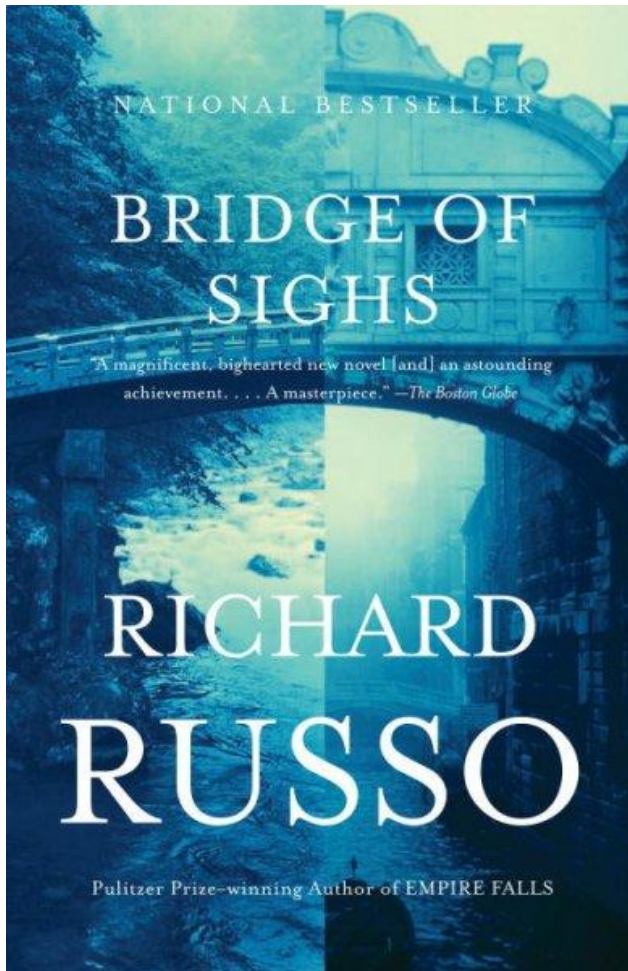
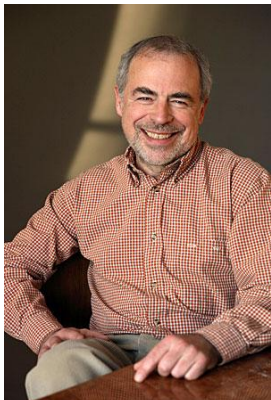


About the book...



Louis Charles, known by all in the upstate New York town of Thomaston, as “Lucy,” has lived in this town all his life. He is now the prosperous owner of a chain of convenience stores. At the age of 60, Lucy decides to write his own version of the history of Thomaston which allows Russo to write flashbacks of Lucy’s childhood, his warm and loving father, ambitious mother and his close friend, Noonan. Noonan is now an exiled artist in Italy. As Russo fleshes out their lives, we learn more about why Noonan has left and the ties that bind them together through so many years of being apart. As Lucy and his wife Sarah plan for a trip to Italy, the complicated web of relationships both surprises and entices the reader.

About the author...



Richard Russo is one of American literature's foremost chroniclers of small-town life, making him a contemporary heir to the likes of Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson. His novels are set in fading industrial towns throughout the northeastern United States, and the towns are delineated so precisely that they almost become characters in their own right. Russo pays keen attention to the socioeconomic divisions that structure small-town life, the invisible but palpable lines that determine where people live, work, study, eat, drink. One of his recurring themes is the way that the decline of the factory town, as it succumbs to the brutal realities of globalization, affects the lives of its citizens who would otherwise be resistant to change. Though the settings

and themes of his novels change—academic life in rural Pennsylvania in *Straight Man*, a tannery that poisons the local river in *Bridge of Sighs*—Russo has said, "Really, what I am writing about in all of these is, class and work."

Russo was born on July 15, 1949 and raised in Gloversville, New York, a town much like the fictional ones he depicts. He earned a B.A. (1967), a M.F.A. (1980), and a Ph.D. (1979) from the University of Arizona. Russo has taught at The University of Southern Illinois, The Iowa Writer's Workshop, Warren Wilson College, and Colby College. He was able to retire from teaching after his novel *Nobody's Fool* was made into a 1994 movie starring Paul Newman.

He has published six novels, one of which, *Empire Falls* (2001), won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for literature. His other novels include *Mohawk* (1986), *The Risk Pool* (1988), *Nobody's Fool* (1993), *Straight Man* (1997), and *Bridge of Sighs* (2007). He has also published a collection of short stories, *The Whore's Child and Other Stories* (2002).

