emagazine Close Reading Competition 2023

A 500-word close reading of the opening of Richard Ford's novel *Canada*.

Winner

Dia Attilakos, City of London School for Girls

Unforeseen and disappointing. Two words that come to mind when reading the narrator's experience of their parent's robbery and the subsequent murders.

Set in first person, the unnamed narrator announces details, writing 'first, I'll tell… about the robbery' and 'then about the murders'. While one expects a linear journey, the narrator submerges the reader into the past, focusing on characterisation instead. They present the parents, saying 'they weren't strange' nor 'obviously criminals', highlighting how events occur that challenge assumptions. This is seen as they delve deeper into their childhood, re-emerging with memories of their father doing 'card tricks and magic tricks'. The narrator drops their matter-of-factness, becoming more vulnerable and reminiscing about the kindness of their father, with connotations to 'magic' being those of wonder and awe – sentiments felt towards one's father. This furthers the juxtaposition between the criminals we have initially been shown, highlighting how appearances can be deceiving.

Moreover, Ford presents this deception through the character of Bev Parsons. The engaging portrayal of Bev, with a 'big square' face, and 'sensuous lips and long, attractive feminine eyelashes', proposes clashing portrayals of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. 'Beverly was a woman's name', yet the narrator still highlights his masculine features, set in post WWII America and working in the military. The fact he was 'open-minded for a southerner' emphasises contrasting notions, as we see Bev defying social norms. This presentation of Bev as something he's not is furthered when the narrator highlights subtle flaws within his character, saying he should've gone 'far in the air force, but didn't', insinuating a flaw that held him back regardless of his 'smiling handsome' charisma. Additionally, this continued artificiality is seen in Bev's persona, as he 'generally conveyed a warmth that was genuine'. The words 'conveyed' and 'genuine' stress Bev's imitation of something he is not.

Furthermore, the reader sees the impact of chance and how it sets one on particular paths. This is seen with the mother, who had 'one hasty encounter' and had 'unluckily gotten pregnant' and whose 'life changed forever – and not in a good way'. From her first interaction with Bev, it had been a significant turning point in her life, ultimately leading to negative consequences. The use of the past tense also allows the narrator to observe from a position of hindsight, reflecting on these events. Their opinion on the mother's decisions are seen with the description of the pregnancy as 'unluckily', highlighting a bitterness towards their parents. This bitterness is furthered through the disapproval of their father's job, seen through comments such as raining 'destruction on the earth' and on 'undeserving people'. The scathing comment condemns the father, refusing to idolise and view him in a heroic manner. This is similar to the way the narrator views the parent's actions, which sets their 'lives on the courses they eventually followed.'. By contextualising the events of the robbery, Ford furthers the shock of the parent's actions, both on the reader and narrator alike.

Runners-up

Jack Organ, Christ College Brecon

The opening of Richard Ford's Canada sets quintessential features of the Bildungsroman into motion, relaying the narrator's coming to terms with the tribulations of their childhood through a predominantly retrospective narrative.

The introductory paragraph is detached from the extract's main timeframe, as the narrator of the present immediately informs us that their parents have committed 'robbery' and 'murders'. These events are described as inescapably pivotal moments in the rites of passage of our new-found protagonist, and thus the chronology of the passage's structure establishes the indirect repercussions of crime as a key theme around which the narrator's childhood, and hence the novel revolves from its outset.

Despite this declaration, the narrator then assures the reader, and perhaps themselves, that the actions of their parents were uncharacteristic of their 'just regular' lives. Here, we hear undertones of the narrator's psychological disorientation despite the measured, even desensitised tone of the narrative, as they struggle to comprehend how the 'destiny' of 'the least likely two people in the world to rob a bank' deteriorated into one of crime. Nevertheless, the narrator then undercuts their own reasoning in the same breath, entitling it 'null and void' thinking in a candid concession that regardless of the positive reputation of their parents (and the narrator's own efforts to stress it), they are indefinitely defined by these irresolvable moral issues.

