Casting his spell

Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Richard Russo will discuss his new book, *That Old Cape Magic*, as part of the first Boston Book Festival this Saturday.

By Glenn C. Altschuler | October 18, 2009

In *That Old Cape Magic*, you compare Cape Cod and the Maine coast. What has living in those places meant to you? I've never lived in Cape Cod, but started visiting because I was going to set the novel there. The Cape had what I needed, though it could have been any of those magical seaside places that are very expensive and kind of recede before you as you run toward them. I've lived in Maine since 1991.

The novel is about a midlife crisis. Have you had one?

Not a terribly serious one. I bought a Miata and think that's about as hairbrained as I got. Some critics assume the main character Jack Griffin is me, that I must be suffering some kind of meltdown and that my marriage was crumbling.

So we should establish that the novel was not autobiographical.

There is some autobiography in the sense that I'm an only child and my wife, Barbara, is one of 10. So I was able to show what it's like to visit a large, boisterous family when you're used to quiet.

Have marriage and family changed in the last 30 years? I don't think there's a doubt in my mind. We're all living longer, but, also, we have to nurse our grievances longer. Families are more likely to just disperse.

Your work is sometimes about loss to individuals and in society. Where is the country headed? Oh, Lord. In the darker days, before the new presidency, there was a sense that America was finished. With Obama, there's a great sense of possibility. But my fellow Americans are beginning to wear me down. Watching people chip away at Obama, I remain optimistic but less so than I was.

You deal with profound issues in your work, yet manage to infuse the narrative with great humor. It hadn't occurred to me until the writing of *Mohawk* and really the editing of it that I was going to be a comic writer. . . . I began to realize I was not going to be able to go, in my novels, from one dark place to another. I was going to have to let loose my profound conviction that the world is a very, very entertaining place when it's not breaking our hearts.

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