



Arm Chair Critic

Patricia B. Bertschy Reviews:

Bridge of Sighs

by Richard Russo

Published By Alfred A. Knopf, 2007

Every so often, you read a novel that you want to tell your friends to read, but when they ask "What is it about?" all you can say is "people, family, falling in love, and watching life unfold."

In other words, nothing really happens and everything happens.

Bridge of Sighs by Richard Russo is one of those novels. Russo won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2002 for **Empire Falls**, a novel that became a terrific HBO movie. **Falls** told the story of a group of folks, some of whom were quite quirky, from a small town in Maine.

Bridge does not have the quirky characters of **Empire Falls**, and that is the appeal. **Bridge of Sighs** is full of everyday people.

The focus is a young boy, Lou, and his family as they struggle to move to the right side of the tracks, and the friends they have and long to have as they do.

Lou's parents own a small grocery store in a time of emerging supermarkets. The store succeeds because of his father's hard work and honesty and his mother's keen sense of what people want. His parents are opposites, his father an optimist, his mother a realist. I loved them both for their predictability, and for their strengths. They want different things for their son because of who they are and where they have come from.

Lou struggles to feel equal to the kids at school, the popular kids, the "cool" kids, even the rough kids on the other side of town. He admires their bravado and wishes he had some of it. Sarah, his girlfriend, is drawn to Lou's life-long friend Bobby. Bobby takes chances and fits into both sides of town. But Sarah loves Lou for his family and the safety they offer her.

Bridge if Sighs is a story of choices, the ones we make as we decide who we will be, or the ones that are made for us because of who we are. But most of all, it is a story about love.

Lou's mother is a sharp observer of human kind. She gives Lou this advice: "You don't really think just because somebody says they're going to do something, that means they're going to do it?"

"But why?" Lou asks.

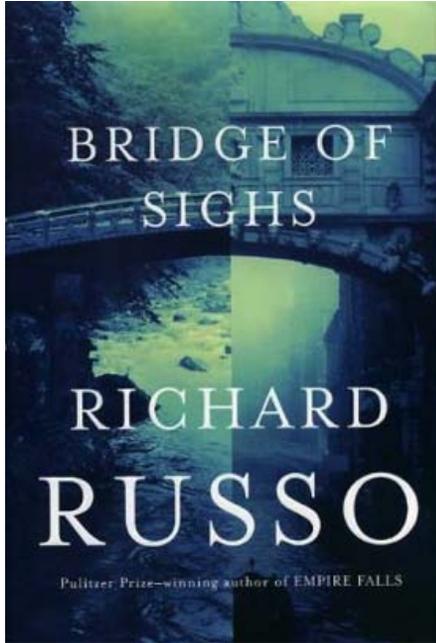
"You know the answer, Lou."

As unsatisfying as that exchange seems on the surface, after getting to know Lou and his mother, we know the answer also. We may not want to accept it, just as Lou holds out hope that when he is older, he will be different from the adults he knows.

Russo's book is full of richly drawn characters. Lou's Uncle Dec is the opposite of Lou's stalwart father. Mr. and Mrs. Marconi make extraordinary concessions to stay together. Sarah's parents are confused and outrageous; and Lou himself, who longs to understand the mystery that he feels is "at the heart of everything, a mystery as deep and profound as why my parents loved each other." It is a mystery he may never fully grasp, but believes. And Russo helps us come to understand it also.

The appeal of **Bridge of Sighs** is that it's deeply thought provoking while seeming to be light-hearted. Lou is frequently asking himself "Are we all just who we are?... Do we have little choice but to slog forward through life, repeating our worst mistakes without ever learning from them or, worse yet, without being able to use what we'd learned?"

Through Russo's characters, we struggle with the questions Lou raises, but as we do, it is a very enjoyable read.



Available at:

www.Amazon.com

www.barnesandnoble.com

Patricia B. Bertschy is an avid reader who lives on Cape Cod.

Her nonfiction story "Discovery" won her a scholarship to the Cape Cod Writers Center Conference held at the Craigville Conference Center.

Patricia was named one of five finalists in the **Norman Mailer Cape and Islands Community College Writing Awards** for a work of non-fiction titled "The Long Walk".

Pat was also awarded third prize in PrimeTime Cape Cod magazine's 2010 Writing Contest for Poetry and Prose, for her short story, "The Dress."

Patricia welcomes your feedback and would be happy to receive readers' recommends for future book reviews. If you have a suggestion please email Katie@CapeWomenOnline.com