

‘No one listens to writers in America. Not anymore’

One of the greatest living writers talks Trump, the state of America and about his latest work, ‘Between Them’ – a profound memoir about his parents



Eileen Battersby

Looking back, perhaps it was gormless, turning up to interview US writer Richard Ford with a bag of his books, all his books; everything. They made an impressive stack on the table causing him to have some fun, criticising the covers. “Now, isn’t that just the most awful jacket you ever saw? I can’t understand what made them do that to that book; my, my,” or words to that effect, including “that one looks really horrible, what were they thinking?”

Ford is welcoming and seems to be in a great good mood, amused to greet his creations like so many members of a team. His pale blue eyes are bright and direct; he rarely blinks and peers at the world with interest, not wariness.

He is relaxed and happy on the publication of a beautiful, very profound work, *Between Them*, his smallest book yet. It comprises two memoirs, one of each parent, Parker Ford and Edna Akin.

It was a book he wanted to write, and while the prose has his singular languid ease, humanity and wry humour, there is also a poignancy and pathos. By writing about his parents, he has immortalised two people whose lives otherwise would have gone unnoticed “like most people” and he has also provided an extraordinary insight into the making of one of the world’s finest living writers.

Throughout his life, Ford has remained a son. “I was an only child,” he says and he never became a parent. His sense of being a son is unusually powerful; comparable to the way Irish writer John McGahern believed he had lived his life as his mother’s child.

It doesn’t seem all that long ago, 2012, since Ford, with his customary wilfulness went and wrote a great American novel, one of the several he has written, and called it *Canada*. It too features parents, “not mine”, he says, and the couple – who get involved in a doomed bank robbery – are clearly invented, if with borrowed elements of Parker and Enid.

hood has been all encompassing. “I liked being a child; I liked being a son, their son.”

If there is a key to the complex personality of Richard Ford it is *Between Them*; in it he makes clear that his parents loved each other and enjoyed their married life together on the road as Parker Ford covered his territories as a starch salesman, his wife travelling with him. They stayed at hotels, ate in restaurants and for a while after Ford was born, their routine continued.

But then Edna stayed behind at base camp with the baby when Parker set off each Monday morning to return on Friday evenings. He sees himself as having come “between them”.

State of shock

His father’s death at 55 from a second heart attack, dying in the 16-year-old Ford’s arms, left his mother, then 50, in a state of shock which lasted until her death 21 years later.

Ford learned early in life to watch adult faces, interpret reactions. Being an only child made him an observer, curious about people and their actions as well as the politics of relationships. It also helped him become a great writer.

The section of *Between Them* about his father is particularly affecting. “He died such a long time ago. I have his things; neckties, shirts, cuff links.” In the memoir Ford writes: “He would not have thought that 70 years later I cannot remember the sound of his voice, but long to.”

Ford’s expression softens and he says: “I do remember his smell.” He says he still has his father’s shaving kit; he repeats: “I have these things” and seems almost vulnerable, not something one would associate with such a strong, capable presence.

Another thing which has always mattered to him almost as much as being a son is being American, an identity which is currently in crisis – although he admits that at least he can get an Irish passport. “I have a grandmother from County Cavan, so I’m okay but Kristina [his wife] is against this.”

He must be weary of being questioned about Donald Trump and the current White House administration? “I try not to encourage it,” he says ironically and laughs loudly. “It is difficult to say something smart about a stupid man” and agrees that whereas Frank Bascombe – his by-now immortal Everyman commentator first encountered in *The Sportswriter* (1986) – eventually got caught up in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, a natural disaster, last year’s US presidential election was a man-made one.

It was also one which Ford saw coming. There is nothing righteous in the way he agrees that his fiction has been proved strangely prophetic.

On a more practical level he admits to having stopped speaking to people he previously knew – “and thought they were sane” – on discovering they had voted for Trump.



I am calm. Oh, I do have this compulsive obsessive disorder thing and can become very fixed about matters, simply won’t let them go... but I am less angry and I was angry; very, very angry. I’m old

He even challenged a startled acquaintance about a Trump bumper sticker.

