Chapter IV

Dark Blossoms: Carnival and Humor as Resilience

Humor and irony are indispensable to mythification in twentieth century literature. Their carnivalesque aspect functions as a ritually sanctioned safety valve in a rigid social context. Humor acts as a safety valve for many of Mordecai Richler’s characters as events and memories encroach on their sanity. In a way, their ability to discern and appreciate the absurd and grotesque even within the Jewish society is an appreciable attribute. Richlerian humor portrays his flair for multiple comic modes—satirical, topical, psychological and parodic.

Jewish humor is a relatively modern phenomenon. It is not often humorous in the general sense. Jewish humor is rather disturbing and upsetting, its phrases dipped in the tragic. The butt of a cruel joke, they found that God had singled them out to be a light unto the nations, but had given them a benighted existence. There was a vast discrepancy between what was to be the "chosen peoples” glorious destiny and their desperate straits. Priding themselves on the cohesiveness of their private world, they felt isolated from the world at large. To cope with the anxiety
produced by these incongruities, they created a humor in which laughter and trembling were inextricably mingled.

Despite the most extreme adversities and persecutions, Jews clung to the myth of the “chosen people.” Despite their pride, it was much too realistic not to recognize how grandiose an anomaly was the contrast between their claim and their position. Hence the characteristic strategy of its humor was an irony which measured the distance between pretension and actuality, held it up for public inspection and then made of it the salt of self-ridicule. Jewish humor in the mid twentieth century Canada was the plaint of a people who were highly successful in countless ways, yet still felt inferior, tainted, outcast; a people who needed some magic device of self-assertion and self-aggrandizement. They were aliens in a larger, more uncertain world. Cut off from the shtetl solidarity, the enemy wasn’t easily identifiable and friends were not readily available. Baffled by the new country, their marginal status, that is, the psychological ambiguity of being on the outskirts, prompted them to make comedy out of constraints.

The most distinguishing feature of Jewish humor is the self mockery which prompted Freud to write:
The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of most apt jokes . . . have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics . . . . I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character. (111-2)

Freud attributed the Jews' excessive ridicule of themselves to the excessive aggression they had to conceal to survive in such an inimical society. This self-directed mirth was a camouflaged form of their masochism. Jewish humor, however, is not only based on masochistic characteristics. The self-critical jokes of the Jews have also been a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness. Maurice Samuel states the case pointedly:

There was nothing jolly and hilarious about the destitution that lay like a curse on millions of Jews . . . They were miserable and knew it, but the question that haunts us historically is, why did they not
disintegrate intellectually and morally? How were they able, under hideous oppression and corroding privation, under continuous starvation to keep alive against a better day the spirit originally breathed on man? The answer lies in the self-mockery by which they rose above their condition to see afar off the hope of future. (210-1)

Richler's humor is also based on the profoundly accurate idea that the prevailing social conditions oppressed and crippled man until he became not only miserable but ridiculous. One is stunned by the audacity, the ferocity, the originality, the sheer abundance and ubiquity of humor among his Jewish characters. They are puffed up with a great sense of their own importance, but at the same time painfully deflated by the endless discovery of weaknesses, failures and stupidities in themselves that militated against the cherished self-image. Eager to purge themselves before suffering another's criticism, they made endless verbal confessions of weakness, folly and depravity, not only forestalling criticism but distancing their true good selves from the selfish, mean, stupid little beings they had been in the past.

Old myths do die and the absurdity of life obtrudes. What can man do when myths themselves become absurdities? For
some, one answer lies in laughter, in the recognition of the meaningless stupidity of all things and of the humor in the serious human effort to act as though these were some ultimate realities. A literature of Black Humor has sprung about this theme. Black humor is a kind of mythic substitute. Within the laughter, there is pathos, a deep sadness for the sickness of humans in their attempts to find themselves through the maze of living, a deep hurt at men's failures to achieve their human potential. The black humorist does not argue for ultimate meaning in life, but into the humor of his writing, weaves quiet tears for the wasted efforts of humans to achieve artificial goals, measure up to the meaningless standards, live according to values set by others.

Black humorists like Terry Southern, Mason Hoffenberg, and Nathaniel West, who were Richler's acquaintances in Paris in the 1950s, have had an influence on him. He acknowledged this in an interview with John Metcalf and shrewdly commented that an expatriate writer might be drawn to the presentational techniques of black humor as a way of disguising increasing gaps in first hand knowledge of his "natural material" and that the "biggest sacrifice" the black humorist makes is the forfeiture of the reader's sympathy since "there's nobody to sympathise with" (73). He agrees that among his novels, Cocksure has the highest
concentration of black humor. The Star Maker plays spider to the
general web of perversion in which the characters find
themselves. Richler employs the grotesque both for humorous
purposes and to signal to the readers, characters who are evil.

_Cocksure_ is surreal and grotesque with human tragedy at
its core. Since black humor is a genre that wipes out the
distinction between tragedy and comedy, the gradual destruction
of the hero Mortimer Griffin is played out against a cacophony of
vulgar absurdity. Mortimer's sad story takes place in a universe
ruled by that ultimate dirty joke Star Maker, whose emblem is two
snakes coupling. The grotesque world in which Mortimer lives has
no place for an upright man like him. It is the monstrous Star
Maker who moves the main action along, for, Mortimer's death at
the hands of a German "hit team" will be at Star Maker's express
command. Richler's fondness for the surreal exaggeration and the
grotesque, an affinity for the atrocious, is apparent here. The dirty
joke turned somehow horrific, the scene of terror altered
somehow into absurdity and this made him, before he himself
knew it, a member of the group later to be labelled Black
Humorists.

_Cocksure_ is a devastating satire on England, with its
demand for instant gratification and its absolute disinterest in the
consequences. Star Maker is the god this shabby time deserves. He / she raises narcissism to hitherto undreamt of heights. He / she is an obscene, Tiresias figure who plays God with the lives of his underlings. Equally grotesque are the images of Star Maker's actors who hang simply in closets when not acting in films, the accounts of Ziggy's girlfriend's drinking human waste from a beer-mug, the parasite infested armpits of Joyce and the performance of the Marquis de Sade's play by ten-year-olds. Grotesqueries emanating from the novel's ubiquitous use of raw, coarse language appear throughout the novel.

Shalinsky typifies the central voice of the schlemiel—which is a distinctive style of Jewish black humor. It is ironical that Richler makes this Jew, the only self-confessed con-man in the novel, as also the only morally admirable character. He is the little man with grandiose visions, who is able, through ironic and defensive humor, to transcend his metaphysical condition. Shalinsky calculatingly plays whatever role is required—for example sitting in waiting rooms of rich co-religionists and hawking, sucking his teeth, treading on the fact that he is an embarrassment, to elicit some contribution whereby he can both keep his magazine Jewish Thought afloat and also send some aid, canned food and writing supplies to the Jewish poets behind
the Iron Curtain. Even (dimwitted) Molly is a siren, for her seemingly harmless games of fantasy prove fatal. Confronting an impending tragedy—Mortimer's death will preserve the secret of Star Maker's empire and enrich it at the same time—Polly can only indulge her own sense of drama.

