

# Here's to Unsuicide: An Interview with Richard Powers

Everett Hamner interviews Richard Powers

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RICHARD POWERS, *National Book Award–winning author of The Overstory (Norton, April 3, 2018) and 11 previous novels*, talks with Everett Hamner, a scholar of literature and science who has written about Powers’s fiction.

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EVERETT HAMNER: One of my favorite aspects of your National Book

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ized: we find the public “banking and wheeling in such perfect y,” a man who has “grown as placid as a bottom feeder,” and another like a “clumsy, autumn-honking fledgling.” In short, there is no n here without an even larger biocentrism. How was this relationship evolving as you began to imagine *The Overstory*, and how did it matter — or not — that the interspecies tie is not just to other animals, but to trees?

**RICHARD POWERS:** If anything, the intervening dozen years have deepened my desire to close the gap between people and other living things. *The Echo Maker* dealt in the strange intelligence of birds, an intelligence deep and foreign enough to be invisible to many of us. But it was also a story of forgotten kinship with creatures who have stunning navigational and problem-solving skills, who keep a complex and shared calendar, who gather in great communities and dance together and mate for life and sacrifice themselves for their young.

*The Overstory* may present an even greater challenge to the sense of exceptionalism we humans carry around inside us. It's the story of immense, long-lived creatures whom many people think of as little more than simple automatons, but who, in fact, communicate and synchronize with each other both over the air and through complex underground networks, who trade with and protect and sustain their own and other species. It's about immensely social beings with memory and agency who migrate and transform the soil and regulate the weather and create a breathable atmosphere. As the great Le Guin put it, the word for world is forest.

Our kinship with trees seems, at face value, much more distant and abstract, but we share a considerable amount of our genes with them, and they (trees come from many different families in their own right) represent several large branches of the single, ramifying experiment called life on earth, a big-boled thing on which we humans occupy just one small and remote branch. Trees exhibit a flexibility in the face of change and challenge that we used to think was exclusively animal in nature. We have depended on trees not just for the invention of civilization but for our very existence. Without them, no us.

If I could have managed it, I would have tried to write a novel where all the main characters were trees! But such an act of identification was beyond my power as a novelist, and it probably would have been beyond the imaginative power of identification of most readers. As one of the characters in the book laments, we are all “plant blind. Adam's curse. We only see things that look like us.” My compromise was to tell a story about nine very different human beings who, for wildly varying reasons, come to take trees seriously. Between them, they learn to invest trees with the same sacred value that humans typically invest only in themselves. And in doing so, they violate one of individual-centered capitalism's greatest taboos.

As it is, individual trees still play large supporting roles in the novel — a giant threatened redwood in northern California, a lone American chestnut planted

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characters and see him on an impossible journey, a journey that matters a woman's family and primes her for future acts of wildness. The novel also features communities of trees — forests and doomed stands and places that are more than mere setting. They are themselves the living world that we're going to have to learn all over again how to accommodate, if we mean to stick around.

**Like Ents, but in fully realist terms.**

The Ents were a real inspiration to me. Slow to anger, slow to act. But when they get going, you'd better be on their side!

**What about nonliterary sources of inspiration? Was there any moment akin to your glimpse of the massive spring staging of sandhill cranes in Nebraska alongside Interstate 80 (which set in motion *The Echo Maker*)?**

There was. I was teaching at Stanford, in Palo Alto. Along a narrow strip to one side of me was the heart of Silicon Valley, one of the greatest concentrations of wealth, power, and transformative human ingenuity ever assembled: the headquarters of Google, Apple, Intel, Facebook, eBay, HP, Netflix, Cisco, Tesla, Oracle, Adobe, Electronic Arts, and countless more. Just to the other side were the many thousands of set-aside acres spread across the Santa Cruz mountains. When I needed to escape the digital-utopian future, I'd head up into the hills. I was not, then, particularly attuned to the magic of trees. But it doesn't take great sensitivity to be stunned into silence by redwoods — the sight, sound, and smell of those forests, which feel to so many people like holy places.

