



# That old magic

August 21, 2009

## Pulitzer prize winning author shares his in Madison

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

**WHAT'S THE HIGHEST COMPLIMENT** a reader can pay to a writer who's already won a Pulitzer Prize? According to "Empire Falls" author Richard Russo: when he's asked what one of his characters is up to.

"It's like an old friend they've fallen out of touch with," he told the audience of 200 at Madison's Scranton Library on a Monday evening, Aug. 10.

As Roxanne Coady, owner of R.J. Julia Booksellers put it to the crowd of 200, Russo has a gift for creating characters you care about, despite or because of their flaws. Take Jack Griffin, a screenwriter turned professor in "That Old Cape Magic," Russo's latest novel. At 57, he's gliding across the Sagamore Bridge, heading for the Cape Cod wedding of his daughter's friend, with the top of his convertible down. A devoted husband and adoring father, with tenure at a prestigious Connecticut liberal arts college, he's also succeeded, it seems, in leading a life in direct opposition to the amoral, self-destructive example set by his parents.

Well, not quite. There's a restlessness burrowing deep inside Griffin: he longs to

abandon his secure job and return to the less settled terrain of writing screenplays in Los Angeles; he's faced with the impending loss of his daughter to marriage and his own thirty-year union is suddenly buckling under the weight of his own discontent; he can't bring himself to dispose of an urn of his father's ashes that's been sitting in the trunk of his car for a year; and his mother is haunting him with constant cell-phone calls from her assisted-living facility.

The amiable, twinkly-eyed Russo, renowned for his ability to leaven weighty subjects with comic quips in his six previous novels, seemed to delight in the cast of characters to which he introduced the packed house. Griffin's parents, for example, a pair of self-involved, bickering English professors, were Ivy League snobs exiled to a huge state college in Indiana which they referred to in "a phrase they didn't say so much as spit." His mother's acid view of the college, summed up in her retirement speech: "ours is a distinctly second-rate institution, as are the vast majority of our students, as are we." To make their circumstances more palatable, they cheated on each other, his father being "a genuine serial adulterer, whereas his mother simply refused to lag behind."

What's the highest compliment a reader can pay to a writer who's already won a Pulitzer Prize? According to "Empire Falls" author Richard Russo: when he's asked what one of his characters is up to. He talked about his latest book "That Old Cape Magic" before a packed house at the Scranton Library in Madison last week.

The novel's title alludes to the torch song "That Old Black Magic." Each summer, with young Griffin largely forgotten in the back seat, his parents sang their own version of the torch song as they themselves crossed the Sagamore Bridge on the way to a summer rental, dreaming of a "finer future only they could see." Having studied the Cape Cod real-estate guide "as intently as each year's Modern Language Association job listings," they divided their options into two disqualifying groups: "Can't Afford It" and "Wouldn't Have It As A Gift." Once there, they collectively scorned less enlightened mortals—of his best friend's mom and dad, his mother sniffed, "they teach junior high"—while violating the sacred Western canon by indulging their baser instincts with thrillers and "other forms of literary pornography."

Lest anyone be fooled by the pastel colors and jaunty seaside cover art on its dust jacket, "That Old Cape Magic" may deliver as an entertaining summery read, but it's not one that needs to be hidden, as was the case with Griffin's parents on their daily beach outings, inside a newspaper.

While less sprawling and ambitious than his earlier works – Russo confessed to having been exhausted by the six years he poured into his 2007 "Bridge of Sighs" – the book nonetheless offers an intriguing meditation on the grip that parents can hold on us well beyond childhood. Griffin has concentrated so intently on not becoming his mother and father that he can't see how thoroughly he's picked up their pet phrases, their pretentious attitudes, even their congenital unhappiness. "You can put a couple thousand miles between yourself and your parents," Griffin says, "and make clear to them that in doing so you mean to reject their values, but how do you distance yourself from your own inheritance?"

See MAGIC, Page 8

# Magic: Pulitzer prize-winning novelist in Madison

From page 13

Russo, 60, grew up "with very little money" in upstate New York among a large, close-knit extended family. Gloversville was a company town. Everyone worked in the leather industry and everyone, at one time or another, got laid off for four or five months a year. His grandmother, he recalled, stored canned peas and canned corn just to make it through the long winters. She, along with his parents, "were of the generation where if you were lucky enough to get a job with one of those companies, you pretty much stayed where you were for certainly the rest of your working life," Russo said. Reflecting his upbringing, his Rust-Belt family sagas, including

the 2002 Pulitzer-Prize winning "Empire Falls," as well as "Bridge of Sighs," are firmly rooted in a sense of place: struggling blue-collar towns where the past seems a lot better than the present or future.

"That Old Cape Magic," he allowed, is a bit of a departure. There are none of the perils of coping without the safety net of financial security. And that's no coincidence. According to Russo, the current American notion of freedom is the opportunity to aim for a better job in a better place.

It's the unattainability of that "finer place," where happiness is a destination never reached,

that is a larger theme of "That Old Cape Magic." For Griffin's parents, two academics, the dream of a job at a top-notch university in the Northeast and their own house on the Cape was forever just beyond the horizon. One of their dubious genetic gifts to Griffin is a sense that there's something better, just not where you're actually standing.

For Russo's loyal readership, the affliction is quite the opposite. "You just don't want to say good-bye to his characters," said Laurel Billings of Guilford, who taught English for forty years at Wilbur Cross High School. "You feel a real loss at the end of every Russo book."