Richler's interest in the horrific and absurd is exhibited in the portrayal of Boy Wonder in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Boy Wonder is a figure who stands on the verge between the credible and the fantastic. On his fantastic side, he is a true Satan in miniature, a veritable fallen angel figure, struck down from handsomeness and promise at the age of twenty-eight by polio and turned into a physical grotesque with only the vestiges of his past beauty remaining. The illness deformed Dingleman's body:

At thirty, he was no longer a handsome man. His shoulders and chest developed enormously and his legs dwindled to thin bony sticks. He put on lots of weight . . . . His teeth, however, remained as white as ever and his smile was still unnervingly fresh . . . . The smile that somehow retained the aura of innocence made those who feared or disliked the Boy Wonder resent him all the more. (*ADK* 132-3)
The Boy Wonder is no mere brutal monster; in fact, he avoids getting involved in bloodshed. He reads seriously and is interested in the arts; he poses as a “God-fearing man” and he does not “smoke or drive his car or place bets on the Sabbath” (130). He mocks the Jews of the Reform temple and so identifies himself with the Orthodox. Yet on every other day, but the Sabbath, he is running his night clubs and gambling halls and importing cocaine, and generally helping to keep Montreal a sinful city. Thus Richler employs the grotesque figure of Boy Wonder for humorous purposes and also as focus of evil against whom it is hard for those who have no real values of their own to struggle.

There are many instances in *The Incomparable Atuk* which have the potential of Black Humor. As a youth in the tundra, Atuk had to resort to cannibalism for survival. The occasion for this most primitive of human gestures is never really described. Atuk is portrayed as having no particular remorse regarding the demise of Colonel Swiggert, the U.S. Intelligence Officer who was the victim. In another scene, Atuk is seen as deliberately sending Mush Mush, a relative he exploits in his sweat shop, to his death, telling him to cross a street against the traffic lights. The advertisement executive Rory Peel’s German maid Brunhilde’s locking the entire Peel family in their bomb shelter, and Atuk
being guillotined on the television are the other grotesque scenes where Mordecai Richler resorts to the techniques of Black Humor.

The cannibalism which Richler had hinted at in *The Incomparable Atuk* takes a real life turn in *Solomon Gursky was Here*. Almost everything in this novel is cannibalistic. Sir John Franklin's search for the North West passage ended in cannibalism—for Ephraim. At his seventy fifth birthday party, Bernard sinks his teeth into Lionel's hand, biting down on his son's fingers as hard as he could. Solomon's son Henry, dies in the frozen North West Territories, and his son "Isaac survived by slicing chunks out of Henry's thighs" (526). Though Isaac swore that he didn't dig in until the tenth day, "the helicopter crew told the RCMP they found little bags filled with cubes of meat hanging from his tent. If Isaac had waited ten days, like he said, Henry's body would have been harder than a frozen log. Splinters is what he would have got, not *boeuf bourgignon*" (526). This prompts Isaac's lawyer to announce that his client "is still suffering from bereavement overload and has nothing to say to the press at this point in time" (527). A bush pilot from the Land of the Midnight Sun muses on the subject for a television audience, "Well, I'll tell ya, it kind of puts you off your prime rib. Like, you know, it's so
good and sweet. Hardly any gristle" (521). There is sharp irony in the reactions of the rebbes:

Considering the nature of Isaac's sin, there were lengthy deliberations before the yeshiva agreed to take him back, and then only on sufferance. 'How could you do such a thing?' one rebbe asked. Another rebbe said, 'The other one maybe. But your own father, alav ha-sholem?' 'The other one was trayf,' Isaac responded, glaring at them. (528)

Richler subverts the ritual feast of the Seder¹ to highlight the macabre monstrosity in another instance of Black Humor. In his most daring and mischievous impersonation, Solomon becomes the enormously wealthy and well-connected Sir Hyman Kaplansky, who knows exactly how to get even with his anti-Semitic British pals. Sir Hyman invites some bigoted London celebrities—politicians, novelists, impresarios, actors—to a

¹ Passover is a Jewish festival that celebrates the flight of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Most Jews celebrate Passover for eight days in their homes at a ceremonial feast called the Seder. At the Seder, the story of the flight of the Israelites is read from a book called The Haggadah. In addition, foods symbolizing the flight from Egypt are served. The most important symbol is the unleavened bread called matzoh. According to The Bible, when the Israelites fled, they did not have time to let their breads rise. They made flat, unleavened bread instead. Therefore Jews eat matzohs instead of leavened bread during Passover. The word Passover comes from the Biblical story of the tenth plague, which God brought on Egypt for keeping the Israelites in bondage. The story says that God killed the first-born child in every Egyptian home but passed over the homes of the Israelites. The word Pass also refers to the passing over of the Israelites from slavery to freedom.
Passover Seder at his Belgravia flat and offer them matzoh specially baked for him by a White chapel rabbi. As his hungry guests begin to munch the "unappetizing-looking biscuits . . . bumpy with big brown blisters," a warm, sticky red fluid "dribbles down their chins and they scream, It's blood, don't you know? . . . . We're all covered in ritual blood!" (308). As the blood-stained guests flee from the Seder, their imperturbable host laughs his head off.

The carnivalesque also figures in Richler's devices as a critical outlook on contemporary society. The erasing of the rigid social boundaries or attempts in that direction sets the inherent social inequalities in easily recognizable hues. Most of Richler's characters have the potential to excel but in their own peculiar ways. The carnivalesque atmosphere aids them get their objectives. Rebelliousness, sexual perversion, a strong dose of humor are indubitable traits of Richlerian characters that foster the carnival in his novels.

In Solomon Gursky was Here, Richler makes savage fun of Canada, Jewish radicals, English anti-Semites, even Eskimos and also all Utopian tales. This novel is filled with moments of high comedy that capture a zest for life's joys and absurdities. The work evolves as an acerbic vision of Canadian institutions and
social groups: small-town barflies who live on odd jobs and welfare checks, dishonest public officials and the staid world of Montreal’s old moneyed families.

Richler’s novel is wildly satiric as it delves below the surface of official history to examine that history’s darker aspects. In essence, it is a comic antihistory designed to entertain and comment upon the Canadian national character. *Solomon Gursky was Here* fuses factual history with Richler’s comic vision, graphically detailing the intractable Anglo-Canadian mind-set that conspired to prohibit people of Hebrew origin from immigrating to Canada at a time when European Jewry desperately needed a safe haven. Richler impresses his readers by his ability to make comedy out of the blending of a Canadian and Jewish sense of historical consciousness. His unique blend of humor, history, geography and myth makes the mixture richer and darker than before.

In Richler’s *St. Urbain’s Horseman*, the humor is both very funny and very black, where it is designed to have us turn away at the end in sheer horror that we have laughed at all. In “Notes on Techniques in Black Humor,” Terry Heller demonstrates how novelists create black humor to produce different effects on the readers. He concludes that black humor is the result of
suspending the two extremes of horror and humor so that the reader becomes moved to the verge of schizophrenia and ultimately tries to reconcile the two to avoid insanity (17-20).

The humor in *St. Urbain’s Horseman* changes into horror only after the work has been read, that is, when the reader thinks back. The humor is designed around the premise that the reader will not always know that he is in fact laughing at the unlaughable. The humor is no less funny because of its horror. *St. Urbain’s Horseman* seems to deny the dichotomy between humor and horror, asserting instead that the two can be inherent in one another. In particular, humor becomes an essential ingredient of horror and horror becomes more horrible as it becomes more humorous.

