

The Last Generalist: An Interview with Richard Powers

Jeffrey Williams



Jeffrey Williams: First I want to ask about personal background. Where did you grow up? I know that you lived in Thailand for a while; that's certainly remarkable.

Richard Powers: I was born in Evanston, Illinois and grew up on the north side of Chicago, in a suburb called Lincolnwood. My father was a school principal there. When I was eleven, he took a job with the International School of Bangkok and brought his five children halfway around the world. I spent my teenage years there, returning to the United States to finish high school. The change in trajectory was incredibly formative for me, going from the suburban Midwest to Southeast Asia at a time when I was still capable of instantly picking up the language and immersing myself in Thai culture.

JW: What years were you in Thailand?

RP: The late 60s and early 70s, from the age of eleven to sixteen.

JW: So that was during the Vietnam War era?

RP: At the height. Bangkok was transformed by the American presence in Southeast Asia. The city was a capital for American servicemen on R & R. Thailand had become dependent on the war's commercial spillover.

JW: The so-called "night market." Do you think that that experience gave you a political sense? It must have made you see America's role in the world differently than if you had stayed in Evanston.

RP: I think it did. My father came from the south side of Chicago, a working-class guy with already something of a political orientation, and the way he raised his children encouraged us to suspect received wisdom. Being in so different a culture at so formative an age confirmed my sense of distance from the life I might have otherwise lived.

JW: So you came back to the states roughly in 1974, to the University of Illinois?

RP: That's right. When I graduated from high school upstate, I came down to start college in Champaign and wound up taking a bachelor's and a master's degree here.

JW: To keep track of a timeline, that was the late 70s. I've gotten the sense from your novels as well as a few of the things I've read about you that you thought of being a physicist. On the other hand you took literature courses, and in *Galatea 2.2*, you describe an influential literature teacher. I don't know if that's biographical or not, but what made you turn from science to literature?

RP: I was the kind of kid who really didn't make great distinctions between different fields and who took huge amounts of pleasure in being able to solve problems in very different intellectual disciplines. If anything, I would say my problem-solving abilities in math and science were always a good deal stronger than my verbal skills. I always thought that I would end up becoming one kind of scientist or another. It wasn't always physics. For a while it was oceanography. For a while it was paleontology.

JW: Unusual for a novelist . . .

RP: Well, I'm not sure what the usual novelist trajectory is! But my orientation was definitely empirical, a real bias toward the "non-subjective" disciplines. I guess the difficulty for me growing up was this constant sensation that every decision to commit myself more deeply to any of these fields meant closing several doors. Specializing involved almost perpetual leave-taking from other pursuits that I loved and that gave me great pleasure. I really resisted the process, as long as I could. I just wanted to arrive somewhere where I could be the last generalist and do that in good faith. I thought for a long time that physics might be that place.

We have this notion of physics -- especially cosmology, I guess -- as representing a fundamental kind of knowledge, and that it's a great field to be in if you want the aerial view of how things work. In fact, in some ways, almost the opposite may be true. The enormous success of the reductionist program depends upon absolute applications of Occam's razor on every level. You have to make yourself expert in a field that's too small even to be called a specialization. The whole overwhelming success of physics as a discipline depends upon dividing and conquering, on separating fields of research into ever smaller domains. And so it became clear to me pretty quickly, to use Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog and fox distinction, that rather than becoming a fox, I had in fact landed in a place that demanded of me a total devotion to hedgehoggism. I got pretty claustrophobic pretty quickly, and it made me look for other fields where I could preserve that sense of multiplicity, of generalism.

JW: So that induced your turn to literature?

RP: That's right. Initially, I thought that in the study of literature, I'd really found that aerial view again.

JW: So you thought that you'd be a literary critic and a professor?

RP: Right, or at least that that's how I would make my living. Since literature seemed to be about everything that there is -- about the human condition -- I figured that a good literary critic would have to make himself expert at that big picture. It didn't take me long to realize that the professionalization of literary criticism has taken reductionism as its model, and that it too can lead to learning more and more about less and less until you're in danger of knowing everything there is to know about nothing.

JW: What was the moment that you decided you wanted to become a novelist?

RP: Well, I was in graduate school studying literature, and my father died of cancer during my first year. I was twenty-one years old. I remember being in a graduate seminar on prosody, and we were discussing Edwin Arlington Robinson's "How Annendale Went Out," a sonnet about euthanasia. And we'd been discussing the poem for half an hour and it occurred to me that we'd never mentioned death, suffering, or euthanasia. The question that the sonnet was raising was not the question that we were raising. Somewhere between life and the study of art, there had been a massive disconnection. It was at that point that I felt: well, I'll get my master's and I'll call it a day, and I'll go out in the world and make a living, because I'm not going to find what I need in this discipline, at least not in the way that it existed then. And so I went to Boston.

