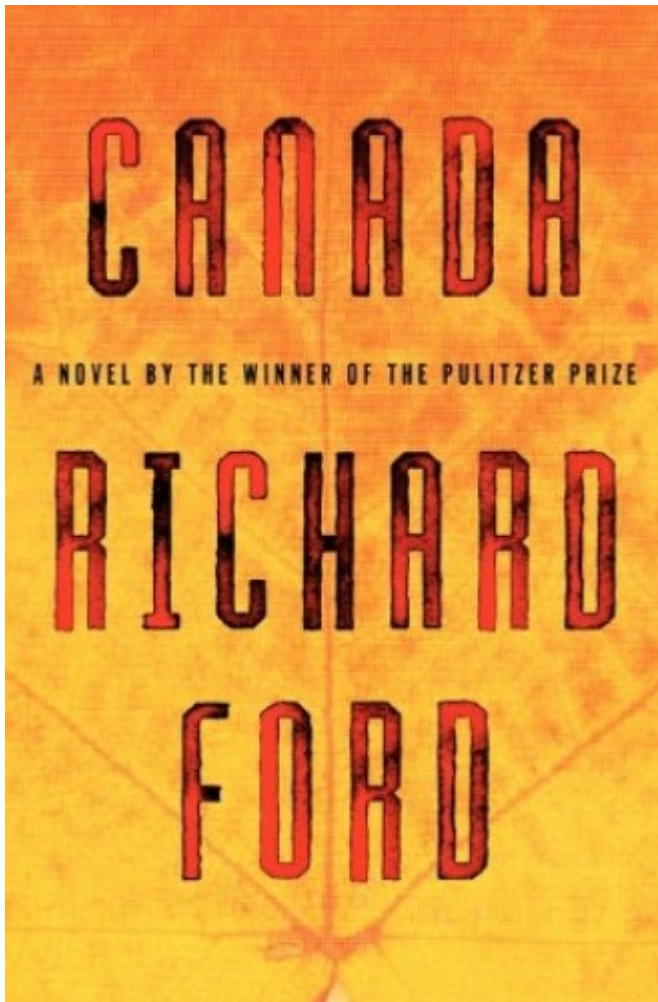


*Canada*, by Richard Ford

reviewed by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



## Canada

By Richard Ford  
HarperCollins

To help us understand ourselves, every age needs its Huckleberry Finn, a naive boy on the lam, harmed or abandoned by his parents and left to confront evil and to figure out life for himself. Though it may be impossible to equal Mark Twain's

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Richard Ford's novel is another masterpiece of the genre. Not only is it a masterful character study, it gives us so much to think about that it rewards repeated readings.

In a season marred by the senseless murder of 12 people in a Colorado movie theater and of six people in a Wisconsin Sikh temple, *Canada* couldn't be more relevant. At 15, Dell Parsons, Ford's narrator, is forced to face evil in both banal and terrifying guises. Fifty years later he still struggles to make sense of the experience. "First, I'll tell about the robbery our parents committed. Then about the murders, which happened later," he states in the novel's opening lines, surely among the most dramatic in recent literature.

Until the day when the police come to arrest his parents, Dell thinks of his life as normal, safe and predictable. He's close to his twin sister, Berner, knows that his parents love him, and looks forward to the beginning of school and to becoming a good chess player. Suddenly the two children find themselves abandoned and bereft. They visit their parents in jail and realize that they are unlikely ever to see them again. No one comes to look after them.

How can parents who, at least to their son, seem to be the most ordinary of people and among the least likely ever to commit a crime do such harm to their children and themselves? Has something innate in their makeup manifested itself in their action? Were they fated to destroy themselves? Had the father's history as a World War II bombardier raining death on Japan made it easier for him to cross the boundary into criminal behavior? Were they desperate to break out of a mismatched marriage and an unsuccessful life? Or were they simply naive and foolish, people with a poor sense of the consequences of their actions?

Dell struggles with such questions throughout his life but can never make complete sense of his parents' characters and motives. His father, he speculates, may have felt that he'd earned the chance to rob a bank "due to circumstances going against him." He may have considered an armed robbery "a satisfactory solution and compensation, since he wasn't truly stealing from depositors but from the government, for whom he'd killed thousands, been a patriot, and which had infinite resources to assure that no innocent person lost a penny." Why Dell's smart, well-educated mother went along with such a scheme is even more of a puzzle. The parents soon learn that the victims of this supposed "crime without victims" are themselves and their children. The family is destroyed, the children left to shift for

themselves.

