

Overstory (Powers)

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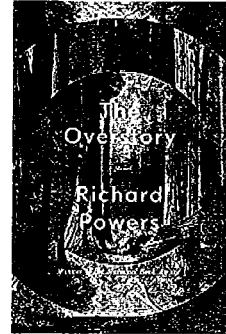
The Overstory

Richard Powers, 2018

W.W. Norton & Co.

512 pp.

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Summary

Winner, 2019 Pulitzer Prize

- ◆ An Air Force loadmaster in the Vietnam War is shot out of the sky, then saved by falling into a banyan.
- ◆ An artist inherits a hundred years of photographic portraits, all of the same doomed American chestnut.
- ◆ A hard-partying undergraduate in the late 1980s electrocutes herself, dies, and is sent back into life by creatures of air and light.
- ◆ A hearing- and speech-impaired scientist discovers that trees are communicating with one another.

These four, and five other strangers—each summoned in different ways by trees—are brought together in a last and violent stand to save the continent's few remaining acres of virgin forest.

In his twelfth novel, National Book Award winner Richard Powers delivers a sweeping, impassioned novel of activism and resistance that is also a stunning evocation of—and paean to—the natural world.

From the roots to the crown and back to the seeds, *The Overstory* unfolds in concentric rings of interlocking fables that range from antebellum New York to the late twentieth-century Timber Wars of the Pacific Northwest and beyond, exploring the essential conflict on this planet: the one taking place between humans and nonhumans.

There is a world alongside ours—vast, slow, interconnected, resourceful, magnificently inventive, and almost invisible to us. This is the story of a handful of people who learn how to see that world and who are drawn up into its unfolding catastrophe.

The Overstory is a book for all readers who despair of humanity's self-imposed separation from the rest of creation and who hope for the transformative, regenerating possibility of a homecoming. If the trees of this earth could speak, what would they tell us? "Listen. There's something you need to hear." (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—June 18, 1957
- Where—Evanston, Illinois, USA
- Education—M.A., University of Illinois
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award-Fiction
- Currently—lives in the Smoky Mountain region of Tennessee

Richard Powers is an American novelist whose works explore the effects of modern science and technology. *The Echo Maker*, perhaps his best known work, won the 2006 National Book Award for Fiction.

Early years

One of five children, Powers was born in Evanston, Illinois. His family later moved a few miles south to Lincolnwood where his father was a local school principal. When Powers was 11 they moved to Bangkok, Thailand, where his father had accepted a position at International School Bangkok, which Powers attended through his freshman year, ending in 1972.

During that time outside the U.S. he developed skill in vocal music and proficiency in cello, guitar, saxophone, and clarinet. He also became an avid reader, enjoying nonfiction, primarily, and classics such as the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Education

The family returned to the U.S. when Powers was 16. Following graduation in 1975 from DeKalb High School in DeKalb, Illinois, he enrolled at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) with a major in physics, which he switched to English literature during his first semester. There he earned the BA in 1978 and the MA in Literature in 1980.

He decided not to pursue the PhD partly because of his aversion to strict specialization, which had been one reason for his early transfer from physics to English, and partly because he had observed in graduate students and their professors a lack of pleasure in reading and writing (as portrayed in *Galatea 2.2*).

Career

For some time Powers worked in Boston, as a computer programmer. Viewing the 1914 photograph "Young Farmers" by August Sander, on a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts, he was inspired to quit his job and spend the next two years writing his

first book, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, which was published in 1985.

To avoid the publicity and attention generated by that first novel, Powers moved to the Netherlands where he wrote *Prisoner's Dilemma*, followed up with *The Gold Bug Variations*. During a year's stay at the University of Cambridge, he wrote most of *Operations Wandering Soul*; then, in 1992 Powers returned to the U.S. to become writer-in-residence at the University of Illinois.

All told, Powers has published a dozen books, winning him numerous literary awards and other recognitions. These include, among various others, a MacArthur Fellowship; Pushcart Prize, PEN/Faulkner Special Citation, Man Booker long listing; nominations for the Pulitzer and the National Book Critics Circle Award; and the National Book Award itself in 2006.