One day, up near Skyline Road, I came across a tree the width of a house and the length of a football field. I would learn later that this single living thing was almost as old as Christianity. It dwarfed every other trunk on that ridge. As I looked at it, I began to realize that all the trees I'd been walking through were in fact no more than a hundred years old. This one tree had escaped the clearcutting that had built and rebuilt San Francisco. And the forest that it came from must have been, compared to the one I was standing in, as the OED is to a pocket dictionary. When I went back down to Silicon Valley that evening, I had the seed for a story.

**What might surprise some who have only glimpsed this novel's gorgeous cover is that the digital entities birthed in that valley feature nearly as profoundly as that mountainous tree. Gesturing back to *Galatea 2.2*, this is almost as much a work about coding and AI as it is about ecology and dendrology — just as *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo* are as much about music as genetics. Indeed much of your work thrives on such unconventional imbrications. Where in the process did you find this story especially resisting and/or welcoming that harmony? What sparked your comparison of the “branching” in tree growth and in lines of code, or the “gift economics” of forests and open-source software?**

rees! But yes: the book tries to give a glimpse of the entire, spreading, interconnected intelligence of life in all its “endless forms most” as Darwin put it.

One of our great errors in thinking — another aspect of that unfortunate idea of human exceptionalism that makes it so hard for us to be at home in this world — is that the natural and the man-made are distinct entities. Like all other parts of the branching experiment, we make and are made by the living environment, and we have done so since before we were us. Without the forests of the Santa Cruz mountains, there would be no Silicon Valley. But Silicon Valley will make or unmake the forests of the future. No nature story, no account of environmental struggle would be complete without bringing on-stage all the human technologies that are to us what the invention of flowers and nuts and chlorophyll and mycorrhizal networks are to the forest superorganism.

Just as the emergence of tree intelligence forever changed the planet, so the emergence of consciousness (which long predated humans) forever changed the nature of evolution. Cultural transmission is orders of magnitude faster than genetic transmission, and digital transmission has accelerated the speed of culture a hundredfold or more. We may soon seem, to our artificial intelligence offspring, as motionless and insentient as trees seem to us. And here we live, trying to make a home between our predecessors and our descendants.

Will we double down on the great migration into symbol space, our decampment into Facebook and Instagram and Netflix and *World of Warcraft*, the road that we have already traveled so far down? Or will Big Data and Deep Learning allow us to grasp and rejoin the staggeringly complex processes of the living world? The two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they're inseparable aspects of the new ecology of digital life.

It's surprising to realize that the rise of ecological and environmental consciousness was made possible by the advent of the Information Age. Life is simply too complex and interdependent for us to wrap our heads around without the help of our machine prosthetics. And now those prosthetics allow us to assemble, generate, contemplate, and interpret the hockey-stick graphs that prophesy our future. We came into being by the grace of trees. Now the fate of trees, and of the whole world forest, is squarely in our machine-amplified hands.

The question is what those machines are doing to our hearts, because without the heart and mind, the hands will get up to all kinds of things.

You're illustrating in this conversation something I regard as a defining characteristic of your novels: in both forms, you are unreservedly and unapologetically fascinated with life's dynamism, tenacity, and unpredictability. Twenty-first-century Americans' increasingly sterilized, digitized existences often seem distant from Darwin's endless forms or Hopkins's dappled things, but your narrators exhort readers to greater attentiveness, presence, *awe*. How

h, naïve, romantic, or mystical?

it question! Think of it this way: fiction is about transformation conflict. By my count, there are three general levels of dramatic conflict: the battle within a person (psychological), the battle between people (social or political), and the battle between people and non-people (environmental). A conflict can exist on more than one level, and most good stories involve at least some elements of all three. But when I think of the literary fiction published in, say, the last 30 years, it feels overwhelmingly dominated by the psychological. When it does cross over into the social and political, the personal and psychological still dominate the foreground of the story (the *Doctor Zhivago* effect). Every time that writers like Don DeLillo or Lydia Millet or Kim Stanley Robinson burst out of the merely private and domestic, the effect is exhilarating. *Oh, there's something bigger at stake out there!*

There's a paradox here. While the challenge to our continued existence on Earth has never been greater or clearer, literary fiction seems to be retrenching into an obsession with the challenges of private hopes, fears, and desires. Granted, those challenges lie at the heart of everything we try to do, but a retreat into *belles-lettres* when human activity is unraveling the climate, exhausting the soil, and killing off 40 percent of the world's other species is simply reactionary solipsism. We need level-three stories and myths, and we need lots of them fast, in all kinds of forms and flavors.

