

eddies of hot political argument and wit, and, most of all, generating a deep understanding of hope, mature love and, there is no better word: character." RICHARD WALLACE

Washington Post

★★★★

"The plot's lack of momentum is exacerbated by the number of potentially exciting events that rise up but come to naught. ... Taken as a whole, *A Free Life* is a striking demonstration of the poetic success [Nan] craved." RON CHARLES

NY Times Book Review

★★★★

"Life, from day to day, seems hardly to alter, yet it shifts beyond recognition over the years — this is what fascinates Jin, apparently, and it's what the Zen-like composure of his prose and his conveyor-belt time-sense seek to demonstrate. This proved, the experimental apparatus keeps on operating, though, repeating the same results with dwindling verve and testing the inner Buddhist in Jin's audience in ways that some may find calming and others sedating." WALTER KIRN

San Diego Union-Tribune ★★

"Misjudged slang alternates with stiff formality to create a

prose style that seems to fumble toward profundity while slipping frequently into banality. Ha Jin may possess the insight and intelligence needed to extract the many themes his story contains, but he lacks the language, and that's hardly an inconsequential liability." SCOTT LEIBS

### CRITICAL SUMMARY

Since emigrating from China to America in the 1980s to study literature, Ha Jin has become one of the most celebrated voices in American literature. *A Free Life* is his first "American" book, a "Chekhovian portrait of life and its soothing dailiness" (Vikram Johri) that explores the meaning of a truly free life. Critics often comment on the author's lyricism and the fluidity of his prose (interestingly, one reviewer notes a connection between Jin and John Steinbeck, while another noted a deficiency in prose). Although rarely plot-driven, Jin's novels instead unfold slowly—like life itself. *A Free Life* offers the greatest reward to those who read with patience and in quiet contemplation, absorbing the author's passion for language. ■

# Richard Russo

## THE LATEST DISPATCH FROM UPSTATE NEW YORK.

BY JESSICA TEISCH

**R**ICHARD RUSSO SETS HIS LATEST NOVEL in Thomaston, New York, where the defunct tannery, once the lifeblood of the blue-collar town, has poisoned the river and its citizenry. Lou C. "Lucy" Lynch and his wife, Sarah, who inherited the family's convenience store and slowly moved up the social ladder, are preparing for a trip to Italy. Before leaving the region for the first time in his life, Lucy starts a memoir that divulges his needy boyhood and his relationship with his cynical mother and blindly optimistic father. He also writes of his and Sarah's dual obsession with Bobby Marconi, whose teenage anger led him away from Thomaston forever.

No novelist writes better about struggling (or dying) small-town and hardscrabble working-class life—and the difficulties of escaping that existence—than Russo. *Bridge of Sighs* (see our review on page 29), Russo's first novel since the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Empire Falls* (2001), once again asks universal questions about how family and class determine destiny and the degree to which people can change. Is choice only an illusion, or do we ever truly "stand before a hundred doors, choose to enter one, where we're faced with a hundred more and then choose again?" Russo asks

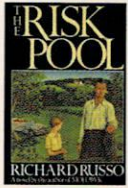
in *Bridge of Sighs*. Or might those doors close faster than we can walk through them?

The limits of opportunity and the weight of the American dream hang heavily over Russo's novels, which reflect his own upbringing. Russo was born in the working-class town of Johnstown, New York, and raised in Gloversville, once the center of American glove making. His father, a construction worker, left the family when Russo was young; tortured father-son relationships feature prominently in his fiction. Russo earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Arizona; during summers, he worked on construction and road crews. His first novel, *Mohawk* (1986), introduced readers to the author's central themes—blighted small towns in New York and New England and the effects on their inhabitants; the (im)possibility of change; luck and acceptance; community pride; and the ties of friendship and love. Since that first novel, Russo's characters—misfits, failures, angry youth, eccentrics, the unemployed, and the faded upper class, all of whom he conveys with deep compassion, humanity, and humor—have endeared themselves to a wide audience.

A retired Professor of English and American Literature at Colby College, Russo, who has two grown daughters, lives in Maine with his wife.

