Ode to a Night Game: Popular Culture and Irony in Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter*

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Irony in sixties art and culture started out the same way youthful rebellion did. It was difficult and painful, and productive—a grim diagnosis of a long-denied disease (Wallace 66). But as novelist and critic David Foster Wallace wrote in his influential 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” the decades dragged by without the diagnosis ever leading to a remedy.

How have irony, irreverence, and rebellion come to be not liberating but enfeebling in the culture today’s avant-garde tried to write about? One clue’s to be found in the fact that irony is still around, bigger than ever after 30 long years as the dominant mode of hip expression. It’s not a rhetorical mode that wears well.... This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks. (67)

The recent publication of *The Lay of the Land* (2006), Richard Ford’s third novel of American Everyman Frank Bascombe, invites us to consider these words again. Beginning with *The Sportswriter* (1986), Ford’s first-person narrator has issued dispatches from each of the last three decades, books thick with references to the popular culture which has been the favorite target of ironists since the time of

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Andy Warhol. All three Bascombe novels have won major awards, and the second volume *Independence Day* (1996) was the first novel ever to win both the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Pulitzer Prize.¹ But it is not an accolade that best sums up the relation of the Bascombe novels to America’s irony-mad culture; rather, it is Blake Bailey’s puzzled reaction (in a review of the newest novel) to Bascombe’s narrative voice: “Wait, is he kidding or not?”

For the same question, applied to Ford himself, is one to which critics have never been able to agree on an answer. Either the Bascombe novels are ironic commentaries on middle-class American culture, or they comprise a rare dissent from the “mode of hip expression” whose dominance—in spite of post-9/11 pronouncements of the “end of the Age of Irony”²—continues today. In addressing this question I will focus on *The Sportswriter*, concurring with David Ulin that *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land* can be seen as a kind of extended coda to the first and seminal Bascombe novel:

Sixteen years ago [before the publication of *Independence Day*], [Ford] seemed poised to do anything, an author of many voices, many sensibilities. Since then, his work has seemed, at times, a matter of retrenchment, more about returning than looking ahead.

Moreover, it is in *The Sportswriter* that Ford establishes the personal circumstances that make Frank Bascombe the source of the books’ contradictions. A failed novelist whose narrative is itself a novel, Bascombe claims “that there are no transcendent themes in life. In all cases things are here and they’re over, and that has to be enough” (16). If from this we expect a Hemingwayesque novel of tersely rendered action, we may be as disappointed in Ford as critics like Paul Marx, who writes, “The overlay of philosophy only throws a fog over his great scenes” (79).

For Frank Bascombe does love to philosophize—a tendency whose source may be found in the gauntlet Ford took up when he created the character. In the early 1980s the Mississippi native was living with his wife, Kristina Hensley, in suburban New Jersey, and his mother was terminally ill. He had published two bleak, vaguely Faulknerian novels which had been met with critical ambivalence and popular indifference, books that he himself saw as a dead end: “By the time 1982 rolled around, I realized I could no longer sustain identifying darkness with
drama. I just sort of ground to a halt” (qtd. in Levasseur and Rabalais 133). For a while he gave up fiction altogether, writing instead for a soon-to-be-defunct sports magazine. Finally, in the wake of his mother’s death, Kristina offered him an inspirational challenge: to write a novel about a happy man. As he later told Bruce Weber in an interview, “Jesus, I hadn’t done that up to then. And I thought, ‘What would a man do if he were living a happy life? What job would he have? Hell, he’d be a sportswriter! What else?’ ” (54)

The novel he wrote—and which proved to be his breakthrough book—was almost certainly not what his wife had in mind. Like Ford in 1982, Frank Bascombe is a displaced Southerner, a law-school dropout and a failed novelist. Suburban New Jersey provides most of the setting, while Ford’s deceased mother is replaced by a young son who has died of Reye’s syndrome. (Ford and Hensley have no children.) Bascombe is divorced from his wife, who is referred to in the book only as X. Except for its numerous flashbacks, the novel is written in the present tense, giving us the impression that Bascombe is putting events to paper more or less as they happen. Though he has several years’ distance from the loss of his son Ralph and the ensuing divorce from X, he has none from the Easter weekend during which the bulk of the novel unfolds, with a second death awaiting him at its end. As if all this were not enough, at thirty-eight Bascombe is facing down the end of his youth. Yet throughout the novel he repeatedly tells us he is happy.

