

Richard Ford

He never intended to be a writer, yet the Pulitzer prize-winning author is considered one of the American greats, ranked with William Faulkner and Raymond Carver. With his seventh novel now published, he explains how he ended up 'doing this'

Interviewed by Ariel Leve

Novelist



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efore my trip to Mississippi, there was a phone call. Richard Ford is a man from the South, but whose Southern roots do not define him. We spoke for a while. His voice had a friendly, uncommon kindness. At the end of the call he offered to pick me up at the airport in Memphis, an hour-and-a-half drive from Oxford. “Well, if you’re going to come all the way down here,” he said, “it’s the least I can do.”

Something was wrong. Except nothing was wrong. Rejecting the label of “Southern writer” does not mean disowning the traits that come from being a Southerner. Namely, good manners.

My flight arrived an hour late. His red Volvo SUV with the Maine licence plates pulled up and Ford, dressed in faded jeans, a blue T-shirt and sunglasses, stepped out exuding the easygoing swagger of someone used to hunting, fishing and open roads. “Welcome to the South!” he said, lifting my bag into the backseat.

In photos, Richard Ford, who is 68, has an intense stare that makes him seem remote, but in person his manner is gentle and he has a taciturn charm. One of his most salient features is that he pays attention. He has pale blue eyes and his gaze is direct. When he’s not speaking, he doesn’t appear to be waiting until it’s his chance to speak again. He’s a man who enjoys listening.

With the airport quickly fading in the rear-view mirror, he points out that as a young boy, after his father got sick, his mother would put him on a plane alone to spend time with his grandparents in Little Rock, Arkansas. Ford was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1944 and, in 1952, his father had his first heart attack. “I don’t remember it very well. I remember him in the Baptist hospital lying under an oxygen tank. It seemed very dramatic.”

He grew up, he recalls, in a trusting environment. The only child adored by both parents. “My mother was 35 and my father was 40. They were Irish and they didn’t think they were going to be able to have children. When they had me, they were astonished – and thrilled.”

Being an only child shaped his sensibility: there is an aloneness that characterises so much of Ford’s

work; an examination of the interior landscape of people’s lives. The sense of place also plays a big role – the effect it has, the nuance of how it marks us.

Ford never intended to be a writer, yet he is considered one of the great American novelists; comparisons have been drawn to John Updike, Walker Percy, William Faulkner and Raymond Carver, who became Ford’s close friend.

He has written seven novels, three short story collections and numerous non-fiction essays. *The Sportswriter*, published in 1986 – the first of the “New Jersey books” – introduced readers to Frank Bascombe, the novelist-turned-sportswriter-turned-realtor, who would populate two more novels including *Independence Day*, for which Ford was awarded both the Pulitzer prize and the Pen/Faulkner Award, and then, completing the trilogy, 2006’s *The Lay of the Land*.

Driving along, we cross the Tennessee border into Mississippi. It is a line on the highway, a sign on the side of the road, the landscape is identical, but it feels significant. In his latest novel, *Canada*, Ford captures this subtle transition; a feeling that something new can happen in a different place. “The ways in which things are superficially similar but also distinct is interesting to me,” he says.

Ford believes these distinctions matter. In the book, a 15-year-old boy is abandoned, left on his own to cross literal and figurative boundaries.

“I’m drawing from a sense that the lives of 15- or 16-year-old kids, as stable as they may be, are extremely fragile. They are not very well equipped for huge disruption and yet often, they have to confront it. And often, they have to figure it out.”

Figuring it out is what counts. Ford’s father was a travelling salesman and had a second heart attack in 1960, when Ford was 16. In his work, as in his life, it’s the importance of the effects that come from tectonic events, rather than the events themselves. Ford and his father were very close. The morning he died, Ford woke up and heard him gasping, taking deep breaths. “My father died in



Ford with Raymond Carver (left), in 1987. Ford was “shattered” by Carver’s death the following year

my arms.” He looks straight ahead down the road. It is a statement heavy with consequences. “That’s tumult. That’s everything exploding.”

Loss may be the underlying reservoir from which one draws other dramas, but Ford says he writes about subjects he thinks are worth writing about in what he considers a compensatory way. “Life and work are on the same set of rails. One provokes the other.”

Often, when he is talking he’ll refer to the collective “we” and admits he is not inclined to talk about himself because he was raised to think it was rude. He prefers talking about politics, sports or literature that someone else wrote. When he was young, before his father died, he went through the whole gamut of mental problems.

Such as? “I had a Tourette’s period. And obsessive compulsive disorder. Things would get in my brain that I couldn’t get out of my brain. When I was nine years old, I’d get a new pair of shoes and I’d have to kiss the soles of my shoes. But little by little it went away. I’m not medicated.”

A few seconds pass. “In order to write novels for a living – it’s not pathological, but I do think and worry and brood and fidget about stuff that I’m working on. I’m worried about my health. I can get a notion in my head about my health, but if I take St John’s wort, it will go away. I don’t give a shit where it goes, I just don’t want it in my brain. If it’s someplace else, shortening my lifespan, I don’t really care as long as it’s leaving me alone during daylight hours.”

