

Book review

New Mordecai Richler novel is welcome but lengthy

By ALLAN GOULD

To say that a new novel by Montreal's Mordecai Richler is a major event is like saying the same about the crumbling of the Berlin Wall: Both are welcome, long-awaited, but not without some misgivings. For just as the fall of the Wall fills much of Europe with dread of German power, along with rejoicing in the freeing of a people, Solomon Gursky Was Here (Viking, 557 pages, \$26.95) is equally problematic, with its pleasures greatly diluted with distress. This is not the Great Work that many of Richler's appreciative fans had hoped for.

And we have hoped for a long time. When the impressive (but still inferior to St. Urbain's Horseman, in this reviewer's opinion) Joshua Then and Now was published in 1980, it followed a drought of nearly a decade. Now, after a similar drought, what do we have? A huge, sprawling, hilarious, offensive, beautifully written, crudely written study of several generations of the Gursky family - a depiction of a certain Montreal Jewish family making big bucks in bootlegging and ending up with a worldwide liquor and real estate empire.

All's fair in love and satire, yes? Well, yes and no. But first, the book: Solomon Gursky Was Here is nothing if not imposing. Richler has never written a longer book - or one which is funnier. To have the great McTavish Distillery family be traced back to a crooked, conniving, vicious, vengeful, brilliant man named Ephraim Gursky, who had come to Canada with the famed, tragically doomed Franklin Expedition, is a comic tour de force. As are the Jewish Eskimos, dropping Yiddishisms as they drop dead from trying to keep kosher, as well as keep the Yom Kippur fast through months of Arctic night.

GEMS

And some of the lines that Richler tosses off through this endlessly fascinating (and often just-plain-endless) novel are gems. A description of Montreal Jewish intellectuals: "Artists, the lot. Washed on to the shores of a cold country that was as indifferent to them as they were to it."

And there has rarely been a more devastating depiction of Canadian morality, placed in the mouth of Callaghan, a Christian friend of Moses Berger, the failed writer who becomes an obsessed "Gurskyologist," determined to track down the history of this extraordinary family: "Let me put it this way. Canada is not so much a country as a holding tank filled with 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 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..."

I quoted the above at length because I think it shows Mordecai Richler at his very best: angry, pained, brutally honest, scathingly satiric. Bravo. And there are some two dozen other lines that can be

rattled off, showing him to be the Mark Twain/Doonesbury/Philip Roth/Mort Sahl/Jules Feiffer of Canada.

DISGUSTING

Then why such a disappointment? Why such a profound sense of letdown, after all the laughs, all the insights, all the profundities? Because there's no moral centre to this novel; every major character, almost without exception, is corrupt, venal, devious, brutal, lecherous, vulgar, monstrous. And, as any first year philosophy student will tell you, if everyone is guilty, then no one is. And if everyone is disgusting, then who really cares?

Gatsby had Nick Carraway to play against and give Fitzgerald's masterpiece a focus, a framework of humanity; Faulkner's crumbling whites always had a Dilsey or some decent (if powerless) black as a moral touchstone for the reader.

In this novel, we have no such thing. His parody of the decent, gentle and hugely gifted Montreal poet A.M. Klein is so petty and repulsive that anyone who knows of the man's life and work will wonder why Richler has dug in the knife so deep; so cruelly. And the protagonists who break the wind, the wildly vulgar nouveau riche, the Jew-hating gentiles, the gentile-hating Jews - after a while, the mind recoils in sadness, because, they are all - all - so hopelessly unpleasant, so unworthy of our interest.

