not deserve.

The superiority of children, as defined in Jacob's dream, lies in their wisdom. It is not surprising that The Hooded Fang hates all children because a child once realized that he was funny instead of terrible. The child was wise enough not to be taken in by the Fang's fake terror. So is Jacob when he realizes that the Fang is secretly "a nice man" (p. 37). In fact, it is this wise realization that leads to the Fang's eventual downfall.

But if that is true, the wisdom of children lies in their lack of knowledge of what the grownup world conceives to be the truth. Neither the child who

laughed nor Jacob has understood the conventional response the grownup world expects them to have to The Hooded Fang; they are too innocent to see things the way they are supposed to see them, so they see them the way they actually are.

Ironically, the main tool grownups use to keep children in their place is this same innocence. Except grownups call it ignorance. In the real world, Jacob is told again and again that he is ignorant of what he ought to know – how to slice bread, how to count sheets, and so on. Even his brothers and sisters, who are "taller and much more capable then he" (p. 3), will not let him play with them because "our game's too complicated for you" (p. 6). In the exaggerated world of his dream, Master Fish and Mistress Fowl tell him that ". . . little people are always doing the wrong thing" (p. 29), and finally call him an "ignorant little troublemaker" (p. 30).

"Ignorance" is the secret weapon. The hold grownups have over children is their ability to persuade children that they are too stupid to understand anything or to do anything that really matters; that they are, in fact, inferior. And Jacob *is* finally "convinced by his tormentors that there simply had to be a prison for little people as obnoxious as he was" (p. 30). But since Jacob's "ignorance" leads to the unmasking of The Hooded Fang and the destruction of Slimers' Isle, there is clearly some question about its value; in Jacob's dream, what is "obnoxious" to grownups is actually what is best about childhood.

It seems that the world of Jacob's dream has three important characteristics. The first is that grownups have all the power within it, keep it by persuading children of their ignorance, and are more funny than terrible. The second is that children are superior to grownups because their theoretical ignorance is simply an inability to understand things that are in fact incomprehensible, or wrong, or just plain silly; that their ignorance is really a wise innocence. And the third, of course, is Richler's insistence that this *is* a dream, that Jacob has imagined this distorted vision of reality for his own satisfaction.

If we take these three things together, we discover that they amount to something very *like* a paranoid delusion. Psychologically speaking, paranoia is the ascription of personal difficulties to the supposed hostility of others; "the paranoid individual . . . cannot accept disappointment in himself, and reacts by developing fictions of superiority and by blaming his shortcomings on the machinations of others."[5]

In the real world, Jacob is disappointed by his inability to "cut a slice of bread that wasn't a foot thick on one end and thin as a sheet of paper on the other" (p. 5), and about the fact that ". . . he was not allowed to sit in a big chair at the kitchen table, but what good was it when he could hardly see over the dinner plate . . . ? (p. 5) He cannot help these inadequacies – they exist because he is a child, not yet physically big enough to cope with grownup artifacts like kitchen chairs or physically skilled enough to handle

grownup artifacts like knives.

Jacob realizes that these difficulties are merely conditions of being a child, not personal inadequacies. He knows that ". . . life was becoming more tolerable" (p. 3), that his capabilities are growing and will keep growing. Nevertheless, his inability to cope inevitably disturbs him personally. In fact, and paradoxically, Jacob is annoyed by his difficulties because he is mature enough to recognize them. He is young enough to fail, but old enough to realize that he is failing and be annoyed by it.

Jacob's solution to that is his paranoia-like delusion, a kind of wish-fulfilment. In his dream, his failures are not his own fault. Grownup artifacts were specifically designed by grownups to torment children, and represent grownup hostility, not childish inadequacy. The list of objects made on Slimers' Isle includes "Shoes made especially for children to outgrow within three months" and "Rain for picnics" (p. 53). It takes a certain amount of protective self-delusion to imagine that the problem is the shoes and not the feet, and that even the weather has been designed by THEM to get YOU. It also takes a lot of egocentric arrogance; but what makes the persecution bearable is the belief that one is important enough to be the object of such intense persecution.

In fact, the world of Jacob's dream is much *like* Freud's description of paranoid delusions: an attempt, and a successful one, "to re-create the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's own wishes."[6] According to Freud, "each one of us behaves in some respect like a paranoic, corrects some aspect of the world which is unbearable to him by the construction of a wish and introduces this delusion into reality."[7] The delusion Jacob introduces into reality, at least into the reality of his dream, allows him to put up with his own failings.

