



The Overstory, by Richard Powers
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, November 2019

The 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was awarded to Richard Powers' uniquely original novel, *The Overstory*, which celebrates the majesty and mystery of trees. The storyline of each main character is in some way connected to trees or endangered forests.

The Overstory begins with the Hoel family, farmers in Iowa. In the middle of the nineteenth century, their Norwegian ancestor, Jorgen Hoel, went west to start farming near Des Moines. He brought a handful of chestnuts with him from Boston to plant. One lofty Hoel chestnut tree grew to a tremendous height.

Back east, however, a chestnut blight, imported from Asia, began to infect the mighty chestnut: "Trees succumb by the hundreds of thousands. A country watches dumbstruck as New England's priceless chestnuts melt away. The most harvested tree in America is vanishing." People flock to see the lone Hoel chestnut in Iowa. Jorgen's son, John, starts the family tradition of photographing their chestnut tree on the 21st day of each month. Several generations later, the fading photos inspire their descendant Nick Hoel's artwork.

As the book progresses, other characters are introduced. Douglas Pavelick, a Vietnam War veteran, who had been saved by a sprawling banyan tree when he parachuted into Cambodia, plants fir tree seedlings back into logging-denuded lands in Pacific Northwest. Mimi Ma, whose father entrusted her with an ancient Chinese scroll, treasures the memory of her family's mulberry tree. The eclectic mix of characters includes Olivia, a free-spirited college dropout; Adam, a psychologist; and Neeley, a wheelchair-bound video-game inventor.

Dr. Patricia Westford, a nature research scientist and writer, is the character who links all the others together. Her book, *The Secret Forest*, describes trees' importance in the ecosystem: "There are no individuals in the forest, no separable events. The bird and the branch it sits on are a joint thing. You and that tree in

your backyard come from the same ancestor; even now, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes.” Inspired by Dr. Westford’s impassioned writing, five characters become ecological activists. Most of their protest activities, including tree-sitting and boycotts, are peaceful. One desperate act, however, has far-reaching consequences.

The author’s prodigious research about the fascinating inner life of trees, indeed, is impressive. A 500-pager, *The Overstory* is not a light read. A few characters seem superfluous, and, at times, the plotting is as dense as a spruce forest. Nevertheless, for readers of *The Overstory*, one thing is clear: You’ll never look at trees in quite the same way again.