Many critics have taken him at his word. “Richard Ford is on to something,” writes Edward Dupuy. “In his third novel, The Sportswriter, he has created a new character in the American literary landscape: a happy man” (93). Weber recalls that the novel “surprised many critics with its overarching lack of irony” (59), and Dupuy is among them, writing that “Ford’s deft portraiture avoids bitterness and irony” (93). Here is a typical piece of Bascombe’s sunny prose:

Nothing, in fact, would I like better than to have a whole new colorful world open up to me today, though I like things pretty well as they are. I will settle for a nice room at the Pontchartrain, a steak Diane and a salad bar in the rotating rooftop restaurant, seeing the Tigers under the lights. I am not hard to make happy. (22)

Yet to another species of critic, this passage—with its salad bar, its rotating
restaurant, and its Rustbelt city—can only be read ironically. Bascombe lives in the New Jersey suburbs, dates a young and unsophisticated Texan named Vicki who "pronounces Detroit so as to rhyme with knee-joint" (59), and takes her along on a business trip to that city—and to all of these banes of the intelligentsia he professes his undying love. Surely a literary author who grew up across the street from Eudora Welty's house could not actually admire New Jersey or the Midwest? Surely when he has Bascombe proclaim we are meant to catch Ford winking at us?

Give me a little Anyplace, a grinning, toe-tapping Terre Haute or wide-eyed Bismarck, with stable property values, regular garbage pick-up, good drainage, ample parking, located not far from a major airport, and I'll beat the birds up singing every morning. (103-104)

Walter Clemons thinks so: "The more Bascombe tells us he's sensible and unremarkable, the more Ford makes us feel the pain and alienation that underlie Bascombe's surface equanimity" (82). Alice Hoffman, writing of the novel's lovingly-described sports telecasts and strip malls, concurs that "Bascombe's estrangement is charted with unsettling irony." In an extended study of the novel Fred Hobson addresses such critics, bringing valuable nuance to his reading of The Sportswriter as an essentially unironic work.

One would assume, as several reviewers did, that Ford is being ironic in dealing with the excesses of American consumer culture: how, one might ask, could a writer of Ford's keen eye and discrimination fail to be? But I am not so sure. Ford is indeed a discriminating writer, but he is also a writer who would object less to the excesses of popular culture than to a particular view—call it elitist or privileged—that would pass judgment on that culture. It is precisely this resistance to easy irony, a resisting the temptation to be ironic in dealing with popular culture, that distinguishes Ford from numerous other contemporary writers. (46, italics in original)

There is much to praise in this reading, particularly the specificity of the term "easy irony," which I will adopt here. Hobson, who also explores the novel's debt to
Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), is bold enough to claim that Bascombe's fascination with the Midwest is sincere.

It is the American Heartland, then, the much-maligned Midwest, the target of much of Walker Percy's satire—to the traditional Southern imagination, the tasteless, standardized, materialistic, and just plain boring Midwest—that this ex-Southerner is drawn to.... And he approaches everything midwestern, as he approaches the suburban, middle-class culture of New Jersey, without distancing himself, without condescension. (49)

When Bascombe, still trying to recover from the death of his son, says, "So much that is explicable in American life is made in Detroit" (115), it seems we would do well to follow Hobson and take him at face value.

But consider the passage that precedes that line:

I have read that with enough time American civilization will make the midwest of any place, New York included. And from here that seems not at all bad. Here is a great place to be in love; to get a land-grant education; to own a mortgage; to see a game under the lights as the old dusky daylight falls to blue-black, a backdrop of stars and stony buildings, while *friendly Negroes and Polacks* roll their pant legs up, sit side by side, feeling the cool Canadian breeze off the lake. (115, italics mine)

To sense that something is amiss here, it is not necessary to know that in 1967 Detroit was the scene of the second-worst race riots in American history, because the city has never recovered from them: the Detroit Bascombe visits is possibly the most racially-segregated city in the nation. This is not to gainsay Hobson's important point that Bascombe approaches the Midwest uncondescendingly (on this count no Southerner, after all, could feel superior), yet the sly reference to racial discord so heavily colors the next sentence—"So much that is explicable in American life is made in Detroit"—that one senses the limits of Hobson's argument.

