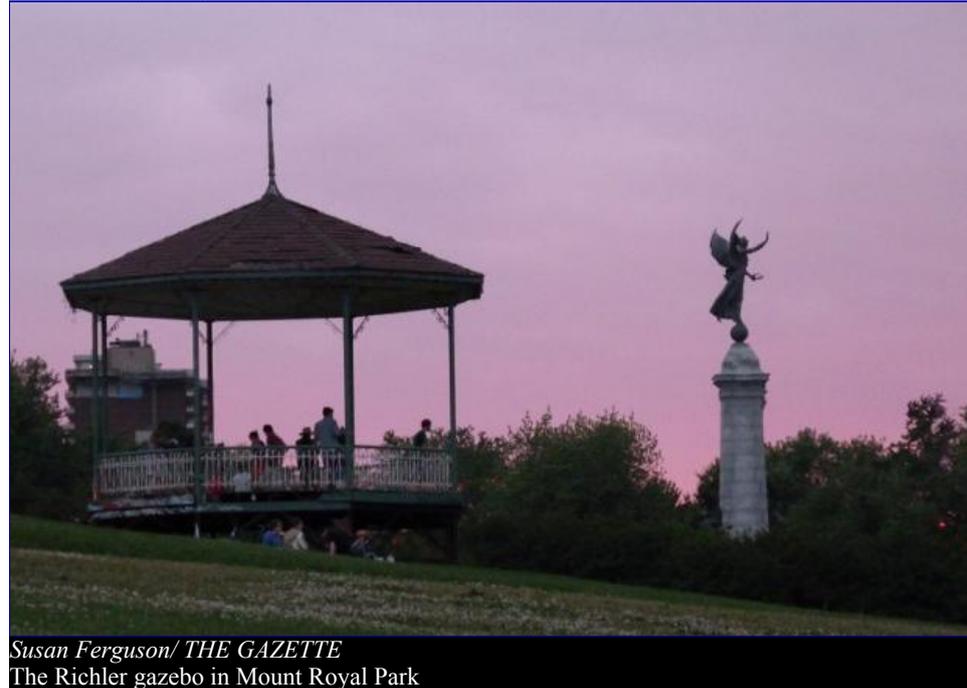


# Barbara Kay: Neglect compounds Montreal's insult to Mordecai Richler

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Susan Ferguson/ THE GAZETTE  
The Richler gazebo in Mount Royal Park

Say what you will about Mordecai Richler – and much has been said, with love, hate and everything in between – he was a gifted writer of international status and renown. One critic called him “the great shining star of his Canadian literary generation.”

Cartographers locate cities on geographical maps. Writers locate cities in our hearts and minds. And Richler immortalized in hearts and minds around the world a part of Montreal that produced many of the greatest contributors to its economic and cultural vitality.

The problem is, while immortalizing us, he drew a lot of metaphorical blood. Ironically, because he was an equal- opportunity pit bull, both Jews and Quebec nationalists got mauled by his sharp literary teeth and unrelenting drive to expose the cultural and political hypocrisies of his era. Unflattering portraits of crassly materialist Jews and ethnic purists abound in his fiction and journalism.

Some Jews ground their teeth in private, but most were proud of their unruly literary son. Nationalists were less forgiving. They nursed their wounds. It didn't help that Richler committed a few truly wounding gaffes, such as his erroneous linkage of the Parti Québécois' theme song (“À partir d'aujourd'hui”) to a Hitler Youth song.

Upon his death in 2001, the question of a memorial arose. For someone of Richler's stature, the normal honour would have been a street name in the immigrant area in which Richler grew up and frequently recreated in his fiction, or an important building – a library for example. Instead it was decided (a full ten years after his death, such was the foot- dragging) that his memorial would be the addition of his name to an old gazebo in Mount Royal park. Many Montrealers thought this ultra- modest gesture was a gross insult, an intentional posthumous “finger” to Richler by nationalists.

What's the big fuss, many readers may wonder. The word “gazebo” conjures up a shady retreat of graceful lines and welcoming repose. What could be a nicer tribute to a man who provided so much reading pleasure to so many people than to settle into an Adirondack chair with a good book in a gazebo bearing the author's name?

If only that image corresponded to the reality of the Mordecai Richler gazebo, I wouldn't be writing this blog post.

Derek Robertson a 50- year old resident of a gentrifying quarter of southwest Montreal is a serious citizen monitor of Montreal's public spaces. He is deeply involved in municipal activism for the betterment of urban life in Montreal. Here is how he describes the condition of the Mordecai Richler memorial gazebo:

“It has no stairs nor flooring. It is missing a section of the railing. The paint is flaking and hasn't been painted in years. The roof shingles are decaying and some are missing completely. It is used on Sundays for the after.. after... after hours crowds who frequent the all- night rave type clubs & all that such a lifestyle entails...”

“I have NEVER seen a Commemorative Plaque or Post ... acknowledging for whom the gazebo was dedicated ... this is truly shameful conduct for a city that has been Re- Branded some years back by the provincial Gov't as a ‘Metropole Culturel’...”

This is a truly shameful state of affairs, adding injury to insult. According to Mr. Robertson, the city of Montreal has \$300,000 to spend on the memorial, but doesn't plan to do so before the summer of 2013. It would have been better, and at least a more honest expression of bias against Richler, to offer no memorial at all than to announce it and do nothing to improve its deplorable state, let alone fail to affix a plaque.

What kind of message does that send to the literary world? It sends the message that Richler's harsh assessment of nationalist hostility to anglophone culture was right on the mark.

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