JW: Don't you write computer code? Is that what you did there?

RP: Yes. When I left with the master's in lit, the most saleable skill that I had on my resume was the ability to program. I'd taught myself how to program through exposure to the PLATO system, a network of educational computers pioneered by the University of Illinois that I'd used in my physics, chemistry, and math courses. I got so intrigued by these incredible machines that, for recreation, to blow off steam on weekends rather than going to a movie, I would go to the computer labs and look under the hood and try to figure out how they did what they did. This is how I learned to program. And when I went to Boston with this newly minted M.A. in literature, potential employers were somehow more interested in the fact that I could program computers than that I could analyze literary texts. I got my first job with a data processing company, and that led to a couple of other jobs in the computer field. And I'm very grateful for that experience, not only because it allowed me a professional activity that nicely complemented my independent reading -- a means of support that wasn't a complete drain on those same energies that I needed to use when writing my first novel -- but for the actual intellectual discipline of programming and for insight into business and finance. Business and the transformation of the world through digitization are themes that have run through my books in many forms.

JW: Especially in your last two novels.

RP: Yes, but in *Gold Bug* as well. In fact much of the setting in *Gold Bug* -- the second shift operations data processing firm where Stuart Ressler and Frank Todd work -- is taken wholesale from my early professional experiences. So I feel fortunate to have had that entrée into the world. Also, during those first couple of years making a living

working with computers, first as a data processor and subsequently as a freelance programmer, I read all those disparate things I'd hoped to read in graduate school, but of course couldn't. So it was a great after-the-fact education in world literature, and I read broadly and widely for a long time without any particular program except pleasure, just following the next clue in the treasure hunt.

At one time or another during this year, I was reading a history of the First World War, biographies of Henry Ford and Sarah Bernhardt, analyses of modernism and the avant-garde, the work of Walter Benjamin -- random pleasures, all over the map. I was living in the Fens [near Fenway Park], right across from the Museum of Fine Arts, which at the time was free on Saturdays, if you got there before twelve. So my standard Saturday morning involved trotting over the Fens and roving about in this unbelievable attic of art. One Saturday, I went to see a show of a German photographer whom I thought I had never heard of before. It was the first American retrospective of his work. I remember very vividly walking into the exhibition room and bearing to my left and seeing this photograph on the wall that instantly seemed recognizable to me. Three young men in Sunday suits, looking out over their shoulders as if they had been waiting there for seventy years for me to return their gaze. I leaned forward to read the caption, and the picture was named, "Young Westerwald Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, 1914." The words went right up my spine. 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. This was a Saturday morning, as I said, and I went down on Monday and gave two weeks' notice on my job. I can't say that the book that emerged was exactly the book that appeared to me in that moment of recognition, but it was close. It certainly had its genotype intact.

JW: So it came as a total surprise; you didn't have fantasies before that, the way some teenagers have of being a rock star, of being a novelist?

RP: I'm still not entirely sure that I'm going to be a novelist! I did love reading so much, and I did know that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life programming computers, but I didn't know the shape of the work I would do.

JW: You seem surprised that *Three Farmers* was successful or almost ambivalent about being a novelist.

RP: I wouldn't say ambivalent. I feel I'm not only doing the work I'm supposed to be doing but that I've somehow lucked into the greatest job imaginable. That I'm getting away with it astonishes me -- a perpetual source of gratitude and wonder. As for the reception, when I wrote *Three Farmers*, I thought: I'm going to put everything that I know in this book, because I'm never going to get another shot at this. I did it absolutely as its own end and its own justification. Afterwards, I figured, I'd have to go back and do jobs that people are willing to pay for. Everything beyond that first book has been gravy. Everything since has seemed a little criminal: people will actually pay me to do this?

JW: You mentioned your reading; what did you read? What would you identify as your literary influences? I saw Proust on the shelf in the other room. And what do you read from the contemporary scene?

