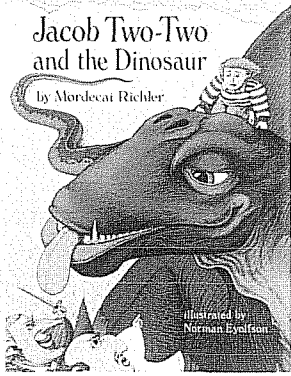


AN UNAPPEALING SEQUEL



Jacob Two-Two and the dinosaur, Mordecai Richler. Illus. Norman Eyolfson. McClelland and Stewart, 1987. 85 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-7484-0.

Jacob Two-Two and the dinosaur is a sequel to Mordecai Richler's enormously successful *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang*. The first *Jacob Two-Two* was well-written, carefully plotted, nicely illustrated, morally satisfying, and, above all, funny to young and old alike. The sequel, alas, has none of those qualities.

Jacob Two-Two is now two years older, and his penchant for saying everything two times has almost entirely disappeared. Since that habit was the source of much of the first book's humour, Richler has sacrificed a great deal in allowing Jacob to age. To portray Jacob's difference from the other kids, Richler resorts to stale jokes. Asked by his teacher, Miss Pickle, to define the word "denote," Jacob repeats what his brother has told him: "Denote is what you write with de pencil and de paper." This response earns Jacob the admiration of the rest of the class and the displeasure of his teacher, the first in a long line of adults who threaten his happiness.

The conflict between adults and children was also at the heart of *The Hooded Fang*, but in that book the satire is light-hearted and directed against the conventional attitudes of adults towards children. Clichés like "Everything you have you owe to us" and "It hurts me more than it hurts you" are hurled at Jacob in the children's court, where he is on trial for insulting behaviour to a big person. Richler has fun with these aphorisms of child oppression, and with other manifestations of adult hostility, exemplified in the products turned out by the children's prison: "No-flow ketchup, guaranteed to stick in the bottle. . . . Shoes made especially for children to outgrow within three months. . . . Major news stories concocted to break only when they could replace favorite television programs." In the end, however, Child Power triumphs, Jacob Two-Two is rescued from prison, and the dreaded Hooded Fang turns out to be childlike himself, redeemed by Jacob's affectionate nature.

In the new book, however, adults are divided into two distinct groups:

Jacob's parents (who are Good) and all other authority figures (who are Bad). Teachers are mean, relatives are oppressive, scientists are foolish cowards, politicians are egotistical maniacs, rich people are snobs, and the government works hand-in-hand with the army to destroy Jacob's pet.

Jacob's pet is, of course, the dinosaur of the title: an enormous *Diplodocus* which grows from a tiny creature that Jacob's father has smuggled in from Kenya. The size of Dippy soon causes problems for Jacob's family: one day he trots through the grounds of the Certified Snobs' Golf and Country Club, where Jacob has been taking swimming lessons. This episode prompts an attempt at satire at the expense of the Certified Snobs' Club (evidently the same country club that took its lumps in Richler's last novel, *Joshua then and now*). The president of the club, Professor Wacko Kilowatt, summons Jacob's father and delivers an ultimatum:

"Look here", Wacko said, "we are now, in spite of what hopelessly inferior people say, a very tolerant club. We have come to accept a few members who are black or Italian or Jewish or Greek, so long as they are also filthy rich. We even accept children for swimming classes whose parents. . .were not intelligent enough to inherit money and actually work for a living. But we must draw the line somewhere. We will simply not accept any green monsters in our club."

It is difficult to imagine what audience Richler could have in mind for this sort of bald sarcasm. Children wouldn't see the irony, and most adults would find it too obvious to be funny. Only readers who assume that all rich people are ignorant, bigoted, and snobbish would be likely to smile at this.

Wacko Kilowatt is the scientific advisor to Prime Minister Perry Pleaser, who bears a suspicious resemblance to our current PM (the illustrator has given him a pronounced chin). Perry Pleaser is prime target for Richler's satire:

On awakening each morning, Perry Pleaser, even before he brushed his teeth, would hug himself and kiss his reflection in the mirror. He wanted all the people to love him at least as much as he loved himself, which was proving very, very difficult.

A little of this kind of humour goes a long way, but Richler evidently felt that he had struck the motherlode with the self-obsessed PM, and he mines it for all it is worth, which is not much. Pleaser has surrounded himself with a chorus of yes men (and yes women) and hardly a chapter goes by without a ringing chorus of "yes" from these sycophants. Unlike the Jacob Two-Two of *The Hooded Fang*, whose repetition of every speech becomes a

significant element in the plot, and evokes sympathetic laughter, the yes men are ultimately boring.

Predictably, Perry Pleaser and Wacko Kilowatt decide that Dippy must be eliminated. The dinosaur, who up to this point has been mute, suddenly begins to speak. This enables him to have witty conversations with Jacob, using lines borrowed from old Mel Brooks routines. When Jacob says, "Aw, who needs girls," Dippy replies: "It's okay for you to talk — you're only eight. But I'll bet when you get to be sixty-five million-plus years you'll be interested in girls too." When apprised that he is being hunted down, Dippy protests: "But I'm a law-abiding citizen. In more that sixty-five million years I've never even had a ticket for jaywalking." Dippy has forgotten that for all but a few months of that time he was apparently only a few inches long and living underground in Kenya. But what does consistency matter if the humour is clever and appealing to readers of all ages? Unfortunately, it isn't.

Reviewers who enjoyed *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang* praised it as much for its warmth and compassion as for its humour. It's difficult to imagine anyone praising *Jacob Two-Two and the dinosaur* for those reasons. This is a mean-spirited book, which promotes an Us vs. Them philosophy, and suggests that Canadian scientists, politicians, and military men are corrupt, self-serving, and vicious. The same attitude pervades Richler's last novel, *Joshua then and now*, a disappointing imitation of *St. Urbain's Horseman*. *Horseman* was characterized by compassion and a clear sense of a moral norm, whereas, *Joshua* seems to be motivated by feelings of revenge and My Family Right or Wrong. Morality in the novel crumbles when it runs up against the brick wall of family ties. *Jacob Two-Two and the Dinosaur* is the product of a similar approach to the world, in which Jacob and his family are right, and everyone else is wrong — and not only wrong, but evil, stupid, and incompetent. One hopes and expects that children will not care for this book.

Finally, the illustrations of Norman Eyolfson are far inferior to those of Fritz Wegner for *The Hooded Fang*. Wegner's approach mirrored the sympathetic and warmly humorous tone of the narrative. Eyolfson's drawings are coarse and distorted: he gives Jacob ears that would make an elephant jealous and hair styled by Lawnboy. The nine-year-old to whom I read the book (and who had previously enjoyed *The Hooded Fang*) commented: "He's not a very good drawer, is he?" Precisely.

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