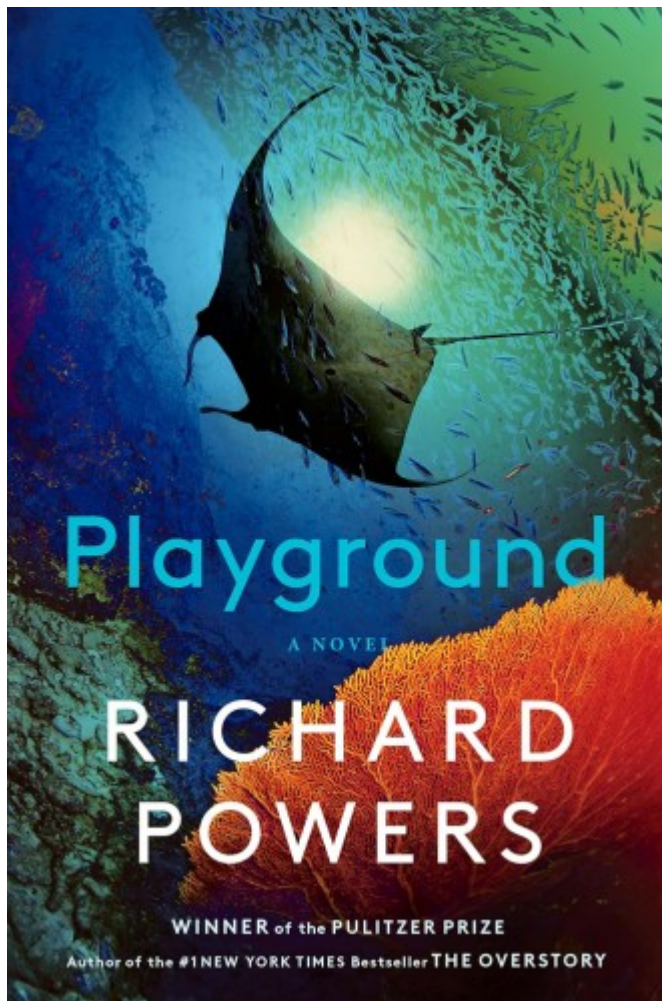


The ocean's infinite game

Novelist Richard Powers has written another love letter to the planet—in this case, the 99 percent of Earth's biosphere that exists underwater.

by [John Rohde Schwehn](#) in the [May 2025](#) issue
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In Review



Playground

A Novel

By Richard Powers

W.W. Norton

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Midway through *Playground*, oceanographer Evelyne (Evie) Beaulieu dives off Truk Atoll in the central Pacific in order to photograph the debris of a sunken World War II ship. Hundreds of feet underwater, Evie is among the first to behold the several tons of crumpled battleship steel, relics of a bygone war now turned into “the largest man-made reef on the planet.” Where before there was only smooth ocean floor, Evie observes how microbial life found a new place to make a home and took over: “Life covered every inch of the twisted surfaces and turned them into high-rise dwellings. . . . The wreckage of war had seeded the greatest nursery she’d ever seen.” The corpses of sailors were similarly overtaken by beautiful coral formations, part of a “continuing conversion” into an arresting, almost beatific vision of life after life. Writing home to her mother, who still grieves the death of her brother in the Pacific War, Evie reports what she saw: “I can tell you that if any place on this entire planet can be called paradise, Uncle Philip is in it. Heaven is growing out of him.”

Playground is the third consecutive novel written by Richard Powers as a love letter to planet Earth, addressed to the hubristic, human-centered story that has come to define (and even create) the Anthropocene. *The Overstory* (2018) considers the world from the perspective of trees and the awe-inspiring networks of life beneath earth’s soil. *Bewilderment* (2021) centers on the vastness of the cosmos and the possibilities of life beyond Earth. And now *Playground* invites us to contemplate the ocean, home to 99 percent of Earth’s biosphere. From the vantage point of these vast, watery depths that teem with primordial life, we mere land dwellers reside in “the marginal kingdom of aberrant outliers . . . ancillaries to the Earth’s main stage.”

