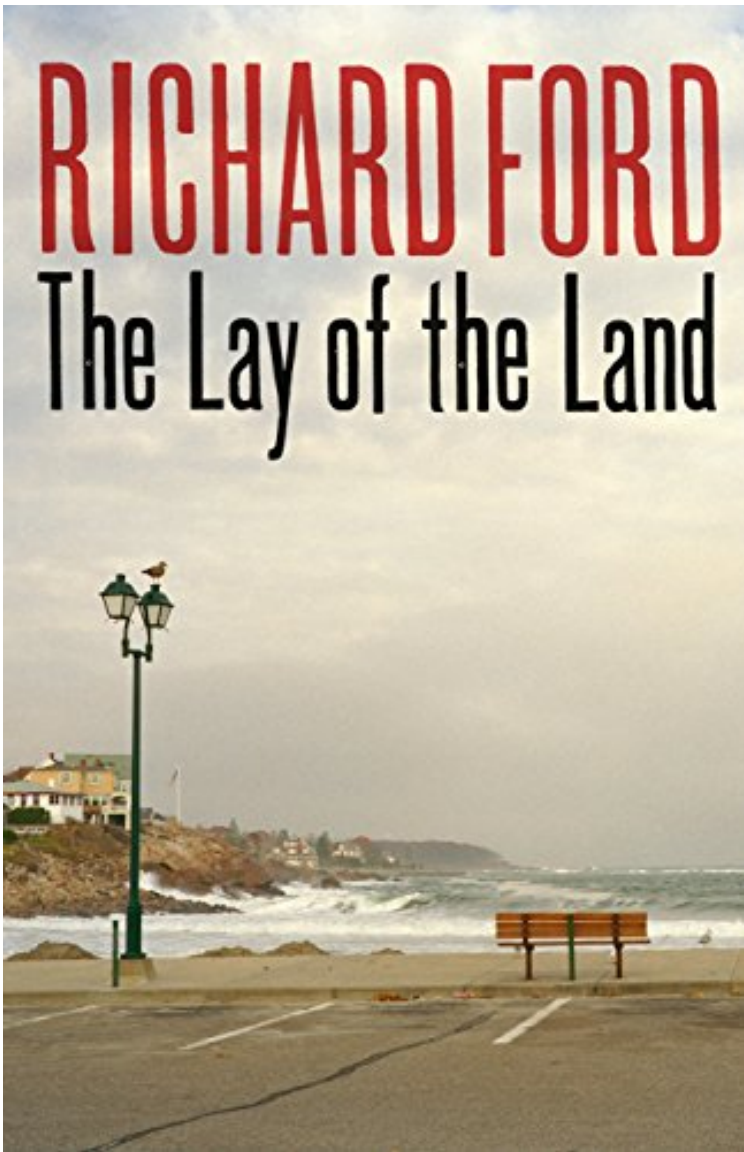


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The Lay of the Land



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIt is fall, 2000 and Frank Bascombe has arrived at a state of optimistic pragmatism that he calls the Permanent Period of life. Epic mistakes have already been made, dreams downsized, and Frank reflects that now at least there are fewer opportunities left in life to get things wrong. But the tranquillity he anticipated is not to be. In fact, as Thanksgiving dinner with his children and first wife nears, the Permanent Period proves as full of possibility as life had ever been. In his third Frank Bascombe novel Richard Ford contemplates the human character with wry precision. Graceful, expansive, filled with pathos but irresistibly funny, The Lay of the Land is a modern American masterpiece..comAfter more than a decade, Richard Ford revives Frank Bascombe, the beloved protagonist from The Sportswriter and Independence Day. Fans will

be scrambling for *The Lay of the Land*, a novel that finds Bascombe contending with health, marital, and familial issues wake of the 2000 presidential election. We asked Richard Ford to tell us a little more about what it's like to create (and share so much time with) a character like Frank. Read his short essay below. --