RP: My influences haven't always been fictional. When you're working on a book that's content-intensive, the downside is that the need for research can really cut into your reading for pleasure. You have to spend a tremendous amount of time just trying to educate yourself and read the bare minimum needed to walk around comfortably in a given field. So I don't read as much fiction as I'd like to. Having said that, as far as great fictional influences, my first was probably Thomas Hardy. My next extended and overwhelming love affair was with European modernism -- Proust, Mann, Joyce, Musil, Kafka -- the stuff that transformed the world in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. That influence has stayed with me throughout my career. I have, in recent years, devoted more time to figuring out what my contemporaries are doing and to learning from them. American fiction at the present amazes me in its unprecedented innovation and range, its diversity and eclecticism. It's doing everything, all at once. There are so many good people writing, and it's hard to believe that they all belong to the same country.

JW: How would you compare yourself to the previous generation, to people like Pynchon, who are postmodern but clearly not your contemporaries. Or what do you think of what I like to call "huntin' and fishin'" fiction, by people like Richard Ford? What do you think of Carver's minimalism, as opposed to shock fiction, by people like Bret Easton Ellis?

RP: These categories are always a little tricky. I don't think we could navigate without categories, so we like to say that Ford comes out of Carver. But it's equally dangerous to see the similarities as annihilating the differences, to see members as representative of their categories without listening to their actual, category-defying sentences. The generation of writers who came of age in the sixties, writers roughly thirty years older than I am, still seem like giants to me. Pynchon and Updike and Roth and Barth: I don't think my contemporaries have yet come out from under these incredibly long shadows. It's hard not to feel, sometimes, that the rise of technology and the increase in our ability to alter the material conditions of existence have left us with a slightly flattened affect in our creative lives. Maybe it's just a trick of perspective, but I feel that those writers, whether known for their realism or for their metafictional dazzle, have a surface complexity, an astonishing technique, and a robustness of theme that make me feel slight in comparison.

JW: Who do you read of contemporary writers?

RP: I've taken pleasure in a wide gamut of people. There are people I come back to again and again and there are people whom I've read once that I'm afraid to go back to because of how deeply those books affected me.

There are people who I'm sometimes lumped with, like David Foster Wallace and William Vollmann, who are widening the boundaries of where a novel can exist. And you also have people like Joanna Scott or Eric Kraft or Bradford Morrow or Maureen Howard who are producing books with great thematic range. Even those few names invoke a sense of the schizophrenic range of where we are and what life looks like now.

JW: Besides fiction, obviously a lot has happened on the contemporary literary scene in literary criticism and theory. As opposed to many fiction writers, I know that you are interested and conversant in it. In *Galatea 2.2*, several lines start with phrases like, "as the literary critics say," and you mention deconstruction and the undermining of the referent. What do you think of the current critical field?

RP: Oh, I'm very interested in it. I'm just an amateur though. There has been a significant recasting of what the critic perceives to be his or her role -- no longer an adjunct to creative constructions or a mere facilitator for literature's themes, but now more of an interrogator, almost a customs guard at the border of understanding, the sites where people might be smuggling cultural work into the unsuspecting domestic consciousness. I've also been interested in trying to understand the backlash against theory, the notion that it might represent a diminution of the role of author as a lightning rod or shaman. Some writers have seen the revolution in critical theory as a war against the literary artifact. I've worked to understand the challenge of theory, and to see these new ideas not as threats to my role as a cultural producer but as a call to greater levels of writerly accountability.

JW: I'm curious about your take on the recent "Science Wars." I'm sure you're familiar with the Sokal affair.

RP: Oh sure. Dragged into the thick of things, against my will!

JW: You would be a natural for people to go to, since you're conversant in both fields.

RP: I wouldn't say I'm conversant with either field, but perhaps the role of a conscientious novelist is to be a free-ranging dilettante. It's my job to try to take the aerial view and get the big picture. The Science Wars interest me because they're really a manifestation of the crisis produced by the triumph of reductionism. Here we are at a point where scientists themselves say they can understand only two or three out of every ten journal articles devoted to their own discipline. And we're trying to hold a dialogue between people who have devoted their lives to one whole set of intellectual assumptions and people on the other side of the line who have devoted themselves to completely separate and untranslatable assumptions. We're reaping the harvest of that intellectual specialization that's made us so successful as a species.

JW: So, in other words, the problem is hyper-specialization?

RP: The Science Wars are, in some ways, the result of intellectual hyper-specialization. Specialized disciplines often like to try to increase their power relative to each other by

making category errors, trumping the work of other fields that operate at other gauges by subordinating them to a grand unified theory internal to the trumping discipline! As far as contemporary cultural theory goes, I do have a bit of [a] problem with it on that count. It can be quite self-righteous at times, quite threatened in the way it appraises other formulations of the world. If you can fault contemporary literary criticism for anything, it would be for its loss of a sense of pleasure. It's veered quite far from the idea that art and science can both be sanctionable, emotional responses to the world. As the economics of the humanistic disciplines become increasingly desperate, the only sure way to raise yourself up is to take somebody else down. Part of the desire of *Galatea* was to poke fun at the high sanctimoniousness of literary theory, to re-establish the fact that we're all in the open boat of existence together. At the same time, that book really incorporates new theoretical notions into it and, while containing the occasional parody of certain kinds of people who believe that theory somehow reformulates human experience in a way that's never been recognized before, the book also tries to be very aware of deconstruction and poststructuralism and to incorporate those notions into the story it tells.