Ford is forthright, not a person to rile. He recently denounced the notion of friendship in a brilliant piece for the *Guardian*. It was funny and – as only Ford can be – scathing with grace. His temper is slow furious but nowadays he seems calmer.

“I am calm. Oh, I do have this compulsive obsessive disorder thing and can become very fixed about matters, simply won’t let them go... but I am less angry and I was angry; very, very angry. I’m old” – he turned 73 in February – “married 50 years, imagine that... I’m finding out old is not bad, it’s good. I sleep better. I’m happier.”

Do not be fooled Richard Ford is sharp, quick, candid, devastating good company and an exponent of an intriguing variety of benign menace.

Most of all, it appears effortless, Ford makes it look easy.

“Well I’d be lying if I claimed anything I did is hard,” he says, in the way Frank Bascombe might choose to claim sports writing is easy and anyone should try it. If there is a defining quality about Ford’s work it is its natural fluency. Don DeLillo, another great and serious American writer, writes serious and important novels, but there is no doubt about the effort they require. DeLillo labours, Ford does not.

Opinionated & playful

In writing about ordinary American life, often through the ironic observations and personal experiences of his Everyman, Frank Bascombe, the opinionated, playful, teasing Ford has articulated the voice of contemporary America; funny, angry and uneasy – somewhat bewildered and increasingly tinged with remorse.

As long ago as his masterful third novel *The Sportswriter*, the book which established Ford internationally, he knew his country was changing for the worse. The old folks optimism had died. Bascombe suspects that his next-door neighbours, an elderly couple named Deffeyes, hold peculiar views. An early-morning encounter

with the old lady, Delia, hears her informing Frank: “Caspar and I think that the States should build a wall all along the Mexican frontier, as large as the Great Wall, and man it with armed men, and make it clear to those countries that we have problems of our own up here.”

Chilling indeed. Ford possesses a jaunty intelligence which is instinctive and also slightly intimidating, almost uncanny.

Born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1944, Ford does not lack regional labels and as if to deflect being viewed a Southern writer, he has throughout his life moved about the US with an efficiency few fugitives from the law could achieve.

He knows his country, and while he may seem slightly less Southern to me than he did when I first met him in London in 1986, all it took was for a man to approach us in the lobby of the Dublin hotel in which we were sitting the other day, for his daunting reserves of Southern courtliness to come into action.

Serious reading

Drawn by the pile of books, the man looked at us and ventured we were about to engage in “some serious reading”. He recommended visiting the Library Hotel in Manhattan. “I love hotels,” beamed Ford. “I grew up in a 600-room one in Little Rock, Arkansas.” The full force of Ford’s Southern charm was unleashed on the newcomer and the friendly exchange continued. In the spirit of spoilsportsmanship, I intervened, pointing out that the Southern gentleman in our midst “wrote the books”. The man paused and said in a tone of discovery, gazing at the books: “So you’re Richard Ford.” Ford smiled and promised to check out the Library Hotel when he is next in New York.

More seriously though, Ford accepts that his books have been chronicling America’s recent history and admits to having been very aware of the evolving peculiar mentality which enabled Trump’s rise to election victory. It is not a good time to be an American. “No one listens to writers in America,” he says, “not anymore.”

He agrees with my observation that had Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal still been alive, Trump would never have survived as a Republican candidate, never mind got elected. “But now it is different,” says Ford. “In America I have never been asked for my views yet I write political comment pieces for the *Guardian*.” He names about a dozen major European newspapers for which he writes regularly.

Glancing at the pile of books it comes as a surprise to see exactly how much he has written. In addition to the eight novels, which also include *Independence Day* (1995), which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award; and *The Lay of the Land* (2006), there have also been four short story collections, including the classic *Rock Springs* (1987); *Women With*

Men: Three Stories (1997) and *A Multitude of Sins* (2002), and the four interlinking narratives of *Let me be Frank with You* (2014) – a book which now reads as openly prophetic.

He also edited the *Granta Book of the American Short Story* in 1992, “and did not include myself” but certainly did make sure that Peter Taylor’s brilliant *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* featured in it. “That story made me want to write, I love Peter Taylor’s work. A wonderful writer.”

