

**Meeting: May 7, 2011**

The winner of at least 6 major literary awards...

A (first person memoir) in 3 parts with  
footnotes  
sports reporting  
song lyrics  
letters  
dirty limericks  
biblical quotations  
manifestos  
entries in rare book catalogues  
a (first person – not the memoirist but Terry McIver's) journal  
TV sit com dialogue  
“blockbuster film ideas”  
face to face dialogue  
telephone call dialogue  
internal dialogue  
diatribe  
summaries of newspaper stories  
poetry  
liturgy  
index card lists  
hand written notes  
Yiddish  
French  
Hebrew  
radio broadcasting  
text from a “Manual for Draft-Age immigrants to Canada”  
courtroom testimony — The Second Mrs. P  
swearing

...that gradually transforms into another first person memoir (the Afterword) written by the original memoirists son, who is also the author of the footnotes.

AND

...it leaves me (almost) speechless. It is as close to being perfect as a novel can be. And it is Canadian by my favourite Canadian writer, his last and funniest work.

There are many reviews that summarize and comment on the book accurately :

Jack Goodstein (Blog)

He tells his story with what seems like unvarnished honesty. He doesn't seem to be hiding anything. When he denies having done something especially egregious, the fact that he has been owning up to all these other misbehaviors gives some credence to his denials.

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Moreover the story just seems to pour out of him. It reeks with sincerity. It never seems artificially pointed to make a case for the reader, despite the fact that it obviously is

Aaron Brown blog

"Barney's Version is about memory; and what happens to a man when his memories outweigh his future and then what that man becomes when those memories fade."...  
"In the final chapter with one sentence Mike Panofsky describes his father with pinpoint accuracy; "Before his brain began to shrink, Barney Panofsky clung to two cherished beliefs: Life was absurd, and nobody ever truly understood anybody else." (417).

The Yale Review of Books

Love has the curious effect of making Barney doubt his previous belief in insincerity. Miriam, he feels, is worthy of his searching for any lingering earnestness, and the process forces a level of self-examination that does not come easily. After years of giddy world-beating, thriving on moments in which he feels "tempted to burst into applause in celebration of my own hypocrisy," Barney's sense of shame suddenly materializes. ...By turns self-absorbed, raucously funny, and sad, Barney Panofsky represents the vanguard of the pop-culture Jewish protagonist, circa 1998. Richler, like Roth and Allen, is getting on in years, and so far-knock on wood-his writing has remained sharp and poignant. But the breadth of Richler's subject matter reflects his colleagues' newly-developed taste for the overtly profound. The strokes are larger now-instead of seeing the world through a single, electric relationship, we are treated to the sweep of an entire life-and the trend toward generality demands increased sensitivity to detail.

Richler's steady hand makes such a feat look easy. His prose rings with so much raw comedy that one barely realizes its deep-seated sadness until the final pages. It is the melancholy of *Barney's Version*, however, that lends the story its majesty

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The first person psychological realism drives the book as Panofsky looks back on his successes and failures and tries to make meaning of his life, though he is upfront about the fact that his memory is slipping. Richler intentionally obscures whether Barney's "version" is the truth, outright lies, or simply something he can't fully remember. Richler's manipulation of this narrative feature is used ingeniously to make the reader question Barney's character, but love him or hate him, the reader feels like he is someone they know personally.

KevinfromCanada

...despite the existence of the plot, this novel is Richler unloading on the world. It is not a double-barrelled shotgun, it is one with at least eight barrels, and very wide-ranging shot. Nothing escapes it: Hemmingway, Pierre Trudeau, the separatists, Israel, feminists, the Montreal Canadiens, many movies, Toronto (oh my god, Toronto), British semi-aristocrats — the list is endless.

Certainly BV is about truth-telling in life and in story telling, and it's about the closely related role of memory in life and story telling, but if I were to pick one theme to explore, I would look closely at what *Barney's Version* is saying about 'digression' and what it means in life 'to digress'.

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Digression is generally defined as a passage or section that deviates from the central theme in speech or writing. In other words a digression is dependent upon and can only be identified as such if there is a 'central theme'.

The central theme of BV is Barney's life and the telling of it to rebut his friend Terry McIver's criticisms: that he is insecure, a toady, a vulgar autodidact, a drunk, who becomes patronizing, uncaring, cruel because jealous, violent, and "capable of murder one day". The problem is that Barney's story both reinforces and disproves all of these criticisms. And the digressions often circle back to underscore both the reinforcement and the disproof. However, what they also do is disprove Barney's two cherished beliefs: Life is absurd, and nobody ever truly understands anybody else."

Digression is the heart, soul and energy of Barney's approach to life. Everything that is most valuable and important to him, every experience that teaches him the most about himself and those he loves is somehow structured or comes about as a digression. Love and betrayal, friendship and enmity, cynicism and sincerity, the proliferation of contrasts and paradoxes and ironies are more or less all revealed as digressions. And of course the ultimate digression from the story— but also essential to it—are the footnotes. It's unlikely that most readers really care about getting these details right. What they do learn from them however is that as Barney is devolving into senility he is not completely disappearing. Someone —we don't know who until the end— cares enough to clean up these details because he knows that to the Barney who is the "vulgar autodidact" they in fact do matter. Somehow this complex character both strives to connect as fiercely and energetically as he pushes away and this energy, contrary to a 'life is absurd' philosophy is life-enhancing and life-promoting.

Humour, often seen as a divergence, is also an aspect of digression. But it too is one of the most potently attractive aspects of Barney's character, another manifestation of his boundless energy for life in all its complexity, and I would say this is so even when it takes the form of sarcasm and satire, which can be characterized as negative put down (not build up) humour. All things exist through their opposites. Through contrast and anti-thesis we make meaning and find purpose.