

The Overstory



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD POWERS

When Richard Powers was 11, his family moved from Illinois to Thailand, where they stayed until he was 16. While living abroad, Powers learned to play multiple instruments and developed a great love for reading. Back in the U.S., he attended the University of Illinois, where he majored in English. Powers had initially intended to major in physics, but he found himself repelled by the specialization this required and instead preferred the “aerial view” of life offered by literature. In 1980, Powers moved to Boston to work as a computer programmer and freelance data processor. After being inspired by a photograph at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, he quit his job and began his first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, which was published in 1985. Powers then moved to the Netherlands and began writing full time, completing the novels *Prisoner’s Dilemma* and *The Gold Bug Variations*. Powers continued to write novels during a residence at Cambridge and then back in the U.S., where he still teaches and writes. His works are known for focusing on science, technology, and music, all through the lens of fiction. His 12th novel, *The Overstory* (2018), won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The *Overstory* presents fictionalized versions of several real-life events and characters, starting with Douglas Pavlicek’s participation in the Stanford Prison Experiment, an infamous psychological study investigating the effects of perceived power through a system of randomly assigned “guards” and “prisoners.” The study had to be shut down early when the participants quickly became abusive. Douglas is then involved in the tail end of the Vietnam War, especially America’s operations in Thailand, where the U.S. Air Force used Thai military bases. Patricia Westerford, meanwhile, is based on the real-life figures of Suzanne Simard—a professor of forest ecology who studies how trees communicate with each other—and Peter Wohlleben, forester and author of *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Perhaps most notably, the activities of the Life Defense Force and Olivia Vandergriff and Nick Hoel’s campout in the redwood tree echo other real-life activists such as Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front, particularly during what was known as the “Redwood Summer” of 1990. Both groups used similar tactics to those described in *The Overstory*, such as locking themselves to trees, sabotaging logging equipment, and sit-ins in an attempt to save old-growth redwoods from logging. The Earth Liberation Front is also known for its use of arson.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *The Overstory*, Powers writes in the tradition of environmental literature. Perhaps the most famous works in this genre are Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the latter of which had a major impact on the environmentalist movement in the 1960s after alerting the world to the dangers of certain pesticides. Powers even quotes Thoreau several times in *The Overstory*. Similarly, Patricia Westerford’s book *The Secret Forest* is based on Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees*, a popular nonfiction book about how trees communicate with each other. Other contemporary works of eco-fiction—that is, fiction focusing on nature and environmental issues—are Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* and Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower*. Powers himself is known for using fiction to discuss issues usually reserved for non-fiction, like computer science, musical composition, and in *The Overstory*’s case, environmentalism. These other works include *The Gold Bug Variations*, *The Echo Maker*, and *Orfeo*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Overstory
- **Where Written:** Stanford University, California, and the Great Smoky Mountains, Tennessee
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel, Eco-Fiction
- **Setting:** The U.S., mostly California and Oregon
- **Climax:** Mimi Ma, Nicholas Hoel, Adam Appich, Douglas Pavlicek, and Olivia Vandergriff set fire to logging equipment in Idaho, and Olivia is killed in the fire.
- **Antagonist:** Humboldt Timber, other logging companies, human greed and short-sightedness
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration. Powers had written about environmentalism before, but he became focused on trees and was inspired to write *The Overstory* after first encountering a giant redwood at Stanford University.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Overstory introduces each of its nine main characters with their own section. The first part begins in the mid-1800s, following the Hoel family as Jørgen Hoel brings six chestnuts

from New York and plants them at his new home in Iowa. One seedling survives and grows massive, even as a blight wipes out most of the country's other chestnuts. Jørgen's son buys a camera and begins taking a photo of the **chestnut tree** once a month. This ritual lasts for generations, up to the latest Hoel, an art student named Nicholas. Visiting the family farm for Christmas one year, Nick is stranded on the road by a snowstorm. When he returns the next morning, he finds his family dead, killed by a gas leak.

The narrative then shifts to China, where Ma Sih Hsuin is preparing to move to America to attend engineering school. Before he leaves, his father gives him their family's treasures: three jade rings carved like trees, and an ancient scroll portraying Buddhist adepts. Sih Hsuin moves to America, changes his name to Winston Ma, and gets married. He and his wife Charlotte plant a mulberry tree at their home in Illinois. They have three daughters: Mimi, Carmen, and Amelia. Mimi attends college and studies engineering. She grows worried when Winston calls her one day and seems depressed, and a few months later he dies by suicide beneath the mulberry tree. Charlotte slips into dementia, and the Ma daughters divide up the family treasures.

Adam Appich grows up in the 1960s with four siblings. His father plants a tree when each child is born, and Adam's is a maple. Adam doesn't get along well with other children besides his sister Jean, but he becomes fascinated with studying insects. When he is thirteen, Adam's other older sister Leigh goes missing. In high school Adam starts a business doing homework for his peers, but he lets his own grades slip. One day he starts reading a book on social psychology and becomes enthralled. When it is time to apply to college, he writes a personal letter to the book's author, who teaches at Fortuna College.

Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly, an intellectual property lawyer and a stenographer, start dating and performing in amateur theater together. Ray is innocent and responsible, while Dorothy is more unpredictable. After they sleep together for the first time, Ray asks Dorothy to marry him. They break up and get back together several times, finally getting married on a whim while vacationing in Rome. They make a plan to plant something new in their yard every year on their anniversary.

As a young man, Douglas Pavlicek takes part in the Stanford Prison Experiment, a psychological study that soon turns to torture and abuse. Afterwards he enlists in the U.S. Air Force and becomes a sergeant in Thailand. One day his plane is hit by a missile. Douglas falls out of the plane and lands in an enormous banyan tree, injuring his leg in the process. He is rescued and discharged, and he returns to America. After a stint as a caretaker for an isolated horse ranch in Idaho, Douglas drives to Oregon. Beyond the edge of the highway he sees hillsides that have been entirely clear-cut, and he is disturbed by the sight. He then takes a job planting thousands

of Douglas-fir seedlings.

Neelay Mehta is seven years old, the child of Indian immigrants, when his father Babul brings home an early computer kit that he is working on. Together Babul and Neelay assemble the computer, and Neelay becomes obsessed with programming it. One day in school a teacher takes his notebook with all his computing work in it, and he curses at her. Crushed by shame, Neelay climbs a tree and then falls, breaking his back and becoming paralyzed from the waist down. Neelay goes through high school in a wheelchair and is accepted to Stanford two years early, already a genius at coding. He soon starts designing computer games and giving them away for free. While researching for his latest game, he wheels his chair into Stanford's outdoor terrarium and is stunned by the variety of alien-looking trees there. He receives a vision of what he must do: create a game that is an entire immersive world for its players.

Patricia Westerford grows up as a deaf child obsessed with plants. She is extremely close with her father Bill, who takes her along on his work trips visiting farms in Ohio. He teaches her all about trees. When Patricia is fourteen, Bill dies in a car crash. Patricia studies botany in college, and then goes to forestry school. While working on her research there, she discovers that trees can communicate with each other through the gases they release. She publishes an article about this that at first becomes popular, but then is brutally condemned by a few prominent scientists. Patricia loses her job and becomes depressed, almost committing suicide by eating poisoned mushrooms.

She then spends years working odd jobs and heading west. She starts working for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and while living alone in the woods, other scientists begin to publish articles that confirm and build on her previous work. She meets two men in the forest who tell her that her work has been vindicated, and she starts living and working at their research station. The station manager, Dennis, eventually asks her to marry him, suggesting that they could still live apart even as a couple. Patricia happily agrees.

The narrative then turns to Olivia Vandergriff, a college student studying Actuarial Science. She is failing her classes and spends most of her time partying, having recently gotten married to a fellow student on a whim. On the day of her divorce she gets high and takes a shower; she is then electrocuted by a faulty socket in her house, and her heart stops. After seventy seconds Olivia's heart starts again, and she senses mysterious beings of light trying to contact her. Soon they lead her to abandon her classes and drive west to join activists trying to save the redwoods in California. On the way, she stops at the Hoel farm where the old chestnut is dying and Nick is trying to get rid of his art. Olivia asks Nick to come with her, and he agrees, amazed and smitten. They soon find their way to a group called the "Life Defense Force" that is committed to saving the redwoods.

At the same time Mimi and Douglas are brought together when a pine grove outside Mimi's office is cut down in the middle of the night, enraging both of them. Together they start joining various activist events defending trees, and both are arrested and physically abused by police. They too make their way to the Life Defense Force.

Meanwhile Neelay starts his own company and becomes fantastically wealthy and successful with his immersive **Mastery** games, constantly building richer and more complex worlds with his coding. Patricia writes a best-selling book called *The Secret Forest*, all about how trees communicate. Adam decides to write his dissertation on the psychological profiles of environmental activists, and he begins interviewing people. Dorothy and Ray try to have a child but cannot, and in their dissatisfaction, they dive into reading and other hobbies. Soon Dorothy starts having an affair.

Nick and Olivia volunteer to take a turn squatting among the branches of a redwood called Mimas to prevent it being logged. They are supposed to only be there for a few days, but their vigil extends for months, and they adjust to an entirely new sense of time living alone in the tree. Patricia is invited to be an expert witness at a trial about logging rights, and she manages to temporarily stop the cutting of new lands. Ray and Dorothy have a fight and she asks to get divorced, but then Ray suddenly has a brain aneurysm and almost dies. Mimi is fired from her job after her latest arrest.

When Nick and Olivia have been in the tree for almost a year, Adam joins to interview them. While he is there a helicopter threatens them and they finally come down, admitting defeat. Mimas is cut down as the three are sent to jail. Afterwards Adam joins the Life Defense Force as well, and the group joins a new community protesting logging in Oregon. When their latest occupation is easily defeated and their members injured, Mimi, Douglas, Olivia, Nick, and Adam decide to take matters into their own hands and begin a new campaign of burning down logging equipment. The group decides to finish one last arson job in Idaho, but an explosion goes off sooner than planned, mortally injuring Olivia. The others try to tend to her, but when she dies they place her body in the flames and flee.

In the aftermath of Olivia's death, the members of the group part ways, some of them changing their names and others going into hiding. Adam returns to graduate school and later becomes a respected professor in his field. Nick lives a transient life, longing for a message from Olivia and continuing to make activist art. Mimi changes her name and becomes a therapist in San Francisco, specializing in a therapy that involves connecting with the patient through sustained eye contact. Douglas lives as a caretaker for a ghost town in Montana.

Meanwhile Dorothy takes care of Ray after his aneurysm, as he is no longer able to speak clearly and cannot move. Together they become intrigued by the plant life in their backyard and learn to identify trees. Patricia starts a vault to preserve the

seeds of trees that will soon be extinct, and she travels around the world both raising money for her project and collecting new specimens. Neelay becomes dissatisfied with his *Mastery* games and wants to start something different, a game about learning to preserve the natural world as it really is on Earth.

A tourist at Douglas's job finds his journal and reports him for arson. To save Mimi from arrest, Douglas decides to identify Adam as an accomplice. Neelay breaks with his company and begins work on a new game, first creating artificial intelligences to learn everything they can about Earth's biome. Patricia is invited to give a talk in front of a crowd of luminaries. In her speech, she discusses what people can truly do to save the world. While she plans to kill herself in front of the crowd (demonstrating her answer to how humanity can save the world), she is stopped by Neelay, who is in the audience. Adam pleads guilty to his crimes and is sentenced to 140 years in prison. Ray and Dorothy decide to let their suburban yard grow wild, slowing their lives to watch all their trees grow and resisting outside pressures to mow everything down. Mimi realizes what both Adam and Douglas did for her and achieves a kind of enlightenment beneath a pine tree in a city park, now able to hear the voices of the trees around her. Nick, meanwhile, continues to make art, finishing with an enormous sculpture spelling out the word "STILL" that is meant to be seen from space.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenhair – Olivia is one of *The Overstory's* nine protagonists. At the start of the novel, she is an immature and reckless young woman from a privileged background, studying Actuarial Science at an unnamed Eastern college. One night when she is high and still wet from the shower, she is electrocuted by a faulty wall socket and her heart stops for a full minute. When she awakes, Olivia is like a different person: she senses that she has been visited by mysterious beings of light, and wants to know what they are asking of her. She soon throws away all her drugs and leaves school, driving west. She eventually decides that the beings want her to join a group of activists trying to save the old-growth redwoods from being logged. On the way, she meets Nick Hoel and the two share an immediate bond, later becoming romantically involved. Taking the new names of "Maidenhair" and "Watchman," the pair live for almost a year in a camp among the branches of Mimas, an enormous redwood, slowly adjusting to an entirely new way of life. After her electrocution, Olivia seems like an almost holy figure to others, filled with purpose and able to communicate with the trees themselves. She also feels like she is atoning for her life before her electrocution and must learn to become patient and attentive again. For most of the book, Olivia is optimistic that

everything will turn out okay, but when the activists are defeated again and again, she joins Nick, Douglas, Mimi, and Adam in their arsonist activities. Olivia is killed when one of their explosions goes off sooner than planned, and her traumatic death breaks the group apart. Olivia represents the potential to have a powerful spiritual connection with trees, and how this connection can change one's life in a positive way. At the same time, the failure of her hopes and her tragic death present a pessimistic view of humanity's future.

Nicholas Hoel/Watchman – Nicholas Hoel is a creative and solitary young man from Iowa, a descendent of immigrants from Norway and Ireland. The latest of a long line of Hoels, Nick breaks from his family's farming roots and becomes an artist. Even as a child, he is especially obsessed with the family's giant **chestnut tree** and their decades-old ritual of photographing it once every month, and when he attends art school in Chicago he focuses on tree-related drawings and sculptures. Nick's immediate family dies in a tragic gas-leak accident one night, and in the aftermath he lives alone in their house for years, working on his art. Olivia shows up at his house one day and invites him to come with her. They share an intense connection from the start, and Nick is immediately smitten with Olivia and agrees to go to California with her. The two end up living together in the redwood Mimas for almost a year, which becomes an almost sacred experience for Nick and the happiest time of his life. After Olivia's death in the fire, Nick feels entirely lost and broken. He moves from place to place, doing menial work but still feeling compelled to keep making activist art about trees. This takes the form of murals, videos, and sculptures that various other characters see at several points in the book. Nick's character shows how art can be a catalyst for changing people's minds and improving the world. In some ways he is even a stand-in for Powers himself, using his art to promote the same kind of messages that Powers puts forth in *The Overstory*.

Mimi Ma/Mulberry – Another of the novel's protagonists, Mimi Ma is the daughter of Winston Ma, a Chinese immigrant to the U.S., and Charlotte, a Southern white woman. The oldest of three sisters, Mimi is raised in Illinois and later becomes a successful ceramic engineer. She is drawn into the struggle to save the trees when the city cuts down a pine grove outside her office in Portland, Oregon. At the site of the logging Mimi meets Douglas Pavlicek and the two become close friends, attending many activist events together. Among the protestors Mimi takes the alias "Mulberry," after the tree that was both her father's pride and joy and the site of his suicide. Mimi then joins Adam, Douglas, Nick, and Olivia in setting fire to logging equipment, using her engineering experience to help in their missions. As Olivia dies in their last arson gone wrong, she holds Mimi's gaze for a long time, and after this Mimi becomes a master of eye contact and silent communication between people. Mimi later moves to San Francisco, changes her name

to "Judith Hansen," and becomes an alternative therapist whose practice consists of gazing into her patients' eyes for hours at a time, exchanging silent communication. At the novel's end, Mimi receives a kind of enlightenment beneath a pine tree in a public park, able to recognize the sacrifices that Adam and Douglas have made for her and also to hear all the voices and signals of the trees around her. Mimi is described as physically small but fierce, and she's very practical but also mystical in her ability to communicate through eye contact. Her enlightenment presents another spiritual aspect to the relationship between humans and trees, and her therapeutic practice is an example of an alternative to the kind of strict psychology that Powers often criticizes.

Adam Appich/Maple – Adam Appich is a psychologist originally from Belleville, Illinois, and is another of the novel's protagonists. Growing up in a dysfunctional family—Adam's father was abusive and his older sister Leigh disappeared when Adam was a child—Adam is solitary from a young age. He then becomes fascinated with psychology in high school after reading a book that seems to prove how predictable and herd-oriented humans actually are. He goes on to attend graduate school, where he is known for his cynicism, but experiences a life-changing experience when he interviews Nick and Olivia in their camp atop the redwood Mimas. Adam quickly falls in love with Olivia, but he also starts to realize that he is studying the wrong people, and the environmental activists are not the crazy ones—the rest of society is. Adam then joins the Free Cascadia activist movement, taking the alias "Maple" after the tree that his father planted when he was born. After taking part in the group's arsons and fleeing in the aftermath of Olivia's death, Adam goes on to become a respected psychology professor, marries Lois, and has a young son named Charlie. When he is arrested by federal agents, Adam decides to not name any other members of the group, instead accepting a prison sentence of 140 years. Adam is practical, ambitious, and sometimes selfish, driven by a life of study and research, but as his sacrifice shows, he also has a strong moral compass. In both his overall character and his own words, Adam represents psychology's failure to examine consciousness beyond the human, and also its inability to measure morality or truth outside of a group's consensus. At the same time, Adam recognizes that art and storytelling have a power to change people's minds, and he himself shows his moral core by giving up his life for the "story" of his own lengthy imprisonment, hoping that it will make the public pay attention.

Douglas "Duggie" Pavlicek/Doug-fir – An Air Force vet from Palo Alto, Douglas or "Duggie" Pavlicek is another protagonist of *The Overstory*. Generally leading an aimless existence, Duggie is first introduced as a participant in the Stanford Prison Experiment, where he quickly succumbs to the abusive atmosphere. Afterwards, he joins the U.S. Air Force in Thailand during the Vietnam War. He falls from a plane in an attack and

is saved by an enormous banyan fig tree, though he injures his leg in the process. Back in the U.S., he is devastated to see clear-cut forests in Oregon and later finds work planting Doug-fir seedlings in the logged lands. He meets Mimi Ma after he is arrested trying to save her pine grove, and she gives him a new sense of purpose in life. He falls in love with her but also just wants to protect and be near her, while at the same time continuing in his environmental activism and even enduring torture at the hands of the police. Duggie joins Mimi and the others in their arson missions, and after Olivia's death he returns to his aimlessness, eventually being arrested and identifying only Adam as an accomplice in an attempt to save Mimi. Douglas has an innocent and childlike personality, and most of the other characters see him as mentally askew in some way. He is easily distracted but also earnest and sincere, and his love for Mimi is his guiding light in life, though he is skeptical of most other people and prefers the company of trees. Douglas's character also displays the complicated webs of human interaction, as he frequently worries that he's a bad person, especially after betraying Adam, but when Mimi realizes his sacrifice for her, she sees that Douglas's heart is as "good and as worthy as wood."

Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford – Patricia Westerford is a dendrologist (a scientist who studies trees) originally from Kentucky. She is born deaf or hard-of-hearing and is given hearing aids at a young age, but she retains a speech disorder of slurring her words. Patricia is extremely close with her father, Bill, as she grows up, and inherits his love of trees and all growing things. Indeed, her educational and career path for her entire life centers around the study of trees. As an adjunct professor in Wisconsin, she makes the remarkable discovery that trees communicate with each other. She publishes a paper on this that is soon attacked by other scientists, ruining her career and sending her into a deep depression. Her research is vindicated years later, and Patricia goes on to write a bestselling book about trees called *The Secret Forest*. Now relatively wealthy and famous, Patricia starts a project of collecting **seeds** from trees all around the world and storing them in a vault, hoping to preserve them from the mass extinction that she sees as inevitable. Patricia is very solitary and wary of other people—the notable exception to this is her husband, Dennis, who lives several miles away, respects her work and privacy, and usually only visits her for lunch every day. Patricia prefers the company of trees and nature to humans, and is generally happiest when she is cut off from society. She is also prone to depression, however, and almost commits suicide after her initial paper is savaged in the press. In *The Overstory*, Patricia is also Powers' main vehicle for his scientific arguments about the value of forests and the relationship between trees and humans. She also offers a rather pessimistic view of the future of this relationship, seeing human extinction as inevitable and only hoping that the forests will outlast humankind. Patricia never meets any of the other protagonists

other than Neelay and Mimi for a moment at the novel's end, but every other main character reads from and is changed by her book *The Secret Forest*. Patricia is likely based on the real-life figures of Suzanne Simard and Peter Wohlleben.

Neelay Mehta – A child of Indian immigrants, Neelay is a coding genius who creates a series of world-building computer games called **Mastery**. Neelay grows up in the Silicon Valley and quickly becomes fascinated with computers and coding through his father, Babul, who works at an early computing company. As a child, Neelay falls from a tree and breaks his back, becoming paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. A prodigy at coding, Neelay is accepted two years early to Stanford and soon starts building games and releasing them for free. He then has a life-changing experience at the Stanford wild terrarium, receiving a bolt of inspiration from the trees around him and seeing a vision of the kind of game he is destined to build. He drops out of school to focus on coding full-time, and soon develops his game that will change the world: *Mastery*. Neelay works constantly, living in his electric wheelchair and often forgetting to eat or sleep, and as he produces successive *Mastery* games, his personal company *Sempervirens* (named after the redwood's Latin name) becomes fabulously wealthy and successful. Extremely tall and thin and with long, flowing hair, Neelay appears to others like a saint or ascetic genius. He longs for physical companionship but thinks that other people find his appearance disgusting. After becoming discontented with *Mastery*, Neelay is again inspired (this time by Patricia's book *The Secret Forest*) to make a new kind of game that reflects the natural world of Earth itself. In preparation for this, he creates AI bots to learn for him and gather information about the way forests work. Though Neelay is relatively disconnected from *The Overstory*'s other characters—he only ever meets Patricia at her final speech, and reads her book—his character offers an example of how technology can help repair humanity's relationship to the natural world. At the same time, the games and bots he creates take on a life of their own, showing that humans are just one aspect of life itself, which is constantly growing and evolving even beyond the human.

Dorothy Cazaly Brinkman – Dorothy Brinkman (née Cazaly) is a stenographer from St. Paul, Minnesota. After a tempestuous courtship, she marries Ray Brinkman in the 1970s, and the two build a life together. Dorothy is fickle and independent, very concerned with maintaining her freedom and not becoming anyone's property, so she resists the idea of marriage for a long time, though she loves Ray deeply. When she and Ray find that they cannot have children, however, Dorothy becomes dissatisfied with her life again, moving from hobby to hobby and then having an affair. After Ray has a brain aneurysm and is barely able to move or speak, the two repair their relationship over many years, especially bonding over reading and discovering the natural world in their own backyard. Previously

impatient and temperamental, Dorothy eventually slows to the pace of Ray's new brain and finds peace with him through exploring the trees out their window and letting their suburban yard grow wild. Like Ray, Dorothy never meets *The Overstory's* other characters in person, though she watches them on TV and reads Patricia's book *The Secret Forest*. Dorothy offers an example of how even the most conventional and suburban people can help repair humanity's relationship with trees—by learning to become patient and attentive, and letting forests grow without trying to impose human ideas of order upon them.

