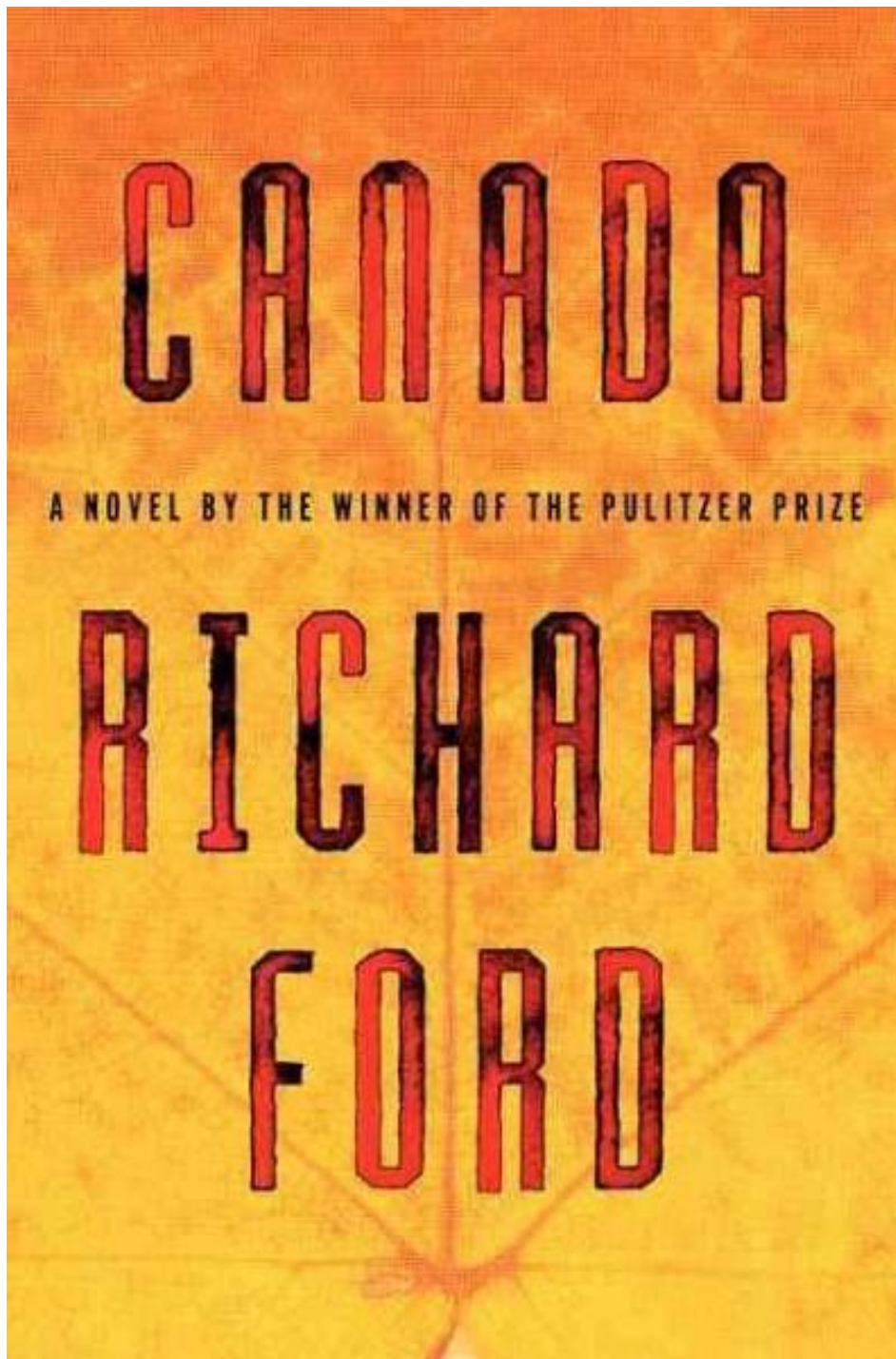


## About the book...

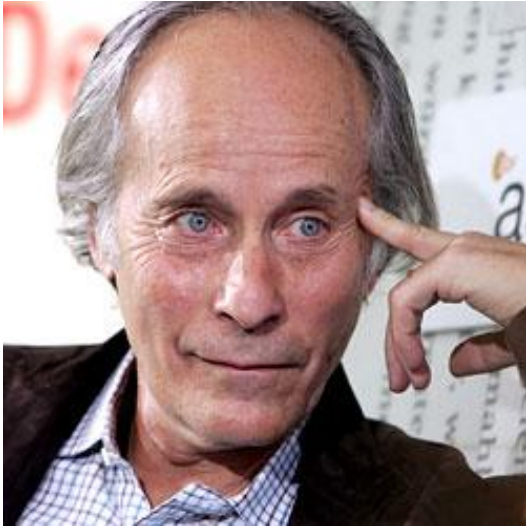


When fifteen-year-old Dell Parsons' parents rob a bank, his sense of normal life is forever altered. In an instant, this private cataclysm drives his life into before and after, a threshold that can never be uncrossed.