JW: How so?

RP: Well, it does so in the book's ultimate vision of mind and consciousness as a negotiated community, in its idea of linguistic performance and self-narration as being a precarious interchange between sense and symbolic projection. The standard social science model of everything being culturally constructed in some ways has it backwards. Something must, in fact, construct culture, and something other than "culture" does give language its shape, even before language shapes our sense of self. Part of me wants to say that that something is a couple of billion years of evolution. Yet that view has been so simplified and so abused in the past that the humanists are rightfully on their guard about it. Yet there's no denying that we all have bodies and that there are more similarities between our anatomies and their attendant bodily states than there are differences. I see this fact as the next big challenge for humanistic disciplines. We must come to terms with a fuller and richer understanding of life science and all that it implies. Why wouldn't a literary scholar want to know everything that neurologists are discovering about the way the brain works? And yet, some critics carry on building theories that would render those discoveries impertinent at best, and even duplicitous or malevolent.

JW: On the other hand, as we were talking about at lunch, one can only do so much. It might just be a disciplinary despair. Some people in the humanities might crinkle their noses at science -- maybe they didn't do well in science in high school, or something like that -- but the conjunction of literature and science is a vibrant field right now, with a yearly conference and such.

RP: I'm intrigued by the idea of communicating between disciplines that operate at different magnifications, fields that would seem to operate under incommensurable axioms. I would like to see more adventurousness in thinking about hierarchies of human knowledges -- not hierarchies in the judgmental sense -- and more thought about how the rules of description change as you change the magnification of the phenomena being described. We have to get better at thinking of changes in gauge, of spectra that are both

discrete and continuous. It's not enough, as so often the temptation for people who become adept at a given level of professional expertise, to claim that the entire world can be understood at that level. Part of the problem with the Science Wars is that each side tries to negate or trump the other, using totalizing systems of explanation that are appropriate only at the level of their own discipline.

I would like to travel across those thresholds. I'd like to require all those specialists to devote a certain fraction of their intellectual time -- like a tithe or something, a real estate tax of thought -- to spend some small percentage of the efforts they expend solving the problem of existence at the level of their own magnification in trying to see how their level of magnification might fit into an integrated spectrum of disciplines. I don't know whether the word to use is hierarchy. I like the word "parfait," which pops up in my fiction a lot.

JW: It's slightly different if you think of it in terms not of knowledge in the abstract but in terms of a contest among faculties, over which becomes higher on the university hierarchy.

RP: That's just it; the economics of higher education now prevent the kind of interdisciplinary vision that I'm describing. I think that a literary critic's work would only be enhanced by a more sophisticated sense of, say, evolutionary paleontology, or molecular biology, or cognitive science, or cosmology. We want to be able to ask answerable questions, but we also want to be able to situate those answers in a broader geography, an engagement of the larger human questions. And that's how my books work; they work by saying you cannot understand a person minimally, you cannot understand a person simply as a function of his inability to get along with his wife, you cannot even understand a person through his supposedly causal psychological profile. You can't understand a person completely in any sense, unless that sense takes into consideration all of the contexts that that person inhabits. And a person at the end of the second millennium inhabits more contexts than any specialized discipline can easily name. We are shaped by runaway technology, by the apotheosis of business and markets, by sciences that occasionally seem on the verge of completing themselves or collapsing under its own runaway success. This is the world we live in. If you think of the novel as a supreme connection machine -- the most complex artifact of networking that we've ever developed -- then you have to ask how a novelist would dare leave out 95% of the picture.

JW: So for you the possibility of the novel is that it represents all these things?

RP: It represents the larger conversation, the larger neural net. We all live our lives as a tale that is told, spending our days hacking out these precarious, tentative truces between little and big, between private and public. To understand humans, you have to try to represent that daily attempt to negotiate this nonnegotiable gap. A novel that gives up on straddling that gap will never tell us who we are.

JW: So in *Gain* you interweave the story of Laura Bodey with the history of American corporations.