Russo is, above all, a storyteller and when he isn't writing fiction, he writes screenplays. Russo co-wrote

the 1998 film *Twilight* with director Robert Benton, who also adapted and directed *Nobody's Fool*. Russo wrote the teleplay for the HBO adaptation of *Empire Falls* and the screenplay for the 2005 film *Ice Harvest*. Though he has recently started to venture into nonfiction, he has said that he has no interest in the role of the public intellectual and doesn't believe it is the novelist's duty to be political. "I'm a professional liar," he explains, "I tell stories. I make things up."

He has two grown daughters and lives in coastal Maine with his wife.

This biography was last updated on 11/02/2007.
(from bookbrowse.com).

Reviews

Booklist /*Starred Review*/ Here is the novel Russo was born to write. Coursing with humor and humanity, the sixth novel by the bard of Main Street U.S.A. gives full expression to the themes that have always been at the heart of his work: the all-important bond between fathers and sons, the economic desperation of small-town businesses, and the lifelong feuds and friendships that are a hallmark of small-town life. Following a trio of best friends who grew up in upstate Thomaston, New York, over 50 years, the novel captures some of the essential

mysteries of life, including the unanticipated moments of childhood that will forever define one's adulthood. Louis Charles ("Lucy") Lynch has spent his entire life in Thomaston, married for 40 years to his wife, Sarah, and finally living in the rich section of town, thanks to the success of his father's convenience stores. Long planning a trip to Venice, he tries in vain to communicate with the couple's best friend, Bobby Marconi, now a world-famous painter living in Venice. Meanwhile, the irascible ex-pat, now approaching 60 and suffering from night terrors, is still chasing women, engaging in fistfights, and struggling to complete his latest painting. Russo slowly and lovingly pieces together rich, multilayered portraits not only of the principals but also of their families, and, by extension, their quintessentially American town. It is a seamless interweaving of childhood memories (sometimes told from three points of view), tragic incidents (the town river, once the lifeblood of local industry, has become a toxic stew that is poisoning residents), and unforgettable dialogue that is so natural, funny, and touching that it may, perhaps, be the best of Russo's many gifts. -- *Wilkinson, Joanne* (Reviewed 09-01-2007) (*Booklist*, vol 104, number 1, p)

Publishers Weekly

Russo's portraits of small town life may be read not only as fine novels but as invaluable guides to the economic decline of the American Northeast. Russo was reared in Gloversville, N.Y. (which got its name from the gloves no longer manufactured there), and a lot of mid 20th-century Gloversville can be found in his earlier fiction (*Mohawk* ; *The Risk Pool*). It reappears in *Bridge of Sighs* , Russo's splendid chronicle of life in the hollowed-out town of Thomaston, N.Y., where a tannery's runoff is slowly spreading carcinogenic ruin. At the novel's center is Lou C. Lynch (his middle initial wins him the unfortunate, lasting nickname "Lucy"), but the narrative, which covers more than a half-century, also unfolds through the eyes of Lou's somewhat distant and tormented friend, Bobby Marconi, as well as Sarah Berg, a gifted artist who Lou marries and who loves Bobby, too. The lives of the Lynches, the Bergs and the Marconis intersect in various ways, few of them happy; each family has its share of woe. Lou's father, a genial milkman, is bound for obsolescence and leads his wife into a life of shopkeeping; Bobby's family is being damaged by an abusive father. Sarah moves between two parents: a schoolteacher father with grandiose literary dreams and a scandal in his past and a mother who lives in Long Island and leads a life that is far from exemplary. Russo weaves all of this together with great sureness, expertly planting clues and explosives, too, knowing just when and how they will be discovered or detonate at the proper

time. Incidents from youth: a savage beating, a misunderstood homosexual advance, a loveless seduction have repercussions that last far into adulthood. Thomaston itself becomes a sort of extended family, whose unhappy members include the owners of the tannery who eventually face ruin.

Bridge of Sighs is a melancholy book; the title refers to a painting that Bobby is making (he becomes a celebrated artist) and the Venetian landmark, but also to the sadness that pervades even the most contented lives. Lou, writing about himself and his dying, blue-collar town, thinks that the loss of a place isn't really so different from the loss of a person. Both disappear without permission, leaving the self diminished, in need of testimony and evidence. If there are false notes, they come with Russo's portrayal of African-Americans, who too often speak like stock characters: (Doan be given me that hairy eyeball like you doan believe, cause I know better, says one). But Russo has a deep and real understanding of stifled ambitions and the secrets people keep, sometimes forever.

Bridge of Sighs, on every page, is largehearted, vividly populated and filled with life from America's recent, still vanishing past.

