

*The Lay of the Land* by Richard Ford (Bloomsbury)

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Richard Ford first created the character Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter*, then brought him back in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Independence Day*. In this, the third and reputedly the last of the Bascombe series, Ford takes his character into “late middle age”: the books are set roughly ten years apart and Bascombe is now fifty-five. He has had a brush with mortality in the form of prostate cancer; his second wife has left him for her first husband whom she’d assumed to be dead; his son Paul is now twenty-seven, writing witty captions for Hallmark cards in Kansas City, and his twenty-five year old daughter Clarissa has left her girl friend and is trying out straight life with a man almost Paul’s age.

All of this makes for a fraught Thanksgiving – like the previous two novel this one is set around a national holiday – and Frank has plenty on his mind. It is quite a mind: ruminative, contemplative, observant, impressionable and tough at the same time. Much of the novel, in fact, happens inside Frank’s head as he makes his way around Sea-Cliff, the affluent corner of New Jersey in which he practices as real estate agent.

As realtor, Frank imagines himself to be the ultimate realist. In *Independence Day*, he saw himself as living through what he called the Existence Period; here he has opted for the Permanent Period: “the time of life when very little you say comes in quotes, when few contrarian voices mutter doubts in your head, when the past seems more generic than specific, when life’s a destination more than a journey and when who you feel yourself to be is pretty much how people will remember you once you’ve croaked – in other words, when personal integration ... is finally achieved”.

The Permanent Period, as Bascombe progressively defines it in the course of the novel, entails a determined avoidance of dwelling on both past and future: “the Permanent Period helps to cancel out even the most recent past and focuses you onto what else there might be to feel positive about,” Bascombe explains, and, later, “the Permanent Period ... cancel[s] unwanted self-consciousness, dimming fear-of-the-future in favour of the permanent, cutting edge of the present.”

If Bascombe is to be believed, he has attained equanimity and acceptance, theoretically the compensations for having outlived one’s more urgent and insatiable drives and desires. As realtor, he believes, he is also the ultimate realist; he shuns anything that smacks of an attempt to transcend the grittiness of daily life: “I do not credit the epiphanic,” says Bascombe in what seems to be Ford’s deprecation of any comparison with James Joyce, “the seeing-through that reveals all, triggered by a mastering detail. These are lies of the liberal arts to distract us from the more precious here and now.”

But the problem may be that the precious here and now may not be all that Bascombe might wish. His son is inexplicably hostile to him, apart from being overweight and sporting a hideous mullet hairdo; his daughter may be about to depart with her offensively suave older lover; his business associate wants to buy him out, and his prostate is charged with radioactive pellets to subdue the cancer. Above all, Bascombe is haunted by the death of his younger son, Ralph, twenty years earlier.

As the Thanksgiving weekend drags its slow length along, through minor mishaps (Bascombe is thrown out of a lesbian bar because the bartender mistakes his emotional

breakdown for drunkenness) and major catastrophes (a shoot-out involving homicidal Russian teenage twins), not to mention the spoiling of the turkey, Bascombe comes to realise that “All these years and modes of accommodation, of coping, ... -- these now seem *not* to be forms of acceptance the way I thought, but forms of fearful nonacceptance, the laughing/grimacing masks of denial”. What he has been denying is the real meaning of Ralph’s death: “It’s not Ralph’s death that’s woven into everything like a secret key, it’s his *not death*, the *not* permanence.” The past cannot be tidied up into some lumber room of memory; it remains present, and must be accepted as that. Having decided that “the Permanent period doesn’t work”, Bascombe now invents the Next Level: his task is to “take on myself the responsibilities of the Next Level – that life can’t be escaped and must be faced entire.”

No matter that the Next Level does not seem all that different from the Permanent Period; in Ford’s book, all subterfuges are honourable that are designed to deal with “this toilsome, maybe not entirely bad life”.

In its free-wheeling style and wry optimism *The Lay of the Land* has something of the Saul Bellow of *The Adventures of Augie March*; indeed, Bascombe’s determination to face life recalls Augie’s resolve “not to lead a disappointed life”. Ford, like Bellow, renders with exuberance, passion and some terrific writing the whole shapeless sprawl, the rampant energy and the strange melancholy of America. “Something essential and ineffable has been erased,” says Bascombe, “and the world knows it and can’t be consoled.” *The Lay of the Land* is both a splendid celebration of what the land has achieved and a moving elegy for what it has lost.