Bev Parsons, the narrator's father, is portrayed as a stereotypical 'country boy' of the American Deep South; physically 'attractive' and openly 'proud' as a 'handsome six-footer', his external machismo is seen to the fore in his presentation. This impression is emphasised by the violent and destructive connotations of his 'burning' ambition for success in the military and heightened by the narrator's description that he 'rained destruction' on 'the enemy and undeserving people alike'. Again here, the narrator's embedded moral concerns arise, as the brutality and injustice of warfare underpins their memory of their father figure. However, the narrator also provides insight into the underlying insecurities of Bev Parson's character; his 'theatrical style' of playful and comedic entertainment appears to mask a 'sensitivity' surrounding his poor 'hearing' and 'woman's name'. Perhaps, the conspicuous bravado of this character is, in part, a façade disguising his inward vulnerability.

Alongside the narrator, we turn to the story behind their parents' marriage. Here, the emotionally detached tone of the narrative reaches its zenith, as epitomised by the narrator's description of their own conception as a mere 'hasty encounter' – both the act itself and the narrator's sentiment towards it appear utterly devoid of pride and intimacy. Accordingly, the further statement that the couple 'couldn't have been more unsuited' conveys dismay at how this improbable marriage came to be. This is typical of the informal and emotionally pragmatic style of the narrative voice throughout, here expressing the narrator's live thought process in its natural form to the reader.

As the passage reaches its conclusion, the narrator's closing judgement that their parents' marriage 'changed [their mother's life] forever', indeed 'not in a good way', serves as a baleful reminder of the crime that looms in the narrator's past and the couple's future; where this passage ends, the narrator's story merely begins.

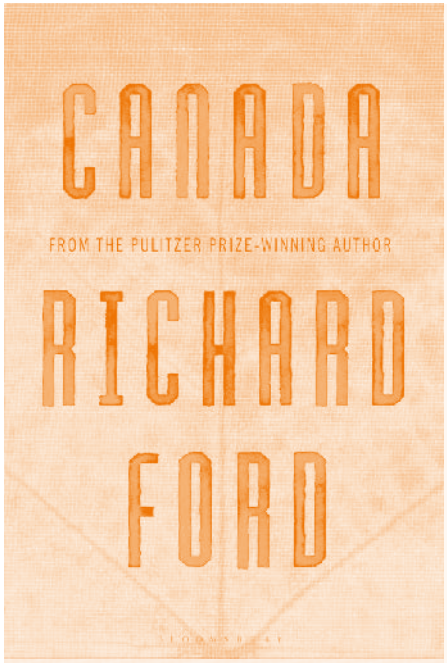
Phoenix Fleming, Marlborough College

This opening from *Canada* by Richard Ford is written in a first-person point of view and introduces the topic of the passage with an exciting and dramatic sentence which creates a feeling of suspense and intrigue. The tone of the passage is matter of fact and straightforward, reflecting on the lives of his parents. This passage outlines the event that happened (the narrator and his sister's parents robbing a bank) and describes in detail their father, his background, and why he married their mother.

The third and longest paragraph of this opening is largely focused on the father of the twins, Bev Parsons. The first very striking thing about Bev's description is the way he is described so contrastingly, at first stereotypically masculine 'handsome six-footer… a big square, expectant face and knobby cheekbones.' This gives the impression of a charming man, who one would expect to see in the air-force with 'handsome' and quite masculine features. However, in the next part of the sentence it goes on to describe 'sensuous lips and long, attractive feminine eyelashes.' The way the lips are describes make them stand out in our imagination as we place them on a square-faced man and in a way, throw off the image of the sharp and stereotypical military man. As well as this the word 'attractive' almost directly contrasts the word 'handsome' in the ways we describe men and women. Bev's more feminine descriptions also link to his name 'Beverley' which would normally be considered a woman's name, however, as he says, 'he never conceded that Beverley was a woman's name.' Bev also appears defensive about this when he describes how 'no one confuses them with women,' while talking about how his name is common. This portrays his character in an interesting way because although his physical description shows him as confident and charming, he does become 'sensitive' about certain topics such as his name or his hearing.

