

The Overstory by Richard Powers – Discussion Questions

1. It has been reported that Powers was initially only going to have trees, not people, as protagonists in the story. Why do you think he changed his mind? What is the role of trees and forests in the story?
What is/has been the relationship between trees/forests and humans? Tree veneration/religion.
Patricia suggests that “forests panic people. Too much going on there. Humans need a sky.” She also describes walking through the wildest forest in the world, Machadinho d’Oeste in Brazil (p,390). Could you imagine yourself doing that?
2. Did the novel change the way you look at trees? Did a particular tree description resonate with you?
3. Two major themes appear in the book: Stillness and Time. How does knowledge of trees help our understanding of these two themes?
4. Of the novel’s opening stories, introducing the human characters, which did you find the most engaging? Which of the characters do you most relate to/ like the most/least relate to/ dislike the most? What roles did trees play in their early lives?
5. How does the author treat “eco-warriors?” Are they heroes in the story? How did their actions and tactics change over the course of the story? What about the actions and tactics of the authorities? How does this story relate to what is happening on our streets today?
Doug asks Adam: “What were we hoping to accomplish? What did we think we were doing?” How do you think the other characters would answer this? Did their actions have any lasting impact or were they ultimately futile?
6. Nick, Olivia, Doug, Mimi, and Adam are all tied together in a plotline around ecoterrorism. How do you think the Brinkmans, Patricia Westerford, and Neelay Mehta stories tie in with theirs? How are they relevant to the author’s message? What is the author’s message?
Or to ask the question in a different way: Patricia, the Brinkmans, and Neelay each had different responses to the question Patricia asks: “What is the best thing a person can do for tomorrow’s world?” What were their answers? What do you think Richard Powers’ answer is to that question? Does technology play a large role in his answer? Who are the “Learners?”
7. Nick chooses to spell out the word “STILL” in gigantic letters, legible from space. What message do you think he was trying to send?
8. Did you find the book depressing or hopeful?

Other Themes We Could Discuss

Each Section has a topic: Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds.

How does each topic relate to the stories in each section?

Favorite passages – particularly the vividness and beauty of the writing

Should trees, plants have rights under the law?

Significance of the scroll and jade rings; the photographic history of the Hoel chestnut tree.

Autism, Asberger's, obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, deafness, paraplegia as they show up in characters.

Father-child relationships; roles of mothers

Is Olivia the imagined child of Ray and Dorothy? For that matter, is Olivia real?

Death, Suicide/unsuicide

Ovid's *Metamorphosis* – how it relates to the story. (Patricia's father's favorite book; the myth of Baucis and Philemon who spend centuries together as oak and linden – see Ray and Dorothy).

The role of “story” and books in the novel

“The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind; the only think that wil is a good story.” p. 336

“What do all good stories do? They kill you a little. They turn you into something you weren’t.” p.412

“In front of him ...is a book. The elves know what that means: the boss has been reading again. Another visionary idea has taken possession of him.” p. 410

“Somewhere in all these boundless, compounding, swelling canyons of imprinted paper, encoded in the millions of tons of loblolly pine fiber, there must be a few words of truth, a page, a paragraph that could break the spell of fulfillment and bring back danger, need, & death.” p.380

Ironic comments that might reflect Powers' view of his own writing:

“She remembers now why she never had the patience for nature. No drama, no development, no colliding hopes and fears. Branching, tangled, messy plots. And she could never keep the characters straight.” p. 419

“To be human is to confuse a satisfying story with a meaningful one. No: life is mobilized on a vastly larger scale and the world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the world seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people.” p. 383