

# Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*: A Novel of Evolution and Self-Evaluation

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## Abstract

Mordecai Richler is one of the important novelists of Canada who wrote about life and ambitions of Jews in Canada. Most of Richler's work are set in Montreal during the 1940s and 1970s.

The present paper on "*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*" captures the essence of the novel, highlighting its central themes and character development. It explores the coming-of-age narrative of a young, ambitious Jewish man who aspires to overcome his humble beginnings and achieve the material wealth and social standing that he believes will earn him respect and validation.

Richler's novel offers a profound exploration of themes such as ambition, identity, class struggle, and the corrupting nature of unchecked ambition. Duddy's journey serves as a cautionary tale, revealing the consequences that can arise when one loses sight of their values and becomes consumed by the pursuit of personal gain.

On a whole, this paper highlights the enduring relevance and timeless appeal of Richler's novel, as it explores universal themes and offers a distressing reflection on the human condition and the pursuit of the American Dream in a morally ambiguous world.

**Keywords:** Mordecai Richler, Jews in Canada, Ambition, Pursuit of the American Dream, Loss of values  
Mordecai Richler was indeed an honest Canadian writer known for his candid and often satirical observations of Canadian society. He was born on January 27, 1931, in Montreal, Quebec, and passed away on July 3, 2001. Richler's works often explored themes of identity, cultural conflicts, and the struggles of Jewish Canadians.

Richler gained international acclaim for his novels, including *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), which remains one of his most famous works. The novel portrays the ambition and ruthlessness of its protagonist, Duddy Kravitz, as he strives to succeed in Montreal's Jewish community. Richler's writing style was characterized by his sharp wit, keen observations, and unflinching portrayal of the flaws and foibles of his characters.

In addition to his novels, Richler also wrote numerous essays and screenplays. His non-fiction works often delved into topics such as Canadian politics, Quebec separatism, and cultural identity. Richler's writing was marked by a strong sense of honesty and a willingness to confront controversial subjects, which earned him both praise and criticism throughout his career.

Richler received many awards and honours for his literary contributions. He was a two-time winner of the Governor General's Award for Fiction, Canada's most prestigious literary prize. He was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and his works continue to be studied and appreciated for their insightful portrayals

of Canadian society and their enduring literary value. Throughout his career, Richler expressed concerns about the potential consequences of separatism and the impact it could have on minority communities in Quebec.

The Quebec sovereignty movement, also known as the Quebec nationalism movement, refers to the political and social movement in the Canadian province of Quebec that advocates for the independence of Quebec from the rest of Canada. While the movement primarily focuses on the province's French-speaking majority, it has implications for all communities living in Quebec, including the Jewish population.

During the Quebec sovereignty movement, the experience of the Jewish community varied depending on individual perspectives and circumstances. It is important to note that the movement itself is diverse, and not all supporters advocate for separation from Canada. Many individuals within the movement seek greater autonomy and recognition of Quebec's distinct identity within the Canadian federation.

Some Jewish Canadians in Quebec were supportive of the movement, sharing the desire for cultural recognition within the province. They saw the potential for Quebec sovereignty as an opportunity to protect and promote Quebec's unique identity and language, which they believed would benefit the Jewish community.

However, like any major political movement, there were also concerns and debates within the Jewish community regarding the impact of Quebec sovereignty. Some Jewish individuals were apprehensive about the potential consequences of separation, such as the uncertainty surrounding citizenship, economic stability, and the protection of minority rights. There were concerns about the potential impact on linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as the position of religious minorities in an independent Quebec.

In Richler's works, particularly in novels such as *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and collection of essays *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!*, Richler depicted the tensions and conflicts that arose within the context of Quebec nationalism. He portrayed the movement as being driven by a narrow focus on French language and culture, which he believed had the potential to exclude and marginalize other linguistic and ethnic communities, including English-speaking and Jewish populations.