The Narrator's mother is introduced by stating that she was attracted to their father and that she got pregnant accidentally. The idea of an 'unlucky' pregnancy acts as a foreshadow to the wife's 'life chang[ing] forever – and not in a good way,' due to marrying Bev. This creates suspense throughout the whole opening of the novel and draws in the attention of the reader. Like how Ford contrasted the physical appearances of Bev, he also contrasts the background of Bev and his wife's families. Bev is presented as ruggish and simple coming from a family of 'backwoods timber estimators,' and who later joined the air-force. This completely contrasts his wife's family of 'educated mathematics teachers and semiprofessional musicians.' The contrast continues to emphasis just how different these two people are and perhaps why their lives didn't quite work out. This is further conveyed by the narrator's thoughts, 'though they couldn't have been more unsuited and different.'

The opening to *Canada* is a suspenseful and striking introduction to the lives of Bev and his wife told through the point of view of one of their children. This introduction gives the reader conflicting feelings on what to expect for the rest of the book as it is very hard to imagine a well-mannered man and his educated wife robbing a bank. The opening provides enough context to the rest of the book to keep it interesting and intriguing but not give anything away too soon creating tension and an effective hook that draws the reader in.



The Opening of *Canada* – Richard Ford

First, I'll tell about the robbery our parents committed. Then about the murders, which happened later. The robbery is the more important part, since it served to set my and my sister's lives on the courses they eventually followed. Nothing would make complete sense without that being told first.

Our parents were the least likely two people in the world to rob a bank. They weren't strange people, not obviously criminals. No one would've thought they were destined to end up the way they did. They were just regular – although, of course, that kind of thinking became null and void the moment they did rob a bank.

MY FATHER, Bev Parsons, was a country boy born in Marengo County, Alabama, in 1923, and came out of high school in 1939, burning to be in the Army Air Corps – the branch that became the Air Force. He went in at Demopolis, trained at Randolph, near San Antonio, longed to be a fighter pilot, but lacked the aptitude and so learned bombadiering instead. He flew the B-25s, the light-medium Mitchells, that were seeing duty in the Philippines, and later over Osaka, where they rained destruction on the earth – both on the enemy and undeserving people alike. He was a tall, winning, smiling handsome six-footer (he barely fitted into his bombadier's compartment), with a big square, expectant face and knobby cheekbones and sensuous lips and long, attractive feminine eyelashes. He had white shiny teeth and short black hair he was proud of – as he was of his name. Bev. Captain Bev Parsons. He never conceded that Beverley was a woman's name in most people's minds. It grew from Anglo-Saxon roots,' he said. 'It's a common name in England. Vivian, Gwen and Shirley are men's names there. No one confuses *them* with women.' He was a nonstop talker, was open-minded for a southerner, had graceful obliging manners that should've taken him far in the Air Force, but didn't. His quick hazel eyes would search around any room he was in, finding someone to pay attention to him – my sister and me, ordinarily. He told corny jokes in a southern theatrical style, could do card tricks and magic tricks, could detach his thumb and replace it, make a handkerchief disappear and come back. He could play boogie-woogie piano, and sometimes would 'talk Dixie' to us, and sometimes like Amos 'n' Andy. He had lost some of his hearing by flying the Mitchells, and was sensitive about it. But he looked sharp in his 'honest' GI haircut and blue captain's tunic and generally conveyed a warmth that was genuine and made my twin sister and me love him. It was also probably the reason my mother had been attracted to him (though they couldn't have been more unsuited and different) and unluckily gotten pregnant from their one hasty encounter after meeting at a party honoring returned airmen, near where he was re-training to learn supply-officer duties at Fort Lewis, in March 1945 – when no one needed him to drop bombs anymore. They were married immediately when they found out. Her parents, who lived in Tacoma and were Jewish immigrants from Poland, didn't approve. They were educated mathematics teachers and semiprofessional musicians and popular concertizers in Poznan who'd escaped after 1918 and come to Washington State through Canada, and became – of all things – school custodians. Being Jews meant little to them by then, or to our mother – just an old, exacting, constricted conception of life they were happy to put behind them in a land where there apparently were no Jews.

But for their only daughter to marry a smiling, talkative only-son of Scotch-Irish Alabama backwoods timber estimators was never in their thinking, and they soon put it out of their thinking altogether. And while, from a distance, it may seem that our parents were merely not made for one another, it was more true that when our mother married our father, it betokened a loss, and her life changed forever – and not in a good way – as she surely must've believed.