While the ocean is the main stage, it’s the human drama that anchors *Playground*’s narrative. Four disparate characters’ lives offer lenses into the grand, dynamic story of the planet in ways both poignant and surprising. Through the lives of Evie, Rafi Young, Todd Keane, and Ina Aroita, we are given players within Earth’s playground who find comfort and identity in the protection, wonder, and mystery of water. Unmoored and adrift in the world due to various life circumstances, each becomes caught up in the beautiful, brutal game of life itself in the hopes of redeeming their own experiences of isolation, loss, suffering, and death.

The key to understanding the interplay between human and planetary drama in *Playground* is summarized by James Carse's 1986 book *Finite and Infinite Games*. Rafi, a studious, grieving bookworm from Chicago's South Side, shares this philosophical text (among many others) with his lifelong North Side friend and eventual billionaire AI entrepreneur, Todd. In it, Carse writes that "a finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play."

Games figure centrally in *Playground*. For the most part, the games humans play are finite ones of winners and losers, strategy and cunning. But the ocean—the source and container of all planetary life since time immemorial—is playing at an infinite game. The battleships beneath the sea that Evie explores are by-products of our finite, geopolitical games; the life that transforms them into something new is the infinite one.

Nowhere are the machinations of the finite game more on display in *Playground* than on the tiny Polynesian island of Makatea. At the turn of the century, this little land mass in French Polynesia was responsible for feeding the human world in the midst of a global population boom. Fossilized marine life (phosphate rock) was mined and extracted by colonial powers, which transformed it into fertilizer before abruptly abandoning the carved-up atoll. Two generations later, a community of 80 or so remaining Indigenous Polynesians and expats are tasked with voting on whether to allow another wealthy, international interloper to profit off their land. Many hope the project will revitalize the economy and raise the quality of life, as promised. Many others want nothing to do with it, for good reason.

Makatea's democratic process becomes nuanced by Indigenous wisdom: Shouldn't children get to vote, as they will have to live with the consequences? And the reef life that will be impacted, who will vote for them? The specific project seeking access to Makatea feels especially prescient. Powers, who has long been interested in the emergent information age of AI technology, puts us into the mind-set of its financier, a tech billionaire who, we are made to believe, desires to use the open sea off Makatea for a project known as seasteading.

Readers of the novel may be aware that a few coastal communities around the world are currently exploring the idea of floating cities as a necessary response to the rising seas of climate change. However, the motivation in *Playground* is wholly different. For Powers's fictional billionaire, Todd, inhabiting international waters is a

way to “kick out all the jams” of accountability and regulation imposed by the state. In other words, seasteading is the latest gambit by the wealthy to escape the finite games of mortality and community in the hopes of actualizing some eternal, libertarian utopia.

Most other humans in *Playground* also obsess over escaping the finite game of life, albeit in different, more subtle ways. Evie’s devoted, land-based husband Bart serves as one exception, as his calling, finally, is to a love that doesn’t seek to win. Buoyed by Bart’s support and sacrifice, Evie becomes a pioneer in the field of oceanography. Through her eyes, Powers offers wonderful deep-sea scenes in glorious, scientific prose. He clearly delights in gilding every glimmering thing with literary and technical precision, but the world he conjures is one whose meaning extends far beyond the immanent frame. *Playground*, ultimately, is a story about life and death, nature and grace, limitation and transcendence. With Evie, we catch glimpses of the sacred mystery—the infinite game—in the dance of the cuttlefish and the play of the manta.

The novel’s closing pages suggest that, perhaps, we readers have been but players in a narrative game all along, a game that seeks to atone for past sins and unite all people into a “continuing conversion” toward infinite life. But such sacred and mysterious things as atonement, forgiveness, and love lie beyond the functions of intelligence or wealth. Only the deepest of waters can do this.