

Older Than Writing

A Conversation with Richard Powers

To continue our Under the Canopy series Nick Hunt talks to Richard Powers, author of 'The Overstory' (recent winner of the Pulitzer Prize) about tree-consciousness, cultural epiphanies, a world going up in flames, and what lies beyond despair. The interview also appears in Dark Mountain: Issue 15.

Nick Hunt

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7th May, 2019

Fiction is meant to shift our perspective, to help us see the world through new eyes. It is extremely rare that it genuinely does. But in the long, hot summer of 2018, with the newsfeeds full of images of blazing forests and blackened trunks, I found myself stopping in the street and staring in astonishment at the trees – cherries, rowans, ashes, limes – that grow in the city in which I live, unable to believe I hadn't noticed them before. Suddenly these familiar presences seemed more present than before. I was more aware of them; and they seemed more aware of me. I had just finished reading *The Overstory* by the American author Richard Powers.

The novel begins with mass death on an inconceivable scale. The opening chapter tells the story of the North American chestnut blight that struck the east of the continent at the start of the twentieth century, killing up to four billion trees and tearing apart whole ecosystems and ways of life. This devastation forms an overture for the book: although *The Overstory* is a novel very much about people, the trees themselves are the focus, the principal subjects of the narrative. Trees are not mere scenery, a backdrop against which the nine central human characters live their lives, but motivating entities that give those lives direction and meaning, intervening, like ancient Greek gods, in countless profound and subtle ways. The struggles, tragedies and triumphs of the humans are played out in the shadow of something much vaster, older, and – in many ways – more interesting than them.

In his previous 11 novels Powers has ranged far and wide through themes including virtual reality, artificial intelligence and genetics. Before becoming a writer he studied physics and worked as a computer programmer. His ability to assimilate and draw from different kinds of knowledge is evident in his multivarious descriptions of trees: they are

never unconscious objects but perceptive, sensitive beings capable of communication, forming interconnected networks of vast reach and complexity; fantastical alien creatures turning sunlight into energy, conjuring matter out of thin air; repositories of memory, travellers through deep time; spirits, even gods. The thing that unites these visions is an overarching sense of awe, which stems from an experience that Powers says first opened his eyes to the extraordinary nature of trees: an encounter with an old-growth redwood in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California, which he has described as an ‘epiphany’.

I tried to meet up with Powers during his book tour in the UK, but – most wonderfully for a novel more concerned with trees than people – *The Overstory* had just been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (it went on to win the Pulitzer), so his schedule was too packed to allow a meeting. Eventually we managed to speak on a crackly phone connection – him on his deck outside his home in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, me outside a cafe in Bristol on a freezing December night – for a conversation that ranged as widely as the themes of his novels.

Nick Hunt

A central strand of the Dark Mountain Project is seeking writing and art that recognises, or perhaps remembers, that humans are not the centre of the universe, not the most important thing, but merely a small part of the whole – work that attempts to decentre itself from the human experience. *The Overstory* achieves this better than almost anything else I’ve read, and certainly anything that would normally find its way to the Man Booker shortlist. Is that what you saw yourself as doing when you started writing it? Decentring yourself from the human experience, and writing from outside that bubble?

Richard Powers

Yes, that’s a marvellous place to start. At the heart of this book is a very simple idea, and it’s one that has been explored for some time by environmentalists and philosophers and scientists and political activists, and yet hasn’t quite seeped into the arts – and certainly not this most human-centric of arts, the commercial novel. The idea, quite plainly put, is that there is no separate thing called humanity, any more than there is a separate thing called nature. The great insight is that there are only reciprocal processes and networks between the agencies and agents and actions and actors of life, and that this entire capitalist, individualist, anthropocentric, commodity-driven, private-means-driven culture is based on a fantasy, an ephemeral fantasy that starts in the wrong place and is going to end disastrously. So the trick is how to use what has essentially become a medium that celebrates all of those qualities – the separatism and the human exceptionalism that we have so deeply assimilated into Western culture now – and turn it towards undermining those very propositions.

The book began as a response to what in North America has come to be called the ‘new forestry’. That is an umbrella for a lot of developments, including many startling scientific discoveries that have become better known to the general public over the last

couple of years, but also economic thinking, social reflection, best managerial practice and so forth. All these insights converge on the discovery that trees are highly social organisms, and that the forest is built out of an immense number of mutualist, reciprocal interdependencies. For every act of competition that we previously thought was the driving force of adaptation and natural selection, there are many, many, many acts of cooperation.