His parents' arrest and imprisonment mean a threatening and uncertain future for Dell and his twin sister, Berner. Willful and burning with resentment, Berner flees their home in Montana, abandoning her brother and her life. But Dell is not completely alone. A family friend intervenes, spiriting him across the Canadian border, in hopes of delivering him to a better life. There, afloat on the prairie of Saskatchewan, Dell is taken in by Arthur Remlinger, an enigmatic and charismatic American whose cool reserve masks a dark and violent nature.

A true masterwork of haunting and spectacular vision from one of our greatest writers, *Canada* is a profound novel of boundaries traversed, innocence lost and reconciled, and the mysterious and consoling bonds of family. Told in spare, elegant prose, both resonant and luminous, it is destined to become a classic.

**About the author...** (<http://www.bookbrowse.com/>)



Richard Ford was born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1944, the only child of a traveling salesman for a starch company, and was raised in Mississippi and in Arkansas. He went to college at Michigan State University, where he met Kristina Hensley, to whom he

has been married since 1968. Ford attended law school very briefly before entering the University of California at Irvine, where he received his M.F.A. in writing in 1970.

After publishing two novels, [\*A Piece of My Heart\*](#) (1976) and *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), Ford took a job writing for *Inside Sports Magazine*. When the magazine was sold, he decided to write a book about a sportswriter; the resulting novel, published in 1986, received widespread acclaim: it was named one of five best books of 1986 by *Time* magazine. [\*The Sportswriter\*](#) was followed by [\*Rock Springs\*](#) (1987), a highly praised book of short stories, and in 1990 by a

novel set in Great Falls, Montana, called [Wildlife](#). His previous novel, [Independence Day](#), won the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, the first novel ever to win both awards. In 2012 he published [Canada](#), his first stand-alone novel since [Wildlife](#).

In addition to his steady production of fiction, Ford has also taught writing and literature at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, at Princeton University, and at Williams College.

Ford lives in New Orleans, Louisiana, where his wife, Kristina, is the head of the city planning commission. He travels frequently and also spends time on a plantation in the Mississippi Delta and at his cabin in Chinook, Montana.

## **Awards**

2013 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence for [Canada](#)

## **Reviews**

*Booklist*

After 15-year-old Dell Parsons' parents rob a bank and are arrested, the trajectory of his life is forever altered. He and his twin sister, Berner, are left to forge their own futures while still reeling from the shock of their parents' desperate act. Berner, burning with resentment, takes off for the West Coast, while a family friend makes arrangements for Dell to hide in Canada. But what Dell discovers in Canada, while in the employ of a mysterious Harvard-educated American with a violent streak, is to take nothing for granted, for "every pillar of the belief the world rests on may or may not be about to explode." Why Dell not only survives his traumatic adolescence but manages to thrive, while Berner, seemingly more worldly, succumbs to drink and a fractured existence is just one of the many questions Ford posits. In subdued, even flat, prose, Ford lays out the central mysteries of Dell's young life, and although the narrative voice here is neither as compelling nor as rich as that found in Ford's great Bascombe trilogy, devoted Ford fans will find that it resonates well beyond the page.

*Library Journal*

Since winning the Pulitzer Prize for his 1995 novel, *Independence Day*, Ford has cultivated a reputation for writing lucid and compelling prose. Here, he lives up to

that reputation. The story unfolds around 15-year-old Dell Parsons, whose world collapses when his parents are jailed for a bank robbery, his twin sister flees, and he is transported across the border by a family friend to an obscure town in Canada. With detailed descriptions of place, Ford connects Dell's feelings of abandonment with the equally desolate setting of a remote Canadian landscape. The novel is pervaded by a profound sense of loss of connectedness, of familiarity, of family, set against a profound sense of discovery. By piecing together the random events in his life, Dell transcends the borders within himself to find a philosophy of life that is both fluid and cohesive. VERDICT Segmented into three parts, the narrative slowly builds into a gripping commentary on life's biggest question: Why are we here? Ford's latest work successfully expands our understanding of and sympathy for humankind.