RP: That book describes how even the terms of individualism -- even the invention of the individual itself -- is a function of these larger institutional forces and historical processes.

JW: You mentioned before that you're teaching a course this spring about "Techniques of Fiction," and you were commenting on how you think fiction writing should be taught, which was different from the normal writing workshop approach. Maybe you could say something about that.

RP: My idea is that successful writing advances as its own, complex, living hierarchy, one that mirrors the kind of complex hierarchy that we living beings are. We exist at the cellular level or even the nucleic or chemical level, at the level of organs and systems, at the level of the complete organism, and at the social level. All of these different levels have their analogies in a good story, levels from diction on up to meaning, and in a good story, all these levels advance simultaneously, in concert. We may not even be aware of these phenomena as we read, but in great fiction, all the parts and subassemblies of creation are integral and mutually supporting. You could look at a sentence of a well-made story and see it as a fractal microcosm of the entire workings of the story. You can hear in the syntax, or in the diction of a sentence, the sensibility that drives voice, and the voice that drives character, and the character that drives drama. Again, a good story exemplifies a continuum, both discrete and continuous, and it works because all of its levels participate in a negotiated conversation with one another. My idea for this class is to teach it as a skills course that would make beginning writers more aware of low-level phenomena inside the story, and more capable of selecting the right word, of choosing the right sentence form, of building the right cadence, and of assembling all the needed particulars and marshalling them in the service of the one thing that they wanted to do all along: to tell the story about their breakups with their girlfriends and boyfriends!

JW: A tried and true story. From what you were saying about your course before and now, it seems almost like a course in narratology 101, basic narrative concepts. It's a lot different from the usual workshop model. Have you ever taken a workshop?

RP: No.

JW: You majored in English, or did you double major in English and physics?

RP: I got my master's in English. As an undergrad I took a degree in Rhetoric and had a concentration in math and physics.

JW: What do you think of the workshop mentality?

RP: I don't think that the workshop needs countering per se; I just think it needs supplementing. We never tell a person who wants to learn how to play violin or how to

paint to go out and figure out all the skills on her own, and then come back and have a group of other autodidacts tell her whether everything is working. Surely it can't hurt a student writer to look at all the nuts and bolts that go into making a resonant story, and to work on exercises that isolate those components. In the class, I do lots of different kinds of exercises -- wordgames, syntax challenges, stylistic imitations -- as well as very close analysis of really masterful stories.

JW: There's a complaint that contemporary workshops have led to a flattening of fiction. Do you think that's true?

RP: I don't want to vilify the workshop. A workshop will play out in profoundly different ways, depending on the leader, the members, and the terms of the exchange. But I do think that the professionalization of creative writing somehow recapitulates the commodification of all other human pursuits at this point in history.

JW: If you talk to publishers, they're very clear about that. Do you think it's different for your generation than for previous generations?

RP: The increased self-consciousness of how fiction is consumed -- professionals actually going out and doing the market research -- must surely make the production of fiction more commodity conscious. So yes, I do believe that it becomes harder and harder to create new kinds of fiction, fiction that the market doesn't yet know how to read. Books that haven't yet been written, unprecedented books, will always need to teach readers how to read them. Marketers want to package a book as something familiar, something that already exists as a known, market commodity. Writers have to work at exploring the varieties of human experience that the market hasn't rendered familiar beyond seeing. But as the product-mentality gets stronger, the writer must tread an increasingly difficult path between resisting commodification and avoiding gratuitous novelty.

JW: We were talking before about the range of reviews that *Gain* has gotten. Are there any misapprehensions that people have that you want to correct?

RP: I'm not necessarily the best person to ask that!

JW: A lot of reviewers noted that there's a fairly overt critique of corporate capitalism in *Gain*. It gives a kind of thick description of the history of how modern corporations developed. You flesh, for instance, Ernest Mandel's genealogy of capitalism, from entrepreneurial to imperial to consumer capitalism. There's one component that critiques corporate capitalism, whereby people die from pollution and poisons to their bodies, although on the other hand you describe how corporations give us the life that we have. Maybe you could say something about that.

RP: The diversity of responses to that book amazes me. The readings ranged not only across a gamut of likes and dislikes, but across an interpretive spectrum of entirely incommensurable readings, as if they were referring to completely different books. One

reviewer called the book a one-note bashing of corporate existence. Another claimed that the book was a glorification of contemporary corporate capitalism. One writer said that the book lacked a vision of evil, but another said that I came down too hard and unsubtly on the insidious corporate evil. Several reviews commented on my new depth of characterization, but others spoke of a cold indifference to character. A charged topic, business. Worse than religion, I think.

