

*Plowing the Dark*, by Richard Powers

Reviewed by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [December 13, 2000](#) issue

The abundance of ideas Richard Powers throws at readers can feel overwhelming. As I read this novel, Powers's seventh, I was tempted to try to identify each literary allusion or reference to popular culture. Yet, though Powers is one of our foremost novelists of ideas, his narratives engage our attention through characters who do more than toss around profound thoughts.

In *Plowing the Dark*, Powers explores the nature of reality and the power of the imagination to shape our experience. Adie Klarpol, a disillusioned New York artist, is invited by an old college friend to work in a digital laboratory on the shores of Puget Sound. There virtual reality researchers are developing an empty room called the "Cavern" that can become a jungle, a painting or a Byzantine cathedral. Juxtaposed with Adie's story is the story of Taimur Martin, an English teacher in Beirut who is kidnapped by Islamic militants and chained to a radiator in an empty white room. Powers alternates these narratives and eventually unites them in a climax that ties together the novel's themes.

In an interview Powers has said that our obsession with technology stems from "a millennium-long desire to get out of our bodies." We tend to prefer our spiritual to our physical natures, a preference that virtual reality attempts to satisfy. *Plowing the Dark* represents a caveat to that "seductive dream," as Powers calls it. Our Promethean attempts to create or control reality slip through our fingers and get out of control.

Part of the genius of this novel lies in its ability to present such dangers realistically, without seeming overly portentous. Powers does so through repartee among his learned, quick-witted characters, and through authorial reflections such as this: "Life was not an algorithm. It was an ongoing negation, a spreading series of overtones." He personalizes the suffering of the world through characters like Martin.

Like any good postmodern novelist, Powers is self-aware. He uses his fiction to limn the interplay of art and reality. A character's comment that "everything we paint comes into the world somehow" serves not only to foreshadow events in the novel

but to build a case for the author's work. Powers has said that we are better equipped to face the problems of real time after we "remove ourselves into the space of symbolic transaction," such as fiction.

Obversely, the attempt to leave real time or to create one's own reality can lead to destruction. Toward the end of the novel the gulf war erupts, and people around the world watch the bombing on TV: "The whole planet descended into the flicker of shared delirium." Though the novel ends with a hint of transcendent reality and a note of the power of human love, it never lets one forget the "ongoing negation" of life, since life is so full of suffering.

At times Powers's intellectual acumen overwhelms his story, and he drifts away from the human passions of his characters. But on the whole, his new novel embraces both the intellect and the emotions, the head and the heart. It rewards the efforts of attentive reading.