

Richard Ford's work builds empathy for range of characters

Richard Ford was nineteen when the track of his life forked sharply.

He was a locomotive fireman on the Missouri-Pacific Railroad, enrolled in college but attending classes half-heartedly.

"It was becoming clear that I could stay and make a lot of money working on the railroad," he says. "I made the decision that I would not stay on the railroad, that I would go back to college."

At Michigan State University, he plodded a slow path through books like William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Frank O'Connor's story, "Guests of the Nation."

Those works left their mark—the Faulkner novel, with its evocation of Ford's home state of Mississippi, and the O'Connor story's final line: "And anything that ever happened to me after I never felt the same about again."

"I was that unlettered nineteen-year-old boy who managed to find his way into reading and was immensely affected," Ford says.

Ford, who in 1996 won the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for his novel, *Independence Day*, will read and discuss his work at the annual People & Stories/ Gente y Cuentos benefit on March 24 at Princeton's Nassau Club.

Due to lifelong dyslexia, Ford says, he embraced the aural and non-cognitive qualities of language. "I heard words: how the fricatives and glottals sound, all those palpable, sensate qualities of the language. I realized that I liked words. I saw how language affected me, and I thought it would be good to write things that affected other people."

Ford's path was peopled with role models: neighbor Eudora Welty; teachers E.L. Doctorow and Galway Kinnell; and his contemporaries, sometimes called literature's "dirty realists," Raymond Carver,

Ann Beattie and Tobias Wolff. Ford resists the idea of type-casting either his characters or readers; in a 1996 interview in *The Paris Review*, he said, "Eloquence or penetrating understanding can visit anybody. In fact, it's fiction's business to try to enlarge our understanding of and sympathy for people."

He recalls one reading in North Dakota at which a lesbian couple approached him; they were farmers and said that they read Ford's books on their tractors. "I thought: Well, then I'm doing something right."

If Ford has a "typical listener" in mind when he writes, that person is "a cross between who I was at nineteen and my wife [Kristina Hensley, whom he married in 1968], an omnivorous reader."

Until his later books—*Canada* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*, a continuation of the story of Frank Bascombe, protagonist of *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*—Ford read everything he wrote out loud to Hensley, sometimes breaking clipboards in exasperation at a passage that sounded off-key. His most recent work, a memoir of his parents, will be published in May.

"I just wrote the first short story I've written in eleven years," he says, following an invitation from *The Toronto Globe and Mail* to craft a story on "Canadian themes." Ford wrote "Driving Up," about an older woman who drives from Michigan to Ontario to visit the ex-boyfriend she followed to Canada decades earlier, when he was escaping the draft.

Ford considers that story, like all his books, to be obliquely political. "Not in the sense that they're about elections or public events, but...I'm trying to write stories that show the ways in which contemporary history affects the lives of individuals."

The People & Stories benefit featuring Richard Ford is open to the public. Invite colleagues, neighbors and members of your book club! Details and tickets available at www.peopleandstories.org

When life collides with short stories, a light goes on

by *Anndee Hochman*

Here's my "elevator answer" when strangers ask, "So, what's *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* all about?" I tell them, "It's about finding that place where something in your life collides with something in a short story, and a light snaps on."

In a recent series at Interim House, an inpatient drug and alcohol recovery program for women in Philadelphia, those bulbs kept popping.

We began with "Thank You, M'am," by Langston Hughes. It's an effective first-session piece because it's short, linear and accessible, packed with vivid description and relatable characters.

I've used "Thank You, M'am" with groups of LGBT youth, older adults in Section 8 housing, recovering addicts and college students. I know the story so well I can practically recite it from memory.

But on that fall day at Interim House, I heard something new. We were mulling over the first line, the reader's introduction to one of the two main characters, a woman whose name, we later learn, is Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. Hughes introduces her this way: "She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails."

One woman said that description made her think of Aunt Jemima. Another said it reminded her of her own purse, which always contained essentials such as body spray, aspirin, tissues and a comb.

The first woman, listening to that list, said, "Oh, a runaway kit." She explained that, during her addiction, if she didn't know whether she would be out on the street all night, it was important to carry everything she might need.

That comment helped us see Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones as more than competent; she was a survivor, prepared by her past for every uncertainty. Hughes alludes to, but never fully explains, Mrs. Jones' back-story ("I were young once and I wanted things I could not get.") But that

first line, illuminated by a reader who'd traveled a similar rough path, suggests that a person can grow—in generosity, in competence, in wisdom—rather than shrink from adversity.

