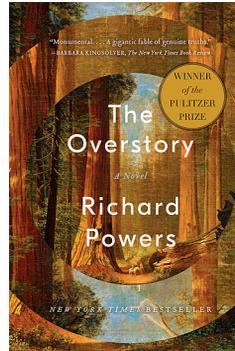


The Overstory: A Novel

By Richard Powers. 2018. W.W. Norton. 512 pages, 27.95 USD, Paper.

Readers of *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* might reasonably wonder why a novel would be reviewed in its pages. A precedent of sorts was set several issues ago with our first review—at least on my watch as Book Review Editor—of a book of poetry, Alice Major’s *Welcome to the Anthropocene* (Citron 2017). But a novel? This isn’t just any novel, however—it’s a brilliant evocation of the life and times of trees as understood, misunderstood, used and abused, by the one species on Earth that supposes itself to be dominant—*Homo sapiens*, you and I and all the other 8 billion or so humans alive today. The entire book, from its title on out, is structured along the lines of and about trees. The title is a play on words, referring at a literal level to the overarching canopy of trees in a forest, the collective crowns of the tallest trees, while signalling the author’s ambition to tell as fully as possible the richly complex story of trees as sentient beings and their interactions with humans.

This Powers does brilliantly, in language that flows with an unusually high degree of authenticity. The novel has four sections: Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds. The first is the only one with subtitled chapters, nine of them, named for the characters introduced in each. I was a bit puzzled at first to read separate stories of such a disparate and seemingly disconnected group of people. Each however had some kind of connection to trees and these early chapters set the stage for Powers’ interweaving, in various combinations, the stories of these people in ways that allow him to address his panoramic purpose. We humans take multifaceted approaches toward trees, whether as sources of food and medicines, shelter and fuel, beauty and meditative healing, or the many lines of work they provide, from scientific studies to logging and milling up construction materials. Powers addresses our approaches in ways that reveal our inherent, eternal conflicts arising from our need to preserve ourselves—read lifestyles, economies—and our yearning for connectivity and transcendence. Powers does not resolve these conflicts, however. While reading his book, it’s possible to hate and fear



the destruction our ‘normal’ lumbering practices are inflicting on the forests while having sympathy for the people whose jobs are at stake if those practices cease, to engage emotionally with the activists going to increasing lengths to end the destruction while gasping at some of their decisions. The world of science is also revealed as conflicted, especially in the characterization of ‘maverick’ versus conventional science through the career of Patricia Westerford and her supportive husband Dennis, based on the career pathway of the very real Diane Beresford-Kroeger and her husband Christian Kroeger. Powers has done his homework—he has a reputation as a prodigiously inquisitive researcher—yet weaves his learning into a highly imagined fictional form.

The author’s deliberate unwillingness to missionize, to leave the reader pondering these dilemmas, is the strength and power of the book, and reason enough, I think, to review it in these pages. Powers claims his own life was changed as a result of researching and writing this, his twelfth novel. In a recent interview, he declared that “Trees are among the very largest, longest-lived, most successful, and most collaboratively social forms of life on the planet. They live, all at once, in the sky, on the surface, and under the ground ... We will learn, as Thoreau says, to resign ourselves to the influence of the earth, or we will disappear” (Brady 2018). The clarity of his personal position notwithstanding, he has managed to resist judgement and condemnation while creating a credible and complex picture of human activities in relation to trees. A number of excellent novels dealing with nature and natural history have come out in recent years, and this is one of the best, shortlisted in 2018 for the Man Booker Prize, winner in 2019 of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. Powers sends readers a message worth the time spent to listen to it.

Literature Cited

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