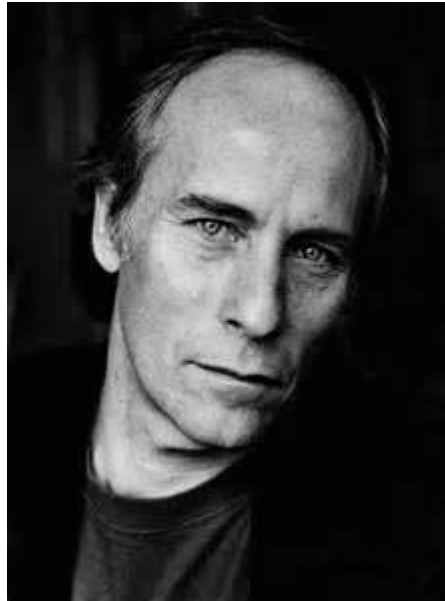


## ANALYSIS

### *The Sportswriter* (1986)



Richard Ford

(1944- )

“The search is on, the quest for one’s heart. The theme reaches its peak with Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, passive, laid back, trying to be cool, concerned where his heart is, yearning to understand not the world but his place in it. He must not invent but reinvent himself. As the country has reshaped itself, so must he....

Ford discovered that language need not be bizarre; it can be characterized as ‘neutral.’ In *The Sportswriter*, it does not move startlingly in any direction, there are no extremes, and it serves its primary function as a narrating voice. It puts us at ease. Although it moves in and out of the protagonist’s voice—the novel begins *Moby-Dick*-like, ‘My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter’—there is no effort to achieve interior monologue or streams of association and consciousness. The interior voice of Bascombe remains one of steady narrative quality. Yet Ford’s great achievement is that with this basic tool, a neutral voice, he is able to gain a wide range of emotional and psychological life. The point he makes is that his novel of neutral narrative, without flourishes, dazzling derring-do, metaphysical flights, or deterministic doom, may also be representative of America....

Ford has gotten the neutral voice down so perfectly that his sportswriter is a representative American, spanning in his modest way the entire breadth of the American experience within its middle ranges. This, too, is a new form of realism. No psychopathic behavior, no manic flights, no violent undercurrents, no morbid pressure from environment, heredity, or immediate society. Bascombe is merely a good chronic depressive, characteristic of a type in the 1980s, when the hype of the 60s and the blandness of the late 70s resulted in a laid-back, somewhat cynical, somewhat passive response to whatever lies out there. He already knows, or comes to learn when he visits a paraplegic former football player, that activity, yearning, willing of self end up in the same place; that the mature person, as Emerson counseled, must try to have good days, or even good moments, and forgo sweeping ideas of happiness. Nothing extends, nothing lasts, nothing goes much beyond a momentary high. Then, when it all recedes, one is back to a chronic depression, for which Ford’s neutral prose is a perfect vehicle....

The quiet, almost bland language of *The Sportswriter* turns out to be a representative medium for the new realism of the 1980s. It perfectly accommodates the novel's assumptions: a sportswriter who must lose himself in the achievements of others in order to express his own opinion. Swallowed by other people and events, Bascombe emerges only in the word, which, as he recognizes, is insufficient for emotional life beyond the event or personal motive. A man on the road, rueful, not joyous or seeking thrills, a broke marriage and a child left behind, withal a keen awareness of human frailty in carrying out his duties; a country which never coalesces, a personal life in which nothing is resolvable, relationships momentarily satisfactory but fleeting and not repeatable, days in hotels and motels where life is regurgitated as detritus—all of this is part of the neutrality of the Ford novel....

If the 1980s and 90s have meant anything to those who see beneath the hype and degradation of language, it is that America has become part of a finite world. *The Sportswriter* shadows that finite world, without subverting momentary pleasures—occasional good sex, a fine phrase, a meaningful gesture. But anything beyond is the language of the foolhardy, unperceptive, and hypocritical. When Bascombe visits the paralyzed football player, Herb, he is made to understand what the sportswriter does not write about: that a man does not face his decline and uselessness with courage, but with hostility and self-hatred. All heroism is squeezed out. After the benefits, the fund-raisers, the fine words, what is left is a crippled man confronting the rest of his life. There is not relief, only days piled on days. This is the language America evades, of course, but it is the language it must face. Bascombe tries.

Ford found the perfect career for his protagonist. He has matched language, individual, and society to job, then job and its implications to what he wants to say about individual and country. A sportswriter is in a strange position. He is honored for his knowledge of games and for his prose, but he is, after all, writing on the sports page, not as part of the more significant death culture on the news pages. He is someone interested in games and players, which places him somewhere in the category of child-man, boy-man; not fully adult or serious, since it is, all in all, only a game. And athletes, while honored and rewarded extraordinarily, are not really serious people; they get paid for playing, for being part of an entertainment that in early all sports carries one back to childhood. The athlete, rightly or wrongly, has not been given credit for much intelligence; and his or her education, such as it is, is nearly always suspect, even when good grades result. Anyone who writes about such players is, accordingly, neither serious nor adult, not a mature person, even a marginal one.

Frank Bascombe has assimilated all those ambiguities of his career. He likes being outside: riding the rails, or taking planes, poking into the private lives of others, being a temporary in-and-out type, living in hotels out of suitcases, experiencing pickup affairs, getting his copy from whatever tidbits the athletes drop into his lap. His job does not require enormous expenditures of mental energy, simply certain deftness, a turn of phrase, a sense of language, since so many sports stories repeat each other or are homogenized. The fan expects courage, determination, will, the desire for victory—and the sportswriter feeds this expectation. Sports are an alternative to the news pages and obituaries, and woe to the sportswriter who fails to provide that alternative. Like film critics or Hollywood observers, sportswriters deal in their own kind of reality. He, or she, signals speciality, without being anyone or anything in particular. The sportswriter is often most read, but, socially, least regarded.