Ray Brinkman – The ninth protagonist of *The Overstory*, Ray Brinkman is an intellectual property lawyer from St. Paul, Minnesota. He marries Dorothy Cazaly in the 1970s, and the two make a life together. Ray is an innocent and naïve person, but he is also extremely steadfast and responsible. In his work, he becomes fascinated by the idea that beings other than humans—specifically trees—could have intellectual property rights. Ray adores Dorothy and tries to make their marriage last even when she is clearly dissatisfied, but both of their lives change when Ray suffers a massive brain aneurysm. Afterwards, Ray can barely move or speak, and though the couple had previously been on the verge of a divorce, Dorothy devotes herself to tending to Ray for the rest of his life. In the aftermath of his aneurysm, Ray's brain remains conscious and intelligent but also drastically slows down, such that he spends most of his day watching the trees in his backyard and can find excitement and drama even in their quiet growth. Like Dorothy, Ray never meets the novel's other characters in person, though he watches them on TV and Dorothy reads Patricia's *The Secret Forest* to him. Ray's character brings up ideas of who deserves rights and whether the Earth itself is a property worth defending from human "invasion," and also how time passes differently for different beings. Through Ray's later life, Powers suggests that people might find peace and satisfaction in simply slowing down and paying attention.

Ma Sih Hsuin/Winston Ma – Ma Sih Hsuin, who becomes Winston Ma when he moves to America, is Mimi Ma's father. A brilliant electrical engineer, he immigrates to the U.S. to study, and also because his father Shouying insists that he escape the approaching Communist takeover. Winston graduates from college, marries Charlotte, and has three daughters: Mimi, Carmen, and Amelia. He works for a company developing a portable phone and is a prominent inventor. Winston is beloved by all as a "cute," friendly, eclectic man who loves math, national parks, and fly fishing, and he takes copious notes about everything. He rarely speaks Chinese or discusses his past, but Mimi realizes his hidden depths one day when he shows her the family treasure of the three jade rings and the arhat scroll. Winston plants a mulberry tree in the yard of his first home in the U.S., and later becomes obsessed with saving it from disease, though he is ultimately unsuccessful. Depressed by the

completion of his invention, his wife's growing dementia, and the death of the mulberry, Winston shoots himself in the head. Even after his death he remains largely a mystery to his daughters, who are left to deal with the fallout from his suicide.

Babul Mehta/Pita – Babul Mehta is Neelay's father. Originally from the Gujarat state in India, he immigrates to the U.S. with a degree in solid state physics. He then begins working for an early computing company, developing a microchip. A kind and brilliant man, Babul is extremely close with his son, who calls him "Pita." Babul starts Neelay on his path to technological stardom when he brings home a computer kit for he and the seven-year-old Neelay to construct together. Babul later becomes very sick and moves to a clinic in Minnesota, but Neelay is able to show him the world of **Mastery** before he dies.

Dennis Ward – Dennis is Patricia's husband, and the station manager at Dreier Research Station. When Patricia first joins the station, Dennis, who is around 10 years older than she is, starts bringing her little gifts whenever he visits. When he asks her to marry him, he suggests that they keep up the arrangement that they already have: live apart, but visit each other when they want to. Over the years, they develop a routine in which Dennis brings Patricia lunch every day and they walk and talk. Patricia feels lucky to have found such a kind and patient man who also respects her need for solitude and independence. Dennis dies in his sleep one night at Patricia's side.

Jørgen Hoel – Jørgen is a Norwegian immigrant to the U.S. in the mid-1850s, and Nick Hoel's ancestor. Jørgen marries Vi Powys in Brooklyn and moves West to Iowa, where they start a family and farm. Jørgen plants the **Hoel chestnut tree** from one of six **seeds** that he finds in his pocket.

John Hoel – John Hoel is Jørgen and Vi's oldest son. As a child, he accidentally kills one of their chestnut saplings when he strips off its leaves to use as play money. As an adult, John becomes obsessed with technology and progress, and it is he who buys the Kodak Brownie camera and begins the project of photographing the **Hoel chestnut** every month. John dies in his bed at age 56.

Frank Hoel Jr. – Frank Jr. is the grandson of John Hoel, and is Nick Hoel's grandfather. He is entrusted with the task of photographing the **Hoel chestnut tree** when he is only nine years old and maintains it for the rest of his life. Frank is an unimaginative man, but he's obedient in keeping up with the photo project.

Ma Shouying – Ma Shouying is Winston Ma's father and Mimi Ma's grandfather, though she never meets him. A Chinese Muslim living in Shanghai, Shouying becomes a wealthy and powerful man through the silk business. He is also an art scholar, calligrapher, and has three wives. He gives Winston (then Sih Hsuin) the three jade rings and the arhat scroll to take

with him to the U.S., knowing that soon the Communists will take over China. It's implied that Shouying is placed in a prison camp for years but is later released.

Charlotte Ma – Charlotte is Winston Ma's wife and the mother of Mimi, Carmen, and Amelia. She is a white American woman who is a "scion of a fallen southern planting family" from Virginia. Over the course of many years, Charlotte slips slowly into dementia, becoming obsessed with Latin and then refusing to believe that Winston is really dead after his suicide.

Leigh Appich – Leigh is Adam Appich's eldest sibling. The tree that her parents planted for her is an elm, which eventually dies of the Dutch elm disease. Leigh herself hardly notices, and also tries to get rid of the gift that Adam makes for her out of the elm's wood. Soon after, Leigh disappears in Florida after getting into a car with a strange man and is never seen again.

Jean Appich – Jean is Adam Appich's older sister and the sibling he is closest with. She looks out for him and protects him from Emmett, calling him "Dammie" and interpreting his moods for those who don't understand him, including their parents. The tree her parents planted for her is the ash. Jean dies at some point during Adam's adulthood.

Rubin Rabinowski – Rubin Rabinowski is a psychology professor at Fortuna College and author of the book *The Ape Inside Us*, which inspires the young Adam Appich to study psychology. Years later as Adam's professor, Rabinowski dies of a heart attack in the middle of a lecture. No one helps him until it's too late, and Adam even thinks that Rabinowski is trying to demonstrate the "bystander effect" instead of actually experiencing a crisis.

Ms. Gilpin – Ms. Gilpin is Neelay Mehta's middle-school American Literature teacher. When she catches him working on computer coding in her class, she takes his notebook and tries to shame him for not appreciating literature more. After Neelay's accident, Ms. Gilpin feels extremely guilty and distraught, and she gives Neelay his notebook back.

Bill Westerford – Bill Westerford is Patricia's father. The two are extremely close growing up, and Bill passes on to Patricia his love of trees and all growing things. Bill works as an agricultural extension agent, and he takes Patricia with him as he visits various farms in Ohio. Bill is killed in a car accident when Patricia is a teenager.

Henry Fallows – Henry Fallows is the senior scientist at the Dreier Research Station in the Cascades. Along with his research partner, Jason, he meets Patricia in the forest one day and is the first person to recognize her and tell her that her past research has been vindicated. Henry later adds Patricia to his station and puts her on a grant.

Moses – Moses is an older man who is a part of the Life Defense Force and introduces Nick and Olivia to the group. He favors using more extreme tactics like sabotaging property in the fight against the logging companies. He is killed along with

Mother N when their group's office is bombed.

Mother N – Mother N is a leading figure in the Life Defense Force, and she is usually the woman holding the megaphone during their meetings and protests. She advocates for entirely non-violent activism in the fight against the logging companies. She is killed along with Moses when their group's office is bombed.

Alan – Alan is Dorothy's boyfriend after Ray's brain aneurysm. He builds wooden instruments and seems to love Dorothy, but he finally decides that he can't handle sharing her with Ray and decides to end their relationship. It's left ambiguous whether or not he was also the man Dorothy was having an affair with before Ray's accident.

Lois – Lois is Adam's wife and the mother of their son, Charlie. A fierce and driven woman, she first assumes that Adam is innocent of the crimes he's accused of and pours all her energy into his legal defense. When Adam admits his guilt and refuses to accept a plea deal, however, she rages at him. Adam wonders if they ever really knew each other at all, and he recognizes that she will probably hate him forever.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Vi Powys – Vi is an Irish immigrant who marries Jørgen Hoel and moves to Iowa with him. Together they start a large family.

Eric Hoel – Eric is Frank Jr.'s son and Nick Hoel's father. He maintains the project of photographing the **Hoel chestnut tree** every month. Eric dies in the family home on Christmas Eve, killed by an accumulation of toxic gas from the old propane heater along with his wife and mother.

Carmen Ma – Carmen is Mimi Ma's younger sister, the middle child of the three Ma daughters. She grows up to study economics at Yale. Carmen and Mimi have a somewhat combative relationship, with Carmen seeming to resent her sister's pragmatic engineering approach to life.

Amelia Ma – Amelia is Mimi Ma's sister and the youngest of the three Ma daughters. She eventually gets a job in Colorado taking care of wounded wildlife. Amelia is much more patient and accommodating than her two sisters, and usually ends up acting as a peacekeeper between them.

Emmett Appich – Emmett is Adam Appich's older brother. He is generally presented as a bully, and his tree is the ironwood. Emmett bullies Adam as a child, and in adulthood steals his inheritance from him.

Charles Appich – Charles is Adam Appich's younger brother, and the youngest Appich sibling. The tree that Leonard picks for him is the black walnut. Charles dies at some point during Adam's adulthood.

Leonard Appich/Adam's Father – Leonard Appich is Adam Appich's father. He is an abusive and aggressive man who over the years breaks Adam's wrist and his own wife's elbow.

Leonard starts the tradition of planting a tree for each of his children, beginning with Leigh “in a fit of fifties optimism.”

Adam’s Mother – Adam Appich’s mother is unnamed in the novel. She generally doesn’t seem to understand Adam, and she’s implied to be an alcoholic and later addicted to codeine after her daughter Leigh’s death.

Ritu Mehta/Moti – Ritu Mehta is Neelay’s mother, whom he calls “Moti.” She loves Neelay deeply, though she doesn’t understand his coding work. Ritu is presented as a traditional Indian woman who later becomes very concerned with finding a wife for Neelay.

Patricia’s Mother – Patricia’s mother is unnamed in the novel, and she is not nearly as close with Patricia as Bill is. After Bill’s death, Patricia’s mother remarries.

Davy – Davy is Olivia’s husband in college. He first introduces her to drugs, and their relationship consists mostly of getting high, having sex, and fighting. Olivia finalizes her divorce with Davy on the day that she is electrocuted.

Olivia’s Father – Olivia’s father is unnamed in the novel. He is implied to be a wealthy and conservative man, and his relationship with Olivia is a tempestuous one.

Blackbeard – Blackbeard is a member of the Life Defense Force who goes out on raids to sabotage logging equipment.

Chris – Chris is a reporter who calls Neelay for an interview. He admits that he is obsessed with playing **Mastery** and questions Neelay about the game and his personal life. Neelay feels attracted to Chris, but he must settle for knowing that the code he wrote has changed Chris’s brain.

Professor Mieke Van Dijk – Professor Van Dijk is Adam’s advisor at graduate school. He is very attracted to her and tries to flirt with her during their meetings. She is the impetus for Adam beginning his study researching the psychological profiles of environmental activists.

Loki – Loki is a member of the Life Defense Force who first brings Nick and Olivia to Mimas, and sometimes brings them supplies as their stay lengthens. He also sneaks Adam in when he, too, ascends the tree.

The Judge – An unnamed judge presides over a case in which Patricia is called as an expert witness. The judge reminds Patricia of her father, Bill, and he seems genuinely interested in what she has to say about trees.

Buzzard – Buzzard is one of the activist camped out in Mimas before being replaced by Nick and Olivia.

Sparks – Sparks is the other activist camped out in Mimas before being replaced by Nick and Olivia.

Sheriff Sanders – Sheriff Sanders is the policeman overseeing the response to the Life Defense Force’s action in the logging company’s headquarters building. He orders his officers to wipe pepper spray into the eyes of the protesters—including

Douglas and Mimi—when they refuse to move.

Brendan Smith – Brendan Smith is a man whom Mimi’s company hired to make sure she leaves peacefully after she is fired. Mimi is offended by his presence.

Mr. Siang – Mr. Siang is an art appraiser who buys the arhat scroll from Mimi. First he tries to undersell her, but she is quickly able to see through him and make a large amount of money from the deal.

Elizeu – Elizeu is a rubber tapper in Brazil and one of Patricia’s guides on her trip to the Amazon.

Elvis Antônio – Elvis Antônio is a rubber tapper in Brazil and one of Patricia’s guides on her trip to the Amazon.

Stephanie N. – Stephanie is one of Mimi’s clients at her therapy practice in San Francisco. She feels herself deeply changed by Mimi’s gaze, and tries to remember all that she learned after leaving the office and returning to the outside world.

Kaltov – Kaltov is one of Neelay’s top five project managers at Sempervirens. He votes against Neelay’s idea for a new, nature-based game.

Rasha – Rasha is one of Neelay’s top five project managers at Sempervirens. He votes against Neelay’s idea for a new, nature-based game.

Robinson – Robinson is one of Neelay’s top five project managers at Sempervirens. He votes against Neelay’s idea for a new, nature-based game.

Nguyen – Nguyen is one of Neelay’s top five project managers at Sempervirens. He votes against Neelay’s idea for a new, nature-based game.

Boehm – Boehm is one of Neelay’s top five project managers at Sempervirens. He votes against Neelay’s idea for a new, nature-based game.

Alena – Alena is a young Eastern-European woman backpacking through America. She meets Douglas and first tries to seduce him, but she then accepts his offer of his room for the night. She finds his journal, reads it, and later reports Douglas to the police.

Charlie – Charlie is Adam and Lois’s young son. A very practical and seemingly uncreative boy, he wants to be a banker when he grows up. Because of this, Adam feels disconnected from Charlie, but he still loves his son and wants to better understand him.

The Man in the Red Plaid Coat – An unnamed Native American man in a red plaid coat helps Nick with his last sculpture: the word “STILL” made from fallen logs and designed to be seen from space. The man represents the healthy and symbiotic relationship with nature that Powers advocates for.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



HUMANS AND TREES

At its heart, Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* is about the relationship between humans and trees.

The book follows nine central characters from different walks of life who are eventually drawn together through their individual connections to trees. Olivia Vandergriff, Nick Hoel, Adam Appich, Mimi Ma, and Douglas Pavlicek become activists defending forests from logging; Patricia Westerford writes books about how trees communicate with each other; Neelay Mehta is inspired by trees to construct new technology; and Ray and Dorothy Brinkman find peace in their suburban life by planting and observing trees. Throughout the book, these connections with trees prove crucial to the characters and contrast with humanity's current relationship to its forests—a relationship based in greed, commodification, and destruction. The novel suggests that humanity must improve its relationship with forests if human beings are to save not only the trees but also themselves.

The Overstory highlights just how broken the relationship between humans and trees is in the modern world. As Olivia, Nick, Mimi, and Douglas attempt to protect centuries-old redwoods from being clear-cut, the logging companies will do anything in their power to get at the lumber that they feel they own. This includes wiping pepper spray into the eyes of defenseless protesters and driving Olivia, Nick, and the psychologist Adam Appich from a redwood with a helicopter and bulldozers. All this violence is in the service of immediate consumption and profit—concepts that Powers suggests are inherently human, but also extremely destructive and shortsighted. When people see trees as only commodities to be used, they will inevitably cut them down at increasing rates until nothing is left.

In relation to the general tragedy of mass deforestation, the novel emphasizes how connected humans and trees truly are, and how harmful this accelerated logging is to both trees and humanity. Patricia Westerford writes in her seminal work on trees, "*You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. [...] Even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes...*" This passage is repeated several times, emphasizing its importance to the novel's conception of the relationship between trees and humanity. Human beings are not masters of

the rest of nature; we are simply a part of it, a cousin even of something as seemingly different as a tree. Patricia further studies (and discovers) how trees share a kind of consciousness all their own, communicating with each other and other species, adapting to unique circumstances, and even exhibiting personalities on an individual level. This all serves to "humanize" trees to readers, making them characters in their own right and thus inherently deserving of protection and dignity.

Powers also suggests that incredible outcomes are possible when the relationship between trees and humans is close and positive. Multiple characters experience trees as direct voices or visions, leading them to inspiration, activism, or enlightenment. The coding genius Neelay Mehta first conceives of his world-changing computer game **Mastery** in a grove of trees, and he returns to that same grove many times to seek messages from the beings he found there. Olivia Vandergriff briefly dies of electrocution, and when she returns to life she is visited by "beings of light" who lead her west to fight to save the redwoods.

The novel also emphasizes the practical knowledge that people can gain (and have gained) from trees. As Mimi Ma looks out at a particular tract of forest, she wonders, "Who knows what medicines might be hidden here? The next aspirin, the next quinine; the next Taxol." All of these now ubiquitous medical treatments originally came from trees—a fact that most people might not be aware of, but that is crucial to an understanding of our deep connection to nature.

Even on less dramatic levels, *The Overstory* shows how a personal connection between humans and trees is overwhelmingly positive in its effects. After years of marital stress and a devastating brain aneurysm, the suburban couple Dorothy and Ray Brinkman find peace and meaning together by planting and learning about trees. Patricia Westerford centers her life around the forest for decades. Despite the destructive power of many human systems, individual people can only benefit by recognizing their connection to trees.

The main complications of the novel arise from attempts to repair this broken relationship between trees and humans. The activist characters experience such frustrating violence and corruption from authorities that they are finally driven to violence themselves. In their anger, Olivia, Nick, Adam, Mimi, and Douglas take revenge for the loss of the trees by bombing and burning down logging equipment. Patricia is similarly driven to despair at humanity's situation and comes very close to publicly committing suicide. She doesn't go through with it, but she also doesn't reject her own argument that the best thing humans can do for nature is simply to die. On the other hand, characters like Nick and the Brinkmans find more positive actions by the novel's end, as Nick continues to make activist art and the Brinkmans simply let their suburban yard grow wild and resist their neighbors' pressures to mow everything down.

There is simply no good answer to such a devastating state of affairs, the book suggests. It is understandable to turn to violence and despair, but it is also important to keep moving forward and try to change things in a positive way. *The Overstory* itself is an example of this—a novel written with the explicit purpose of highlighting the connections between humans and trees and bringing to life the desperate situation we have created for ourselves and our world.



TIME

An important aspect of *The Overstory* is that it decentralizes humanity as the assumed protagonist of life on Earth—that is, the novel makes people

step back and recognize that there are other beings living alongside us, with their own valuable and interesting experiences. *The Overstory* most notably does this by questioning different notions of time. Overall, Powers uses the book's style and plot to disrupt the usual human perception of time, instead challenging his readers to see the passage of time through other perspectives, and to appreciate that their own perspective is only relative to others.

Powers immediately disrupts usual notions of narrative time by describing the action of the book entirely in the present tense, forcing readers to see time from an unusual perspective.

Though the novel begins centuries before the present day and soon jumps quickly forward, the narration always stays in the present tense. This suggests that all the action—whether in the past or present—is in some way taking place concurrently, with the same branching possibility of what might happen next.

Nothing is set in stone; everyone is acting only in their own perceived present.

Beyond this, the narration jumps around among centuries and even millennia, disrupting the usual linear conception of time.

The novel often returns to the idea of the rings of a tree, growing outward with each year. This is in contrast to the usual human idea of time as a line or arrow—the tree rings exist all at once, past, present, and future, and grow outwards in *all* directions rather than just one. A good example of this is the

Hoel family chestnut tree. *The Overstory* opens with a description of the first Hoels in America, and how they began a tradition of photographing their chestnut tree every month for decades. The narrative flows through generations of Hoels in the course of a few paragraphs, but the book of photos often returns in the novel as characters flip through it and watch the ancient tree grow in seconds over and over. This suggests that time passes differently for trees and humans. While generations of Hoels come and go, the chestnut tree is still moving through its slow adolescence, growing outward ring by concentric ring, preserving all the years of its past within its own body even as humans pass it by.

This brings up another concept central to the book: relativity,

and how the pace of one's life affects one's perception of time. As a child, Neelay Mehta is struck by a story about tiny aliens who move "so fast that Earth seconds seem to them like years." This, the book implies, is how humans perceive trees. Trees are not really immobile and lifeless, but simply existing on a plane that moves much more slowly than our own. Nick Hoel dreams of a tree laughing at humanity, and "even the laugh takes years." However, this idea also turns tragic in light of mass deforestation. Because humans move at their own fast pace, they cannot perceive the centuries needed to create an old-growth forest, or the importance of each complex organism moving in its own sense of time—they instead demand immediate lumber.

In contrast, Ray and Dorothy Brinkman adjust to the timeline of a tree after Ray's brain aneurysm. It takes him several minutes to say a single word, and almost everything between them is conveyed through slow glances and subtle interpretations on both their parts. Similarly, Mimi Ma's therapy practice later in her life consists of her staring into her patients' eyes and going through a process of long, slow looking and understanding without the usual human need to immediately divert or distract. These characters then show how a person might (whether willingly or not) restructure their sense of time simply by being still, slow, and methodical like a tree. In putting the very speed of existence into perspective like this, the novel again makes trees like characters in their own right—just ones that move more slowly and experience time differently than their human counterparts.

When Mimi Ma is a child, her father Winston shows her three jade rings that are her family heirlooms—three rings carved as trees representing the past, present, and future. Patricia Westerford thinks of her lectures to her forestry students as "post[ing] a memory forward to their distant futures, futures that will depend on the inscrutable generosity of green things." Throughout *The Overstory*, the passage of time is linked with these "green things" who experience time differently than humanity and can potentially help us step back from our own experiences and speed of living and help us consider perspectives other than our own.



DESTRUCTION, EXTINCTION, AND REBIRTH

The Overstory contains many tragic examples of people destroying nature and harming themselves in the process, and the book ultimately presents a rather bleak view of our prospects on this planet. People cannot seem to stop commodifying everything, destroying it for immediate profit with no thought for a long-term future or for the rights of beings other than themselves. This mass destruction and extinction are simple facts of life at this point in history, but the novel tries to step back from a narrow human point of view and look at Earth's living environment as a whole. Though humanity

has disrupted the usual cycles of nature, these cycles will adapt and adjust. *The Overstory* ultimately concludes that humanity's destructive character will likely result in our own extinction—unless we are able to make a drastic change—but that nature and life itself will persevere, continuing on through its slow cycles of death and rebirth.

The clearest point the novel makes in this regard is that humans are causing the extinction of countless other species, at a rate unprecedented in all of Earth's history. Patricia Westerford spells it out clearly to her husband, Dennis: "A third to a half of existing species may go extinct by the time I'm gone [...] Tens of thousands of trees we know nothing about. Species we've barely classified. Like burning down the library, art museum, pharmacy, and hall of records, all at once." The end of this quote shows how such destruction is harmful not only to the species going extinct, but to humans as well. So much value—medicines, knowledge, inspiration, history—comes from the natural world.

Some of the book's characters react to this dire situation with despair, even going so far as to hope that humans go extinct soon in order to save nature. Living in the branches of a redwood tree called Mimas, Nick Hoel hopes that "green has a plan that will make the age of mammals seem like a minor detour." Douglas Pavlicek tells the seedlings that he plants, "*Hang on [...] You just have to outlast us.*" Indeed, the book makes the point again and again that the destruction of nature will inevitably lead to human extinction, and in the face of these failures, some characters feel that humanity deserves it. The hope that they derive from this situation is that though humanity may perish, nature will not. Trees just have to "outlast us" and they will be able to recover, however long it may take.

This leads to the idea of **seeds** and rebirth: that there is still hope for both nature and humanity despite the destruction that has already taken place. Though Patricia is one of the most pessimistic and pragmatic characters regarding the state of nature (she goes so far as to plan to commit suicide in public, saying that the best thing humans can do for nature is simply to die), she also takes action to prepare for a better future by starting a seed bank. She travels all around the world, gathering seeds from different species of trees and keeping them in a frozen vault, hoping to one day replant them even if they go extinct in the wild. These seeds then become physical symbols of hope for the future.