Humor leads us into laughter at the expense of another human being. The laughter is nervous because we recognize that the person on the receiving end could easily be us, his misfortune our misfortune. There are several instances of scatological humor in *St. Urbain’s Horseman*. While the setting of the novel is not the public toilet, the protagonist’s name, Jake, is the English slang for it. When Jake’s lawyer Ormsby-Fletcher invites him for dinner, Jake arrives with a sandwich in his pocket. He goes to the bathroom to munch on his sandwich, inspects his hostess’
laundry and infers her naughty tendencies from it. After the dinner is over, Jake's sandwich upsets his stomach and he returns to the toilet. The humor is at its funniest when Richler portrays Jake who wants nothing more than to go home, despises the bourgeois idiocy of his hosts and is confronted with a non-functional flush. He is at a loss as to what his next step should be:

Oh my God, Jake thought . . . . What to do? Ah, he thought, opening the toilet door softly . . . . Jake . . . found a plastic pail, filled it with water . . . and poured it into the bowl. (184)

The visual image of a grown up adult standing and staring at his stool is hilarious enough; but the humor of the situation gives way to universal humor in which we all recognize ourselves when he first counts down with the child's way of hoping for a reprieve, and then immediately rationalizes that he would have done it had he not only been disturbed. This is Richler at his most cinematic, constructing, as he does throughout the novel, a scene which gains its humor through the visual images more than through the linguistic treatment. The incident also throws light on Jake's failure to adjust to the norms of British society even in the toilet where the foreign plumbing fails him. Michael Greenstein comments that "in their clash between nature and culture,
between the organic and the mechanical, we are uncertain whether to blame the inadequate toilet which may have atrophied from British constipation (at most those polite bite-sized foods) or the Jew's salami-sized stool" (205-6).

Jake is arguing with himself in his characteristic style. This attitude plagues Jake throughout the novel, as what he wants to do conflicts constantly with what he knows he should do. He carries on a debate with himself in the privacy of the bathroom. His conscience says that there is a simple solution, but Jake denies the simplicity with an equally disarming simple question, "yes, . . . but how do I pick it up?" (185) How, he is asking, can he do what his conscience is demanding. Everything is holy, says his conscience, mocking his idealism. Jake, his origins and his end-product are all misfits. The toilet reveals the physical discrepancy within the horseman—never fully able to rid himself of embarrassment, nor able to retrieve his whole self.

Like the conventional society, Jake can neither face nor get rid of the unwanted things of his own creation. But instead of resorting to the physical means of grabbing his excreta, Jake relies on his quick wit and rushes to the downstairs toilet. "Baruch ato Adonoi, he said twice, before he pulled the chain. It flushed" (185). Though he never solves the problem, Jake emerges
triumphant, while Ormsby-Fletcher’s child is left to take the blame. The reproaches of his conscience do not go away, but the dilemma is temporarily overcome. The juxtaposition of the Jewish Canadian guest holding his jockey shorts and undergoing his ordeal of civility and the bourgeois British hostess, whose laced black panties undercut her artistic aspirations, creates much of the humor. “Always a guest, never fully assimilated, the diaspora Jew carries a burden which is sometimes displaced to scatological, comic regions and must be rectified, not by deferred eschatological dreams, but by his immediacy of wit and cultural revenge” (Greenstein 206).

The novel contains at least twenty references to lavatories, sewers, bad smells, filthy habits and various forms of excreta. The idea of the inevitability of the society to get rid of its unwanted elements is continued in Harry Stein, who is pointedly described as a “lump of shit” (413, 442). Since we must base our impressions of Harry solely upon his actions in the novel, we can hardly disagree with this. While Jake’s befriending of the disgusting Harry makes little sense on the rational level, it does make sense on the metaphoric level in that sewer and excreta tend to go together. So far, no one has been able to flush Harry away. At the novel’s end, though, Justice Beal rids society of its
"lump of shit" for seven years, explaining as he does so how the unwanted must be disposed of:

You are a humbug, Harry Stein, and a troublemaker of the most reprehensible sort. In my opinion, what we need is an island somewhere, where people like you could be sent. Not so much out of sight, out of mind, but to protect the public . . . . I know very well that I will be criticized for this in the liberal press tomorrow morning, but it seems to me that men like you are let out of the prison only to prey on other members of society . . . . Unduly light sentences in the past, in my opinion, are responsible in no small part for the present serious increase in sexual perversion and crime. (450)

Jake's brother-in-law Henry, who is a salesman for bathroom supplies, adds his share of bathroom humor to the novel. Henry's idea of sightseeing is to visit the public toilets in the famous cities of the world. Moreover, his personal goal is to invent a "toilet with a mind" (393). This toilet will regulate the amount of "flush" depending on the "need" and it will make the inventor not only a public benefactor but also rich and famous. Henry demonstrates the problem to be solved. "... 'Watch this.'
With a flick of wrist, Herky flushed the toilet. ‘It’s going on everywhere, day and night. Now you take the Fraser River, for instance. More than once a day the untreated contents of one hundred thousand toilet bowls empty into it.’ To which Jake murmurs, “That’s a lot of shit, Herky” (392).

Such use of the revolting and the grotesque brings to fore another characteristic trait of Richler’s humor which is scatological. The use of striking images serves to highlight the absurdities and incongruities that envelop the life of his characters. As black humor foregrounds the underlying pathos of reality that triggers such reactions, so also its scatological variety helps identify the bizarre in the banal. More often than not, it is the only recourse open to the author to bring attention to the macabre that the world casually overlooks.

Although passages of scatological humor in *St. Urbain’s Horseman* are frequently placed for comic effect, they serve the darker, moral issues in the book as well. On two separate occasions, the daily degradation of inmates in Nazi death camps is indicated through a lavatory image:

The women often lapped up their food like dogs; the only source of water was right next to the latrine, and this thin stream also served to wash away the
excrement. There the women stood and drank or tried to take a little water with them in some container while next to them their fellow sufferers sat on the latrines . . . . And throughout it all the female guards hit them with clubs. And while this was going on the S.S. walked up and down and watched (175, 271).

Jake, tormented by the heritage of suffering and humiliation bequeathed to all post-Holocaust Jews, cannot come to terms with a degradation he vicariously shares; by himself he cannot flush the clotted horror of history out of his mind. But Richler has created a protagonist whose name suggests toilets; the function of this protagonist, on the metaphoric level is to serve, as sewer or conduit, through which accumulated historical horrors can flow. And this achieves for the reader, who shares Jake’s heartache, a unique catharsis of memories and pain—with humor—through Henry’s unabashed enthusiasm for “crappers”; with disgust for Harry Stein’s disgusting personal habits; with rueful laughter and sympathy for Jake’s worried preoccupation with the state of his bowels. With all the bathroom words and evocations in the novel, a symbolic easing of congested anxiety is achieved. In St. Urbain’s Horseman, the lavatory is as multifaceted and integral, a symbol as the eponymous horseman, though more easily
misunderstood. The lavatory references offer a uniquely comic mode of flushing out horrors and disgusts. This way of dealing with the past runs parallel to—though on a lower track than—Jake's longing to ride with the Horseman, "cantering on a magnificent Pleven stallion . . . . Planning fresh campaigns, more daring manoeuvres" (35). Both the glamorous Horseman avenging the Jews and the unglamorous lavatory flushing away the messes of the past, serve Jake in coming to terms with his history.

Nowhere is our laughter more towards victims than in the numerous grotesque references to the illness-stricken as they are portrayed in newspaper articles. The first such article appears in the novel's first few pages. Entitled, "Chin Up. The Polio Girl can Cook," (4) the article provides a visual image of an invalid's attempt to do something as perfunctory as cooking. Inserted as a human interest story, for the purpose of stirring our admiration for a crippled girl who is able to rise above her infirmity, the simple fact that the article is placed right after the humorous descriptions of Jake's fantasy about baseball forces us to recognize the inherent irony. In fact, each illness-related newspaper article in the novel becomes extremely funny because of its sheer absurdity, especially in the visual image it presents. The polio girl
“cooks” by moving “a switch in different positions with her chin,” (5) an obviously humorous image. William Powell’s statement that “I was one of the lucky ones” (12) belies the word “luck”, since we would not associate his having faecal matter emptying “into a pouch around his middle” with good fortune. The article about the crippled boy becomes funny because of the heavy irony in the statement: “Apart from his physical handicap he is registered as a blind person.” (28) Similarly, although not presented as a newspaper article, Jake’s reaction to the display of artwork by the handicapped at the residence of Ormsby-Fletcher becomes funny when we see, with Jake, images of painters trying to hold a brush with either their feet or their mouths. With Jake we laugh at each visual image, all the while knowing that the laughter is morally wrong but inevitable, in part, because of the very seriousness with which the information is conveyed. The laughter becomes, on our part, highly nervous, because we know that it is laughter which should not exist at all.