If we don't (or can't) tell level-three stories, it's because we believe that all conflict between humans and nonhumans has long ago been decided in favor of omnipotent humanity. Now that our omnipotence is crumbling in the face of the whirlwind it has sewn, we are so dazed and out of the habit of taking the nonhuman seriously that we can't even accept the reality of what is happening. Climate-change denial may be just a manifestation of Fredric Jameson's famous observation that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

I believe the reason for that retrenchment into the personal is that we have all completely habituated to the first tenet of commodity-individualism: meaning is entirely something we make for ourselves. We have absorbed that belief so completely it is impossible for most of us even to imagine that there might be other possibilities. But there is, of course, a meaning of and for trees, a meaning to the hugely interconnected living world that cares very little for human meaning. And if we don't begin to understand and accommodate *that* meaning, ours will come to mean very little. Awe and wonder are the first, most basic tools involved in turning toward and becoming attentive to that meaning above and beyond our own.

When a person says, "I live in the real world," they generally mean that they live in the artificially created social world, the human-made world that is hurtling toward a brick wall of its own making. This is what I'd ask the critics of the literature of extra-human awe: Which is more childish, naïve, romantic,

project four and a half billion years old deserves a little reverent

ids familiar! Here's the dialogue in the novel that sparked the question: "What's crazier? Believing there might be nearby presences we don't know about? Or cutting down the last few ancient redwoods on Earth for decking and shingles?"

The whole book keeps turning on this question of what is reasonable, practical, inevitable, or sheer nuts. I like the etymological sense of the word *bewilder* — to be made wild. My nine bewildered characters in *The Overstory* each must discover, to their own amazement, that there comes a point when you need to take a forest as seriously as a city, and a tree as seriously as a human being.

You mentioned Kim Stanley Robinson: in his novel from last year, *New York 2140*, he weaves 10 focal characters into an ensemble piece that shares with *The Overstory* a profound awareness of the inseparability of climate change — or "global weirding," a term I like even better — from global capitalism, consumerism, and larger sociopolitical structures. In facing these sticky problems, Robinson has recently called himself an "angry optimist." I tell students that I aim to be "soberly hopeful," because given the seriousness of our situation, there will be no reason for hope if we do not first risk it. How would you describe your outlook during this project's years of gestation, which have been so tumultuous in US politics? Where did the novel articulate an inner scream, and where a whisper?

This is the question that the core group of would-be tree-savers in my novel must stare down, both on the ground, in the face of bulldozers and feller-bunchers, and two hundred feet in the air, camped out in the incredible canopy ecosystem of the giant coastal redwood, Mimas. How much are we compelled to give to a cause that may already be lost? Does it matter that you save the last few acres of virgin forest, if 98 percent of it is already cut? When does practicality and reason start becoming the enemy of sanity, and vice versa? What is the use of resorting to tactics that are likely to lose the hearts and minds of the public without doing much more than annoy the clear-cutters and cause them to speed up the project of human mastery over everything else alive?

I like Robinson's "angry optimism." I've also always been fond of Gramsci's "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." Back at the beginning of my career, I put it this way: What we can't bring about in no way changes what we must bring about.

Of course, the real question about optimism and hopefulness is: Hopeful for *what*? I have zero hope that our current culture of consumer individualism will survive. How could it? Its basic principles are at war with *real* real life, and fantasy can't defeat inexorable biological truths. There is no place for a system predicated on endless growth in a world of finite resources being infinitely



ful for life? It's a pretty good long-term bet. The planet has several ne back from the brink of nothing, even from perturbations in the systems as violent as the one we have set in motion. That kind of hope, though, requires thinking on the scale and time frame of forests, not people.

