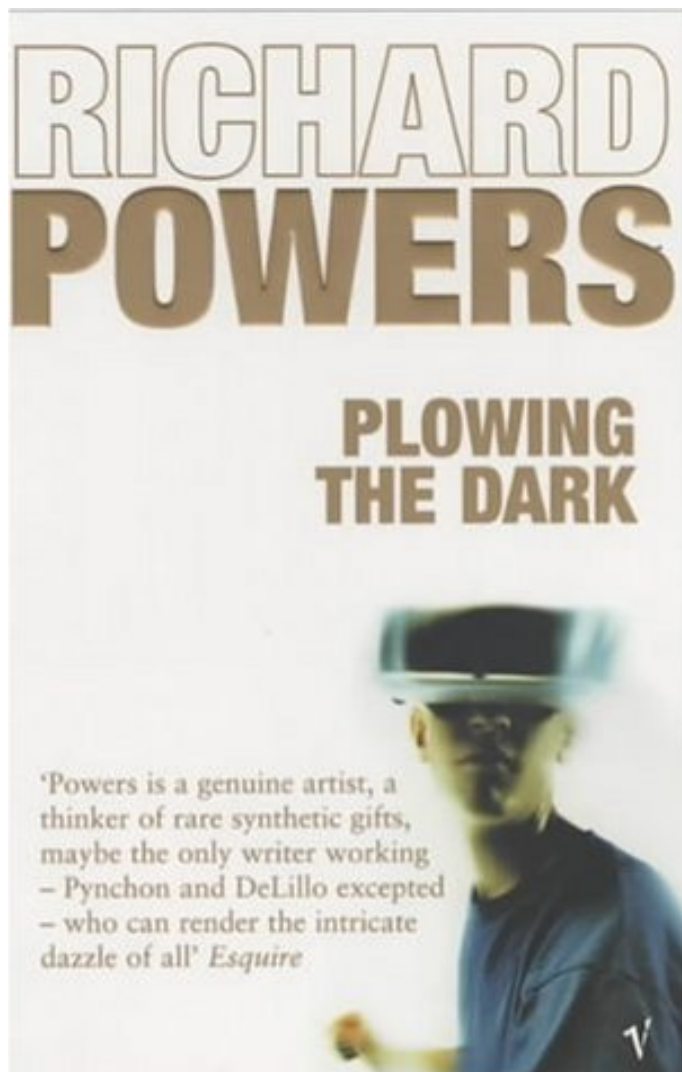


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**Richard Powers**

**Plowing the Dark**



Title: Plowing the Dark

Author: Richard Powers

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## Description

In a digital laboratory on the shores of Puget Sound, a band of virtual reality researchers race to complete the Cavern, an empty white room that can become a jungle, a painting, or a vast Byzantine cathedral. In a war-torn Mediterranean city, an American is held hostage, chained to a radiator in another empty white room. What can possibly join two such remote places? Only the shared imagination, a room that these people unwittingly build in common, where they are all about to meet, where the dual frames of this inventive novel to coalesce.

Adie Klarpol, a skilled but disillusioned artist, comes back to life, revived by the thrill of working with the Cavern's cutting-edge technology. Against the collapse of Cold War empires and the fall of the Berlin Wall, she retreats dangerously into the cyber-realities she has been hired to create. As her ex-husband lies dying and the outbreak of computerized war fills her with a sense of guilty complicity, Adie is thrown deeper into building a place of beauty and unknown power, where she might fend off the incursions of the real world gone wrong.

On the other side of the globe, Taimur Martin, an English teacher retreating from a failed love affair, is picked up off the streets in Beirut by Islamic fundamentalists and held in solitary captivity. Without distraction or hope of release, he must keep himself whole by the force of his memory alone. Each infinite, empty day moves him closer to insanity, and only the surprising arrival of sanctuary sustains him for the shattering conclusion. *Plowing the Dark* is fiction that explores the imagination's power to both destroy and save.