Invalids are not the only victims we laugh at, even if they are the most obvious. They are, after all, victims of Nature, more than anything else. The novel forces us to laugh, also at victims of manipulation, and this laughter is far more seriously reprehensible to scenes of manipulation which arouse laughter. The first, Jake’s
manipulation of Herky, is truly humorous, while the second, Harry's near-terrorism is humorous only in the overall context of the story. Both, however, make us laugh at the victims of manipulation.

After unsuccessfully trying to manoeuvre his uncles, Sam and Lou, into giving him money to go to New York, Jake decides to try Herky. Jake, taking his cue from Herky's envy of the sexual proclivity of the "college boy" (105), tells Herky, "You see, I'm not interested in girls," and asks, "Remember you once put Rifka up to asking me funny questions. Like was I scared of snakes?" Jake fakes homosexuality to blackmail Herky, who does not want Rifka, his wife, to find out, for fear of incrimination through association. "Herky, you don't understand," says Jake—"my passions" (105) Jake knows he has Herky on the run, and he continues the charade when Herky asks if he wants to borrow money. "I'd pay you back," he says. "Honestly, darling" (105). As Herky grows more and more frustrated and desperate to get rid of this menace, Jake increases his ardour in the deception to ensure that the manipulation will not fail, "Oh, you snake! Sewer!" exclaims Herky, "you really neck with other guys?" (105) to which Jake replies by blowing him a kiss. The scene ends with us knowing
that Herky has provided the money, although we are never
directly told so.

Jake’s brilliant, pathetic, bitterest enemy and old friend
Harry Stein is the major manipulator in the novel. When a bomb
scare takes place on a plane on which Jake is travelling, he
immediately blames Harry. Harry denies the accusation, asserting
instead that Jake is suffering from “paranoid delusions” (360).
While Harry sees Jake as paranoid, Jake sees Harry as a
psychotic and he continues to insist that Harry created the scare
as a joke, to begin. Jake’s charge is rendered more credible by
the ensuing conversation, during which Harry describes another
act of (humorous) terrorism, the kidnapping of the wife of the
banker (362). The situation is humorous because Harry had not
performed the actual abduction, but had read about it, sent the
ransom note and obtained the money. Funny though this may be,
the fun is at the expense of another human being and one can
imagine the effect of the incident on the woman’s husband, who
would naturally expect that his wife would be safe after he had
paid the ransom. Finally, Harry explains a previous bomb threat in
the Olympia and how humorous he found the episode:

They took it seriously, you know. Old Krushchev
waving his shoe at the U.N. Castro in New York
raising hell. They didn’t take any chances . . . . And all those dignified . . . tarts, you should have seen them move. Spilling out of the Olympia very smartly indeed. I watched from across the street,. . . . They turned Olympia inside out that night, looking for my bomb. (366)

This is not funny, except to Harry. Harry’s confession makes us realize, suddenly, that we have been laughing at the same sort of thing throughout the novel. The only difference has been that, seen through Jake’s eyes or in Jake’s situations, the other episodes have seemed less important, less serious. And they have been. Jake has manipulated the individual people, filling them with discomfort, while Harry has manipulated crowds, filling them with fear. But the result has been torture, and we have been laughing all the while.

Though a joke usually involves a thrust at someone else, Jewish humor is often a jab at the Jews themselves. Purpose and endurance, the twin characteristics of elevation and survival, led to an internalization of discrimination and oppressive results. This quality of perseverance, noted by various thinkers, is rooted in the humor of self-ridicule. Freud was the first to recognize self-
mockery as essential in group stability. The process he describes fulfills an important ingredient in honoring oneself:

A particularly favorable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share—a collective person, that is (the subject’s own notion for instance). The occurrence for self-criticism as a determinate may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes... have grown upon the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews against Jewish characteristics. (111-2)

The intellectual tradition of Jewish culture added a special dimension to its humor, a quality connected to self-analysis one labelled “rebellious rationalism” by Irving Kristol (436). Thus the humor has been extraordinarily cerebral, creating a distance between the reality and the individual, enabling the person to confirm a mental loftiness while at the same time keeping a cautious skepticism.

Many of Richler’s characters sink into pettiness and they become little people with little notions. Even the bodily
movements of such people are funny; they seek and strive and bustle about, show the most strenuous exertions; work themselves to death over a trivial, joyless shred of bliss which is either fabricated or worthless. These figures are far from heroic, but they proceed along their quixotic adventures with unusual almost heroic courage. The pettiness of their ideas is tragic in itself. The comedy lies in their external appearance, in the movements, words and details of their predicaments. The people in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* are constantly boasting, arguing, cajoling, telling jokes, singing songs. A typical scene at the high school commencement is as follows:

The men mopped their necks with handkerchiefs and women wearing too much make-up fanned themselves with programmes that announced GREETING GRADS from MORRIE THE TAILOR, and scholarships for $100 donated by Steinberg's Groceterias and for $50 in everlasting memory of Mrs. Ida Berg . . . .

“Well, well, if it isn't Tannenbaum in the flesh. You got a son here?”

“Why not?”
“Is yours going to a night club afterwards? Mine . . . next week he goes . . . to work in the store . . . .”

“Mine’s going to McGill to be a lawyer.”

“The way you operate, Tannenbaum, you’ll need him.”

Fanning themselves they watched as the staff filed in, silent and severe, and took their place on the platform at last.

“White men,” Panofsky said sourly. (63-4)

Though this incident portrays only the most minor of background characters, it reveals the Jewish psychological predicament in Canada. The exaggerated demand upon the child by his parents that he attain some wonderful achievement, undermined at the same time by a rearing so fondly indulgent and devoid of frustration that the child never developed the discipline and self-control necessary for great accomplishments. Parents portrayed here are genuinely proud of the accomplishments of their educated children, but the very vulgar energy that gave that offspring opportunity is also a source of embarrassment. Even a donation in “everlasting memory” is just for $50 and the rhetoric itself is an echo of the self-congratulating tributes made by lower middle class Jews in their temples and synagogues. Hence the
solution provided by humor, that marvellous device of fantasy that enables us to fail and be forgiven, to attack and not be resented, to assert ourselves to the height of our best and never to deliver anything more substantial than a laugh to a receptive and sympathetic clique.

It can also be seen in the above passage, the inklings of vertical class structures, as one man's son is soon to follow in the path of his father into "the store," whereas the other will ostensibly become a lawyer, a professional, again thanks to the hustling, probably illegal efforts of his father. Dan Ben-Amos has argued that joking in Jewish culture does not often involve mocking of the self directly or obliquely, but rather manifests social differentiation. "The fact that the Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much self-hatred as perhaps the interval segmentation of their society" (121).