JW: You have an almost scholarly sense of the reviews. Sometimes writers say they never read their reviews.

RP: I do read my reviews, and they're important to me. I don't think they are necessarily more important than any other individual, intelligent reading of the work. In best cases, the reviewer has put in some time with the story and is trying to be articulate and comprehensive in response to the work. However, reviewers also serve vested interests and can have a more mediated interaction with the book than private readers will have.

JW: *The Wall Street Journal* would be pissed off at the book because it's not nice to corporations.

RP: Reviewers for any mainstream medium look[] over their shoulders a little bit to see whether the review is going to serve the target readers. Critical responses to *Gain* resembled the blind men and the elephant. The reader who latched onto the trunk described a very different animal than the one who latched onto the ear. The book was itself struggling to describe an elephant, an invention whose ramifications have become so large that they defy any intellectual categorization that we'd like to reduce them to. My wish in the book was to reawaken people to the absolute ubiquity of the effect of the limited liability corporation on their lives.

JW: There's one passage I remember where Laura looks around her house and does a kind of inventory, and discovers that everything is made by the Clare Corporation, or so it seems. Everything that she has around her, from what's in her medicine cabinet to her vinyl siding, has enabled her life to be as it is, but also kills her.

RP: At the moment where she begins to suspect that the gamble is not worth the game, that the meal is not worth the price being charged, she has this knee-jerk impulse to go on a purge, to separate her existence from corporate existence, to get rid of all traces of Clare in her life. Five minutes of the crusade makes her realize she'd have to pull up the floorboards and torch the house. One of the messages of the book is that, for better and for worse, our lives have all become incorporated. We cannot separate ourselves from this machine we've built. Once it enhanced the way we lived; now it's life support. The variety of readings of the book speak to a variety in our willingness to understand that inseparability.

I basically wrote two stories. The book is a dialogue between two individuals: the real individual, the forty-two year-old woman, dying of ovarian cancer, and the Clare Corporation, which under the law of the land is an individual, enjoying due process.

These incommensurable individuals can't talk to each other; they partake of different ordinal realities. The story of this 170-year-old phenomenon that ends up employing 50,000 people and selling into every country on earth and the story of this forty-two year-old woman minding her own business and taking her kids to soccer are at the same time mutually unintelligible and mutually dependent. We've become parasites in the body of the host that we've assembled around us.

The traditional book implicitly promises that all open frames will come together. The challenge of a book that's created out of two incommensurable frames is to show how they entangle without contriving a dramatic confrontation, say, in the form of a lawsuit. *Gain* suggests that any lawsuit resolution would be a red herring. A lawsuit is not going to give Laura any redress. No lawsuit is going to change the rules of existence or recast the dialogue between the personal and the corporate. But the book's refusal of that dramatic confrontation has troubled readers into saying, "Well, because these frames are incompatible, A must be the real story, and B just incidental or subordinate to A." Or the other way around. What I really wanted was a reader who could say, "A and B are incompatible stories, but they're also the same story and cannot be told independently any more."

JW: I thought the novel was very powerful affectively, in both Laura's story -- which is also the story of the people around her who have to deal with her illness -- and the Clare story, which I found a virtuoso narrative, almost of headiness, of the rise of the company. In a way it steals the show in the first half of the novel. You suggest a causal link because the stories are contiguous, but the causal link is amorphous.

RP: The causal link between Laura's cancer and Clare remains obscure, and that says a lot about where we live. We don't know how badly we're poisoning ourselves. We can't yet tell whether we've created an epidemic or not. All we have is statistics, the vague math that only partially connects little to big.

To link this question to the one that you asked earlier about the nature of fiction now: if you took just that Laura Bodey story, you'd have a story that looked a lot like 80s domestic fiction. It wouldn't be Raymond Carver, but . . .

JW: You mean the divorce, the relationship with the ex-husband, the portrait of disaffected kids who you can't quite reach . . .

RP: Exactly. Minimalism brilliantly describes the symptoms of our private alienation, but it leaves tacit an understanding of the causes. To get to an etiology, I had to set that private story down alongside another story that starts in 1830 when an Irish immigrant washes up in Boston, his wife dead of cholera, and gets the secret of soap-making stolen from him by these Boston merchants. And then I had to let that other story spin, let it produce a monstrosity that makes Procter and Gamble look benign. Meanwhile, that original, minimalist story moves enharmonically through the other, becoming something totally different. This very familiar story becomes estranged and reconfigured, because

the missing link is now on stage, revealed as having been there, looming over the kitchen table, from the beginning.