In 2010 and 2013, Powers was a Stein Visiting Writer at Stanford University, during which time he partly assisted in the lab of biochemist Aaron Straight. In 2013, Stanford named him the Phil and Penny Knight Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of English.

While writing his 2018 novel, *The Overstory*, Powers left Palo Alto, California, moving to the foothills of the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. (*Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 4/16/2018.*)

Book Reviews

Monumental...*The Overstory* accomplishes what few living writers from either camp, art or science, could attempt. Using the tools of the story, he pulls readers heart-first into a perspective so much longer-lived and more subtly developed than the human purview that we gain glimpses of a vast, primordial sensibility, while watching our own kind get whittled down to size.... A gigantic fable of genuine truths.

Barbara Kingsolver - New York Times Book Review

[Powers is] brilliant on the strange idea of "plant personhood" ...opening our eyes to the wondrous things just above our line of sight. Memorable chapters unfold [with] many unforgettable images in a novel devoted to "reviving that dead metaphor at the heart of the word bewilderment."

Sam Sacks - Wall Street Journal

Remarkable.... This ambitious novel soars up through the canopy of American literature and remakes the landscape of environmental fiction.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

A big, ambitious epic...Powers juggles the personal dramas of his far-flung cast with vigor and clarity. The human elements of the book—the arcs his characters follow

over the decades from crusading passion to muddled regret and a sense of failure—are thoroughly compelling. So are the extra-human elements, thanks to the extraordinary imaginative flights of Powers's prose, which persuades you on the very first page that you're hearing the voices of trees as they chide our species.

Michael Upchurch - Boston Globe

The time is ripe for a big novel that tells us as much about trees as *Moby Dick* does about whales....*The Overstory* is that novel and it is very nearly a masterpiece.... On almost every page of *The Overstory* you will find sentences that combine precision and vision.

Times (UK)

An extraordinary novel.... An astonishing performance.... There is something exhilarating, too, in reading a novel whose context is wider than human life. *The Overstory* leaves you with a slightly adjusted frame of reference.... What was happening to his characters passed into my conscience, like alcohol into the bloodstream, and left a feeling behind of grief or guilt, even after I put it down.

Guardian (UK)

[I]mpassioned but unsatisfying....Powers's best works are thrilling accounts of characters blossoming as they pursue their intellectual passions; here, few of the earnest figures come alive on the page.... [T]he novel feels curiously barren.

Publishers Weekly

Standing as silent witnesses to our interweaving genealogies, cyclical wars, and collapsing empires, trees contain our collective history.... [A] deep meditation on the irreparable psychic damage that manifests in our unmitigated separation from nature. —Joshua Finnell, Colgate Univ., Hamilton, NY

Library Journal

(*Starred review.*) A magnificent saga.... Powers's sylvan tour de force is alive with gorgeous descriptions; continually surprising, often heartbreaking characters; complex suspense; unflinching scrutiny of pain.... [P]rofound and symphonic.

Booklist

(*Starred review.*) [A] masterpiece of operatic proportions, involving nine central characters and more than half a century of American life.... A magnificent achievement: a novel that is, by turns, both optimistic and fatalistic, idealistic without being naive.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, use our LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for OVERSTORY ... then take off on your own:

1. *The Overstory* is split into four sections: Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds. How do those sections reflect the thematic concerns of the novel—that human development (in the micro and macro) mimics growth in the "natural world," that human beings are deeply, intimately bound to nature?

2. *Follow-up to Question 1:* The Hoel family keeps a photographic record of the American chestnut tree in their field. In what way does this photographic record of the tree's life mirror the family's own life?

3. Of the novel's nine opening stories, which do you find most engaging? Is that because you find the characters more compelling ...or the storyline itself ... or can't the two be separated?

4. What do you make of Patricia Westerford's statement:

You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes.

5. Westover also says, "Forests panic people. Too much going on there. Humans need a sky." Do you panic in deep forests? (Forests are different than the lovely shaded groves and glens where we love to picnic.)