The closing sour observation of the teaching staff as "white men" certainly establishes the awareness that Jews have of their considerable distance from the English establishment. What these laughter makers were doing was exorcising the Jewish evil spirit, the dybbuk, from their souls. The peculiarity of humor lies in its elasticity. It can operate for and against, reject and elevate, oppress and liberate. On the one hand, it enables the creation of
pejorative images; yet, on the other, it makes possible the reversal of such stereotypes. In Canadian society, the forms of aggressive humor directed towards Jews were institutionalized in stereotyped roles—historical forces had consigned an image which fused Jews. To control Jews, the white Anglo Saxon Protestant Christians fixed on the machinations of Shylock: industrious, sly grasping and smart. The Jews countered this situation by developing a special body of humor extraordinarily creative, vibrant, devious and flexible which folklorists have identified as Protest Humor (Summons 567).

Protest Humor helps the minority group maintain an elevated morale, a sense of dignity and a feeling of power. The objectives here are not the adaptation of the majority's prejudices but rather a different perspective. Similar to other oppressed groups, Jewish energies are galvanized to retaliate. They have resorted to putting down their adversaries by utilizing virtually the identical stereotypes employed against them. Jews have employed the term ‘they’ and the much harsher ‘goy’ although on many occasions they have turned to other Yiddish slang terms such as schlemiels and schmucks. Hence the majority (WASPs) is regarded as unworthy because “they” are slovenly, “they” eat
like chazars (pigs) and they possess goyishe, meaning dumb minds. Especially, they just don't think.

*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* also brilliantly captures the humorous gropings for legitimacy of the nouveau riche Jews with an anthropological accuracy right down to minks, summer holiday hotels and situational ethics. For example, in an episode at Rubin's hotel in Laurentian hills, Duddy is thought drowned after fleeing the grounds in humiliation over being cleaned out in a crooked roulette game. Mr. Rubin squares off with his indignant guests:

‘How could you let a 17 year old kid lose all his tips in a roulette game?’

‘I knew nothing about it. I swear I—’

‘Save it for the reporters tomorrow when they drag the kid out of the lake . . .’

‘Bite your tongue,’ Rubin shouted.

‘The poor kid.’

‘Next season it is the Hilltop Lodge for me,’ Mrs. Dursky said.

‘Me too,’ Mrs. Faber said.
Rubin reminded his guests that there had been a case of ptomaine poisoning at the Hilltop Lodge last year.

‘You think your food goes down so good, Rubin? Around the corner at the drug store bicarbonate sales are booming.’ (91)

The passage begins with a genuine accusation and descends through comedy into self-serving banality; concern for Duddy is supplanted by the game of forcing a recalcitrant owner to fork up drinks and food for “concerned” guests. Further, even the detail of salami sandwiches adds a mundane, deflating humor while revealing culinary tastes. The thrust and parry of insult that surfaces in this typical passage also get at the bristly nature of the Jew who spends all but two weeks of the year looking for angles and gimmicks in the ghetto. Indeed, you can take the people off St. Urbain street, but you can’t take the street out of the people. The above graphic account is typical of Richler’s character sketch. His ability to capture the snide and blustering banter of these people, the ethnic inflections of speech, the self-drama and the joyousness of expression is revealed to the readers. Yiddish has, after all, the greatest number of curses collected in any language (Howe and Libo 226-7).
In *Joshua Then and Now*, Joshua's prize fighter father Reuben Shapiro hands him an aggressive comic tradition in which a hyper-trophied body comes to terms with its atrophied intellectual powers. A Bible in one hand, a glass of ale in the other, Reuben Shapiro mixes high and low brow. Joshua's and Reuben's attempts to integrate the Gentile and the Jew into a unified society meet with inevitably comic results. Reuben opens his Bible for a lesson in humorous hermeneutics that parallels his pugilistic instruction:

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. You see there were lots of contenders, other gods, mostly no-account idols, bums-of-the-month, before our God, Jehovah, took the title outright, and made a covenant with our forefathers who he had helped out of Egypt. A covenant is a contract. (69)

Even Reuben Shapiro quotes scripture. This heretic humor derives from the disjunction between sacred history "then" and its Reubenical exegesis "now."

Reuben inherits a comic convenant that permits him freedom of interpretation to use his low-brow vernacular as a vehicle for instructing his son in the ways of monotheism. His own
vulgar approach with its body language parallels his forefathers’ iconoclasm: where Abraham smashed idols, Reuben breaks the fists of those who fail to adhere to their part of the contract, whether in gangsterism or pretentious religious affiliation. In the example of the Shapiros, we see how the mighty of “then” have fallen into the common place of “now,” how material progress becomes a façade for spiritual regression. Through these Jewish jokes we regain paradise, not for eternity, but for an instant of laughter that bridges “then” and “now,” and retrieves historical loss. To counteract the Fall and the Expulsion, comedy raises the spirit and reintegrates the outsider into society.

Joshua’s comic inheritance helps bridge the distance between ghetto poverty and nouveau riche’s affluence, for Richler’s humor exposes the gap between origins and margins of Jews who deny “then” in favour of “now.” One of these is the psychiatrist in the novel:

The esteemed Dr. Jonathan Cole, author of ‘My Kind, Your Kind, Mankind,’ a rotund man, brown eyes mournful, turned out to be Yossef Kugelman, of all people. When they had been kids together on St. Urbain Street, Yossel had already catalogued his library of Big Little Books . . . And now, Joshua could
see, Yossel was still a collector. From salvage he had graduated to art. Canadiana. A Pellan hung on one wall, a William Ronald on another. (60)

These transformations from then to now, from junk to art—Joshua exposes all of these as he assaults psychiatric authority, trying to remember whether Yossef had been the one to turn up at Bea Rosen's sweet-sixteen wearing a fedora hat. During their hostile reminiscence the distance between them shrinks and by the end of their meeting Joshua has Yossel worried about his wife Bessie and his own health. Later when the Coles are on vacation, Joshua enters their home and defaces one of their paintings, a valuable A. Y. Jackson landscape, by erasing the signature and signing "this copy by Hershl Sugarman" (265). An interloper and a vandal, Joshua rewrites history for those who seek to forget.

What Joshua enjoys most of all is seeking out old classmates to bait, St. Urbain urchins who had struck it rich. Try as hard as they will, they cannot erase embarrassing traces of their ghetto upbringing that cling to them in their climb up the vertical mosaic to the heights of urbanity, Montreal's Westmount district. Irving Pinsky, now a dentist, lives on Summit Circle, drives a Mercedes, travels around the world, belongs to a gourmet club and collects vintage wines. "They passed through a
laundry room, with its twin tubs, the sanctuary, its up-to-date thermostat set at 13 Celsius. And here a glowing Pinsky allowed a fulminating Joshua to fondle, warning him not to shake unduly, his cherished bottles of Chateau Mouton Rothschild '61 and chateau Lafite’ 66” (109). Pinsky’s “now” exaggerated fastidiousness is deflated by his “then”—“celebrated sneakers he let rip in Room 42, FFHS,” (109) flatulence that must still be washed out in the twin laundry tubs. He remains blind to the two people he really is: the young stinker who once forced others to sniff and the man who now sniffs the best wines. The contrast between an ‘up-to-date’ thermostat and the historical 1961 and 1966 wines point to the broader comic incongruity of a ‘with-it’ Pinsky who retires on labels alone, those outer superficial trappings of success. But beneath his air of success, his body still communicates with the world through its celebrated sneakers. Joshua takes revenge on Pinsky’s historical amnesia by stealing into his mansion, invading the ‘inner sanctum,’ removing all the labels from his bottles and rearranging them on the racks. Where once his father had broken a dentist’s fingers for the mob, Joshua discovers a subtler method of retribution: Pinsky will now have to rely on his well-trained nose instead of his blind eyes to discover the truth in taste.
Even wealthier, the Montreal tycoon Izzy Singer, finally receives the Order of Canada award, which forces Joshua to laugh aloud as he remembers him from Room 42 and his twelfth birthday, when he played violin and “was betrayed by a stream of hot piss darkening Izzy’s trousers, spreading in a tell-tale puddle round his shiny new pair of shoes” (269). And now he owns an empire that sprawls from Los Angeles to Nova Scotia, a more extensive puddle than that which surrounded him as a child. As Jews commit the genetic fallacy of forgetting their humble origins in their drive towards materialistic expansion, Richler’s humor serves as a reminder of the past that deflates all pretensions to superiority. “Ostensibly the perfect prosperity package. But his onyx cufflinks were just a mite too large, and the initials woven into the breast pocket of his shirt too prominent. Izzy, of St. Urbain born, was still pissing in his pants as he played” (270). The emperor’s clothes do not quite fit his body, his body does not quite fit his soul and his present circumstances do not fit his past.

