

About the Author

Prizewinning author Richard Russo is regarded by many critics as the best writer about small-town America since Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. "He doesn't over-sentimentalize [small towns]," said Maureen Corrigan, the book critic for NPR's *Fresh Air*. Nor does he belittle the dreams and hardships of his working-class characters. "I come from a blue-collar family myself and I think he gets the class interactions; he just really nails class in his novels," said Corrigan.

When Russo left his own native small town in upstate New York, it was with hopes of becoming a college professor. But during his graduate studies, he began to have second thoughts about the academic life. While finishing up his doctorate, he took a creative writing class; and a new career path opened in front of him.

Russo's first novel set the tone for much of his later work. The story of an ailing industrial town and the interwoven lives of its inhabitants, *Mohawk* won critical praise for its witty, engaging style. In subsequent books, he has brought us a dazzling cast of characters, mostly working-class men and women who are struggling with the problems of everyday life (poor health, unemployment, mounting bills, failed marriages) in dilapidated, claustrophobic burghs that have -- like their denizens -- seen better days. In 2001, Russo received the Pulitzer Prize for *Empire Falls*, a brilliant, tragicomic set-piece that explores past and present relationships in a once-thriving Maine town whose textile mill and shirt factory have gone bust.

Russo's vision of America would be bleak, except for the wit and optimism he infuses into his stories. Even when his characters are less than lovable, they are funny, rueful, and unfailingly human. "There's a version of myself that I still see in a kind of alternative universe and it's some small town in upstate New York or someplace like that," Russo said in an interview. That ability to envision himself in the bars and diners of small-town America has served him well. "After the last sentence is read, the reader continues to see Russo's tender, messed-up people coming out of doorways, lurching through life," said the fiction writer Annie Proulx. "And keeps on seeing them because they are as real as we are."

(barnesandnoble.com)

Reviews

“The 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was awarded to Richard Russo for *Empire Falls*. Written with clarity and insight, *Empire Falls* is a snapshot of small-town, American life.” - *ashcanrantings.com*

“Like most books named for cities and towns -- fictional and otherwise -- the cast of characters in *Empire Falls* is large and convoluted. If Richard Russo's latest novel were less well plotted and engaging, you'd need a score sheet to keep track. As it is, Russo weaves the reader, quickly and tightly, into a community of personalities as easy to remember as your next door neighbor.” -*januarymagazine.com*

Movie Adaptation

A well-crafted movie adaptation of the book (starring Ed Harris, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Helen Hunt and Paul Newman) is now available on DVD.

(*ashcanrantings.com*)

Further Reading

Straight Man by Richard Russo

Wonder Boys by Michael Chabon

Back When We Were Grownups by Anne Tyler

The Bean Trees by Barbara Kingsolver

Foolscap by Michael Malone

Blood Mud by K. C. Constantine

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

Empire Falls

By Richard Russo

Possible Discussion Questions

1. Does Empire Falls learn anything about itself as a town over the course of the book?
2. How does Miles' memory of his mother continue to shape his life as an adult?
3. What is the root cause of the problems between Miles and Jimmy Minty?
4. How does the book's conclusion turn the Whiting mantra of "power and control" on its head?
5. Do Empire Falls and its residents fail John Voss?
6. What is the role of religion in the life of the Roby family?
7. Why do so many marriages in *Empire Falls* fail?
8. How does Russo use minor characters to develop the main figures? What roles do Horace Weymouth, Bea Majeski, Charlene Gardiner and Otto Meyer play in shaping your impression of and opinions about Miles, Janine and Tick?
9. Richard Russo's description of Empire Falls is as memorable and vivid as his portraits of the people who live there. How do the details he provides about the town, including its streets, buildings, and neighborhoods, create a more than physical backdrop against which the story is played out? How does his use of flashbacks strengthen the reader's sense of the town as a living character?
10. What adjectives would you use to describe Empire Falls? How does Russo make the story of a dying town (with more than its share of losers) entertaining and engaging? Did you find most, if not all, of the characters sympathetic in some way?

(NoveList.com and readinggroupguides.com)