But we should not forget Richler's careful insistence that Jacob is in fact dreaming. It shows us that Jacob realizes his dream is not the truth – only a temporary replacement for it. Jon C. Stott says that Jacob "misunderstands the attitudes of older people toward little kids."[8]But he does not really misunderstand. His parents do feel he is incompetent (and to some extent, he *is* incompetent); and the older children really do not want to play with him. Stott says Jacob has a "persecution complex", but Jacob really *is* persecuted.

Furthermore, he understands the true nature of the persecution. When Jacob flees the grocery store, he does so, not because he is terrified by the grocer's threatened punishment, but because he knows the grocer is merely teasing. If we assume that Jacob's response to the exaggerated cruelty of the grownups he imagines in his dream represent his attitude toward the pretend cruelty of the grocer, then what bothers Jacob is that the grocer is belittling him. Either Jacob is dumb enough to believe the grocer, or weak enough to have to put up with cruel teasing. Either way, the grocer is a fool – and in

his dream, Jacob makes grownups into fools. He does not misunderstanc the grownup world (and his own place in it) so much as he dislikes it; that i why he transforms it into something easy to dislike, and himself intc something so easy to admire.

In any case, the dream itself contains an acknowledgement of its owr exaggeration. We are told that the various inventions of Slimers' Isle arc designed to get children "in trouble with big people who did, in fact, lovc them" (p. 54). So Jacob acknowledges that such people do exist, even i none appear within the dream. The dream is not something Jacob confuses with the truth, but something he uses to make the truth more bearable Jacob is not a paranoid with a persecution complex, in need of clinica treatment; he is a sane and successful user of paranoid delusion.

In fact, the best thing about Jacob's dream is that it is, in fact, just a dream. Knowing that grownups are not really unthinking, ridiculous monsters with nothing on their minds but the repression of children, children who read the novel can instead pretend for awhile that grownups *are* such monsters, and purge their feelings of repression with laughter.

In this sense, *Jacob Two-Two* is a subversive book – a comical attack on grownup supremacy that undermines the control grownups have over children. Within Jacob's dream, he possesses the power he lacks in reality, and it is no wonder that the phrase "Child Power" operates so significantly in the novel. Paranoid fantasy is a means of power for those who are otherwise powerless, and in *Jacob Two-Two* Richler associates with other members of powerless groups who feel repressed by the society they live in. The control over their own existences such people lack is available to them only in fantasy, and we are all familiar with books by Blacks about magnificent Blacks and hilariously weakminded Whites, or books by women about magnificent women and unnecessarily arrogant men. In such literature the powerful are made figures of fun, and the weak become blameless heroes. *Jacob Two-Two* offers children smiliar consolations if they feel similarly powerless; for not only does Jacob have power within the dream, but perhaps more significantly, the power to dream is itself a significant replacement for the power he lacks in reality. It does not change the world, or even himself; but he can continue to operate in the real world because of his indulgence in the dream one. He can bear persecution if he has power over his persecutors – especially since it is only in his imagination.

It is a large part of Richler's genius as a novelist for children that he recognizes, and allows his youthful protagonist to enjoy, the pleasures of paranoia. Jacob manages to be what Richler says he himself and too many other contemporary writers too often are: "triumphant in our vengeful imaginations as we never were in actuality."[9] It may well be a flaw in theoretically mature novelists that they re-invent the circumstances of their lives in order to makes themselves feel better about them. But for Jacob,

who is too powerless to have other means of feeling better about himself, a vengeful imagination turns out to be a boon and not a failing.

NOTES

[1]Mordecai Richler, *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 21. All further references are to this edition.

[2]John Parr, "Richler Rejuvenated," *Canadian Children's Literature* 1, 3 (1975), 101.

[3]*The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children's Books* (Boston: Little Brown, 1969), p. 86.

[4]P. 94.

[5]Robert M. Goldenson, *The Encyclopedia of Human Behaviour* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 2, 920.

[6]*Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 28.

[7]P. 28.

[8]"Running Away to Home – A Story Pattern in Children's Literature," *Language Arts*, 55 (1978), 475.

[9]"A Sense of the Ridiculous," *Shovelling Trouble* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), pp. 32-3.

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