### *BookPage Reviews*

#### **A new life beyond the border**

A reader might speak of Richard Ford's haunting and uplifting new novel, *Canada*, in terms of magic, mood and morality. But Ford himself talks about the novel he has been thinking about for 20 years mostly in terms of technique: diction, sustaining an illusion and obsessive devotion to the hard work of his craft.

"It's hard for me not to fasten down on things," Ford says during a call to his office at the University of Mississippi, where he is teaching creative writing this year. He has been good-humoredly describing how earlier in the day he stopped the HarperCollins presses to correct a few smallish errors in the book. "I'm dyslexic. So in order to function at all, I've had to teach myself to be extremely disciplined. I mean I don't touch anything that it doesn't get a mistake riven into it somehow. I mistype, I reverse letters. One of the odd things about dyslexia is that what your eye sees will not register in your brain. It's a well-known phenomenon, but it has advantages, too, I will tell you. The need to so intensely concentrate on every word is good, because that is how you'd like to be responsible as a writer."

Of course, great powers of concentration and a keen sense of responsibility don't come close to explaining how Ford has become one of America's best contemporary fiction writers. But it's a start.

Ford gained widespread acclaim for *The Sportswriter* (1986), the first novel in his Frank Bascombe trilogy, and won a Pulitzer Prize for its sequel, *Independence Day* (1995). *Canada*, Ford's 10th work of fiction, is, quite simply, his best book to date.

*"Suddenly life is broken and it goes another way, and you never get to come back to that again."*

Set in Montana and Saskatchewan in 1960, **Canada** tells the story of 15-year-old Dell Parsons, whose middle-class parents—an unlikely romantic combo and even more unlikely pair of criminals—rob a bank in Montana and are quickly arrested and imprisoned. Abandoned to their own devices, Dell and his twin sister Berner go their separate ways. The rebellious, sexually precocious Berner heads to San Francisco, almost though not exactly with flowers in her hair. Dell, whose tale this is, is spirited away from social-service authorities and taken to Saskatchewan by his mother’s friend, where he falls under the spell of a charismatic American ex-pat named Remlinger who turns out to be an embodiment of chaos and violence. *Canada* is ultimately about Dell’s consequential choice to make a decent life for himself.

“I was sitting around in a little wheat prairie town called Dutton, Montana, waiting for my editor Gary Fisketjon to send me back the edited manuscript for *Wildlife* [1990],” Ford says of the origins of the novel. “Just twiddling my thumbs. So I rented a little room above a car repair, and I started writing a story about a kid who somehow or other was made to leave his parents and is somehow or another taken to Canada. Then after five or six days, here comes the edited manuscript, so I set the book aside.”  
But the idea didn’t go away.



“I’m a person who for better or worse when I write a book I think I have basically written all I know on the subject. But then my mind goes on playing over things. So 20 years later I come back to certain kinds of formal features, certain kinds of tonalities and I want to see if I can extend this whole thing further and better. In the intervening 20 years, I kept on squirreling away notes on this story, without ever going back and looking at it. And I wanted to write about Saskatchewan and I wanted to be able to tell it in the first person and I wanted it to be more active, more antic than *Wildlife*. I wanted guns to go off. I wanted big actions to take place. Henry James talks about the germ of a story. I had a whole phylum of germs.”

From these seeds, Ford grows a story that seems to be heading in one direction until it veers sharply in another. It’s a shift that will cause readers to catch their breath.

“I very much wanted the move from part one to part two to be abrupt and for the book to change. Because to me that’s consonant with the way kids sometime experience life. Suddenly life is broken and it goes another way, and you never get to come back to that again.”

But as dramatic as its turn of events are for Dell, *Canada* is also remarkable for Ford's great descriptive powers. In Ford's telling, the vast western landscape of the United States and Canada is both physically tangible and resonant with meaning. It's a landscape Ford knows well.

"Ray Carver and I used to go up to Saskatchewan and go goose hunting, so I have been all over that landscape for 20 years. You could say that was research, but more than research it was just living life. For me life comes first and writing comes second. I hardly ever go someplace with the intention of writing about it. But if I start to write about something and feel I don't know enough about it, I'll go look. I did that several times. I would take forays up there with my tape recorder and drive the roads that I knew would be in the novel and record what I saw and how I felt about the things I saw."

After these forays, Ford would return to a rather spare writing room, a former boat repair shop, on Linekin Bay in Maine to work on the book. Ford and his wife, Kristina Hensley, have lived in Maine since 1999. Ford, who is 68, was born in Mississippi and considers himself a Mississippian, but he has lived all over the U.S. as Hensley pursued her career.