Further, the book describes all the different ways that seeds survive, and how some of them must even undergo traumatic processes in order to germinate. When she receives her "enlightenment" beneath the pine tree at the novel's end, Mimi Ma is comforted by the idea that "*There are seeds that need fire. Seeds that need freezing. Seeds that need to be swallowed, etched in digestive acid, expelled as waste. Seeds that must be smashed open before they'll germinate.*" This implies that destruction is an inherent part of new creation—some things must be "smashed open" before they can bloom—and both are aspects of the same

natural cycle. There is hope for nature even in the midst of tragedy, *The Overstory* suggests, and by the same logic, there is even hope for humanity. If we, too, can make a dramatic change and stop destroying nature at such a reckless rate, we also will survive and adapt.

Olivia's last words to Nick as she dies are, "This will never end—what we have. Right?" It is ambiguous what she is asking about, and these words haunt Nick for decades to come, but they also speak to the question of endings and beginnings, destruction and rebirth, that threads *The Overstory*. Even when it seems that all is lost, nature has the potential to "never end." Despite human destruction and even possible extinction, nature continues to adapt and be reborn.



HUMAN NATURE, PSYCHOLOGY, AND STORYTELLING

The Overstory dives into the psychology of human beings as a species in order to explain their destructive impulses. Primarily, the novel questions how humanity can grow to recognize the life-or-death matter of saving the trees considering what has proven again and again to be inherent to human nature: the unstoppable desire to "grow harder; grow faster." *The Overstory* acknowledges the many flaws in human nature and psychology—the need for always "a little bit more," and to fit in with the group consensus, no matter how wrong it might be—but the novel also suggests that storytelling and the empathy that accompanies it can encourage people to act more morally and responsibly.

The Overstory emphasizes how psychology has proven that most people will become easily corrupted by power and also go along with whatever the rest of their immediate group is doing. Douglas Pavlicek first enters the story as a participant in the infamous (and historical) Stanford Prison Experiment. In this 1971 psychological study, the participants were randomly divided into prisoners and prison guards, with the latter group given total power over the former. Within only a few days, the guards were abusing and torturing the prisoners—who also turned against each other—and the study had to be shut down.

The character of Adam Appich further develops the idea that human beings follow predictable patterns. Adam becomes intrigued by psychology after reading a book called *The Ape Inside Us*, which contains many examples of how humans often fail at logical problems but are excellent at "herding each other" and "figuring out who's in and who's out [...] who should be heaped with praise and who must be punished without mercy." Later, Adam's class lets his professor die of a heart attack while doing nothing to help. Adam blames this on the "bystander effect," which says that people in a group are unlikely to help a victim, as they will follow the group and assume that someone else will take care of it.

This idea is then later applied to the destruction of the forests.

As Adam talks with Olivia and Nick among the branches of the redwood called Mimas, they discuss how easy it is to ignore the deforestation crisis when six billion other people are also ignoring it. In this way, the novel suggests that human nature actively prevents us from taking positive action as long as the majority of our “group” remains apathetic or ignorant. This makes it all the more important to make the environmental crisis more prominent in the public mind.

Neelay Mehta’s game **Mastery** highlights a different aspect of human nature important to the book: the desire for endless growth and control. In the game, characters explore, harvest resources, and build, all while competing with other players for limited resources. Later versions of the game add new elements—new continents, new resources, better graphics—but keep the same idea of potentially limitless growth and consumption. Similarly, when Neelay himself tries to change the game to something more like actual nature, his staff revolts. All they want to do is keep expanding the world of the game and keep it about “mastery,” and thus continue making more and more profits. This is an extended analogy for how humans act in the real world: treating trees as renewable resources with no limit, and cutting them down much faster than they can grow back. The logging companies demand immediate profits and cannot account for the complexity of an interdependent environment or the centuries needed to build up an old-growth forest. And while the group agrees that this is an acceptable state of affairs, the majority will remain passive bystanders.

Despite this grim outlook on human nature, the novel does offer a way to get around humankind’s herd mentality and selfishness: storytelling and art. When Adam first joins the environmental activists, he is skeptical about changing the public’s mind because of what he knows about group psychology. Olivia asks him what they can do, and he responds: “The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story.” Later Adam puts this into practice by making a story out of his very life—accepting more than a century in prison instead of giving up his fellow activists, and even claiming responsibility for crimes he didn’t commit. Mimi Ma realizes that “he has traded his life for a fable that might light up the minds of strangers”—it is only a story like this that might actually change people’s ingrained opinions. Likewise, Nick continues to make activist art for the rest of his life after Olivia’s death. Other characters often see this art in person or on the internet, and they are moved by its passion. At the end of the novel Nick is constantly moving about, creating installations and graffiti, and though he is still haunted by loneliness and regret over Olivia’s death, the book presents his actions as a positive influence on the world: an attempt to use art for the sake of activism.

Overall, the novel suggests that “a good story” is what is needed to break through the biases of human nature—and that

is exactly what *The Overstory* itself aims to be. Richard Powers essentially takes his argument about the importance of defending trees and turns it into a novel, in the hopes that the “good story” will connect with more people and change more minds than a scientific tract or essay would.



COMPLEXITY, BRANCHING, AND INTERDEPENDENCE

While *The Overstory* attempts to base its sense of time on the concentric growth of rings on a tree, it also structures its story around the endless branching and complexity of a tree’s limbs and roots. There are nine main characters, each with their own storylines, yet all are inextricably connected. This then gestures towards a paradox at the heart of the book, and of trees themselves: how beings can be both complex and ever-dividing while also being bound to each other and interdependent. Through both the style of the novel and its various subjects, *The Overstory* suggests that trees, like the actions of humans, are simultaneously full of complex division and ultimately bound to each other.

The novel’s structure reflects the nature of a tree. Each character is first introduced in a section called “Roots.” This is when they are all still divided (none of them know each other yet), but drawing closer together, just like the branched roots of a tree leading up towards the single trunk. The next section, “Trunk,” tells of when many of them are actually in the same place, working as an activist unit against the logging companies. “Crown” then describes them splitting off from each other again (after Olivia’s death) like new branches. “Seeds” looks towards the future, showing what might fall from these “branches” and sprout someday. Further, the book’s nine protagonists are each narrated in the present tense, which immediately creates the sense of nine different branches with the potential to divide in further ways through any future action they might take. Any choice they make beyond the current present tense represents a new branch.

Within the novel’s actual story, many characters also muse on time and human action as a kind of branching. Neelay in particular deals with branching in his software programming (“branching” is also a technical term, as the novel points out), and is inspired by the structure of the trees at Stanford’s wild terrarium to create his incredibly complex and immersive game **Mastery**. He is described as “reincarnating himself” to live thousands of other lives through the alternate reality he creates, and he even dreams of branches at night. Once Dorothy starts finding joy in identifying and nurturing trees, she looks out on their chestnut tree and sees in “[its] branching the several speculative paths of a lived life, all the people she might have been, the ones she could or will yet be...”

Intertwined with this motif of branching and division is another, seemingly contradictory image: that of connection and

interdependence. Among trees, this is mostly illustrated through Patricia's studies and discoveries. Her first great breakthrough—which is initially mocked but later makes her famous—is that trees actually communicate with each other and with other species. Then she writes a book, *The Secret Forest*, all about the subject. “There are no individuals in a forest, no separable events,” she writes. “Maybe it’s useful to think of forests as enormous spreading, branching, underground super-trees.” This connects the two images elegantly: the forest is ever spreading and branching, but it is also all one interconnected whole, a single, infinitely complex organism. Similarly, though the novel’s characters undergo their own divided stories, they are all connected in some way, however tenuously. The most obvious example is in the “Trunk” section, when Olivia, Nick, Douglas, Mimi, and Adam all join together, first with Free Cascadia and then as their own arsonist group. But more tangential characters also share the same story. All the characters read Patricia’s book *The Secret Forest* at some point, Ray and Dorothy follow the stories of the activists on the news, and Neelay seemingly prevents Patricia’s suicide by waving his arms and shouting to her when no one else in the room will act. Like trees, which seem divided and ever-dividing within themselves, people are also connected at their roots and constantly in communication with each other, affecting others with their own actions.

Living among the trees, Patricia observes that “when the lateral roots of two Douglas-firs run into each other underground, they fuse [...] and become one.” They are still two separate trees on the surface, but deep underground they join together and share nutrients. Similarly, both the structure and the characters of *The Overstory* are both unique entities, divided and branching, and intimately bound together, even in ways no one else can see.



CONSCIOUSNESS, VALUE, AND MEANING

The Overstory seeks to question human assumptions about basic things like consciousness, value, and meaning. If people were able to step outside of our limited selves, the novel suggests, we could take a larger view of these concepts and grow wiser in the process, recognizing that we are not the only conscious beings in the universe and that ideas of meaning and value might mean different things to different species (most notably to trees).

The Overstory suggests that trees have a kind of consciousness all their own. The book presents scientific evidence for this, primarily through Patricia Westerford and her studies. She is the first to discover that trees communicate with each other, warning other trees of threats or sharing and distributing resources. The novel cites real science in these sections, and Patricia herself is based on real-life figures like the ecologist and professor Suzanne Simard and the forester and writer

Peter Wohlleben. These passages about tree consciousness are essentially Richard Powers working his research into the constraints of the novel’s form, fitting a non-fiction essay into the words of his characters.

The novel also makes non-scientific arguments for the consciousness of trees through characters like Olivia, Neelay, and Mimi. All three characters experience visions or voices of some kind that are associated with trees. The most extreme example is Olivia, who dies by electrocution, comes back to life, and then senses “beings of light” who eventually lead her west to fight for the redwoods. She can’t say specifically what these beings are, but she senses that they are intimately connected to the redwoods themselves. Neelay has a vision of his future creations while looking at trees, and Mimi receives a kind of enlightenment while sitting under a pine. The book thus presents trees as not only conscious beings but also spiritual and sentient ones.

If trees have consciousness and intelligence of their own, then this raises questions of value that extend beyond human gain. Human laws and systems only know how to measure forests for our own utility and profit. The loggers fighting the Life Defense Force repeatedly state that they are just trying to do their jobs and feed their families. Logging companies as a whole are concerned only with their own immediate growth and profits, and they have no space for philosophical questions of value. The book’s argument is then most clearly stated again through Patricia, when she speaks with a judge in defense of old-growth forests. While the opposing lawyer argues for “managed” and “consistent” forests, Patricia responds that these would be “better for us. Not for the forest.” She acknowledges that to maximize immediate profit, the easiest thing to do is clear-cut. “But,” she says, “if you want next century’s soil, if you want pure water, if you want variety and health, if you want stabilizers and services we can’t even measure, then be patient and let the forest give slowly.” In this way, the book suggests that we must rethink questions of value to not just focus on the immediate and the profitable, but also on long-term benefits and the consciousness and worth of other creatures.

Finally, the book questions common ideas of what is meaningful. In the opening pages, a woman (presumably Mimi) receives messages from the trees who say, “If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we’d drown you in meaning.” What the trees speak of must be necessarily different from human conceptions of meaning, as it requires the human mind to become something “greener” to comprehend. This is the kind of meaning that Powers tries to hint at. As Patricia looks out over an ancient aspen grove, she thinks, “Life will not answer to reason. And *meaning* is too young a thing to have much power over it”—implying that ideas like reason and meaning are human constructs that are of little concern to nature as a whole. Indeed, if we are dealing with consciousnesses other than our

own and systems of time and value other than our own, then surely we must also allow for new concepts of meaning as well.

Dorothy and Ray Brinkman read countless books together, but the narrator notes that they all share a connecting thread: assuming that human life and character is “all that matters in the end.” “To be human is to confuse a satisfying story with a meaningful one, and to mistake life for something huge with two legs,” the narrator says. Instead, *The Overstory* tries something more ambitious—to show life as something rooted and branching, to separate itself from usual human ideas of meaning and value, and to instead consider what those ideas might mean to consciousnesses other than our own.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE HOEL CHESTNUT TREE

The Hoel family chestnut tree symbolizes the passage of time; humanity’s destructive power against nature; and the potential for storytelling and art to make a positive change in the world.

When Jørgen Hoel moves from Brooklyn to Iowa to start a family in the mid-1800s, he brings six chestnut **seeds** with him and plants them in his new home. Years later, only one has survived, but it continues to grow and thrive until the tree is a landmark known for miles around. In the meantime, a blight brought from imported trees wipes out billions of chestnuts in their natural range along the American East Coast. After Jørgen’s death, his adult son John buys an early camera and starts photographing the tree from the same position once every month. John continues this ritual for his entire life, and so does his son after him. In the book’s present day, Nick Hoel is fascinated by the book of photographs, which show the chestnut tree’s growth over the course of decades through just a flip of its pages.

Most importantly, the tree—and the photographs of it—show how time passes differently for trees and for humans. Though a tree seems stationary and lifeless from a human point of view, the photo book allows people to see time from a tree’s perspective, visually portraying its growth and movement at a rate that we can actually understand. This is an early symbol of *The Overstory*’s larger point that trees have intelligence and purpose of their own; they just move through time in a different way than humans do. Looking through the photos doesn’t really give someone like Nick the full experience of living like a tree does, but it can help put this experience in human terms.

At the same time, the chestnut blight—which eventually reaches even the Hoel chestnut and kills it, though it is

hundreds of miles outside of its native range—shows how human interference can be extremely destructive to the balance of nature. While the blight is not an example of purposeful destruction, it is entirely a product of human activity, in this case shipping in chestnut trees from Southeast Asia for commercial purposes. The tree’s fate shows how shortsighted greed can have devastating and long-lasting effects beyond humanity’s immediate desire for growth and profit.

Finally, the book of photographs of the Hoel chestnut represents the power of art to change people for the better. Nick is inspired by the photographs at a young age, and he incorporates the image of the chestnut into his artistic work later in life, both before and after his involvement with the other characters and their environmental activism. Having this visual representation of time as a tree sees it, the book suggests, can help people step outside of their own perspectives and consider other kinds of life as being just as valuable as their own.



MASTERY

Mastery, the first major online game that Neelay Mehta creates, represents the human need to endlessly grow and consume, as well as just how unsustainable this practice is in the long term. As a teenager studying at Stanford University, Neelay is inspired by the trees at the school’s inner quad and experiences a vision (as though receiving a message from the trees themselves) of a game that he will create: an incredibly complex, immersive world for the player to explore and build in. The game—called *Mastery*—becomes an incredible success, and its many sequels make Neelay and his company extremely rich and famous. For a while, Neelay thinks that *Mastery* is the culmination of his vision from the trees, but soon he grows dissatisfied with pursuing the same model over and over, and a conversation with a player one day makes him realize that the game has a “Midas problem”—all it can do is add ever more resources and space to exploit and control, like the mythical King Midas turning everything to gold but finding no joy in his ever-expanding wealth.

Instead of being the realization of the trees’ message to Neelay, then, *Mastery* is actually an allegory for humanity’s need to endlessly grow, consume, and take control of everything. In the world of the game, the developers can always add new continents and resources—but this isn’t the case in real life, where our current rate of growth and consumption is unsustainable and is leading to the destruction of both nature and humanity itself. When Neelay comes to understand this, he abandons the *Mastery* franchise (which also means losing his immensely successful company) to start on a new project. His new, more enlightened goal is to create a game that reflects the

real world of growing things and the complex web of life, a game that can help people learn more about the planet that is their home.



THE THREE JADE RINGS

The Ma family's three jade rings symbolize the passage of time and how it can be perceived differently by different beings. The rings first appear when Ma Shouying gives them to his son Ma Sih Hsuin (later Winston Ma) to take to the U.S. when he flees the coming Communist Revolution in China. The rings are priceless artifacts, each intricately carved to portray scenes involving trees. Shouying describes one ring as the Lote tree (a sacred tree in the Quran) that represents the past; the second ring is Fusang (a mulberry tree in a mysterious Eastern land) that represents the future; the third tree is a pine, representing the present or "Now." Years later, Winston shows his own daughter Mimi Ma the rings and repeats his father's explanations.

Throughout *The Overstory*, the narrator plays with different perceptions of time, challenging readers to consider how time might pass differently for a tree than for a human being. Introduced early in the book, the jade rings serve an important purpose by connecting the motif of trees with the idea of time. Further, the very idea of rings as related to trees points to the "rings" of a tree's trunk. Most trees grow a new outermost ring each year, building on the rings of their past years. This, the book suggests, is a different way of experiencing time than people are used to. Instead of time moving like an arrow from a past that is left behind and toward a distant future, it moves concentrically outward, always containing the past (like the tree's inner rings) even as it exists in the present and grows toward the future. Mimi Ma herself experiences a similar sensation after first seeing the three jade rings: she feels like time becomes "a column of central circles," with her timeless self at the center and her present existing on the outermost ring. This idea of different ways of experiencing time is then important to *The Overstory's* general goal of getting readers to step outside of their own limited perspective and consider other kinds of consciousness (namely, that of trees) as having meaning and value.



SEEDS

Throughout *The Overstory*, seeds represent hope for future life and new growth, as well as resiliency and adaptation in the face of disaster.

Seeds feature prominently in several characters' storylines. The book begins with the origin of the **Hoel chestnut tree**, a magnificent tree that manages to escape the American chestnut blight (at least for a time) all because Jørgen Hoel accidentally brings six chestnuts with him from New York to

Iowa and plants them. Over a century later, Neelay Mehta's father compares their early computer and coding work to a tiny seed producing an enormous banyan fig tree, and this image of the potential for endless branching growth sticks with Neelay for the rest of his life. Most notably, Patricia Westerford starts a seed vault, traveling the world and gathering seeds to keep in her subzero bunker in the hopes of preserving dying species for the future. Patricia is notably pessimistic about the future of humanity, but she has total faith in the patience of trees and in a seed's ability to survive and thrive. In all of these instances, the act of gathering or planting seeds (whether real or imagined) is a way for characters to remain hopeful and envision the future as something that is beautiful and limitless in its potential, like a tree's ever-growing branches.

Seeds are not only full of potential but also resilient to various stresses and traumas—and some even require such experiences to properly germinate. As the narrative notes in several places, some seeds require fire to open, some need to be frozen or digested, and some can survive for thousands of years and still germinate. This represents life's ability to adapt even to man-made catastrophes like worldwide deforestation. *The Overstory* encourages readers to take comfort in the fact that although humanity might not survive to see the future of seeds like those in Patricia's vault, life itself—as symbolized by those seeds—will always continue.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *The Overstory* published in 2019.

Part 1: Roots—Nicholas Hoel Quotes

●● The generations of grudge, courage, forbearance, and surprise generosity: everything a human being might call the *story* happens outside his photos' frame. Inside the frame, through hundreds of revolving seasons, there is only that solo tree, its fissured bark spiraling upward into early middle age, growing at the speed of wood.

Related Characters: Nicholas Hoel/Watchman, Frank Hoel Jr.

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

For generations, members of the Hoel family in Iowa photograph their chestnut tree every month from the exact same position. They then assemble the photographs into a flip book, showing the tree's slow growth from a sapling to a local landmark. This passage refers to Frank Hoel Jr., who will become Nicholas Hoel's grandfather, as he looks at the stack of photographs.

This quotation introduces one of the *The Overstory's* most important ideas: that people define what is valuable, meaningful, and what makes a good story only on limited terms. That is, people tend to only regard other human beings as worthy of close consideration. The novel, however, seeks to make other kinds of life (like the slow growth of a tree) seem just as meaningful and interesting to its readers. The two stories—the generations of Hoels and the growth of the chestnut tree—are taking place in two different kinds of time (the former in human time, the latter “growing at the speed of wood”) and with two different kinds of consciousnesses (one human and one tree). But they are intimately connected to each other, as the passage shows by directly juxtaposing them here.

Further, this passage, like almost all of *The Overstory*, is narrated in the present tense. Beyond describing two different kinds of time—what makes up generations for the Hoels but just a few years relative to the tree's lifespan—this also complicates the usual narrative presentation of time, in an attempt to get readers to question their own perspectives.


Part 1: Roots—Mimi Ma Quotes

☝ “They see every answer. Nothing hurt them anymore. Emperor come and go. Qing, Ming, Yuan. Communism, too. Little insect on a giant dog. But these guy?” He clicked his tongue and held up his thumb, as if these little Buddhas were the ones to put money on, in the run of time.

At that click, a teenage Mimi lifted from her own nine-year-old shoulders to gaze at the arhats from high up and years away. Out of the gazing teen rose another, even older woman. Time was not a line unrolling in front of her. It was a column of concentric circles with herself at the core and the present floating outward along the outermost rim. Future selves stacked up above and behind her, all returning to this room for another look at the handful of men who had solved life.

Related Characters: Ma Sih Hsueh/Winston Ma (speaker), Mimi Ma/Mulberry

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Winston Ma is showing his young daughter Mimi their family treasures: the three jade rings and the ancient scroll that depicts several arhats (people who have achieved enlightenment, according to some Buddhist traditions). Mimi then has the strange experience of time that is described here.

This passage builds on the idea that time can pass in different ways for different beings, and that people can learn to change their own perception of time. Generally, time is depicted as moving in one direction like an arrow or line from the past toward the future, with the present moment existing like a dot on that line. However, *The Overstory* challenges readers to think of the passage of time as more like the rings of a tree—expanding outward in all directions at once and containing the past within itself at all times. Just as trees add a new outer ring each year while retaining all the concentric rings of their previous years, Mimi sees herself as having a “core” self at the center, future selves expanding around her, and the present moment as an “outermost rim” like the outer bark of a tree. This reimagining of time is also, it's suggested, part of the enlightenment that the arhats on the scroll have achieved, as Winston comments on how their wisdom has outlasted all the great upheavals of history.

Part 1: Roots—Adam Appich Quotes

☝ Adam can't stop reading. Again and again, the book shows how so-called *Homo sapiens* fail at even the simplest logic problems. But they're fast and fantastic at figuring out who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down, who should be heaped with praise and who must be punished without mercy. Ability to execute simple acts of reason? Feeble. Skill at herding each other? Utterly, endlessly brilliant. Whole new rooms open up in Adam's brain, ready to be furnished.

Related Characters: Ruben Rabinowski, Adam Appich/Maple

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

As a teenager, Adam Appich feels aimless and isolated in



high school—until one day, he finds a book of popular psychology by Rubin Rabinowski called *The Ape Inside Us*. As described here, Adam delights in the author’s insights on how the human brain works, and how easily we can be categorized and studied like any other animal.

The Overstory mostly uses Adam’s character to highlight ideas like those presented here: that human beings are limited by our herd mentality and are much better at knowing “who’s in and who’s out” of our groups than at being objectively reasonable or moral. The “*sapiens*” of *Homo sapiens* even means “wise,” which this passage slyly critiques—we call ourselves wise, but our wisdom is extremely limited in most cases. The book will go on to apply these psychological ideas to the Earth’s environmental crisis, which is portrayed as a cognitive dissonance between reality and our shared delusion as a society. The broad study of social psychology here is also part of *The Overstory*’s overall project to not just tell the story of various characters interacting with one another, but also the human species as a whole and how it interacts with other life forms on Earth.

Part 1: Roots—Douglas Pavlicek Quotes

☛ In fact, it's Duggie's growing conviction that the greatest flaw of the species is its overwhelming tendency to mistake agreement for truth. Single biggest influence on what a body will or won't believe is what nearby bodies broadcast over the public band. Get three people in the room and they'll decide that the law of gravity is evil and should be rescinded because one of their uncles got shit-faced and fell off the roof.

Related Characters: Douglas “Duggie” Pavlicek/Doug-fir (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84-85

Explanation and Analysis

After being discharged from the Air Force, Douglas Pavlicek works tending a horse ranch in Idaho and living entirely alone except for the horses. He mostly spends his days reading and thinking, and he comes to the conclusion described here during this time.