## ANOTHER BLUE-COLLAR TOWN

### The Risk Pool (1988)

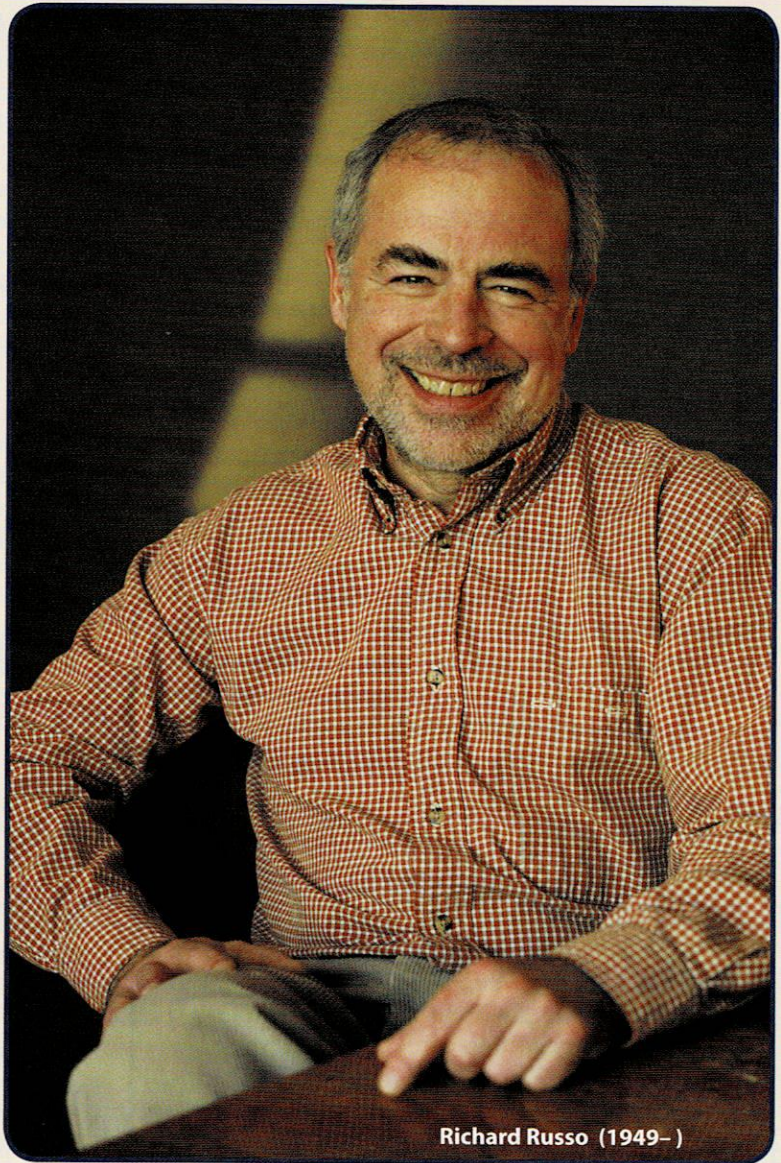


In his previous novel *Mohawk*, Russo introduced the blue-collar town of Mohawk in upstate New York; here, he continues the sad, hilarious, and outlandish saga of the decaying town. Written while his father was dying, the story is based on their relationship.

**THE STORY:** Ned Hall, “Sam’s son,” tries his best to grow up in the desperate, decaying town of Mohawk. When his mother has a nervous breakdown, Ned moves in with his father, a perpetual drifter, in dilapidated rooms above the department store. Soon, Ned starts to pick up his father’s bad habits, but he remains torn between both unstable parents.

**“This is a superbly original, maliciously funny book, peopled by characters that most of us would back away from plenty fast if they ever lurched toward our barstool. It is Mr. Russo’s brilliant, deadpan writing that gives their wasted lives and miserable little town such haunting power and insidious charm.”** JACK SULLIVAN, NEW YORK TIMES, 12/18/88

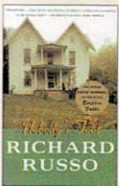
**THE MOVIE:** 2008, starring Tom Hanks, and directed by Lawrence Kasdan.



Richard Russo (1949–)

## THE BEST SELLER

### Nobody’s Fool (1993)



Mohawk was destined for oblivion; North Bath, New York, the setting of Russo’s third novel, is one small step up—barely. Russo demonstrates the same pathos for his characters’ lives, however, with his trademark mix of humor, compassion, and despair.

**THE STORY:** In 1984, 60-year-old Sully, a classic underachiever, finds himself divorced from his wife, seeing another man’s spouse, and crippled by a bad knee. To make matters worse, life in North Bath isn’t what it used to be. The town, a defunct mineral spa, abuts the prosperous resort area of Schuyler Springs but enjoys none of its benefits; Sully’s landlady’s banker son may soon evict him; his estranged son has problems of his own—and the specter of Sully’s abusive father follows him everywhere he goes.