Furthermore, no matter how excellent, the sportswriter does not have to engage himself deeply; the pursuit is, as noted, only sports, a childish reflection of life, not life. In still another area, sports writing means that Bascombe can move in a world of men, other writers, the athletes, their coaches and trainers, and publicists. This is a compelling point, for Bascombe is very much aware of himself as a man, and when he is not on the road, he belongs to a Divorced Men's group. Ford's protagonist is responding to the feminist movement, not with overt hostility, but in his drawing back to the support of other men, a kind of forerunner of Robert Bly's woodsy men beating drums, chests, and perhaps their meat [Professor Karl has poor taste]. But Bascombe's world is laid back, uncommunicative, without emotional intensity; he identifies with those who clamp down on their feelings, especially since all his emotional life has been directed to his son's death. Bascombe *can* feel, as evidenced by his superb musings on his young sons end, but he parcels it out, husbands it, does not engage in display.

But there are other emanations of Bascombe. As a kind of double for the sportswriter is the unfortunate figure of Walter Luckert. Luckert seems perfectly ordinary, but he has had what he considers an 'accident' in his past, a homosexual encounter that has unsettled him and made him in his eyes incomplete. His encounter is no big deal for Bascombe, but Luckert refuses solace from those who try to pep him up. The crossover comes in Frank's own inability to be pepped up. Although reasonably optimistic about himself as a writer, he feels incomplete emotionally, drained, enervated, playing out the game, an old athlete well past his prime but still in it for the money. Like Walter, with his dread of what he did, Frank experiences an undercurrent of doom, the fear he cannot pull it all together. Walter's suicide is a manifestation of one area of Frank that has rejected commitment. But there is still another side reflected by the crippled football player, Herb. Frank interviews him, and is full of the usual approaches, to cheer him, tell him he has something left; but Herb refuses all sympathy or support. He stares into his paralyzed condition, and he knows his accident has made him permanently incomplete. This, too, becomes part of Frank's recognition of self.

In this triangulated arrangement, Ford is fictionally reshaping one's perception of the decade, reaching deeply into emotional matters but not taking the self to impotence or destruction. His insistence on the ordinary with an intense outreach is key to his kind of Realism. An instance comes with Frank's lady friend, Vicki, a hotdog of a woman who refuses the depression and withdrawal she perceives in Frank. She insists on her own kind of reality, which blinds her to everything outside her immediate vision. Frank is nervous in his visit to her home, a right wing, redneck setup (in his eyes) that he tries to understand. She and her family represent the country, he the outsider, and the two cannot possibly mesh. He speaks too much, he misses the need for silence, and he errs on the side of effort; to the extent she realizes he does not fit.

This absurd family suddenly closes ranks, and Frank is on the periphery, shut out because of some perceived deficiency. Yet because of his split self, he knows things Vicki can never know; he knows about the 'small empty moments' that cannot be avoided. He knows that his withdrawals alternating with his talkiness are part of self-destructive rhythms every sensitive person experiences: *they* are the norm, the ordinary. He also knows she will lose interest in him the more he attempts to reach her; he knows Vicki wants something—and he is not sure what it is—but he cannot give; and yet he tries to talk his way into it. He reaches out to embrace those 'empty moments,' and they engulf him; they lock him in as a sportswriter.

What remains strong and true are his memories of Ralph Bascombe, the nine-year-old wasting and dying. That is the one anchor in his life, the singular moment when he can concentrate all the hopes and failures that have gone into him. It is death, not life, which grabs him. 'In his last days,' Ford writes, 'Ralph changed. Even in his features, he looked to me like a bird, a strangely straining gooney bird, and not like a nine-year-old boy sick to death and weary of unfinished life. Once he barked out loud to me like a dog, sharp and distinct, then he flopped up and down in his bed and laughed. Then his eyes shot open and burned at me, as if he knew me better than I knew myself and could see all my faults. Somehow, Frank cannot get past this scene. The novel, in fact, begins with a vigil he and his former wife hold at their son's graveside; it is the determining point.

What Ford has captured is an extremely complicated kind of life, and he has done so in language that by avoiding all extremes becomes a guideline in the new realism since the 1960s.... No hyperventilation, no hyperbole, no extreme scenes or emotional outbursts, no hard violence, no brutality of spirit, and none of the anomie and nihilism we associate with twentieth-century American fiction. There is a rootedness to the language, just as there is to Frank; and yet beyond or under the rootedness is that awareness of the terrible sorrow of life, that negation and emptiness in the American soul. Frank must seek out his experiences on the fringes, in a fringe career and with fringe women. He has denied himself complacency; and yet even as he drifts toward the suicidal Walter and the paralyzed Herb, he insists on that small space the individual keeps to provide self-definition.

There is a parable for the 80s buried in here: not a simple message, but one loaded with complexities. Below the patina of a basically moral and ethical life lies the despondency of the particular experience, the shakiness of the enterprise, the inability to make connections, the awareness of destabilization everywhere—death of son, breakup of marriage, suicide of friend, crippling of player(s), the uncertainties

of who and what one is, the inability to find one's location, and the difficulty of recovering the space whereby one gains definition. Avatar of the new century, the sportswriter says it all.... Sequels often disappoint, but *Independence Day* [1995] strengthens Ford's position as the advocate of the 'new realism'—extremes brought to the center by way of a mediating prose."

Fredrick R. Karl  
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Michael Hollister (2015)