This passage builds on the previous quote about human psychology from Adam Appich’s perspective. Using a technique called free indirect discourse, Richard Powers as narrator mixes his own voice with Duggie’s, describing his thoughts in the third person but using more informal

language that Duggie himself might use (like “shit-faced”). This also enables Powers to essentially make a direct statement to the reader through a character’s thoughts. *The Overstory* tries to prove again and again that we as human beings are living in a shared delusion—similar to agreeing that gravity shouldn’t exist—regarding the unsustainable and destructive way that we continue to live on this planet.

Duggie also has personal experience with this idea of “mistaking agreement for truth” because of his participation in the Stanford Prison Experiment, a real-life psychological experiment in which volunteers roleplayed as prisoners and guards. In this experiment, people quickly went along with what the rest of their respective groups were doing, even if their actions would have seemed unconscionable outside the context of the study.

Part 1: Roots—Neelay Mehta Quotes

☛ There's a story he's waiting for, long before he comes across it. When he finds it at last, it stays with him forever, although he'll never be able to find it again, in any database. Aliens land on Earth. They're little runts, as alien races go. But they metabolize like there's no tomorrow. They zip around like swarms of gnats, too fast to see—so fast that Earth seconds seem to them like years. To them, humans are nothing but sculptures of immobile meat. The foreigners try to communicate, but there's no reply. Finding no signs of intelligent life, they tuck into the frozen statues and start curing them like so much jerky, for the long ride home.

Related Characters: Neelay Mehta

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Growing up, Neelay Mehta is obsessed with computers and coding but also loves to read science fiction and fantasy books. This passage describes a story that deeply affects him and that he will remember for the rest of his life.

This story about the tiny, fast aliens is an allegory for humans and trees, and it illustrates the importance that *The Overstory*’s places on recognizing different perspectives of the passage of time. In the story, the aliens are so small and move so quickly that humans seem lifeless to them, and so the aliens eventually assume that they are the only intelligent life on the planet and begin to exploit humans for their meat. Similarly, humans don’t usually see trees as being truly conscious, intelligent, or valuable because of

their slowness and foreign size, and so they feel little compunction about destroying them for our own use. Powers tries to humanize trees here with this little tale, encouraging readers to put themselves in a tree's place and see how monstrous it is that we treat them like we do.

Part 1: Roots—Patricia Westerford Quotes

●● Watching the man, hard-of-hearing, hard-of-speech Patty learns that real joy consists of knowing that human wisdom counts less than the shimmer of beeches in a breeze. As certain as weather coming from the west, the things people know for sure will change. There is no knowing *for a fact*. The only dependable things are humility and looking.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia “Patty” Westerford, Bill Westerford

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Growing up, Patricia Westerford (here still called Patty) is extremely close with her father Bill, who shares with her his wisdom and his great love of trees. Patricia learns many lessons from him, one of them being the idea described here: that human ideas of meaning and fact are limited and temporal, and “the only dependable things are humility and looking.”

This is an important idea in *The Overstory*, as the book advocates for a change of mindset in readers, encouraging them to step back from the usual fast-paced flow of information and knowledge that our society prioritizes. Humility, observation, and awareness are qualities that the book elevates and associates with a closeness to trees and nature—and it even implies that these are qualities of trees themselves, as their own conscious beings. Patricia is the character closest to trees from the start, and she learns early on not to trust too much in the certainty of any human knowledge, recognizing that even the idea of what is meaningful is subject to change.

●● She controls for everything she can, and the results are always the same. Only one conclusion makes any sense: The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. Her maples are signaling. They're linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other. She can't quite let herself believe. But the data keep confirming. And on that evening when Patricia finally accepts what the measurements say, her limbs heat up and tears run down her face. For all she knows, she's the first creature in the expanding adventure of life who has ever glimpsed this small but certain thing that evolution is up to. Life is talking to itself, and she has listened in.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia “Patty” Westerford

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 125-126

Explanation and Analysis

For months, Patricia has been analyzing the chemical output of trees using a quadrupole mass spectrometer. When one of the trees she is studying is attacked by insects, she discovers that the tree is actually warning other trees around it through signals in the compounds it releases: an incredible scientific breakthrough. One of the real-life people Patricia's character is based on, Suzanne Simard, made similar discoveries about how trees communicate with each other.

In this passage, Patricia again mixes the scientific with the emotional and spiritual, as she immediately starts to cry and makes a mental leap from her study's data to ideas about life itself as a conscious, intelligent force. This kind of holistic view of nature is what *The Overstory* promotes in general, and it fits with the book's style of mixing scientific knowledge with more fantastical elements. Patricia's discovery also makes concrete the idea that trees are in fact social creatures, depending on and communicating with one another. This means that a forest is not only an interdependent organism, but that trees actually have their own kinds of consciousness and intelligence, and thus that humanity must begin to think about them in a new way.

●● These people are nothing to Plant-Patty. And yet their lives have long been connected, deep underground. Their kinship will work like an unfolding book. The past always comes clearer, in the future.

Years from now, she'll write a book of her own, *The Secret Forest*. Its opening page will read:

You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes....

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford (speaker), Nicholas Hoel/Watchman, Douglas "Dougie" Pavlicek/Doug-fir, Dorothy Cazaly Brinkman, Ray Brinkman, Neelay Mehta, Adam Appich/Maple, Mimi Ma/Mulberry

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

This passage follows a brief description of all the other protagonists of *The Overstory* (minus Olivia Vandergriff) and what they are doing at a particular moment in time, finally returning to Patricia Westerford and the quotation here. At this point in the book, each character is still separate from one another but also slowly growing closer within their own storyline and timeline, like roots (the title of the book's Part One) growing upwards toward the trunk (the title of Part Two). The narrator makes this imagery explicit in this passage, comparing the characters to roots ("connected, deep underground") that don't yet know that they are all part of the same organism.

This idea is then linked to the larger tree of life—as described in Patricia's book—in which humans and trees share a common ancestor millions of years in the past. This illustrates the idea that living things are both divergent and interdependent; humans and trees have split apart but are also connected in both the past and present. This is then another attempt to "humanize" trees by pointing out our similarities, even in the most scientific of ways.

Part 2: Trunk Quotes

●● Before it dies, a Douglas-fir, half a millennium old, will send its storehouse of chemicals back down into its roots and out through its fungal partners, donating its riches to the community pool in a last will and testament. We might well call these ancient benefactors *giving trees*.

The reading public needs such a phrase to make the miracle a little more vivid, visible. It's something she learned long ago from her father: people see better what looks like them. *Giving trees* is something any generous person can understand and love.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 220-221

Explanation and Analysis

The first paragraph of this quotation comes from Patricia Westerford's book *The Secret Forest*, and the second paragraph describes how the readers of her book will go on to relate to this passage.

This quotation incorporates many of the most important elements of *The Overstory*. Patricia's book offers new scientific knowledge about trees that readers might not be aware of. At the same time, her language humanizes trees as well, or at least reveals them as conscious beings with their own desires. The second paragraph then acts as a commentary on human psychology, and why it is so difficult for us to see other beings as intelligent and therefore equally as valuable as we are. The best way to do this, the passage and *The Overstory* as a whole suggest, is to use storytelling and art to widen people's limited perspectives with a potent phrase or image. Finally, the description of Douglas-firs as "giving trees," combined with other passages in Patricia's book, offers a different view of nature than the usual survival-of-the-fittest bloodshed and competition. If forests can exist as interdependent systems full of cooperation and communication, then human society could reorganize itself to follow this model as well.

“I'd like to determine the personality factors that make it possible for some individuals to wonder how everyone can be so blind . . .”

“...while everyone else is still trying to stabilize in-group loyalties. Now we get somewhere. This could be a topic. With *much* more narrowing and definition. You could look at the next step in this same historical progression of consciousness. Study those people who support a position that any reasonable person in our society thinks is crazy.”

“For instance?”

“We're living at a time when claims are being made for a moral authority that lies beyond the human. [...] You've seen the news. People up and down this coast are risking their lives for plants. I read a story last week—a man who had his legs sheared off by a machine he tried to chain himself to.”

Adam *has* seen the stories, but he ignored them. Now he can't see why. “Plant rights? Plant personhood.” A boy he knew once jumped into a hole and risked live burial to protect his unborn brother's sapling from harm. That boy is dead. “I hate activists.”

Related Characters: Professor Mieke Van Dijk, Adam Appich/Maple (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

Here Adam Appich, now a psychology graduate student at UC Santa Cruz, talks with his advisor, Professor Mieke Van Dijk, about a topic for his dissertation. Together they narrow down a topic—Adam should study environmental activists, or people who think that beings other than humans also deserve rights and that there is a “moral authority that lies beyond the human.”

Since high school, Adam has been interested in human bias and groupthink, and how we act against our own interests if everyone else around us is also doing so. This also means studying those who *don't* go along with the group, and what it is that makes them immune from “in-group loyalties” even when it means being labeled crazy or dangerous. At this point, Adam is not yet considering which position might actually be the correct, logical, or moral one, but is still only interested in the psychology behind whatever belief system an individual might adhere to. He hasn't held any sincere convictions since childhood, as here he remembers how he once injured himself trying to save a tree and contrasts that boy with his current jaded self.

Plot-wise, this psych study is also what leads Adam to the other characters of *The Overstory*, who are the ones “risking

their lives for plants” elsewhere on the West Coast.

“The opposing counsel asks whether preserving slightly larger forest tracts is worth the millions of dollars it costs people. The judge asks for numbers. The opposition sums up the opportunity loss—the crippling expense of not cutting down trees.

The judge asks Dr. Westerford to respond. She frowns. “Rot adds value to a forest. The forests here are the richest collections of biomass anywhere. Streams in old growth have five to ten times more fish. People could make more money harvesting mushrooms and fish and other edibles, year after year, than they do by clear-cutting every half dozen decades.”

“Really? Or is that a metaphor?”

“We have the numbers.”

“Then why doesn't the market respond?”

Because ecosystems tend toward diversity, and markets do the opposite. But she's smart enough not to say this.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia “Patty” Westerford, The Judge (speaker)

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 282-283

Explanation and Analysis

Patricia is invited to act as an expert educating witness on a trial about logging rights on federal lands. Here, she makes the argument that old-growth forests are superior to tree farms (new trees planted in the wake of clear-cutting) not just in their moral or spiritual value, but even in terms of economic profitability.

Elsewhere in her testimony, Patricia appeals to the judge's emotions—but here, she limits herself to speaking the language of business, the law, and capitalism. Because the law only considers human beings as deserving of rights (a limitation critiqued elsewhere in *The Overstory*), to appeal to the law, Patricia must speak its language, which means only considering what is best for humanity. Her point here then shows that clear-cutting forests is not just morally wrong but also economically unsound in the long term. Later in the book, this is referred to as the “suicide economy”: our rapid rate of growth and exploitation of nature that is entirely unsustainable and hurtling us toward our own destruction. This isn't even a question of human interests versus nature, but of human interests being self-destructive. The only

benefit that our current lifestyle offers is immediate gratification, at the expense of long-term gain and even survival.

Unfortunately, human nature and our current economic systems prevent much of anything from changing about this current disastrous cycle. Without concrete incentives to radically restructure society, the book suggests, people will always gravitate toward short-term profits, especially as long as everyone else around them is doing the same thing.

☞ "We're not saying don't cut anything." She dangles her arm, reaching out to the men from two hundred feet away.

"We're saying, cut like it's a gift, not like you've earned it. Nobody likes to take more gift than they need. And *this* tree? This tree would be a gift so big, it would be like Jesus coming down and..."

She trickles off on a thought that Watchman has at the same moment. *Been there. Felled that, too.*

Related Characters: Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenair (speaker), Nicholas Hoel/Watchman

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 288-289

Explanation and Analysis

While Olivia and Nick are camped among the branches of the redwood Mimas, they regularly argue with the loggers at the base of the enormous tree. In this exchange, the loggers accuse the two activists of hating people and of being crazy, and here Olivia offers a potential change of mindset regarding trees and our use of lumber.

The idea to “cut like it’s a gift” is one possible response to our current crisis that Powers seems to advocate in *The Overstory*. Acting on this idea would mean not only changing our economy’s constant demand for cheap lumber. It would also mean reimagining our relationship to trees and nature as a whole and recognizing that trees are not just commodities to be exploited but living, intelligent beings who share this planet with us. Humans do need to use wood, Powers admits, but we could certainly harvest it more thoughtfully than we do now. At the same time, the book seems to acknowledge that such a drastic change is unlikely to happen considering all that we know about history and human nature. The passage uses Jesus as an example of this, comparing him to Mimas as a similarly generous being who was likewise “felled” by greedy,

frightened, and shortsighted people.

☞ "People are so beautiful."

He turns to her, horrified. But he's a man of faith, and waits to hear whatever explanation she cares to deliver. And, *Yes*, she thinks. The thought makes her stubborn. *Yes: beautiful*. And doomed. Which is why she has never been able to live among them.

"Hopelessness makes them determined. Nothing's more beautiful than that."

"You think we're hopeless?"

"Den. How is extraction ever going to stop? It can't even slow down. The only thing we know how to do is grow. Grow harder; grow faster. More than last year. Growth, all the way up to the cliff and over. No other possibility."

"I see."

Clearly he doesn't. But his willingness to lie for her also breaks her heart. She would tell him—how the towering, teetering pyramid of large living things is toppling down already, in slow motion, under the huge, swift kick that has dislodged the planetary system. The great cycles of air and water are breaking. The Tree of Life will fall again, collapse into a stump of invertebrates, tough ground cover, and bacteria, unless man...Unless man.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia “Patty” Westerford, Dennis Ward (speaker), Mimi Ma/Mulberry

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 304-305

Explanation and Analysis

Dennis has just told Patricia about the environmental protesters (including Duggie and Mimi) being pepper-sprayed in the eyes by police. Patricia and Dennis both acknowledge the tragedy and horror of the situation, and then they have the exchange related here.

This passage offers another vocalization of Powers’s belief that the “Tree of Life” itself has been upended by human activity, and only humans can stop or even slow this disaster—yet everything we know about human nature and psychology suggests that we will not stop growing and exploiting nature as long as this system offers immediate profits and gratification. Both Patricia and *The Overstory* often take the pessimistic view that humanity is essentially doomed, driven toward extinction by its own actions and

bringing much of the rest of life on Earth with it. At the same time, the book finds beauty and meaning in the actions of individual people. As she states here, Patricia—who has always found trees beautiful but often struggled to live among her own species—sees beauty in the desperate actions of the protesters, who continue to take drastic action even when things seem hopeless.

☛ "I want to start a seed bank. There are half as many trees in the world as there were before we came down out of them. [...] Tens of thousands of trees we know nothing about. Species we've barely classified. Like burning down the library, art museum, pharmacy, and hall of records, all at once."

"You want to start an ark."


She smiles at the word, but shrugs. It's as good as any. "I want to start an ark."

"Where you can keep . . ." The strangeness of the idea gets him. A vault to store a few hundred million years of tinkering. Hand on the car door, he fixes on something high up in a cedar. "What . . . would you do with them? When would they ever...?"

"Den, I don't know. But a seed can lie dormant for thousands of years."

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford, Dennis Ward (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 305-306

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Patricia talks to her husband, Dennis, and comes up with her idea to start a seed bank. She will go on to gather seeds from all around the world and store them in a vault in Colorado, in the hopes of preserving some species before they go extinct.

Patricia's words in the first paragraph illustrate the devastating loss that deforestation is causing to our planet. This is evidenced in the way that she perceives trees as having multiple kinds of value: like a "library, art museum, pharmacy, and hall of records, all at once," not to mention what she already knows about their intelligence and ability to communicate as conscious beings. Several times in *The Overstory*, the narrative lingers on the great tragedy that is the loss of Earth's forests, and here that loss is framed in

explicitly human terms as all the resources and wisdom that we are throwing away.

In answer to this state of affairs, Patricia decides to take a concrete form of action by starting her seed bank, saving the seeds for the possibility that at least *something* will change in the future. Patricia has little hope for the survival of humanity but great faith in the patience of trees and the limitless potential of seeds.

☛ "It's so simple," she says. "So obvious. Exponential growth inside a finite system leads to collapse. But people don't see it. So *the authority of people is bankrupt*." Maidenhair fixes him with a look between interest and pity. Adam just wants the cradle to stop rocking. "Is the house on fire?"

A shrug. A sideways pull of the lips. "Yes."

"And you want to observe the handful of people who're screaming, *Put it out*, when everyone else is happy watching things burn."

A minute ago, this woman was the subject of Adam's observational study. Now he wants to confide in her. "It has a name. We call it the bystander effect. I once let my professor die because no one else in the lecture hall stood up. The larger the group . . ."

"...the harder it is to cry, *Fire?*"

"Because if there were a real problem, surely someone—"

"—lots of people would already have—"

Related Characters: Nicholas Hoel/Watchman, Adam Appich/Maple, Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenhair (speaker), Rubin Rabinowski

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

Adam Appich has just climbed up into the redwood tree Mimas to interview Nick and Olivia for his psychological study. They quickly push aside Adam's official questionnaire and begin asking him piercing questions like those described in this passage.


This rapid-fire exchange of dialogue is another example of Richard Powers using his characters' voices to make arguments for him. Olivia, Nick, and Adam reiterate some of *The Overstory's* main points: that humanity's current rate of growth is unsustainable, and the reason that more people aren't panicking about this fact is because the "bystander

effect” is taking place on a massive, even global scale. Adam uses his own experience with the bystander effect—letting his professor die in the middle of a lecture because no one else acted either—and lets himself step beyond the limits of his study and consider what Nick and Olivia are really fighting for. It is among the branches of Mimas that Adam experiences an awakening, no longer holding himself at a distance from the activists he studies. Instead, he’s actually coming to believe that *they* are the “sane” ones, and that the rest of humanity is deluding itself by ignoring the disaster unfolding all around us. It is this return to the sincere convictions of his childhood that inspires Adam to join the activists that he once scorned.

On his fourth night in the cell, Nick dreams about the Hoel family chestnut. He watches it, sped up thirty-two million times, reveal again its invisible plan. He remembers, in his sleep, on the cot’s thin mattress, the way the time-lapse tree waved its swelling arms. The way those arms tested, explored, aligned in the light, writing messages in the air. In that dream, the trees laugh at them. *Save us? What a human thing to do.* Even the laugh takes years.

Related Characters: Nicholas Hoel/Watchman

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

Nick, Olivia, and Adam have been driven down from Mimas and the great redwood is finally cut down. The three then spend several nights in jail, though they haven’t been charged with anything, and on his fourth night Nick has the dream that this passage relates.

Nick’s dream brings back the image of the Hoel chestnut tree and the photo book portraying its growth. This symbol again illustrates the way that time can pass differently from different perspectives: the chestnut’s years of growth are condensed into a few seconds of photographs, and alternately, its brief laughter in the dream takes years in human time. The dream also shows trees as having consciousness and desires of their own that are sometimes beyond human understanding. The novel’s characters are trying to save the trees from destruction, but in the dream, the chestnut tree just laughs at this, implying that even their sincerest convictions are still limited in their scope, and

humans might not be the only ones with agency and power in this situation. Again, the book tries to get readers to broaden their views of what consciousness means, and what makes a meaningful story—even something entirely beyond the limits of humanity itself.

“You’re a psychologist,” Mimi says to the recruit. “How do we convince people that we’re right?”

The newest Cascadian takes the bait. “The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story.”

Maidenhair tells that story that the rest of the campfire knows by heart. First she was dead, and there was nothing. Then she came back, and there was everything, with beings of light telling her how the most wondrous products of four billion years of life needed her help.

Related Characters: Adam Appich/Maple, Mimi Ma/Mulberry (speaker), Nicholas Hoel/Watchman, Douglas “Doggie” Pavlicek/Doug-fir, Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenhair

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 336

Explanation and Analysis

Adam Appich has just joined the encampment of activists that includes Olivia, Nick, Doggie, and Mimi. His answer to Mimi’s question here is a very important line of dialogue in *The Overstory*.


Adam’s character generally highlights the flaws in human nature and psychology, and here that means the idea that we are often illogical and unlikely to change our minds even when presented with facts and reasoned arguments. Something that *can* change minds, however, is a “good story.” Olivia then goes on to tell her own unique story, offering an immediate example of how this is true, as she has inspired so many of the other characters in their activist work.

At the same time, Adam’s statement here is also an example of Powers commenting on his own project in writing *The Overstory*. He wants to convince readers that we need to drastically change our way of life on Earth, but instead of writing a non-fiction book about tree intelligence and the environmental crisis (which, as Adam says here, is unlikely to change many people’s minds), he has written a novel. Thus, he’s trying to make the struggle for Earth a “good story” that people will better relate to and remember.

●● He looks up at the peaked roof of the construction office and thinks, *What the hell am I doing?* The clarity of recent weeks, the sudden waking from sleepwalk, his certainty that the world has been stolen and the atmosphere trashed for the shortest of short-term gains, the sense that he must do all he can to fight for the living world's most wondrous creatures: all these abandon Adam, and he's left in the insanity of denying the bedrock of human existence. Property and mastery: nothing else counts. Earth will be monetized until all trees grow in straight lines, three people own all seven continents, and every large organism is bred to be slaughtered.

Related Characters: Neelay Mehta, Adam Appich/Maple

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 347-348

Explanation and Analysis

In the middle of the group's final act of arson, Adam experiences the moment of crippling doubt that is described in this passage. He wavers between the sense of hope and purpose that has driven his recent efforts and despair that all of it is in vain, and human nature fundamentally cannot change. Everything he knows about human psychology seems to contradict his efforts—and indeed, his doomsday scenario that “Earth will be monetized” seems more likely than the alternative, that we will be able to radically restructure society and the economy in time to avoid disaster. Nonetheless, he continues to take action. This echoes *The Overstory's* often pessimistic view of humanity's future, but also how its support of individuals doing whatever they can to make things better; the only other option, the novel suggests, is to despair. The word “mastery” in this passage is also noteworthy, as it echoing Neelay's game that exploits the same aspect of the human psyche: the desire for constant control and growth.

●● “How long can it last?”


“Not long,” he promises.

She claws at him, an animal falling from a great height. Then she calms again. “But not this? This will never end—what we have. Right?”

He waits too long, and time replies for him. She struggles for a few seconds to hear the answer, before softening into whatever happens next.

Related Characters: Nicholas Hoel/Watchman, Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenhair (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 352

Explanation and Analysis

During the group's last act of arson, one of the explosive devices goes off early, mortally injuring Olivia. In this passage, she speaks her last words to Nick and then dies, marking the climax of *The Overstory*.

Olivia's last question will haunt Nick for the rest of his life, and the meaning of her words is left ambiguous in the narrative. She might be asking about the group and their work on behalf of the environment, and if her death will cause them to give up hope. Alternately, she might be asking about her relationship with Nick, as the two have grown extremely close ever since their seemingly preordained meeting beneath the Hoel chestnut tree. Later, Nick comes to believe that Olivia's words refer to the life force itself, the beings that were speaking to her and that will continue on after humanity is gone. All of these possibilities connect again to the idea of time and how its passing is relative to everyone and everything. What is “not long” and what will “never end” are both concepts that might be very different for a human being and for a tree, and especially for the life force of the Earth itself.

Part 3: Crown Quotes

●● Species disappear. Patricia writes of them. Too many species to count. Reefs bleach and wetlands dry. Things are going lost that have not yet been found. Kinds of life vanish a thousand times faster than the baseline extinction rate. Forest larger than most countries turns to farmland. *Look at the life around you; now delete half of what you see.*

More people are born in twenty years than were alive in the year of Douglas's birth.

Nick hides and works. What's twenty years, to work that's slower than trees?

We are not, one of Adam's papers proves, wired to see slow, background change, when something bright and colorful is waving in our faces.