Daphne Durham Richard Ford on Frank Bascombe I never think of the characters I write as exactly people, the way some writers say they do, letting their characters "just take over and write the book;" or for that matter, in the way I want readers to think of them as people, or even as I think of characters in novels I myself read (and didn't write). In my own books I do all the writing--the characters don't. And for me to think of them as people, instead of as figures made of language, would make my characters less subject to the useful and necessary changes that occur as I grow in my own awareness about them as I make them up. Writing a character for twenty-five years and for three novels, as I have written about Frank Bascombe, has meant that Frank has, of course, become a presence in my life (and a welcome one). When I wrote *Independence Day* I began with the belief that Frank was pretty much the same character and presence he was in *The Sportswriter*. But when I went back later and read parts of *The Sportswriter*, I found that the sentences Frank "spoke" and that filled that second book were longer, more complex, and actually contained more nitty experience than the first book. This has also been true of *The Lay of the Land*: longer sentences, more experience to reconcile and transact, more words required to make lived life seem accessible. You could say that Frank had simply changed as we all do. But practically speaking--as his author--what this makes me think is that I've had to make up Frank up newly each time, and have not exactly "gone back" and "found" him--although Frank's history from the previous books has certainly needed to be kept in sight and made consistent. What is finally consistent to me about Frank is that I "hear" language I associate with him, and it is language that pleases me, with which I and he can (if I'm a good enough writer) represent life in an intelligent and hopeful and buoyant spirit a reader can make use of. --Richard Ford ExtraitPart 1

Toms River, across the Barnegat Bay, teems out ahead of me in the blustery winds and under the high autumnal sun of an American Thanksgiving Tuesday. From the bridge over from Sea-Clift, sunlight diamonds the water below the girdering grid. The white-capped bay surface reveals, at a distance, only a single wet-suited jet-skier plowing and bucking along, clinging to his devil machine as it plunges, wave into steely wave. Wet and chilly, bad for the willy, we sang in Sigma Chi, Dry and warm, big as a babys arm. I take a backward look to see if the NEW JERSEY'S BEST KEPT SECRET sign has survived the tourist season now over. Each summer, the barrier island on which Sea-Clift sits at almost the southern tip hosts six thousand visitors per linear mile, many geared up for sun n fun vandalism and pranksterish grand theft. The sign, which our Realty Roundtable paid for when I was chairman, has regularly ended up over the main entrance of the Rutgers University library, up in New Brunswick. Today, Im happy to see its where it belongs. New rows of three-storey white-and-pink condos line the mainland shore north and south. Farther up toward Silver Bay and the state wetlands, where bald eagles perch, the low pale-green cinder-block human-cell laboratory owned by a supermarket chain sits alongside a white condom factory owned by Saudis. At this distance, each looks as benign as Sears. And each, in fact, is a good-neighbor clean- industry-partner whose employees and executives send their kids to the local schools and houses of worship. Management puts a stern financial foot down on drugs and pedophiles. Their campuses are well landscaped and policed. Both stabilize the tax base and provide locals a few good yuks. From the bridge span I can make out the Toms River yacht basin, a forest of empty masts wagging in the breezes, and to the north, a smooth green water tower risen behind the husk of an old nuclear plant currently for sale and scheduled for shutdown in 2002. This is our eastern land view across from the Boro of Sea-Clift, and frankly it is a positivists version of what landscape-seascape has mostly become in a multi-use society. This morning, Im driving from Sea-Clift, where Ive abided the last eight years, across the sixty-five-mile inland trek over to Haddam, New Jersey, where I once lived for twenty, for a day of diverse dutiessome sobering, some fearsome, one purely hopeful. At 12:30, Im paying a funeral-home visitation to my friend Ernie McAuliffe, who died on Saturday. At four, my former wife, Ann Dykstra, has asked to meet me at the school where she works, the prospect of which has ignited piano-wire anxiety as to the possible subjectsmy health, her health, our two grown and worrisome children, the surprise announcement of a new cavalier in her life (an event ex-wives feel the need to share). I also mean to make a quick stop by my dentists for an on-the-fly adjustment to my night guard (which Ive brought). And I have a Sponsor appointment at twowhich is the hopeful part. Sponsors is a network of mostly central New Jersey citizensmen and womenwhose goal is nothing more than to help people (female Sponsors claim to come at everything from a more humanistic/nurturing angle, but I havent noticed that in my own life). The idea of Sponsoring is that many people with problems need nothing more

than a little sound advice from time to time not problems you'd visit a shrink for, or take drugs to cure, or that requires a program Blue Cross would co-pay. Just something you can't quite figure out by yourself, and that won't exactly go away, but that if you could just have a common-sense conversation about, you'd feel a helluva lot better. A good example would be that you own a sailboat but aren't sure how to sail it very well. And after a while you realize you're reluctant even to get in the damn thing for fear of sailing it into some rocks, endangering your life, losing your investment and embittering yourself with embarrassment.