Indeed, in light of narrative through which he delivers it, Bascombe's central philosophy is difficult to read unironically. Not a religious man, Bascombe recalls how he soured on the church in his Vietnam-era college days:
Christianity...was too factual and problem-solving-oriented. The spirit was made flesh too matter-of-factly. Small-scale rapture and ecstasy (what I’d come for) were out of the question given the mess the world was in. Consequently I loathed going. (104)

To this day he abhors “factualism,” the tyrannical drive to explain and analyze the messiness of life, and instead espouses “literalism,” the ability to immerse oneself in the mystery of immediate existence. His is a credo seemingly indebted to the “negative capability” of John Keats in “Ode to a Nightingale” and other poems—and in the face of the unforeseen death of a child, for which no rational explanation satisfies, it does seem a compelling answer. But when Bascombe, in recalling his short stint as a college literature instructor after Ralph died, condemns the factualism of academia—

Some things can’t be explained. They just are. And after a while they disappear, usually forever, or become interesting in another way. Literature’s consolations are always temporary, while life is quick to begin again. It is better not even to look so hard, to leave off explaining. Nothing makes me more queasy than to spend time with people who don’t know that and who can’t forget, and for whom such knowledge isn’t a cornerstone of life. (223-224)

—it is midway through a twenty-page philosophical digression from the events of the book. Surely those critics who characterize the novel by its eschewing of irony have missed something.

The scene which provides the key to understanding Bascombe’s narrative voice arrives halfway through the novel. Here he recalls how, in the first six months after the death of their son Ralph—the event that would ultimately destroy their marriage and set all the other parts of the novel in motion—he and X took to compulsively reading mail-order catalogs together.

The life portrayed in these catalogs seemed irresistible. Something about my frame of mind made me love the abundance of the purely ordinary and pseudo-exotic.... I loved the idea of merchandise, and I loved those ordinary good American faces pictured there, people wearing their asbestos welding aprons, holding their cane fishing rods, checking their generators
with their new screwdriver lights, wearing their saddle oxfords, their same wool nighties, month after month, season after season. In me it fostered an odd assurance that some things outside my life were okay still… A perfect illustration of how the literal can become the mildly mysterious. (196)

At first glance, this passage recalls the pseudoreligious fetishizing of consumer goods in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), a novel which B.R. Myers—sparking a literary controversy a few years ago—called

a tale of Life in Consumerland, full of heavy irony, trite musing about advertising and materialism, and long, long lists of consumer artifacts, all dedicated to the proposition that America is a wasteland of stupefied shoppers. (25)

Critics, says Myers, are complicit in the “Consumerland” view of America, and Jeffrey Folks is perhaps a case in point when he refers to the scene of the mourning Bascombes as “a particularly droll and ironic passage” (85). But if we follow the passage to the end we can see that Ford’s intent is different.

We all take our solace where we can. And *there* seemed like a life—though we couldn’t just send to Vermont or Wisconsin or Seattle for it, but a life just the same—that was better than dreaminess and silence in a big old house where unprovoked death had taken its sad toll. (196-197)

Folks calls Bascombe and X “the comic butt of this mocking narrative voice” (85). But are we really meant to mock parents who have lost a child? The irony Folks approvingly notes is the “easy irony” Hobson and Myers speak of—haughty mockery of American consumer society—and it is, I think, nowhere to be found on the page. Ford is dealing in a different kind of irony, more compassionate and far more interesting.

In an interview he has called *The Sportswriter* “a book about getting on” (qtd. in Bonetti 84), and it is through bourgeois consumer culture that Bascombe seeks his recovery. Rather than using his narrator to unquestioningly admire that culture, or to disparage it from a cool ironic remove, Ford has given us a man who wants to admire it. The irony arises from the strain of an honest and praiseworthy
effort, one rooted no doubt in the author's own struggle to make peace with a New Jersey he did not love. Praiseworthy because not everyone can be a Byronic hero—and because everyday suburban life, in spite of elitist mockery, is not without its genuine charms.

To be fair, Folks does recognize Ford's concern with these phases in life:

In contrast with Walker Percy's central figure of the "wayfarer" embarked on a quest for existential identity, Ford's protagonists are less decisive but more tolerant, focused not on the problem of one's very existence but on getting by. (75)

But when, in the midst of a solemn meeting with X at their son's grave, Frank catches a whiff of someone's swimming pool—

The cool, aqueous suburban chlorine bouquet that reminds me of the summer coming, and all the other better summers of memory. It is a token of the suburbs I love, that from time to time a swimming pool or a barbecue or a leaf fire you'll never see will drift provocatively to your nose. (14)

—Folks calls it "vacuous praise," through which Ford "interrogates the superficiality and oppressiveness of the suburbs" (87).