Related Characters: Nicholas Hoel/Watchman, Dr. Patricia “Patty” Westerford, Douglas “Dougie” Pavlicek/Doug-fir

(speaker), Adam Appich/Maple

Related Themes:



Page Number: 374

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation touches on several of *The Overstory*'s characters as twenty years pass after Olivia's death and the subsequent scattering of the group. In its structure, the passage again places the flow of time in perspective by juxtaposing the characters' individual experiences against the "story" of all life on Earth, which at this point is mostly a story of nature's rapid destruction and humanity's explosive growth. The facts presented here highlight the disastrous rate of extinction, and the book again laments the loss of parts of life that we haven't even discovered yet.

The speed of this catastrophe is so great that it almost catches up to the usual human perception of time—but not quite, as Adam's paper is again a reminder of our psychological limitations. No matter how disastrous its consequences, we are statistically unlikely to see "slow, background change" when something more immediately gratifying is constantly distracting us. Once again, then, *The Overstory* seeks to awaken its readers to that background change by placing it within the context of a story about human beings and their relationship to nature.

Explanation and Analysis

Over the years after Ray's brain aneurysm, he and Dorothy develop new routines together, including Dorothy reading aloud to him for hours every day. They make their way through hundreds of novels, and gradually Ray comes to the realization about the stories that is expressed in this passage.

As his brain has been changed in the aftermath of his aneurysm, Ray seems to experience time and gain a perspective that is more like a tree than a human being. This is why he can find so much drama in just watching things grow in his backyard for hours at a time, and it's also why he can look beyond the limitations of the novels that Dorothy now reads aloud to him and see that they are all essentially about the same thing: human beings and their struggles with one another.

Then, the last sentence of this passage is Powers showing his hand and commenting on his own goal in writing *The Overstory*. He states directly (through Ray's narrative and thoughts) that life is about so much more than the subject of these novels. In *The Overstory*, then, Powers himself is literally trying to "make the contest for the *world* seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people." Whether readers see this as literature, propaganda, or a mixture of the two, he clearly feels that it is the best moral action he can take as a writer.

☛ The books diverge and radiate, as fluid as finches on isolated islands. But they share a core so obvious it passes for given. Every one imagines that fear and anger, violence and desire, rage laced with the surprise capacity to forgive—*character*—is all that matters in the end. It's a child's creed, of course, just one small step up from the belief that the Creator of the Universe would care to dole out sentences like a judge in federal court. To be human is to confuse a satisfying story with a meaningful one, and to mistake life for something huge with two legs. No: life is mobilized on a vastly larger scale, and the world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the *world* seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people.

Related Characters: Dorothy Cazaly Brinkman, Ray Brinkman

Related Themes:



Page Number: 382-383

☛ One passage keeps springing back, every time fear or scientific rigor makes her prune it. *Trees know when we're close by. The chemistry of their roots and the perfumes their leaves pump out change when we're near. . . . When you feel good after a walk in the woods, it may be that certain species are bribing you. So many wonder drugs have come from trees, and we haven't yet scratched the surface of the offerings. Trees have long been trying to reach us. But they speak on frequencies too low for people to hear.*


[...]

As soon as she seals the carton with packing tape, she cracks it open again. The last line of the last chapter is still wrong. She looks at what she has, although the sentence has long since burned itself into permanent memory. *With luck, some of those seeds will remain viable, inside controlled vaults in the side of a Colorado mountain, until the day when watchful people can return them to the ground.* She purses her lips, and pens an addendum. *If not, other experiments will go on running themselves, long after people are gone.*

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford

(speaker)

Related Themes:      

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 424-425

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Patricia is finishing and sending off her second book, which is suggested to be more poetic, abstract, and fundamentally pessimistic than her bestselling work *The Secret Forest*. Once again, Patricia's character and her writings combine many of the most important themes of *The Overstory*. The first paragraph she writes here highlights trees as intelligent beings actively trying to communicate with us, though we are generally unable to hear them (an exception being some of the novel's protagonists, who can indeed tune into these "low frequencies" at certain times).

The last lines of Patricia's book then offer her vision of the future. She tries to be hopeful at first, anticipating "watchful" people who will plant her seeds and help regrow the Earth. The word "watchful" is especially important here, as *The Overstory* often emphasizes the qualities of observation and attention as belonging both to trees and the people close to them. Ultimately, Patricia forces herself to be more realistic, however, and accept that people are unlikely to truly become more watchful in future generations. Humanity itself is unlikely to survive, she believes, but life itself will continue—and it, too, has its own desires, intelligence, and ability to keep running "experiments." This is a recurring idea in *The Overstory*: it presents dire predictions about the future of humanity, but alongside a sense of hope that nature will outlast us and continue to adapt and thrive.

“A forest knows things. They wire themselves up underground. There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren't shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link enough trees together, and a forest grows *aware*.”

Her words sound far away, cork-lined and underwater. Either both her hearing aids have died at once or her childhood deafness has chosen this moment to come back.

“We scientists are taught never to look for ourselves in other species. So we make sure nothing looks like us! Until a short while ago, we didn't even let chimpanzees have consciousness, let alone dogs or dolphins. Only man, you see: only man could know enough to *want* things. But believe me: trees want something from us, just as we've always wanted things from them. This isn't mystical. The 'environment' is alive—a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other.”

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia “Patty” Westerford (speaker), Neelay Mehta, Mimi Ma/Mulberry

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 453-454

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Patricia gives her last and most important speech, in front of a group of scientific luminaries and other notable figures at a conference called “Home Repair: Countering a Warming World.” Mimi Ma and Neelay Mehta are also in the crowd, marking the first time these characters have any direct contact with each other. Patricia begins her speech with these paragraphs, describing all that we have learned about trees and how they communicate.

Patricia's words again serve as part of *The Overstory*'s goal of presenting its readers with scientific information in the format of a novel, trying to reach people by way of “a good story” rather than dry data and logic. In her second paragraph of dialogue, Patricia acts as Powers's mouthpiece once more, commenting on how limited humans' idea of intelligence is and how this has had disastrous consequences for other species. *The Overstory* wants its readers not just to see trees as intelligent beings, but life itself as something that has desires—and these desires include what it wants for humanity. “This isn't mystical,” Powers claims, but scientific.

●● The single best thing you can do for the world. It occurs to her: The problem begins with that word *world*. It means two such opposite things. The real one we cannot see. The invented one we can't escape. She lifts the glass and hears her father read out loud: *Let me sing to you now, about how people turn into other things.*

Neelay's shouts come too late to break the room's spell. The speaker raises her glass, and the world splits. Down one branch, she lifts the glass to her lips, toasts the room—*To Tachigali versicolor*—and drinks. Down another branch, this one, she shouts, "Here's to unsuicide," and flings the cup of swirling green over the gasping audience. She bumps the podium, backs away, and stumbles into the wings, leaving the room to stare at an empty stage.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford (speaker), Dennis Ward, Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenair, Neelay Mehta

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 466

Explanation and Analysis

Patricia finishes her speech, planning to commit suicide onstage by drinking a poison she has made from mixing various extracts from trees. Everyone in the crowd seems to know what she is doing, but no one acts except for Neelay. Instead of going through with her suicide, however, Patricia changes her mind at the last second. This passage acts as a second climax to *The Overstory* after Olivia's death, and it contains most of the book's major themes.

First, the scene here touches on human psychology and the "bystander effect." No one in the crowd acts to stop Patricia's suicide, going along with the idea that we are unlikely to take action if no one else in our group is doing so. Neelay alone seems immune to this, as (like *The Overstory's* other protagonists) he is willing to go against the crowd and make trouble. Patricia also thinks about the limitations of human psychology at the podium, noting that our shared idea of "the world" is the product of mass invention and delusion (which is also the source of the bystander effect) and is different from what is *actually* the world—something so much larger than we allow ourselves to see.

The passage also illustrates the themes of time and branching, as Patricia experiences a real split in time at the moment she is about to drink the poison. There is one branch in which she dies, and one in which she doesn't—again, time is presented not as a straight line but as something more like a tree, growing outwards and branching upwards with past, present, and future able to

exist simultaneously.

Finally, the passage deals with *The Overstory's* main goal: how we can better relate to our world and move forward in the midst of environmental disaster. No longer bound to humanity after Dennis's death, Patricia truly thinks that the best thing humans can do for the world—the keynote of the conference—is quite simply to die. She believes that life will continue on without us, as things are always changing into other things (referenced here with the line from Ovid that has stuck with her since childhood). At the last second, Patricia seems to change her mind, however, deciding that we *can* change and survive if we can learn to "unsuicide." This word calls back to the message that Nick painted to accompany one of the group's arson attacks: "NO TO THE SUICIDE ECONOMY." As *The Overstory* has made abundantly clear, our current rate of growth is unsustainable and leading toward our own extinction—so to "unsuicide," we will need to drastically change how we live on Earth.


Part 4: Seeds Quotes

●● The words Neelay writes add to a growing organism, one that has just now begun to add to itself. At other screens in other cities, all the best coders that several hundred million dollars can hire contribute to the work in progress. Their brand-new venture into cooperation is off to the most remarkable beginning. Already their creatures swallow up whole continents of data, finding in them the most surprising patterns. Nothing needs to start from scratch. There's so much digital germplasm already in the public domain.

The coders tell the listeners nothing except how to look. Then the new creations head off to scout the globe, and the code spreads outward. New theories, new offspring, and more evolving species, all of them sharing a single goal: to find out how big life is, how connected, and what it would take for people to unsuicide. The Earth has become again the deepest, finest game, and the learners just its latest players.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford, Neelay Mehta

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 482

Explanation and Analysis

Neelay has turned away from his wildly successful *Mastery* franchise to start a new game, losing his company in the process but feeling happier than he has in years. Originally inspired and seemingly spoken to by the trees at Stanford University's inner quad, he has come to realize that *Mastery* was not really the game that the trees wanted him to make, as it was built around the human desire to compete and to control everything that it can.

Instead, Neelay now sets to work on a new game, one that will be based not on competition and mastery but on "cooperation"—this game will be about the real Earth and all the complex connections between the organisms that live there. In exploring and building this game its players will learn to "un suicide"—the term that Patricia used to end her speech, at which Neelay himself was present.

In building this game, Neelay has also helped create a new form of life: artificial intelligence. This is part of the book's ideas about life existing beyond the limits of humanity, and it's an example of how the life force might evolve past us, as life is always transforming and adapting. Neelay's bots are not limited by human bias and so are able to observe everything they can about life on Earth, which is already infinitely more complex than any role-playing game.

☛ Although he should just shut up, so much time has passed since Nick has had the luxury of saying anything to anyone that he can't resist. His hand goes out, gesturing toward the conifers. "It amazes me how much they say, when you let them. They're not that hard to hear."

The man chuckles. "We've been trying to tell you that since 1492."


The man has jerked meat. Nick doles out the last of his fruit and nuts. "I'm going to have to think about restocking soon."

For some reason, his colleague finds this funny, too. The man swivels his head around the woods as if there were forage everywhere. As if people could live here, and die, with just a little looking and listening. From nowhere, in a heartbeat, Nick understands what Maidenhair's voices must always have meant. *The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help.*

Not them; us. Help from all quarters.

Related Characters: Nicholas Hoel/Watchman, The Man in the Red Plaid Coat (speaker)

Related Themes:      

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 493

Explanation and Analysis

Nick is out in the woods somewhere far north, working on his latest art project: the word "STILL" written out in fallen trees, and meant to be scene from space. A man in a red plaid shirt finds him and wordlessly starts to help him work, and then they have the conversation described here.

The mention of 1492, the year that Christopher Columbus first came to the Americas, implies that the man in the plaid has Native heritage (since he seems to be referencing the effects that European colonization had on Native Americans). Elsewhere, *The Overstory* has suggested that Indigenous people have a much healthier relationship to nature than modern capitalist societies, and that they could offer examples of alternate ways of living that would be less destructive. The man illustrates this on an individual level by commenting on the how the trees communicate, and the abundance present in a forest that doesn't require destroying it to enjoy.

Nick then has an important realization about Olivia's communication with the beings of light: the "most wondrous products of four billion years of life" that needed saving were not trees, but *people*. This calls back to Nick's dream about the Hoel chestnut tree, in which the tree laughed at humanity for thinking that the trees needed saving. Once again, *The Overstory* seeks to make life itself a conscious character, one with its own plans and desires that include but also extend beyond humanity. Our job, then, is to discover what life wants and to work within its plan, rather than assuming that we alone have intelligence, value, and power.

☛ In silence, he walks his lifelong partner through old and central principles of jurisprudence, one syllable at a time. Stand your ground. The castle doctrine. Self-help.

If you could save yourself, your wife, your child, or even a stranger by burning something down, the law allows you. If someone breaks into your home and starts destroying it, you may stop them however you need to.

[...]

He can find no way to say what so badly needs saying. *Our home has been broken into. Our lives are being endangered. The law allows for all necessary force against unlawful and imminent harm.*

[...]

In mounting excitement, he sees how he must win the case. Life will cook; the seas will rise. The planet's lungs will be ripped out. And the law will let this happen, because harm was never imminent enough. *Imminent*, at the speed of people, is too late. The law must judge *imminent* at the speed of trees.

Related Characters: Ray Brinkman (speaker), Adam Appich/Maple, Dorothy Cazaly Brinkman

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 497-498

Explanation and Analysis

Dorothy reads aloud the news story about Adam being sentenced to one hundred and forty years in prison, and Ray has his own moment of enlightenment about the law that is described here.

Ray's character is often used to critique the limitations of the law and human ideas of what is valuable and what has rights. Here, he comes to the realization that the law's limitations are part of what is allowing the human race to destroy itself. Because of this, the law's worldview must be radically changed to judge the entire planet as the "property" that must be defended at all costs. It must also change its perspective on time, particularly in regard to what "imminent harm" is. The only alternative, the passage suggests, is the disaster that is also described here, all of which will happen legally if nothing changes about our fundamental systems of law.

Unfortunately, Ray is unable to articulate any of this to Dorothy (or argue before a jury and defend Adam). His brain aneurysm, which is the very thing that has helped him to take such a broad view of life and time, is the same thing that makes him unable to communicate with other human beings. In this way, Ray is also like a tree, trying to reach out to people but moving so slowly that they don't even see it.


☛ *There are seeds that need fire. Seeds that need freezing. Seeds that need to be swallowed, etched in digestive acid, expelled as waste. Seeds that must be smashed open before they'll germinate.*

A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still.

She sees and hears this by direct gathering, through her limbs. The fires will come, despite all efforts, the blight and windthrow and floods. Then the Earth will become another thing, and people will learn it all over again. The vaults of seed banks will be thrown open. Second growth will rush back in, supple, loud, and testing all possibilities. Webs of forest will swell with species shot through in shadow and dappled by new design. Each streak of color on the carpeted Earth will rebuild its pollinators. Fish will surge again up all the watersheds, stacking themselves as thick as cordwood through the rivers, thousands per mile. Once *the real world* ends.

Related Characters: Dr. Patricia "Patty" Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenhair, Mimi Ma/Mulberry

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 499-500

Explanation and Analysis

Mimi Ma sits under a pine tree in Dolores Park and receives her own kind of enlightenment, becoming able to hear signals from the trees around her and seemingly experiencing the same kind of communication that Olivia did after her electrocution.

The trees offer Mimi a vision of hope for the future of life on Earth—though it is a world without humanity. Elsewhere, *The Overstory* has commented that what we think of as the "real world" is just our shared delusion as a society, the idea that humans alone have intelligence and therefore value and power over everything else on Earth. It is only once this delusion is shattered—which seems to be by our own extinction, as we have shown little capacity for change—that life itself will recover and thrive once more.

As Patricia herself believed, the seed banks are unlikely to be opened by a future race of more enlightened human beings, but by something else entirely, as the world continues to transform and adapt. The book then uses the language of abundance and beauty to make this future seem bright indeed, even if none of us will be around to see it.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: ROOTS

In a city park, an unnamed woman sits leaning against a pine tree. “Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies,” and she can hear the pine tree speaking to her. The tree speaks in ambiguous phrases, saying that “sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering,” and that “a thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still.” The woman continues listening and hears signals from all the other trees around her in the park.

This mysterious opening passage introduces The Overstory’s use of fantastical elements, as the unnamed woman receives messages from the trees around her. The phrases she hears send the message that non-sentient elements of nature (like the sun or water) are “worth answering,” and that one can have a wide variety of experiences by “holding still,” like a tree does. In other words, the trees let the woman know that nature is worth paying attention to, and that people can learn from trees if they’re willing to slow down and see things from a different perspective. These statements immediately introduce the idea that trees have intelligence and purpose of their own, and they also have their own sense of time.



More and more trees join the chorus, even from very far away. Together they tell the woman that humans don’t perceive trees in the right way. While humans only perceive what is above the ground, “there’s always as much belowground as above.” Finally, the trees say, “If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we’d drown you in meaning.” Then the pine tree tells her to just “listen.”

This passage suggests that humanity’s perception of trees (and all other life forms besides our own) is flawed and incomplete, as we limit our ideas of intelligence and consciousness. Further, it implies that there is another type of “meaning” beyond human consciousness, one that requires the mind to become a “greener thing”—that is, more like a tree—in order to comprehend it.



PART 1: ROOTS—NICHOLAS HOEL

All along the East Coast of the United States, it is “the time of **chestnuts**.” Jørgen Hoel, a recent Norwegian immigrant to Brooklyn, joins a group who are throwing stones at the trunks of chestnut trees to make the nuts fall. Later, he and his friends roast the chestnuts and enjoy their bounty. That night, Jørgen proposes to an Irish girl named Vi Powys.

The main events of The Overstory begin with a sweeping summary of one family (the Hoels) over the course of more than a century, yet all of it is narrated in the present tense. This immediately disrupts usual notions of narrative time, as what takes place centuries ago or over the course of decades is presented as simultaneously occurring in an ever-expanding present. Beginning in the mid-1800s, the book presents an earlier United States that’s rich with the bounty of chestnut trees.



Jørgen and Vi get married. Two months later, they become U.S. citizens, and soon they decide to head west, feeling a “hunger for the uncut world.” They move to the new state of Iowa and start farming. Their lives are hard, and the winter is harsh, but they keep working. Vi gets pregnant in the spring. In May, Jørgen finds six **chestnuts** in his pocket from the day he proposed, and he plants them. The narrator notes that they are hundreds of miles west of the tree’s native range.

The Hoels’ first child dies as a baby, but Jørgen and Vi go on to have many more children. Years pass, and Jørgen keeps fighting to keep his farm and his **chestnut** seedlings alive. One fails to sprout, one is killed in the winter of 1862, and one is accidentally killed by the oldest son John, who strips off its leaves to use as play money. Jørgen beats the boy when he finds out what he did. There is a draft in 1863, but Jørgen is deferred, as he has “a smaller country to save.”

Meanwhile in Brooklyn, a “poet-nurse to the Union” is writing about “A leaf of grass,” though the narrator notes that Jørgen will never read his words. On the Hoel farm, the three surviving **chestnut trees** keep growing, and Jørgen dreams of their future bounty of chestnuts. But one tree dies that year.

More years pass, and lightning strikes one of the **chestnut trees**, which burns to the ground. The last chestnut keeps growing and flowering, though now it has no mate for hundreds of miles. Despite this, the tree continues on with its “ancient formula: *Keep still. Wait.*”

Decades pass, and many of the Hoel children marry and move away from home. John remains to work the farm, buying a new tractor and becoming enthralled with “speed, progress, and machines.” In 1901, Jørgen lies dying in his bedroom, looking out the window at the last **chestnut tree** as his granddaughter attends to him. He dies soon after, and John Hoel buries him beneath the chestnut.

The book’s omniscient narrator frequently switches between describing the characters and commenting on facts (usually about nature) beyond their immediate perspective. The human characters are not always the center of attention, as the book seeks to make nature itself a character. The Hoels’ move west is an example of the nearly universal human desire to grow and expand, and particularly to settle in places that are “uncut” or undeveloped by others.



The war mentioned here is the American Civil War. (The “smaller country to save” likely refers to the American frontier, or the Western territories that were neither Union nor Confederate states.) The book follows two parallel storylines to highlight how time moves differently for humans and trees: new generations of Hoels appear as the chestnut trees are still experiencing their own version of childhood. It is also telling that John kills the tree to use its leaves as play money—highlighting that our real (paper) money also comes from trees, and that so often forests are destroyed entirely in the name of profit.



The “poet-nurse” is Walt Whitman, the author of the poetry collection Leaves of Grass. Whitman’s collection connects to The Overstory in that both books honor nature and explore humanity’s interconnectedness with everything else in the universe. Again, the narrator highlights the narrow view of each individual character by pointing out the larger web of connections that they cannot see.



The chestnut tree does not move or think like humans do, but it does move, grow, and think in its own way.



The human world progresses rapidly, with an emphasis on “speed, progress, and machines,” as the chestnut tree remains the same. By now, this specific tree is inextricably bound to the history of the Hoel family in Iowa. It even becomes Jørgen’s final resting place, outliving him and remaining a constant presence even as dramatic shifts take place in the Hoels’ lives. In this context, the chestnut tree represents the idea that trees are witnesses to history in their own right, and that they experience time in a vastly different way than people do.



The **chestnut tree** becomes a “sentinel tree,” a landmark that others use to navigate in the prairie. John Hoel keeps buying new machines, and he soon purchases a Kodak No. 2 Brownie camera. He photographs many things, including the chestnut. One day John remembers the “zoopraxiscope” he bought for one of his daughters, and he comes up with an idea: to take a photo of the chestnut tree from the same spot for every month for the rest of his life. No matter the weather or his wife’s teasing, he stays true to his goal for a full year.

A zoopraxiscope was a device for showing moving pictures through a quick succession of still images. John Hoel thus hopes to achieve a similar effect through a flipbook of photographs of the chestnut tree. This project of photographing the tree every month will last for decades, and it shows a concrete connection between the experience of time for a tree and for a human family. Presumably, it will show how the chestnut tree remains a stoic and unchanging landmark for the family and for passersby, while human history continues to move at a much faster pace. As such, the photographs could inspire viewers to think about the passage of time from the tree’s perspective rather than their own.



Meanwhile, on the East Coast, a fungus that kills chestnut trees arrives via the shipment of trees from Asia. Soon, the blight has spread across state lines, killing hundreds of thousands of trees. No matter what people try, the chestnut plague quickly stretches the entire coast.

Human meddling in the usual processes of nature causes the introduction of the devastating chestnut blight. The narrator again comments on events taking place far beyond the perspective of the book’s individual characters, which speaks to the interconnectedness of people with one another and with their environment.



Back in Iowa, the Hoels haven’t heard of the chestnut disaster. John continues photographing his **chestnut tree** every month until his sudden death at age 56. His two sons take over the farm, and the younger one, Frank, decides to continue the photography ritual. When Frank is called off to fight in World War I, he entrusts his nine-year-old son Frank Jr. to continue the practice. Frank Sr. dies overseas. Meanwhile, the chestnut blight continues to spread. By 1940, four billion trees have been killed.

The chestnut tree continues its slow process of growth even as humanity causes worldwide destruction—in both the form of the chestnut blight and World War I. Meanwhile, the chestnut tree outlives another member of the Hoel family, again emphasizing the vast difference between how humans and trees experience time.



Decades pass, and Frank Jr. continues the ritual of photographing the **chestnut tree** every month. Frank suffers from a lack of imagination, and he never thinks deeply about why he keeps doing it—it’s just a “monthly exercise in noticing a thing worth no notice at all.” Soon, the Hoel chestnut is recognized as one of the few old trees to escape the blight, and it becomes a curiosity to many.