For every centrifugal force of achievement and recognition there is a comic centripetal force. Izzy’s mainstream status is contradicted by a stream of hot piss accompanying him from one end of the continent to the other. The external Order of Canada award is denied by the internal disorders of his body, his past and
his make-believe world. Despite the opulence of his Westmount home, everything is in conflict—the conflicts of now and then, living room artifacts and kitchen delights, a veritable delicatessen tempting Izzy for a midnight snack that sets off his entire alarm system. Trespassing and pissing on his own property, the upstart can never really be at home, for he is betrayed by his bodily needs and his roots. Comedy, which leaps over boundaries between ghettos and empires, and shifts margins, may be his true home.

Joshua returns to Ibiza twenty five years later to find out what had happened to its various inhabitants after his departure. With Mueller's death and innocence, he realizes his mistake "and laughed until he almost cried" (337). He resorts to laughter as catharsis. Though he resigns himself to his fate, he rises above his own condition through a humor that bypasses the obstacles of history and its persecutions. "You did. You didn't. Ancient history. But my ancient history, damn it. He paused to set his wrist watch to Montreal time. Home time. Family time" (338). The comic Jewish historian, who doesn't possess ultimate answers overcomes the universality of ancient history and the Diaspora by a subjective gesture. The prodigal son returns home without answers, but with the right comic questions; his St. Urbain Street
savvy broadens into worldly wisdom and wit, those comic weapons that slay hostile dragons of the diaspora.

*Barney's Version* (1998) is wildly comic, but as with most good satire, those who make fun of others also mock themselves. Richler's (anti)heroes suffer from a kind of Samson complex, as if compelled to pull down the temple even though they are inside it at the time. “I dislike most people I have ever met” (138), says the leading character of the latest of Mordecai Richler's tales about smart, ambitious Jewish-Canadian men at war with their culture. *Barney's Version* is almost universally offensive—to both French and Anglo-Canadian assimilated Jews, feminists, black activists, liberals, right- wingers, the ignorant young and their querulous elders, politicians, writers and anyone else claiming special consideration. *Barney's Version* is also an autobiography masquerading as a murder mystery—as a collection of musings about political correctness, hockey, the outrages and injustices of life in Quebec, old age, hypocrisy and crazy headlines about bizarre legal battles.

Barney Panofsky is the eponymous anti-hero of Richler's latest novel which takes the form of a memoir written as a response to an enemy's autobiography. In his book, Terry McIver writes of Barney's often abusive three marriages, his alcoholism,
his dishonesty and even a possible murder. Barney admits to some of these, is even a little proud of the odd indiscretion, but he feels obliged to give his side of the story. Here is a Montreal Jewish boy not born with many obvious talents who manages to make his way through Canada, Britain and the United States as an adventurer and movie maker. He is also disarmingly candid. He is willing, for example, to tell his readers that much of what he made is nonsense. Barney has a loathing of most aspects of modern life and shouts in fury and cackles in derision at such varied targets as lady psychoanalysts who shave, Quebecois separatists, people who claim to be of ‘Jewish descent’ rather than Jews, health faddists, corrupt cops, writers who become famous for masterpieces constantly in gestation but never produced and artists whose million-dollar earnings deprive them of the friendship of their less successful and envious colleagues.

The animated and only occasionally forgetful narrator Barney takes, as the point of departure for his belated memoirs, the Paris of the early fifties, where he and a number of other young Canadians and Americans were making their first runs at art and fame. Barney’s bittersweet memories of poverty, laughter, sexual betrayal and high affectation in Paris among a group of bohemian artists set up all sorts of ironies, as the storyteller
follows through who became famous and why. It is the pretentious
drudge in the group who becomes the famous novelist.

Barney experimented with bourgeois life, buying a big suburban house, trying “to infiltrate the Jewish establishment” (188) as a volunteer fundraiser for United Jewish Appeal. The road to Jewish respectability started with a visit to the fundraising professional, Irv Nussbaum, who displays in his office a model of his yacht.

“I’m going to trust you with just a few cards to begin with,” said Irv. “But listen up. Rules of the game. You must never visit your target in his office, where he is king S. . . and you’re just another shmuck looking for a hand out. If you run into him in the synagogue, you can butter him up with Israel’s needs, but it’s no good putting the touch on him there. Bad taste. Money changers in the temple. Use the phone to schedule a meeting, but the time of day you get together, is of the utmost importance. Breakfasts are out, because may be. . . he didn’t sleep because of heart burn. The ideal time is lunch. Pick a small restaurant. Tables far apart. Some place you don’t have to shout. Make it eyeball to eyeball. S . . . We’ve got a problem this
year. There’s been a decline in the number of anti-Semitic outrages” (189).

Irv further advises Barney that every time some fanatic “daubs a swastika on a synagogue wall or knocks over a stone in our cemeteries, our guys get so nervous they phone me with pledges. So, things being how they are this year, what we’ve got to do is slam-dunk your target about the Holocaust. Shove Auschwitz at him. Buchenwald. War criminals thriving in Canada to this day. Tell him, ‘Can you be sure it won’t happen again, even here, and then where will you go?’ Israel is your insurance policy, you say” (189). Though Irv Nussbaum is just one among the scores of minor characters, Richler makes him striking with a few deft strokes. This fundraiser for aid to Israel heartily and humorously approves of even the desecration of synagogues, because it generates donations from fearful Jews. The author is merciless in portraying the contradictions of Jewish community where altruism and self-aggrandisement jostle each other for ascendancy.

The novel is full of running gags and the protagonist’s mordant observations about modern life and the events and fashions of the day. In one scene Barney is approached by a rich man (actually Barney’s long time friend Duddy, from one of Richler’s earlier novels) who says, “I need a disease” (162). He
confides that he is searching for “some disease still out there, something sexy I could start a charity for and appoint the Governor-General . . . honorary patron” (162). What he means is that since he is rich, he needs a cause for charity to climb up the social ladder:

‘There has to be a disease out there not yet spoken for . . . Polio was terrific. Something kids get tugs at the heart strings. People are suckers for it.’

‘What about AIDS?’ I suggested.

‘Where have you been? That’s long gone?’ (162-3).

Though Richler never spares the social upstarts, somehow his humor is never grim. The humor is black but the vision is not bleak. Richler pokes fun at puffed-up people and their absurd manners. Throughout the novel Barney takes a number of shots at everyone else whose politics and cultural ideas have nothing to do with their lives but are merely a way for them to feel virtuous without any cost to themselves.

