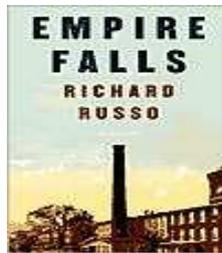




## Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

*Empire Falls*  
by Richard Russo  
(Knopf, 2001)



**Target Audience:** Adult readers who enjoy domestic fiction, and reading about small-town life.

**Synopsis:** Miles Roby has been slinging burgers at the Empire Grill for 20 years, a job that cost him his college education and much of his self-respect. What keeps him there? It could be his bright, sensitive daughter Tick, who needs all his help surviving the local high school. Or maybe it's Janine, Miles' soon-to-be ex-wife, who's taken up with a noxiously vain health-club proprietor. Or perhaps it's the imperious Francine Whiting, who owns everything in town – and seems to believe that “everything” includes Miles himself.

**About the Author:** Prizewinning author Richard Russo is regarded by many critics as the best writer about small-town America since Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. “He doesn't over-sentimentalize [small towns],” said Maureen Corrigan, the book critic for NPR's “Fresh Air.” Nor does he belittle the dreams and hardships of his working-class characters. “I come from a blue-collar family myself and I think he gets the class interactions; he just really nails class in his novels,” said Corrigan.

When Russo left his own native small town in upstate New York, it was with hopes of becoming a college professor. But during his graduate studies, he began to have second thoughts about the academic life. While finishing up his doctorate, he took a creative writing class; and a new career path opened in front of him.

Russo's first novel set the tone for much of his later work. The story of an ailing industrial town and the interwoven lives of its inhabitants, *Mohawk* won critical praise for its witty, engaging style. In subsequent books, he has brought us a dazzling cast of characters, mostly working-class men and women who are struggling with the problems of everyday life (poor health, unemployment, mounting bills, failed marriages) in dilapidated, claustrophobic burghs that have – like their denizens – seen better days. In 2001, Russo received the Pulitzer Prize for *Empire Falls*, a brilliant, tragicomic set-piece

that explores past and present relationships in a once-thriving Maine town whose textile mill and shirt factory have gone bust.

Russo's vision of America would be bleak, except for the wit and optimism he infuses into his stories. Even when his characters are less than lovable, they are funny, rueful, and unfailingly human. "There's a version of myself that I still see in a kind of alternative universe and it's some small town in upstate New York or someplace like that," Russo said in an interview. That ability to envision himself in the bars and diners of small-town America has served him well.

## **Reviews:**

### *Book Magazine*

Writer Tom Wolfe charged that "the American novel is dying, not of obsolescence, but of anorexia." The remedy? "Novelists with the energy and the verve to approach America in the way her moviemakers do," with "huge appetites and mighty, unslaked thirsts." For a feast of social realism, the hungry reader might turn to Richard Russo's latest work, a multigenerational epic of rich detail, memorable character and indelible plot. This is the sort of big-theme novel that complainers maintain no one is writing any more, an ambitious throwback to an era when novelists more often looked outward than inward for inspirational nourishment.

In *Empire Falls*, which is set in a Maine town teetering toward oblivion, Russo introduces a cross section of society's also-rans; trapped between a past of minimal opportunity and a future unimaginable as anything better, characters settle for diminished returns on the dreams of their parents. The lay of this fictional land will be familiar to admirers of Russo's previous books about the blue-collar Northeast, including his 1986 debut, *Mohawk*, and its 1988 sequel, *The Risk Pool*, as well as 1993's *Nobody's Fool* and 1997's hilarious *Straight Man*.

Even if the title *Empire Falls* (it's also the name of the town) is a bit too dramatic or obvious, the central imagery of the river in this story finds Russo imaginatively engaging and challenging his readers. "Has it ever occurred to you that life is a river, dear boy?" the controlling heiress, responsible for the closing of both the town's mill and its factory, asks the novel's protagonist. "I suspect that's occurred to anyone who's ever seen a river, Mrs. Whiting," replies Miles Roby. In the novel's prologue, Mrs. Whiting's husband attempts the folly of changing the river's course to suit his whim. The rest of the book explores the possibility of changing the course of one's life, which is perhaps as great a folly – but maybe not, as Miles eventually dares to consider.

Miles, the book's moral compass, abandons a college education that offers a life beyond Empire Falls in order to care for his ailing mother. He comes home to run the Empire Grill for Mrs. Whiting, who has promised him ownership when she dies, though he doubts that she ever will (die, that is) or that the grill would be worth anything if she does. Paralyzed with obligation, he proceeds by numbness rather than nerve, acceding to "the strange decisions a man discovers he's made by not really making them." Miles' only hope – that his teenage daughter will not find herself trapped in Empire Falls – is marred by irony: Miles' mother vowed the same for him.

The soul of the novel lies in the relationship between Miles and his daughter, Tick, whose high school experiences provide parallels with her father's. Easily the most perceptive character (and the only one whose chapters are written in the present tense rather than the past), Tick wonders whether all adults suffer from "some sort of collective amnesia" or whether they are just "fundamentally dishonest." Russo's depiction of adolescence is particularly acute, balancing the love that the father and daughter share

with the distance that separates them. And while Miles empathizes with his daughter's generation, he understands the limits to his understanding.