The Hoel chestnut is only able to survive because it is so many hundreds of miles away from where chestnut trees usually grow. The Overstory often highlights the importance of attention and “noticing” as a way of slowing down and better connecting with nature. Frank Jr., then, is treating the photograph project more like a menial task than a meaningful experience—the tree is “worth no notice at all” to him. Nevertheless, he carries on his father’s commitment to documenting the tree.



In 1965, the Brownie camera breaks, and Frank Jr. replaces it. Many years pass, and the **chestnut tree** keeps slowly growing while the Hoel family moves through generations. They experience the Great Depression, weddings, divorces, funerals, addictions, and scandals. “Everything a human being might call the *story*” happens beyond the frame of the chestnut photos. Eventually, most of the Hoel land (like their neighbors’ farms) is taken over by massive monocrop factories. When Frank Jr. is old and bedridden, his son Eric sets up the camera and shoots the next picture of the chestnut. He shows it to his father, who tells him to “leave that damn thing be.” Despite this, Eric doesn’t stop.

Eric’s son Nicholas Hoel is now 25 and flipping again through the book of photos of the **chestnut tree**, watching his entire family history “encoded somehow in that animated tree.” The photo book has always been his favorite family heirloom, and he can never get his fill of it. As Nick flips through the images, he also relives scenes from his own childhood: digging in the dirt with his cousins, stealing the photo book to keep poring over it, starting to sketch branches, surviving high school, going to “juvie” for six months for smoking a joint, and finally realizing that he needed to devote his life to art.

Nick remembers first telling his father that he wanted to go to art school. He was very nervous, but his father quickly accepted the situation. Nick then went off to Chicago where his view of the world broadened, but he continued to focus on drawing branches. He once even dreamed of spines growing out of the palms of his hands, and when he awoke, he realized that the image came from the photos of the **Hoel chestnut tree**.

Now 25 years old, Nick has graduated, won a prize for sculpture, and he works as a stock boy in a Chicago department store. He is back at the family farm for Christmas, and it is the day before Christmas Eve. Just he and his parents are here, along with his grandmother, who still lives on the farm; but on Christmas Eve, many more Hoels will arrive. That morning of the 23rd, Nick invites the family to go along with him to see an art exhibit in Omaha, but no one takes him up on his offer. It is very cold out, and Eric Hoel has turned on the house’s old propane heater. Nick heads out.

This passage highlights the fact that people’s idea of “the story”—that is, what is meaningful in life—is a limited one. The Overstory instead seeks to present the lives of trees and nature itself as also telling a meaningful and even compelling story. The book does this explicitly here by representing the many dramas of generations of Hoels in just a few words, and by juxtaposing this with the slow growth of the chestnut tree alongside them. Meanwhile, the death of the family farm is another sign of human destruction in the name of immediate profit.



The narrative finally arrives at its first protagonist, Nicholas (or “Nick”) Hoel. The fact that the book takes so long to get here, and instead begins with the origin of the Hoel chestnut tree, again shows the book’s goal of decentering its human characters and challenging usual notions of the passage of time. Through the book of photos, Nick becomes attuned to the relativity of time from an early age, recognizing that his entire family history is also “encoded somehow in that animated tree.”



Nick’s art is inspired by nature and also by other art about nature—namely the family photo book—and his own art will go on to inspire others. Many characters in The Overstory will become obsessed with ideas of endless branching, an image that emphasizes the complexity of the natural world and humanity’s relationship to it.



After extensive summary and flashbacks, the narrative now truly arrives at the present action for its first protagonist. Nick is divided from the rest of his family by his love of art, which is what leads him to take the trip to Omaha by himself.



It snows as Nick drives, and on his way back home from Omaha, the storm worsens. Soon he is having to inch his way along through a wall of falling snow, and after a near miss with a skidding 18-wheeler, he parks the car at a rest stop, shaken. He tries to call his family, but their phone lines are down. Nick sleeps in his car for a few hours and heads home before dawn. When he arrives, he notices that the road is unplowed, which is unusual.

Nick finally leaves the car and slogs through the snow to the house. He bursts in singing but is greeted by silence. Nick then walks through the house and finds his father, mother, and grandmother all dead, the latter two still curled up in their beds. The propane heater has been leaking toxic gas, all of it sealed inside by the well-insulated house. Nick staggers outside and falls into the snow, passing out. When he revives, he looks up and sees the branches of the **chestnut tree**.

PART 1: ROOTS—MIMI MA

It is 1948 in Shanghai, China, and Ma Sih Hsuin, an electrical engineering student, is preparing to leave for America. He sits with his father Ma Shouying, a wealthy businessman and scholar, discussing their family. They speak English—Shouying’s English is aristocratic and British, while Sih Hsuin’s is poor and awkward—and Shouying notes how far they have come. Their family is Muslim and originally from Persia, but now they run a business empire in Shanghai. Shouying then explains that Sih Hsuin must go to America because the Communists will soon arrive and destroy their family and its wealth. Sih Hsuin protests that the Americans will help them, but Shouying tells him he is being naïve.

Shouying then takes Sih Hsuin to another room where he unlocks a secret safe hidden behind a filing cabinet. Inside are many treasures. First, Shouying removes **three jade rings**, each intricately carved to show three different trees. “Look the color!” Sih Hsuin exclaims when he sees them. He examines their incredible artistry as Shouying speaks. “You live between three trees,” he says. Behind is the tree of the past: the Lote tree, a sacred tree in the Quran and a sign of their family’s Persian history. In front is the tree of the future: Fusang, a mulberry tree in a magical land to the East. “You’re off to Fusang now,” Shouying tells his son.

The unplowed road is the first hint that something is wrong. Nick knows that his family members, the descendants of frontier farmers, are usually hard and fastidious workers.



This horrifying scene is seemingly the end of the Hoel family saga, as only Nick now survives of his immediate family. Once again, this event—which is devastating for the human characters—is juxtaposed with the chestnut tree, which continues in its patient growth and constant branching upwards.



As The Overstory shifts to focus on its second protagonist, Mimi Ma, the chapter begins with the backstory of his family, much like the previous chapter began with the backstory of Nick’s family. Sih Hsuin is only allowed to go to America to study engineering as part of a special program (implied to be part of the Displaced Persons Act of 1948), explaining why the rest of his family cannot accompany him. The book again touches briefly on major events in human history, in this case the 1949 Communist Revolution in China.



These three jade rings are a concrete representation of the passage of time through the image of trees. The ring’s Lote Tree (also called Sidr, a kind of buckthorn) is an image from the Quran, marking the “farthest boundary” at the end of the seventh heaven. Fusang is a mythical tree from Chinese literature representing a mysterious land to the East—often interpreted to mean Japan or the Americas. Shouying sees Fusang as the United States, where his son is now going to make a new life.



Shouying hands Sih Hsuin the third **ring**, explaining that the third tree is the tree of “Now,” the tree that is all around and will follow him always. Sih Hsuin asks what kind of tree this is, and in response, Shouying opens a beautiful wooden box. Inside is an ancient painted scroll depicting several old men in robes, one sitting beneath a pine tree. Shouying says the tree of Now is this kind: the pine. The script on the scroll is too old for Sih Hsuin to translate, but his father tells him that it says the men are “*Luóhàn*. Arhats. Adepts who have passed through the four stages of Enlightenment and now live in pure, knowing joy.”

Sih Hsuin is overwhelmed to see these treasures, and he realizes that his family is much wealthier than he ever imagined. Shouying tells him that he must take these objects with him to America, because otherwise the Communists will destroy them. Sih Hsuin reluctantly accepts, but he promises to bring the heirlooms back when China is safe again.

Later Sih Hsuin begins his journey east. He takes a train to Hong Kong, where he boards a ship. The Asian passengers are crammed together belowdecks, while the Europeans live luxuriously above. After 21 days at sea, they arrive in San Francisco, and Sih Hsuin feels happy and optimistic. To fit American norms, he reverses his name, so that he is now Sih Hsuin Ma instead of Ma Sih Hsuin.

A customs official questions Sih Hsuin and looks through his luggage. She doesn't find the **jade rings**, which have been baked into moon cakes, but the scroll is out in plain sight. The official asks about it, and Sih Hsuin tries to stay calm. He explains that the men in the paintings have discovered “the True Thing,” which is that “human beings, so small. And life, so very big.” The official laughs scornfully at this and waves Sih Hsuin through.

Years pass, and Sih Hsuin becomes “Winston Ma.” He attends school in Pittsburgh, marries a Southern white woman named Charlotte, and moves to Wheaton, Illinois. In the backyard of their new house Winston plants a mulberry tree, the tree of Fusang, to honor his father and the silkworms, the source of their family's success. As they stand looking at the tree, Charlotte relates a supposed Chinese saying that the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, but the next best time is now.

*In some Buddhist traditions, the *Luóhàn* are arhats, or holy people who have become enlightened and achieved nirvana. One aspect of enlightenment that is emphasized here is living in full awareness of the present, or the “Now.” The Buddha famously became enlightened while sitting beneath a Bodhi Tree (also called sacred fig tree), and one of the arhats in the scroll reflects this image with his position beneath the pine tree. This also calls back to The Overstory's opening passage, in which the unnamed woman sits beneath a pine tree and receives messages from the trees around her.*



Shouying has no hope for the future of his family or his country, so he sends off his most prized possessions with his son. Everything the Mas have built might be destroyed, but at least these precious objects may yet survive.



The Overstory tends to only briefly touch on important events from history and the human experience, and everything is narrated in the present tense. This creates a disorienting mixture of past and present that's similar to how a tree experiences time (a tree's rings contain both the past and the present). Here, the book touches on anti-Chinese racism: Sih Hsuin is forced into poor conditions on the boat simply because he's Asian, and he feels compelled to Americanize his name so that others will accept him.



In his beginner's English, Sih Hsuin touches on the idea that human beings do not encompass the whole of life, and in fact are just a small aspect of something much larger and more complex. He is referring to this principal in the context of Buddhism, but it also applies to the book's general portrayal of humanity as just one part of the natural world.



Silkworms only live on mulberry trees, and it is implied that the Ma family in China made its fortune at least partially through the silk business. This is also the tree represented on one of the jade rings: Fusang, or the tree of the future. Meanwhile, Winston is suppressing his past self—even his name—in order to more fully assimilate into American culture.



“Countless nows pass,” and Winston’s three young daughters sit eating beneath the mulberry tree while their parents are shut up in their bedroom, blasting classical music. The girls argue about who Mao is, their “Chinese grandpa” who is in a work camp, what their father’s job is—Winston works at a lab inventing a travel phone—and what they think their parents are doing in their room. Nine-year-old Mimi, the oldest girl, starts to climb the mulberry to look into their window.

Mimi thinks about her father, who was entirely a mystery to her until just the day before. Winston is beloved by all as a “small, cute, smiling, warm, Muslim Chinese guy who loves math,” but he never speaks Chinese and rarely talks about his past. The day before, however, Mimi had come home crying because of a classmate’s racist bullying. Winston then finally told his daughter about his life in China and about Mao and the Communists.

Winston then took Mimi into his study and showed her the **three jade rings** and the arhat scroll. About the arhats, Winston said, “They solve life. They pass the final exam. [...] Chinese superhero!” At that moment, Mimi felt as if older versions of herself were rising up within her current nine-year-old self, as time became “a column of concentric circles,” with her eternal self at the center and “the present floating outward along the outermost rim.”

Back in the present, Mimi keeps climbing the mulberry tree. Her youngest sister, Amelia, yells at her that she’s not allowed to climb the tree, and then calls to their father that “Mimi’s in the silk farm!” Mimi hushes her and promises to show her and Carmen, the middle sister, something special. Then they sneak into Winston’s office, and Mimi shows her sisters the **rings** and the scroll.

Winston Ma loves America’s national parks, and every June he takes the family on a trip to visit them. He spends months planning and preparing, and then they all squeeze into their car and take a road trip. This summer they go to Yosemite, and Winston takes meticulous notes about every campsite where they stay. The girls practice their instruments in the car but mostly fight with each other. Charlotte doesn’t try to stop them, and the narrator notes that she is already beginning to slip into dementia, though no one knows it yet.

Describing the past as a collection of “nows,” or present moments, challenges the way people view time. It suggests that perhaps the past, present, and future aren’t as distinct as human beings tend to assume. Winston’s daughters know almost nothing about China or their father’s past life there, suggesting that he is still very closed off about this part of his identity. The “Chinese grandpa” is Shouying, who was indeed imprisoned by the Communists as he himself predicted.



Winston seems to want his agreeable personality (he’s “small, cute, smiling, warm”) to overshadow any cultural or racial differences that could make him stand out in the U.S. However, because Mimi has no connection to her Chinese family or background, she feels confused when faced with racist bullying. As a result, Winston’s love for his daughter overcomes his reluctance to talk about his past.



Mimi’s feelings in this scene present the passage of time as being like the rings of a tree. Instead of moving towards the future in one direction, trees grow outward ring by ring, always preserving their past rings in concentric circles alongside their outermost present ones. Mimi feels like this for a moment: she becomes “a column of concentric circles” in which “the present float[s] outward along with outermost rim.” In other words, she contains past, present, and future within herself all at once.



The Mas refer to the mulberry tree as the “silk farm” because it is the only kind of tree that can house silkworms. The unique description of time continues as Mimi remembers her revelation in the study while also experiencing the present moment of climbing the mulberry tree.



Mimi will come to associate these trips to national parks with memories of a happy childhood, which means that she will also feel a strong connection to the wilderness and forests of these parks. In mentioning Charlotte’s worsening dementia, the omniscient narrator again steps outside the perspective of the characters in the present.



At one campsite, Winston fly fishes in a lake, and Mimi accompanies him. Winston loves fly fishing and feels free out on the water, measuring everything and trying to “think like a fish.” Watching him, Mimi thinks that he is like the next arhat, a descendant of the men on the scrolls. Later, as the family is picnicking, a bear suddenly wanders into their camp. Charlotte grabs Amelia and runs into the lake, and Mimi and Carmen quickly climb a tree. Winston remains seated.

The bear wanders around the camp as Winston stays perfectly still, taking photos of it. When the bear approaches him, Winston stands up and starts talking to the bear in Chinese, while slowly edging toward the car. The bear seems distracted, and Winston is then able to toss it some food and the whole family runs to the car. Later that night Mimi, in awe of her father, asks Winston if he was afraid. He says that he wasn’t, and that it is “Not my time yet. Not my story.” This idea frightens Mimi—that he could know when his “story” will end. Winston says that when he was talking to the bear, he apologized to it for humanity’s stupidity. He said, “Don’t worry. Human being leaving this world, very soon.”

Mimi ends up going to Mount Holyoke College, where she starts to date women. She studies poetry at first, but after reading Edwin Abbott’s book [Flatland](#), she realizes that she wants to be an engineer like Winston. She transfers to Berkeley and starts studying ceramic engineering. She thrives there, and after graduation takes a job as a casting process supervisor in Portland. The job requires a lot of travel, and she goes to Korea often. Meanwhile Carmen and Amelia also grow up, go to college, and get jobs.

In Wheaton, the mulberry tree is attacked by bugs and bacteria. Winston tries everything, but the tree is slowly dying. One day, he calls Mimi and tells her that his invention has finally been completed and sold to other companies. Winston seems dispirited by this, however, and he lingers on the dying mulberry tree. Mimi tries to cheer him up, as she has never heard him sound so depressed. Charlotte picks up the phone and starts speaking in Latin. Then Winston returns, asking Mimi, “What I do now?” When they hang up, Mimi intends to call her sisters and tell them about the call, but soon other responsibilities and distractions drive it from her mind.

Mimi recognizes that Winston becomes like an enlightened arhat when he lets his mind and attention slow, focusing on the movements of the river and “think[ing] like a fish.” This is another example of the book’s emphasis on the importance of paying attention and immersing oneself in nature.



Winston carries over his arhat-like attention to the dangerous encounter with the bear, as he is able to remain calm and keep his family safe by treating the bear like a fellow conscious creature. It is also notable that in a time of crisis, Winston returns to speaking Chinese, suggesting that he has not cut off that part of himself at all, but just keeps it private now that he’s living in the U.S. This is the first example of a character taking comfort in the fact that nature will outlast humanity, as Winston assures the bear that humans will go extinct soon, and then nature will be left alone once more.



The narrative again speeds up to summarize several years in the course of a few paragraphs. [Flatland](#) is an allegorical novel satirizing class rigidity and dogmatism through a world based on geometry. Ceramic engineering involves working with certain kinds of inorganic and non-metallic materials, and it’s applicable to many industries and other kinds of engineering.



Despite their love for each other, Winston still remains something of a mystery to his daughters, and Mimi doesn’t know how to comfort him in his depression. She expects him to stay the same as always, and she can’t accept that there might be deep pain beneath his mild exterior. Winston focuses on the mulberry tree as the image of his troubles, feeling that his own life’s story is coming to an end as the tree dies.



That fall, Winston dies by suicide. One day, while Charlotte is in the basement studying Latin, Winston sits under the dying mulberry and shoots himself in the head. There is no suicide note except for a poem by Wang Wei left open in his study. Mimi is at the airport when she gets the call. Before she even answers, she feels that she knows what has happened and is even remembering it already.

Mimi returns home, where Charlotte is slipping into dementia and won't accept that Winston is dead. The body and gun have been removed, but nothing else, so Mimi has to clean up the bits of her father's brain scattered across the yard and mulberry tree. When she's done, she sits under the dying tree and weeps.

Carmen and Amelia arrive, and the three sisters sit together, remembering their father and trying to understand his suicide. They avoid the mulberry tree. Mimi tells them about the phone call, and in response, Amelia comforts her while Carmen blames her. Meanwhile, Charlotte keeps speaking about Winston in the present tense, claiming that she'll see him again.

The three daughters have to deal with all the paperwork that comes with a sudden death. Mimi tells the others that they need to divide Winston's belongings, and that Charlotte can't take care of herself anymore. She and Carmen argue, while Amelia tries to keep the peace. Later, the daughters decide to each take one of the **three jade rings**. They reach in blindly to pick at random, and Mimi receives the ring representing the tree of the future: the pine. Mimi suggests selling the arhat scroll or donating it to a museum, but Carmen wants it to stay in the family. She leaves it to Mimi to get its value appraised.

The police return the gun that Winston used, but no one in the family has a permit for it. Mimi puts it in the carrier of her old bicycle and rides to the gun shop where Winston bought it, hoping to sell it back. On the way, she is stopped by a police officer. She is terrified that he will find the gun, but he sends her on her way. Later Mimi waits at the airport for her flight back to Portland, twisting the **jade ring** around her finger nervously. She has the arhat scroll in her carry-on bag. Mimi feels that she only wants peace, but she must now live "in the shadow of the bent mulberry."

As with the death of Nick Hoel's family, this tragedy is placed in immediate proximity to an important tree. When Mimi gets the call about Winston's death, she has another experience of time that differs from the usual human perspective. Wang Wei was a famous Chinese poet from the 700s B.C.E. Wei's writing embodied Buddhist ideals like the concept of the "now," which harkens back to the tree of "Now" represented by the third jade ring.



This traumatic event makes Winston's death viscerally real for Mimi, as she must experience the literal destruction of his mind beneath the mulberry tree. Further, she cannot even turn to her mother in this time, as Charlotte becomes wholly delusional in response to the tragedy.



As with the Hoels and their chestnut, the Ma mulberry tree is now intimately tied to both Winston's life and his tragic death. Mimi and Carmen seem to have a combative relationship, while Amelia generally tries to keep the peace between her sisters.



The pine tree is associated with the arhat scroll and the Buddha's bodhi tree. It's also another reminder of The Overstory's opening pages in which the unnamed woman achieves a kind of enlightenment beneath the pine; it's possible that this woman is Mimi.



Instead of finding enlightenment beneath a tree, Mimi has, at this point, found only sorrow under the mulberry. She feels wholly lost as she must now return to her normal life, devastated by her father's death but still entirely without answers or closure. As with the section about Nick Hoel, Mimi's introduction ends with human tragedy "in the shadow" of a tree.



PART 1: ROOTS—ADAM APPICH

In 1968, five-year-old Adam Appich paints a picture of the four trees planted behind his family's house as his mother watches. The trees correspond to each of Adam's parents' four children: the eldest, Leigh, has an elm, Jean has an ash, Emmett has an ironwood, and Adam has a maple. Adam is reluctant to add his father to the picture, but he does so at his mother's urging. Adam gives the picture to his mother, who is in the living room drinking with two neighbors. As he runs back upstairs, Adam hears her say that he is "a little socially retarded." In the boys' bedroom, Adam asks his brother Emmett what "retarded" means, and Emmett tells him that it means "not regular people." Adam is okay with this; he feels that "there's something wrong with regular people."

Months later, Adam's father tells the children that they need to find a tree for their new sibling who will be born soon. They look through a book of trees and each come up with different ideas. Adam starts crying, worried that they might pick the wrong one. He notes how each sibling is like their corresponding tree, and Emmett starts arguing. Their father Leonard ends the discussion by picking a tree that's on sale: black walnut. The narrator comments that this tree will indeed be appropriate for the unborn Charles.

The baby is not yet born when the walnut tree arrives. Leonard tries to wrestle the tree into its hole in the yard, but Adam sees its roots wrapped in burlap and worries that the tree will suffocate. He panics and throws himself into the hole just as Leonard tosses the tree in. The weight of the tree lands on Adam's leg, and he screams. Leonard drags him away, cursing, as Adam cries—in pain, but mostly worrying about his brother's tree.

Four years later, the Appich siblings argue over whose tree is the most beautiful. Nine-year-old Adam decides to hold a vote. It comes down to Emmett's ironwood versus Adam's maple. Jean supports Adam, as she always does, but Emmett still wins. By age 10, Adam is a loner. He doesn't understand other children, who often play cruel pranks on him—especially his brother Emmett. Instead, Adam focuses on reading about natural history and collecting specimens. He fills the house with his findings. One day, Adam comes home to find his "museum" destroyed. His mother explains that it was all junk, and Adam slaps her in his anger. When Leonard hears about this, he twists Adam's wrist until it breaks.

After Nick and Mimi, the remaining characters are introduced without the decades of family backstory. Adam and his siblings are another example of people being closely connected to specific trees throughout their lives. Adam grows up in a dysfunctional family and feels disconnected from the rest of humanity even at a very young age.



Adam tries to order the world in order to make sense of it, so he feels like each tree must correspond with each sibling. This means that, for him, picking the right tree for the new baby is a life-or-death matter.



Adam sees the tree as something human that needs to breathe and also as a stand-in for his new sibling. In this way, he seems to understand and appreciate nature in a way that other people don't—perhaps because he, too, is misunderstood.



Adam's father is abusive, his mother is distant (and implied to struggle with alcoholism), and his brother Emmett is a cruel bully. In the face of this troubled family life and a lack of any connection with his peers, Adam focuses on research and study, trying to categorize and understand the world on his own terms.



One day that spring, Adam climbs up his maple tree and doesn't come down for hours. He looks out over the neighborhood and enjoys observing everything both below and in the tree. The narrator notes that Adam will remember this vigil years later when he is atop a massive redwood tree, looking down on people who mostly want him dead.

Adam enjoys feeling removed from the rest of humanity, studying it from on high. Again, the narrator zooms out to mention something that the present characters could not possibly know—in this case, Adam's own future.



When he is 13, Adam notices that his sister Leigh's elm tree is withering. It soon dies of the Dutch elm disease, which has killed countless trees throughout the country. Leigh seems unbothered by this, joking with her father Leonard that he's always "had it out" for her, but Adam mourns the loss. He makes Leigh a clumsy present out of a piece of the elm's wood, but she leaves it behind in her donation box when she goes off to college.