At the mention of Taylor’s novel *A Summons to Memphis*, he merely sighs with pleasure. He has other favourite writers: Eudora Welty and John Cheever, to whom his wonderful homage, *Reunion*, is dedicated. Ford edited a further selection in 2007, by which time he had also edited the *Granta Book of the American Long Story*. His writings on the short story form are insightful and based on his intensive reading.

Few writers are better placed to comment on the American short story than he is and he went even further to assisting readers when he edited *The Essential Tales of Chekhov* in 1999. “It meant I could read all of the stories, about stories, about how to read.”

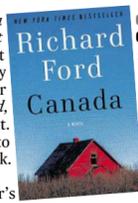
“I am a reader,” he says. “It took me a long time to even admit I was a writer. The first time I did that was at the airport when I was on my way to England for the publication of *The Sportswriter*.” He describes being faced with a form which had a black space beside the word “occupation”. “And I looked at it, wondering what I should write?”

In a world going crazy, he has kept his humour and his blunt responses, pleased to admit to his obsessions. Love is his fundamental concern, small wonder he can laugh about the rituals of friendship. He writes about divorce because it is an alien experience he would fear. “Now I’m thinking about writing another Bascombe book” and gleefully plans on giving Paul, Frank’s son, a horrible disease.

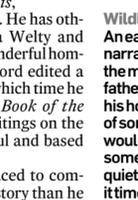
By commemorating his parents Richard Ford had placed his life and possibly his art in context. “I love teaching, you know, I love it. I don’t teach writing, I teach literature. I don’t set out to make writers; I make readers.”

Richard Ford, *The Wire* creator David Simon and *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O’Toole will discuss current US politics at the Borris House Festival of Writing Ideas on Saturday, June 10th. festivalofwritingandideas.com

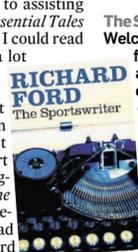
Essential Ford Key works



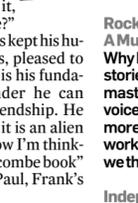
Canada (2012)
Only a writer with as sure-footed a sense of irony as Ford would write a great American novel and call it Canada. But then, why not. The narrator looks back 50 years to the time his parents planned a bank robbery and then in old age he meets the sister who had left home years earlier only to reappear old and ill and clearly doomed.



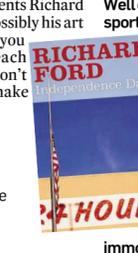
Wildlife (1990)
An earlier version of the familiar Ford narrator son recalls a defining moment in the marriage of his parents, when his father, a failed golf pro and a dreamer, pins his hopes on the oil boom, or even a hope of something, anything, “a chance that would lead him and my mother and me to something better.” Wry, poignant and quietly magnificent; read it once and read it time and again.



The Sportswriter (1986)
Welcome to Frank Bascombe, bereaved father and divorced husband, who ambles into your life and may well change your views on fiction. Ford’s conversational self-discovery is brilliantly enabled by the rhythmic ease of a narrative which articulates male longing, the need to belong and most of all, the importance of relationships – Frank Bascombe, observant, witty and trying to survive, is not tensed jaw loner with an interest in metaphysics.



Independence Day (1995)
Well old Frank Bascombe has given up sports writing and is now selling real estate. His humour is becoming sharper, as is his disillusionment. But it is the 4th of July and he is setting off with his scruffy, monosyllabic now teenaged, surviving son Paul to visit the Baseball Hall of Fame... what could possibly go wrong as a father attempts to bond with a brick wall of a son. Rich in masterful set pieces, it won Ford the Pulitzer Prize and literary immortality – and rightly so.



A Multitude of Sins (2001)
Why have one superlative collection of stories when you can have two? Ford, a master of the American short story, is the voice of his beleaguered homeland, now more than ever with the US in crisis. His work preserves vital links to the America we thought we knew.

■ “It is difficult to say something smart about a stupid man,” says US author Richard Ford of President Donald Trump.
PHOTOGRAPH: BRENDA FITZSIMONS