

## Book Review: Cooke, Nathalie

### **Mordecai and Me, an Appreciation of a Kind, by Joel Yanofsky. Calgary: Red Deer Press, 2003. 336 pp.**

The first-name intimacy of Joel Yanofsky's title—*Mordecai and Me*—implies that this book grows out of a close relationship between biographer and subject. Such is not the case. Yanofsky's self-described "really unauthorized" biography confesses to the distance between these two men, despite their shared vocation, city, and cultural heritage, and despite the biographer's various attempts to bridge that distance during Mordecai Richler's lifetime.

Perhaps such candour accounts for the ambivalent subtitle. Yanofsky argues that *An Appreciation of a Kind* tips readers off to the fact that this isn't a hagiography. Indeed. But surely the word "appreciation" betrays a certain admiration; and the confessional tone of sections of this book betrays more— [End Page 219] disappointment that the relationship wasn't closer, that brief conversations were cut short. Yanofsky's reader is disappointed too, since Yanofsky opts not to explore other sources of information—interviews with Richler's friends and family (with the exception of conversations with Richler's friend William Weintraub, which inform much of the book), close analysis of Richler criticism, or scrutiny of Richler's unpublished papers. Instead, and more curiously, Yanofsky pursues conversations with his *own* family and friends, including transcriptions of various conversations with his wife and his dream analyst about his obsession with Mordecai and his anxiety over the biographical project. This is the *Me* part of the book: a self-conscious discussion of a writer's concerns, written as if in the heat of the writerly project.

The titular *Me* also signals that this is memoir as well as biography, although Yanofsky's name recognition is less than that of the traditional memoirist. (Ever candid, *Me* admits as much.) But, as a Jewish Montrealer, career journalist, and writer of fiction, Yanofsky brings something valuable to the writerly conversation. He is intimately familiar with the Montreal literary scene, with both those who live and work in it and with those who have written about it (William Weintraub, for example). He has reviewed their books, including those by Richler and Richler's children, and interviewed them for print, radio, and television. If this is a book about writerly concerns, it is also a book about Montreal: *Mordecai and Me and Montreal*.

Another intimacy evoked by the phrase *Mordecai and Me*, an intimacy upon which this book and its sales ultimately depend, has more to do with its reader than its author. After all, those who knew Mordecai to be Richler, and especially those Richler aficionados who knew how little commentary was available on his life and work, were the first to crack its covers. They also hoped to see certain crucial questions answered. The usual biographical questions, of course: What was the relationship between the life and the work? What might account for the author's genius? For what will he ultimately be remembered? But also answers to the usual questions about Richler: Was he ultimately for or against the Jewish community? How justifiable was his biting satire—and especially his comments on Quebec, which caused such outrage? How did he balance his famed love of scotch with his seven-day work schedule? How did the life-long romance with his beautiful wife, Florence Richler, really unfold? Was he, as the media and his readers came to suspect during the later years, really a nice guy despite all the bluff and bluster? How does his work stack up against the other Jewish writers of his time?

The other Richler biography—Michael Posner's "oral biography," which draws upon Richler's letters and more than 150 interviews with Richler's family and friends and was published in 2004, the year after Yanofsky's *Mordecai* [End Page 220] *and Me*—answers these questions. Yanofsky's does

not, but nor does it claim to do so. Instead, it poses all these questions—and more. Yanofsky's *Me*, after all, first came to Richler as a reader; and his book—part memoir, part confession—is a disarmingly candid account of his conviction that Richler can be read through his books. Posner is a biographer; and he looks primarily to sources beyond Richler's published work for insights to Richler's life. Yanofsky is a reader: he tests Richler's comment that "it's all in the books" by using Richler's published work, together with his comments during interviews and speaking engagements, to shed light on the writer's life—Richler's and his own. The result is a conversational cultural study of the Canadian literary scene from a Montrealer's perspective, which sheds light on Richler's books and provides valuable insights into the cultural context of their production and reception.

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