

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Date: April 1, 2014

Hosts: Catherine LaCroix, Anne Ogan, and Leigh Fabens

Novel: *Independence Day*, by Richard Ford

Papers:

Biographical: Jill Mushkat (delivered by Ham Emmons)

Critical: Louise Mooney

Spring seemed finally to have arrived on the warm, breezy evening of April 1 as twenty-four members and guests of the novel club gathered at the home of Catherine LaCroix. President Leon Cabinet called the meeting to order at 8:17. Ted Sande asked to introduce a proposal about meeting location. Since the scheduled June meeting hosts do not have space in their homes, they would like to suggest that the last meeting for this season be held at Dunham Tavern, which is available for rental at the rate of \$280 rent + \$15 security deposit. There was some discussion of related issues, and decision was made to postpone decision on this issue until the Annual Meeting, which is scheduled for Sunday, April 27 at 5 p.m. at Jay and Toby Siegel's house. On that topic, Toby Siegel circulated a sign-up sheet for members to choose a contribution to the Annual Meeting meal. Toby noted that there is often a shortage of main dishes among the signups, so people should please consider that—and also remember that a \$10 donation would be accepted in lieu of an in-kind donation.

There was no Treasury report. The Program Committee reported that the selection list for next season is complete and will be electronically distributed in time for members to read the summary descriptions and make choices in advance of the Annual Meeting.

Guests introduced included Jim and Betsy Sampliner, guests of the Siegels, and John Gable, guest of Louise Mooney.

Ham Emmons delivered Jill Mushkat's biographical paper on Richard Ford.

Richard Ford was born in 1944 in Jackson Mississippi, and perhaps partly due to this geographical coincidence has been compared to William Faulkner and to Eudora Welty, to whom he was a friend, literary executor and pall bearer. Ford's father was of Irish descent. Richard was sent to live with his grandparents at the age of eight after his father's first heart attack; the father died when Richard was sixteen. Richard has said that his parents were "nice," and that any bad habits he had, he formed on his own. He lived with his grandparents, who were railroaders. He began his career at Michigan State University studying "hospitality management," but changed his major to

literature. He later spent some time in the Marines, but was discharged with hepatitis. He married his high school sweetheart, who became a business person in her own right. They remained childless by agreement and by choice; Ford has said he hates children. After college Ford tried law school briefly, but then entered University of California at Irvine creative writing program, where he was mentored by E.L. Doctorow. He later taught at Williams and Princeton, and published two 2 novels that were critically well received but not financially successful.

Then in 1986, *The Sportswriter* was declared “one of the best novels of the year.” Subsequently, *Independence Day* won a Pulitzer and Pen Faulkner Award. Since then he has continued to have a successful career in writing, editing, and teaching. Ford’s own life is in some ways parallel to that of Frank Bascombe [whose name, incidentally, is borrowed from Faulkner – Bascombe being the maiden name of Miss Caroline Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*].

Louise Mooney delivered the critical paper on *Independence Day* and provided discussion questions.

Louise noted that although born in Mississippi, Ford is avowedly **not** a “Southern Writer,” a calling others have answered better. He is more appropriately compared to East Coast writers such as Cheever and Updike. He has a distinctive voice, different from the Northeastern bourgeois, more associated with working-class New Jersey.

Independence Day is the second novel in the Bascombe trilogy. Frank Bascombe has appeared first as a promising novelist, then as a sports writer, and now as a real estate salesman. He mourns the loss of his first son and of his marriage. In *Independence Day* he is “in a new era,” having “reinvented himself” as a realtor. At heart he is a man of good will who, while representing sellers, still thinks that when he sells a house he is selling a new life to his customers. The novel mainly follows his ongoing relationships with his ex-wife Ann, now living with her second husband in the sinisterly opulent “Cheever Country” of suburban Connecticut; his current girlfriend Sally Caldwell; and his now fifteen-year-old son Paul.

Ann is overmatched by Paul’s many problems, so she has enlisted Frank to spend some time with Paul over *Independence Day* weekend. Frank takes on the assignment, hoping to foster Self-Reliance in Paul via a baseball-themed tour. The primal father-son confrontation in the Cooperstown batting cage leads to a surgical intervention, nearly successful, which brings the parents to a more understanding condition than before.

Discussion began with a focus on readers’ reactions to the characters of Frank and his son Paul. Paul’s rebelliousness was viewed in the context of his understandable reactions to the death of his brother and the end of his

parents' marriage. Frank's character as a salesman struck some readers as skillfully created, trying both to represent the interest of the sellers and to offer the potential buyers visions and metaphors for the new life they may live in the home he is trying to sell to them. Readers differed as to whether they would or would not be likely to buy a house from Frank Bascombe.

Questions were raised as to how Ford's work compares to that of women writers, and whether his women characters are fully realized. In the course of an extended discussion of the difficulty of typifying gender roles for writers, readers noted that some topics are more typically handled by male or female writers. As to the realization of the female characters, on the one hand it was asserted that the narrator lacks empathy for female characters, but on the other hand noted that this is the first-person narrator's characteristic, not the author's. Additionally, readers argued that the author does after all treat some "feminine interest" topics such as love and marriage, childraising, and homebuying—and does create female characters who seem to be aware of Frank's failings.

In more general discussion, readers found that the comic scenes in the novel add interest and make the book more engaging, but there was division of opinion as to whether the structure of the book was well managed or not. As with *Tristram Shandy* in last month's discussion, some found the idiosyncratic plot construction lifelike and engaging whereas others found it unsatisfying and offputting. Some readers found this approach invoked a typical slice of life, even a mundane existentialism. Some credited Ford with presenting characters who could help readers empathize with emotionally disturbed or psychologically handicapped individuals, while others suggested that the depiction of parent-child relationships reflected the fact that Ford had never been a parent nor wanted to be.

The secondary, subordinate but colorful characters seemed to Louise to offer a sort of Pilgrim's Progress travel-novel structure, within which Frank reaches out to do something good and make life better for each one. Dissenting voices opined that Frank speaks glibly to and negatively about each of these secondary characters, with a negative overall effect.

Later discussion raised questions about the significance of the title (e.g., does this segment of the trilogy ironically represent the opposite of independence for Frank?) and of the symbolic possibilities of pervasive allusions to the Oedipus story and references to the Founding Fathers. By this time the ten o'clock hour had passed, and the meeting adjourned to the refreshment table with likely many more comments still left to be made.