

Mordecai Richler was here!

by David Deaton

Solomon Gursky Was Here
Mordecai Richler
Penguin Books, 1989
557 pp.

How sad *not* to be able to say of this book, "The master has given us his masterpiece." Mordecai Richler, at the peak of his powers, took the better part of a decade to write *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. He shouldn't have.

Hailed in advance as his most ambitious, complex and daring novel to date, even the hyperbole hints at the trouble he had in bringing it off. That's what you get for trying to stuff all of Canada into a novel.

Not to put too fine a point on it, *Gursky* is a damned thick book. It's a winter's trudge through the tundra. One wonders whether — as with so many other attempted classics — it will be roundly praised and reluctantly read.

To unravel the plot of this 150-year saga doesn't appreciably help matters. Richler's novel is so chronologically fuddled that you simply give up reading to learn what happens next.

To stuff the story into a sentence, however: an obsessed and alcoholic writer, Moses Berger, researches three generations of a particularly obnoxious family named Gursky and is staggered by what he finds out.

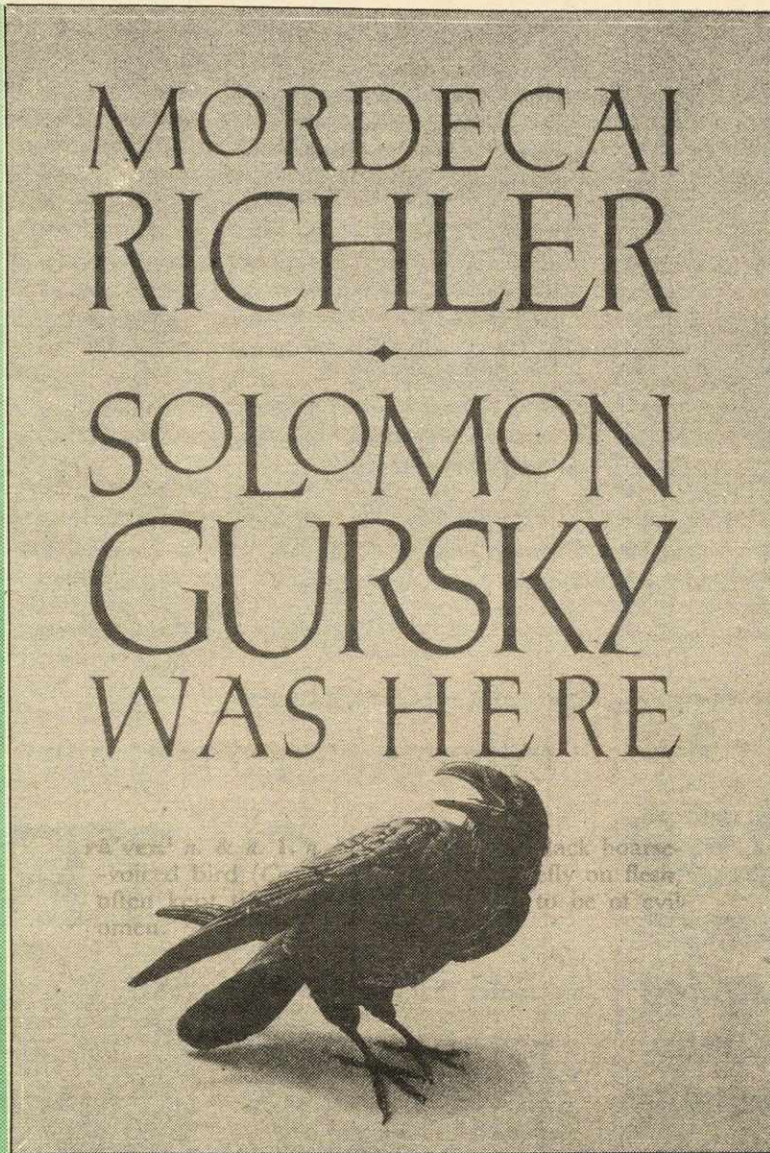
The parallels to real life are tempting. It's no secret that Richler modelled his fictional family on the Bronfman dynasty of Montreal, whose liquor empire reportedly grew out of a bootlegging operation. Richler's novel fleshes out the thesis that behind every great fortune is a petty criminal. We are treated to several.

As if to divert suspicions of a roman a clef, the novel abounds in myth-making and dubious history. The novel properly begins with Ephraim Gursky, the family patriarch, aboard the ill-fated Franklin expedition of 1850. This chunk of Canadian history gets recounted in all its grisly detail.

All of the crew on the ice-locked ship go mad and die as a result of eating lead-poisoned canned goods — all, that is, except Ephraim, who has the foresight to bring his own kosher provisions. One legacy of Ephraim's arctic sojourn is the wholesale conversion of a community of Eskimos to Judaism. Don't ask why.

Turning tragic history into the farcical and far-fetched sets the tone for the rest of the book.