Most recently she was head of city planning in New Orleans and then chief of staff for that city's post-Katrina renewal project. Next year, if the logistics

work, the couple will have a joint appointment at Columbia University.

Ford and Hensley have been married 44 years. "She's my first reader," Ford says. "Always has been." He has dedicated each and every one of his books to her.

Returning to the new book, Ford says he found writing the end of part two, where Dell witnesses and is implicated in a gratuitous murder, "actually quite elevating."

Why?

"Because it allowed me to take human behavior that was in some ways like any other human behavior—I mean people do rob banks, as Dell keeps saying. Kids do get abandoned. People do murder other people for completely stupid reasons—and have an opportunity to say provisionally, as all novels are provisional, what the human consequences of this are. We think conventional wisdom tells us what the human consequences are, and we rely on that. Yet to try to invent new consequences, to try to see the consequences through new eyes, made me try to take my book beyond the duff of just murders and bank robberies and abandonment."

Part of the magic of *Canada* is that it does indeed take a reader "beyond the duff" of plot and story into some new emotional and moral terrain. *Canada* is about a

boy crossing all kinds of borders, physical and metaphorical, and coming to hard choices about how to lead life as a full human being.

Ford seems reluctant to wear the label but he does admit that his type of realistic fiction does have a moral purpose. "Realistic fiction—and probably any art, whether it's realistic or not—has as one of its moral goals to bring us closer to life and make us value it more and see it more clearly. And that is what I've grown to want to do."

The remarkable *Canada* achieves that goal.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

A great American novel by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author. This is Ford's first novel since concluding the Frank Bascombe trilogy, which began with *The Sportswriter* (1986), peaked with the prize-winning *Independence Day* (1995) and concluded with *The Lay of the Land* (2006). That series was for Ford what the Rabbit novels were for Updike, making this ambitious return to long-form fiction seem like something of a fresh start, but also a thematic culmination. Despite its title, the novel is as essentially all-American as *Independence Day*. Typically for Ford, the focus is as much on the perspective (and limitations) of its protagonist as it is on the issues that the narrative addresses. The first-person narrator is Dell Parsons, a

15-year-old living in Montana with his twin sister when their parents--perhaps inexplicably, perhaps inevitably--commit an ill-conceived bank robbery. Before becoming wards of the state, the more willful sister runs away with her boyfriend, while Dell is taken across the border to Canada, where he will establish a new life for himself after crossing another border, from innocent bystander to reluctant complicity. The first half of the novel takes place in Montana and the second in Canada, but the entire narrative is Dell's reflection, 50 years later, on the eve of his retirement as a teacher. As he ruminates on character and destiny, and ponders "how close evil is to the normal goings-on that have nothing to do with evil," he also mediates between his innocence as an uncommonly naïve teenager and whatever wisdom he has gleaned through decades of experience. Dell's perspective may well be singular and skewed, but it's articulate without being particularly perceptive or reflective. And it's the only one we have. In a particularly illuminating parenthetical aside, he confesses, "I was experiencing great confusion about what was happening, having had no experience like this in my life. I should not be faulted for not understanding what I saw." At the start of the novel's coda, when Dell explains that he teaches his students "books that to me seem secretly about my young life," he begins the list with *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*. Such comparisons seem well-earned.

### *Publishers Weekly*

A great American novel by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author. This is Ford's first novel since concluding the Frank Bascombe trilogy, which began with *The Sportswriter* (1986), peaked with the prize-winning *Independence Day* (1995) and concluded with *The Lay of the Land* (2006). That series was for Ford what the Rabbit novels were for Updike, making this ambitious return to long-form fiction seem like something of a fresh start, but also a thematic culmination. Despite its title, the novel is as essentially all-American as *Independence Day*. Typically for Ford, the focus is as much on the perspective (and limitations) of its protagonist as it is on the issues that the narrative addresses. The first-person narrator is Dell Parsons, a 15-year-old living in Montana with his twin sister when their parents--perhaps inexplicably, perhaps inevitably--commit an ill-conceived bank robbery. Before becoming wards of the state, the more willful sister runs away with her boyfriend, while Dell is taken across the border to Canada, where he will establish a new life for himself after crossing another border, from innocent bystander to reluctant complicity. The first half of the novel takes place in Montana and the second in Canada, but the entire narrative is Dell's reflection, 50 years later, on the eve of his retirement as a teacher. As he ruminates on character and

destiny, and ponders "how close evil is to the normal goings-on that have nothing to do with evil," he also mediates between his innocence as an uncommonly naïve teenager and whatever wisdom he has gleaned through decades of experience. Dell's perspective may well be singular and skewed, but it's articulate without being particularly perceptive or reflective. And it's the only one we have. In a particularly illuminating parenthetical aside, he confesses, "I was experiencing great confusion about what was happening, having had no experience like this in my life. I should not be faulted for not understanding what I saw." At the start of the novel's coda, when Dell explains that he teaches his students "books that to me seem secretly about my young life," he begins the list with *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Great Gatsby*. Such comparisons seem well-earned.