“My God, he couldn't help thinking, how terrible it is to be that age, to have emotions so near the surface that the slightest turbulence causes them to boil over,” Miles reflects on the teenage temperament. “That, very simply, was what adulthood must be all about – acquiring the skill to bury things more deeply.” Such turbulence moves from the plot's periphery to its climactic center, as parents who have failed to save themselves face the challenge of saving their children. Derided by his wife as “the human rut,” Miles must accept the responsibility of salvaging his own future if there is any hope for Tick's. He finds the key to that salvation buried deep in the past, discovering the secrets of a town that he thought he'd known as well as his reflection in the mirror.

For all of its traditional pleasures, this is very much a novel of its time, building to a crescendo that calls to mind a contemporary tragedy with a terrifying immediacy. Though the conclusion is as riveting as any modern-day headline, the story's breadth over the span of decades makes it impossible to dismiss its developments as sensationalist plot twists. The narrative progression from borderline farce to bittersweet tragedy, set against the backdrop of a failing factory town, reflects an understanding of what makes seemingly drastic acts not just possible but perhaps inevitable.

Striving to sustain the interplay between the tragic and comic elements of the story, this book doesn't always sustain the graceful precision characteristic of smaller, more carefully wrought novels, ones that concern themselves with interior worlds rather than the world at large. What distinguishes Russo's work is the generosity of spirit he extends to both his characters and the reader. While some novelists satisfy their ambitions by tickling the brain, Russo feeds the hungry heart.

#### *Publishers Weekly*

In his biggest, boldest novel yet, the much-acclaimed author of *Nobody's Fool* and *Straight Man* subjects a full cross-section of a crumbling Maine mill town to piercing, compassionate scrutiny, capturing misfits, malefactors and misguided honest citizens alike in the steady beam of his prose. Wealthy, controlling matriarch Francine Whiting lives in an incongruous Spanish-style mansion across the river from small-town Empire Falls, dominated by a long-vacant textile mill and shirt factory, once the center of her husband's family's thriving manufacturing dominion. In his early 40s, passive good guy Miles Roby, the son of Francine's husband's long-dead mistress, seems helpless to escape his virtual enslavement as longtime proprietor of the Whiting-owned Empire Grill, the town's most popular eatery, which Francine has promised to leave him when she dies. Miles' wife, Janine, is divorcing him and has taken up with an aging health club entrepreneur. In her senior year in high school, their creative but lonely daughter, Tick, is preoccupied by her parents' foibles and harassed by the bullying son of the town's sleazy cop who, like everyone else, is a puppet of the domineering Francine. Struggling to make some sense of her life, Tick tries to befriend a boy with a history of parental abuse. To further complicate things, Miles' brother David is suspected of dealing marijuana, and their rascally, alcoholic father is a constant annoyance. Miles and David's secret plan to open a competing restaurant runs afoul of Francine just as tragedy erupts at the high school. Even the minor members of Russo's large cast are fully fleshed, and forays into the past lend the narrative an extra depth and resonance. When it comes to evoking the cherished hopes and dreams of ordinary people, Russo is unsurpassed.

### *Library Journal*

People don't mind imposing on a nice guy like Miles Roby. Francine Whiting, for instance, owns most of the struggling mill town, including the Empire Grill that Miles manages for her, though she won't agree to the liquor license that might make it profitable. Francine's disabled daughter, Cindy, has a lifelong crush on Miles and has twice attempted suicide over him. His wife has left him for a flashy jerk, a health club owner who comes to the grill daily to taunt Miles; his ne'er-do-well father constantly nags him for handouts; and his daughter Tick seems to care about Miles, but she is navigating the treacherous shoals of high school, with the school bully determined to win her back and a complete outcast dependent on her for friendship.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. Richard Russo's description of town of Empire Falls is as memorable and vivid as his portraits of the people who live there. How do the details he provides about the town's setting and its streets, buildings and neighborhoods create more than a physical backdrop against which the story is played out? How does the use of flashbacks strengthen the sense of the town as a "living" character?
2. "One of the good things about small towns, Miles' mother had always maintained, was that they accommodated just about everyone." Is this an accurate description of Empire Falls? Which characters in particular benefit from this attitude? What influences the level of tolerance Miles is willing to extend to Max Roby, Walt Comeau and Jimmy Minty, all of whom are constant irritants to him? What does he see as the redeeming characteristics of each of them?
3. Why is his relationship with Tick so important to Miles? In what ways is it reminiscent of his mother's attachment to him? How do Grace's expectations for Miles, as well as her ultimate disappointment in him, shape the way he is raising Tick?
4. Even before the full story of Grace and Max's marriage is revealed, what hints are there that Grace was less than the ideal wife and mother Miles remembers and reveres? Why does Miles choose to accept his mother's version of events of their trip to Martha's Vineyard, even though it entails a betrayal of his father? When Miles finally realizes who Charlie Mayne really is, does it change his feelings about Grace in a significant way? Would he have felt differently if Grace were still alive and able to answer his questions? How does Miles own situation – particularly his separation from Janine and his discovery of the relationship between Charlene and David – color his reaction to his mother's affair? How does his brief conversation with Max about Grace and Charlie shed light on the relationship between father and son?
5. Janine calls Miles "The World's Most Transparent Man" and Tick says, "It's not like you don't have any [secrets] . . . It's just that everybody figures them out." Does Mrs. Whiting share this image of Miles? What evidence is there that she sees and understands more about the "real" Miles than the people closest to him do?
6. How does Russo use minor characters to fill out his portraits of the main figures? What roles do Horace Weymouth, Bea Majeski, Charlene and Otto Meyer play in shaping your impressions of and opinions about Miles, Janine and Tick?

