

K N O P F Q & A



A conversation with

RICHARD RUSSO

author of

CHANCES ARE. . .

Q: This novel centers on three old friends, Lincoln, Teddy and Mickey reuniting after many years in a place that is loaded with memories and meaning. I imagine for a novelist a reunion is such a super tempting premise?

A: I actually find reunions with old friends kind of terrifying because often we recall the deep bond of affection we once had even as we fear that maybe it hasn't withstood the test of time. What if we don't have anything in common anymore? What if age or loss or success or illness has fundamentally changed that younger person we were once so fond of? Worse, what if *we've* changed and are a source of disappointment? Ah, but then there's the moment that these fears prove groundless, and there's your old friend, like you a little the worse for wear, but otherwise still the same, your relationship worn near to perfection by time. That's what Lincoln, Teddy and Mickey feel, I think.

Q: Among many other things, CHANCES ARE...is a mystery about the never solved disappearance of the fourth musketeer in this group—Jacy. Did you set out to write a mystery?

A: Not really, though I'm happy enough to have done so. The mystery of what happened to Jacy keeps the reader turning pages (I hope), but what kept me writing those pages was an even more profound mystery—who was she? Because clearly the three boys who are in love with her don't know. They not only don't know *her*, they don't understand the world she came from, and it's that intersection of the individual and class that particularly interests me. Writing the boys (and later men) who loved her was easy (they revealed themselves to me right away); writing her was thrillingly difficult.

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Q: You have written so well for so long about communities where class divisions between rich and poor; between locals and summer folks are always simmering. How did you decide to set this new novel specifically on Martha's Vineyard?

A: My literary agent and his wife love to travel. I don't. I'm generally okay when I get where I'm headed, but I have to be dragged. They are also excited to try new restaurants, new cuisines, whereas I tend to return to my favorite places and there order the same dishes again and again. It's a question of bandwidth, I guess, and mine has always been pretty narrow. Anyway, some years ago my agent asked why my wife and I returned every year to Martha's Vineyard. He'd visited the island years before and knew it was beautiful, but that wasn't what he was asking. What I suspect he wanted to know was why the place had so captured my imagination. In some ways *Chances Are...* is an answer to that question.

The Vineyard turned out to be an interesting place to explore someone's disappearance. Like Agatha Christie, I love the idea of crime on an island. Most crime requires flight. You get in your car and drive off at a high rate of speed. On an island you have to wait for the ferry, which means it's not a great place to rob a bank. I spent a good year reading crime logs and court proceedings in the local island newspaper, which were sometimes hilarious but more often depressing in their lack of imagination and similarity.

Q: This is very much a novel about friendship (and specifically about lifelong friendships) that asks as you so eloquently put it: "Was this what we wanted from our oldest friends? Reassurance that the world we remember fondly still exists?" So, is it?

A: Our oldest friendships are often the deepest but also the most fraught. Most people become more skilled at dissembling over time. Our oldest friends knew us before we got good at it. They tend to love us, as one character in the novel says, "anyway." And maybe that's the best way to love and be loved. We know—not everything, but a lot—and are undeterred in our affections.

Q: Do you think it's fair to say that while this is a novel about the very best of friends it is also very much a novel of secrets?

A: Yes, this is a novel of secrets, where the truth (as Grace Slick long ago insisted) is all too often found to be lies. But that's not as bad as it sounds. If you don't have secrets, you don't have an inner life. Who would want total transparency? We're all entitled to that place we retreat to and shut the door behind us. It's more than a little ironic, I suppose, that it's the novelist's primary job to intrude into that private place, to shine a light on our inner lives, to violate the privacy we all rightly value and seek to protect. In this we are more ruthless than Google, Facebook, and Amazon combined. In our defense, though, we have far better motives. We're after understanding, even wisdom. They just want to sell us stuff.

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Q: The memory of Vietnam and the draft are ever present in the lives of your characters, as are the ideas of lost youth vs lost innocence. How does that war inform this novel?

A: One of the very first things I knew about this novel was that Vietnam would haunt it. I knew, for instance, that we would be introduced to these characters by their draft numbers. I gave one of them my own (322), a number that has haunted me ever since. In his show on Broadway, Bruce Springsteen wonders out loud who died in his place (“because somebody did”). In terms of historical context, I also knew that *Chances Are...* would be bookended by two lying presidents, one whose lies finally caught up to him, the other who, as the novel ends, is about to ascend what he thinks of as a throne and whose day of reckoning approaches on horseback.

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:

Gabrielle Brooks / gbrooks@penguinrandomhouse.com / 212-572-2152

Demetris Papadimitropoulos / dpapadimitropoulos@penguinrandomhouse.com / 212-572-2799