

Richard Russo

Novelist, screenwriter

Discussed: The language of Hollywood, book publishing technology, downeast accents, hot sex, real estate, and the Pulitzer Prize

Richard Russo is packing up for a trip to Amherst, Massachusetts, to see the latest, most exciting addition to Russoland, his one-month-old granddaughter Molly. Because he's also been flying to Los Angeles, traveling on book tours, and going on vacation to visit his daughter Kate in England, Russo and his wife, Barbara, have been spending winters in Boston's Chinatown. Folks in Florida must get a real kick out of hearing that, he says; just the mere thought of a "Boston winter" is sure to elicit a snicker.

He'll be back in Camden this summer, where the coast is just the way he likes it—a little rough, a little raw, a little more honest.

Russo is in the midst of a dozen projects—putting finishing touches on an essay for *Granta*, reviewing for the *New York Times Book Review*, editing *The Best American Short Stories 2010*, writing a new novel about our obsession with the better places, shopping around a script about natural gas reserves in the Catskill Mountains, and polishing up three screenwriting projects.

The protagonists in Russo's novels are often middle-aged men stuck in ruts, but the author, on the other hand, is on a roll. And he has a big barrel laugh to prove it.

Maine: *Tick, the young girl in Empire Falls, is based on your daughter's experience in high school. Your daughters' marriages played into That Old Cape Magic. How much Richard Russo is there in Jack Griffin, the book's protagonist?*

Richard Russo: I was a novelist who came to screenwriting late, and Griffin is, essentially, a young screenwriter who came to teaching and writing fiction later. I'd like to think that I'm not quite as lost as Jack Griffin. He's very much like an earlier character of mine, from my novel, *Straight Man*, Hank Devereaux. These are both novels, essentially, about middle-aged, white guys kind of circling the drain. They're out of control, they're trying to mix things up, they're about to lose the very things in their lives that mean the most to them, and they don't seem to understand that. That part is not autobiographical. I haven't been in that position, but to put a character in that position, especially a middle-aged, white guy, and just watch him, just totally lost trying to find his way back to the people and the things that mean the most to him—it's a wonderful device.

M: *The book takes some jabs at the academy and you call screenwriting a "betrayal of genetic gifts." How much of that is drawn from your own experience?*

RR: I'm still doing a fair amount of screenwriting, and that's another way in which this is not autobiographical. For Jack, he's not been blessed with the kind of work that I've been blessed with, working on *Empire Falls* or *Nobody's Fool*. Jack has been kind of a journeyman screenwriter who's done a couple of marginal movies and then gone into doing TV, movies, crappy Movie of

the Week type of stuff. Then, I think, the last we hear of him, he's written something like a game show before he moves on. I have been blessed with working with really good directors and wonderful actors. It's been lucrative work; it's been rewarding work in almost every way. But I'm one of those really, really rare novelists who's been treated that way.

M: *Like Jim Harrison or Richard Price?*

RR: Yes, they both have done well. Russell Banks and my friend Dennis Lehane have done pretty well. But you can almost let your voice fall there. The number of writers who have been abused by Hollywood, the list goes on and on. So, I have been able to throw some gentle jabs at the whole world of screenwriting. Not so much the world of screenwriting as the world of deal making, which I haven't had to do a lot of, but I know it's out there.

I've had my share of movies and TV pilots go belly up, so I know how quickly a producer's outrageous optimism can turn in a heartbeat. When somebody says to you, "I think this draft is really a step in the right direction," that often means, "You're fired." That's the language of Hollywood, which is so wonderful. I had a chance to play with some both first- and secondhand screenwriting experiences.

M: *Is it a problem to do screenwriting and also to work on novels?*

RR: So far, it hasn't been a problem. I just did a panel with a writer buddy of mine out in Spokane, Jess Walter. He says that novel writing is like a relationship; screenwriting is hot sex. There's an element of truth to that.

Richard Russo's latest novel, *That Old Cape Magic*, will be out in paperback on June 1.



They're not mutually exclusive, when I'm working on a novel and I come up against the wall and I have a choice either between staring at it and getting nowhere and saying, "All right, I'm going to take six weeks off here and go write a screenplay." You're just so much better off with six weeks of hot sex than staring at something that you can't fix. If you go away for a while and come back, you'll find that often, by not working on it, you'll solve some problems. So for me, the two have crossed over in a fairly healthy way.

M: *How did you end up coming to Maine?*

RR: *Nobody's Fool* had an option for a film. I was getting to the point where I was finally making some money as a writer. But, with two little girls, I couldn't yet quite make that plunge that would say, "All right, I can make it as a full-time writer." Colby College offered me exactly the kind of job I was looking for. I took a part-time job, which allowed me to continue teaching and allowed me to devote more time to my writing. I immediately took advantage of all of their flexibility and I was only there for a few years. I'd had a number of academic postings by that time. I loved my job at Colby, but I was ready to stop repeating myself in the classroom.