That image contrasted with the story's other character, "Roger," who tries to snatch Mrs. Jones' purse and ends up with a life lesson he may not appreciate for years. Mrs. Jones drags Roger home, feeds him and gives him ten dollars to buy the blue suede shoes he covets.

"That first line, illuminated by a reader who'd traveled a similar rough path, suggests that a person can grow—in generosity, in competence, in wisdom—rather than shrink from adversity."

Mrs. Jones, one woman said, is "living large"—not rich in material possessions, but willing to share everything she has.

The same thing happened when we read "Fat," by Raymond Carver, the story of a harried waitress whose outlook shifts after serving an overweight, unfailingly polite customer. We talked about the story's enigmatic moments, including a time when the waitress peers into the fat man's sugar bowl ("I know I was after something. But I don't know what").

Helicia had worked as a waitress; what she remembered most was how hungry she felt at the end of a shift. That memory opened a window into Carver's story: The fat customer ate and ate, while the waitress was starving—for dinner, perhaps, but also for love, for recognition, for kindness.

"I think he's her alter-ego," another woman added. Ah, yes: the stuffed customer, who gobbles food to fill a vacant

"Stories make us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving."

--Madeleine L'Engle

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place in his soul, and the hungry waitress, whose life lacks something she can't even name. Two sides of the same yearning. We'd never have landed on that insight without Helicia's life experience to guide us there.

In "The Home-Coming," Milly Jafta deftly paints the final moments of an African village market day, including "the welcome smell of meat overexposed to the sun." Rotting meat: a welcome smell? "That's the smell of her childhood," one woman said, and then we all named smells whose first whiff carries us home: horse manure, dogs, Jean Nate bath splash, incense, marijuana, Christmas candy. Not all would be pleasing to outsiders, but for each individual, they were odors charged with meaning and memory.

"The stuffed customer and the hungry waitress... Two sides of the same yearning. We'd never have landed on that insight without Helicia's life experience to guide us there."

"The Day It Happened," by Rosario Morales, brought one more illumination. In this story of a young woman, several months pregnant, who finally summons the courage and community support to leave her abusive husband, Morales describes the departing taxi packed with a lamp, a typewriter and a box of books.

"What's this with the lamp?" asked Marcia, noting a detail I'd overlooked. The women spilled with ideas: "She's a writer. She's educated. She cares about books. Maybe she wants to read to her child."

Then one said gleefully, "And she took the lamp because she wants to leave Ramón in the dark!" She went on, imagining the heartbroken, hapless Ramón scrounging for light bulbs at the Dollar Store the following day.

Ramón might have been floundering in

the shadows, but we—thanks to readers who allowed life and literature to intertwine—could glimpse a small cone of light. Together, we followed it forward.

The fall 2016 series at Interim House included a writing component and two visits from a guest author, novelist Connie Garcia-Barrio. After each story, the women responded to a prompt that invited them to explore connections between their lives and the texts. Here are some excerpts:

After reading "Looking for Work," by Gary Soto

When I was growing up, I always felt different. Kids used to pick on me all the time. They used to call me a black spook and made fun of my name. They called me the teacher's pet. I even felt strange at home with my family. I had all brothers. I wanted a sister so bad. I picked a spot on the wall in my room and pretended like it was my sister. Gave it a name, too. My mom thought that something was wrong with me.

--Rosa

After reading "Did My Mama Like to Dance?" by Shay Youngblood

My father recently passed away by suicide in March of 2016. If I could have asked him one more question before he died, it would have been, "Could I have done anything?" Why didn't he wait to talk to my brother and me first? Did he really intend on dying? Is the woman he was in a relationship with responsible? Was he proud of me?

I'm at an angry state right now since it's so fresh, but there's lots of questions...

--Kelly

My grandmother was my soul mate. The first time I ever recall seeing a hummingbird was with her, and we commented to each other that they are scarce in that part of Michigan. She passed away a few short years later, and it just so happened that the day of her funeral was the next time I saw a hummingbird. I asked the universe if my Gram was actually with me right then, and immediately upon asking, a warm wind picked up, rustling the trees, giving me my absolute answer that yes, she is still with me.

--Jen

"Perhaps some day I'll crawl back home, beaten, defeated. But not as long as I can make stories out of my heartbreak, beauty out of sorrow."

--Sylvia Plath

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P&S in 2016: growing access for new readers

“Novels and stories are renderings of life; they can not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us courage to stay a given course.”