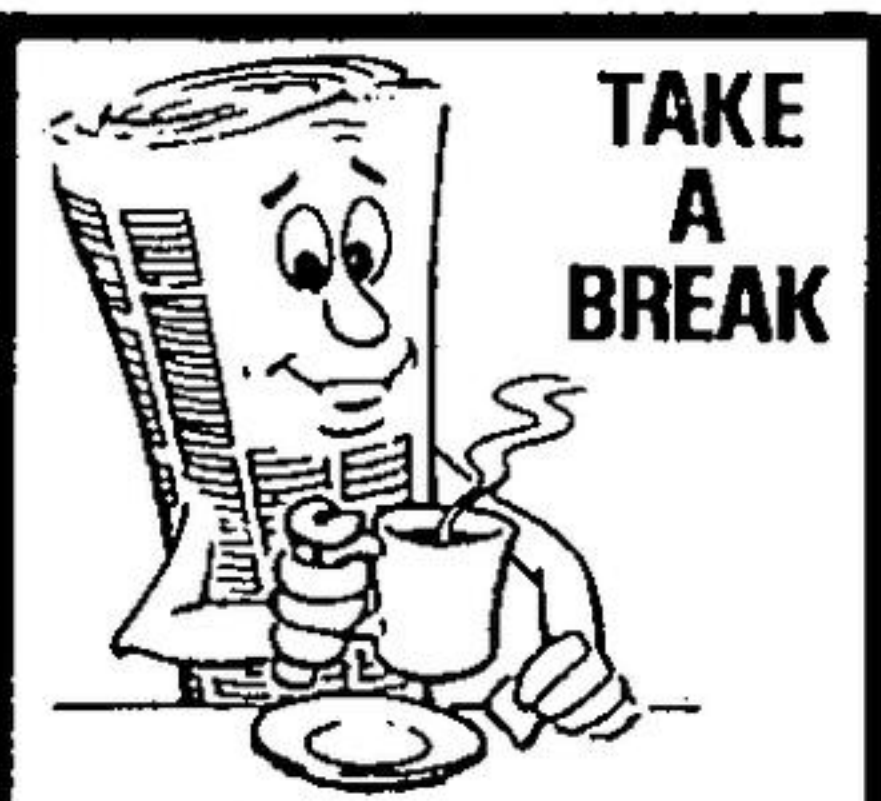
Don't get me wrong: I love Richler at his most hard-hitting, and continue to think that Cocksure (obscene, raging) is his greatest novel. But that was a cartoon, albeit a brilliant one. Solomon Gursky Was Here longs to be taken seriously - and in its complex raven symbolism, its occasionally glorious parodies and satires, its devastating depictions of Canada's pettiness - it deserves to be. But what a great letdown it is in the end! Read it, for Richler deserves to be read. But this is not

the novel that we lovers of his writing have been longing to see, alas, alas.

-Allan Gould, a Toronto-based writer and reviewer, is the author of 13 books, the latest two being The Great Wiped Out North, a work of political satire, and the co-authored Childfinder, about Canada's leading tracker of missing children.



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DATE BOOK

Feb. 3, 1990

Today is the 34th day of 1990 and the 45th day of winter.

S	M	T	W	T	F	S

TODAY'S HISTORY: On this day in 1962, President John F. Kennedy ordered a ban on nearly all U.S. trade with Cuba.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAYS: Horace Greeley (1811-1872), newspaper editor; Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), writer; Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), illustrator, painter; James A. Michener (1907-), author; Joey Bishop (1918-), actor; Bibi Osterwald (1920-), actress; Shelley Berman (1926-), comedian; Fran Tarkenton (1940-), football player; Bob Griese (1945-), football player; Morgan Fairchild (1950-), actress.

TODAY'S QUOTE: "Money is always there but the pockets change; it is not in the same pockets after a change, and that is all there is to say about money." - Gertrude Stein

TODAY'S MOON: Day after first quarter (Feb. 2).

ON AN AVERAGE DAY: 3,502 fifth-graders fall in love.

Source: "On An Average Day," by Tom Heymann (Fawcett Columbine)

TODAY'S BARBS BY PHIL PASTORET

Learn to read the ads. "For qualified buyers" means anyone with enough cash can walk away with whatever it is they're selling.

The February thaw is that time of this month when the power fails and the freezer load of food becomes a total loss.

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Fortunately, it is a joy to report to you this month, on market conditions in the Georgetown area. Sales are coming in very nicely, there's lots of activity on the market, with ample purchasers scouting the market, and the listings are just enough to give you a choice within your price range.

Now, don't get me wrong, it is by no means a "hot" market, but it is a more realistic market and a comfortable market for everyone to buy and sell in.

After working through the past eight months of a very "soft" market, this is a treat to work in. I even have some interesting observations to make, just for the record. Upon comparing notes with quite a few sales reps in town, I am hearing much the same story that I had already concluded. Although the inventory of listings is probably better than average for this time of year, it is still difficult to find really "good" homes in most price brackets. By "good" I mean well priced, well maintained, nicely decorated, in a good area of town, and with a few "perks" thrown in for good measure. It is always sad to see a home, that would sell well, if the owners had taken the time to do a little work on the house before putting it on the market, for then they would have the edge, as always.

So, in reality, this market is no different than any other. Good homes sell fast, and you will get the value from them if you have been careful to price accordingly. This is still not the market to overprice your home to "see what happens" for I can assure you that "nothing will happen." People are still looking for good value, as always, and they are in no hurry to make their decisions. Please listen to your sales rep regarding pricing. Ask for a market analysis, and come to a price that is reasonable to ask, together. You will save yourself a lot of grief and aggravation, if you will listen. Current sales tell the story - don't get yourself caught up in the "emotional" value of your home. If you are not sure that your sales rep of choice has given you a price that you can live with, call another person in to give you a market evaluation and see what they say. Do try to be up front with both representatives, and tell them what you are going to do, so that everyone is working with a full deck of cards. You should be able to see for yourself, quite clearly, what your home is worth by the recent sales.

It looks like 1990 is starting off well, and that is the best news that I can report to you, except that spring is just around the corner!

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