**“Dialogue is what Mr. Russo does best, and the fun of this novel is in hearing these guys (and women) talk, giving one another a hard time—they’re funny, quick and inventive. ... Like his characters, Mr. Russo deals with interesting themes (he’d have to, in all these pages): change and stasis, free will and obligation, luck, responsibility, forgiveness—the bonds of community, friendship and family.”** FRANCINE PROSE, NEW YORK TIMES

BOOK REVIEW, 6/20/93

**“Russo’s pointillist technique makes his characters astonishingly real, and gradually the tiny events and details coalesce, build up in meaning and awaken in the reader a desire to climb into the page and ask for a beer. ... In *Nobody’s Fool* the random hand of chance is everything, and the best that can be hoped for in the end is a shift in luck.”** E. ANNIE PROULX,

CHICAGO TRIBUNE, 5/30/93

**THE MOVIE:** 1994, starring Paul Newman, Jessica Tandy, Bruce Willis, and Melanie Griffith, and directed by Robert Benton.

## THE ACADEMIC SATIRE

### Straight Man (1997)

Richard Russo



In this academic satire, Russo diverges from his tales of hardscrabble, blue-collar life. He nonetheless still creates all-too-human characters—hilarious, sympathetic, and pathetic all at once. **THE STORY:** The rebellious, once-promising William Henry (Hank) Devereaux, Jr., chairs the English department at a small, second-rank college in Pennsylvania, which harbors some of the biggest, ugliest wars ever seen in academia. In a single week, Hank alienates

### IN HIS OWN WORDS

"When I finish a novel it's hard to go back and try to reconstruct its beginnings. It's a little like an interrogation: what did you know and when did you know it? Here are a couple of things, though. When I was living in Waterville, Maine, some years ago, a factory closed down that had employed a large number of women who had been sewing famous-label men's dress shirts for much of their lives. They'd done everything they could to save their jobs and the factory, but the multi-national company that owned it shut them down anyway. That struck me as a story that was playing out all over the country, if not the world. From the beginning of my writing career, I've always been interested in ordinary people swept up in economic and political forces they can't begin to comprehend, as well as in the changing face of American labor. ... I think the place you grow up in is a lot like 'The Hotel California': you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave. We'll never know any place better than the place we grew up, and no place, I suspect, will ever be more important to us, at least in terms of our imaginative lives. For that reason there's something tragic in the understanding that many kids from small towns have—that in order to be a success in life, they'll have to leave; to remain behind would be an admission of failure. For many, it means leaving their heart's home. Then again, there's a long American tradition, embodied in the novels of Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis and others, which suggests that leaving a small town may be about the best thing that can happen to any young person."

(New York State Writers Institute, 9/25/02)

a colleague and considers the allure of another, imagines his wife's affair, threatens to kill a campus duck on TV, and is jailed and hospitalized. Then, of course, there's his ailing, philandering father and his own midlife crisis to consider.

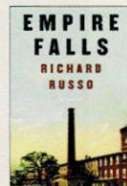
**"What makes *Straight Man* grandly universal is Russo's ability to convey how despair and resignation bubble up as people drift into middle age. What drives Hank and some of his colleagues out of their well-educated gourds is the realization that the lives they are currently leading are, indeed, the only lives they're going to get. It's that simple."** DEIDRE DONAHUE, USA

TODAY, 7/3/97

**"[Hank's] creator knows inside out the gifts and challenges of social realism, of deep truths posing as one-liners, and he casts those lessons within the humble guise of an eminently flawed and witty man."** GAIL CALDWELL, BOSTON GLOBE, 7/13/97

## THE PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

### Empire Falls (2001)



"The history of American literature may show that Richard Russo wrote the last great novel of the 20th century," noted *The Christian Science Monitor* about *Empire Falls*. A quintessential American novel, it uses a cross section of society to paint a panoramic view of small-town life in an economically depressed former mill town in Maine, which could stand in for many such towns in the United States.

**THE STORY:** Miles Roby, manager of the Empire Grill, once saw beyond his blue-collar life, but circumstance dictated his return to Empire Falls. Now trapped, he must deal with his meddling father, his troubled brother, a member of the town's fading ruling family, his soon-to-be-ex-wife, and their adolescent daughter, Tick, who he hopes will one day escape from Empire Falls. Like everyone else, Miles once had dreams of his own, but they always clashed with his obligations and his family's history.