Again we are reminded of White Noise, of which Jayne Anne Phillips writes approvingly, "This is an America where no one is responsible or in control; all are receptors, receivers of stimuli, consumers" (qtd. in Myers 39). But Bascombe, in significant contrast, is a man, trying to survive loss and using what he can—as anyone would—in his endeavor. This is why we cannot accuse him of complacent consumerism when he tells us, "Nowadays, I'm willing to say yes to as much as I can: yes to my town, my neighborhood, my neighbor, yes to his car, her lawn and hedge and rain gutters" (52).

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With regard to popular culture, then, The Sportswriter employs what we might call an "irony of aspiration": a tone which measures Bascombe's struggle to accept and celebrate the suburban world around him. Critics who read the novel unironically will dwell less on the struggle than the acceptance; this is
Dupuy’s focus when he describes Bascombe’s “relenting nature.” “As the word suggests, Frank yields—he becomes pliant or flexible—to the vicissitudes of life” (97). This is true so far as it goes, and Dupuy is also correct when he writes that Bascombe “is about as far from Thomas Sutpen, Jay Gatsby, or Captain Ahab as a character can get” (97).

But to describe the protagonist of The Sportswriter as antithetical to the central characters of Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Melville is to raise an important question: Can one really build a novel around a man who relents? That Ford believes otherwise is suggested by the second death in the novel, to whose implications relenting will not be an option for Bascombe, and against which his philosophy of literalism will offer him no protection.

Indeed, before the midpoint of the novel Ford has us wondering if its espousal of literalism is another of the novel’s ironies. Here is Bascombe’s profile of his paragons of literalism, the men he interviews for his job.

Athletes, by and large, are people who are happy to let their actions speak for them, happy to be what they do. As a result, when you talk to an athlete...he’s never likely to feel the least bit divided, or alienated, or one ounce of existential dread. He may be thinking about a case of beer, or a barbecue, or some man-made lake in Oklahoma he wishes he was waterskiing on, or some girl or a new Chevy shortbed, or a discotheque he owns as a tax shelter, or just simply himself. But you can bet he isn’t worried one bit about you and what you’re thinking.... In fact, athletes at the height of their powers make literalness into a mystery all its own simply by becoming absorbed in what they’re doing. (62-63)

With its Zen overtones it is a strangely seductive passage, and yet one is tempted to respond as Wallace does in his rumination on sports journalism.

We prefer not to consider the shockingly vapid and primitive comments uttered by athletes in postcontest interviews, or to imagine what impoverishments in one’s mental life would allow people actually to think in the simplistic way great athletes seem to think. Note the way “up-close and personal profiles” of professional athletes strain so hard to find evidence of rounded human life—outside interests and activities, charities, values beyond
the sport. We ignore what's obvious, that most of this straining is farce. It's farce because the realities of top-level athletics today require an early and total commitment to one pursuit. An almost ascetic focus.... A consent to life in a world that, like a child's world, is very serious and very small. (273)

Is Bascombe's attempt to celebrate American popular culture an example of this farcical straining? For the purpose of his Good Friday trip to Detroit is to write one of these "up-close and personal profiles." He plans to interview Herb Wallagher, he tells us, an ex-football player crippled by a waterskiing accident who has become an inspiration to his former teammates by demonstrating courage and determination, going back to college, finishing his degree in communication arts, marrying his black physiotherapist and finally becoming honorary chaplain for his old team. "Make a contribution" will be my angle. It is the kind of story I enjoy and find easy to write. (5)

In person Herb, as Raymond Schroth writes, "is clearly loony, the drugged bitter opposite of what the American sports hero is supposed to be" (227). It is significant that Bascombe, who failed as a novelist out of an unwillingness to look life in the eye ("I seemed, I felt later, to have been stuck in bad stereotypes" [46]), decides not to write about Wallagher at all.

"It is better not even to look so hard, to leave off explaining," he has told us—and lest we forget that this is a credo drawn from real life, Ford gives us the Divorced Men's Club, an informal social circle whose meetings capture perfectly the way men talk about sports in order to keep their relationships superficial. At one of the group's outings Bascombe, picking up distress signals from Walter Luckett, uncharacteristically responds. "'Is something bothering you, Walter,' I said—and shouldn't have, since I broke the rules of the Divorced Men's Club, which is that we're none of us much interested in that kind of self-expression" (86). Bascombe and Luckett trade sports talk over drinks, and then Luckett—whose wife has run away to Bimini with another man—abruptly confesses to a recent homosexual encounter. Bascombe is not judgmental, but nor is he supportive, and he remains aloof two days later when Luckett shows up at his house to undertake a tortured self-analysis. The reader can sense that the cuckolded Luckett is veering toward suicide, but Bascombe seems determined not to notice. He sends Luckett
on his way and unplugs his phone. "Don't call, my silent message says, I'll be sleeping. Dreaming sweet dreams. Don't call. Friendship is a lie of life. Don't call" (195).