Meantime it's sitting in gaspingly expensive dry dock at Brads Marina in Shark River, suffering subtle structural damage from being out of the water too long, and you're becoming the butt of whispered dumb-ass-novice cracks and slurs by the boatyard staff. You end up never driving down there even when you want to, and instead find yourself trying to avoid ever thinking about your sailboat, like a murder you committed decades ago and have escaped prosecution for by moving to another state and adopting a new identity, but that makes you feel ghastly every morning at four o'clock when you wake up covered with sweat. Sponsor conversations address just such problems, often focusing on the debilitating effects of ill-advised impulse purchases or bad decisions regarding property or personal services. As a realtor, I know a lot about these things. Another example would be how do you approach your Dutch housekeeper, Bettina, who's stopped cleaning altogether and begun sitting in the kitchen all day drinking coffee, smoking, watching TV and talking on the telephone long-distance, but you can't figure out how to get her on track, or worst case, send her packing. Sponsor advice would be what a friend would say: Get rid of the boat, or else take some private lessons at the yacht club next spring; probably nothing's all that wrong with it for the time being these things are built to last. Or I'll write out a brief speech for the Sponsor to deliver to Bettina or leave in the kitchen, which, along with a healthy check, will send her on her way without fuss. She's probably illegal and unhappy herself. Anybody with a feet-on-the-ground idea of what makes sense in the world can offer advice like this.

Yet it's surprising the number of people who have no friends they can ask sound advice from, and no capacity to trust themselves. Things go on driving them crazy even though the solutions usually as easy as tightening a lug nut. The Sponsor theory is: We offer other humans the chance to be human; to seek and also to find. No donations (or questions) asked. A drive across the coastal incline back to Haddam is not at all unusual for me. Despite my last decade spent happily on the Shore, despite a new wife, new house, a new professional address Realty-Wise Associates despite a wholly reframed life, I've kept my Haddam affiliations alive and relatively thriving. A town you used to live in signifies something possibly interesting about you: what you were once. And what you were always has its private allures and comforts. I still, for instance, keep my Haddam Realty license current and do some referrals and appraisals for United Jersey, where I know most of the officers. For a time, I owned (and expensively maintained) two rental houses, though I sold them in the late-nineties gentrification boom. And for several years, I sat on the Governors Board of the Theological Institute that is, until fanatical Fresh Light Koreans bought the whole damn school, changed the name to the Fresh Light Seminary (salvation through studied acts of discipline) and I was invited to retire. I've also kept my human infrastructure (medical- dental) centered in Haddam, where professional standards are indexed to the tax base. And quite frankly, I often just find solace in the leaf-shaded streets, making note of this change or that improvement, what's been turned into condos, what's on the market at what astronomical price, where historical streets have been revectorized, buildings torn down, dressed up, revisaged, as well as silently viewing (mostly from my car window) the familiar pale faces of neighbors I've known since the seventies, grown softened now and re-charactered by time's passage. Of course, at some unpredictable but certain moment, I can also feel a heavy curtain-closing sensation all around me; the air grows thin and dense at once, the ground hardens under my feet, the streets yawn wide, the houses all seem too new, and I get the williwaws. At which instant I turn tail, switch on my warning blinkers and beat it back to Sea-Cliff, the ocean, the continent's end and my chosen new life happy not to think about Haddam for another six months. What is home then, you might wonder? The place you first see daylight, or the place you choose for yourself? Or is it the someplace you just can't keep from going back to, though the air there's grown less breathable, the future's over, where they really don't want you back, and where you once left on a breeze without a rearward glance? Home? Home's a musable concept if you're born to one place, as I was (the syrup-aired southern coast), educated to another (the glaciated mid-continent), then come full stop in a third spending years finding suitable homes for others. Home may only be where you've memorized the grid pattern, where you can pay with a check, where someone you've already met takes your blood pressure, palpates your liver, slips a digit here and there, measures the angstroms gone off your molars bit by bit in other words, where your primary care-givers await, their pale gloves already pulled on and snugged. My

other duty for the morning is to act as ad hoc business adviser and confidant to my realty associate Mike Mahoney, about whom some personal data would be noteworthy. Mike hails from faraway Gyangze, Tibet (the real Tibet, not the one in Ohio), and is a five-foot-three-inch, forty-three-year-old realty dynamo with the standard Tibetans flat, bony-cheeked, beamy Chinamans face, gun-slit eyes, abbreviated arm length and, in his case, skint black hair through which his beige scalp glistens. Mike Mahoney was the American name
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