The kinds of discoveries that lie at the heart of the new forestry involve things like trees signalling to each other over the air, coming together to form vast shared immune systems, or the trading of food and medicines underground through these long fungal filaments. And, most stunningly of all, the discovery that these mycorrhizal systems actually link together creatures of different species, so that a birch tree and a Douglas fir tree would be inextricably linked through these fungal intermediaries. So now, when we look at a forest, instead of seeing this justification for an archaic understanding of evolution and the survival of the fittest, we see a highly cooperative and interdependent system that you can almost think of as a superorganism.

NH

In a way that's what the novel does, doesn't it? We see humans being drawn into that superorganism. Trees are not only communicating with each other underground and through the air, but they also communicate with people.

RP

That's right. I could very easily have created a novel that did some kind of sleight of hand, or a fabulist approach to trees, and have introduced them as protagonists in their own right. But that would have committed the fallacy of exceptionalism from the other side – to have created a narrative about nature as if nature were separate from human activity. What I'm proudest about in the novel is the juxtaposition of human protagonists and non-human actors and agents, to put them together into a shared ecosystem, showing the ways in which their fates are inseparable. To me that is a return to what world literature was, in most cultures and for most of history, prior to the modern Western industrialised separation from nature. There was a time when any story we told about ourselves would necessarily have had to place non-human actors and agents at the centre of that story. We have to find some way to narrate and dramatise this huge mycorrhizal superorganism that connects us to everything else alive.

It was a matter of surprise to my acquaintances and my friends while I was working on the book, and was always met with a great deal of suspicion, when I said that I was trying to tell a novel that was profoundly concerned with the fate of trees. However, having spent the six years making and publishing and promoting the book, my surprise is that all of literature doesn't put the non-human front and centre. How can it not? And you know, it once did. What has happened to me in the course of gaining a kind of tree-consciousness is an undermining of this deeply colonising idea that meaning is private, and that our art needs to explore the pursuit of that private meaning through personal psychologies and private lives. So now, for me, the surprise is how long we've gone – and how deeply we've gone, and how universally we've gone – in the direction of

believing that somehow we can narrate our fates. Why don't all novels have trees as part of their cast of characters?

NH

And where did this tree-consciousness come from? You've described an epiphany moment, seeing an old-growth redwood in a second-growth forest and having almost a religious conversion. Was that where it started, that awakening?

RP

That direct confrontation with the old-growth redwood in the Santa Cruz Mountains was instrumental, that was my road-to-Damascus moment. But what I don't often get to talk about is that that moment became less important to me than the processes it set in motion. The starting moment almost became secondary to a long set of processes that are still going on deeply in me, you know, once I came down from that mountain. So it is really a story about the weeks and months and years that followed. And that took me outward and outward the more I read, the more I looked, the more I stood in the field and held still, asking this question again and again: what is this individual tree doing that no other tree is doing? And that took me back east, to the part of the country that I had grown up in, into the broadleaf deciduous forests of eastern North America, where the trees had been at least nominally familiar to me, and I saw them in a totally estranging and new context that was really the heart and soul of my transformation.

No, it isn't enough to have a powerful affective or aesthetic moment. The processes of indifference and inattention must disappear, to be replaced by a state of perpetual presence. I live in the Smokies, I go out every day into this remarkable place where there are more species of trees than there are in all of Europe, from Portugal to the Baltic states, and I spend hours out there. Each day becomes the source of a new potential education, a new potential appreciation.

NH

Right, it's relatively easy to have one profound moment that shocks you or surprises you, that Damascene moment, but the real work is what you do after that. People have those experiences and then forget them, because they can't integrate them into their ordinary lives.

RP

A couple of observations about that. The first is, indeed, that that kind of insight cannot be integrated into ordinary life as we know it. What we call 'ordinary life', what we call 'the real world', is of course this vastly faked-up and artificially supported and sustained imaginary world called human self-sufficiency. So to have to come back down that mountain and rejoin a world which operates under the assumption that meaning is personal, and depends upon the individual's relationship to commodity, and the individual's standing in the artificial hierarchy of social structure – all of these suppositions of Western capitalism that are so deeply engrained in us that we don't even see them, let alone consider that there might be alternatives... In fact, the process isn't

incorporating them into your ordinary life, the process is shedding what was once your regular life in favour of a series of constant surprises and insights.

The second observation is, you referred to this process as ‘the real work’, and I’m happy to say that it’s the very opposite of work. It’s a kind of release, and relief, and joy, that defeats the ordinary idea of work as a generator of meaning. It’s a surrender, a kind of supplication, a humble position, that is a source of pure daily pleasure.

