



The Writers Who Inspire Me

Tom Connolly

THERE ARE WRITERS I LOVE. I mean, really love. The ones whose books tie me up in knots. There are writers who do the same job on me that musicians did when I was young; make me think I understand their words more than anyone else can, that we're the same, that they write for me. William Maxwell, The Jam, Marilynne Robinson, The Cure, Bukowski and Bruce...the list is long.

I love those writers, but do those writers inspire me directly? I'm not sure they do or should, other than as a fundamental call to create. They have given me a great deal and they've told me some great stories.

But Richard Ford, he inspires me. When I read him, I want to be a better father, a better man and a much, much better writer. I will never be as good a writer as Richard Ford's books make me want to be. 'Fear and hope are alike underneath,' he wrote. I keep those words pinned above my desk.

He puts words into his characters' mouths that I need to hear. I don't just want to hear them for the sake of the story. And I don't love reading them simply because he's good with words. I need to know what he has to tell me through his characters. It helps me in my life to drop in on them as they try not to screw up their lives. Everything he writes seem to pertain to me, to what's in my head, in my past, in my possible future. That's why it reminds me of the relationship to music at the age when music is everything. His best-known character, Frank Bascombe, makes me feel



good about being average. 'If you lose all hope, you can always find it again,' he tells me, in *The Sportswriter*.

It's the ordinariness of his characters, and how deep they penetrate, that inspires me. In a *New Yorker* interview, Ford had to remind the interviewer that Bascombe is not a person. 'He's an instrument and a vessel,' Ford said, 'made of language, which I fill up with all sorts of things that are running through my mind.' Reading interviews with Ford always inspires me to ignore everything about being published other than doing the writing. I met him at Charleston a few days before the birth of my son and asked him to sign a copy of the fourth Frank Bascombe novel for me, and his memoir about his parents for my partner. He asked her name and why she wasn't there. 'She's due to give birth tomorrow,' I told him. He nodded to himself and, as he wrote a message to her, said 'but you're still here.' 'She has me exactly where she wants me,' I said. 'And I needed to come and tell you that your books had meant the world to me and they still do.' He wrote in my book, *For Tom, with my gratitude, Richard Ford*.

I even wish I could sign books like him.