7. How do David's feelings about Mrs. Whiting and the Empire Grill differ from Miles? Whose attitude is more realistic? Is David's harsh criticism of Miles' passivity justified? What insights does it give you into David's character? Is David more content with his life than Miles is with his own, and if so, why?

8. Charlene tells Miles: "David has this theory that between your mom and dad and him and you there's, like, one complete person." Has each member of the family selected a particular role, or has it been thrust upon him or her? Is the division of roles a natural part of family life? Which member of the Roby family is the "most complete," and what sacrifices did he or she make to establish a strong individual identity?

9. What does Father Mark offer Miles that he cannot get from his other relationships? Is Miles drawn to him only because he is a priest? Why does Russo depict both priests as flawed men – Father Mark by his sexual longings and Father Tom by his dementia? How would you characterize the impact of Catholicism on Miles and Grace? Does attending church genuinely comfort them, or is it a convenient way of hiding from the problems in their lives and the decisions they have made? In what ways do Grace's confession to Father Tom and the penance he demands affect her character and her outlook on life?

10. Why does Tick befriend John Voss? How does her sense of responsibility for him compare to Miles' feelings – both when he's a child and a grown man – about Cindy Whiting? Are the differences attributable to the circumstances that bring each pair together, or do they reflect something deeper about Tick's and Miles' morality and their ability to empathize with other people? What other incidents demonstrate Tick's understanding of what other people need? Why is she unable to treat Janine in the same comfortable, nonjudgmental way she treats Miles and Max Roby?

11. Would you define Mrs. Whiting as a mother figure for Miles? Does she perceive herself in this way? Does Miles? Beneath their very different personas, what traits do Mrs. Whiting and Grace share? Do they represent strengths and weaknesses usually associated with women? In what ways does Mrs. Whiting's description of her relationship with Grace reaffirm their similarities? Which woman is more honest with herself about her motivations and feelings?

12. All of the marriages in Empire Falls fail in one way or another. Does your sense of who is responsible for each marital breakdown change as the events of the past and present unfold? Discuss the contrast between the way each of these marriages is initially described and the "real" stories: Grace and Max; Mr. and Mrs. Whiting; Miles and Janine. Mrs. Whiting says "Most people . . . marry the wrong people for all the wrong reasons. For reasons so absurd they can't even remember what they were a few short months after they've pledged themselves forever." How does this assessment apply to the marriages mentioned above?

13. From the almost unimaginable cruelty of John Voss's parents to Mrs. Whiting's coldness toward Cindy, to Grace's emotional withdrawal from David (and to some extent Miles) when she joins the Whiting household, the novel contains several examples of the emotional and physical harm parents inflict on their children. Why do you think Russo made this a central theme of the book? Does it adequately explain, or even justify, behavior you would otherwise find completely unacceptable?

14. Empire Falls traces three very different families – the Whitings, the Robys, and the Mintys – through several generations. What do each of these families represent in terms of American society in general? How do their fates embody the economic and social changes that have occurred over the last century? To what extent are the members of the current generation trapped by the past?

15. What does Empire Falls provide that its residents might not be able to find in another town or city? Does living in a small town necessarily limit the satisfactions people get out of life? Miles says, "After all, what was the whole wide world but a place for people to yearn for their hearts' impossible desires, for those desires to become entrenched in defiance of logic, plausibility, and even the passage of time?." Is he right? Which characters might have had better, more fulfilling lives if they had moved away from?

16. In contemplating the past year, Tick says, "Just because things happen slow doesn't mean you'll be ready for them. If they happened fast, you'd be alert for all kinds of suddenness. . . "Slow" works on an altogether different principle, on the deceptive impression that there's plenty of time to prepare." How does this relate to the novel as a whole and the way it is structured? Why has Russo chosen Tick to express this insight?

17. What adjectives would you use to describe *Empire Falls*? How does Russo make the story of a dying town (with more than its share of losers) entertaining and engaging? Did you find most, if not all, of the characters sympathetic in some way?

**Prepared by Lisa Hewel of Moffat Library of Washingtonville. November 2009  
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**