This book has changed my life profoundly, including changing where I live. Following the trees while writing *The Overstory*, I moved to the Smokies, and I will go on living here, in one of the most biologically diverse areas on Earth, now that the book is done. In fact, I hope to hike all the 800-plus miles of trails down here while writing this same book all over again! These mountains are an object lesson in what can happen when land is rescued from the hopes of human dominance and returned to the hopeless passivity of leaving things alone. The place still faces unbelievable pressures from acid rain, introduced blights, insect parasites that are no longer killed by winters, and warming seasons that drive endangered creatures to the tops of mountains until they're perched at the peak with nowhere further to retreat. But over the course of a mere century, on half a million acres, life has come roaring back. It might take another half a millennium of being left alone for the six different kinds of forests here to rebuild all their broken networks. But half a millennium is a heartbeat, for such things.

Natural selection does its work, no matter the failings of any local wrong turn. The Anthropocene is as tenuous as any other era, in the far greater, older, larger, self-regulating experiment. As more than one of the characters in *The Overstory* discovers, it's not the world that needs saving, it's us. For *us* to be saved, as a lot of the very old myths say, we'll have to come home and be born again.

I'm struck that instead of answering in terms of what you needed art to "express," your focus is in the opposite direction. If Rilke's poem demands, "change your life," you indicate that the author is not exempt. In *Generosity*, in fact, I interpret your narrator as seeking to *live by myth*, to write breath back into being even when a suicide's lungs have fallen silent.

On one hand, you've been clear that this potential of storytelling is not about literal wish fulfillment. In a relatively dark moment in *The Overstory*, an older woman sees a forest she loves engulfed by second homes and fears this is a war humanity will "lose by winning." On the other hand, two hundred pages later, a younger woman doubles down on the value of fiction, holding together intellect and will as she asserts, "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story."

How do you imagine a good (level-three) story can change minds — and perhaps also hearts and hands?

The challenge is that a "good story" often seems to mean one that makes us feel good about ourselves by privileging individual choices and fates and reinforcing

network of connections that runs far beyond their own small selves, and their own species.

Myths often revolved around the ultimate value of *xenia*: generosity, openness, guest-friendship. In the myth of Baucis and Philemon, the gods, disguised as beggars, knock on the doors of everyone in the city and are turned away by all except one old couple. In reward for opening their door to the unknown strangers, the old couple are turned into an oak and a linden. This is the myth that runs throughout all the characters' fates in *The Overstory*, from the terrorist-turned-psychologist who accepts his jail sentence without a legal fight to the compulsive environmental artist, making designs out of fallen logs in a forest readable only by observation satellites. It's the myth we need now, more than any other. Four billion years of blind tinkering has produced consciousness. We can open that consciousness to the knocks of strangers so very unlike us, or we can close the doors and go back inside. Either way, as the old Ovidian song says, a change is gonna come.

A phrase one of my favorite characters in your novel tattoos on her scapula! Yet change is discomfiting, like stories about failures of hospitality. Your Greek tale brought to mind a similar Hebrew one, the Genesis 19 narrative in which the neglected angels are already inside Lot's house and the strangers at the door are would-be rapists. Too often this narrative becomes a weapon by which to justify treating LGBTQ people like the Sodomites wanted to treat Lot's guests, rather than motivating the graciousness you're describing, but the implications could expand more positively to our present ecological crisis — were we to seriously consider how consumerism also relies upon exploitation of unseen others.

I raise this Biblical passage for another reason: during our conversation, as in your fiction, you've alluded to Adam's curse, the "sacred value" and the "grace" of trees, and the call to "come home and be born again." You've been an astute critic of simplistic, coercive religiosity across your career — in *The Overstory*, you juxtapose the senses against doctrine — but I also hear you inviting richer treatments of ancient wisdom, and not just from theologians. Without question, we must expand our literary diets beyond the traditional Western canon, but how might such works also be redeployed in contemporary fiction? (I must say: I loved asides like Olivia's vision of "Jesus the Communist, the crazed shop-trasher, the friend of deadbeats.")