As Dell narrates these events from the seamlessly melded perspective of his 15-year-old and 65-year-old selves, the family's insularity and alienation become clear. They have moved from air force base to air force base, from rented house to rented house, from school to school. The mother, the child of Jewish immigrants from whom she has become alienated, refuses to associate with the people on the bases and in the towns in which she finds herself. She looks like no one else, thinks she will not be accepted and takes refuge in considering herself too intellectually superior to associate with those around her. The children have few friends and mainly rely on each other for company. The family observes the comings and goings at the Lutheran church across the street, but none of them ever step inside it. Though the father is officially a Church of Christ member who has been saved, he doesn't attend church. The mother calls herself an "ethical agnostic" and lives in places where synagogues are hard to find. She fails to consider that ethical behavior may best be nurtured in community.

Left alone, the children have no one to turn to—no relatives, no circle of friends, no religious community, not even social services, which seems to have forgotten about them. A few days after the parents' arrest, Berner, the rebellious child, walks off, makes her way to California and fends for herself as best she can. Dell, the dutiful son, follows his mother's instructions to stay in the house and wait for her only friend to come to his rescue. That rescue, the mother's desperate, last-minute plan, takes him across another border, to Canada, and places him under the care of a psychopath. The murders soon follow.

Unlike Huckleberry Finn, who can't stand conventional life, Dell wants nothing so much as to be a normal, regular person living a morally and socially acceptable life. Since even before the robbery, chess and beekeeping have been his solace—chess because it requires intelligence, planning ahead and learning about consequences; beekeeping because bees live an orderly, productive communal life governed by rules. For him the great question becomes how, traumatized and deserted as he is, he can achieve such a life. Like one of Charles Dickens's abandoned children, he needs the help of a good-hearted stranger to get there, and he needs a survival strategy to keep himself psychologically whole.

For Dell, a large part of that strategy involves listening to the often puzzling advice people give him and interpreting it in a way that will help him. His father is the first

of the advice givers. Just before his arrest, he warns Dell that something bad might be coming his way and then tells him, "Some things you have to accept and understand—even if they don't make sense at first. You have to make them make sense." He sets a puzzle for Dell, the puzzle of human motivation, of what, for example, can make seemingly normal people carelessly toss away their lives. A piece of the puzzle is always missing, but Dell takes up the challenge and finds strength and solace in trying to make sense of it.

Dell's education in how dangerous human beings can be to themselves and others continues in Canada, where his quest for a good, orderly life runs into an even greater obstacle. Delivered into the care of Arthur Reminger, a man who lacks the ability to form human connections, Dell tries to follow the advice his mother's friend gives him: "Don't spend time thinking old gloomy. . . . Your life's going be a lot of exciting ways before you're dead. So just pay attention to the present. Don't rule parts out, and be sure you've always got something you don't mind losing."

During the desolate months that follow, the meanings that Dell finds in this ambiguous advice nearly lead him astray but ultimately help him to survive. He pays close attention to Reminger and realizes that there's something wrong with him, but nevertheless briefly falls under his spell. Many years later, from the safety of a well-lived life, Dell concludes that Reminger was not an enigma, "a figure worth long consideration." Rather, Reminger's chief characteristic was an internal absence, which caused him to suffer but which he couldn't overcome: "Other people were dead to him."

Though Dell becomes an unwitting accomplice to murder, he manages to escape his circumstances through the help of another advice giver who puts him on the path to resuming his education and the normal life he has tried to preserve for himself despite his close brush with evil. He's been forced to realize "how close evil is to the normal goings-on that have nothing to do with evil."

Far more introspective and aware than Huckleberry Finn (he is, after all, writing from the perspective of an old man as well as that of a teenager), Dell knows that he has had a number of selves to choose from, has chosen well and has constructed a meaningful narrative for his life. The novel makes clear that in the face of evil, it is a great achievement to construct a life that connects the things that happen to us into a "whole that preserves the good, even if admittedly good is often not simple to find." "We try," Dell says, "All of us. We try."