JW: To put it in a more general way, you think that the novelist's job is to portray the full complexity of life. On the other hand, is there a political component? *Gain* doesn't wave any flags or beat any polemical horses, but it would be hard not to see it as a political commentary on corporate life.

RP: The novelist's job is to say what it means to be alive. I don't think there are any wrong ways of doing that; I think there are wrong ways of not doing that, of avoiding it, but I think there's nothing that you could throw into that hopper that would be irrelevant. The more you can treat -- providing you can continue to synthesize it into something that's both intellectually and emotionally engaging -- the better. Right now a lot of fiction restricts itself totally to dramatic revelation, raising a lot of proscriptions about the way that fiction can and can't function. The direct introduction of discursive material has been considered anathema for a long time. I've been trying in different ways to violate that prohibition from my first book on. True, you can get more emotive power over your reader by dramatic revelation than by discursive narrative. But you can get more connection with discursive narrative! The real secret is to triangulate between these two modes, getting to places that neither technique could reach in isolation. Because that's how the human organism works. We employ all sorts of intelligences, from low-level bodily intuitions to high-level, syllogistic rationalism. It's not a question of which way of knowing the world is the right one.

JW: People would say that you're more "cerebral." That's a word I frequently see to describe your fiction.

RP: That's been a hard rap to shake, no matter what paths I've chosen to take. I try to include head and heart, to write using all the modes of knowing the world that we employ as we bump around in it. To open the novel back up to taking science as a legitimate subject, to let the novel treat the political without betraying psychological insight: these paths are full of emotional potential. I'm interested in reclaiming lots of intellectual territory for the novel, but I'd like to see that happen without a loss of emotional territory. The novel is a genre that presents unique opportunities to appeal to all sorts of different ways of knowing. It's one of the most powerful tools we have for saying what it means to be alive.

JW: That's fairly neutral; what of the political valence of the novel? To say what it means to be alive could lend to psychological stories.

RP: You're right. But politics is psychology as it plays out in groups larger than two. The two exist along a continuous, if discrete, continuum. In *Gain*, Laura's death is not just the story of her own, private dying. It's also the story of what happens to her ex-husband, of what happens to her children, of what it means to the town to have another resident die of cancer, of what it means to the company to run this rear-guard action while simultaneously cutting the settlement checks for the class action suit. Political events

have aesthetic valence, and private events always have their political component. It is possible to write a book that doesn't have an overt political component and still say something about what it means to be alive. But it's also possible to create rich psychological portraits without shying away from the questions of collective politics. Prohibiting a novel from taking on overtly polemical or ideological concerns is like making people swim with handcuffs on. It can only make the picture stunted and smaller.

JW: One could see it in a Chomskian vein as a question of manufacturing consent. There is a pressure in publishing, as our mutual friend Jim Neilson tells us, to prohibit overt, political material in the novel.

RP: More market forces at work. A huge portion of our lives, even as measured from within this fictional construction of the individual -- which *Gain* goes to great pains to see as a by-product of the rising technological and corporate world -- will always play out in the public sphere, in the social confrontations of polis-making.

JW: Rather than saying politics is generally part of life, what kind of politics would you espouse? Do you think the novel should espouse a particular kind of politics or maintain a certain remove from them?

RP: I do believe in fictional transference. If the novel wants to raise political questions resonantly, it will more profoundly move readers to discovery if its process is one of negotiation and interaction. The novel that deploys one inarguable, fixed, rigid, and reductive polemical position is more likely to alienate than to engage the reader. Yet the best of deeply committed literature can deploy an overt political position and still be so persuasive that it moves people despite a lack of rich, literary dialogism. *The Jungle* did produce essential legislation. And it's not a subtle book.

JW: Do you see yourself in that line? Earlier you also mentioned Frank Norris, I assume thinking of *The Octopus*.

RP: My desire in *Gain* was to provoke a political question and to suggest a political vision without declaring a simplistic resolution to the enormous questions raised by the ascendance of the corporation. I hoped that Laura's gradual awakening in consciousness following her cancer would strike the reader as too little, too late, thereby producing a dramatic discomfort that might encourage the reader to complete the steps that this woman had begun.

JW: What would those steps be?

RP: I want the reader to come to a deeper awareness of the material causes that control the terms of our existence, and to reach a more nuanced awareness of the myths that she has been asked to buy into. I'd like the reader to finish the book asking the questions, "What world have I been sold?" and "What world do I want to live in?" I don't think it's the task of novelists to say, "Here is what you must do to save the planet." But it is the task of the novelist to say, "Here are some things that desperately need doing."