6. How does the author treat eco-warriors: are they the novel's heroes? Does he seem sympathetic to their causes ... or impatient with their stridency? What is *your* attitude toward eco-warriors, both the ones in the novel and the ones in real life?

7. Some reviewers claim that characters in *The Overstory* get short-shrift, that they are subsumed by the book's ideas. Others say the book's characters are convincing and invested with humanity. Which view do you agree with? Do the characters come alive for you, are they multifaceted, possessing emotional depth? Or do you see them as fairly one-dimensional, serving primarily as the embodiment of ideas?

8. Has Powers novel changed the way you look at trees? Have you previously read, for instance, *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben, *Lab Girl* by Hope Jahren, or Annie Proulx's novel, *Barkskins*?

9. What might the title, *Overstory*, signify? What is the pun at its heart?

10. What of this observation on the part of the lawyer who turns to novels for solace but then seems to question their value?

To be human is to confuse a satisfying story with a meaningful one.... The world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the world seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people.

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online and off, with attribution. Thanks.)

top of page (summary)

Why do you think Richard Powers chose the title “The Overstory”?

What was your experience with trees as a child, and what has it been as an adult? Have trees shaped your life in any meaningful way? Do you have a favorite tree?

Adam initially builds his career on studying the faults in human brains, such as confirmation bias and the conflation of correlation with causality. Meanwhile, Douglas is convinced that humans’ greatest flaw is mistaking agreement for truth. What questions does this book ask about human failings?

What does Powers mean when he describes humans as “trapped in blinkered bodies”?

What do you make of the voices Olivia hears, and her sense of conviction that “the most wondrous products of four billion years of life” need our help?

Which character’s story do you identify with the most, and why?

It is a difficult moment for Douglas when he learns that all of his years of planting trees have only allowed companies to increase its annual allowable cut. How did this book make you think differently, if at all, about clear-cutting? Do you see it happening in your own community?

What are you learning about trees that you didn’t know before? Did some of Patricia’s research surprise you, either about the “giving trees” or the ways dead trees contribute to forests? Did any of it change the way you see trees?

Patricia describes trees and humans as being “at war” over land and water and the atmosphere, and that she can see “which side will lose by winning.” What does she mean by that?

The book is divided into four parts: “Roots,” “Trunk,” “Crown,” and “Seeds.” What is the significance of each section? Were you surprised when the stories began to intertwine?

Our book club just finished reading “We the Corporations,” a book about the ways corporations have gained many of the same rights as individuals. In “The Overstory,” Ray is moved and upset by a legal argument that suggests trees should also share those rights. Do you agree?

Were you surprised by the lengths that Adam, Olivia, Nicholas, Mimi and Douglas went to try to wake people up to the destruction of forests? What did you think of their tactics?

What have you read in the news lately that mirrors the stories in “The Overstory”? How is “The Overstory” playing out in real life in your own community?

What is the significance of the worlds Neelay creates within his game, “Mastery”?

What was your opinion of “direct action” as a means of effective activism before the book? What is your opinion after reading it? Do you think it should play a role in addressing the destruction of our planet?

Toward the end of the book, Dorothy is arrested for her determination to let her yard grow wild. Did this book change how you see your own backyard?

As the book closes, Mimi seems to say that the world as it has been is ending and a new one will begin. Does that ring true to you? How does that make you feel?

Richard Powers writes: "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story." Do you agree? Did any part of this story change your mind?

Reading Guide Questions



Please be aware that this discussion guide will contain spoilers!

