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Helmerich Award-winning novelist tells Tulsa students being a 'bad' kid can still be start of something great

By James D. Watts Jr. Tulsa World Dec 2, 2017 Updated Dec 4, 2017 ☐ 0



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Event

**Peggy V. Helmerich
Distinguished Author
Award winner Richard
Ford**

Lecture and book signing

10:30 a.m. Saturday

Central Library in downtown
Tulsa, first floor



Novelist Richard Ford told a roomful of Tulsa high school students that he had only one thing to prove to them.

“My rationale for being here this morning is to prove to you what an ordinary chap I am,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of such novels as “The Sportswriter” and “Independence Day” said. “I do this so that any of you who might want to become a writer won’t be discouraged.”

Another rationale for Ford’s presence in Tulsa this weekend is that he is the 2017 recipient of the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, presented by the Tulsa Library Trust. Ford received the award — a \$40,000 cash prize and an engraved crystal book — at a black-tie gala held at Tulsa’s Central Library.

Ford will also take part in a free public event 10:30 a.m. Saturday at Central Library, Fourth Street and Denver Avenue.

Friday morning, Ford spoke to Tulsa high school students from Memorial, Booker T. Washington and Cascia Hall about his life’s work as a writer.

“I wasn’t the best in my class,” Ford said. “I wasn’t rich. I wasn’t the child of highly educated parents. If you knew me when I was at your age, 17, 18 years old, you would have thought, ‘Not a chance.’ At your age, I was already in the probationary system from breaking into houses, stealing cars, things like that.”

Even at a younger age, Ford said, he was “not an easily supervised child,” and his mother would often drop him off at the library in his hometown of Jackson, Mississippi.

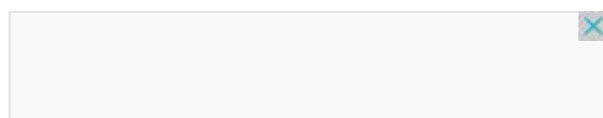
“She’d just leave me there for a few hours,” he said. “And that was great because I found out what a book was. Not so much to read, because I’m dyslexic, but as an object to hold. I could see how people might come to treasure books.”

What ultimately set Ford on the path to a life in literature was his discovery of what he called “the habit of art” — the consistent employment of certain qualities that he applied to reading and writing.

“Persistence. Belief in the imagination. Patience. Intensity. Concentration,” Ford said. “When I was in high school in Jackson, Mississippi, no one knew anything about dyslexia. They just thought I was bad or lazy. I remember teachers telling me, ‘Richard, you aren’t dumb. You just need to concentrate more.’ And it turned out to be true.”

Ford also knew that because of his dyslexia, it would take him a lot more time and effort to read a book to the end. But the slowness of the process became an advantage, as it made him more aware of language and how to use it, of seeing “words as physical things, with syllables and different sounds,” and realizing the simple pleasure of making one’s way through a sentence one word at a time.

The students in attendance had read Ford’s most recent work, a memoir of his parents titled “Between Them.” When asked the reason for writing the book, he said: “I loved my parents, and I missed them. My mother died in 1981, and I wrote the essay about her soon after because I didn’t want those memories to go away. My father died in 1960 — he was a traveling salesman and was not a strong physical presence in my life, but a couple of years ago I realized I missed my father.



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“People may think it strange that I would miss someone who’s been out of my life more than 50 years,” Ford said. “People talk about ‘closure,’ that crazy idea. I prefer to believe what the writer Penelope Fitzgerald said: ‘Experience is not given to us to be gotten over.’ ”

When asked about his inspirations, Ford literally pointed to his wife, Kristina, who took jobs early in their life together so that Ford could devote himself to writing. Another inspiration was Eudora Welty, a previous Helmerich Award winner.

“I didn’t know her, but she was the one shining light in our nasty, churchy, bigoted little town,” Ford said. “What her presence meant was that, floating in the air, there was this possibility of being a writer.”

Ford was asked if growing up in a racially segregated town had an impact on his writing.

“It had a profound impact on me as a person,” he said. “The

government, the powers of that society, was telling us there was this whole bunch of people over there who were different than you, not as good as you. And we knew it was wrong, irrespective of how you dealt with it.

“I never played sports against a black kid. I never went to a mixed-race dance. That’s preposterous,” Ford said. “It made me completely skeptical of anything anyone would say to me from a position of authority. It also showed to me that life is kind of absurd. There’s a big discrepancy between how things are supposed to be and how they truly are. It has a great deal to do with the kind of writer I am.”

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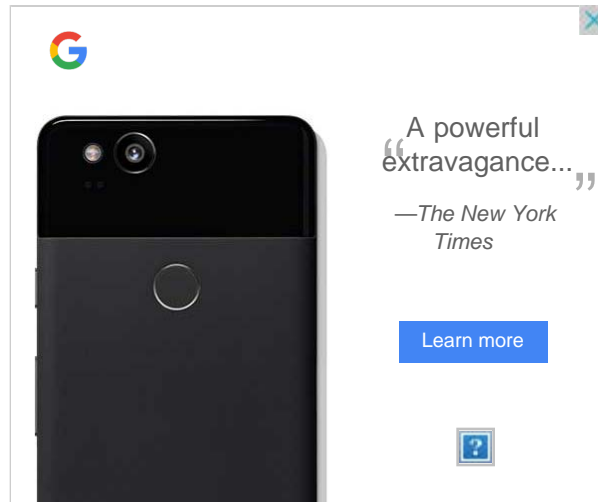
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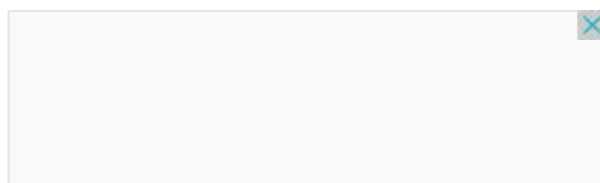
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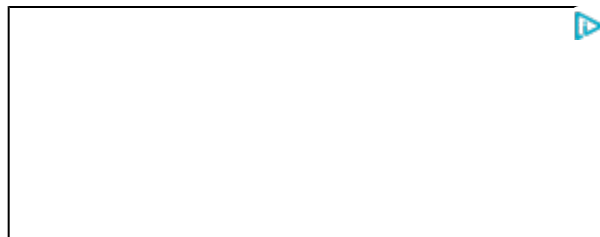
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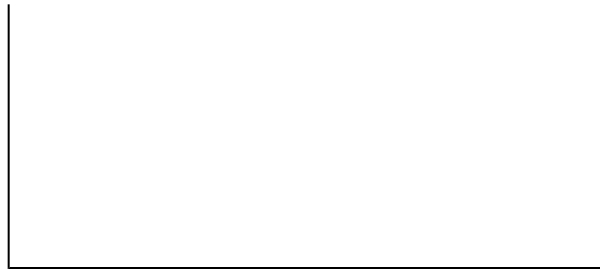
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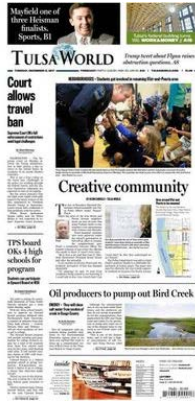
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