## **Discussion questions**

(<http://whatsmartwomenread.com/books/canada/>)

1. Why does Ford set Part I in the U.S. and Part II in Canada? Does this say something about Dell's crossing from innocence to experience? Does it speak to the relationship between the two countries?

2. Does the author spoil the novel by revealing the robbery in the first paragraph?
3. In what way is this novel a family story? How would you describe Bev and Neeva and their marriage?
4. How do Dell and Berner cope with their family's isolation? How do you account for the differences in their coping mechanisms?
5. Why does Ford have Dell and Berner engage in an incestuous act? What does that add to the novel?
6. What are Dell's 'uncreated ideas about the world' (page 317) and what is the importance of 'reverse-thinking'? (page 386)
7. What does Dell learn from Remlinger?
8. Why are there three parts to this novel? Does it have something to do with Ruskin's statement that 'composition is the arrangement of unequal things'?



9. Last, consider the ending of the novel. How does Dell reconcile his feelings about his family history?

### **Further Reading:**

Frank Bascombe trilogy by Richard Ford

[The Sportswriter](#) (1986)

[Independence Day](#) (1995)

[The Lay of the Land](#) (2006)

### **Readalikes:**

[Dirt](#) by David Vann (**2012**)

In this novel, author David Vann tells a disturbing story of mental instability and family dysfunction. Galen, 22, lives with his mother, Suzie-Q, in the aging family home near Sacramento. His grandfather dead and his grandmother in a long-term care facility, Galen spends his days in the company of his mother. The monotony of their existence, financed by a trust fund, is broken occasionally by visits from Aunt Helen and teenage cousin Jennifer. Galen is sexually attracted to Jennifer, and Jennifer uses that fact to her advantage. In addition to the cravings Galen feels for his cousin,

the disturbed young man also yearns for release from the constraints of his physical existence. Gradually, the depths of Galen's depravity and the family's dysfunction are revealed.

[\*Heading Out to Wonderful\*](#) by Robert Goolrick (2012)

In this novel by Robert Goolrick, World War II vet Charlie Beale arrives in Brownsburg, Virginia, in 1948 with a large stash of cash and a collection of butcher knives. He finds work at Will Haislett's butcher shop and takes on five-year-old Sam Haislett as his companion and confidante. In that role, young Sam is privy to Charlie's relationships with the people of his tiny new town. Although Charlie can never quite fit into the tight-knit community, he finds friendship and forbidden love with Sylvan Glass, the scandalously young bride of local tycoon Boaty Glass. Their ill-fated affair will have tragic consequences for Charlie, Sylvan, and the residents of Brownsburg, including the innocent young witness, Sam Haislett.

[\*Island Apart\*](#) by Steven Raichlen (2012)

Claire Doheney is a book editor who is house sitting in Martha's Vineyard as she battles cancer, seeking a

calm and quiet setting where she can finish her passion project--a biography of a famous psychotherapist. Into her life comes a mysterious man known locally as the Hermit. As Claire and the Hermit grow closer, they share their love of cooking and embark on a passionate affair. Soon, it becomes apparent that the Hermit is hiding a secret so explosive that it threatens to destroy their unexpected romance. Will Claire's long-dormant heart remain open, or will she lose what might be her last chance at love?

[\*The Orchardist\*](#) by Amanda Coplin (2012)

William Talmadge is a good man who keeps to himself and wouldn't hurt a soul. He is an orchardist, a man who takes care of his apple and apricot trees as though they were members of his family. When he finds two young girls stealing from him, his first instinct is not to yell at them or shoot at them to scare them away from his property. Instead, when the stealing becomes frequent, he invites them in. Finding that both are pregnant teenagers, he takes care of them with the same gentleness he shows his orchards. Just as the group begins to feel like family, several

men arrive, toting guns and unafraid to shoot. What happens next will scar Talmadge for the rest of his life.

