



St. Urbain's Horseman (New Canadian Library)

Mordecai Richler

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St. Urbain's Horseman is a complex, moving, and wonderfully comic evocation of a generation consumed with guilt – guilt at not joining every battle, at not healing every wound. Thirty-seven-year-old Jake Hersh is a film director of modest success, a faithful husband, and a man in disgrace. His alter ego is his cousin Joey, a legend in their childhood neighbourhood in Montreal. Nazi-hunter, adventurer, and hero of the Spanish Civil War, Joey is the avenging horseman of Jake's impotent dreams. When Jake becomes embroiled in a scandalous trial in London, England, he puts his own unadventurous life on trial as well, finding it desperately wanting as he steadfastly longs for the Horseman's glorious return. Irreverent, deeply felt, as scathing in its critique of social mores as it is uproariously funny, *St. Urbain's Horseman* confirms Mordecai Richler's reputation as a pre-eminent observer of the hypocrisies and absurdities of modern life.

From the Hardcover edition.

St. Urbain's Horseman (New Canadian Library) Details

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Author : Mordecai Richler

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From Reader Review St. Urbain's Horseman (New Canadian Library) for online ebook

Talya Rubin says

Mordechai Richler's portrayal of Jacob Hersh, a Jewish Montrealer with aspirations of being a great film maker and ties to a past that has given him an anxious personality and a hero complex, makes for a wonderful read. The sometimes indulgent and ridiculous main character wins us over with his charm and delinquency. Richler is extraordinary at portraying the struggles of a man coming to terms with his identity, his conscience, his loves and his life.

Daniel Kukwa says

It's certainly the most savage of the Richler novels I've read...a mega-mix of his dark/serious side with his irreverent/love of pastiche side. I think it's too sprawling for its own good, but the novel's ambition still produces some amazing passages & prose. I'm not entirely satisfied, but certainly impressed.

rabbitprincess says

I'm giving this one four stars for its merits as a character-driven novel. Richler really buries us deep inside the head of Jake Hersh, an expat Canadian film director living in London, as he contemplates his life to date. When the story begins he is embroiled in a scandalous trial along with probably the scuzziest fellow I've read about in a while, and Jake looks back on everything that has happened to bring him to this point. A recurring figure in his thoughts is his cousin Joey, whom he dubs the "Horseman", avenging wrongs and living a life of derring-do, but whose exact whereabouts are unknown.

As I mentioned, the character of Jake is very well realized. He reminded me a bit of Barney Panofsky from Barney's Version, perhaps because both characters are prompted to take stock of their lives because of allegations made against them, and both have near-mythical figures haunting them from their pasts. Both novels also feature frank depictions of sex and aging (the sex depictions were a little *too* frank for me, personally, but that is what speed-reading is for). However, the humour in this one is not as overt as in Barney's Version. It's still there of course, but Jake is not as gleefully vindictive as Barney is.

Overall I would recommend this for people who like character-driven novels and those who have enjoyed previous works by Mordecai Richler, especially The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz. (Duddy does make several appearances, at one point prompting me to wonder whether I'd picked up the wrong book.)

Denton says

This book is a black satire, and study of characters far more interesting than they initially appear.

Jake Hersh's life has become unravelled. His relationships with his family, his troubles with the law, the questions about his work - everything seems to be coming apart. The early chapters of this book reflect that, as everything in his world is thrown at you, all at once. But slowly, the book starts to build a complete character out of all these fragments, coming together as you see the gears in motion which took Jake to his current situation.

In some ways, this is a perfect way to introduce a protagonist this book - Mordecai Richler's sense of humour works best when his characters are unlikeable. The confusing opening keeps you from getting too attached to Jake until you see some of the uglier sides of his personality. By the time you get a chance to like Jake, you understand him, which lets the book come to a nicely satisfying conclusion.

This is a book which is ideal to read as part of a book club - not only because a bit of extra motivation might be needed to plow through the first few chapters, but also because it will generate some excellent discussions afterward, I'm sure.

Carole says

I remember reading Richler many years ago and was excited by his humor and directness. He fit comfortably with the burst of Jewish writers of stature, intelligence and accomplishment in the second half of the last century. He wrote with daring and plunged into the most outrageous human and sexual behaviors with wit and originality.

However, on second reading, he fails to fascinate. The Jewish self-analysis and caricatured behaviors become tiresome and exaggerated. He spins out the tale expertly, teasing you about why the protagonist is on trial for a variety of sexual offenses. But you become tired of the characters and wish that they would just get over some of their obsessions.

The book is still highly regarded, but this is another instance for me that a rereading of an admired book is often a disappointment.

Mary says

Overall I would say that this is a book about heroes and how they do and do not help a person deal with their life. It took me a while to figure out what was going on in this book, it seemed to just wander for quite a while but, as with Barney's Version, once I adjusted to the lack of linear plot and just went with it things got better. I thought the generational position of the characters, they are a bit older than the baby boomers, was very similar to Gen-X in being ahead of a huge cohort. Jake provided a good perspective on the world around him as he was between a lot of different cultural groups (British and Canadian, 2 generations, the film world and his old neighborhood, Jews and Gentiles, etc.). Once again Duddy Kravitz is a character--I really need to read his story.

Ira says

I thought it interesting to read what was a contemporary book of it's time period. Richler hadn't quite reached his stride as an author yet and the book suffers as less coherent in comparison to Barney's Version or

Solomon Gursky. As many reviewers have commented, Richler often writes great, comic vignettes but sometimes has trouble bringing them all together and some of the scenes and characters are so black comic as to be out of place in the structure of the novel or character. That said, there is a great deal of beautiful writing here. The scene where the narrator describes his inability to feel true joy even when doing something so pure as playing in the park with his children and family, is heartbreakingly rendered. The book describes a time and people (the generational mix of yiddish speaking, shtetl/lower east side dwelling to fully assimilated/ secular American Jews of the 20th Century) that may be fading slowly from the world, which to me made it particularly poignant.