Richler's book *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* is a collection of essays and articles that examine various aspects of Canadian society, with a particular focus on Quebec and its relationship with the rest of Canada. Published in 1992, the book offers a critical analysis of Quebec nationalism, language politics, and cultural identity. *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* garnered attention and sparked debates, as it confronted sensitive issues and challenged prevailing narratives surrounding Quebec nationalism. Richler's perspectives were met with both support and criticism, but his work contributed to ongoing discussions about identity, language, and the evolving nature of Canadian society.

Richler argued that Quebec nationalism, in its pursuit of a singular vision of identity, disregarded the multicultural fabric of Canada. He criticized what he saw as an intolerance towards diversity and a disregard for the rights of minority groups. He believed that the movement's emphasis on cultural preservation sometimes led to a dismissive attitude towards the contributions and concerns of non-French communities.

Through his writings, Richler sought to challenge and provoke discussions about the implications of Quebec nationalism, highlighting the need for inclusivity, understanding, and recognition of Canada's multicultural character. His perspectives contributed to the ongoing dialogue about identity, language, and

unity in the context of Quebec's relationship with the rest of Canada. While *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* draws upon elements of Richler's own experiences and reflects aspects of his cultural and social milieu.

The novel is a coming-of-age story that delves into the complexities of identity, the impact of societal expectations, and the price one is willing to pay for success. Richler's portrayal of Duddy Kravitz is both critical and sympathetic, shedding light on the challenges faced by individuals striving for success while grappling with their own values and sense of self.

*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* tells the story of a young Jewish man named Duddy Kravitz who is determined to become successful and attain wealth at any cost. The novel is set in Montreal, Quebec, and explores themes of ambition, identity, and the challenges faced by Jewish Canadians in the mid-20th century. Although Richler himself was born and raised in Montreal and came from a Jewish background, it is important to note that the novel's protagonist and the events portrayed in the book are not direct reflections of Richler's own life. Instead, Richler drew upon his experiences and observations of the Jewish community and the broader Canadian society to create a vivid and realistic portrayal of the character and his world.

Richler's own life and upbringing certainly influenced his writing, and elements of his personal experiences can be found in his works. However, it is more accurate to describe *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* as a work of fiction that incorporates themes and settings that Richler was familiar with rather than an autobiographical account of his own life.

The novel explores themes of ambition, the pursuit of the American Dream, and the consequences of unchecked ambition. Duddy's journey takes him through various ventures, including working in a resort, buying land, and producing films. Along the way, he faces moral dilemmas, conflicts with family and friends, and the tension between preserving his Jewish heritage and assimilating into mainstream society.

*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* can indeed be seen as a novel of evolution and self-evaluation. The story follows the protagonist, Duddy Kravitz, as he navigates his journey from adolescence to adulthood, grappling with his ambitions and the consequences of his actions.

Throughout the novel, Duddy's character undergoes significant changes and transformations. Initially, he is driven by a relentless desire for success and is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve it. However, as he faces challenges, ethical dilemmas, and the disillusionment that comes with his pursuits, he begins to question his choices and evaluate the true meaning of success.

Duddy's journey is marked by self-reflection and introspection. He confronts his own values, confronts the expectations of society, and seeks to define his own identity. As he matures, he learns valuable lessons about integrity, empathy, and the importance of genuine human connections.

The novel explores themes of ambition, identity, and the price of success, offering readers an opportunity to reflect on their own values and aspirations. Duddy's evolution serves as a cautionary tale and a reminder of the significance of self-evaluation and personal growth in navigating the complexities of life.

That being said, Richler did explore his own life and family history more directly in some of his other works, such as his memoir *This Year in Jerusalem* (1994) and the semi-autobiographical novel *Barney's Version* (1997). These books provide more direct insights into Richler's personal experiences and reflections. Richler, himself a Jewish Canadian, had a complex and nuanced perspective on the Jewish community in Canada. While he acknowledged the challenges and prejudices faced by Jews, he also

celebrated their contributions to Canadian society. He wrote about the experiences of Jewish Canadians, exploring themes of identity, assimilation, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Richler's works reflect a deep understanding of the Jewish experience in Canada, portraying it as multifaceted, resilient, and integral to the country's cultural fabric.

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