## Insightful reviews

William Leight: Half of this book is similar to the other personal stories of near-future science-fiction, here based on virtual reality, that I've read by Powers. The other half is the harrowing (fictional, though based on a number of real-life narratives) story of an American held hostage in Lebanon from 1986-1990. If you find yourself asking how these two very different stories could possibly be tied together, the answer is, basically, that they can't be. Powers tries to draw a parallel between a group of artists, scientists, and engineers assembling a VR room, and the lone hostage creating his own virtual reality in the intense solitude of the room he's held captive in, but it's not particularly convincing, and his attempt to forge a more direct connection at the end of the novel founders because he doesn't sufficiently prepare you for it to allow for the necessary suspension of disbelief. As a result, the book is actually better as two disjoint and unrelated stories, which makes the fact that they are interleaved an unnecessary distraction. Additionally, the failure to combine the two halves into a whole makes their individual weaknesses stand out the more. The hostage story is actually the superior one, though it takes a while before we start really caring about its hero, and the end is perhaps too predictably tear-jerking. It's the VR story, surprisingly, which ends up less interesting, even though it seems like the more natural continuation from Powers' previous (and excellent) novel, "Galatea 2.2". Part of the problem is that VR just isn't interesting enough to hold center stage here. Powers tries to solve this problem by setting the story at the beginning of the computer revolution, in 1989-1990, when it was perhaps still possible to think of VR as one of the next big things, but that ends up just making the whole story appear ridiculously outdated, and given hindsight

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(granted, fifteen more years of it than Powers had when he wrote the thing), the grandiose descriptions of VR as some sort of next step in human evolution seem hopelessly overblown. It doesn't help that Powers depicts several of the scientists as trying to use computers to predict the literally unpredictable (e.g., the weather). The connection to VR is pretty tenuous here -- it's nice that you can make some pretty pictures from your model, but that's hardly necessary if it works -- but the real issue is that nobody told Powers about the problems inherent in predicting the future evolution of nonlinear processes, also known as chaos theory. The reason you can't predict the weather beyond a few days is because the weather of the future is strongly dependent on the weather of today: so strongly, in fact, that a tiny change in the description of the weather today will lead eventually to a completely different prediction of the weather in a few months. In effect, you can only predict the weather to an infinite horizon if you can completely describe today's weather with infinite precision, which is of course entirely impossible. Strangely, Powers doesn't acknowledge this at all, and as a result much of the science in "Plowing the Dark" lacks credibility, a disappointing contrast to "Galatea 2.2", where the discussion of AI holds up remarkably well twenty years later. The sixties-refugee (well, early '70s, really) characters at the center of the story are fairly well drawn, but the attempt at the end of the book to reframe the whole thing around the military-industrial complex was kind of pointless, partly because much of the force it might have had was vitiated by having a character's dislike of militarism be reduced to an alcoholic and emotionally abusive military father. Still, with a sufficiently strong connection to the other story, these issues could have been overcome: it's the lack of any such connection that's fatal.

Nicolas: "futurity needs to be euthanize" concludes Richard Powers after analysing the interconnection between art, technology and geopolitic for about 400 pages. While science fiction must be critical of our world and what we do with it, answering the usual question: "where are we going?" by a definitive and gloomy "nowhere" makes for a very childish book. I was less under the impression of reading a smart and talented sci-fi author than under the impression of hearing some tele-evangelist preast preaching about the fall of mankind who couldn't stay away from technology. Both might be expected to defend some conservative positions but I expect more subtlety and more nuance from a Science fiction writer.

