



The Overstory



About the Author:

Richard Powers is an American novelist whose works explore the effects of modern science and technology. His novel *The Echo Maker* won the 2006 National Book Award for Fiction. He has also won many other awards over the course of his career, including a MacArthur Fellowship. As of 2018, Powers has published 12 novels and has taught at the University of Illinois and Stanford University. He won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Overstory*. He lives in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee.

Inside the kit:

- (8) copies of the book
- (1) book club guide

About the Book:

(from Litlovers)

An Air Force loadmaster in the Vietnam War is shot out of the sky, then saved by falling into a banyan.

An artist inherits one 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 life.

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 continents few remaining acres of virgin forest.

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 non-humans.

Suggested Reads:

Clock Dance by Anne Tyler

The History of Bees by Maja Lunde

A Kind of Freedom by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton



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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” and that human beings are deeply, intimately bound to nature?
2. 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. 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?
6. Has this book changed the way you look at trees? If so, how?
7. What might the title, Overstory, signify?
8. Some reviewers claim that the characters get short-shrift, that they are overwhelmed by the book’s ideas. Others say the book’s characters are convincing and invested with humanity. Which view do you agree with? Why?