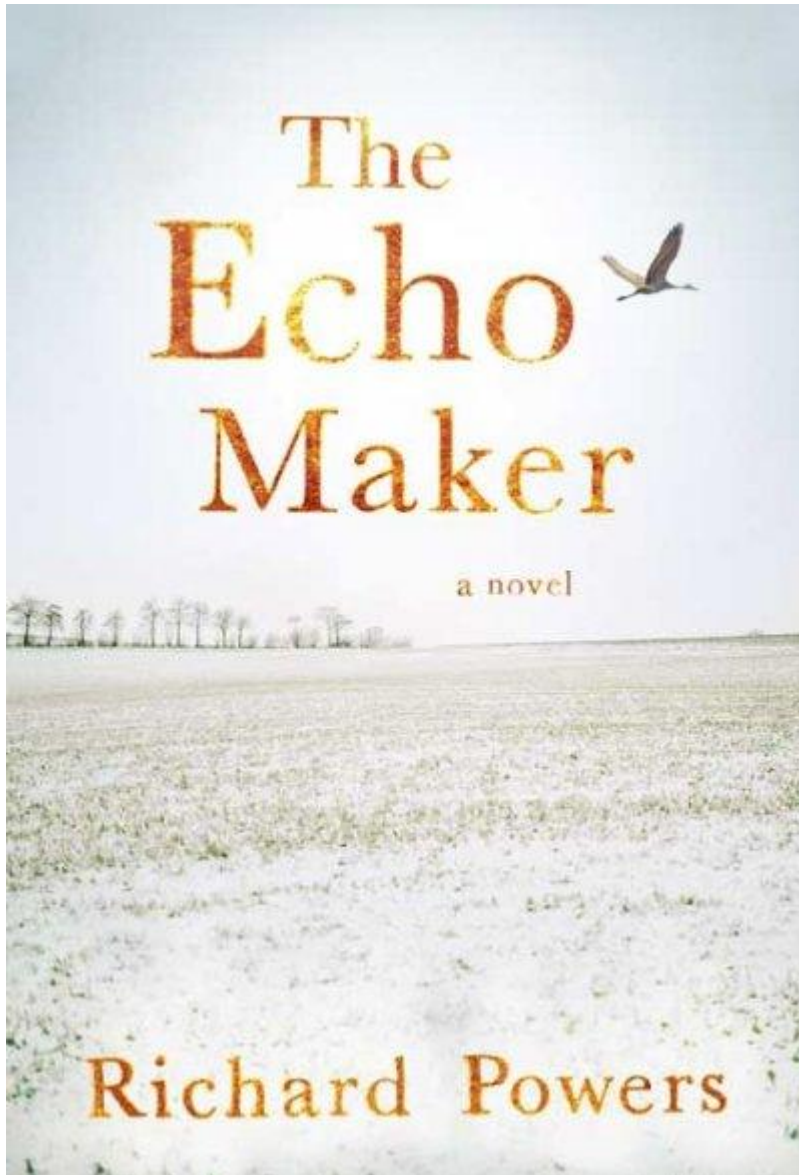


## About the book...



On a winter night on a remote Nebraska road, twenty-seven-year-old Mark Schluter has a near-fatal car accident. His older sister, Karin, returns reluctantly to their hometown to nurse Mark back from a traumatic head injury. But when Mark emerges from a coma, he believes that this woman--who looks, acts, and sounds just like his sister--is really an imposter. When Karin contacts the famous cognitive neurologist Gerald Weber for help, he diagnoses Mark as having Capgras syndrome. The mysterious nature of the disease, combined with the strange circumstances surrounding Mark's accident, threatens to change all of their lives beyond recognition.

## About the author... (BookBrowse)

Richard Powers (born 18 June, 1957 in Evanston, Illinois) has received numerous honors including a MacArthur Fellowship, a Lannan Literary Award, and the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Historical Fiction. He teaches in the Creative Writing M.F.A. program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, teaching a graduate seminar in multimedia authoring and an undergraduate course in the mechanics of narrative.

He grew up in the northern suburbs of Chicago, the fourth of five children. Early in the 1960s his father, a high school principal moved the family to the north Chicago suburb of Lincolnwood; then, when he was 11 (1968) his father accepted a job at the International School of Bangkok, and the family spent the next five years in

Thailand, where he became both an accomplished music student (cello, guitar, clarinet and saxophone) and a voracious reader - his earliest literary passion being for nonfiction - particularly biographies and science. He recalls feeling that he was "destined to be a scientist", thus as a teenager he explored careers in paleontology, oceanography, archaeology and physics.