NH

There is a real sense at the moment, I think, that people are finally being shocked awake to some of the reality of what’s going on. Especially after this last summer, when we saw forest fires raging across the Northern Hemisphere from California to Greece to Scandinavia. There were even moorlands burning in the north of England. This has been so utterly terrifying, so unprecedented, so horrific, that a lot of people are finding it harder to deny the very basic evidence about what’s happening on a global scale, about where capitalism is leading us, where consumerism is leading us; these insane political systems that people have stopped believing in but still have to go through the motions of. Do you have any sense that something might finally be changing in our culture, that people might be being shocked out of this dominant narrative?

RP

The fires have been deeply sobering and overwhelming, not just this year but the last several years running. It’s often been commented that we used to have a fire season, and now that season has become year-long. The incidence level goes up and down, but the danger is omnipresent. The recent governmental report on the consequences of global warming – that, ironically, was produced under the Trump administration – has intimated what the future of the country may look like with regards to these fires, not only in their hugely increased incidences, but in their vastly increased range. This report speculates that, unchecked, the amount of damaged area per year could go up by a factor of six in the next century. That’s just mind-blowing.

No, the question is whether something like that – a direct confrontation with the consequences of our alienation from everything that’s alive – whether that can be the sobering trick that helps us turn the corner... I think there is evidence of it happening. It happens at small gauges that aggregate into large gauges. When you read interviews with people who have lost everything in these fires, there is always that moment when they say: ‘I have awakened to what’s important in life.’ That individual moment of conversion in the face of disaster. At the level of collective social awareness, I do believe that we’ve passed a kind of trigger point with the proportion of people who realise that an unreflective way of life is now being presented with a bill. There is a growing public call for stepping back and asking what it is that we consider important.

Of course, we do have a president who has blamed the fires on the trees, on ‘poor forest management’ – meaning not enough lumbering – and this is all understandable too, in terms of psychology. When an individual person is confronted with news of their own

mortality, the stages of denial are quite clearly mapped out and understood. The fact that Trump has tapped into a portion of the country whose answer to the catastrophic challenges presented by climate is denial – returning to an era where human mastery was never questioned, and is part and parcel of a programme of dominance and separatism and superiority – is not surprising. We know enough about human psychology to know that the first thing we’re going to do when the doctor tells us we’re looking at a possible death sentence is to say, ‘To hell with you!’

NH

It seems to me that it’s almost gone beyond denial – that seems a bit old-fashioned now. On some deep cultural level capitalism has accepted that catastrophe is happening, and its reaction is to go faster, go harder, go deeper, consume more. It’s almost like a death wish. We’ve gone this far, and it’s easier to go over the edge of the cliff than pull back, and then do all the hard psychological grieving that pulling back entails...

RP

The way that the Trump administration is trying to accelerate the destruction of natural capital... that’s not driven by economic considerations. In fact any kind of reasonable approach to profit would have to accept and acknowledge that opening up, for example, a national monument to drilling is not a profitable activity. I live half a mile from the boundary of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. People come here because they’re absolutely desperate to feel a part of something that they’ve lost – so the park brings in almost one billion dollars a year in the form of touristic revenue. Destroying anything that is generating revenue on that scale, in order to produce a one-time windfall that can barely match the annual draw of the park, is just insane. To take Bears Ears National Monument and reduce it by 85%, and say ‘Let’s put a mine in there’, a mine that’s going to have a finite lifetime and completely destroy the land for any other use... it’s got nothing to do with making money. It simply has to do with the assertion of a thwarted will. It is the same programme as the rejection of multiculturalism and LGBT liberties; it’s a demographic of white male privilege that’s been lost, and is now trying to reassert itself.

But I’m almost uncomfortable making the argument that these places would have more value if you count both the ecosystems services and the social revenue, because to do so is to remain inside that colonised narrative where we have to justify everything in terms of economics. What needs to be said is that the human spirit itself is dying under these systems, however profitable or unprofitable a course of action might be. We are simply withering away in terms of meaning and purpose – this idea that Robin Wall Kimmerer and others talk about, of ‘species loneliness’. None of this can be addressed by simple economic calculations.

NH

The phrase ‘ecosystems services’ I find utterly horrific – the whole idea of ‘natural capital’, where everything is defined by how useful it is to the human

economy. I understand it as a tactic, but I think it's flawed reasoning. We need to find meaning in a very different place...

