Richard Russo Biography

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Richard Russo was born in 1949 and grew up in Gloversville, New York, a town in the Leatherstocking Region known for the artisanal manufacturing of leather dress gloves. By the second half of the twentieth century, not only had glove-making become mechanized and outsourced overseas, but fashions had changed. Men stopped wearing hats and women stopped wearing dress gloves. Gloversville and other nearby towns suffered the kind of economic downturn that is featured in so many of Russo’s novels, such as his 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Empire Falls*, and his trilogy of North Bath novels, *Nobody’s Fool* (1993), *Everybody’s Fool* (2016), and his most recent novel, *Somebody’s Fool* (2023).

Russo’s parents separated when he was young and he lived with his mother in the upstairs unit of a two-family house above his maternal grandparents. His mother worked for General Electric in Schenectady, earning more than most Gloversville men, whose wages were kept low by mill owners. His father was a decorated war hero, having survived the onslaught at Utah Beach, but growing up, Russo knew very little else about him except that he gambled, played pool, and lived still in Gloversville, but exactly where, Russo didn’t know. He eventually established a relationship with his father, one that subsequently became the basis for Donald “Sully” Sullivan, the main character in the North Bath novels.

After graduating high school, Russo and his mother moved to Arizona, where she found work in Phoenix and he attended the University of Arizona in Tucson. Russo married his one and still wife after finishing his undergraduate work. He eventually earned Master of Fine Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in English and American Literature, also from the University of Tucson, finishing his studies in 1979.

Russo began what he describes as a decade-long academic nomadship, during which he jumped from job to job, teaching and writing. In his 2012 memoir, *Elsewhere*, he writes, “Caring not a whit about tenure and promotion, I thumbed my nose at the advice of department chairs about what I needed to do to succeed in the university.” His writing at the time, while copious, focused on things he knew little about like crime and cities and thus, editors rejected his work. He and his wife moved to New Haven, where he was working when he sold his first novel, *Mohawk* in 1986. As a result, he was offered his first “real,” i.e. full-time tenure-track teaching job at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, where he would have time to pursue his writing.

In 1991, he accepted a job offer at Colby College in Maine where he stayed until the success of the 1994 movie, *Nobody’s Fool*, starring Paul Newman, based on Russo’s 1993 novel enabled him to retire from teaching and work full-time as a writer. By then, he had written three novels and was also beginning to write or co-write television and movie scripts. To date, he has written ten novels, including the 2001 Pulitzer Prize winning *Empire Falls*, and his 2023 *Somebody’s Fool*, the third of his Sully/North Bath novels. A review of this last states that Russo “paints a shining fresco of a working-class community, warts and all, a 30-year project come to fruition in this last, best book.” Russo’s books are notable for their character development and his ability to render in exquisite detail the worlds that they inhabit. In addition to novels, Russo has written four collections of short stories, three non-fiction books including two memoirs, and nine screenplays.

Russo’s 2012 touching and heartbreaking memoir focuses on his relationship with his mother in what one reviewer referred to as a “momoir.” It wasn’t until after her death in 2007 and the subsequent diagnosis of his older daughter that he realized that his mother had suffered her entire life from obsessive-compulsive disorder. Russo, with his wife Barbara, had been his mother’s caretaker. He knew his mother was unstable and that she had what family members referred to as “the nerves,” but he never made the connection to a diagnosable condition that could be helped. Thus, while his mother moved with him throughout the decades and he cared for her as a devoted son, even to the detriment of his marriage that nonetheless survived the countless crises, each move for her was a cataclysmic disruption to her established routines. His mother’s one goal was to escape both the confines of Gloversville and the scourge of poverty that had characterized her life growing up, as the fortunes of her family and town had been tied so intimately to the fortunes of a dying manufacturing industry. Thus, while she was extremely proud of her son’s successes, she was nonetheless baffled by people who wanted to read Russo’s stories set in the “kind of industrial backwaters from which she’d worked so hard to escape.” (*Elsewhere, p. 122).*

Russo built his nearly forty-year writing career writing about the kind of people, places, and values he witnessed while growing up in Gloversville. In a 2019 interview, Russo recounts a conversation with his literary agent in which he asked, “What happens if I get ‘pigeonholed,’ and people expect me to always be writing about this one subject: mill towns in New York, blue-collar workers—people that do not have much education or money or opportunity. And my agent said, you know what? Don’t worry about that—people expect certain things of writers.” And so many of Russo’s books take place in deindustrialized towns, often in upstate New York, sometimes in Maine. But, some of his books, such as *Straight Man* and *Chances Are* also take readers to academic settings that evoke Southern Illinois University at Carbondale or Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

Moreover, readers can get to know people who passed through Russo’s life, such as Don “Sully” Sullivan who was modeled after his father or Miss Hattie, aspects of whom are readily recognizable in Russo’s mother. Or for that matter, Sully’s son, Peter, who fails as a university professor and who returns to Bath and takes on adjunct teaching at a local community college. As one reviewer wrote about *Empire Falls* and which can be said about Russo’s entire catalog, “Shot through with the mysteries of generations and the shattering visitations of the nation at large, it is a social novel of panoramic ambition, yet at the same time achingly personal. In the end, *Empire Falls* reveals our worst and best instincts, both our most appalling nightmares and our simplest hopes, with all the vision, grace and humanity of truly epic storytelling.”