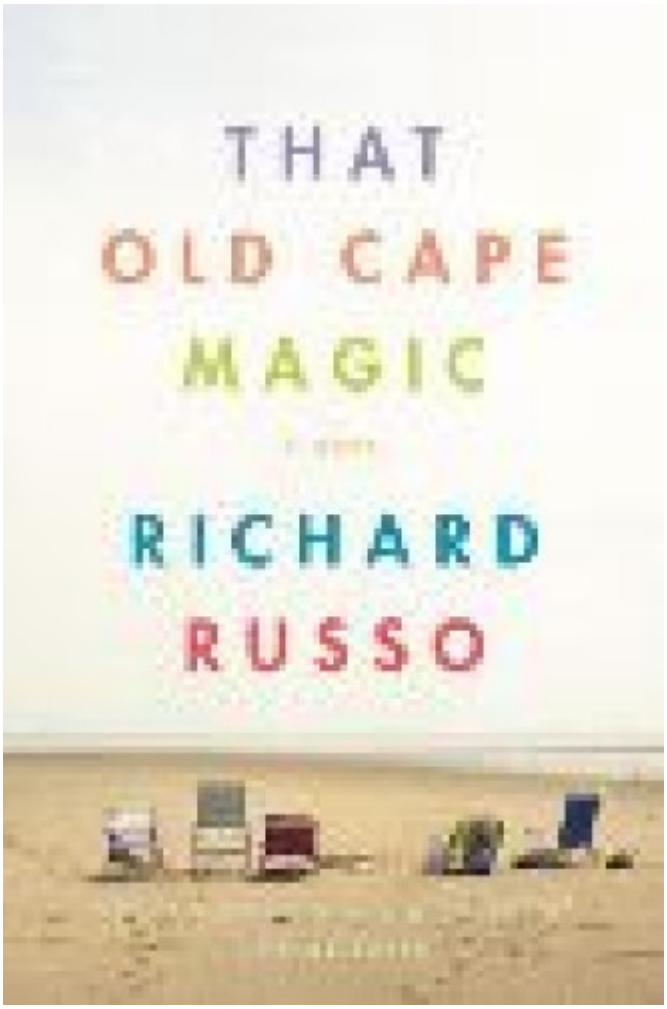
That Old Cape Magic

reviewed by Trudy Bush in the December 15, 2009 issue

In Review



That Old Cape Magic

Richard Russo
Knopf

Discontent isn’t listed among the deadly sins, but Richard Russo’s new novel convinced me that it should be. In late middle age, Jack Griffin, the main character,

finds his life derailed by the kind of pervasive dissatisfaction that made his parents' lives a disaster. English professors with Ph.D.s from Yale, the elder Griffins felt entitled to jobs at eastern schools—if not the Ivies, at least well-known liberal arts colleges—but instead find themselves stuck at a large state university in Indiana, in what they term the "Mid-fucking-west." Refusing to live the life available to them, they move year after year among houses rented from professors on sabbatical, while their carelessness with other people's possessions gives them fewer and fewer options. Equally careless about relationships, they torment each other by having constant and public affairs, and they neglect their son. Only their annual vacation on Cape Cod provides a kind of solace.

To their adult son, these parents are monsters, but monsters of whom he can't rid himself, for all his efforts to put as much distance as possible between himself and them. And the reader, too, will find them hard to forget. Insufferably snobbish, unkind, competitive and self-destructive, they are also vivid and hilarious. Russo, who won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Empire Falls*, names Charles Dickens as one of his primary literary influences, and the elder Griffins take their place with the likes of Mr. Dorrit and Miss Havisham.

Their annual quest for the perfect Christmas tree sums up their approach to life. Their son comes to understand "that the perfect Christmas tree was a lot like the perfect house on the Cape, first because it didn't exist in the real world, and second because all the imperfect trees fell into two categories. The first was the all-too-familiar Wouldn't Have It As a Gift, and the second applied to just one tree: Well, I Guess It'll Have to Do." The tree they bought was inevitably too tall, had to have its top sawed off and left ugly greenish-brown streaks on the white ceiling of whichever house they were currently renting.

Their son, usually known as Griffin, moves to California, becomes a screenwriter and marries a woman as different from his mother as possible—a kind-hearted, loving woman who has mastered the art of contentment. But those parental voices keep echoing in his head. "What sort of person doesn't do graduate work?" his mother asks when Griffin tells her that Joy, his fiancée at the time, went to work after earning her B.A. "So she finally got her way then," his mother says when Griffin tells her that his wife is pregnant. He has so thoroughly internalized his mother's voice that it guides his reactions to Joy's large, close family, whom he resents and pokes fun at.

By late middle age, Griffin has achieved what seems to be an idyllic life. He has a seemingly happy, decades-long marriage, a beloved daughter who has just become engaged to a man she loves, a beautiful, well-kept house, and a job as a popular professor of screenwriting at the kind of prestigious eastern college his parents idolized. But the worm of discontent is feasting on his heart.

Though a long-postponed funeral takes place in the course of the story (Griffin drives around for two years first with his father's ashes and then with the ashes of both parents in the trunk of his car), the novel, as a good comedy should, ends with a wedding. It also begins with one, but in the year between the two, the consequences of what Joy calls Griffin's "congenital unhappiness" rule his life. Several surprising revelations during the course of that year, as well as Russo's spot-on send up of a certain kind of academic snobbery and dissatisfaction, keep the novel from being a simple morality tale.

Like Dickens, Russo places his faith in the kindness of good-hearted people—here mostly women. One of these is Griffin's daughter, Laura, for whom Joy can find no precedent in the family tree. "She makes me almost . . . ashamed," Joy says, but quickly adds, "She's not brilliant, though, is she? . . . Only stupid people are happy." To the Russo's credit, the novel's happy and loving women turn out to be more complex than they at first seem, and more capable of inflicting pain.

Although Russo's book is often laugh-out-loud funny, it's also a serious examination of family relationships. Caustic parents may be the hardest to leave behind. How can we still their voices, which continue to echo in our heads long after their deaths? Can we see them for what they are and yet admit that we love them? Can we learn to laugh at and deal with our resemblance to them? And, most crucial of all, can we live lives of love and contentment even while we recognize the imperfections and uncertainties that haunt all of our relationships and endeavors?