



Reading Group Gold

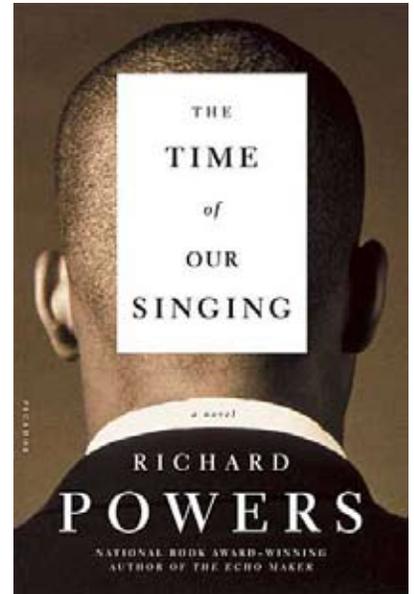
The Time of Our Singing

by Richard Powers

“A great hurtle of a book, telling several powerful stories at once...An astonishing performance...a prodigious, illuminating and exhilarating run.” —*The New York Times*

Reader’s Guide Synopsis

On Easter Day, 1939, at Marian Anderson’s epochal concert on the Washington Mall, David Strom, a German Jewish émigré scientist, meets Delia Daley, a young Philadelphia Negro studying to be a concert singer. Their mutual love of music draws them together, and—against all odds, advice and better judgment—they marry. They vow to raise their offspring beyond time, beyond race, beyond belonging, steeped only in song. But their three children, the unwitting subjects of this experiment, must survive America’s brutal here and now. Jonah, Joseph, and Ruth grow up during the early Civil Rights era, come of age in the riot-torn 1960s, and live out their adult-hoods through the racially retrenched late century. Jonah, the eldest, “whose voice could make heads of state repent,” pursues a life devoted to his parents’ beloved classical music. Ruth, the youngest, chooses a path of militant activism and repudiates the white culture her brother represents. Joseph, the middle child and the narrator of this far-ranging, multigenerational tale, struggles to remain loyal to both siblings. As polarized America threatens to tear the family apart, only their deep, shared love of song stands any hope of preserving them.



ISBN: 978-0-312-42218-9 | 2004

About The Author

Richard Powers has been the recipient of a Lannan Literary Award and a MacArthur Fellowship. He is the author of eight novels, including *Plowing the Dark*, *Gain*, and *Galatea 2.2*. He lives in Illinois.

Discussion

1. At the start of the novel, the author says of the Easter 1939 Marian Anderson concert that “memory will forever replay this day in black and white.” What role does memory play in the Jonah, Joseph and Ruth’s lives? Does the manner in which they treat their own memories come out of the home in which they were raised, or the world outside the Hamilton Heights house?



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2. Who is Joseph Strom, as a boy and as a grown man? Why does he say “whatever I chose to do, I’d let someone down”? Which choices does he and doesn’t he make for himself?
3. Throughout the book, again and again, we’re reminded that “music belongs to no one.” And though Jonah himself educates his brother by saying “Who cares what some poor sucker hundreds of years ago thought the pieces meant? Why listen to him, just because he wrote the thing?” Jonah certainly has a grasp on music that others do not. What exactly does Jonah “possess,” and furthermore, who owns what in this novel? With the notions of bigotry and slavery as a subtext in the book, what does America itself claim of the Strom children?
4. Discuss the role of Time in the characters’ lives and the novel at large. How are mandelbrot, the Unicorn tapestries, and the city of New York touchstones in the author’s imagining of Time?
5. “A voice that could make lifelong fugitives surrender themselves”; “sings to save the good and make the wicked take their own lives”; “whose voice could make the heads of state repent.” Why do you think Jonah’s singing is viewed as an expression of judgment or punishment?
6. Additionally, what does Jonah believe the expression of his talent accomplishes? And how do his and Joseph’s opinions of Jonah’s singing connect to our discussion of Time? Look in particular at The Washington DC performance for the America’s Next Voices competition, when Joseph says “Rivers didn’t turn in their course to track his sound...” (p. 215)
7. What sort of hatred does Delia face on a personal level? How does she choose to react and how is her reaction different than her sons’?
8. How does Delia’s death affect her children’s adult lives? What does Joseph mean when he states “We died when Mama did.”?
9. *The Time of Our Singing* is not only a book about hatred, but about love. Who loves what and whom in the novel? What is your opinion about how the characters express love to one another and others? And most importantly, why might some of the characters elect to love more or less than they should? At the novel’s close, a young black boy tells Delia and David a saying told to him by his mother and his uncle: “The bird and the fish can fall in love. But where they gonna build their nest?” David is astonished that the boy is familiar with this saying, simply because he maintains it is a Yiddish phrase. How indeed could the black child in 1939 know this?

Acclaim for *Time of Our Singing*

“Ingenious...A heady, panoramic novel, scored, like so much of Powers’s work, for full orchestra...One of our most lavishly gifted writers.” —*The New Yorker*

“One of the best novels ever written about race in America...one of the best written about the joys of mu-



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sic...A major novel, harrowing and haunting in blending such intense beauty and such great sorrow into one great, unforgettable American symphony.” —*Newsday*

“A bold and vibrant set of variations on the themes of music, race and time...It is hard to think of another novel since Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* that uses music so effectively and with such authority.”
—*Chicago Tribune*

“*The Time of Our Singing* is an astonishment but not a surprise...Richard Powers has been astounding us almost every other year since 1985...We can no longer be surprised about whatever he dares to think in ink about.” —*Harper’s Magazine*

“With his characteristic mastery of structure and language, Powers has orchestrated a story that...plays with bravura to the end.” —*People*