

"the sportswriter" by
richard ford: a rarity in
american literature
essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

" The Sportswriter" by Richard Ford: A Rarity in American Literature

The Sportswriter" by Richard Ford is a novel which stands out in American literature.

Its uniqueness lies in its protagonist, Frank Bascombe. In American literature, most characters were depicted as tortured individuals who resist change and attempt to manipulate fate in their favor. On the contrary, Ford's main character does not fit in this stereotype. He is optimistic and adaptable to change. Frank does not try to control his life; rather, he embraces all of life's difficulties and blessings. It is the admirable character of Frank Bascombe which makes " The Sportswriter" by Richard Ford a notable literary piece.

Compared to other works of American literature, " The Sportswriter" proves to be standout. Bruce Weber, a contributor for The New York Times Magazine, once noted that " The Sportswriter" was " a departure from the alienated, often nihilistic spirit that has pervaded much of America's fiction" (qtd. in Dupuy 71). Ford's novel is in contrast to other American texts, as it presents a story about a man who could have lived in sorrow and dwelled in his misfortunes, yet chose not to. According to Dupuy, Ford " has created a new character in the American literary landscape: a happy man" (71). The happy character Ford created was Frank Bascombe. He is man who would not be typically considered as happy; after all, he had reasons to be miserable.

Years prior to his narration, his eldest child Ralph passed away due to Reye's syndrome. After his death, he and his wife, a character identified only as X,

divorced. Death and divorce are events which would naturally result in extreme despair; the loss of a child and wife could make a man feel intense bitterness. However, Frank was neither in despair nor embittered. One would think that after all the unfortunate occurrences he experienced, he would recall his past on a negative light. Instead, he had this to say: " My life over these twelve years has not been and isn't now a bad one at all. In most ways it's been great" (Ford 3-4).

Frank is a man who suffered significant losses yet still considered his life as a great one. It is the fatalistic nature of Frank Bascombe which makes " The Sportswriter" a remarkable piece of American literature. Seiler points out that Ford and the characters he created are " avowed fatalists, happy enough to get through a day without turbulence or tragedy" (61). Unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby or William Faulkner's Quentin Compson, Ford's Frank Bascombe easily surrendered to fate. This does not mean that he is a weak or powerless character; in fact, it is his acceptance of the unexpected nature of life which proved to be his strength. Unlike the aforementioned characters, Frank's story did not end in his demise.

This was because he had a different approach to life. He acknowledged the inherent temporality of life and simply goes along with the changes. He said, " I believe I have done these two things. Faced down regret. Avoided ruin" (4). Frank prevented his own ruin through the appreciation for each day.

Despite the difficulties he went through, he was able to face each day with a sense of optimism. Duffy described him as a character that " while enduring

the unavoidable aggravations and tragedies of a life, retained an unshakeable faith in the potential of life to bring mystery and pleasure" (17). For Frank, every new day is special because of the mysteries inherent in each one. The mystery of everyday afforded him limitless possibilities. Consequently, these possibilities allowed him to have numerous choices as well. Frank said, " A woman I met at the college where I briefly taught, once told me I had too many choices, that I was not driven enough by dire necessity. But that is just an illusion and her mistake. Choices are all we need" (Ford 7). Frank looked forward to every day for the choices it presented. Instead of sulking over his losses, he focused on the choices available for him to proceed. Frank continued, " Things I don't know anything about but might like are here, possibly waiting for me" (Ford 7). His optimistic attitude on life was evident when he spoke of his relationship with X.

Frank narrated, " her mother still writes me regularly and believes X and I will eventually reconcile, which seems as possible as anything else" (Ford 8). Aside from his belief in the possibilities of everyday, it was Frank's adaptability to change which allowed him to live a meaningful life despite his personal tragedies. The other heroes of American literature are known to have manipulated their lives and redirected it towards a specific end. While they have lived their lives in accordance to their goals, they were still met with failure. Frank never encountered this sort of failure, for he did not try to control his life. He knew everything was temporary, so he prepared himself for change.

Frank realized early on that change was always possible and that he must be always ready to confront it. Frank narrated, " it seemed to me as though a change were on its way, as if this dreaminess tinged with expectation, which I have felt for some time now" (Ford 5). His acknowledgment of change made him easily adaptable to both triumphs and misfortunes. He knew that if he can adapt to the changes, it would be easier for him to proceed in his life.

It was Frank's attitude towards change that caused Price to describe " The Sportswriter" as " an exploration of an individual's accommodation to the changed cultural spaces of contemporary America" (261). The fatalistic attitude of Frank was most evident in his approach to death. When the novel started, Frank was waiting for his ex-wife in the cemetery where they were supposed to meet up at Ralph's grave to commemorate what would have been his 13th birthday. He said, " It is simply that I don't know how to mourn and neither does X" (Ford 11). Frank's inability to mourn is linked to his appreciation for everyday and adaptability to change. There is a reason why he does not know how to mourn; it is imply because he cannot. A man like Frank who cherishes each day for the mystery and possibilities it brings simply cannot grieve. Also, his adaptable nature made the loss of his son bearable; this allowed him to properly move on with his life.

This is not to say that Frank was not affected by the loss. He was deeply hurt by the death. However, he did not cling to the pain he felt. He simply acknowledged the reality of such loss, adapted to it and moved on. Frank mused, " Sometimes we do not really become adults until we suffer a good whacking loss, and our lives in a sense catch up with us and wash over us <https://assignbuster.com/the-sportswriter-by-richard-ford-a-rarity-in-american-literature-essay/>

like a wave and everything goes" (Ford 9). Instead of responding negatively to his son's death, Frank chose to see it as an opportunity for growth. He felt that the loss was necessary for him to develop into a better person.

He considered the event that could have led him to his ruin as a chance to become a better individual. How does a fatalistic character like Frank Bascombe make "The Sportswriter" an outstanding novel? The novel deviates from the norm of American literature and offers the readers an individual they could emulate. Unlike other books which showcase nihilistic characters, the novel gives you a man like Frank, one which offers hope and optimism.

Such character makes the reader believe that one is able to go through the difficulties in life and emerge undefeated. Through Frank's character, Ford was able to show people that it is possible to have a relevant existence after hardships. No matter what kind of misfortune one is faced, the right attitude could bring life back together. A character like Frank Bascombe not only challenges the stereotype of American literature protagonists, it also makes a strong statement to the audience. "The Sportswriter" by Richard Ford is one of American literature's finest pieces. Its greatness is mostly due to Frank Bascombe, the protagonist. He is a character which proves to be different from the rest.

His fatalistic attitude and positive outlook in life makes him truly admirable. Though he was a man who had been through painful losses, he did not let his struggles dominate his life. It was the nature of Frank Bascombe's character which made "The Sportswriter" the great novel that it is. Works Cited Duffy,

Brian. *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford*. New York: Rodopi, 2008. Dupuy, Edward. "The Confessions of an Ex-Suicide: Relenting and Recovering in Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*."

"Perspectives on Richard Ford. Ed. Huey Guagliardo. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2000.

71-81. Ford, Richard. *The Sportswriter*.

New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Price, Joanna. "Richard Ford: The Postmodern Exile and the Vanishing South." *The World is Our Home: Society and Culture in Contemporary Southern Writing*.

Ed. Nancy Summers Folks. Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2000.

259-272.

Seiler, Casey. "Richard Ford: From Mississippi to Montana, the Author of *The Sportswriter* and *Rock Springs* Crafts Fiction from the Heartland."

Conversations with Richard Ford. Ed.

Huey Guagliardo. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 61-65.