M: *Is that when you researched *Empire Falls*?*

RR: In so far as it was researched, yes. The Hathaway shirt company was still in business at the time. As I was writing *Empire Falls*, I was just becoming more and more outraged by the way those women were being treated. They were bought out by a multinational company, Warnaco, and they were all told that they could keep their jobs if they work extra hard and if their unions made extra concessions. They went along with all of it to save their jobs, and I think, really, what happened was that they became profitable again and the company took all of those profits, put it in their pocket, and shut the mill down.

That's a very familiar story to me, growing up in Gloversville, New York. But it was like watching the events of my childhood play out in a particularly ugly way in Waterville. Of course, there were other industries—textile, paper, rope—and they were all on hard times in Maine at the time.

M: *Some of your other novels have places named North Bath or Thomaston. Does being in Maine affect your writing?*

RR: To be honest, I don't think it has shown up nearly as much in anything that I've published yet, as it is likely to in the future. As I watched people that I lived with on the coast of Maine, as I observed them, and their behavior starts making more sense to me, it seems only logical that Maine, whatever we mean by Maine as a state, as a state of mind, as a physical place, as a place where people work, the kind of work that they do... the longer you live in a place, the more you observe, the more it becomes part of your own rhythms. So I suspect that if you're seeing, in various ways, Maine turning up in my fiction and *Empire Falls* set in Maine. So was a little bit of *That Old Cape Magic*.

M: *Writing about a place that's territorial and strong-minded can take a lot of courage. I feel like you've done Maine justice so far, but then again, I'm from away.*

RR: *Empire Falls* was received in Maine with much more generosity than I could ever have dreamed, knowing how fiercely territorial Mainers are about their place. They used to be made fun of and condescended to, by writers from away, and filmmakers from away, television shows from away, and they're rightly suspicious, I think. I fully expected a drubbing, and didn't get it. Even though *Empire Falls* is set in Maine, I didn't try to do Maine. I made very conscious decisions, for instance, to include no Maine dialect at all. There isn't a downeast talker anywhere in that novel.

I was writing about the rhythms of people's work lives that were pretty much the same between Waterville, Skowhegan, all those Central Maine towns, and were just very close to what I was writing about in all those upstate New York novels. So, people said about *Empire Falls* that "Richard Russo, he really got Maine right on the first try." No, I don't think I got Maine right, I think I got class right. I think I got mill towns right. I think I got the kind of work that people do and the kinds of problems that they have as a result from the kind of work that they do. I got that right, but I've been watching that my whole life, not just in Maine.

M: *Your latest novel is something of a departure from these small-town narratives?*

RR: What I was interested in is America's ongoing obsession with what we think of as finer places, no matter where we are. We're always looking for the finer place. I've been noticing for years that—and I love where I live in Maine—but when you log on to your homepage in the morning, there'll be a little thing up there that says, "Ten Best Places in the World to Live" or "Ten Best Small Communities." Like everybody else, I always click on those things.

My grandparents and my extended family grew up around the corner from each other in this small town in upstate New York. We all knew there were other finer places in the world to live, but that's where we lived. That was back in the time when people would work for a company like General Electric. Now that we don't identify with our employers, and now that families have to break up in order to follow jobs everywhere, where we're just dispersed all over the country, that's contributed to an attitude of "since nothing is permanent," then let's keep looking for the next best thing and then the next best thing—always looking for that magical place. The character in this book is somebody whose parents were that way and he's kind of that way, too. Happiness is always someplace else. You haven't quite gotten there yet but you will be happy if you only just find a way to get there.

M: *What will you be working on this summer?*

RR: I'm finishing up a long short story that is set in Maine. It's about a realtor. My wife is a realtor. It's about somebody doing work in Maine, that involves Maine, that involves selling Maine. So, it's allowed me to distill some slightly deeper, wiser understanding of Maine than I would have been capable of a decade ago. You can't make your main character a Maine realtor without having probably a little more than surface knowledge of what gets sold when you're selling Maine real estate.

Another one of my projects is going to be a coffee table book with really nice production values that will feature my daughter Kate's art and her husband Tom's design. I think

we'll include the realtor story, and probably maybe one or two other stories. I've come to think of it as a kind of anti-electronic book. Something that there would no reason to sell electronically because the whole idea would be to have a beautiful object in your hands. I think books may need to become more beautiful as more words are backlit on an iPad or a Kindle. Jeff Bezos at Amazon would like to put bookstores out of business. He thinks of the book as obsolete, basically. We're going to find out in the next, probably, five, six, seven years, all of us—writers, readers—we're going to find out whether he's right.

M: *Are you thinking about starting a bookstore?*

RR: No. We already have two bookstores in Camden. We're bookstore rich, compared to most of America. I think it will be suicidal to lose bookstores. I think that the Internet is really good at selling very cheap things that people already know they want. In 1986, nobody knew that they wanted a Richard Russo novel because *Mohawk* was just being published then. Who the hell was Richard Russo anyway? Probably, nobody ever would have known that they wanted to read a Richard Russo novel if it hadn't been for really small independent bookstores handing customers the book.

