

OLLI Spring 2020
The Novels of Richard Powers: An Overview

Instructor:

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Course Description: Authors like to hear that their latest book is their best. When saying that about a Richard Powers novel we should always add “so far.” Every new novel makes some advance upon the others, and who is to say that one step is more important than another? Yet some novels seem to be strides rather than steps, and his latest, *The Overstory* (2018) is such a stride.

This course will survey each of Powers’ twelve novels in chronological order, from *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) to *The Overstory*. I will feature favorite passages in each novel, reflect their glories, and indicate what is distinctive about each. Powers’ readers will be reminded of novels they wish to reread.

The course will also consider Powers’ novels as twelve parts of a whole which, properly put together, gives us a large look at Richard Powers. I will propose theses about the novels: They refuse to succumb to the predictabilities of a genre. They change themes, structures, and tones, though some themes recur and reassert their importance. The twelve take up complex issues and pose problems of individual responsibility. They have in common Powers’ resolution to make each unique and his determination in every case to “get it right.”

Recommended:

Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

Course Outline

The twelve novels will be discussed in four groups of three each, as follows:

WEEK 1: ENTRY AND BREAKOUT

Course introduction: The Powers Style
Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance (1985)
Prisoner's Dilemma (1988)
The Gold Bug Variations (1991)

WEEK 2: THE CRUCIBLE

Operation Wandering Soul (1993)
Galatea 2.2 (1995)
Gain (1998)

WEEK 3: CREATION & EXTINCTION

Plowing the Dark (2000)
The Time of Our Singing (2003)
The Echo Maker (2006)

WEEK 4: OPPOSING NATURES

Generosity: An Enhancement (2009)
Orfeo (2014)
The Overstory (2018)
Conclusion: Reading and Rereading Richard Powers