He enrolled at the University of Illinois as a physics major but was inspired to change fields after taking an honors literature seminar (taught by Robert Schneider, a charismatic teacher and an accomplished Freudian critic who convinced Powers that literature was the "perfect place for someone who wanted the aerial view") - which led to him earning an M.A. in English. After graduating, he worked in Boston as a technical writer and computer programmer while continuing to read voraciously; he spent many weekends at the Museum of Fine Arts where, one day, he came across a photograph titled "Young Westerdale Farmers on Their Way to a Dance", in an interview sometime later he told an interviewer, "I knew instantly not only that they were on their way to a different dance than they thought they were, but that I was on the way to a dance that I hadn't anticipated until then. All of my previous year's random reading just consolidated and converged on this one moment, this image, which seemed to me to be the birth photograph of the twentieth century."

The identity of the three men in the picture preoccupied him so much that he decided to put his speculations in a novel. Within two days he had given up his job to focus on writing and three years later, in 1985, he published *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*. It was praised by critics, but what most excited Powers was that at the age of 32 his indecision was over, "It was the discovery that I didn't have to give up anything that electrified me about writing, Here was a place where being a dilettante was actually an asset. You could, for two years, live vicariously as a German farmer or a molecular geneticist, that thing that you gave up at 18 and figured you'd never visit again."

Since then has published a book every two to three years: *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988), *The Gold Bug Variations* (stories, 1991), *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993), *Galatea 2.2* (1995), *Gain* (1998), *Plowing the Dark* (2000), *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) and *The Echo Maker* (2006).

His books share what Powers refers to as "a restlessness in theme", covering a multitude of areas but usually, if not always, exploring the effects of modern science and technology that, in Powers's words give an "an aerial view" - portraying humanity as just one small element in a complex universe.

## Reviews

*Booklist*: /\*Starred Review\*/

Late one night, near the Platte River in Kearney, Nebraska, where the sandhill cranes pause every year in their spectacular migration, Mark Schluter flips his truck. Brain damaged, he develops Capgras syndrome, which makes him think that

his sister, Karin, is an impostor. Despondent at Marks constant requests to produce his real sister, Karin writes a letter to Gerald Weber, a cognitive neurologist whose case histories of bizarre brain disorders have best-selling appeal (think Oliver Sacks). Weber, who is suffering a very different kind of identity crisis himself, agrees to examine Mark. Powers has taken the primal question--Who am I?--and traced it to its chemical elements, exploring the ways the mind constructs smooth narratives out of messy reality. But his investigation is larger than the individual, leading him to explore how humans as a species smooth out the rough spots, tuning out the natural world, straying from the instincts that might keep us alive on our own long journey. Powers has complete command of storytelling skills, building questions of both plot and philosophy so deftly that, in their denouement, there is no surprise, only recognition. A remarkable novel, from one of our greatest novelists, and a book that will change all who read it.

*Publishers Weekly:/\*Starred Review\*/*

A truck jackknives off an "arrow straight country road" near Kearney, Nebr., in Powers's ninth novel, becoming the catalyst for a painstakingly rendered minuet of self-reckoning. The accident puts the truck's 27-year-old driver, Mark Schluter, into a 14-day coma. When he emerges, he is stricken with Capgras syndrome: he's unable to match his visual and intellectual identifications with his emotional ones. He thinks his sister, Karin, isn't actually his sister; she's an imposter (the same goes for Mark's house). A shattered and worried Karin turns to Gerald Weber, an Oliver Sacks-like figure who writes bestsellers about neurological cases, but Gerald's inability to help Mark, and bad reviews of his latest book, cause him to wonder if he has become a "neurological opportunist." Then there are the mysteries of Mark's nurse's aide, Barbara Gillespie, who is secretive about her past and seems to be much more intelligent than she's willing to let on, and the meaning of a cryptic note left on Mark's nightstand the night he was hospitalized. MacArthur fellow Powers (Gold Bug Variations, etc.) masterfully charts the shifting dynamics of Karin's and Mark's relationship, and his prose - powerful, but not overbearing - brings a sorrowful energy to every page.

*Library Journal:*

Powers (*The Time of Our Singing*), who has won a Lannan Literary Award and the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for historical fiction, here investigates the mystery of traumatic brain injury. Set in small-town Nebraska near the bird-watching spectacle of Platte River, Powers's ninth novel centers on the life of 27-year-old Mark Schluter, who is unable to recognize his sister, Karin, after suffering a near-fatal accident. Desperate for clarity, Karin turns to world-renowned cognitive neurologist and writer Gerald Weber (reminiscent of the real-life Oliver Sacks). Cleverly, this novel isn't simply about Mark's damaged brain (he appears to suffer from a rare case of Capgras syndrome); instead, it sheds light generally on the human mind and our struggle to make sense of both the past and the present. Echo Maker is both mystery and case history as Mark struggles to investigate his accident through an anonymous note and Weber attempts to sort through the nuance and plasticity of the mind in his own declining years. Powers bounces back and forth through Mark's rambling thoughts, Weber's neurological theories, Karin's insecurities, and

wonderfully poetic details of the cranes on the Platte River. Recommended for large public libraries.)

*Kirkus: /\*Starred Review\*/*

The theme of cognitive disorder, variously explored in Powers's forbiddingly brainy earlier fiction, is the central subject of his eerie, accomplished ninth novel.