**"Clear writing, a sharp eye for life's accidental absurdities and sympathy for universal dilemmas are Russo's raw ingredients. ... This genetic secret is essential to the dynamics of present-day Empire Falls, but it also introduces the new Russo reader to the qualities that make his books such a good read—the keen wit and subtle humor applied to conflicts that cross the boundaries of race and class, issues that hit the moral and ethical core of his characters and, thus, readers."** ROBIN VIDIMOS,

DENVER POST, 5/27/01

**"To create a world with such a rich history and such real characters needs an incredibly large scope for a novel, but Russo expertly manages it, showing how the sins of the parents are visited upon the children who hope for a better**

future but are limited by their surroundings." GAVIN QUINN, CHICAGO

SUN-TIMES, 5/27/01

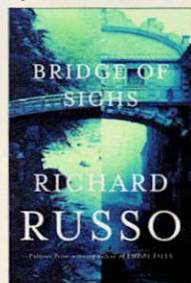
**THE MOVIE:** 2005, TV, starring Ed Harris, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and Helen Hunt, and directed by Fred Schepisi.

## HIS LATEST WORK



### Bridge of Sighs

By Richard Russo



When he was a child in the ailing industrial upstate New York town of Thomaston, Lou "Lucy" Lynch befriended Sarah, his future wife, and the aloof Bobby Marconi. He also joined his family's struggles to make their decrepit convenience store profitable. Now 60, planning a trip to Venice with Sarah, and finally living in the wealthier part of

town, Lucy reflects on the childhood events and relationships that defined his adult life: a trauma that left him with mysterious spells; the town's vicious racial tensions; his blindly optimistic father and shrewd mother; his adoration of the seductive Bobby, who escaped Thomaston to become a famous expatriate painter—and the love triangle that could have destroyed them all.

Knopf. 528 pages. \$26.95. ISBN: 0375414959

Boston Globe



"That Russo manages to juggle so many characters, themes, places, and time periods through 528 delicious pages is an astounding achievement. From its lovely beginning to its exquisite, perfect end, Russo has written a masterpiece."

MAMEVE MEDWED

USA Today



"It's his most ambitious and best work. ... Russo does wonders with small men with small dreams. *Bridge of Sighs* is dramatic in a small town kind of way, which is a big part of its beauty."

BOB MINZESHEIMER

Miami Herald



"[Russo] doesn't do nostalgia as a commodity, and he doesn't do bittersweet as a literary device. ... Russo here is doing what he does best, putting a microscope over what looks like vacant territory and showing us the abundant life beneath the surface." BETSY WILLEFORD

San Diego Union-Tribune



"The author masterfully reconciles and interweaves local color and social mobility with pertinent characterization as he plays a little temporal leapfrog throughout. ... Shall we draw

any lessons from the actual Bridge of Sighs that led to the old prisons and that was regarded—at least legendarily—as the last view of scenic Venice (New England) that convicts saw before their imprisonment?" GORDON HAUPTFLEISCH

Christian Science Monitor



"Sarah is treated to a late-breaking plotline that seems a little contrived (as, frankly, does the idea of Lucy writing a memoir), but overall, the novel shifts sure-footedly between the three main characters, tracing the patterns between generations of three families stuck in a literally poisonous town. ... And nobody does upstate New York—with its financial hardship, despair, and several feet of snow—better than Russo." YVONNE

ZIPP

Washington Post



"Richard Russo was already the patron saint of small-town fiction, but with his new novel, *Bridge of Sighs* ... he's produced his most American story. ... This is not a particularly dramatic story—a racially charged high-school beating provides the only real fireworks—but Russo's sensitivity to the currents of friendship and family life, the conflicts, anxieties and irritations that mingle with affection and loyalty, make *Bridge of Sighs* a continual flow of little revelations." RON CHARLES

New York Times



"So much of *Bridge of Sighs* concerns itself with oddball details, from petty rivalries between the Lynch and Marconi families to the Lynch in-house dispute about how to run a convenience store. ... But in the midst of these small matters, the big contours of *Bridge of Sighs* emerge." JANET MASLIN

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



"What [Russo] really wants to pull, I believe, is to write an earnest, charming cautionary tale on the importance of loyalty and perseverance in an atmosphere of trust and forgiveness. What he misses is humanity's power to rise above the ordinary, the quality of transcendence that has lifted wiser novelists to greater heights than *Bridge of Sighs*." BOB HOOVER

### CRITICAL SUMMARY

In his first novel since the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Empire Falls* (2001), Richard Russo again explores Main Street, USA, in a bittersweet, multilayered tale about fate, social mobility, humanity, and the limits of choice and self-invention. This time, he casts his compassionate (but never condescending) eye on three families, interweaving Lucy's, Bobby's, and Sarah's stories over 50 years. The Lynch-Marconi rivalry, race relations, high school classes, and the running of the store engaged most critics, though some noted redundancy, a misplaced note of social conscience, and the awkward juxtaposition of Lucy's and Bobby's lives. In the end, however, *Bridge* fulfills its creator's greatest literary gift: teasing out the intricacies of life in small-town America. ■