Plowing the Dark is that immature. It's piling on philosophical non-sense on philosophical non-sense for so long that it made me angry. It has for instance - and contrary to what it pretends - a very basic approach of art, which it defines as a cumulative medium through which the same idea of creation has been passed through from the caves of Lasceaux to the cyber age. The medium doesn't matter anymore, and by extension the virtual reality device Powers builds loose all its power of imagination and all of its mystery. Here it's just the next machine in a long series of machines (pencils, brush, television, computer,etc.) that have been and are still crafting not art but mechanical representations of the world. To pounder his message in our brains, Powers relies on stereotypical characters who relie to much on irony to be mistaken for real people. Through them he vehiculates his over-simplistic philosophy by turning each and everyone of their dialogue into some rethorical staged debate about art, the world, mankind and futurity.

The manipulation of a reader to which he tries to feed his philosophy might have worked better if Plowing the dark was interested in his characters or in its story, but Powers is no master at story-telling. None only his novel is a big mess but the narrative strategy he employs don't help.

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For instance, Powers relies a lot on "ghosts". His characters, especially the main ones, all have this mysterious past he suddenly decided to evoke without really preparing the reader to the importance of his revelations. It doesn't add up with the nature of the story and frankly it feels superficial. So instead of making the characters more real, it tends to turn them into stereotypes.

While the story of the hostage trying to survive his captivity and his boredom by using his imagination is a bit more interesting than the main story-line if only because we want to know how he may survive the horror of his situation, it hardly fits well in the novel. As much as Powers tries to convince us that both stories are about the same thing (that is to say imagination) the connection here is too thin and too artificial and it's not his last, pseudo-metaphysical attempt to connect them that will convince me otherwise. The story could have done without the intervention of a deus ex machina and save itself from metaphysical considerations added too late and too abruptly not to make me sigh. Plowing the dark already had a lot of issue but this lousy conclusion was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Gena: Oh my GAWD I have been reading this book forever. It is fine. Better than fine -- I \*think\* it is good. The sections about the hostage were more compelling than those about the virtual reality chamber, mainly, I think, because the technologies of hostage-taking have changed so little in the 20 years since this book came out, and those of virtual reality have changed enormously. But the experience of reading this novel was like slowly wasting away in a shallow pit of quicksand. Plowing the Dark, indeed.

Suzette: The digital truth tale used to be less fascinating than the hostage tale and never as well-written. I infrequently locate Powers' works to be slogs to read, however the VR tale bordered on a slog. This ebook remains to be worthy examining even supposing the bright prose is scattered a piece too carefully throughout.

Chuck O'Connor: A tough and cerebral learn that's pushed by way of a fractured narrative to demonstrate the bidirectional caliber of human consciousness. while Powers turns the nook and starts resolving his thesis with the popularity that subjective comprehension is ruled through inside experience, it truly is moving. An writer that works with a stability of intellect, mind's eye and feeling.

Dickon Edwards: packed with fantastically written aphorisms in regards to the electronic era's reference to humanity through the tale of a digital truth layout workforce operating within the past due 1980s. it is cleverly juxtaposed with a Beirut hostage's personal internal flights of mind's eye to whereas away the horror of his captivity. However, it is a novel I well-known yet could not fully enjoy. the 2 tales come jointly correct on the result in a slightly deus ex machina, magical realism way, which felt fairly unearned for me. Plus i used to be bemused through how a host of state of the art computing device programmers in 1990 could have pictures of Mr Spock and Yoda on their place of work wall but there isn't a unmarried connection with the subsequent iteration television series's Holodeck, which had a excessive profile in geek tradition from January 1988 onwards (rather unhappy that I regarded this up...)Mr Powers can also be a kind of writers who likes principles greater than characters. i am positive while this can be utilized to brief stories, yet in a four hundred web page novel i think the reader merits a bit extra

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sort in characterisation. Instead, everybody speaks in a Richard Powers-y way, and the discussion occasionally simply reads like a circulation of interchangeable philosophising rates - natural sock puppets for the author. As a result, this novel approximately fact frequently did not suppose actual enough. However the occasions have been definitely plausible - quite the anxious Beirut narrative.

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