Along the way, he has had some health concerns that he couldn’t ignore. “Look,” he says, with a sudden seriousness. “I’ve had my throat cut at the Mayo Clinic.” He points to a horizontal scar across his throat. “They thought I had lymphoma.”

This happened “four or five years ago” and when the doctors first discovered something they didn’t like at 8am, they told him to come back at 4pm. During that time he went to the movies. He thought to himself, “No one has told me conclusively yet that I have cancer. This is an interesting moment.”

Wasn’t he worried? “Sure, my mother died of cancer. But what I wasn’t was afraid. I’ve had a lot of people die in my life. I’ve had a tune-up for it.”

The death of Raymond Carver in 1988 was a profound loss for Ford. It was “a shattering experience. My life has never been the same.” They were more than close friends – kindred spirits: their parents were from the same place and they laughed about the same things.

We enter Oxford, a placid historic town that seems like exactly the place William Faulkner would be from. We pass by his grave, past oak trees, and head downtown. Ford has an absence of nostalgia, only a sentimental attachment to the South and a strong positive feeling about the Delta, which is west of where we are. The conservative, often bigoted beliefs are anathema to him and soon



Ford with his wife, Kristina, and their dogs in Maine, 2006

Had Ford not met Kristina, he can’t imagine what his life would have been like. ‘It wouldn’t have been a life,’ he replies without hesitation. ‘I would have had a career’

he’ll be leaving Mississippi to move with his wife, Kristina, who has a PhD in urban planning, to New York, where they will both teach at Columbia University.

Ford has been with one person his entire life. He met Kristina Hensley when he was working his way through Michigan State University. She was 17, he was 19. “I was bussing tables and I saw this girl and I thought, my goodness.” He sighs, still sounding awed. “I went over and introduced myself.”

He puts the blinker on and turns left down a quiet road lined with giant green elm trees. “I’ve always said to Kristina, if a person can’t stay married to you, then they can’t stay married to anybody.”

A few hours later, Ford collects me at the hotel and shows me Rowan Oak, the home where Faulkner lived, a few minutes away from where he and Kristina have a rented house. The sprinklers are on a timer. They shower a mist over the azaleas as we head inside and Kristina Ford opens the door with a cheerful smile. She is a striking woman with a bright laugh and winsome presence.

The three of us sit in the living room and chat. She is as formidable as her husband and talk turns to the durability of their marriage. “It’s luck that we found each other, that we like each other, that the reasons we liked each other when I was 17 and he was 19...”

Ford finishes her sentence, “...are still the same reasons. It takes a certain amount of intelligence to not let differences drive you apart. One of the things about marriages is, you have a person who is your constant target. But we haven’t made each other a target. You’re the person who makes me happy, not the person who makes me unhappy.”

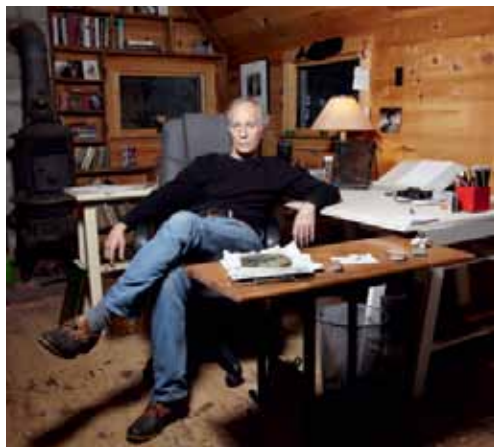
She nods. They’ve learnt how to get out of each other’s way. “He’ll say to me, look I’m in a bad mood. Don’t talk to me until noon.”

While we’ve been chatting, there’s been a lot of whimpering from the back room and suddenly, their three dogs have escaped. It’s a cue to look at the time and head to dinner.

On our way to the restaurant, we return to an earlier discussion about how we’re marked by where we come from. Ford refers to what we carry with us psychologically. “How we are imprinted is something we are not to be victimised by,” he says.

He explains that being a writer, where success is in large measure uncontrollable except by one’s own efforts, means the only way he can exert any kind of control over life is to be in charge of what happens in his books. The car is now parked and he continues for a moment after the ignition has been turned off. “I made a dedicated decision that I am going to take responsibility for everything and the things that I can’t take responsibility for, I’m not going to worry about.” ▶ p 45

Ford in his writing cabin at his home in Maine, May 2012



‘In order to write novels for a living – it’s not pathological, but I do think and worry and brood and fidget about stuff I’m working on’

After graduating from Michigan State University, Ford had a variety of different jobs. Hepatitis cut short his Marine Corps career and he was discharged. He applied to the CIA, went to law school for a term, then enrolled in graduate school for writing. He taught creative writing at Princeton, wrote two novels (*A Piece of My Heart* and *The Ultimate Good Luck*) but in 1981, he quit. There was a creeping sense of powerlessness in his own destiny.

He was working as a sportswriter when he tried to get a job at *Sports Illustrated* magazine to no avail. It was then when things changed; he was 37.

