No day at the beach

With an idealized Cape Cod as a central metaphor, a middle-aged screenwriter finally - painfully - grows up

By Glenn C. Altschuler | August 9, 2009

Sitting at a "leftover table" at the wedding of his daughter's best friend, Jack Griffin, the main character in Richard Russo's new novel, pumps his fist in solidarity with the young people on the dance floor, as they shout the refrain of a Jon Bon Jovi tune: "Oh-oh! We're halfway there." Worried that his wife, Joy, was right - that he had "too little faith - in the world, in her, in himself, in their good lives" - Griffin wonders whether he wants, once again, to be halfway there. And whether, in not so quiet desperation, with evidence of a "fundamentally crappy world" all around him, he is "Livin' on a Prayer."

A meditation on marriage and other family ties, "That Old Cape Magic" was originally conceived as a short story. It is less dense, deep, and ambitious than Russo's last two novels, "Empire Falls" and "Bridge of Sighs." Indeed, in less skilled hands, it might well have collapsed into cliche, as it examined the education of a middle-aged, middle-class mope. Happily, however, Russo retains a magic that is anything but black and white, stale, or trite. This novel is suffused with his signature comic sensibility, and with insights, by turns tender and tough, about human frailty, forbearance, fortitude, and fervor.

For much of his life, Jack Griffin has tried to distance himself from his parents. English professors with Ivy League pedigrees, Bill and Mary Griffin "had been less wed to each other than a shared sense of grievance" over being exiled to a university in Indiana, the only institution that offered a job to both of them. To make life more tolerable, they rent a house on Cape Cod for a month every summer; have affairs, and pretend to be wounded when they're discovered; get divorced; and (unhappily) remarried.

To make clear to himself - and them - that he rejects their values, Jack goes west instead of east for college, becomes a screenwriter, and marries a girl who hasn't done graduate work (his mother's greatest barometer of personal worth) and has a sister who in a game of Twenty Questions takes on the fictional identity of "Princess Grace of 'Morocco.'"

But he can't outrun his inheritance. Although Joy prefers a honeymoon in Maine, Jack insists on another dose of Cape Cod magic. Years later, looking more and more like his father, with thinning hair and a nose taking over the center of his face, Jack leaves Los Angeles for a position his parents lusted after: professor of creative writing at a prestigious college in New England. Most tellingly, Jack spends more than a year, with his father's ashes and bits of bone in an urn in the back seat of his car, deciding on the perfect Cape Cod resting place for him. He takes phone call after phone call from his mother, and continues talking to her long after she too is dead.

At the end of the novel, of course, Griffin will learn that only by embraces his past can he go beyond it. His awakening, such as it is, will require some tough love, an uncivil war at the rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding of his daughter, and a magic elixir mixed by Russo. In late middle age, Russo reminds us, almost everything we experience, especially midlife malaise, is predictable. And yet, we're virtually always unable to see it coming in time to reflect or react. So grace, if it comes at all, follows loss, pain, sadness, and, in Griffin's case, a well-placed punch from a provoked brother-in-law.

Looking as "if the eyeball had been removed from its socket, a tennis ball inserted in its place and the skin stretched over it and sewn shut," Griffin, bloody but unbowed, still manages to attend Laura's wedding. He begins to believe that even though hearts are "notoriously unruly," love is "the most courageous and thrilling of economic and emotional strategies."

And even more importantly, that happiness is within reach for anyone who recognizes that the perfect Christmas tree and the perfect summer rental house do not exist. Happy people, Jack can now say, are willing to seek out and celebrate anything that is at least "as good as could be expected." Road construction crews have a word for it: plumb. A half bubble off in the foundation of a 30-story building, Griffin discovered when he was a kid working as a carpenter's assistant, was not a big deal. "Plumb some . . . close enough."

In contrast to Cape Cod, in its "shimmering elusiveness," the stuff of dreams, the Maine coastline, the site Laura had chosen for her wedding vows, now appeared to him in a new light, "not just real, but battered by reality," its inhabitants looking "scoured." A place he could fall in love with (as Russo has).

Jack's not sure - how could he be - that there's anything left between him and Joy. But he's willing to tell his mother that he's going to be OK. And that it's all right for Bill and Mary to be dead. In fact, he adds, "afraid he'd given them too much leeway. I insist."

http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2009/08/09/in_that_old_cape_magic_russo_meditates_on_marri...
In ‘That Old Cape Magic,’ Russo meditates on marriage, other family ties - The Boston Globe

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