



Reading Group Gold

The Echo Maker

A Novel

by Richard Powers

Winner of the National Book Award

Picador Trade Paperback



The ECHO MAKER
RICHARD POWERS



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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Echo Maker* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Echo Maker*.

About the Book

Published to wide critical acclaim and winner of the National Book Award, Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* tells the haunting story of twenty-seven-year-old Mark Schluter, who survives a nearly fatal car accident only to face a devastating new perception of the world. Coping with the consequences of traumatic brain injury, Mark lives with a blend of paranoid obsessions, including the belief that his caregiving sister, Karin, is an imposter who merely looks, acts, and sounds just like his sister. Desperate for a treatment to end these strange, maddening symptoms, Karin enlists the help of internationally renowned cognitive neurologist Gerald Weber, known for studying some of the world's most bizarre brain disorders. What Gerald uncovers in the prickly terrain of Mark's mind begins to undermine even his own sense of self. Searching for answers to a question that bridges medicine and memory, both Gerald and Mark sift through shards of the past, while the true answers lie on the lonely Nebraska road where Mark's truck mysteriously crashed during that tragic winter night.

A searing novel that probes the boundaries of trust between friends and lovers, healers and patients, siblings and parents, *The Echo Maker* gives us an inventive new glimpse of the mind's powerful eye.

The questions that follow are designed to enhance your experience of *The Echo Maker*. We hope they will enrich your book group's reading of this stirring masterwork.

Coast-to-Coast Praise for *The Echo Maker*



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“A grand novel—grand in its reach, grand in its themes, grand in its patterning. . . . If Powers were an American writer of the nineteenth century . . . he’d probably be the Herman Melville of *Moby-Dick*. His picture is that big.”—Margaret Atwood, *The New York Review of Books*

“A brilliant novel. . . . A vision of wonder.”—*The Boston Globe*

“Fascinating. . . . In the end we see what Powers, with his beautiful language and broad reach, always wishes to have us see: the eternal mystery of human personality and how it functions in the extreme drama of the modern world.”—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

“A kind of neuro-cosmological adventure . . . an exhilarating narrative feat. . . . Powers is a formidable talent, and this is a lucid, fiercely entertaining novel.”—*The Washington Post Book World*

“Wise and elegant. . . . The mysteries unfold so organically and stealthily that you are unaware of his machinations until they come to stunning fruition. . . . Powers accomplishes something magnificent.”—Colson Whitehead, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Powers may well be one of the smartest novelists now writing. . . . In *The Echo Maker*, Powers hopes to plumb the nature of consciousness, and he does so with such alert passion that we come to recognize in his quest the novel’s abiding theme—what it means to be human will forever elude us.”—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“A book that will change all who read it.” —*Booklist*, starred review

About the Author

Richard Powers is the author of nine novels. *The Echo Maker* won the National Book Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Powers has received a MacArthur Fellowship, a Lannan Literary Award, and the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Historical Fiction. He lives in Illinois.

Discussion Questions

1. What echoes do the cranes create throughout the novel? What do the cranes signify to those who admire them—tourists, environmentalists, local residents along the Platte River? What parallels exist between the echo of the migrating birds and the echoes lurking in Mark’s shattered memory?
2. How would you characterize the sibling dynamics between Mark and Karin? How much of their former relationship remains intact after his accident? Would you have sacrificed as much as Karin did to help an injured brother or sister?



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3. What is Bonnie's stake in helping Mark heal? Is her perception of the world distorted, like Mark's, or is she actually his best chance for returning to rational thinking? How does she cope with Dr. Weber's assertion that faith in God has a neurological component?
4. Discuss the Nebraska landscape as if it were a character in the novel. What makes it alluring as well as daunting? In what way does the region's "personality" mirror that of its inhabitants?
5. Which segments of Mark and Karin's childhood do they most want to recall? Which memories of their parents continue to hurt them? Is either sibling on a path, perhaps even unwittingly, of carrying on their parents' legacies?
6. What contemporary environmental concerns are reflected in the showdown over the Central Platte Scenic Natural Outpost? Is Daniel equally zealous about his relationship with Karin?
7. Were you suspicious of Barbara in the novel's early chapters? How did your perception of her shift? How would you have responded if you had been in her position on the night of the accident?
8. In part three, Karin tells Daniel she thinks Mark might have been better off if she had stayed away. How can we know the difference between selfless and self-serving caregiving? In the end, was Karin right to remain in Mark's life to such an intense extent?
9. What aspects of body, soul, and memory are presented in the epigraphs appearing throughout the book? Taken by themselves, do these quotations underscore or contradict each other?
10. In what ways did Gerald take on a fatherly role for Karin and Mark? Was their perception of him any more accurate than that of the fans who attended his lectures or saw him on television? What aspects of his true self was Gerald able to reclaim in Nebraska? What do you predict for his future with Sylvie and Jess?
11. From the friends who figure prominently in his life, particularly Duane Cain and Tom Rupp, and the figures who represent fear (such as Robert Karsh) what picture of Mark's past were you able to piece together? What is the best way to discern the truth when memories clash?
12. Did Capgras syndrome make any aspects of Mark's perception crystal clear or even closer to reality than his caregivers' view of life? What universal experiences are reflected in his inability to accept the identity of someone who loves him, or, near the end, to acknowledge that he is fully alive?
13. How did you ultimately interpret the note? For each of the main characters, what did it mean to be no one? In the end, who else was brought back?
14. What does Karin have to discover about the mind's ability to shape memories? How does her understanding of her past change throughout Mark's illness?
15. In what ways does *The Echo Maker* enhance themes in previous novels by Richard Powers you have read? What is unique about his approach to topics as far-ranging as science and history, deception and devotion?