Barney, whom Richler presents as Falstaffian in his pleasures and his cynicism, appraises great events mainly for their entertainment value. Barney is at his best when he revels in the flaws of the famous. One of the delicious passages in the novel is a list of great men who have hypocritically betrayed their
highest principles or exploited others. When he mentions Eliot, Jefferson, Martin Luther King, Admiral Byrd, John F. Kennedy, Freud, they appeal to him most for their human weaknesses—"say the story of T. S. Eliot having his first wife locked up in the bin, possibly because she had written some of his best lines" (276). Nothing delights him more than "a biography of one of the truly great that proves that he or she was an absolute s...." (276).

For Richler, no one is so high and mighty that they cannot use a jab in the ribs. Few of us are entirely immune to such forms of humor. It can, as it does for Barney, make one's own private feelings easier to live with.

The narrator of *Barney's Version* is as much a figure of satire as a satirist. Richler is masterful in weaving an authentic portrait of mortal Barney, a man amid history, casually ignoring momentous events to concentrate upon his own often picayune machinations. For Barney Panofsky "life was absurd" and "nobody ever truly understood anybody else" (189). If that is the case, the best antidote to an intolerant and hypocritical world might be a gigantic chuckle. Laughing well, may be the best revenge.

Even in his late sixties Barney writes prank letters in different personas to his loved ones and enemies; or abusive letters under his own name, only to accuse his enemies of writing
them. Writing to an old, black, Muslim friend whom Barney knew during their salad days in Paris, and who changed his name to Ismail ben Yussef and joined Lois Farrakhan's "Nation of Islam," he muses:

But holy cow, if the ancient Egyptians were black, then so was Moses, a prince in Pharaoh's court. And . . . . it follows that the slaves whom Moses liberated were also black, or he would have stuck out like the proverbial "n...in the woodpile," and the notoriously contrary Israelites would have complained, "Listen here, have we run so low that we're going to wander through a desert for forty years led in circles by a schwartzter?" . . . . So, assuming that Moses and his tribe were black, what perplexes me is that when the undeniably eloquent Farrakhan denounces my people, is it possible that, unbeknownst to him, he is in fact just another self-hating Jew, like Philip Roth?" (59).

Always irreverent, Richler is particularly uninhibited here, taking swipes at Philip Roth as well as other figures.

Barney sows the landscape with his grievances, finding egotism, fashion and self-aggrandizement everywhere he looks.
His pseudonymous letters to the Clara Charnofsky Foundation for Wimyn are typical of his savage humor. “Dear Personhoods. Hi there. I’m writing to apply for a grant on behalf of CRAP (Chaps Resolutely Against Prejudice) . . . .” (254). Another tongue-in-cheek letter: “Shalom sisters. I was born Jemima (after the eldest of Job’s three daughters) Fraser in Chicago 35 years ago, but since I came to the town of Dimonah in the Negev four years ago I pass by the name of Zipporah Ben Yehudah” (282). Barney’s view of the world is ruthless, unsparing and finely attuned to the vanity of human wishes, including his own. He’ll do anything for a joke or a prank or a withering remark.

Gallows humor is a reaction originating from trapped circumstances. This type of humor perches on the edge of personal destruction. Essentially, it confronts a hopeless and unavoidable situation and recognizes its inevitability. Gallows humor enables the individual to not give in without recognizing the scene and insulting it at the same time. It is an awareness which causes the individual to cope up regardless of how terrifying or hopeless it might be. Gallow’s humor is an unmistakable index of the morale and spirit of resistance of the oppressed, the absence of which reveals either resigned indifference or a serious breakdown in the will to resist tyrannization (Obrdlik 709-12).
Humor was one of the "soul's weapons" in the struggle for self-preservation. "It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds" (Frankl 68-9).

Through his own version, Barney takes the readers on a guided tour of his boozy night of the soul. The readers' reaction changes from chuckle to chortle to gasp. We may think we are being entertained by some stand-up comedian: half way through the novel, we realize that this is a deep, dark business and that *Barney's Version* is a fearful reminder of our own fleeting mortality. *Barney's Version* goes on like a torrent of memories, blanks, digressions and stories of better days, all laced with swigs of scotch and politically incorrect statements:

Lying in the dark, fulminating, I recited aloud the number I was to call if I had a heart attack. "You have reached the Montreal General Hospital. If you have a touch-tone phone and you know the extension you want, please press that number now . . . . Twenty one for emergency ambulance service' . . . . "You have reached emergency ambulance service. Please hold and an operator will come to your assistance as soon
as our strip-poker game is over. Have a nice day.”

While I waited the automatic tape would play Mozart’s

‘Requiem.’ (11)

It is this gallows-humor and grumpiness that makes Barney
Panofsky’s grousing strangely endearing. He shows the
indomitable spirit to rise above the grim situation even when he is
gradually succumbing to Alzheimer’s disease. It satirizes both the
object of contempt and the complainer himself.

Barney is an utterly insecure man compromised by the very
intensity of his passions. He tosses off barbs like:

those were the days when you could smooch with
college girls with impunity . . . . Moonlit nights on
deck, nice girls wore crinolines, cinch belts, ankle
bracelets and two-tone saddle shoes, and you could
count on them not to sue for sexual harassment forty
years later and their suppressed memories of date-
rape retrieved by lady psychologists who shaved. (4)

Barney has an arsenal full of monologues, come-backs and one-
liners, extracting every last microgram of humor from such
venerable comic standbys as aging, sex, money, cuckoldry,
culture, art, literary life, narcissism, psychology as well as the less
promising subjects of Alzheimer’s disease, Canadian politics and
death. Richler's acid pen and cutting wit are seductive and charming. Nothing is safe from Barney's well-lubricated insults, and there are howlingly humorous moments.

Mordecai Richler's eye for the absurd comes with a poignant intensity in the scene where Barney comes to take the test for Alzheimer's. It is the eve of Quebec's 1995 referendum on whether or not to leave Canada. " 'What city are we in?' asks the doctor. 'Montreal . . .' 'And the country we're in?' What a ridiculous question to ask in Quebec. The answer you'd get certainly doesn't depend on whether or not the guy you're talking to has got Alzheimer's" (38). It takes considerable adroitness to produce a wildly funny, satiric virtuoso self-portrait of a man unaware that he is trembling on the brink of the abyss.

Barney leads us to a whole carnival of supporting players. Some are artists like Leo Bishinsky, some are genuine artists and heroes like Bernard Boogie Moscovitch and others are just attractive patterns on the delicately drawn black cloth that is a Mordecai Richler novel. It is for feminism that Barney saves his heavy artillery. Richler has a go at contemporary trends in icon-creation by making Barney's first wife, Clara Charnofsky, a fidgety marginally talented and neurotic artist attention-seeking kleptomaniac who hates other women, into a feminist martyr after
her suicide. Barney meets Clara during his days as a “roistering-provincial” in Paris, naively happy to be in the company of expatriate artists. Clara has a penchant for freakish, unfashionable clothes from the flea market. She is a hysterical, self-hating Jew who is desperate to suppress her Jewishness and lies about her ancestry. Clara is also a painter and poet, and dabbles in astrology, palmistry, tarot, Satanism and also dabbles in other men. Though a nymphomaniac, she extends her favours to Barney without any enthusiasm. She puzzles Barney by her mad mixture of frigidity with him and promiscuity with others. When she becomes pregnant, Barney does the manly thing and proposes marriage in the belief that she is carrying his child.