M: *Like this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Paul Harding's *Tinkers*?*

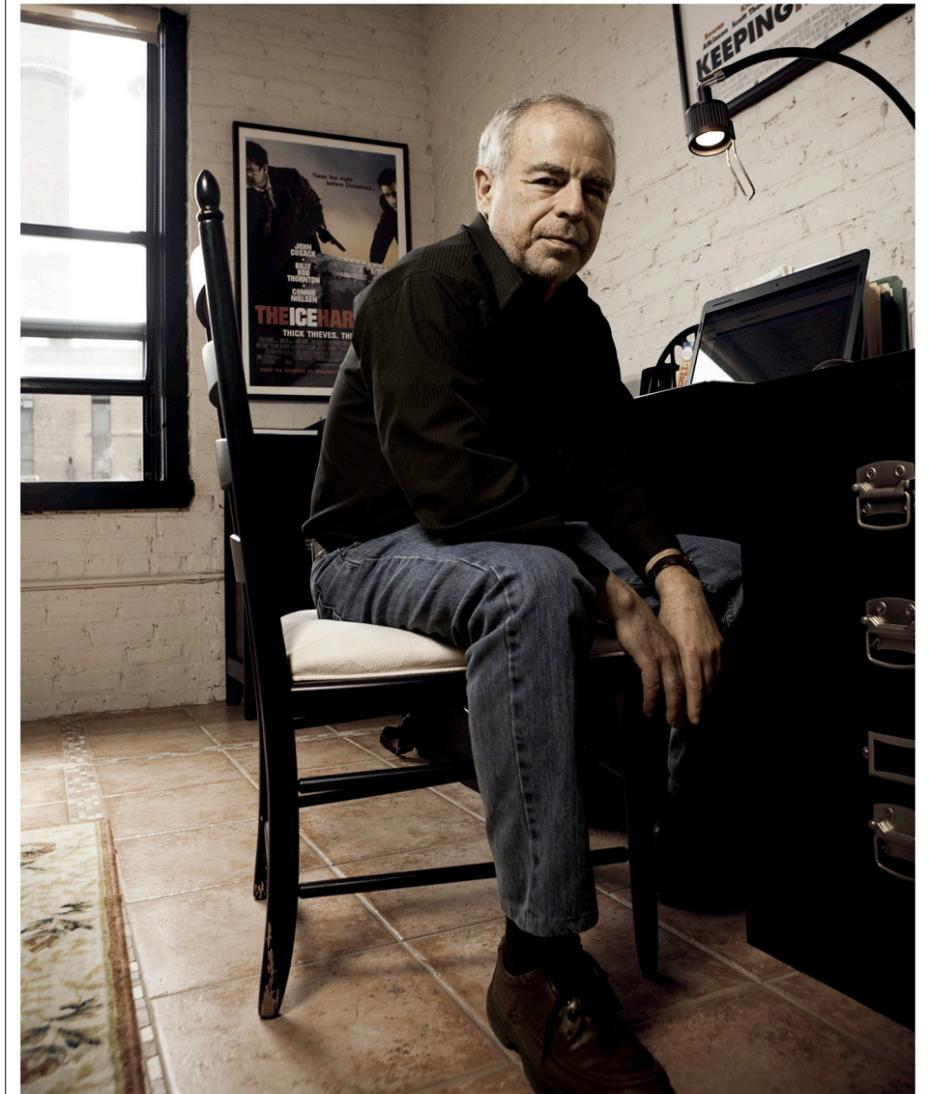
RR: Exactly. That was a small-press book sold by hand in small independent bookstores.

M: *The last 15 years of Pulitzers seems to have a disproportionate number of novels that are either set in Maine or written by authors who lived in Maine—Annie Proulx, Richard Ford, Michael Chabon, Elizabeth Strout...*

RR: There's a new license plate. It's not The Way Life Should Be, it's Come to Maine If You Want a Pulitzer.

M: *Do you think there's anything behind that? Or does the Pulitzer just favor small-town Americana?*

RR: Maine has long winters. There's really no



Richard Russo writes longhand in the morning, and puts words on disk in the afternoon.

reason not to fill up empty pages with words. I have long thought that what I like best about Maine is that it is essentially outside the culture. It's one of the few places in America. Whatever is going on in the country is going on in Maine. But, for some reason, you can almost feel it. You just cross the bridge from New Hampshire into Maine, and it does feel like some of the culture begins to fall away. I don't know how that can be, but I appreciate the fact that it does feel that way.

It's amazing how many people, when you're out and about in America, you'll hear people say, "You know, if it gets bad enough, we're

just going to sell everything and move to Maine." There is that sense, I don't know whether it's earned or not, I don't know whether it's just part of the air and the water. There's something about Maine that feels a little bit less like the rest of America.

M: *And that's what brings you here?*

RR: Yes. I love my country but the things that make me craziest about this baffling nation that we live in seem less in my face everyday in Maine than they do almost anywhere else I go. +