

Comment

Comment is an opinion column open to members of the university community who wish to present an informed opinion on a topic of their selection.

Richler's lecture disappoints audience

by Jim Young

An attentive and eager crowd awaited Mordecai Richler's "lecture", entitled "Writing in Canada", which was read from a prepared text (not unlike a TV newscaster). After paying a dollar for the privilege of attendance, the audience expected intelligent thought, witty remarks and incisive comment from one of Canada's foremost authors. (The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, Cocksure, The Incomparable Atuk, St. Urbain's Horseman). Alas, it was not to be.

In a tone which managed to sound both bored and condescending, Richler began with autobiographical details regarding his explanation (justification?) for his decision to leave Canada and live in Europe and England, where most of his writing was done. In his lecture, he cited the low esteem in which Canada was held, the desertlike quality of its intellectual and artistic life and the need to prove himself and gain critical acclaim from the more demanding intellectual circles in New York and Europe. Most of those who chose to stay in Canada to work he characterized as big fish in a little pond who lacked the courage and talent to leave and test their ability within a more competitive and gifted group. I would like to suggest that perhaps a different sort of courage and strategy was displayed by some or many of those who stayed in Canada (eg. Margaret Laurence, Ernest Buckler, Gabrielle Roy and others) - the courage to stay and build a literary community which attempted to give the public a picture of the Canadian reality within the context of good literature.

Although some things of which Richler spoke were of little relevance to the topic (for example, the

difficulties involving in getting a good drink in Toronto, the attire of the waitresses, etc.), his remarks on the Committee for an Independent Canada were pertinent and topical. As a member of that organization, he stressed the scope and importance of American ownership and/or control of Canadian resources and industry. Given this premise, one would expect that he would have gone on to denounce the encroaching American influence within, and domination of, the arts and culture in Canada via U.S. control of publishing houses, bookstores, theatres, etc. Instead of recognizing the importance and prevasiveness of American influence on ideas and values in Canada (cultural imperialism) which is just as real and powerful a force in its consequences as American control of Canadian mineral extraction. Richler ignores this (whether through ignorance or choice is uncertain.) Instead, he lashes out at what he terms "nationalist hysteria" - a trend which defines, a work as good merely because it is written by a Canadian. While I would agree that this is not a healthy tendency and certainly not a proper criterion for judging literature, I believe that Richler has missed the point here. In not perceiving "nationalist hysteria" as a reaction (albeit an incorrect overreaction) to American control, he fails to see its origins.

As an alternative to this trend, Richler makes an appeal to writers and others in the arts, stating that they should strive to say something about the human condition and that excellence should be their goal. While this appeal may sound grandiose and "above" the narrow confines of present Canadian judgement, it has the effect of blotting

out or ignoring what has been described as cultural imperialism while allowing it to continue. Richler's universalistic approach also gives the impression that some facet or picture of the Canadian reality cannot coexist with a thesis on the human condition - that they are in some way mutually exclusive. There is no reason why Canadian life and experience cannot be the subject of good literature, especially if F. Scott Fitzgerald's very time-, location- and class- specific writing is labeled (by Richler himself) as being "major". Furthermore, the need for Canadians to learn about themselves and their country (including external influences upon it) exists and should be incorporated within the arts, as well as being directed to other forms of expression and analysis.

Richler's optimism regarding the future of good Canadian writing is somewhat maligned by his wholehearted support of second-rate writing (eg. Richard Rohmer, Arthur Hailey, etc.) which he claims

provides the money to support the publishing of good works - such as his own. His materialistic approach to literature (for example, in his essay "Why I Write" he characterizes publishing as promos for those on the lecture circuit and states that he reads reviews like a market report) does not, however, explain the disappointing nature of his presentation. At the conclusion of his talk, Richler displayed an obvious desire to leave as soon as possible (as evidenced by his reluctance to receive and properly answer the questions asked of him.) It is disheartening to discover that books one has admired and enjoyed were written by one with little of interest or consequence to say to a public audience, especially when done as if it were a burdensome task not worthy of their time or talents. At one point in the evening, Richler stated that he wanted to be remembered for his writing, not for his personality or showmanship on the lecture circuit. On that score, he need have no fear.

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Staff did an excellent job on security, however their forces were spread quite thin. When it seemed that on top of all their other responsibilities they would have to protect the band's equipment as well, the members of the PHI DELTA THETA rolled up their sleeves and pitched in to help. To the fine individuals at the Fraternity our thanks and our praise.

Also one thanks Mr. Doug Taylor and his SUB Attendant Staff for a job well done, Murdoch Ryan and his Bar Staff, SUB Operations Coordinators, and Ms. Fiona Perina and all the fine people working out of the Programming Office.

Our special thanks are extended to John Graham and Clem Norwood, without whose immense organizational help and moral support this event would never have been possible.

Finally, we would like to thank Mr. Tom Stephen who organized the Bare Bear Bash; a fine and hard working individual whose industriousness paid off in a manner one did not think possible. We are eternally indebted to him for a fine job.

Dalhousie Winter Carnival Committee.

Communicator responds

To the Gazette:

This is a reaction to the article printed in your paper, "Prisons need ..." dated January 20.

I agree with much said by author/activist, Claire Culhane. Prisons do need coverage, the sooner the better. All the publicity

we do get is almost totally negative and deals with escapes, riots, assaults and other stuff like that. The public never hears about the people who get out and never return to prison. That wouldn't make good news.

There are at least a dozen inmate publications in this country, and in them one can find the thoughts of people who have not been and will not be dehumanized by the system, and are trying to raise the level of awareness that allows, and indeed perpetuates this mad institution.

We, (the Communicator) send each issue of our paper to the Student Union at your university, but how many people read it, or even are aware of it? I'm willing to bet that the only group there that is interested in our paper is that horde of new social workers. They have a vested interest in understanding the inmate mentality, seeing that they will be pounding on the door of the system soon enough. Unlike in the Kafka story, though, they will be admitted, and will complete their theses on the heads of us interesting, incarcerated guinea pigs. Unfortunately, Ms. Culhane is

naive about the whole treatment and rehabilitation scene, but we wouldn't want to disappoint her. She'll find out soon enough, that those poor oppressed inmates are not all that receptive to being helped by concerned citizens working out their guilt.

Greg Scott
Communicator

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