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Essays When I am Dead

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### Idyllic Russo

Pure contentment arrived one winter evening as I walked down Fifth Ave looking across a snow covered Central Park circa 2005. It hadn't been easy getting there. All summer and late into the fall I worked hard to earn the time for this vacation. Setting aside money with every pay check and enduring long days and late nights as a city police detective working criminal investigations in a small beach resort town in California. By early November, I had collectively solved, closed, or diverted all my cases so I could go on furlough without distraction. And I planned to make the best of it. I wanted to see every iconic Manhattan attraction from the Statue of Liberty to Columbus Square all the way up to the Apollo in Harlem, even if it meant looking like a clichéd west coast tourist visiting the big city for the first time. Which I was. And so, walking down Fifth Ave. having just left the Museum of Modern Art and heading for a romantic dinner at the Sea Fire Cafe, my wife of seven years took my hand, looked deep into my eyes, and whispered, "I love you. I'm having a wonderful time." My heart swelled with joy. I felt content.

Idyllic. Almost Capra-esque. Perfect. I recognized the moment for what it was, letting it fill me as I tried to memorize each and every detail. The look of it. The feeling of it all. And just as I did, the moment passed. It was too pure. Which was when I understood what joy and sadness felt like put together. Bittersweet, I believe it's called.

Because I knew, as wonderful as that moment was, ephemeral and sublime, it only had but a short life to live its purity before sadness took me back down to acceptable heights of reality.

When I read Richard Russo novels, I feel the same way. Joyful as I read with a touch of melancholy as the end of the story arrives to bring me back to reality. Not because of the story's ending, but because *the* story has ended. My time reading coming to a close. Russo affects me that way. He tends to be a balm for men of a certain age, which, as far as I'm concerned, is one of the greatest compliments you can pay any author concerning his or her work. Russo novels are a pleasant affairs even when they're not.

Beginning with *Mohawk* in 1986, Richard Russo has written a memoir, two short story collections, and nine novels - with a tenth, *Somebody's Fool*, set to be released in July 2023. His career highlights include winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2002 for *Empire Falls* (2001), publishing a three-set short story collection and novella with his artist daughter, *Intervention* (2012), and living to see two of his best works, *Nobody's Fool* and *Empire Falls*, receive respectful cinematic adaption with Paul Newman, Ed Harris, and Jessica Tandy bringing his words to the screen. The man is, as they say, no slouch in the writing department.

If you have read Russo, you know. His stock and trade is nostalgic manna, but only as a thematic device allowing him to delve into deeper truths. Looking back to a perceived simpler time and place when people were small town happier so the reader can live vicariously against harsher truths. Which is nothing new in literary threads. Both Chaucer and Homer channeled nostalgia. As did Dickens and Twain in spades. Along with Wharton and Bradbury where nostalgia was generally used to heighten the impact of their more serious plots – precocious orphans, vulnerable damsels, and intrepid heroes all confronted by the evils of thuggery, thievery, and the evil mirthlessness of being stuck in the unjust circumstances of their times.

Russo uses nostalgic themes as well, but in slightly different focus. There is no danger beneath his projection other than the danger we present to ourselves. The harsher truths we try to protect and avoid within ourselves living each and every blue collar, eastern seaboard, slice of life tale he tells. That message being modern living is difficult and we, sadly, tend to be the evil which brings folly and harm to our own existence. We are the fools who strive for idyllic moments of brief contentment rather than inhabit the realistic joy and sadness that makes daily life so wonderfully, bittersweetly worth living. If anything, Russo has successfully captured “us” on the page in all our myriad of foolishly subtle ways by reflecting us back at ourselves. A subtle technique to hide truth in nostalgia, but powerfully life affirming in the right writer’s hand.

Which isn’t to say Russo is the perfect writer. He isn’t. If I had any one bone to pick, it would be how often he returns to the thematic device of affable “middle aged white guy” befuddled over the somewhat inconsequential man he has aged into when his memories recall the boy full of potential he once was. A shtick that has worn thin over the years. Or maybe I have grown older and don’t find the relevance I once did with such characters.

Taken as a whole though, at heart, Russo’s novels grant us the insights of being middle class men and women seeking moments of contentment. I am now fifty-four and understand much better his intentions and actions. To achieve contentment, we must carry the responsibilities of our life choices, losing ourselves not to those moments of idyllic, but to the bittersweet mundanity of our daily, idiosyncratic lives. And sometimes read a Richard Russo novel or two in the process.

Richard Russo novels rarely disappoint. When they work, you get the wonderful *Nobody’s Fool* (1993) and *Empire Falls* (2001) to lighten your day and make straight your paths. When they don’t, you still get the droll enjoyment behind *Everybody’s Fool* (2016) and *Nate in Venice* (2013).

But I do not know if Russo will stand the test of authorial time. Or be remembered beyond this current generation of fans. He is not unlike Irwin Shaw or Herman Wouk in this way. His work fades, as theirs have. Not from the lack of power in narrative, or relevance, but because the reading landscape has changed. Reading has diminished as have literary standards. Well beyond significance thanks to the proliferation of social media and portable, streaming internet devices of leisure. Once reading was a center stone of life - for education, importance, and entertainment. Now we watch 30 second content videos of people protesting the inanity of their existence and feel...what? Writing, to this latest generation, has become an irrelevant tool only helpful if it is packaged in easily assimilated, self-help bites of information.

Which isn't to say all aspects of literature will completely vanish. Russo, like his fellow Pulitzer Prize for Fiction brothers and sisters, will have his Pulitzer Prize winning novel recorded for posterity. But when was the last time you read anything by Shirley Ann Grau who won the Pulitzer for *The Keepers of the House* in 1965? Or William Kennedy for *Ironweed* in 1984? To stand the test of time, a novel has to be controversial, or at least the author does, and grind out their novelistic longevity through the required reading pantheon of national education. Something the more respectful authors of fiction's veritable institutions aren't likely to do.

We are at a time when literature is either diminished, as Aldous Huxley suggested would happen in *Brave New World*, or outright cancelled like George Orwell's prescient *1984*.

Still, if you want to read the best of Richard Russo, the one novel that encapsulates and defines his style and contains the most satisfying ratio of narrative to interest to likability, then hands down you should look to *Empire Falls*. Or if you ever wondered what Charles Bukowski, Atticus Finch, and Ernest Hemingway might be like if mixed together and left to live on the eastern seaboard, then *Nobody's Fool* is the book for you.

Or tap into your inner lost child with *Bridge of Sighs*. Or the ridiculousness of academia in *Straight Man*. You can't go wrong. Each reading moment is sure to be idyll. With a touch of the bittersweet underneath.

For me, reading Richard Russo novels will remain a bittersweet experience I have learned to embrace as part of life calling on me to appreciate the moment. Even when reading brings about the source our source of pain at the end.

My recommendation? If you can't go on vacation to Manhattan, then pick up a Richard Russo book, head over to the OTB to play the numbers, and drop by the local brewpub for a beer. The moment is sure to be happily bittersweet.

The End.