2002 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction: a static view of American life

Richard Russo's Empire Falls

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Richard Russo, Empire Falls *, New York: Random House, 2001*

Richard Russo is the author of several well-received novels, including *Mohawk* (1986), *The Risk Pool* (1988), and *Nobody's Fool*, which was made into a motion picture starring Paul Newman in l994. His most recent publication is *The Whore's Child and Other Stories*.

Empire Falls, the winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, covers material that Russo has examined in his previous work: the lives of ordinary people in small, decaying American towns over the last two decades. Russo's people often feel contemporary and true-to-life with typical problems: divorce, job and money woes, and the uneasiness that these bring on.

The protagonist, Miles Roby, is manager and chief cook of the Empire Grill in Empire Falls, Maine, a town in decline since its three mills shut down years before. Miles is getting divorced from his wife and sleeps in the attic above the restaurant. The novel centers on him and his family and friends as they work or visit at the restaurant.

Russo depicts another local family, the Whitings, who dominate the economic life of Empire Falls. Miles is dependent on the goodwill of the presumptuous Mrs. Whiting. Although she has left him the Empire Grill in her will, she is determined not to allow him to forget his place as an employee. The novel's flashbacks recall—more credibly with the Robys than the Whitings—the emotional histories of both families over several generations. The tension of the novel consists in Miles's defiance of Mrs. Whiting.

Russo has developed some restless characters. They often feel hemmed-in: Miles's reprobate father, Max, cannot bear family responsibilities and encourages a senile priest to run away with him to the Florida Keys, where they will scrounge drinks from tourists. A younger priest deals with his homosexuality. In one satisfying flashback at a resort for the wealthy on the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard, Miles's mother, Grace, passionately searches for love, and finds it.

Young people's impressions of the routine and the stupidity of institutions are memorable as well. Miles's daughter, Tick, earlier in the novel, pits her intelligence and rebelliousness against weary and uncaring high school teachers. This is nothing new in recent life or fiction, but it is good to hear about the response of youth to the terrible philistinism imposed upon them in public schools.

For other characters, mistrust invades the realms of love and emotional security. Miles's estranged wife, Jannine, is about to marry a health-club owner who, she learns, lies about his age. She suspects that he is duping her in financial matters too.

Russo can also let us hear the dissatisfaction aimed at the elite. In one scene, a local cop remembers his father, a one-time strikebreaker, watching the nightly news on television and interpreting life in America:

"'In school they tell you it's a free country, I bet.' Jimmy couldn't deny that he'd heard this opinion expressed on more than one occasion.

"'Yeah, well, don't you believe it. They got the whole thing figured out, believe me, and they've thought of everything. Who they'll let you marry. Where you and her are gonna live. How much the rents gonna be. How much money you'll make. Which ones are gonna die in their wars. All of it. You think *you*

gotta say? Think again.'"

These sentiments are not so unusual as Russo perhaps imagines, and to record them may not be original, but it is important to keep this reality and pitch alive in fiction.

Russo, unfortunately, does not continue it for long. The novel is remarkably passive. Life mounts up painful or even horrible problems for its people, and we might expect some kind of outright dissent against a whole *way of life*. But *Empire Falls* does not provide us with any realignment of or challenge to habits or beliefs.

Instead, there is a school shooting. Various people die. Others flee. While the moment is affecting enough, it acts as a convenient escape from the characters' problems. Despite Russo's sympathetic portrayal of the perpetrator, a badly abused boy whom Tick has befriended, the act functions as a plot-trigger instead of a necessary, if surprising, development of character in specific social conditions.

The novel ends with a series of coincidences and tying-up of loose ends. Mrs. Whiting, for example, is swept away by the local river that had been a stubborn encroachment on the Whiting property. When her husband had built the house, the river had been depositing dead animals and garbage there, all on its own, apparently. Russo tries to provide an aesthetic balance here, but it feels artificial; this is not Homer's sentient river Xanthus. The novel only looks foolish hinting at mysticism.

Mrs. Whiting now ceases to be a problem to Miles or the town. Empire Falls looks like it will recover from its slump. Corporate types with Massachusetts plates on their cars (an unhappy sight in Maine) show up and, far from providing more pain and frustration, decide to invest in the town. Miles and Tick escape to Martha's Vineyard and recover in a house by the sea owned by generous Hollywood friends. On his return to Empire Falls, Miles becomes a "fully vested partner" in a small business.

Overall, one feels that Russo is playing footloose with reality, and that his attitude is not altogether serious. The novel strikes a sour note repeatedly, especially at the end.

While there has been a good deal of writing about ordinary Americans over the last 20 years (Raymond Carver, Russell Banks, John Casey, to name a few), much of this often displays a shaky or merely superficial hold on how things actually work in society. There is certainly a notion of class and even of social conflict—this is present in *Empire Falls* in the conflict between the Whiting and the Robys. Yet there is little sense of an actual history to these conflicts, or much sense that they pass beyond the fate of individuals.

Instead, working class life—and life in general—in American fiction is largely static. Too often, the plots of novels move by coincidence and convenience, or are dominated by one overwhelmingly odd or stunning situation. Ordinary people in almost any contemporary novel or short story usually *react* to the difficult conditions they face. They constitute a passive social group without a visible potential for activity.

To portray people and events as in an actual process requires either the intuition of a genius or an intellectual culture that places value on the historical determination of social groups and the individual personalities embedded within them.

The view that society is an organic entity that evolves as social groups (classes) come into conflict is largely lost from American culture right now. The past does not inform American writers; clearly, in the minds of many of them, history is irrelevant to fiction. That is why in Russo's novel many themes and events, from the relations of worker and owner to the outbreak of violence, 'sound' tinny and unconvincing. They are isolated from the logic of society.

There is a need for more imagination and more intuition in fiction, to be sure. The weaknesses of *Empire Falls* suggest that these will only emerge, however, from a culture of literary realism that begins to assimilate—consciously—history, aesthetics and philosophy in an effort to understand how society develops.