The book is indeed filled with what Bron Taylor would call *dark green religion*. But in most cases, it's a religion without metaphysics, which is something that even the religion of humanism can't always claim! Tree-consciousness is a religion of life, a kind of bio-panteism. My characters are willing to entertain a *telos* in living things that scientific empiricism shies away from. *Life wants something from us*. The trees say to each of these people: *There's something you need to hear*.

Karen Armstrong has a brilliant book called *A Short History of Myth*. In it, she describes the history of civilization as a concurrent rise of human technological



aged present results from this utter loss of all the old spiritual s. When there is no authority but collective mastery and might, and use but the feeding of individual appetite, the human spirit turns It will blithely destroy, without thought to the consequences. Armstrong ends her book with a plea to artists to take up the fallen mantle of meaning-making that the old myths and the discredited religions once wore:

A novel, like a myth, teaches us to see the world differently; it shows us how to look into our own hearts and to see our world from a perspective that goes beyond our own self-interest. If professional religious leaders cannot instruct us in mythical lore, our artists and creative writers can perhaps step into this priestly role and bring fresh insight to our lost and damaged world.

That's why *The Overstory* is swarming with Greek and Egyptian and pagan European and Indian and Chinese and Indigenous American myths about trees. It's trying to resurrect a very old form of tree consciousness, a religion of attention and accommodation, a pantheism of sorts that credits other forms of life — indeed, the life-process as a whole — with *wanting* something.

The resulting polyphony stands in stark contrast to the cacophony of so much public discourse, which does not teach us to see the world differently, but drives us further and further into lonely enclaves of endlessly harmful self-interest, where our desires drown out everything but the murmurs and shouts we could mistake for our own. The first novel my climate fiction students read this semester was Ashley Shelby's *South Pole Station*, and when she joined us for a videoconference, we considered whether the protagonist's brother's suicide might be a warning against his whole species's direction. Similarly, in several of your novels, major characters nearly commit suicide, but abstain or are thwarted. Walker Percy, a self-described “bad Catholic” whose novels' roots must entwine somewhere with your own, distinguished between the “ex-suicide” who can actively choose life — rather than simply floating along by default — and the “non-suicide” who remains controlled by fear of death. How close is that to your thinking about self-destruction and transformation? What alternative does *The Overstory*'s neologism, “unsuicide,” offer to a culture overwhelmed by demagoguery, machismo, fear of the other, and “alternative facts”?

It may be neither hyperbolic nor rhetorical to call the current turn in American politics a collective suicide. Premature deaths, damage to human health, dislocation of populations, destruction of coastal and storm-belt property, disruption of essential components of the food supply: climate change casualties are mounting rapidly, and coping with, let alone trying to reduce them will require one of the greatest concerted public efforts in history. (Incidentally, deforestation contributes more greenhouse gasses than all the world's trucks and cars, and climate change contributes massively to deforestation, a most vicious positive feedback loop.)

ts, crippling the solar power industry, subsidizing “beautiful, clean” energy, turning national monuments to drilling, and revoking or rescinding laws of air, water, and land that took half a century of massive political will to put in place. Cynical appointments have destroyed guardian agencies from the Department of the Interior to the EPA, killing them from the inside out. History is filled with moments when doomed regimes redouble their own insanity by speeding up self-destruction rather than capitulating to accountability. We are in one such moment, perhaps the most catastrophic one ever.

No one should be fooled: the motive behind all of this “deregulation” is not primarily economic. Any reasonable accounting reveals that the sum of these measures carries external costs far greater than the hoped-for benefits. (Did you know that the number-one killer in the world is pollution? And that doesn’t even include premature deaths from climate change.) The push to remove all environmental safety strikes me as mostly psychological. It’s driven by a will to total dominance, underwritten by the hierarchy of values that George Lakoff calls “stern paternalism,” putting men above women, whites above minorities, Americans above all other countries, and humans above all other living things. Trumpism calls it a return to greatness (a.k.a., “Grab ‘em by the…”). It might better be called a tantrum in the face of a crumbling control fantasy.