But even here we can tell from the self-reproach that Bascombe senses, however hazily, what is happening. And from the structure of the narrative as well—for it is here that he inserts his flashback to the aftermath of his son’s death. It is here that he recalls taking solace with his wife by reading mail-order catalogs, just before the novel confronts him with a death that requires a different kind of reaction.

The next day is Easter Sunday, and though Bascombe’s relationship with Vicki has soured during their Detroit trip, her family has invited him to Easter dinner in a neighboring New Jersey suburb. Their house has an almost life-sized wooden crucifix hanging on its front, which Bascombe wryly calls “Jesus in his suburban agony” (243). But his flippancy masks an unspoken awareness that factualism awaits him now. Consumer goods were the embodiments of “mildly mysterious” literalism during his mourning, and now Bascombe finds factualism in the same vehicle. In the basement Vicki’s father Wade shows off the vintage tailfinned Chrysler he has been restoring. That the car is black is not the only sign of what it represents; when asked if he ever drives it, Wade replies, “Oh, I do. Yes. I start it up and drive it a foot one way and a foot or two back. There isn’t much room down here” (264).

To Bascombe’s remark that “So much that is explicable in American life is made in Detroit,” we can apply another coat of irony. This Chrysler in its crypt is death made factual. “It’s every bit completely knowable, son,” Wade says of the car. “Wires and bolts” (273). Bascombe is struck by a sudden vision of a terminally ill Wade checking into a hospital—“Once he’s walked in the room he will never be the same. This is the beginning of the end, and frankly it scares me witless and gives me a terrible shudder” (274)—but the source of his fear is not Wade or the Chrysler but the suppressed knowledge of what Walter Luckett is about to do. It is in the middle of Easter dinner a short while later that the telephone call comes for Bascombe: X is on the line with news that Luckett is dead.

Hoffman writes that “the death has negligible emotional effects on Bascombe,” but this is misleading. The two men were never close, but Bascombe’s inability to deeply mourn Luckett enables him—as was never the case with the loss of his
son—to transform the death into a signifier of his own mortality.

The thirty-eight-year-old Bascombe immediately senses the challenge that his own eventual death poses to his credo of literalism. Taking solace is not an option; he must address, as Folks said about the protagonists of Walker Percy, "the problem of one's very existence." In contrast to his earlier dismissal of the modern Church as "too factual and problem-solving-oriented," he looks up at the crucifix as he takes his leave and thinks, "He makes life a perfect misery for as many as he can, then never takes the heat. He should try resurrection in today's complex world. He'd fall right off His cross on His ass. He couldn't sell newspapers" (294). A moment later Vicki, whom he has loved in the unexamined way his literalism dictated, dumps him for this reason, punctuating her feelings with a fist to his mouth.

Bascombe knows he must act, but his first actions are befuddled and pathetic. From a telephone booth he phones Selma Jassim, a professor with whom he had an affair in his college-teaching days, and half-heartedly proposes to her. Next he goes with X to Walter Luckett's empty apartment and startles himself by suggesting they get in Walter's bed and make love. X disgustedly calls him a cliché, and Bascombe realizes that the bland comforts of suburbia have left him unable to look his own mortality in the eye.

Life-forever is a lie of the suburbs—its worst lie—and a fact worth knowing before you get caught in its fragrant silly dream. Just ask Walter Luckett. He'd tell you, if he could. (319)

It would appear that Bascombe is on the verge of renouncing his claim to literalism, one that his heavily philosophical narrative has always rendered problematic.

But as Dupuy writes, "death and its cohort, grief, are far too factual for his mystery-laden world" (103). Indeed, Bascombe considers going to his son's grave alone to "be silent and invisible with Ralph in our old musing way. But I would soon be up against my own heavy factuality, and consolation would come to a standstill" (340). He impulsively takes a train to New York and heads to his office, intending to take another stab at his writing assignment. Have the events of this Easter weekend equipped him to tell Herb Wallagher's tragic story rather than the inspirational puff piece he planned? We will never know; Bascombe
writes three sentences and then finds himself interrupted by a young and starstruck female intern. A new love affair promptly ensues, the least believable of any of the novel's plot turns, and the end of the novel finds Bascombe living alone in Florida five months later, unsure where life will be taking him next.