Kirkus Reviews /* Starred Review */ A dying town symbolizes arcs separately traced by people who abandon it and others who stubbornly stay home,

believing change must be for the best, in Russo's (*The Whore's Child: and Other Stories*, 2005, etc.) crowded sixth novel.

Its setting (fictional Thomaston in upstate New York) resembles that of both his early books set thereabouts (*Mohawk*, *The Risk Pool*) and his New England-based Pulitzer-winner *Empire Falls*. Thomaston is the site of the now-defunct tannery that had provided jobs and is now suspected of causing cancer. It's the hometown of Lou C. Lynch (tormented, inevitably, by the lasting nickname "Lucy") and his wife Sarah, now 60-ish and hoping to pass on their family's "empire" of convenience stores to the next generation. A narrative composed by Lou (about his hometown and himself) is juxtaposed with memories of his childhood and youth, and with a parallel narrative set in Venice, where the Lynches' childhood friend Bobby Marconi now lives as a gifted, renegade artist—and a cancer victim. Nobody now writing rivals Russo at untangling the

Nobody now writing rivals Russo at untangling the knots of family connection, love and sexuality, ambition and compromise, fidelity and betrayal that link and afflict a formidable gallery of vividly observed, generously portrayed characters. Prominent among them: Lou's eternal-optimist father and namesake; his stoical mother Tessa; the lower-class boys who taunt and threaten him and the girls he turned to (and sometimes loved); and the luckless

Marconis, victimized by a viciously abusive father. Every page bristles with life. True, many of the details and motifs (e.g., an embattled family business; prosperity transformed by inevitable change; a black-sheep sibling) closely echo the matter of *Empire Falls*. Nevertheless, this is a wise, uplifting book: a big-hearted, often comic, yet sturdily realistic testament to the resiliency of ordinary people who surprise us, and themselves, by coping, rebuilding and moving on.

Discussion questions

1. *Bridge of Sighs* alternates two narratives: Lucy's first-person memoir and the story of Robert Noonan. What are the advantages of this structure? How does it affect the way plot unfolds? Does it influence your impressions of the main characters?
2. How does Lucy's description of Thomaston [pp.9–11] create an immediate sense of time and place? What details did you find particularly evocative? What does Lucy's tone, as well as the way he presents various facts about Thomaston and its history, reveal about his perceptiveness and his intelligence?
3. Lucy says, "I've always known that there's more going on inside me than finds its way into the world, but this is probably true of everyone. Who doesn't regret that he isn't more fully understood?" [p. 12].

To what extent does this feeling lie at the heart of his decision to write his book? Does it play a central role in memoir-writing in general? What else does Lucy hope to accomplish by recalling his past? At the beginning, does he see the dangers, as well as the benefits, of examining his life and the people and events that shaped him?

4. The horrific prank the neighborhood boys play on Lucy [pp. 21–30] triggers the first of many “spells” he will have throughout his life. What is the significance of his spells? What do they reveal about the emotional attachments, anxieties, and doubts that define him both as a child and as an adult?

5. Lucy makes many references to the pursuit of the American Dream and its implications within his own family and in society in general [pp. 52–55, 78, 92–93, for example]. In what ways did American attitudes in the postwar years embody both the best parts of our national character and its darker undercurrents? What incidents in the novel illuminate the uneasiness and enmity that results from the class, racial, and economic divisions in Thomaston? Do Lucy’s beliefs, judgments, and achievements (as a businessman and as a happily married husband and father) color his reconstruction of these events?

6. Unlike Lucy’s story, Noonan’s story is told in the third person. Is the change of voice a literary device, a way of adding variety to the novel, or does it serve another purpose? In what ways does it help to convey

the basic difference between Lucy and Noonan and the way they see themselves and their place in the world? Compare the tone and language Russo uses in creating Lucy's voice with the style he uses in his portraits of Noonan. What aspects of Noonan's character and personality come to life in his conversations with his art dealer and his mistress [pp. 35–51]; his reactions to Lucy's missives [pp. 131–134] and to Mr. Berg's class in high school [pp. 310–314]; and, ultimately, his thoughts and behavior on arriving in New York [pp. 500–508].

7. Lucy and Bobby [p. 130 and p. 141–142 respectively] attempt to explain why their lives—and Sarah's—have turned out the way they have. Do you agree with Lucy that "To see a life back to front, as everyone begins to do in middle age, is to strip it of its mystery and wrap it in inevitability, drama's enemy"? To what extent does Bobby share this view? Why does Bobby see himself as being in control of his life in a way that neither Sarah nor Lucy is? Is this a result of his background and the circumstances that forced him to prepare himself for a second act? From the evidence in the book, is it accurate to describe Lucy as a passive participant in life, and Bobby as a man who actively responds to events, rather than becoming a pawn—or a victim—of things beyond his control?