An image of sand-hill cranes migrating from Nebraska's Platte River sets the scene, where 20-something slaughterhouse-worker Mark Schluter crashes his truck in an adjacent field, sustaining severe bodily and neurological injuries. Repeating an all-too-familiar pattern, Mark's older sister Karin leaves her job and life in Sioux City to be with him—stirring up memories of their shared childhood in thrall to a violent, alcoholic father and religious zealot mother. But Mark (whose inchoate, terrified viewpoint is rendered in a rich mlange of semi-coherent thoughts and visions) no longer knows Karin; he is, in fact, convinced she's a stranger masquerading as his sister. Eventually, he's diagnosed as suffering from "Capgras syndrome . . . one of a family of misidentification delusions." But Mark's symptoms elude the pattern familiar to Gerald Weber, a prominent New York cognitive neurologist and bestselling author, summoned by Karin's importuning letter. Weber's "tests" fail to relieve or explain Mark's delusive paranoia, and Karin turns first to the siblings' former childhood friend Daniel Riegel, long since estranged from Mark, now a deeply committed environmental activist; then to her former lover Robert Karsh, a manipulative charmer who has risen to local prominence as a successful developer. Contrasts thus established seem pat, but Powers explores the mystery surrounding Mark through suspenseful sequences involving his raucous drinking buddies (who may know more about his accident than they're telling); compassionate caregiver Barbara Gillespie; and the unidentified observer who left a cryptic message about Mark's ordeal at the patient's hospital bedside. Issues of environmental stewardship and rapine, compulsions implicit in migratory patterns and Weber's changing concept of the fluid, susceptible nature of the self are sharply dramatized in a fascinating dance of ideas.

One of our best novelists (The Time of Our Singing, 2003, etc.) once again extends his unparalleled range.

### **Discussion questions**

([http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading\\_guides/detail/index.cfm?book\\_number=1891](http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm?book_number=1891))

1. What echoes do the cranes create throughout the novel? What do the cranes signify to those who admire them—tourists, environmentalists, local residents along the Platte River? What parallels exist between the echo of the migrating birds and the echoes lurking in Mark's shattered memory?
2. How would you characterize the sibling dynamics between Mark and Karin? How much of their former relationship remains intact after his accident?

Would you have sacrificed as much as Karin did to help an injured brother or sister?

3. What is Bonnie's stake in helping Mark heal? Is her perception of the world distorted, like Mark's, or is she actually his best chance for returning to rational thinking? How does she cope with Dr. Weber's assertion that faith in God has a neurological component?
4. Discuss the Nebraska landscape as if it were a character in the novel. What makes it alluring as well as daunting? In what way does the region's "personality" mirror that of its inhabitants?
5. Which segments of Mark and Karin's childhood do they most want to recall? Which memories of their parents continue to hurt them? Is either sibling on a path, perhaps even unwittingly, of carrying on their parents' legacies?
6. What contemporary environmental concerns are reflected in the showdown over the Central Platte Scenic Natural Outpost? Is Daniel equally zealous about his relationship with Karin?
7. Were you suspicious of Barbara in the novel's early chapters? How did your perception of her shift? How would you have responded if you had been in her position on the night of the accident?
8. In part three, Karin tells Daniel she thinks Mark might have been better off if she had stayed away. How can we know the difference between selfless and self-serving caregiving? In the end, was Karin right to remain in Mark's life to such an intense extent?
9. What aspects of body, soul, and memory are presented in the epigraphs appearing throughout the book? Taken by themselves, do these quotations underscore or contradict each other?
10. In what ways did Gerald take on a fatherly role for Karin and Mark? Was their perception of him any more accurate than that of the fans who attended his lectures or saw him on television? What aspects of his true self was Gerald able to reclaim in Nebraska? What do you predict for his future with Sylvie and Jess?
11. From the friends who figure prominently in his life, particularly Duane Cain and Tom Rupp, and the figures who represent fear (such as Robert Karsh) what picture of Mark's past were you able to piece together? What is the best way to discern the truth when memories clash?
12. Did Capgras syndrome make any aspects of Mark's perception crystal clear or even closer to reality than his caregivers' view of life? What universal

experiences are reflected in his inability to accept the identity of someone who loves him, or, near the end, to acknowledge that he is fully alive?

13. How did you ultimately interpret the note? For each of the main characters, what did it mean to be no one? In the end, who else was brought back?
14. What does Karin have to discover about the mind's ability to shape memories? How does her understanding of her past change throughout Mark's illness? In what ways does *The Echo Maker* enhance themes in previous novels by Richard Powers you have read? What is unique about his approach to topics as far-ranging as science and history, deception and devotion?

**Read alike** (LibraryThing)

Jane Hamilton, *When Madeline was Young: a novel* (2007)

Heidi Julavits, *The uses of enchantment: a novel* (2007)

Ward Just, *Forgetfulness* (2006)

Ken Kalfus, *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country : a novel* (2006)

Jess Walter, *The Zero: a novel* (2006)