

Book Review: *Bewilderment* by Richard Powers

Kerem Ak

A science fiction novel that tells the story of an astrobiologist father and his neurodivergent son and cunningly unveils wrongdoings of mankind in nature.

After the publication of the Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece, *The Overstory*, in 2018, a book about the interaction between people and trees, Richard Powers followed his earlier success with a brand-new book titled *Bewilderment* in 2021. The first thing that catches the eye is that both novels deal with environmental issues. But in his latest book, Powers presses the same issue with the voice of a young, neurodivergent boy who has lost his mother. *Bewilderment*, which was shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize and longlisted for the National Book Award, hints at the scientific and political causes of the growing environmental disaster, without bothering us with scientific explanations and details. Instead, the readers witness the impact of the global disaster on a troubled, yet special, young boy who keeps up his curiosity and care for the natural world throughout the novel.

In *Bewilderment*, Powers introduces the story of a father and his son. The narrator of the novel, Theo Byrne is an astrobiologist, who is based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and works on life outside planet Earth. After losing his wife, Alyssa, an environmental activist and lawyer, in a car crash, Theo dismisses the responsibilities of his job so that he can spend more time with his son, Robin. He is a nine-year-old boy who mourns the death of his mother and experiences bullying at school.

Robin is an extremely sweet and smart child with a voracious appetite for nature, tiny creatures, unknown planets, and possible intelligent life forms. On the other hand, he faces troubles such as oversensitivity to noises, lack of concentration, and difficulties to control his anger. Robin has been diagnosed with few neurodevelopmental conditions and disorders, Theo explains to the readers: “the votes are two Asperger’s, one probable OCD and one possible ADHD” (97). Despite the warnings raised by the authorities, Theo rejects putting his son on psychoactive drugs and holds on the idea that “life is something we need to stop correcting” (5).

Bewilderment falls into the genre of science fiction due to its dystopian tone and its special attention to alien life on exoplanets. Moreover, the novel introduces the Decoded Neurofeedback (Dec Nef), a fictional non-chemical procedure in which patients are placed in an fMRI machine and trained to alter their behavior and neural activities by making use of the neural patterns of other people. Rather than relying on Ritalin or other similar psychoactive drugs, Theo agrees to try this treatment on his son by using the mental picture of his dead wife, who participated in the project before. With this life-altering decision, the story takes a different turn.

Readers who are familiar with Power's earlier novels can effortlessly recognize striking similarities between them and *Bewilderment*. For instance, in *Galatea 2.2* (1995), the narrator who experiences a sort of career stagnation in writing teaches a computer to read literary texts critically. In another novel, titled *Generosity: An Enhancement* (2009), Powers questions the possible consequences both on the personal and social levels of finding the genetic code to happiness. Regardless of the main idea of his specific novels, Powers's fiction feeds on the scientific and technological developments and their great impact on both humans and the non-human inhabitants of nature.

Bewilderment is a novel that deals with big questions of astronomy and science whose answers remain still unknown to us. And yet, its story about the intimate relationship between a father and his son enables readers to picture the incomprehensible and to imagine extrasolar planets, other suns, and neutron stars.

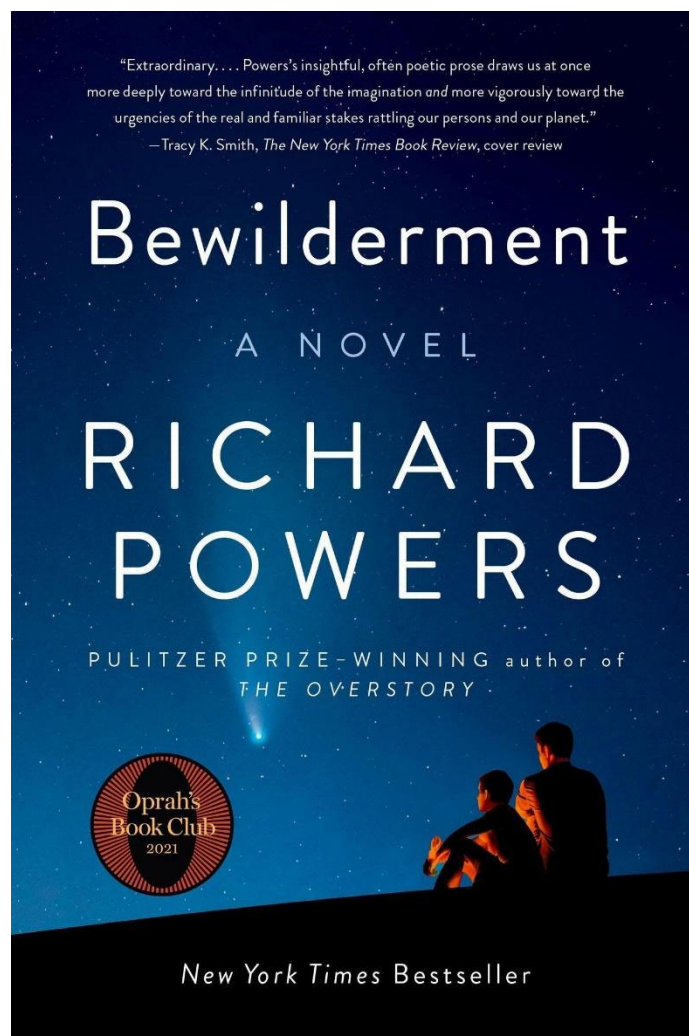


Figure 1. *Bewilderment* was published by Norton & Company.

Born in Evanston, Illinois in 1957, Richard Powers has always been interested in different art forms, particularly music and literature. While doing his major in physics, he took a U-turn and decided to study literature. Powers decided to build a career in writing and took inspiration from his former education in science and its merits and dangers as a theme in his novels. So far, he published 13 books in which he deals with the impacts of modern science and technology on distinct characters. For his debut novel *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), Powers received the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In addition to that, he won several prizes such as the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical Fiction with *Gain* (1998), Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award Prize with *Plowing the Dark* (2000), the National Book Award with *The Echo Maker* (2006), Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with *The Overstory* (2018). Powers's thirteenth novel, *Bewilderment* (2021), was praised for its original content and was longlisted for the National Book Prize and shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize.

Author Biography

Kerem Ak is a Master's student of literature and films at Leibniz University of Hannover. His study interests include fantasy literature, utopias and dystopias, nature writing, climate fiction, festival movies, and podcasts. He also contributed to the *T-Litcon: 1st Annual International Conference on Literature: "Human Rights & Literature"* (2023) with his abstract on Gilbert Imlay's epistolary novel, *The Emigrants* (1793).