In the compound noun of the novel's title are two potential emphases, and the reader expecting physical action is apt to be disappointed by *The Sportswriter*, to the point of wishing Bascombe would apply to himself his prescription for Herb Wallagher: "What Herb needs, of course, and can’t have, is to strap on a set of pads and beat the daylights out of somebody and quit worrying about theories of art" (166). But "a book about getting on" is bound to focus on change of an interior kind, and once the awareness of his mortality has settled in, Bascombe understands that another transformation has taken place: He no longer mourns his son.

Now I am at the point of not knowing the outcome of things again, a frame of mind that pleases me. I sense that I have faced up to a great empty moment in life but without suffering the usual terrible regret. (369)

He is back in his preferred mode of uncertainty. Whether he will solve the existential problem of his own existence is a question left for the subsequent Bascombe novels (and on this question the critics are in typical disagreement). His achievement in *The Sportswriter*—a humbler one, and yet one with which we can readily identify—is to have faced up to a great empty moment in life. And the vessel for the Keatsian openmindedness which has seen him through is American popular culture—whether a game under the lights, a mail-order catalog, or the smell of a barbecue grill—the favorite target of the easy ironist.

For Wallace irony is "critical and destructive," unsuited to building anything new. But what we have called Ford’s "irony of aspiration" is a different and more expansive thing. About his failed literary career Bascombe remarks, "It is no loss to mankind when one writer decides to call it a day" (47), and Ford’s own comment on this line—a novelist explaining why it might be just as well not to be a novelist—simultaneously pinpoints the inherent irony of *The Sportswriter* and confirms his own genuine love of literalism.

To a literary audience, I think, for a writer to stop being a writer seems a kind
of world-class defeat, and for him to say “Well, it’s no big deal” is kind of ironic. Except that just isn’t the way I mean it to be. I mean it to be all right. I mean it to be fine. Because he goes ahead and lives the happiest life he can live, full of mirth and tragedy and affection. (qtd. in Bonetti 84)

And the true affection for popular culture that the The Sportswriter occasionally reveals is far more disarming than it would be in a novel entirely and mawkishly earnest. In a passage in the final pages Bascombe spends his time at the baseball parks used for Major League spring training, and the only thing about which he speaks unironically is baseball itself.

Things occur to me differently now, just as they might to a character at the end of a good short story. I have different words for what I see and anticipate, even different sorts of thoughts and reactions; more mature ones, ones that seem to really count. If I could write a short story, I would. But I don’t believe I could, and do not plan to try, which doesn’t worry me. It seems enough to go out to the park like a good Michigander, get the sun on my face while somewhere nearby I hear the hiss and pop of ball on glove leather. That may be a sportswriter’s dreamlife. (369-370)

The irony of the last line is clear, of course, but so is the sincerity. Frank Bascombe endeavors to embrace the charms and consolations of his middle-class American life. It is the singular achievement of The Sportswriter that today—twenty years further into the Age of Irony—we can still greet his struggle with affirmation.

Notes

1. A phenomenon worthy of its own study has been the ability of the Bascombe novels—with their philosophical woolgathering, their lavishly detailed eye for middle-class American life, and their determinedly sedate pacing—to polarize critics. The Sportswriter seemed to Jonathan Yardley “a book oddly deficient in energy, one that lazes around in circles without managing to go anywhere” (18). Time critics Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo have since named it one of the 100 best novels in English. In a contemptuous review of the double-award-winning Independence Day,
James Bowman sniffed, "Such traditional forms of literary excitement as plot and character development are presumably beneath the dignity of those who have Deep Thoughts to think" (A12). The closest to a critical consensus has been the generally favorable reception to The Lay of the Land, which The New York Times named one of the ten best novels of 2006, though in the same paper Michiko Kakutani dismissed the 485-page novel as "a padded, static production, far more overstuffed with unnecessary asides and digressions than its predecessors."

2. Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter sparked a mainstream-media spat on September 18, 2001 when he declared that the September 11 attacks had brought "the end of the age of irony" (qtd. in Beers)—though Roger Rosenblatt had written the same thing in Time two days earlier. In fact both Carter and Rosenblatt were attacking straw men more accurately labeled "frivolous cynicism" than irony, and six years later it is difficult to argue that Wallace's 1993 critique has lost much of its relevance.

Works Cited


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