



Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!: Requiem for a Divided Country

Mordecai Richler

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A humorous look at Quebec's movement toward independence from Canada, remarking upon the Draconian language laws imposed on English-speaking Quebecois, the economic problems posed by the movement, and the troubles with blind nationalism.

Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!: Requiem for a Divided Country Details

Date : Published May 5th 1992 by Knopf (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780679412465

Author : Mordecai Richler

Format : Hardcover 277 pages

Genre : Cultural, Canada, Nonfiction, History, Politics

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Dan O'Meara says

Richler gives full vent to his prejudices and crude stereotypes to produces a splenetic and thoroughly inaccurate caricature of Quebec. Given the prejudice he experienced in his own life, it is sad to see such a great writer and humanist falling into mere ethnic ranting.

Emma Anja says

I admit I bought this after Brexit in an attempt to make myself feel better about the whole divided union mess thing. Throughout the campaign and the early aftermath I was aware of comparisons through Quebec, and came to the conclusion (or perhaps pinned my hopes upon the theory) that the Bank of England's Mark Carney was perhaps the only key player who had considered Brexit a reape possibility due to his being Canadian, and the two close sovereignty referendums in Quebec. This is a fascinating book on a topic I wasn't particularly familiar with, and one which I do think actually aided my understanding of the U.K./EU mess and where we might go from here. The two situations are obviously very different, but regardless it's an interesting comparison. Richter makes a sound case for the historical legacy of Quebec and its impact upon the québécois population today, and clearly lays out the issues facing Quebec and Canada within their current relationship, and the viability of independence. It will be interesting to see how this plays out in the future, given the current trend in world politics.

Luke says

Still fresh.

Bob Frias says

Cogent analysis of the problem

Jay says

I found myself vigorously disagreeing with some of the conclusions Richler made in this book. It's good as an introduction to the topic, but it doesn't have much of a structure to keep the reader interested.

Robert says

Mordecai Richler wrote this in the lead-up to the referendum on Quebec independence in the early 1990s.

What is surprising is how relevant the book still is today. Language especially is a topic revisited often, made more interesting because of the laws Richler cites in this book.

Some of it is unintentionally relevant, as when he exhorts Ottawa and Quebec to explain the true costs of independence. It's worth quoting here, "...Parizeau, wearing his Tinker Bell suit, actually told a group of Université de Montréal students that independence would not cost a cent and, instead of heaving him out the window, the students clapped hands to show that they believed in fairies." Isn't this how Brexit came to pass?

A good, if highly specialized, read.

Gregory says

"Quebec, My Country. Canada, My Ass"

Incredible chant from the 1991 Canada Day celebrations in Montreal.

This book masks itself as Mordecai Richler's Grumpy's/Woody's bar rambblings, yet exists as a thorough and well-references piece of Canadian History surrounding the state of Quebec during the late 80's/ early 90's. The cover art depicting the defaced stop sign is an iconic piece of Canadiana and I want it on a t-shirt. Quebec was governed by graffiti and that is charming and good.

Lisa says

Read as research for my dissertaion on Quebec politics.

F. Roberta says

Yeah, I know. Late. But I sat through the 1995 referendum with my bags packed, ready to head to Ontario. So, I thought I'd like to read Mr. Richler's cynical take on the whole thing. No fiction usually takes me ages, so...

Helen says

The situation has changed since the publication of this book but it was interesting to get an overview of the history leading up to the call for referendum in the early 90s. Having studied Quebec history and society at the francophone Universite de Montreal a few years ago, it was interesting to get the Anglophone viewpoint, including some of the anecdotal evidence. As always in these things, there are genuine hurts and concerns on both sides of the linguistic divide. The author also seeks to address and critcise the anti-Semitic elements he has experienced, although perhaps this takes up a little more of the book than I anticipated.

David Bales says

A very funny, interesting, poignant and informative discussion of Quebec's "Separatism" and its roots as it played out circa 1990, when Quebec's PQ leaders wanted "independence" and the Meech Lake Accord which guaranteed Quebec's "special" status in Canada fell through. Great history of the province and of the French in Canada as well as the reasons for their grievances towards English Canada, although Richler is a definite skeptic as to how bad the French-Canadian oppression is or was, having born the brunt of anti-Semitic prejudice in Montreal as a kid growing up in the '30s and '40s when Quebec's nationalist movement took its walking papers from the Franco and Mussolini regimes. Fascinating stuff!