1. Why do you think Powers leads with the story of the chestnut trees?
2. How has your attitude toward the environment changed in the last 10 years? How about the last 20 years or longer? Has *The Overstory* changed your perspective?
3. Have you been an activist? If so for what causes? What triggered your involvement?
4. Which of the characters do you most relate to and why? Which do you find hardest to understand?
5. Many of the main characters are associated with a specific tree. Which tree would you pick to represent you? Why?
6. Doug, Mimi, Adam, Nick and Olivia are all tied together in a plotline revolving around ecoterrorism. How do you think the Brinkman's, Patricia Westerford's and Neelay Mehta's stories tie in with theirs? How are they relevant to the author's message?
7. Were there particular facts about trees in *The Overstory* that surprised or impressed you?
8. Patricia says that she feels "Girls doing science are like bears riding bikes. Possible, but freakish." How has this changed over the years? To what extent is this still true?
9. Are there any quotes in the book that resonated with you?
10. Olivia has a near-death experience, and it changes her forever. She thinks that she hears voices from beyond the world directing her actions. Do you think this is possible?
11. Several characters say throughout the novel that humankind is "always wrong." What do you think they mean, and do you agree?
12. Olivia enjoys Nick's company in part because he's "comfortable with silence." Are you comfortable with quiet, or do you feel the need to fill the void? Why do you think you lean the way you do?
13. Ray and Dorothy thrive on books. "Ray's shelves are organized by topic, Dorothy's by author. He prefers state-of-the-art books with fresh copyrights. She needs to communicate with the distant dead, alien souls as different from her as possible. Once Ray starts a book, he force-marches through to its conclusion, however hard the slog. Dorothy doesn't mind skipping the author's philosophies..." How are your shelves organized, and what are your reading habits? Whose style is closer to your own?
14. Nick thinks that "He has landed in a druid tree cult... Oak veneration at the oracle at Dodona, the druids' groves in Britain and Gaul, Shinto sakaki worship, India's bejeweled wishing trees, Mayan kapoks, Egyptian sycamores, the Chinese sacred ginkgo – all the branches of the world's first religion." Did you know before reading the novel that so many early cultures valued trees? Why do you think that was? And why is it no longer true, for the most part?
15. Dennis and Patricia debate the question, "What use is wilderness?" What's your response? Do you think forests should be valued more for their contribution to the economy or for their ecological contribution?
16. Many of the characters break the law in order to bring attention to the plight of trees. Adam states that by committing arson they "accomplished more in two nights than [they] did with years of effort." Do you think their actions were justified? Do you think the authorities' responses were reasonable? When is defying the law the right thing to do, if ever?
17. Patricia continues to talk with her partner even after his death, even though she doesn't believe in an afterlife. Do you think this is a common reaction to a loved one's death? Do you ever "talk" to people with whom you've had a connection, who are no longer living?
18. Doug asks Adam, "What were we hoping to accomplish? What did we think we were doing?" How do you think the various characters would answer this? Did their actions have any lasting impact or were they ultimately futile?
19. Several times throughout the novel people state, "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story." What do you think the author means by this? Do you agree?

20. The night Olivia was injured Adam was sent for help, but he returned without assistance to protect the rest of the group, himself included. Do you think this was the correct course of action?
21. Olivia asks Adam, "Do you believe human beings are using resources faster than the world can replace them?" Later, Patricia says that her book was written when the "planet [was] still young enough to rally." Do you think an environmental crisis is underway? If so, do you think the planet can still recover?
22. Patricia asks, "What's the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world?" How would you answer this?
23. Nick chooses to spell out the word "Still" in gigantic letters, legible from space. Why do you think he chose this particular word?
24. Early on, the author quotes Thoreau: "Old trees are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity...." What do you think this means? Do you agree?
25. Nick reads that "Beliefs should not be considered delusional if they are in keeping with societal norms." Do you think this is a valid definition? Based on it, who among the characters do you think is delusional?
26. Adam's thesis is about the "bystander effect." How do you think this influences his actions? How can we avoid being bystanders?
27. Do you think Adam should have fought his conviction for his family's sake, or was he right to accept his responsibility for the crimes committed?
28. As Mimi's father leaves China, his father tells him that "You can't come back to something that is gone." Is this true even if your home hasn't been destroyed? Is "home" ever still really there after one has left?
29. Mimi thinks, "The only thing worth believing in is measurement. She must become an engineer, like her daddy before her. It's not even a choice. She's an engineer already, and always has been." Have you ever had a moment of clarity, where you felt you knew exactly what you were meant to be doing? If so, how did it play out in your life?
30. How do you think the main characters' lives would have transpired had Olivia not died?