

Pessimism and the Unhuman: *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

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The Overstory, New York: W. W. Norton, 2018, 512 pp.

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* may be one of the most important American novels of ideas of the past several years. Winner of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *The Overstory* is a novel about trees and our relationship with them, revealing through narrative, argument and richly informative detail just how dependent humans are upon arboreal nature.

Powers is the author of 12 novels, many of which explore particular fields of study, such as *Galatea 2.2* (1995), about an artificial intelligence experiment, and *The Echo Maker* (2006), a National Book Award-winning novel about a man who suffers a traumatic brain injury and in which Powers meditates upon the ways we construct a perceived reality through cognition and memory.

In *The Overstory*, Powers follows nine people whose lives are all in some way directed by their relationships to—and feelings of protectiveness for—trees and, in Powers' elegantly complex plot, branch, touch and twine with each other in unanticipated ways over the course of five hundred compelling pages.

While its human characters travel in history from a mid-nineteenth-century Iowa homestead to the Occupy movement in Zuccotti Park (the reference to the 2011 protests is perhaps revealing) and beyond, the novel takes us back in time billions of years to the first appearance of life on Earth and intermittently recapitulates, in language at once taxonomical and poetically beautiful, the incomprehensibly deep history of arboreal life. The thematic canopy of *The Overstory* is that, as more than one character says, "the trees need us," we need the trees, and it may be too late to save them or ourselves. Under that grim but simple canopy, Powers explores with considerable but varying success, some of the most pressing social and environmental problems of our time. However, the success of the novel as an environmentalist manifesto or social statement is seriously damaged by its grimness, its pessimistic misunderstanding of "humanity." More on that later.

The structure of *The Overstory* first establishes the nine characters in their own "Roots" sections, each of which

qualifies as a fine short story in itself. It is in these sections that personalities are established, and moments of beauty, wonder and trauma are depicted. We see the introverted boy Adam painstakingly paint the thoraxes of ants with various colors of nail polish so that he can discern the patterns of their movements. We also see him tortured by his older brother.

We follow Patricia—"Plant Patty" as she will later be called in college—as a girl, as she accompanies her father on his rounds as an agricultural extension agent. These introductory chapters provide the material with which each character will face the events that arise in the long "Trunk" section of *The Overstory*. The following section of falling action is called "Crown," and "Seeds" closes the novel with endings that are not endings, Powers suggesting in this section the various possible futures he envisions for humanity and the planet.

The novel's characters are for the most part compelling and believable, even in situations of extremity, such as Olivia and Nick's protesting deforestation by sitting two hundred feet above the forest floor in a giant redwood, Neelay's running the world's most successful computer game company and Doug's working as "winter caretaker" of a remote Montana ghost town. Among Powers' most interesting creations is Olivia, who in her opening section is a self-centered but pitifully lost college student who accidentally dies by electrocution. This is no spoiler because she comes back to life ten minutes later, wholly transformed, such that people now "become vulnerable in her eyes, and infinitely dear."

Such a plot device is a bit out of keeping with the book's commitment to realism, but Powers is planting a theme that he will cultivate later to the reader's intellectual satisfaction. Olivia will go on to see and hear mysterious beings who urgently enlist her help in a mysterious cause to which she selflessly dedicates her life. Once again, the reader follows Powers where he takes us, in this case because sanity has, even by this early point in the novel, become a matter up for debate, so that when a character concludes, "There was no

path left but sanity,” the line reaches a dozen tendrils of meaning throughout the novel.

In one of *The Overstory*’s more provocative threads, Powers introduces us to a latecomer to the cast of characters, “the learners,” who represent artificial intelligence (AI), which, Powers tells us, has “learned, in a few short decades, what it took molecules a billion years to learn to do.”

While only giving us glimpses of AI’s potential relationship to humankind (at one point Powers lists with a wink the stock science fiction scenarios of robots using us as fuel and putting us in zoos), *The Overstory* tackles more comprehensively questions of what humanity is and what trees are, what interdependence might mean, and why a recognition of limits and mortality is necessary. All of these questions are addressed by multiple characters, and there is some variety in the conclusions they reach. Almost no character draws a firm conclusion that humanity and the forests are irreversibly doomed, though these thoughts preoccupy almost every character’s, and the narrator’s, mind.

Despite its ambiguous prognosis, *The Overstory* is pessimistic at its core, less in the conclusions that it draws than in the premises it uses to form its questions. As Powers frames the matter of environmental destruction and species extinction, of flora and of fauna, the villain is the abstraction “humanity.” It is an all too culturally familiar vision, the natural world succumbing to the indomitable forces of human greed and rapacity. As one character puts it in the context of the legality of deforestation, “The law is simply human will, written down. The law must let every acre of Earth be turned into tarmac, if such is the desire of people.” As though “people” had any say in the matter!

The significance of treating phenomena in their historical interconnection and subjecting them to a class evaluation comes into play here. It is easy enough, but also banal and superficial, to view pictures of denuded forests, strip-mined mountains and fouled oceans and conclude that, since “human beings” carried out this destruction, “humanity” as such must be to blame. But that is the conclusion of an impression, not of informed, scientific-rational thought applied to social life. It ignores history and the reality of our class-divided society. Production for profit and the accumulation of personal wealth at the expense of society as a whole, and every crime against both humanity and nature that goes with those processes, are inseparable from capitalism, but capitalism must *never* be confused with humanity itself. That very confusion speaks to a stagnant and reactionary political and artistic climate. It also speaks to the outlook of a certain social layer.

In fact, the words “capitalism” and “capital” appear five times in *The Overstory*, but always in a way that obfuscates

the distinction between that system and a suprahistorical idea of humanity. In one scene, Powers views protesters preparing to confront a road crew as “trying to bail out the ocean of capitalism with an acorn cap.” Certainly a handful of protesters cannot stop the machinery of capitalism, but later in the scene we see that by “capitalism,” Powers means some eternal, occult force, the protesters and road crew constituting “ignorant armies going up against each other as they have forever, for reasons hidden from even the most vehement.” Elsewhere the novel’s narrator interprets a group of environmentalist protesters as “the latest Stop the Humans movement.”

If the pillage of the environment were the result of inherent and immutable human nature, this would indeed be cause for pessimism. In fact, though, it is the result of a historically determined, and historically doomed, economic and social system. For all its aesthetic virtues and all its polymathic brilliance, given its pessimism, Powers’ novel is ultimately one-sided and wrong on this critical issue.

Cause for optimism—an active, not a passive optimism—emerges, first of all, from a profound understanding of social development and the specific contradictions of capitalism that provide the objective impulse for doing away with it. That understanding is attracting a growing audience in the international working class, who at this moment are waking to the horror that is capitalism, who alone have the historic role of sweeping aside capitalism and its governing logic of rapaciousness, and who alone have the strength to usher in an era of international cooperation in the interest of human welfare and planetary health. The task is not impossible. As Leon Trotsky writes in the conclusion of “Dialectical Materialism and Science,” “The impenetrable does not exist for conscious thought! We will reach everything! We will master everything! We will rebuild everything!”

The Overstory is a work of art, and as such has value beyond its ultimate political message. In its intellectual sweep, its narrative intricacy, its energetic prose, and its painful and beautiful stories, it is a novel well worth reading. In fact, it is a novel readers should read. It has much to say, but it is far from the last word on the crises it does so much to illuminate.



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