

Breaking away from
the breaks: a
biographical analysis
of richard price



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Richard Price is an accomplished novelist and screenwriter, writing his first novel *The Wanderers* while he was attending Columbia University. After this impressive debut he wrote several more novels in quick succession including *Bloodbrothers*, *Ladies' Man*, and *The Breaks*. *The Breaks*, written in 1983, was a novel loosely based on his experience at Cornell University. He has said that *The Breaks* was “[t]he hardest book for me ever to write, and the least satisfying” (“*The Art of Fiction*”). After writing this novel he struggled as a novelist and turned to screenwriting for movies and television series. While continuing to be a screenwriter, Price returned to writing novels with his famous work, *The Clockers*. Price admits that his reason for turning to screenwriting after writing *The Breaks* was due to his inability to come up with new material. This novel was an influential point in Price’s career because it led him to explore a different route in his writing and helped him create new material later in life. While Price admits that *The Breaks* was his least satisfying novel, it shows his talent as a novelist because it helped shape his writing later in his life and influenced him to change his technique.

Richard Price’s first three novels contained autobiographical connections to the main character. For example, Peter Keller, the main character in *The Breaks*, studied law in college and chose an entirely different route after graduating; he began teaching but continued to pursue his dream of becoming a comedian. Price had a similar story, intending to go to Cornell to become a lawyer, he chose instead to become a writer. His experience while attending Cornell provided him with the material to write *The Breaks*, intertwining his own story with Peter Keller’s. Price’s style of including autobiographical elements to his first four novels left him with little else to

write about. This novel led Price to exclude his personal story from his writing. In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, Price stated, " I left writing about myself with my first batch of novels because it was getting boring...it smelled of panic" (" Richard Price"). He has since left himself out of his novels, showing that his experience writing *The Breaks* has made him realize that he must experience new things in order to become a better writer.

Price's difficulty and dissatisfaction with *The Breaks* stemmed from multiple factors. One problem Price had was that he was reading another book while writing his own. He read *Sophie's Choice* while trying to complete his novel, which he said " was like trying to sing while somebody else is singing another song in the background" (" The Art of Fiction"). Price said that this caused him to stray off track and lose his focus. Another reason Price had trouble with this novel is because he wrote *The Breaks* to ensure that his name was out there. After publishing two novels almost annually, he felt he had to produce another novel in order to not be forgotten. He stated that " if you have enough talent you'll deliver readable page after readable page after readable page" (" The Art of Fiction"). Price showed this talent with his novel, although he feels that it has no value because it was simply a piece to stall his career from a downward spiral.

After completing *The Breaks*, Richard Price began his career as a screenwriter, using his past experience as a novelist to help him gain success. In Price's interview with James Linville, he states that his reason for accepting his first screenwriting assignment was because of his " feeling that he had cannibalized his own life as a subject matter" (" The Art of Fiction").

Price felt this way because of his first four novels content, especially *The*
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Breaks, with its limited success. Price's career as a screenwriter is impressive, writing for Martin Scorsese and helping create such films as *Sea of Love*, *Kiss of Death*, *Mad Dog*, *Glory*, and *Ransom*. Although Price became successful as a screenwriter, he was still a novelist at heart. Robert Birnbaum asked Price in his 2003 interview if he could stop writing books since he was an established screenwriter, Price replied, "Naw, that's what I do. I mean I would like to think that I could stop writing screenplays" ("Richard Price"). Price cannot simply stop writing screenplays because he has to support his wife and two kids, however, he does not let this stop him from writing novels. Price ended his ten year dry spell by writing his hit, *The Clockers*.

Price's turn to screenwriting after completing *The Breaks* was necessary in order for him to continue his career as a novelist. It is because of his success in the movie industry that pushed him back in the direction of writing novels. When asked about his return to writing novels with *The Clockers*, he stated, "I got an awful lot of confidence back as a writer because my screenplays were well-regarded" ("The Art of Fiction"). This statement shows that Price lacked confidence in his writing after *The Breaks* and needed to regain confidence in himself in order to continue writing. Price also learned from his past novels that it is not always necessary to include autobiographical details into the story. *The Clockers* was his first novel that he did not write about himself, instead he went into the environment he intended to write about to gain a better understanding. He explains his philosophy on the matter in his interview with Robert Birnbaum by stating, "Just go out and learn something. Just hang out and see how good a writer you really are. See if

you can imagine lives not your own" (" Richard Price"). This experience was crucial to his career because it taught him a different perspective on his writing, a perspective he could not have learned had he not wrote *The Breaks*. Price's development as a writer is directly related to the path he chose in his career. His experience as a screenwriter influenced his writing for novels such as *The Clockers*, *Freedomland*, and *Samaritan*. Through this career path he learned this valuable lesson: " I don't have to write about myself all the time. I had a number of assignments for which I had to write about people that were completely outside my sphere, but I learned that if I simply hung out and absorbed their world a bit, I was able to create characters that were compelling and somewhat faithful to their sources" (" The Art of Fiction"). He did not learn this as a novelist and was discouraged about his writing after *The Breaks*. This novel turned Price to the film industry and caused him to reevaluate his technique. The fact that Price was able to learn this only by becoming a screenwriter shows that *The Breaks* was an important piece in his career. Had it been an immature or flawed novel, Price would not have let it influence his decision to change his career. He could have put it behind him, but his talent in writing *The Breaks* accomplished more for him than it could to a reader.

The Breaks played an important role in his life. It was because of this novel that he chose to pursue screenwriting, where he learned invaluable techniques to make him the successful novelist he is today. This novel showed his talent as a novelist because of his ability to regain his passion for writing novels. One could argue that *The Breaks* is a flawed and immature work because it caused him to change his career; however, this novel

strengthened his talent as a writer. He acknowledges that *The Breaks* did not offer a significant point of view or address an important issue that he prefers to write about, but it laid the foundation for his future writing. By understanding Price's career path and history, one can see how influential this novel was to him. Perhaps this novel was not viewed as a masterpiece to his readers, but to Richard Price it is arguably his most important because it shaped who he would become.

Works Cited