We are seated at a quiet table in the back of the restaurant.

“I had published two books in my life – both of them were mildly received. Nothing had come of them. I was living off my wife who was a professor at Rutgers. I had a Guggenheim grant. And I decided that I would write another novel. My agent said, ‘This is your last chance. You’re not going to thrive unless this novel is a success.’”

He returned to the house in Princeton, New Jersey. “I thought, if am going to continue what I’m doing, I’m going to have to bump my game up in a really big way. I knew I had to get serious.”

He spent a year accumulating all the things he was thinking in a notebook. “It was full of raw catalytic material. Which in the end, I would study – like you study for a bar exam – and then commence to write the book.”

He began writing *The Sportswriter* on Easter Sunday in 1982 and four years later, in 1986, it was published. His strategy paid off. The novel became Ford’s breakout book.

“I willed my way to being able to write a book that took full advantage of all the things I was capable of doing. It involved a greater degree of application and seriousness. And so, at that point, it was probably true that I decided anything that happens to you, you have to feel you’re responsible for.”

And if the novel had failed? “I would have been OK with that,” he says, convincingly. “I would have been disappointed for a while, but I would have gotten over it.”

What the success meant to him was a personal validation. Prior to *The Sportswriter*, he admits, “I had never been completely confident that I knew how to do something. Anything that’s ever happened to me that was good – relative to my writing life – has always seemed anomalous to me.”

Surely finding that *Time Magazine* named *The Sportswriter* one of the 100 best novels ever written has provoked a sense of pride. He shakes his head. “I thought, how could that be? That probably can’t be right.”

What’s driving him now is a question that puzzles him. “Not very much.” He shrugs. “I never felt I have to write. I chose to write. I find the number of times you have to read your book long

after you have written it to be exceedingly unpleasant. I don’t want things to be unpleasant any more.”

Ford is dyslexic and cites a comical element to the tediousness of correcting his own work. “There are certain things I’ll never get right. It’s hilarious really. I’m constantly trying to make things better and making them worse.”

The dishes have been cleared away, Bruce Springsteen is on in the background, tablecloths are being pulled off the tables and Ford rethinks his position. This feeling of not wanting to write again will pass, he says. Because it always does. “It’s part of my habit to bring everything back to zero after every book. You have no laurels to rest on.”

And winning the Pulitzer prize – where did that fit in?

He pauses. “It was encouragement. It made me think I could write good books. Made me think I wasn’t hopeless.”

Kristina reads all the reviews and tells him about the good ones. Reviews matter, he says, only because the bad ones drive readers away. He refuses to review books because he doesn’t trust his judgment. “Giving a book a bad review is like driving along the road and seeing a hitchhiker and deciding that instead of not picking him up, you’ll run over him. Sorry, I can’t pick you up, but I will kill you.”

He laughs.

The following morning we meet for coffee. Ford seems genuinely interested in other people – the young student behind the register, the man who asks him to sign a book; engaging in small talk is not a chore. We walk through town, past the county courthouse, and head to Square Books, an independent bookstore owned by one of his closest friends.

Inside, it is a relaxed and inviting atmosphere. Faded oriental rugs on the floor, dark wood, photographs on the wall of authors, ceiling fans whirling above. We go upstairs and sit in the fiction section. Soon he will be packing up again and he speaks about the ease he has with transience and where it came from. “When my father died, I had conflicted feelings of grief and freedom. I’ve always experienced a lack of mooring.”

Nothing about the places he has lived in have stuck. “The only thing that’s stuck is her [Kristina] and me,” he says.

Early on, they decided not to have children. They agreed four years before they were married and he remembers exactly where they were.

“We were in my car driving and I stopped at the stoplight at the corner of Grand River Road and Hagadorn in East Lansing, Michigan. I said, ‘You know that I don’t want to have children,’ and she said, ‘Oh thank god, neither do I.’”

Ford credits Kristina for his having become a writer and when asked if she believed in his ability early on, he declares, “I had no ability! She just thought it was a good idea. She believed in us. I’ve tried to live up to Kristina’s expectations of me.”

Had he not met her, he can’t imagine what his life would have been like. “It wouldn’t have been a life,” he replies without hesitation. “I would have had a career.”

He’s aware that from his beginnings, it’s hard to trace the arc to where he is now. “Unless you’re Martin Amis or John Updike – people who got first-rate educations – everyone’s kind of confected themselves. I try not to be so vulnerable, because I think there is a mystery at the heart of every writer’s vocation. Why would this person end up in life doing this? It’s almost impossible to calculate. But now, after having lived with it for decades, I’m kind of comfortable with it. I guess a lot of people feel – I don’t want to say fraudulent – that’s too strong – that you’ve put the pieces together in order that you can do this. So that the books are not imposters. Whatever I’ve done to make myself smarter than I am – as long as the books are there, it’s the books, not me.”

His next book will possibly be a memoir about his father – a companion piece to go with his essay “My Mother in Memory”. “All I am is dogged,” he says. “Dogged.” **FT**

“Canada” is published in paperback by Bloomsbury (£12.99). To comment, email magazineletters@ft.com