8. Tessa is the practical, steady member of the Lynch family. In what ways does her behavior reflect her

own choices, needs, and desires, and in what ways are these determined by the time and place in which she lives? What qualities make her stand out, not only in Lucy's eyes, but also within the community as a whole?

9. Does Lucy's identification with his father distort his image of his mother and his understanding of her strengths and her weaknesses? Beyond her immediate anger, what drives her to tell Lucy, "I *never* wanted you to not to love your father. . . . I wanted you to love *me*. . . . Did it ever occur to you, even once during all those years, that you might have taken *my* side? That *I* might have needed a friend?" [p. 217]? Is this a valid criticism, or is Tessa herself responsible, either inadvertently or intentionally, for the differences between Lucy's relationships with each parent?

10. Sarah comes from an unconventional family, especially in the context of Thomaston. Is her ability to deal with the eccentricities of her parents and the summer/winter living arrangements they established unusual? In what ways does she not only adapt to but also benefit from the very things that set her apart? Is her attraction to the Lynches in part a reaction to her dysfunctional family?

11. Are Mr. Berg's obsessions—with perpetuating his image as a rebel, with the "great" book he is writing, and with his failed marriage—sympathetically drawn? What is the significance of the fact that he is Jewish?

What biases, both good and bad, do the people of Thomaston (including Lucy) have about Jews and what impact does this have on Berg and his reputation within the community?

12. What role does her mother play in Sarah's sense of self? What are the implications of her views on marriage [p.326]? Do they influence Sarah's feelings about her own marriage and that of her in-laws? Why is Sarah drawn back to the home she shared with her mother when she faces a crisis in her relationship with Lucy [pp. 464–499]? What does she learn by revisiting the past?

13. What traits do Tessa and Sarah share? In what ways do their marriages mirror one another? Do you think either—or both—foolishly gave up their own dreams and desires, sacrificing a life of adventure and sexual passion for the love and security of a “good” man? Behind their apparent contentment, are there indications that they regret the choices they made?

14. The Bridge of Sighs in Venice connects the Doge Palace to an adjacent prison, and, as Lucy relates, “Crossing this bridge, the convicts—at least the ones without money or influence—came to understand that all hope was lost” [p. 320]. How does the historical function of the bridge, as well as the myths surrounding it, relate to characters' lives? Why has Russo chosen it as the title of the novel?

15. Does the ending bring the various threads of the novel to a satisfactory conclusion? What would have happened if Lucy, Sarah, and Noonan had met again after so many years? In what ways are their memories and imaginings a more powerful—and truer—version of reality?

16. In an interview Russo said, “The future and the past are repeatedly getting mixed up in people’s minds. They think that which is gone is going to come back” (Powells.com). Which characters *Bridge of Sighs* are particularly prone to getting the past and the future mixed up? Do any of the characters fully escape this way of thinking?

17. Richard Russo has written about small towns throughout his career. What are some similarities between *Bridge of Sighs* and previous novels like *Empire Falls* and *Nobody’s Fool*? In what ways does *Bridge of Sighs* enhance and expand the portrait of America that is so central to Russo’s writing?

Readalikes

***Please Don’t Come Back from the Moon* by Dean Bakopoulis** Men mysteriously disappear from a working-class suburb of Detroit, leaving their wives and children behind. Michael, one of those abandoned, must grow up in a hurry.

***The Island Walkers* by John Bemrose** In a Canadian mill town in the 1960's, a union organizer tries to convince workers to come together to protect themselves from their textile conglomerate employer.

***Brownsville: Stories* by Oscar Casares** Set in a Texas border town, these stories evoke the humor and pathos of middle-aged Latino men and their neighborhood dramas.

The Chisellers* by Brendan O'Carroll** Agnes Browne, single mom, raises six children in public housing in Dublin. Second in a trilogy; the first titled ***The Mammy.

***North River* by Pete Hamill** Dr. James Delaney lives in Greenwich Village during the Depression where he ministers to his grandson who has been abandoned by his mother and tries to fend off corruption and exploitation in a city torn apart by poverty.

***Edson* by Bill Morrissey** In a first novel by a popular folk songwriter, folk musician, Henry Corvine who, after years of touring, quits after feeling like he's sold out to the corporate world. He moves back to Edson, New Hampshire, a dying mill town where he finds friendship and hope.

