

# SHRIEKS AND KVETCHES

“...Richler’s novel is an *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* for the Ritz Brothers, Toole’s an astonishingly original comic spree...”

**Joshua Then and Now**, by Mordecai Richler. Knopf, \$11.95.

JOSHUA SHAPIRO IS MORDECAI RICHLER’S irresistible incarnation of the Wandering Jew, returned to Canada after two decades of scouring the planet for his inheritance, “any inheritance, weightier than the construction of a transcontinental railway, a reputation for honest trading, good skiing conditions.” A TV celebrity and sportswriter whose fame inspires envy and anger in many of his overachieving buddies from the *shtetl* of St. Urbain Street in Montreal, Shapiro is nonetheless up against it. He’s in the hospital with multiple fractures, his wonderful *goyisheh* wife is on the lam, his “homosexual” correspondence has been leaked to the press, and he is being hounded by reporters anxious to show that this media heavy is light in the loafers. Shapiro is a familiar Jewish type, a man in the vanguard of suffering. *Oy vay*, does he have problems. But give him 435 pages and all will be explained.

Joshua then, and now, has an appetite for vindictive triumph. Richler never writes better than when Joshua, in his role as Jewish avenger, is allowed to “glow with ill will.” Life has betrayed his early political idealism; the only great cause left is getting his *tuchis* off the table. His Spain, “the first political kiss,” is now a vacationers’ paradise; World War II is “source material for *Hogan’s Heroes*”; the McCarthy era has been reduced to “Lillian Hellman saying no to the resounding sound of her own applause”; and even his battles against censorship in England in the early sixties, lifting the ban on *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, “one of the most tedious novels ever written,” have resulted only in *Forum*, *Climax*, and the rise of pornography. His political inheritance has become the property of the Hollywood producer who displays matching, reverently lit busts of Bobby Kennedy and Ché

John Lahr’s most recent book is *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*. James Wolcott writes the column “Medium Cool: Television and Its Discontents” for the *Village Voice*.

Guevara in his front hall and the star “who wouldn’t eat California grapes. Who was for abortion-on-demand and ERA, but against Zionist duplicity and colored toilet paper.”

And that is not all. “I can’t be forty-seven yet,” Shapiro moans. “I’m not ready.” Death starts to haunt Shapiro’s celebrated life, as one by one his



Richler: The real Jewish penicillin.

old high school gang—the boys of Room 42—start to succumb. Clinging to adolescence with one foot in the grave, one of Joshua’s friends, Seymour the compulsive womanizer, says to him in the john, “I’m scared of dying. You?” Joshua says nothing, but already he’s vowing to diet, to lose his paunch by next year. Once he had dreamed of writing something that would last. “His new ambition, as serious as the earlier one, was to be so flat of stomach come his forty-eighth birthday that he would be able to look down in the morning and see it. Good morning, big boy.”

Richler writes funny. Laughter, not chicken soup, is the real Jewish penicil-

lin, doing shtick while waiting for the coronary. Richler’s characters enter as philosophers and exit as stand-up comics, firing zingers as they go. Joshua’s mother, Esther, always the scene-stealer, does a striptease at his bar mitzvah. His father, Reuben, an ex-boxer and petty criminal, gives him Bible lessons: “Esau was one fine fella, a hunter, and he used to bring his dad venison to eat. . . . And Jacob, a real Outremont kid, always looking for angles, a way to get ahead, he says you want to nosh, sell me your birthright.” The narrative gusto of *Joshua Then and Now* rushes the reader past its longueurs and turns it into a kind of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* for the Ritz Brothers. In its mournful hilarity, the novel is a mosaic of four worlds: contemporary Canada, Ibiza and London in the fifties and sixties, and growing up poor and Jewish in Montreal in the thirties and forties. In the end, for Shapiro and Richler, *chutzpa* conquers all. —J.L.

**A Confederacy of Dunces**, by John Kennedy Toole. Louisiana State University Press, \$12.95.

NEW ORLEANS, SIMMERING IN ITS OWN funky juices, is a vice hole teeming with lesbians, litterbugs, junkies, jades, gum-chewing prosties, and lewd old sots in greasy raincoats. Or so claims Ignatius Reilly, the indignant hero of John Kennedy Toole’s posthumous novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Ignatius himself is one of the city’s more impressive eyesores. Stupendously fat, he lazes away the afternoon guzzling Dr. Nut, masturbating into a rubber glove, and toddling down to the Prytania to heckle the latest Doris Day horror. Despite his insatiable appetite for mass-culture trash, this bullying hulk fancies himself a neo-medieval philosopher king whose mission is to subvert the ideas and sentiments of the modern age. Between wanks and sips of Dr. Nut, Ignatius scribbles his thoughts into notebooks that litter the floor of his fetid room like so many Proustian droppings. When financial hardship compels him to seek employment, fiasco follows fiasco. In a pants