When the still-born child turns out to be black, Barney packs his bags for Canada while Clara prepares a last-ditch gesture of reconciliation that fails when Barney’s concierge forgets to deliver a message. Barney finds Clara dead, the table set for a candle lit dinner. Though Clara is a convincingly comic monster, her suicide is shocking—not least because we discover that Barney is in a way responsible. Clara left behind her a pile of poems and pictures of goblins making violent love to young women that led, absurdly in Barney’s view, to her exemplary mythical canonization as a feminist saint. She enjoys a Sylvia
Plath-like posthumous glory on the strength of these sketches and poems that no one took seriously when she was alive. Barney though clearly weary of the fuss, is amused by Clara’s status among feminists as in his memory she hated women, preferring the company of men. Barney signs away his rights to Clara’s cryptic poetic scribblings and gloomy, non figurative paintings, thereby cutting himself out of a fortune.

Clara’s manuscripts and drawings are published years later as “The Virago’s Verse Book,” which is now in its 28th printing. The “Clara Charnofsky Foundation for Wimyn” is handing out hefty grants, while Barney is gaining international notoriety as the “Calibanovitch” of one of her poems. The novel contrasts Barney’s story of his first marriage to the poet and painter Clara Charnofsky with the account put forward by feminist academics. Barney summarizes their differences this way: “the martyred St. Clara’s admirers are legion and they have two things in common: they take me for an abomination and fail to understand that Clara intensely disliked other women, whom she considered rivals for the male attention she thrived on” (109). Passages from Mclver’s memoirs corroborate Barney’s portrait of Clara as a woman who was dependent on men for her identity. Her uncle Norman Charnofsky, who established a foundation in her name to help
female artists and academics, thought that her diaries indicated she was grateful to Barney and even loved him (157). But many recipients of grants from the Clara Charnofsky Foundation for Wimyn, like Ms. Morgan, focus on Clara’s negative poetic representations of her husband; Morgan calls Barney’s wish for a divorce from Clara “abandonment” and holds Barney responsible for her suicide (145-6). In their representations of Clara, the scholars confuse their own interpretation of events with facts.

Fuelled by outrageous comic energy, Barney does things most people only fantasize about. During the party to celebrate his second marriage, he glimpses a beautiful stranger across the room, falls instantly in love, rushes to her side and says—“I’ve got two tickets for tomorrow’s flight to Paris in my jacket pocket. Come with me” (213). He confides to a friend, “I’m in love. For the first time in my life I am truly, seriously, irretrievably in love” (214). His wife of less than an hour overhears this and embraces him and says “and so am I honey, and so am I” (214). But Barney was not speaking of his wife. He was speaking of a woman he had met minutes ago and is about to flee the wedding reception to pursue and to persuade her that she, and not the second Mrs. Panofsky, is the one who holds the key to his heart. It is an
extraordinary moment in one of the weirdest wedding scenes on literary record.

Marrying the second Mrs. Panofsky was the main event of Barney’s ill-fated foray into bourgeois respectability: “I decided to infiltrate the Jewish establishment, set on qualifying as a pillar, or at least a cornice” (188). Barney hates his second wife so much that he does not even give out her name and refers to her only as the second Mrs. P. Though she is a bore, Barney concedes that she, like his old friend Hymie Mintzbaum, “possessed that quality I most admire in other people—an appetite for life” (191). She is unmercifully garrulous, unconventional in her ideas and her parents, “the ultimate mock Wasp Jews” are equally uptight and pretentious. Describing Barney’s father-in-law Richler says, “You’ve heard of mock turtle soup? Well, the father of the bride turned out to be the ultimate mock Wasp Jew” (Richler, Interview with Jennifer Poyen 3).

Though the second Mrs. P promises faux-genteel respectability, their marriage gets on the wrong foot because (a) the wedding date conflicts with a crucial game of the Stanley Cup play offs—Barney is a hard core fan who reads The Hockey News over breakfast, (b) Barney’s father Izzy, a veteran detective and consummate boor, scandalizes his son’s new in-laws and friends
with tales of police brutality and (c) the groom, dancing with the bride at the reception, glances past her shoulder and is smitten by the ravishingly beautiful Miriam, who later becomes his third wife. Even as Barney goes through the wedding ceremony, he is wishing he were at the Montreal Forum, where the Canadian hockey team is playing for the Stanley Cup against Toronto. When Barney and his wife are pronounced man and wife, he kisses her “and made straight for the bar. ‘What’s the score?’” (206).

The social fabric of Montreal continues to provide rich material to Richler, especially in characters who rose from its working class Jewish neighbourhood. The bourgeois second Mrs. P has a propensity to sustained prattle. Although she is ridiculed by Barney, her loopy, rambling maddening monologues contain some of the best lines in the novel. Richler does a virtuoso turn reproducing maddening long-distance phone conversations with her mother from her honeymoon in Paris:

Yes, the waist is back and I’ve still got mine. I’m not being snarky. How many times do I have to tell you that you have a terrific figure for a mature woman. It’s from Dior. Yeah, I wore it this morning. Boy, did I ever turn lots of heads. It’s pale blue shantung pleats with
a cape collar, and over it I wore my new coat, it's a Chanel, a cardigan, nubby beige wool piped with navy blue silk. I'll wear it to the temple on Rosh Hashanah. Arlene will die on the spot. And wait till you see my shoes and the handbag that goes with...." (224).

There are a number of hilarious episodes like this and the objects of Richler's satire are numerous and familiar. As a satirist, he is adept at characterizing the foibles of human kind.

Richler claims:

To be a Jew and a Canadian . . . is to emerge from the ghetto twice, for self-conscious Canadians, like some touchy Jews, tend to contemplate the world through a wrong-ended telescope . . . . Like Jews again, Canadians are inclined to regard with a mixture of envy and suspicion those who have forsaken the homestead (or shtetl) for the assimilationist flesh pots of New York or London.

(Hunting Tigers Under Glass 9)

Richler satirically surveys American and British perspectives from his vantage point in Montreal. Straddling between the two worlds,
the doubly displaced Jewish Canadian uses humor to challenge the authority of these cultural capitals.

Richler’s “comic characters take revenge on a society that confines them to a double marginality” (Greenstein 197). As Jews, they have to fight against a peripheral position within a class-conscious Canadian mosaic that, unlike the American melting-pot, hinders assimilation and recognition; as Canadians, they are denied acceptance into a Jewish-American alliance that has achieved mainstream status. If Canada is “the No-man’s land, the Demilitarized zone . . . invisible from South of the Border as well as from the Other Side of the Atlantic” (Fielder 101), then Richler’s highly visible, militant satire invades this buffer zone and seeks to restore hyphenated Jewish-Canadians from margins to center stage.

An understanding of Jewish humor in Canada has to begin with a telescopic view into distant historical reaches. It is overwhelmingly a history of marginality and of endurance. Isaac Deutcher illuminated a salient feature of Jewish existence when he stated that it has often been on the borderlines of different civilizations, religions and national cultures. “They lived on the margins or the nooks and crannies of their respective nations. Each of them was in society, yet not in it, of it yet not of it. It was
this that enabled them to rise in thought . . . and to strike out mentally into wide horizons, and far, into the future” (Deutcher 231).

The unique qualities of Jewish humor have been its self-criticism, reliance on rationality and realism, its cautious yet positive assessment of the next moment and its high degree of historical perspective. “Jewish humor is more than a comedy of affirmation,” surmised Sharon Weinstein. “It is more accurately a comedy of continuity. To be Jewish is to remember what Jews ‘have been’ as well as what they are.” Though the keyword is “remember,” the emphasis goes beyond the past, it connects to what is coming. “Jewish humor, their sense of triumph even, emerges from a fluid connection with their history and with the prevailing optimism that this too, no matter how horrible, shall pass, and that Jews as a people will endure” (Weinstein 1).
Works Cited


