

WHAT THE MIND MAKES

Trey Strecker

PLOWING THE DARK

Richard Powers

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*The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and You—beside—
—Emily Dickinson*

Throughout his career, Richard Powers's work has received critical attention for its vast erudition and its dazzling display of diverse forms of knowledge. The above epigraph from Powers's fifth novel, *Galatea 2.2* (1995), a heartfelt meditation on the nature of human and artificial intelligence, could easily serve in the same capacity for his most recent book, *Plowing the Dark*. Largely set in the Realization Lab, a Seattle virtual reality research center, *Plowing the Dark* explores the stirring power of the human imagination to create and to transform its reality. "The mind is the first virtual reality," according to Spider Lim, a hardware engineer. "It gets to say what the world isn't yet."

Powers's new novel opens in the 1980s, as Adie Klarpol, a disillusioned artist from New York City who has given up painting in favor of commercial design, is recruited for the Realization Lab by Steve Spiegel, a college friend, now programming "a prototype immersion environment." This "Computer-Assisted Virtual Environ," nicknamed the Cavern, consists of an empty room that emerging VR technology and the imagination can transform into Henri Rousseau's *Dream*, Vincent van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles*, or the Hagia Sophia. Yet despite the researchers' scientific expertise and huge wads of corporate funding, Spiegel tells Adie that no one on the project can draw convincing lifelike images. Awed by the potential of the Cavern's multidimensional template, Adie is

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lured onto the design team by the promise that she might "make something beautiful."

In a parallel storyline, Taimur Martin, an Iranian-American teacher, escapes a disastrous romantic attachment and accepts an ESL job in Lebanon, where he is kidnapped by a group of radical fundamentalists and held in solitary confinement. As the RL team simulates a virtual world, Taimur escapes within his memory and imagination to inhabit a world outside his cell. In a recent *Conjunctions* interview with Bradford Morrow, Powers describes how these stories serve as figure and ground for one another, "two stories that have absolutely no point of contact, except that each is fated to save the other." Although Taimur and Adie never actually meet in real life, their parallel narratives achieve "a stereoscopic effect" in a breathtakingly beautiful climax.

In addition to exploring multiple connections between individuals and their stories, *Plowing the Dark* charts various linkages between virtual reality, the imagination, and the natural world. Each of us, Powers suggests, is a scientist running life's complex experiment in the world lab:

Event ran on an analog machine the size of the globe, a planetary computer that performed the necessary calculations and generated the required results. The world took its instructions from the shapes of its smallest parts, aggregate subroutines, reusable containers, object-oriented modules that forward-chained into ever larger autonomous agents, extending the program even as it passed through its run-time interpreter.

As the team of VR researchers project televised images of the Tianenman Square massacre, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the Desert Storm bombings onto the Cavern's walls, Adie begins to doubt the inexorable logic of the digital conjuring act, "the place where ingenuity could always hit the Undo button," and to consider the social responsibilities of the artistic and scientific imagination. In an essay on the technology of reproduction, which might serve as a companion to the novel, Powers suggests that, "like a book," the greatest value of digital representation may be "its ability to refresh us to the irreducible complexity of the analog world, a complexity whose scale and heft we might always have underestimated, without the shortfall of its ghostly imitations" (*Context*, 3 [2000]). To reconstitute the immense complexity of modern life in programming terms, one of Powers's scientists asks a colleague, "How many millions of instructions per second do you think Hungary is executing, all told?"

A spectacular book, brimming with profound ideas and intense emotions, *Plowing the Dark* bridges art and science, imagination and reality, knowledge and feeling to create an intricate work of human artistry that is moving and instructive. *Plowing the Dark* brilliantly demonstrates the redemptive power of the creative imagination and reasserts Richard Powers's status as the contemporary author who best understands and represents the dangerous, delightful, and awesome complexity of our living world.

Trey Strecker recently completed his PhD in American Literature at Ball State University.