--Robert Coles

by Patricia Andres

At People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, we begin with the belief that powerful literature belongs to everyone. We partner with organizations that serve prisoners, people living in low-income housing, immigrants, at-risk youth, seniors, and adults enrolled in GED or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Our work on the regional level is made possible by individual donors and foundations. Our national work is sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in collaboration with libraries across the U.S.

In 2016, we added programs for Spanish speakers at Dorothea House, Princeton; for Spanish-speaking seniors in low-income housing in Hightstown; and for formerly homeless men and women at HomeFront in Ewing. On the national level, we added programs for incarcerated men in California; for wives of migrant workers in Georgia; for adult ESL students in Iowa; for low-income seniors in North Carolina; and, in Alabama, for women who have been victims of sex trafficking.

We are grateful to ALL our supporters for helping us expand—and, thus, offer more people access to stories that matter.

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“The story—from Rumpelstiltskin to War and Peace—is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind for the purpose of understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”

--Ursula K. LeGuin

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At HomeFront, reading fosters rich connections

by Rachel Epstein

At the HomeFront Family Campus, a transitional housing facility in Ewing, New Jersey, children often pass from one friendly person's arms to another's, and older residents offer baby-care advice to new parents. For a People & Stories series held there this past fall, the atmosphere of camaraderie set the stage. Participants brought along their babies and toddlers to sessions, and the children's presence kept some themes weaving through the story discussions: parenthood, responsibility, generational cycles.

The first day, we discussed the young protagonist's allegiance to her difficult family in James Joyce's story, "Eveline." Deborah held on her lap another participant's five-year-old son, who was shyly listening to the conversation. "He has something he wants to say," Deborah told us at one point. "He just whispered in my ear, 'I'd never leave my family.'" The participants were touched by this tangential echo of one of the story's themes. It triggered exploration of what it means to leave one's family: how perspectives change from childhood to adulthood and the importance, to many people in the room, of loyalty.

Families typically stay at HomeFront for two to three months, supported with counseling services, skills training and child care. Through the eight weeks, participants lingered after sessions, talking about how good it felt to engage in this kind of deep reading and discussion. "I'm a reader," said Sharon. "All my books are in my storage unit. When I was a kid, I just loved reading." She was energized by this group, expressing that it allowed her to reclaim part of her identity.

JoAnn, too, seemed to come alive in the discussions. "I love stuff like this," she told me several times. She was planning to move out of the facility soon, but said she wanted to keep coming to the sessions even if she had to take two buses.

Throughout the series, one participant,

Tina, was quick to associate the stories' themes with contemporary problems. When we read "Just Lather, That's All," by Hernando Téllez, she honed in on a passage in which the narrator, a barber working secretly for the rebel cause in military-ruled Colombia in the mid-20th century, contemplates how he should handle the brutal captain he is shaving:

I'm a revolutionary, not a murderer. And how easy it would be to kill him. And he deserves it. Does he? No!... No one deserves to have someone else make the sacrifice of becoming a murderer. What do you gain by it? Nothing. Others come along and still others, and the first ones kill the second ones, and they the next ones— and it goes on like this until everything is a sea of blood.

Tina described the paradox of gang activity in Trenton. "It just keeps going. There's no end to it." Jazzmine listened intently and focused us on the sentence, "No one deserves to have someone else make the sacrifice of becoming a murderer." She said that if people paused before taking an action, maybe the cycle of violence could be broken.

At the end of the series, Jazzmine cited this story as her favorite on the participant survey, remarking on the barber's mentality: "He thought about the consequences, which more people should do." She pointed me to another one of her responses, saying, "I think you'll like number three." The question: "Did people turn out to be different from how you expected when the program started?" Jazzmine's answer: "Yes. They seemed very intelligent. Open minded."

Participants' responses to the sessions made it evident that they are eager to take part in layered discourse. Residents at HomeFront are consumed by the logistics of housing, transportation, and medical care. A People & Stories session is not one more activity to pile on top of existing commitments. It is a vehicle for working the mind around and beyond practical hurdles, to connect to oneself and others in fresh ways.

**"Modern storytellers
are the descendants of
an immense and
ancient community of
holy people,
troubadours, bards,
griots, cantadoras,
cantors, traveling
poets, bums, hags and
crazy people."**

--Clarissa Pinkola Estés

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Board members recall books and world travels

Talking with newcomers
Julie Denny & Toby Taylor

There they were, a group of “Princeton matrons” and incarcerated men, reading Langston Hughes and talking about their grandmothers.

From that first People & Stories session in 2007, Crossing Borders volunteer Julie Denny says she was struck by how short stories became common ground for readers from widely disparate backgrounds.