Lauren Simmons says

Shifting timeline? Done. Generally a limited narration from the view of one character's thoughts? You got it. A little bit Canadian, a little bit international, a little bit Montreal, a little bit sexy, a little bit tragic? Yep. This book has a few of the things I'm generally drawn to in lit, but it fell short of the five stars because (a) it took me so long to finish it and (b) I couldn't quite understand Jake, for whatever reason. I liked it though, and it's different from other Richler.

Olga Tsygankova says

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Ann Diamond says

This was on the shelf at a friend's house. I took it home, read a few chapters, and then remembered why, long ago, when this novel first appeared, I wasn't interested in it. I'm sad to say little has changed in 30 years, except that Richler's characters, their dreams and desires, are even more irritating than back in their heyday. Sorry.

Krzysztof says

So I just recently watched the film version of Richler's "Barney's Version", and having finished "Horseman" I feel that it would be equally ill-advised to translate this work to the screen. There's just too much going on. On the one hand you have funny dialogue - I'm sure Dustin Hoffman, having wrapped his tongue around "briskets and blowjobs", could do Issy Hersh as well as he did Izzy Panofsky. But then there's all the other stuff - the Montreal nostalgia, the political/cultural satire, the mystical/metaphysical (who is the Horseman really?)...The writing is at times over the top, but the whole work has a depth and sensitivity that reminds me why Richler is a writer of international stature. People will continue to read him after lesser Canadian authors have been forgotten (hello D. Coupland, you putz).

Nancy Lamb says

Sublime satire of a film director who longs for the return of his heroic alter-ego.

Uthpala Dassanayake says

St. Urbain's Horseman says a lot about a troubled race. As a Jew, one's story is not simple even when period and geography keeps you away from holocaust. If your race is despised should you escape from it or should you preserve it's values to show you don't deserve the despise. You have to be racial to guard your own race from racism and show bravery. If you were trampled as a race you should hate to show that you are not a chicken. With all this, like anybody else, you have your own dreams to achieve, relationships to handle and ego to manage. It is very complex.

It helps if you have a role model, somebody to follow and revere, so that you can convince yourself it is possible to become such a personality. If you don't have one, you could give your imaginary personality to someone, to somebody of your own caliber. Somebody less known about and mysterious so that the imaginary personality will not clash with actual. Jake's selection is Joey, the other J. Hersh.

The story is expertly built up gradually revealing past and constructing characters to arrive at the focal scene.

Kam says

wow, what a fancy (and actually rather cheap-looking) modern looking cover for a book that feels more historic.

The book jumps right in with some esoteric stuff, and he doesn't do us the courtesy of explaining anything – until – – when? I don't have the patience. Will this be 100 pages of piecing things together, forming some kind of idea from a broken mirror?

It seems like a good mind getting at something, but I never got to where I could grab onto something. I kind of pieced together what other reviewers here have said, but how long will I have to wait till I can be involved?

The "nonlinear-ness" definitely got on my nerves; the writing seems self-indulgent: I need to read on and read on (past where I stopped) to figure out what's going on – I wonder where I will ever "get it"?

Alan says

I haven't laughed so hard while reading a book. Seriously! I always thought the Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz was Richler's best book, but I'm not so sure anymore. St Urbain's horsemen is a witty, adventurous and humorous tale that definitely has my 5\5 star rating. If your Jewish or Canadian that's only more of a reason to read this. You'll understand the subtle references, making Richler's novel even more engaging.

Toni Osborne says

The center of the novel is a crisis point in the life of Jake Hersh, a film director of modest success and a man disgraced. A Canadian living in London going through a mid-life crunch triggered by an unfulfilled professional life and intimidated by his mortality. Jack fails to navigate successfully into middle age as he gets involved with the repellent Harry Stein, a petty criminal, and his cousin Joey, his alter ego, who Jake recreates in the image of his needs. Joey is the avenging horseman of Jake's impotent dreams.

In St. Urbain's Horseman we have a medley of paranoid Jewish Montrealers struggling in a gentile world. This novel is very rich and complex, teetering on being pretentious but salvaged by fine characterizations and hilarious prose. This story has a slow sometime confusing beginning that progresses into a clearer and more interesting ending. I am not a dedicated fan of this type of writing.

Charlotte says

Definitely not my favourite Richler but glad I stuck it out. Early on, I had no idea what was going on but, in classic Richler style, it all comes together in the end.

1.1 says

Richler proves that he has the mettle to deal with a bunch of issues in each book he writes and this one is no exception. Nazis, interracial marriage, the sexual revolution, Duddy Kravitz, bigotry, stolid English characteristics, infidelity and several varieties of angst. At times this book reads a bit like a broken record, especially if it's read with a bunch of other Richler novels - Uncle Abe's diatribe near the end reminded me of another diatribe in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*; ultimately, however, both diatribes are good enough that my objection is useless. Hail to the King and all that...

Heather Mcgrail says

The characters in this book are fantastic, the descriptions are incredible, and the development is amazing. I find myself in a similar place, though, as when I read "Native Son:" I really just want to bleach something. I have a strong desire to make something clean, even if it is simply my apartment.

Colin Grieve says

I was expecting to like this more. Very unpleasant and not very believable characters, particularly the female ones. It might have been a good portrait of a time and place but it hasn't aged well. I have Solomon Gursky Was Here, hopefully will enjoy that more.
