

*The Overstory*, a novel by Richard Powers. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2018, 502 pages

Review by C. Michael Rich, ECU associate professor and KWOA board member

This book will likely show up as a birthday or Christmas present for many of us from our family members or friends who know of our interest in and love for trees. That not many novels foreground trees as intensely as this one will make it an easy choice for people browsing the bookstore in search of a suitable book to give their arboreally-addled friends or relatives. My mother gave me my copy, with the note, "you'll like part about ECU!"

Intrigued, I delved into the novel some months ago, only to find myself unable to continue reading more than fifty pages into the novel. A long summer vacation finally afforded me the requisite fortitude to plow through this novel, and while I found it compelling at times, it was still a tough row to hoe.

The story spans roughly one hundred years, from before the chestnut blight to our present silicon valley dominated virtual reality. Events such as environmental protesters living in the tops of giant sequoias in attempting to prevent them from being cut down, 9/11 and the Occupy movement lends a somewhat Forest Gump-ian approach to outlining the passage of time in the novel. Geographically, the trees described span from chestnuts harvested in New York City being planted in Iowa, to mulberry trees from China representing the lost fortune in silk of an immigrant from China.

The people in the novel also span a wide range, all of whom are either figuratively or literally "saved" by trees. An ecologist whose academic career is destroyed by others who find her findings too far out makes a final act of protest with a vial of tree essence. A Vietnam vet who is miraculously saved from a helicopter crash by a sacred fig tree discovers a new career replanting clear-cuts. A college student revived from a fatal electrocution finds a new life as an activist saving trees and defying lumberjacks who see her as a threat to their livelihood. And an adulterous actress defies her neighborhood association in order to reforest her suburban lawn she shares with her ailing lawyer husband.

The climax of the story occurs during the aftermath of a failed attempt to protect old-growth redwoods from cutting in Oregon. How the people in the novel attempt to rebuild their lives following a tragedy that occurs in the aftermath of their protest represents their resilience, gained in no small measure by the trees that have been an integral part of their lives. Yet their lives seem diminished by their failure to overcome overwhelming corporate and government oppression.

The protagonists' intimate relationships with trees are described in emotional and scientific detail. Ethnographies and mythology of forest people are embroidered into the text. A Tang dynasty poem, references to MacBeth, precious family heirlooms of jade rings carved with tiny

trees, even the redbud's alternative identity as the Judas tree, show the forest derived symbols that shape our worlds of meaning.

Suicide, murder, threats and acts of violence and betrayal. This book is not a light read. The author has done a masterful job of weaving scientific and poetic insights about trees into a work of fiction. Given the current state of our political and environmental reality, it is perhaps no accident that the novel does not end on an unambiguously bright note. As one person in the novel concludes about their attempts to enlighten others about the importance of trees, "Soon we'll know if we were right or wrong."