RP

Meaning is out there. And yes, perhaps it has taken us some degree of well-being and prosperity and security to reach a point where we can begin to turn back to that question, but it's not being nostalgic to say that when pre-modern cultures thought about meaning they had an arsenal for confronting all the terrors of mortality that we don't have, they had an arsenal for joy and purpose and connection that we don't have. The real challenge for us, if we are to hold out any hope – not for continuance, because we can't continue in anything like the current configuration of the social order – if we are to think of true rehabilitation, of reclothing and repurposing and rejoining our existence to this world, to living here, and not in some imaginary place of our own devising, the real challenge is: how are we going to get there with our current reservoir of technology and knowledge intact? What would be nostalgic is the belief that, in order to rejoin the world, we have to go back to a pre-technological state. That's not going to happen. It's too late for it to happen. I think there is another possibility between going back to some Rousseauian, prelapsarian vision and going down in the full blazing fireball of the capitalist embrace. I want to introduce at least the possibility of some third outcome.

People often forget that the rise of environmental consciousness in its modern form, the rise of ecology as a science, the rise of complex systems as something that we can understand and model, all those things arose as a consequence of the development of computation. If we didn't have machine computation, we would not be able to make models of climate that confront us with the consequences of our own actions. There is no one in the fight to save humanity from itself that isn't enlisting and depending upon these incredibly powerful prosthetics to help them understand what is going on, to communicate the message to other people.

NH

I wanted to ask about your relationship to hope. In the novel something very interesting happens. The environmental activists ultimately fail: two of them occupy a giant redwood for over a year to prevent it being felled, and witness the forest being brutally cut down around them. But during that process, when they're squatting the tree, they undergo a deep transformation that happens on a spiritual level. They become one with the tree, they fall in love with the tree as well as with each other. So it's ultimately the story of a failure to protect the thing they're trying to protect, but going through the process changes them profoundly.

RP

Yes. In failing, and in going into the Underworld for a long time, and emerging only to be punished again by society, is the beginning of this truly Ovidian metamorphosis whose consequences can't be seen from inside the story. The question of hope is such a loaded one, because we need to stop first and ask: hope for what? Those people who feel despair are in the first necessary stage of transformation. You need to despair for the impossibility of the continuance of the life you've embraced, in order to become

something else. Even the most pessimistic among us very rarely say that they believe that the changes being worked in the Anthropocene are going to be fatal to life on Earth. Life on Earth has survived many mass extinctions. Trees themselves, which date back almost 400 million years, have survived many mass extinctions. The continuance of the project of life gives no comfort to the person who has placed all of their sense of meaning on the human exceptionalist venture, so they must go through – as the characters of the book do – a defeat, and some degree of despair in the face of not being able to hold that particular project intact.

NH

That's very much the journey that many involved with Dark Mountain have been on. They've been through despair, and not turned away, and found that there is something on the other side. I still can't quite define what that something is...

RP

Might I suggest this tentative exploration? Think of all the things that give delight, and purpose, and meaning, to a person inside this individualist, exceptionalist, commodity-driven culture. Take them all away, with a kind of annihilating despair. And then start to replace them with certain things that seem terribly small at first, like the realisation that life will continue in the face of anything that humans can throw at it. Imagine a life where humans were still here – this astonishing thing that natural selection comes up with after four and a half billion years of tinkering, called awareness, consciousness – and say that too could be an integral component of the relentless, ubiquitous exploration of life as it postulates what can work here on Earth. If you can start thinking of us not as lords and masters, but as a kind of singular possessor of something that life is after, that can be put to the service of understanding, revelling in and promoting rich, stable ecosystems, then that is the first component of a dream of human habitation on Earth that would be full of meaning, that wouldn't be at war with everything else that is alive.

Here's what may be some cause for hope. The clock of biological evolution is very slow. The clock of cultural evolution is blindingly fast in comparison. And the clock of digital evolution is even faster. We've been creating the Anthropocene over centuries now. In a much, much shorter interval we've come up with a complex symbiotic relationship between humans and computing machines that allows us to create models that have changed our consciousness. We look at these interpretations of climate and we see ourselves. All of a sudden we know who we are and what we are doing. All of that happened so quickly. It would be wrong to say that we aren't capable, in light of yesterday's transformation of our understanding, to begin to change the infrastructure of human existence. Yes, it's clear that we're living through a new mass extinction event that we've created, but because our machines can travel even faster than us, the speed and leverage that our prosthetics give us might very quickly enable another way of living.

NH

Time moves in very different ways. We already know that tree-time is vastly slower than human-time.

RP

Right. There are individual bristlecone pines alive in the White Mountains of California that are older than writing...

<https://dark-mountain.net/older-than-writing/>

Dark Mountain: Issue 15

The Spring 2019 issue is a collection of non-fiction, fiction, poetry and artwork that responds to the 'age of fire'.

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