That series at Bo Robinson Assessment and Treatment Center was “extraordinary. [Literature] brought us all together, says Denny, who recently joined the People & Stories board. “The highlight, for me, was when one of the inmates came on the last day and he said that he had written a poem and would like to share it. He read this beautiful poem; there wasn’t a dry eye.”

Denny’s mother was an avid reader; her father was book advertising manager of *The New York Times*. The family owned so many books that they spilled from the shelves and lay in tipsy piles on the floor.

“I remember reading *Jane Eyre* and a lot of Thomas Hardy. I loved the roughness of his writing, the wild terrain and weather,” Denny says. Today, she gravitates toward novels that illuminate other cultures; those, not tour books, are her “travel guides.”

Denny has been to thirty-four countries including Burma, Vietnam, Thailand, New Zealand, El Salvador and Honduras.

“Travel opens a lot of doors in my mind,” she says. “When I come home and friends say, ‘Where did you go?’ I say, ‘Let me tell you what I learned about the people.’”

For years, Denny was an actress; later, she managed a grant for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Now she’s a mediator, often taking discrimination cases.

She hopes to see People & Stories grow to reach new audiences, such as the women she’s met as part of the domestic violence response team for Womanspace in Princeton. “I would love to get victims of domestic abuse together to read short

stories and share their personal experiences...something that will make them feel whole again,” she says.

Recently, Toby Taylor picked up his high school copy of *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, by William Barrett. After a few pages, he remembered why he’d never finished the book.

As a student—he graduated from Drew University and earned his MBA at Boston University—Taylor’s reading consisted mostly of business texts, essential but dry materials on marketing and finance.

In the last ten years, though, he’s tasted from the literary smorgasbord: mysteries; political biographies, including a recent book on Nixon; and lawyer Bryan Stevenson’s searing memoir, *Just Mercy*, about his work with death row prisoners.

It was People & Stories’ work with incarcerated men—Taylor heard about it from a Crossing Borders volunteer—that first piqued his interest. Then he learned that the organization’s scope was broader, reaching marginalized populations in a wide range of settings.

“The idea of people learning how to articulate and talk about themselves—that’s a big deal, especially for people who are behind bars,” he says.

Taylor, a retired financial planner, still does occasional consulting, along with taking classes at Princeton University and The Evergreen Forum, cycling, rowing and serving as president of an investment club.

He expects to use his financial acumen to help the P&S/GyC board take a frank look at budget, fundraising and how to maintain consistency as the program grows.

Like Denny, Taylor and his wife, Patricia, are avid travelers to places both familiar and far-flung: Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, England, Portugal, the Netherlands and Egypt. They flew into Istanbul just as the Bosnian conflict was ending; they rode the Orient Express. More recently, they toured India, Iran and Cuba.

“I like seeing a different part of the world. Iran is much like the American southwest: lots of mountains and arid desert. When we traveled on the Orient Express through Bulgaria and Romania, we saw people with horses trying to plow fields...In Iran, the food was pretty bland. But talking to the people: that was fascinating.”

“If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.”

--Barry Lopez

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On the Bookshelf...

Am I Alone Here? Notes on Living to Read and Reading to Live, by Peter Orner. New York: Catapult, 2016.

by Anndee Hochman

“Alone in the garage with all these books,” begins novelist and short story writer Orner, describing himself as a “hoarder with a highbrow rationale” surrounded by the likes of Eudora Welty, Juan Rulfo and Vaclav Havel, not to mention the dozens of books he will never have a chance to know.

“...to measure a life in unread books seems about right to me,” he writes in this memoir that is preoccupied with absence—chiefly, the absence of the author’s father, who died in 2014. After that, Orner says, he was unable to muster the inventive impulse to write fiction; instead, he sought company in stories whose characters also grappled with loneliness and loss.

In “First Day of Winter,” by Breece D.J. Pancake, a writer who committed suicide at age 26, Orner is struck by the depiction of a hardscrabble farm family on the cusp of a brutal winter. “My brain flings all over the map,” he writes. “I’m in Northern California reading about a family in West Virginia, feeling guilty that the last time I was back home in Chicago, I didn’t even take the time to go and see my father.”

Some stories Orner reads poke him with guilt or regret; others comfort him with glimmers of reconciliation, hope or love. He deftly weaves the events of his own life—a first marriage that ended in divorce; an ex-spouse with a serious mental illness; an unexpected pregnancy and a cherished daughter—into this satisfying hunt through a wide range of literature, each story helping, in some way, to bring him back to life. “Books pursue us,” he writes. “And how many others might be out there... telling us things we need to hear?”

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