Adam is a teenager now, but he still sees the trees as having an important connection to each Appich sibling and so worries about Leigh when her tree dies. He is also still unable to connect with other people in a meaningful way (other than his sister Jean), and Leigh immediately discards his thoughtful gift.



That fall, Adam becomes fascinated with ants. He sits in the grass for hours, watching them and noting their complex behavior. He borrows some nail polish from Jean, paints certain ants different colors, and starts to watch and take notes. Despite Emmett's cruel teasing, Adam keeps at his project, designing experiments to test the intelligence and group willpower of the ants. He realizes that they have their own kind of intelligence, one wholly different from humanity's but similar in its cunning.

Adam's interest in research and study grows, pointing toward a potential future as a scientist. He also already recognizes that there are other kinds of intelligence besides humanity's, even in creatures that others might find mindless and insignificant.



At the end of the year, Adam enters a science fair and presents his observations of the ant colony. The judges are clearly impressed, but they assume that an adult has done Adam's work for him. He denies this and even starts crying, but they refuse to give him a medal. Adam knows that they can't believe that any child would work so hard "for no reason at all except the pleasure of looking until you see something."

Adam is still a shy and sensitive child trying to make his way in a world that doesn't understand him. Here, the book again touches on the power of simple attention, observation, and patience—working simply for "the pleasure of looking until you see something."



A few months later, Leigh disappears in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, after getting into a car with a man she met the same day. Her parents break down, and Adam's mother blames his father. Leonard breaks her elbow in response. After this, Adam accepts that "humankind is deeply ill. The species won't last long. [...] Soon the world will be returned to the healthy intelligences, the collective ones." The remaining siblings hold a secret funeral for Leigh, as Leonard still won't accept that she's dead.

After his sister's presumed death and his father's continued abuse, Adam assumes a very pessimistic view of humanity as "deeply ill." He even takes comfort in a hope that people will go extinct soon, and that the "healthy intelligences" (like the ants he studies) will take over once more. Many characters in The Overstory will share similar sentiments, as they represent one possible response to the crisis of humanity's destruction of nature.



After the science fair, Adam gives up on taking notes and observation. In high school, he delves into a world of role-playing games with his friends, fearing and avoiding girls while also trying to study them like his ants. In class, he learns to do the bare minimum and still pass. As his mother slowly becomes addicted to codeine, Adam starts his own business doing assignments for other students. It starts as a joke but quickly grows lucrative. He experiments with his cheating system and stores away his extra cash.

In the fall of his senior year, Adam picks up a book for another student's assignment that he's writing. The book is called *The Ape Inside Us* by Rubin M. Rabinowski. Adam starts to read it and becomes enthralled. The book both explains and seemingly proves that humans are extremely predictable, hopelessly bound by bias and groupthink. They will fail most logic problems but excel at recognizing who their group has decided is in and who is out, who should be praised and who should be punished. Obsessively reading the book, Adam feels better than he has since Leigh died.

Despite all his work for other students, Adam's own grades are poor, and he knows that no college will accept him. Instead, he writes to Rubin Rabinowski, who is a psychology professor at Fortuna College in California. In his letter, Adam praises Rabinowski's book and says that it opened his eyes to human nature and changed his life. Later, Adam receives a letter back; Rabinowski tells him that Fortuna College will strongly consider his application. Clipped to the letter is a handwritten card saying, "Don't ever blow smoke up my ass again."

Adam grows ever more jaded as he continues to feel misunderstood and misused by other people. He turns to the outlets and mindsets that many teenagers in similar situations do, and in his case, this means feeling especially disconnected from women. Adam also learns to use his intelligence for an immediate profit.



*All of Adam's previous work seems to have been leading up to this revelation about the science of psychology. Adam has always felt disconnected from other people but also wanted to study them like any other species, and Rabinowski's book seems to do exactly that. This is also part of what *The Overstory* is intended to do—to look down at humanity from above and show how we are easily influenced by a "herd mentality," or going along with whatever the larger group is doing.*



Adam's character largely serves as a window into observations about human social psychology with regards to nature and the environmental crisis. Going to school for psychology sets Adam up as both an independent observer and an active participant in the events to come. Meanwhile, Rabinowski's note shows that he recognizes that Adam is using Rabinowski's own tactics of persuasion against him, but he at least respects this.



PART 1: ROOTS—RAY BRINKMAN AND DOROTHY CAZALY

Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly are "two people for whom trees mean nothing." In Minnesota in 1974, they go on their first date. Ray is a junior intellectual property lawyer, and Dorothy is a stenographer who often works at his firm. When Ray first asks Dorothy out, she picks the venue: an audition for a community theater production of Shakespeare's [Macbeth](#). Neither has acted in anything since high school, and the audition is "terrifying," but they laugh about it afterwards. Both of them even get cast in the play: Ray as Macduff, and Dorothy as Lady Macbeth.

*Ray and Dorothy are the two characters perhaps least connected to the others in *The Overstory*, though they still play an important role in illustrating goals with the book. It is notable that they are also introduced as people with seemingly no connection whatsoever to trees—"trees mean nothing" to them. This sets them apart from most of the other characters, though it's possible that they'll develop a love for nature later in life.*



Ray tries to back out, but Dorothy convinces him not to, and they both take the parts. Ray is a terrible actor at first, but he quickly improves. He is a very innocent man with a strong sense of responsibility and patriotism, and Dorothy tries to test his limits with her own free-spirited whims. The actual staging of [Macbeth](#) includes the scene of the traveling forest, and Ray as Macduff hides among its branches. After the wrap party, Ray and Dorothy have sex for the first time. They talk afterward, with Dorothy first asking Ray probing questions and then Ray slowly suggesting that they are meant to be together and should get married. Dorothy is shocked and scornful at first, but then seems to agree.

Five years pass, and Ray becomes a partner at his firm. He is a skilled intellectual property lawyer, and his earnestness and sense of responsibility help him in his work. Meanwhile, Dorothy continues at her stenography job. The couple break up and get back together several times, often in dramatic fashion. One time, Dorothy writes Ray a note, saying that she wants to be with him but is deathly afraid of being someone else's property. Ray responds, and Dorothy shows up one night with two tickets to Rome. While there, the two finally get married on a whim.

Dorothy moves back in with Ray and occasionally starts thinking about her own future children. On their first anniversary, Ray writes Dorothy a note proposing a plan: that every year, they should plant something new in their yard. Dorothy reads the note while she's driving, starts to cry, and ends up crashing her car into a large linden tree. She is uninjured except for a cut on her face, but Ray rushes to the hospital in a panic. When Dorothy sees him, she says, "I'm not going anywhere. Let's plant something."

PART 1: ROOTS—DOUGLAS PAVLICEK

One morning, the police arrive at Douglas "Dougie" Pavlicek's tiny apartment in Palo Alto to arrest him. Dougie can't help smiling as he's being taken away—he's participating in an experiment where he will be paid 15 hours a day to do essentially nothing. He is taken to the real police station, however, and then blindfolded and placed in a makeshift "prison," where he is labeled as Prisoner 571. The nameless guards are already overeager with their clubs and perform several roll calls and "ritual humiliations" that night.

A famous scene in Shakespeare's [Macbeth](#) involves an army using branches as camouflage, such that it seems to fulfill a prophecy that the forest itself will physically move. This is then presented as the first time Ray and Dorothy really think about trees, but here it is still only within the context of their growing relationship. They are very dissimilar people, but they immediately share a strong bond with each other.



Ray's work as an intellectual property lawyer will act as a vehicle for the book's ideas about what beings besides humans have intelligence and therefore rights under the law. In contrast to Ray's profession, Dorothy is extremely concerned about never feeling owned by anyone else.



What would be a prop in another book—the linden tree that Dorothy crashes into—is specifically noted in *The Overstory*, almost like a brief side character. Despite their tempestuous relationship, Ray and Dorothy find a sense of common hope in the idea of planting trees together.



Douglas (or "Dougie") is introduced as a participant in the Stanford Prison Experiment, a real-life psychological study that took place in 1971. In the study, subjects were randomly divided into "guards" and "prisoners," with one group being given total control over the other. It had to be shut down early when the participants quickly began abusing one another.



In the middle of the night, Duggie is pulled from his bed for another torturous roll call. He realizes then that this experiment is testing something more frightening than he'd been led to believe, but he still feels that he can survive for at least two weeks. On the second day, tensions escalate further between the guards and the prisoners. Soon, the guards are torturing those who rebel and throwing them in solitary confinement, strip-searching at random, and making even the bathroom a privilege. Duggie already starts to think of himself only as Prisoner 571.

Duggie now feels like he can't survive two weeks after all. Another prisoner snaps and says he wants to go home, but per the parameters of the experiment, he cannot. Duggie can tell that the man is having an actual mental breakdown, and eventually someone takes him away—but the experiment continues. Everything gets worse, with the guards pitting the prisoners against each other and escalating the torture and manipulation.

A new prisoner starts to organize a hunger strike, and the guards punish him severely. They then announce that if anyone wants to give up their own blanket for the night, the new prisoner will be released. Duggie feels guilty about it, but because no one else gives up their blankets, he doesn't either. That night, Duggie lies awake, wondering what would happen if this experience were to last for years, as it does for millions of people.

The next morning, some higher-ups arrive and disband the experiment. Everyone is allowed to go home. Only six days have passed, yet Duggie can barely remember himself outside of Prisoner 571. The "prisoners" are all indignant about what has happened and the suffering they've endured, but Duggie knows now that he must always see himself as someone who wouldn't surrender his blanket to help a fellow person.

When Duggie returns to his efficiency apartment, he holes up, drinking and watching TV. He sees a program about the U.S. operations in Laos and decides to enlist. He knows the war is hopeless, but he also recognizes that "something is distinctly fucked up in the status quo," and he just wants steady work for a while.

As with the character of Adam Appich, the book introduces the Stanford Prison Experiment to emphasize the idea that humans have a natural tendency to adopt a herd mentality. If one's group decides that it is normal and right to act in a certain way—whether this is to dehumanize themselves, like Duggie and the other prisoners, or to torture those they have control over, like the guards—people are extremely likely to abandon logic and go along with the group's actions.



As with the other participants in the study, Duggie quickly adapts to his new experience and is unable to maintain the amused aloofness that he entered with. He knows that this is just a psychological study, but he is also now truly afraid for his health and sanity.



Not only do the guards abuse their newfound power, but the prisoners also turn against one another. In such a situation, it seems that almost everyone reverts to their most selfish instincts. The book then makes the point that although this particular situation is an experiment, it is also a lived reality for millions of others, emphasizing just how cruel people can be to one another.



Duggie must now return to his normal life, but he has been forever changed by his brief experience in the study. He comes to similar conclusions as Adam, though by very different means: that humans are basically selfish animals whose behavior is extremely predictable.



Duggie joins the Vietnam War, in which the U.S. also had operations in neighboring countries. He feels broken by his experience in the "prison" and disenchanted with the "status quo" of society, so he wants to quiet his troubled mind with hard work.



Years later and now in Thailand, Douglas Pavlicek has become a technical sergeant with the U.S. Air Force, flying planes loaded with barrier material and explosives. He still recognizes that the war is lost, but he prizes staying busy over “paying attention.” During the day, Douggie often forgets to drink water and passes out, but he gets drunk or high every night. The Thai people seem to recognize that they’ve backed the wrong side in the war, but Douggie only experiences kindness from them, and he is considering staying in the country even after the war.

Douggie lives a life of constant distraction, trying to avoid thinking about what he now knows about human nature. He actively avoids “paying attention”—which the book presents as an overwhelmingly positive act—and instead loses himself in work and substances.



One day, Douggie is making a routine flight to Cambodia when his plane is hit by a missile. They try to fly for a while on only one engine but then begin to go down, and a fire starts on the plane. Douggie knows they must drop their pallets of explosives or they’ll all die, and he works quickly despite the flames. He manages to drop all the deadly cargo, but then Douggie himself falls out of the plane as well.

During the Stanford Prison Experiment, Douggie wouldn’t give up his blanket to help a fellow “prisoner.” But here, in this moment of crisis, he does act selflessly, risking his life to clear the plane of explosives and save all of his men. This offers a more hopeful view of human psychology.



The narrative switches to describe the birth of a banyan fig tree three hundred years earlier: how it was fertilized by a specific wasp, passed through the digestive system of a bird, and eventually took root. Centuries passed, and the fig grew massive. Its limbs became new trunks dripping down into the earth and finally became a grove of thousands of tree trunks, yet still all a single banyan tree.

The Overstory frequently treats specific trees like characters in their own right, as is the case with this banyan fig and its origin story here. This is also another example of the narrative disrupting the flow of time to expand to a perspective beyond its characters’ immediate experience.



Douggie is still falling through the air. In his panic, he accidentally discharges the gun strapped to his thigh, and a bullet tears through his leg. He screams and then crashes into the banyan tree, which has “grown up over the course of three hundred years just in time to break his fall.” Branches cut him and tangle his parachute, and he ends up hanging 20 feet above the ground.

Here, the book explicitly shows how time might pass differently for a tree and for a human, as Douggie’s seconds-long fall from the plane is compared to the tree’s 300-year growth to catch him in its branches. The two beings move in their own sense of time but still come together at exactly the right moment.



Meanwhile, a bus of pilgrims arrives to see the “divine tree” and the shrine set among its trunks. Just as the group approaches the shrine, Douggie crashes into the tree. The pilgrims scatter and then see the American hanging from the branches of the banyan. They cut him down and debate what to do with him. When he regains consciousness, Douggie first thinks he’s dead, but one of the pilgrims tells him that the “*Tree saved your life.*”

The fact that Douggie’s life is saved by a tree will haunt him for a long time and affect many of his future actions. It’s also noteworthy that this particular tree is seen as holy, and that pilgrims actively come to see it—this is a rare example in the book of humans actually respecting and revering a tree instead of seeing it as an object to be exploited.



Douggie is driven to the city of Khorat, where his leg is treated, and then back to his base. All his crewmates have survived, mostly thanks to his actions, though his own leg is hopelessly crippled. Douggie himself is still mystified that he was saved by a tree. The Air Force discharges him, gives him a medal and a pension, and sends him back to California.

Readers can infer from Douggie’s life-saving encounter with the banyan tree that he, like the book’s other characters, will go on to respect trees and value nature in a way that most people don’t. As an injured war veteran, Douggie’s character goes against the usual stereotype of environmental activists.



Nine years later, Duggie is in Idaho watching a horse ranch for a wealthy elderly couple. Winter is coming on, and Duggie spends his Saturday smashing potholes into the road that goes past the ranch just so people will have to slow down and maybe talk to him a bit. Otherwise, he spends all his time alone with the horses, reading to them and thinking about humanity. He increasingly believes that “the greatest flaw of the species is its overwhelming tendency to mistake agreement for truth.” At the same time, he recognizes his own need for affirmation from others—why he’s smashing potholes in the road, for example.

The next night, Duggie goes to Blackfoot, the nearest town, and drinks and gambles the night away. Then he returns and settles in for the long winter. For months he is completely alone, reading to the horses, whittling, and thinking about women. In spring he tries to go hunting, but he finds that he can’t pull the trigger. When his employers return in the summer, he politely quits and leaves the ranch, unsure of where to go next. He decides to drive west to Eugene, Oregon, where he has a friend.

Driving backroads through the dense forest, Duggie pulls over to use the bathroom. He steps through the first few rows of trees by the road and then sees daylight—the entire hillside has been brutally clear-cut. Duggie staggers across the road and checks the other side, only to find the same thing. He realizes that all the supposedly pristine forest he’s been driving through is just a façade, a thin veneer of nature to disguise the mass destruction happening behind it. At a gas station, Duggie asks the cashier about the clear-cutting. The man says that the thin curtains of trees are called “beauty strips,” and that the land is a national forest, not a national park, so it’s not protected at all.

Duggie keeps driving, growing increasingly enraged by both the logging itself and the successful trick of the “beauty strips.” In Eugene, Duggie pays for a ride in a prop plane, wanting to see everything from above. He is devastated by the destruction. When he returns to ground, he spends three days on his friend’s couch, depressed. Then he finds a job with a contractor, planting Douglas-fir seedlings back into the clear-cut lands. He vaguely knows that he’s just working for the same people who logged the forest in the first place, but he feels he has to do something to change the appearance of the ravaged landscape.

Duggie no longer tries to distract himself constantly, but finally slows down in his solitude and lets himself think about the Stanford Prison Experiment and his experiences in the war. He comes to a conclusion similar to Adam’s: that humans are guided more by “agreement” with their surrounding group than objective reason or “truth.” It’s also noteworthy that he treats the horses like fellow intelligent beings by reading and talking to them.



Duggie generally leads an aimless existence after returning from the war. He seems to prefer the company of animals and nature rather than people.



Clear-cutting is a real phenomenon that the book is bringing to readers’ attention. People generally don’t like to see clear-cut forests, but they do want cheap wood products, so companies have learned to hide their destruction behind a narrow screen of living trees. Even the name “national forest” is a kind of façade, as it sounds synonymous to a national park—but national parks are primarily about preservation, while national forests can be used for resources like lumber.



The book presents Duggie’s discovery of the clear-cutting and his subsequent anger in the hopes that bringing awareness to such practices will make readers feel similarly. Duggie’s move to start planting seedlings is one possible response to the crisis, but he’s not being as effective as he’d like.



Douggie works for months, traveling the clear-cut zones and planting thousands of seedlings, sleeping in tree-planter camps with other quiet, isolated workers. As he works, he is overwhelmed by the smell of the cut trees, and he can hear the logging equipment working in the distance, but he is comforted to know that silent growth is also happening all around him. Douggie works through fog and rain, alone and with others. The tiny saplings look helpless amid the destruction, but he recognizes that if they survive, they can become giants. Douggie blesses his trees as he plants them, thinking, “*Hang on. Only ten or twenty decades. [...] You just have to outlast us.*”

The Overstory often comments on the slow, quiet growth of trees that is happening all around, even as its human characters move about and act within their own sense of time. Here, Douggie reflects the sentiments shared by several other characters: the belief that humanity is doomed to go extinct soon, but that this will also mean the salvation and rebirth of the natural world.



PART 1: ROOTS—NEELAY MEHTA

Described as “the boy who’ll help change humans into other creatures,” Neelay Mehta is a seven-year-old boy watching TV in his family’s San Jose apartment. Neelay’s mother Ritu (whom he calls Moti) is from the Rajasthan state in India, while his father Babul (whom he calls Pita) is from Gujarat. Ritu is cooking in the kitchen when Babul climbs the stairs to the apartment, carrying a large box. Babul came to America eight years before, has a degree in solid-state physics, and is now working for a company developing computers.

Neelay’s character introduces another aspect of *The Overstory*: how technological progress applies to the future of our planet. As is cryptically noted here, his later work will transform the human brain. This is another example of the book’s broader point that humankind does not compose the entirety of consciousness on Earth but is in itself constantly in flux. Neelay’s father, Babul, works on early computers in what is now known as Silicon Valley.



Neelay is very excited about the box his father is carrying, and Babul reveals that it is a present for both of them: a computer kit. When he opens the box, the boy is disappointed by its appearance, but Babul explains that someday this device will come to life and do whatever they want. He himself helped design the microprocessor. Neelay is skeptical that such a small thing could hold so much potential, and in response Babul shows him a photo of an enormous banyan tree that has taken over a temple. The boy is horrified by the “vegetable probing” of the countless trunks and branches, but he also can’t look away. Babul tells him that if such a tree could come from a tiny **seed** the size of Neelay’s fingertip, then they, too, can fit anything into their new machine.

Seeds represent several things in *The Overstory*, but one meaning introduced here is the idea that something tiny and seemingly insignificant can contain within it the potential for exponential growth. Babul uses this image to refer to the computer processor, making clear the book’s analogy between the natural world and technology: how both have the potential to branch endlessly outward. Meanwhile, Babul shows Neelay a photo of a banyan fig tree—the same kind that caught Douggie in its branches.



Over the next days and weeks, Babul and Neelay build the computer and teach it a few simple commands. Months pass, and they increase its memory. Neelay becomes obsessed with working on the machine, “branching” himself into new worlds. The narrator notes that Neelay will continue this work for his whole life, reincarnating himself endlessly and furthering the new processes that are quickly rewiring the human brain. The narrator then describes the many different ways that trees branch and spread and compares this endless growth to the code expanding beneath Neelay’s fingertips.

Richard Powers, the author of *The Overstory*, worked as a computer programmer for years, so he brings his own knowledge to these passages with Neelay and his father. Here, he connects trees and computer coding through the concept of “branching.” In both of these contexts—a person wiring a computer or a tree growing—each branch represents new potential and also a new point of connection within a complex system’s web.



As the computing business grows, the Mehta family becomes wealthier and moves to a new neighborhood. Babul fills the garage with a constant wave of new technology and gear. Meanwhile, Neelay attends school and lives like a normal child, but he is not concerned with normal childhood things—instead, he dreams only of coding and data. He recognizes something important as well: that “people are in for it,” and soon they will be “upgraded.”

Neelay also loves to read, especially fantasy and science fiction books. One story that will stick with him forever, though he forgets its name, is about tiny aliens who come to Earth. The aliens move so quickly that humans can’t even see them, and Earth seconds seem like years to them. In the aliens’ perception, humans are just “sculptures of immobile meat.” Assuming that they aren’t truly alive or intelligent, the aliens take humans for food for their journey home.

Neelay is still extremely close to his father, and he and Babul delight in their new discoveries and inventions. When Neelay is 11, he plans to make his Pita a kite: not a real one, but a digital one that can be interacted and played with on the computer. He fills a notebook with diagrams and ideas, and he tries to keep it a secret from his father. One day in his literature class, however, Neelay accidentally exclaims out loud when he solves a particular problem in the kite program. The class laughs, and his teacher, Ms. Gilpin, calls Neelay up to the front with his notebook. He tries to explain that it’s just “computer stuff,” but Ms. Gilpin takes the notebook, clearly disappointed that Neelay would rather work on this than read literature.

Neelay goes to Ms. Gilpin’s office at the end of the day and asks about his notebook. She condescendingly asks if he was really “working” in it at all, and Neelay feels like she wants some kind of confession or gratitude from him. Suddenly angry, he asks for his “damn notebook” back. Ms. Gilpin is shocked that he would swear at her, and she promises to tell his parents. She demands that he come to her room first thing the next morning to discuss his punishment.

Neelay is presented as a prodigy from the start, knowing that his life will center around computing and never straying from his goal. Here, he also comes to the conclusion that human beings are doomed. While most of the times that this sentiment appears in The Overstory, it refers to nature retaking Earth, Neelay thinks of humans as being replaced by artificial intelligence.



The story of the aliens is an allegory for The Overstory’s overall point about the nature of time. The aliens are like people, and humans (in the story) are like trees. Because the aliens move so much faster than humans and thus experience time in a different way, they assume that human beings lack any kind of consciousness (they’re simply “sculptures of immobile meat”). As a result, they feel no guilt about exploiting them for their resources. This, the book implies, is exactly how humans treat trees, simply because we cannot understand them. Furthermore, most people can’t comprehend the fact that what seem like years to us might only be seconds for a tree.



This passage briefly addresses the divide between literature and science, suggesting that there shouldn’t be a divide at all. This is an idea that underpins much of Richard Powers’s writing, including The Overstory, which contains many nonfiction elements within the framework of a novel.



Ms. Gilpin can be read as a parody of those who believe that only the humanities are worth pursuing and are far superior to science. The quiet, solitary Neelay explodes when his work is taken away from him for no good reason, and as he recognizes that he is being condescended to.