JW: What do you think needs to be done, extrapolating from *Gain*? What would you advocate?

RP: I'd say: Connect. Inform yourself of all that is bigger and smaller than you. Interrogate progress. Be aware that what we can do doesn't have to determine what we want to do. In so many ways, my books mean to counter the unquestioned ascendancy of the technological world, the tacit assumption that we have to do what our inventions tell us to do, the blind acceptance of market-driven determinism. There's a line in the book where the estranged ex-husband travels to ground zero, into the corporate headquarters, where he tries to weasel out of his contact inside the company any information he can get about the prospects of the lawsuit against Clare. His contact totally stonewalls him, but on his way out, when he's about to go back out into the brutal, sub-zero, Midwestern winter, he sees this inscription on the cornerstone of the building, a quote from Winston Churchill: "We construct our buildings, and thereafter, they construct us." I think the politics of my writing hover around this idea that yes, we have constructed our buildings, but no, they don't have to construct us. If we keep from lying to ourselves, if we connect more to other gauges, to other magnifications, to other disciplines, if we keep asking ourselves about the nature of the project that we're on, then we can preserve our agency and better write the story that we're living.

JW: What is the project that we're on?

RP: Those who believe in the postmodern break would find ludicrous the notion that we're part of any project at all! This is our current malaise: not to believe that we belong to anything larger than ourselves. At the same time, we nurse this fantasy of unhindered growth. We want to think that we can become endlessly richer, more powerful, better able to extend our technical leverage over the material world. So right now, the most valid global project I can imagine would be catching up emotionally and socially with what we can do technologically, building a society that is not based on inherent exploitation or inequality yet one that still preserves space for self-realization and reflection, those private freedoms that we consider necessary for a dignified, full life.

At the end of *Gain*, at Laura's funeral service, the minister -- who, typical of the world of reductionist specialization, knows nothing about the woman for whom he's giving the eulogy -- quotes from Genesis: "Go forth, be fruitful and multiply, and subdue the earth." At that moment Don, the ex-husband, who until then has demonstrated unlimited belief in our ability to manufacture an ever safer and brighter future, cries out, "It is subdued." This insight, on the part of a character who shouldn't have been able to reach it, is for me the emotional core of the book.

JW: How have your novels developed? *Gain* strikes me as making an obvious political comment on modern life, whereas your earlier novels, like *Three Farmers on the Way to a Dance*, don't seem as overtly political.

RP: *Three Farmers* was political! It took as its central text a highly politicized essay by Walter Benjamin. But its method of connecting the personal and the political is very

different than that of *Gain*. You could say that my even-numbered novels, like *Gain*, join the political to the personal, while the odd-numbered ones, like *Three Farmers*, join the personal to the political. I seem to follow a kind of two-stroke engine in my creative cycle. I'll start by writing these books that are enraptured by certain resonant connections between art and technology and consciousness. But writing those works creates an instability in my own sense of worldly accountability, and that sense of instability leads me to write novels that return to the world of political events and material conditions. So numbers two, four, and six -- *Prisoner's Dilemma*, *Wandering Soul*, and *Gain* -- are much darker, much more materialist in their orientation.

JW: What about your next book, *Plowing the Dark*? I saw the manuscript sitting on the table in the other room.

RP: I'm still finishing it. Gradually, I seem to be exploring ways of bringing those two disparate approaches together. In *Galatea*, even though the book is a very personal meditation on consciousness, self, fiction, and literature, Helen's story is also an investigation of racism, the story of the dispossessed Other. The lines that she is supposed to gloss in her final entrance exam into the human race are Caliban's, the outcast monster from *The Tempest*. And the story that makes Helen decide that she doesn't want to play anymore, that she doesn't want anything to do with humans, is the newspaper account of a black man beaten with a tire iron by a white man for causing a fender-bender. I guess what I'm saying is that as I get older, my real goal as a writer seems to be to make a book that links up pure aesthetic wonder and astonishment with a more mature accountability to intractable social questions.

JW: What's *Plowing the Dark* about, in a nutshell? Here's a chance to blurb your own book.

RP: It's about a disillusioned woman artist conscripted to work on a virtual reality project, an American hostage held in solitary confinement in Lebanon for four years, and the empty white room where they meet. It's about whether the imagination is powerful enough to save ourselves from its power.

This interview took place at Richard Powers' home in Urbana, IL, on 23 November 1998. Thanks to Richard Powers for his unexceptioned hospitality. And thanks to the *mr* staff for initial help in transcribing it.

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