

Mr. Richler makes a tough distinction



Canada Today/D'Aujourd'hui recently published excerpts from a paper on Canadian culture by Robert Fulford, editor of the magazine, *Saturday Night*. Mr. Fulford addressed himself to the difficulties Canadian artists have in being recognized in the United States as artists, and, particularly, as Canadian artists.

Mordecai Richler, a Canadian novelist who is recognized at home and abroad, has a somewhat different view. *Canada Today* does not necessarily espouse either his or Mr. Fulford's opinions. The excerpts which follow are from a paper by Mr. Richler delivered at Carleton University last spring to a large audience, which included the faculty.

"... Isn't it time the nationalists stopped declaring all things Canadian-made or owned intrinsically good, even inviolate, and started to go in for tougher distinctions, say — for openers — putting excellence . . . before country of origin?

"... I have warned students again and again that if twenty years ago Canadian writers suffered from neglect, what we must guard against now is over-praise. The largest insult. The dirty double-standard. One test for Canadian writers, another, more exacting litmus applied to foreigners. Good Canadian writers, I told them, (have) no need of a nationalist's dog license and the rest are simply not worth sheltering. But, more recently, venturing into balmy, sun-drenched California, deep in the Berkeley hills, I discovered, to my dismay, that I could speak in two voices. I found that, once having explained our nationalist conundrums to American students, some of them baffled, others bored, I was making a plea for our writers, asking that Americans, subject to their own brand of parochialism, no longer dismiss anything written north of the border out of hand. Look here, the nationalists are not alone in their anger against the arrogance and condescension of some Americans toward all things Canadian. Going back to my student days, the U.S. has always been something we both loved and resented. Loved, because the novels we consumed with appetite as well as the pop culture that shaped us, were largely American-made. Resented, because to visit New York, brimming with goodwill, and to proffer a Canadian ten dollar bill was to be told, 'What's that, kid, Monopoly money?' And to introduce the subject of Canadian politics to socially concerned American friends, fascinated by all things African, was to witness their eyes glaze over with boredom.

"... Problems, problems.

"An American or British writer can lecture abroad and take it for granted that any literate

audience will readily grasp what he is about if he mentions Wall Street or the City, Broadway or the West End, Harvard or Oxford, a home run, a sticky wicket, Babe Ruth, Elizabeth I, and more, much more. But I had to assume that I'd lose most of my audiences if I mentioned St. James Street, Westmount, Carleton University, Howie Morenz or John A. MacDonald, without explaining my references at tedious length.

"Look at it this way. If, instead of F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer out of Ottawa had written a story called, "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz," he would have had to title it, "A Diamond as Big as the Chateau Laurier, the Most Exclusive Hotel in Ottawa, Capital of Canada." But within the frustration lies our greatest strength. Our largest advantage. Canadian symbols are not yet hackneyed. The mythology is still to be fabricated. Unfortunately, instead of exalting in this rare situation, the inherent freshness of our native material, too many Canadian writers have taken it as a cause for petulance, self-pity and even meanness of spirit. They are, they feel, not accorded instant recognition abroad merely because they are Canadian.

"It is, if I understand one nationalist argument correctly, because we are colonials, far removed from the centre of imperial power and taste-making, that is to say, New York, that our work is largely ignored. But Doris Lessing is also a colonial and so is V.S. Naipaul. Camus emerged from Algeria, Borges from Argentina and even James Joyce came out of a colony, if you like.

"Years ago I once wrote that to be a Jew and a Canadian was to emerge from the ghetto twice, for self-conscious Canadians, like some touchy Jews, tended to contemplate the world through a wrong-ended telescope, and that observation, unlike some others I prefer not to recall, seems to me even more valid now. . . . Many nationalist Ca-

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