Margarita says

A bit of an outdated read at this point, but certainly a good introductory read to the language issue once you weed through Richler's opinions.

Vanessa says

Amusing and well-written (and a quick read, as far as 250-page treatises about Quebec politics go), this book will put you in the center of Quebec's pre-referendum political and social climate. My only complaint is that Richler spends a lot of time discussing antisemitism in Quebec, more than I believe is necessary to get the point across. It makes some sense for the context in which this book was published (e.g. the book's postscript is a long-form response to comments received about an excerpt of the book published in *The New Yorker*), but someone intent on modernizing the text could probably edit it down a further 50 pages or so.

As for the content of the book, well, I fear that it has only solidified my lingering unease with Quebec as a province. Some of Richler's observations resonated with me, proving that the book's 20-year-old portrayal of Quebecois culture, nationalism, and the anglophone experience in Quebec is not as dated as it should be.

But let's back up a minute. I'm not actually an anglophone. I was born in Montreal to immigrant parents, grew up speaking French at home, and even attended a year of francophone school before we moved to Ottawa in 1992. I remember sitting on my parents' bed in 1995, watching the referendum results roll in, and seeing their relief when the status quo prevailed and the sovereignty issue faded from public view. A few years later, we were back in Montreal looking at houses, though we never did return.

As I relocated around the rest of Canada instead, I often told people that I was from Quebec (in so much as one can be "from" a place when having moved around as much as I have - my longest stint was 13 years in Ottawa, which, being more of a conglomerate of government offices than a real city, never felt much like home). What a disappointment to discover on my eventual return to *la belle province* that I was an outsider now, too long away to be a *pure laine* Quebecoise, but no anglophone either, my French too fluent (and my Montrealite prejudices too ingrained) for a move to NDG. Sadly, Richler's observation that Quebec culture is an insular and exclusive club remains true in many ways. One cannot become Quebecois merely by being born in the province, speaking the language fluently, or enjoying poutine.

Anglophones do have an easier time of it these days: no longer the targets of hostility, they get cooed over for signing up for French immersion and babbling "bonjours" in meetings. Shopkeepers are all too happy to switch to English at the slightest hint of an accent (confounding the province's continued sensitivity about

losing its language). As for me, speaking French with my Canadian mutt accent, I get grilled about my parents' and my background (questions that would be considered politically incorrect if I were a visible minority) in order to ascertain precisely what type of Quebecer I am. Alas. Twenty years on, Quebec still struggles to define itself.

Tim Weakley says

While I have to admit that this book presents a biased point of view on the issue of the french language and seperation issues, it is not a bias I disagree with for the most part.

Richler is true to form as he gives a personal history of the Quebecois sense of disenfranchisement, combined with an examination of rascism embodied within the spirit of Quebec nationalism. His sarcasm and wit add to the flow of the book, but his (perhaps justified) attitudes regarding anti-semitism in Quebec tend to roll over the points he is trying to make.

Overall it was a very good read that was a testimony of the year it was written. It might be a little dated today but I well remember the feeling of growing up in that time period.

Troy Parfitt says

Mordecai Richler walks us through a history of Quebecois Nationalism to show us it was born out of xenophobic sentiment and blossomed into a movement that was sweeping, pointless, borderline fascist, and utterly insane. Far from being oppressed by les maudites Anglais, Richler documents how the English minority and newcomers to Quebec were subjected to discriminatory laws at the hands of Francophones. The separatist movement tapped into tribal feelings and did little except disrupt the economy, force thousands of Quebecers to move elsewhere, and create a lot of animosity. This book deftly deals with the extremism and intolerance of French-Canadian nationalism. It should be required reading for every Canadian, and hopefully it will sell another 85,000 copies when that sordid and silly movement rears its ugly head again. A wonderful book, intelligent and witty. And there there is no retort to it.

Troy Parfitt is the author of Why China Will Never Rule the World