Near the climax of my book, my dendrologist Patricia Westerford (whose personal history qualifies her as a Walker Percy “non-suicide”) must stand in front of an auditorium of technocrats who share something of that fantasy of control and human dominance, while answering the question, “What is the single best thing a person can do for a sustainable future?” Her lecture-demonstration on one very plausible answer — *kill yourself* — takes a turn toward a startling gesture, a toast to *unsuicide*. That is the gesture behind the entire novel: the active, even violent effort to oppose a way of life that would gladly bring itself and all else down with it, rather than capitulate to even the mildest forms of reconciliation to the rest of the living world.

I find it interesting to take this analogy of “suicide” literally. If the most common causes of individual suicide are depression and psychic isolation, the cause of our accelerating and collectively willed suicide may be despair over the failed system of capitalism and commodity-driven meaning, as well as the crippling condition that psychologists call “species loneliness.”

We will always be parasites on plants. But that parasitism can be turned into something better — a mutualism. One of my radicalized activists makes this proposal: We should cut trees like they are a gift, not like they are something we a priori deserve. Such a shift in consciousness might have the effect of slowing down deforestation, since we tend to care for gifts better than we do for freebies. But it would also go a long way toward treating the suicidal impulse in people caused by species loneliness. Many indigenous people knew this for millennia: thanking a living thing and asking for its pardon before using it goes a long way toward exonerating the guilt that leads to violence against the self and others.

already had.

clude with a scene featuring two of the characters who most fully potential of such mutualism. Olivia and Nick spend much of the novel lodged in a redwood like the ancient tree above Silicon Valley you described earlier — or as you put it more mythically, Maidenhair and Watchman rest in Mimas's arms. From their perch, they inform clear-cutters below that contra the dominant religion of capitalist efficiency, "It might not be so bad, to destroy a little productivity." And in the ensuing quiet, they ask each other, "*Can you feel it lift and disappear? That standing wave of constant static. The distraction so ubiquitous you never even knew you were wrapped in it. Human certainty. The thing that blinds you to what's right here — gone.*"

Of course productivity can be healthy if it stems from dedication, not exploitation; certainty may be a reward of rigorous study, when held loosely and in the awareness that new data might always appear. But *The Overstory* suggests how these values have been perverted beyond all recognition. Nodding to Greek's distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*, what steps strike you as most crucial if we are to redefine our role on Earth and think about time not just according to human quantities and scales, but also qualitatively, in light of larger ecologies?

The first step is for each of us to commit suicide.

At the end of the book, Nick is engaged in an enormous environmental art project, arranging downed tree trunks in a boreal forest to spell out a word on the forest floor. The word he spells out is "Still." To hold still is to shift postures from dominant to accommodating, to trade use and mastery for looking and receiving. And when a person holds still and looks, all the agents and emissaries of the meaning *out there* begin to look back and start talking.

Thoreau puts this beautifully: "Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, resign yourself to the influence of the earth." Resignation will not come easily, to us masters of reality. But nothing else will come at all, if we can't master ourselves enough to simply hold still and see. We cannot save the world; the world will go on well enough, long after it shrugs us off. But we might just be able to save ourselves, by coming home to the world's influence and living in *its* seasons, not our own.

A friend came to visit me here in my home in the Smokies. Despite the winter turbulence that whipped the jet stream around like a jump rope, making for 80-degree days in February and polar-vortex March nights 20 degrees colder than average, spring was creeping back in. The first ephemerals were rising everywhere through last year's leaf litter: hepatica, trailing arbutus, star chickweed, spring beauties. I stopped on the trail where we were walking and pointed out the crown of a maple infused in red, like a blurry watercolor.

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've been flowering every spring, for the last hundred million years.  
vered in every year you've been alive. And with luck, they'll flower for  
a few years yet to come.

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*Everett Hamner is an associate professor of English at Western Illinois University. His book  
Editing the Soul: Science and Fiction in the Genome Age (Penn State, 2017)  
includes a chapter on Richard Powers's two novels preceding The Overstory.*



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