Cut to 1930, when Ephraim's three grandchildren have established themselves in the distillery business (rum-running). Richler



Birth of a Corporation

Solomon sent for copies of the Orders-in-Council, studied them in bed, and the next morning summoned Bernard and Morrie. "We're going into the wholesale drug business," he said.

Wearing his uniform, Solomon took the Manitoba Liberal party bagman to dinner at the Victory Hotel. "How I envy you," the bagman said. "I was desperate to join my regiment but the prime minister insisted I could do more for the war effort in Ottawa."

A girl was provided for the bagman, a considerable tribute was paid, and the necessary license was forthcoming. An abandoned warehouse was acquired and the Royal Pure Drug Company of Canada was born. Within weeks it was producing Ginger Spit, Dandy Bracer, Dr. Isaac Grant's

Liver & Kidney Cure, Raven Cough Brew, and Tip-Top fixer, among other elixirs.

The brew was blended by pouring sugar, molasses, tobacco juice, blue stone and raw alcohol into washtubs and letting it sit overnight. In the morning, once the drowned rats had been scooped out with a fishing net, the solution was stirred with an oar, strained, tinted different colours, and bottled.

Death of a Magnate

"Bernie, Bernie," his wife sobbed, "do you believe in God?"

"How can you talk such crap at a time like this?"

"It's not crap, sweetie-pie."

"It's not crap, she says. Don't you understand? Don't you understand anything? If God exists, I'm fucked."

opts once again for the fantastical in his treatment of Solomon Gursky, the book's elusive hero.

Long assumed to be dead, Solomon Gursky turns out to be alive and well and living wherever history is being made. Moses uncovers evidence of Solomon on

the "Long March" with Mao, Solomon lobbying for Jewish immigration during the '30s, Solomon attending the Watergate hearings in the '70s. And so on.

Solomon is more symbol than somebody, the literary counter-

Something to Offend Everyone

"Canada is not so much a country as a holding tank filled with the disgruntled progeny of defeated peoples. French-Canadians consumed by self-pity; the descendants of Scots who fled the Duke of Cumberland; Irish the famine; and Jews the Black Hundreds. Then there are the peasants from the Ukraine, Poland, Italy and Greece, convenient to grow wheat and dig out the ore and swing the hammers and run the restaurants, but otherwise to be kept in their place. Most of us are still huddled tight to the border, looking into the candy store window, scared by the Americans on one side and the bush on the other. And now that we are here, prospering, we do our damn best to exclude more ill-bred newcomers, because they remind us of our own mean origins in the draper's shop in Inverness or the shtetl or the bog."

part of Woody Allen's *Zelig*, the ultimate wandering Jew. Unfortunately, we see far too little of Solomon and all too much of his loathsome brothers.

Bernard, the eldest, occupies the dark heart of this book, the

target of such unremitting satire that his depiction savours of a vendetta. Bernard Gursky triumphs as a one-man juggernaut of ruthlessness and bad taste. So shameless is he in grabbing some retroactive respectability, he hires a local poet to sing his praises.

(Note: Montreal poet A.M. Klein, now thesis-fodder, worked as a speechwriter for Samuel Bronfman.)

Moses Berger, the ruined son of a ruined poet, is the one compelled to put it all together. No wonder he takes to drink.

For all of its fitful energy, *Gursky* soon gets caught in the numbing intricacy of a Robertson Davies novel. Its gratuitously fractured narrative makes it difficult to follow the family fortunes.

As one gets to know the family better, one wishes it were impossible. *Gursky* is distinguished by an almost Swiftian misanthropy and disgust with mankind. (Women scarcely exist in this novel.) Those who are not knaves are fools, and most are both.

It's hard to recall a more contemptible cast of characters in recent fiction. Collectively, they make you feel that nuclear war can't come too soon. That 500-plus pages should be given to such vain, vicious creatures begs the question: why, why, why?

What is one to make of such a stupendous and stupefying effort? Richler has never concealed his admiration for the mighty works of Dostoyevsky. Perhaps he sought comparison in an epic-length tale about the Brothers Gursky. In this, his ninth and possibly last novel, who can begrudge him one final try to scrawl on the wall of literature, "Mordecai Richler Was Here"?

Alas that biggest is not always best. Except in isolated patches, *Gursky* doesn't come to life, let alone roam in the imagination. For that reason, ironically, the novel turns out to be a surprisingly fast read. There just isn't a whole lot to mull over. Characters come and go. Sordid events take place. The machine winds down.

Sustaining the novel when all else fails is Richler's ferocious wit and intelligence. The man couldn't write a bad book if he wanted to, but he's written a strangely unsatisfying one.

Solomon Gursky Was Here will be a pleasure for die-hard Richler fans only. I remain one of them. I even expect he'll get his wish for literary enshrinement.

But it will likely be for the finely drawn sketches contained in *The Street* or the unforgettable portrait of *Duddy Kravitz*, rather than for this sprawling, savage canvas.