Neelay skips the bus and walks home, panicked about what will happen when his parents find out that he swore at a teacher. He knows that word will spread throughout their entire community and “his mother will die of disgrace.” Neelay goes to a nearby park and walks among the trees. One low branch seems to beckon him, and he starts to climb. From high in the tree, he thinks about how his life is ruined, how all his family in India will find out, and how Babul will be crushed that Neelay talked back to a white person in a position of authority.

Neelay then has the idea to let himself get “dusted up a little bit” falling out of the tree, so as to win some sympathy from his parents. Instead, he accidentally slips and falls from his high perch. He lands on his back on the park’s concrete path, cracking the base of his spine. Neelay looks up in a daze at the million green branches of the oak tree, seeing it as a perfect piece of self-writing code. Then, he passes out.

Neelay wakes up in the hospital, several days later. His arms and legs are restrained in tubes. His mother, Ritu, notices that his eyes have opened, and she starts sobbing. High on painkillers, Neelay drifts through various visions and feels a terrible itching everywhere above his waist. When he becomes coherent, he asks why he’s being restrained. No one tells him yet, but over the following days people come to visit him, everyone trying their best to look comforting. Neelay, meanwhile, feels that he is just fine—only his body, his “avatar,” has been injured. He asks again to remove the tubes, and at last understands that he is now paralyzed from the waist down.

Neelay quickly accepts his paralysis, as he is only concerned with his computing work, but his parents despair and will take years to fully accept his state. A few days after Neelay’s realization, Ms. Gilpin visits him in the hospital. She tries to apologize and soon breaks down crying, though Neelay acts like his normal self. Ms. Gilpin tearfully returns his notebook, and when Neelay sees it, he immediately forgets about her and his injury—he’s just excited to have his work back.

Six years pass, and Neelay is now six-foot-six, extremely skinny, and has long flowing hair. Maneuvering about in a wheelchair, he spends his days coding, barely eating or drinking. He goes to Stanford two years early, where he finds a community of other coders. On Sunday nights, they get together and discuss the potential of their work. They feel that they are part of the next era of human evolution, entering completely uncharted territory. Neelay claims one night that in the future, machines will be living and self-learning. The other students laugh, but Neelay is serious.

Neelay’s worries reveal more about his parents as characters: his mother is very connected to her community and adheres to traditional values. This is presumably why she would “die of disgrace” if she knew that Neelay got in trouble during class and swore at a teacher. His father, meanwhile, has taught Neelay that he should diminish himself in order to avoid conflict with white, American authority figures.



As with many of the other characters, Neelay experiences a traumatic event directly related to a tree. He himself even makes the connection between a tree’s branches and his own obsession with coding.



Neelay already feels like he is living in a digital world, such that his physical body is like an avatar that he might inhabit in a simulation. Because of this, he is much less upset about his paralysis than everyone else around him is.



Again, Neelay is primarily concerned with his coding work and the state of his mind, almost forgetting about the devastating injury that his body has suffered.



Neelay is a prodigy, remaining true to his childhood obsessions even as he becomes a young adult. He feels no real attachment to human beings as a species and can see that soon life will evolve beyond them. His peers are uncomfortable with this idea, but it also fits with the book’s overall message that humanity is only being one temporary piece of the world.



Neelay soon starts building games and giving them away for free over the internet, and his name becomes well-known in online circles. Eventually other developers start forming companies and charging money, however, and the online gift economy shrinks. For at least a year Neelay resists this, playing a “Robin Hood” on the internet by recreating commercial games and offering them for free.

Neelay’s latest game is a role-playing space opera, and he goes to the Stanford library to find ideas for “surreal bestiaries” to build up his world. Taking a break at dusk, he rolls his wheelchair across campus to fuel up on snacks. After almost crashing into an elderly woman, he suddenly looks up to see an otherworldly tree—it looks like it’s from outer space, and it is the inspiration he needs. Looking around, Neelay sees more fantastical trees of every variety. He feels like he’s on drugs or transported to another planet. He rolls from tree to tree, touching and smelling them.

The other tourists leave the wild terrarium and Neelay is left totally alone. Suddenly, he receives what seems to be a direct thought from the trees around him: a vision of a game that creates a whole new world, populated by its own plants and animals and visited by millions of players around the world. The goal of the game is simply to explore and build this endlessly rich, complex world. The vision ends, and Neelay starts to plan how to bring his idea to fruition. He will need to drop out of school and work on development full-time, sell the space-opera game for real money, and then start work on his life’s new goal. Neelay rolls away from the terrarium, as all around him trees work out their own slow, secret plans.

PART 1: ROOTS—PATRICIA WESTERFORD

As a child in 1950, Patricia Westerford creates tiny creatures out of **seeds**, sticks, and leaves to play with. She rarely speaks, and for years her parents are worried that she has a mental disability. Finally, a doctor discovers that she is deaf, and now she wears hearing aids, though she doesn’t like them. Patty (Patricia) and her father Bill Westerford are extremely close, and Bill understands both her tiny, created worlds and her slurred speech. Bill is an agriculture extension agent, and he frequently tours farms around southwestern Ohio, taking Patty along with him. Though Patty’s mother objects, Bill convinces her that these trips will teach their daughter more than any classroom could.

Powers describes the early days of the internet, as an entirely new form of existence comes into being and is soon subsumed into capitalist systems of greed and competition.



Neelay enters Stanford’s inner quad, where he encounters these fantastical trees from around the world. This passage emphasizes the power of trees to excite and inspire, giving wholly new ideas and images to Neelay as he seeks to create a fantastical world in his game. Neelay also has the patience to truly observe the trees, spending time with them and engaging them with all of his senses.



Besides the woman in The Overstory’s opening pages, Neelay is the first character to experience a direct message from trees. With this, the book portrays trees as not just crucial parts of the natural world, but as beings with their own kind of consciousness and even spiritual power. Thus, Neelay’s vision here is not just inspiration from within his own mind but a signal from the trees around him, which have their own purpose in communicating with him.



Patricia feels close to trees from a very early age, and she will go on to make many of The Overstory’s strongest arguments for the importance of preserving forests. Her love for trees is both inspired and nurtured by her father, and her difficulty hearing and communicating in early childhood might also contribute to her comfort with a lack of human company, alone in nature. Bill is an agriculture extension agent, meaning that he takes part in educational programs about farming practices in rural areas.



As they drive together on their road trips, Bill teaches Patty all about trees and then quizzes her on her knowledge. She loves answering one particular question: that a name carved four feet high in a beech tree will still be four feet high after 50 years of growth. Eventually she starts to realize what her father is trying to teach her: that plants have lives, personalities, and goals all their own. In school, Patty doesn't relate to the other children at all, only finding refuge in her father and the world of plants.

Together on their work trips, Bill and Patty travel from farm to farm, all of them either suffering from blight or fast using up their topsoil in the pursuit of monocrops. Bill laments all the lost trees and how little humans know about how trees actually live and grow. From her father, Patty slowly learns that all human wisdom and factual knowledge is temporary, and that "the only dependable things are humility and looking."

One day, Bill helps Patricia design an experiment to find out where all the bulk of a tree comes from, such that it can grow from a tiny **seed** to something so huge. They weigh a tub of soil, weigh a small beechnut tree, and then plant the tree in the soil, as Bill explains how the word "beech" became the word "book." Bill says they will weigh the tree and the soil again in six years, when Patty turns 16. Patty is delighted by this, and she realizes that she's doing science.

Years pass, and Patty—now Patricia—is almost as knowledgeable as her father regarding trees. For her 14th birthday, Bill gives her a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Patricia is struck by the book's first sentence: "Let me sing to you now, about how people turn into other things." She is drawn to the stories that follow, and especially loves the ones about people turning into trees, like the myth of Baucis and Philemon. The next winter, Bill is driving home when his car hits a patch of ice, and he is killed in the crash. Patricia reads from Ovid at the funeral. She is devastated and saves all of her father's possessions.

Patricia recognizes trees as fellow living creatures very early on, aided by her wise and knowledgeable father. As with many of the other characters in The Overstory, she finds herself disconnected from the rest of humanity (besides her father). This fact about the name carved four feet high in a beech tree becomes an important memory for Patricia.



Here, the book briefly comments on the fact that many modern agricultural practices are extremely harmful to nature—and they're not even profitable in the long term. This passage also returns to the idea that there is a definition of meaning that is beyond what most people can conceive of, and which is here linked to quiet observation and attention ("humility and looking").



Several other languages (along with the English "beech" and "book" mentioned here) also have etymologies for words about writing and language that originate from words for trees. Patricia is fascinated not only by nature, but also by the scientific method.



In the myth of Baucis and Philemon, the gods Zeus and Hermes came to earth in disguise and were rejected by everyone except for one old couple who welcomed them into their home. As a reward for their hospitality, the gods allowed the couple (Baucis and Philemon) to become trees after their death, an oak and a linden intertwined forever. This idea of metamorphosis further connects trees and humans as almost interchangeable living beings.



Patricia barely survives high school, keeping to herself, dressing plainly, and avoiding boys. She gets into Eastern Kentucky University, where she will study botany. One day before she leaves for school, she remembers the beech tree that she and her father planted for their experiment. She is ashamed to have forgotten about it for two years longer than they had originally planned, and she spends an afternoon freeing the tree from its soil and weighing it. The tree has grown much heavier, she finds, but the soil weighs exactly the same. Patricia realizes what her father was trying to teach her: all the tree's mass comes from the air, not the soil. She replants the tree beside the house and places a small notch in its bark, four feet above the ground.

Patricia blossoms at college, filling her dorm room with plants. She still doesn't understand other people her age, but she is happy working at the campus greenhouses, taking classes, and reading. She prefers the natural history books from her father's library to the novels that her peers enjoy. Though she doesn't seek out attention, people are drawn to her authenticity and sureness. Boys even ask her out on dates. She goes out with one boy for a few months and has sex for the first time.

After college, Patricia goes to forestry school at Purdue. She teaches undergrads in exchange for room and board and can hardly believe her luck. By her second year, however, she starts to realize the "catch." All her professors and peers believe in cleaning dead growth from forests, making them "thrifty" and economically beneficial. Patricia knows they are wrong—"a healthy forest must need dead trees"—but she doesn't have data to back up her views. She hopes that her professors' beliefs will eventually fade away, and then she will have her time to shine.

Patricia tries to teach her theories to her undergrads, and she generally gets on well with her fellow students despite their disagreements on forestry. She even has a brief romantic encounter with a woman in plant genetics, but she purposefully represses her embarrassed memory of it afterwards. Meanwhile, she continues to develop a theory that trees are actually social beings. No one else in the forestry school agrees, however.

Bill is seemingly Patricia's only real connection to other people (her mother and siblings are hardly even mentioned), and so growing up she remains a loner who only feels comfortable in nature. The notch that she makes in the beech tree is a poignant reminder of her father and his many lessons about trees. Though Patricia briefly forgets about their experiment with weighing the trees, she is clearly still centering her life's work on Bill's teachings, as she plans to study botany in college.



Patricia manages to remain true to herself and also start to find connection with other people. She continues to focus on science and botany even in her new and more open environment.



Patricia brings her lifelong love of trees as complex living beings to a practice that, at this point, is focused on making nature most productive for humanity. She is finally surrounded by fellow forestry scientists, but they have fundamentally different views about the value of forests and the web of life and death within them.



Patricia's personal growth and blossoming echoes the trees she loves so much, though she still is restrained in her willingness to open up to other people. The idea that trees are social beings with their own kind of consciousness would go against everything her professors are currently teaching, as it would mean that they have value and rights in themselves, not just as resources for humans to use.



Purdue receives a new machine—a quadrupole mass spectrometer—which Patricia realizes she can use to measure what gases trees release and how they affect other trees. She presents the idea to her advisor, saying that she believes trees behave differently in a wild forest than they do in cultivation. The advisor is skeptical but allows her to work as she sees fit. Patricia starts immediately and loves the often-monotonous work. Her experiment consists of taping plastic bags over the ends of branches to collect chemicals that the tree releases, and then bringing the samples back to the lab and analyzing them. Out in the woods all day, Patricia feels like her father is with her again, asking his penetrating questions. In her classes, she rhapsodizes about the wonder of trees.

Patricia earns her doctorate and starts going by “Dr. Pat Westerford” in an attempt to disguise her gender in writing. She becomes an adjunct professor in Madison, Wisconsin, and has lots of free time to continue her research. She studies sugar maples in a forest outside town, still collecting her bags of gas and analyzing them.

One day Patricia finds that one of her bagged trees is being attacked by insects. At first, she thinks her data is ruined, but after studying her samples she has an extraordinary revelation. She repeats the experiment several times before she allows herself to really believe what she’s seeing: that trees actually warn each other about possible threats. They release signals through the compounds they emit, protecting each other. When the data finally confirms this, Patricia starts to weep, feeling that she has glimpsed an entirely new aspect of life on Earth.

Patricia writes up her results, trying to use strictly scientific language and to focus on the data. Her paper is published in a scientific journal and then picked up by the press, and other papers run headlines about trees talking to one another. A few months later, the journal that originally published her paper runs a letter signed by three famous dendrologists. These men mock Patricia’s findings and conclusion. They also only refer to her as “Patricia” and never use the word “doctor” except in describing themselves. After the letter runs, Patricia stops getting asked for interviews, and other papers publicize her supposed debunking.

*Patricia’s character is based on two real-life figures. One is Suzanne Simard, who made important discoveries about how trees communicate with one another, similar to what Patricia does here. Essentially, she is examining the various gases and compounds that trees release. Like Powers’s project in *The Overstory* itself, Patricia’s character mingles the scientific study of trees with a poetic sense of wonder and beauty.*



Patricia is still happy to live outside of regular society, and she finds her greatest joy in patient, attentive work among the trees. Here, Powers also briefly touches on the gender dynamics of her work, as she must downplay her femininity in order to be respected.



This is Patricia’s great breakthrough, confirming what she has long suspected: that trees actively communicate with one another, living as social creatures who seek to protect each other from harm. This scientific discovery makes Patricia weep, as she feels that an entire new side to life itself has finally been revealed—that we are surrounded by conscious beings who are communicating with one another, and perhaps with us as well.



*Dendrology is the scientific study of trees. In writing her paper, Patricia recognizes how many scientists distrust any kind of emotion or speculation—though *The Overstory* seems to advocate for a more holistic approach. Patricia’s study challenges the majority’s opinion, and they respond by cutting her down, not even addressing her data and weaponizing her gender to make her seem like a less respectable scientist.*



In the aftermath, Patricia isn't renewed for her position at Madison, and she can't find other work anywhere. Some friends sympathize with her, but no one publicly defends her work. She starts substitute teaching at high schools and grows dangerously depressed. Six months later, Patricia forages some deadly "Destroying Angel" mushrooms and cooks them into a gourmet meal for herself. She imagines that people will assume her death was an accident, as people die every year from consuming the wrong mushrooms.

Ready to eat her deadly meal, Patricia lifts a fork to her mouth and then feels her body flooded with signals, saying "Not this." She drops her fork, experiencing a sudden clarity, and throws out her suicidal dinner. After this, she feels a new sense of freedom, like she has escaped the need for acceptance from other people and is now ready to discover anything.

Patricia then spends a few years outside of academia, working odd jobs and traveling. To others it seems like she is aimless and struggling, but really, she is busy "learning a foreign language." She spends all her free time in the woods, just observing, sketching, and taking notes, reading John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, and foraging for her own food. She makes her way west, at peace with herself and forgiving the people who destroyed her career because of their own fear of wildness.

Patricia visits an aspen grove in Utah and stands weeping beneath the beautiful golden leaves, thinking about aspens throughout history. She finds a part of the grove where someone has been "improving things"—that is, chopping down trees—and she estimates that some of the downed trunks were 80 years old; yet she knows that they are not separate trees at all. She has come to this place because what seems to be an aspen forest is actually one single organism, a clone colony thousands of years old and hundreds of acres wide. She can hardly wrap her mind around it.

The narrative then briefly touches on Mimi Ma, Nicholas Hoel, Douglas Pavlicek, Dorothy Cazaly and Ray Brinkman, and Neelay Mehta, all spread across the country at that moment and involved in their own lives. None of them yet know each other, but the narrator notes that "their lives have long been connected, deep underground." There is then an excerpt from the book that Patricia has yet to write: its opening passage is about how humans and trees share a single common ancestor from billions of years ago.

After the breakthrough that brought her so much joy, Patricia's career is suddenly ruined by the words of a few men. This dark passage shows that Patricia is also prone to depression and even suicidal ideation, as she feels that her life's work has been in vain.



Like other characters in The Overstory, Patricia seems to receive a direct signal from something non-human. Even as one of the most science-oriented characters, she also has access to the spiritual aspect of a positive relationship with trees. This near-death experience also makes her feel free from the herd mentality that is elsewhere described as being so powerful in people—the need to be accepted and affirmed by one's larger group.



Freed from ideas of what her career path should be, Patricia is now able to move at her own pace with her work and life. She mingles art and literature with her scientific study, which the book suggests can be a more effective way of truly understanding forests than solely relying on hard data. Patricia also thinks of trees as speaking their own "foreign language," one that she must slowly try to learn.



The Overstory introduces many facts about trees that readers might not be familiar with, including describing this ancient aspen clone colony (which is called Pando and is located in south-central Utah) that is one of the largest and oldest organisms in the world. The image of the clone colony also fits with The Overstory's themes of branching, complexity, and interdependence, as the organism separates and renews itself through new trees on the surface while remaining connected at its core deep beneath the earth.



Here, the book makes a direct connection between the aspen clone colony and the characters of The Overstory. Each of these people is an individual following their own independent storyline, but they are also bound together and dependent on one another. This idea is then repeated again in the image of the Tree of Life, where trees and humans split apart long ago but share a common root in the past.



Still in the aspen grove, Patricia recognizes that the clone colony is slowly migrating to adapt to the changing climate. Looking around to see where it might go, she sees a new housing development cut into the heart of the trees. Patricia feels the weight of this impending tragedy and considers the war between humans and trees all over the world. She already knows “which side will lose by winning.”

Patricia eventually makes her way to the Pacific Northwest, where she first encounters an old-growth forest of conifers. She is floored by their size, “lost in reason’s opposite.” She wanders the forest, examining dead logs that are teeming with tiny creatures. She feels overwhelmed in the presence of so much life and death coexisting at once. She can understand why her old forestry professors would find such a place “decadent” and want it to be cleaned up, as all the decomposition thick around makes her feel like she’s in the frightening part of a fairy tale. Humans will always fear decay, she thinks. She continues through the forest, stopping at a cedar tree and thanking it out loud for all the things its wood can build, and all the gifts it has given.

Patricia starts working for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), living in a sparse cabin and spending her days cleaning up trash and tending to the forests. She loves everything about the work and the simple lifestyle, and she stays for 11 happy months. Back in the human world, however, a new paper is published in a famous scientific journal echoing her original findings about how trees communicate with each other. The paper cites her original research and reproduces her findings in new places.

One day, Patricia is out in the woods when she comes across two researchers. She watches them from a distance as one of the men summons an owl with his own imitation of its call. They photograph the bird and then disappear. Three weeks later, she finds the researchers again, this time examining beetles in a fallen log. They speak to her, and together they commiserate about the old forestry belief that fallen trunks should all be cleared away for a forests’ health.

The men discuss their research, which is essentially studying all the life within a dead log, and then the older man sees Patricia’s name tag and calls her “Dr. Westerford.” He says that he saw her speak years ago, and he’s glad that she has now been vindicated. Patricia clearly doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Introducing himself as Henry and his companion as Jason, the man invites Patricia back to their research station to talk.

Patricia can see the trees moving at their own pace, but it is far too slow to keep up with the rate of human growth. She also recognizes that for humanity to win this kind of race against nature will eventually mean our own destruction—we are the side that will “lose by winning.”



This important passage acknowledges that it is a natural part of human psychology to fear death, decay, and chaos, and that this is linked to forestry’s desire to clean up old-growth forests and make them seem more manageable. We simply cannot comprehend all the complex process at work there, and so it is natural to try and simplify things. This passage also links the imagery of the old-growth forest to mythology and fairy tales, like the Ovid myths that Patricia loved as a child. Once again, Patricia mixes the scientific study of trees with a spiritual and emotional connection to them (“reason’s opposite”), as she thanks the forest aloud for all that it has given to humanity.



As usual, Patricia is perfectly happy to live apart from other people, do repetitive work, and spend all her time in the forest. While her life has shifted to the natural rhythms of her surroundings, however, the human world continues on at breakneck speed, and her research returns to the public eye.



Ever since her career’s downfall, Patricia has been very wary of other people, particularly other scientists, but she finds an immediate camaraderie with these two. They clearly share her respect for all living things as well as her scorn for the forestry beliefs that she was first taught.



The men share Patricia’s belief in the importance of the slow processes of decay and rebirth that are essential to an old-growth forest—the antithesis of the beliefs she once fought against. The fact that they recognize Patricia’s name suggests that something major has changed in the scientific world that she has tried to leave behind.



Soon after, Patricia is working with Henry Fallows, Jason, and several other researchers in the Cascades, where she finally feels part of a true community. Henry is the senior scientist, and he puts her on a grant. She lives in a trailer and has access to a mobile lab and spends two happy years working. Meanwhile, her reputation in the wider scientific community has been totally rehabilitated, and scientists everywhere continue to build on her work. Patricia doesn't care about this, though, and she prefers her life working in the forest, surrounded by all the plants and animals she loves.

Patricia's colleagues continue making new discoveries that confirm her intuitions and are radically different from the way humans usually think about trees. The old-growth forest they study is like a huge, complex, symbiotic organism, with each part partnering with every other part. Patricia herself now focuses on studying Douglas-firs. She finds that when the roots of two Douglas-firs contact each other underground, they graft together and join their vascular systems, sharing nutrients and essentially becoming a single tree. Patricia starts to think that nature isn't just about fighting each other to survive. Instead, trees all seem to live by cooperation and sharing.

Henry Fallows wants Patricia to come back with them and teach at Corvallis, but she says she isn't ready yet. Meanwhile Dennis Ward, the research station manager, brings Patricia little gifts whenever he comes by. She grows fond of him and his visits, and she likes that he respects her privacy and solitude.

One night Dennis brings Patricia a foraged dinner and asks her questions about her work. After dinner, they take their usual walk. Dennis talks to Patricia about what a happy, self-reliant person she is, but he says that it's also nice to cook for her sometimes. He then asks if they could have an arrangement: keep their separate places but still see each other like they already do. Patricia is frightened at first, but then the offer suddenly seems both inevitable and comforting, and she can't believe her luck to find a relationship like this. Dennis says that he would like to make the marriage official, though, just so she could get his pension when he dies. Patricia takes his hand in the dark, feeling like a tree at last finding the root of another tree to bond with deep underground.

This is a truly happy time in Patricia's life, as she is able to continue her scientific work and solitary life but also finds a small community of people that she actually feels a connection to. If other characters in The Overstory must learn to look beyond humanity and see trees as fellow intelligent beings, Patricia must finally come to love humanity as she already loves the forests.



These passages are some of the most important in presenting The Overstory's idea of trees and forests as symbiotic, interconnected organisms that communicate and share resources. The usual human view of nature is of a constant competition for survival—but the world that starts to take shape through Patricia and her colleagues' studies suggests an entirely different way of life, one playing out slowly and silently but based in cooperation, redistribution, and interdependence. This, the book implies, would be a much healthier system for people to live by.



Patricia has found a community that she loves, but she still isn't ready to face the wider world that once brought her to the brink of suicide. Dennis seems to understand Patricia implicitly and to move at a similar pace as she does.



Dennis is a perfect match for Patricia, both in his great kindness and love for the forest and because he respects her work and solitude. Finally letting herself truly open up to someone romantically, Patricia immediately makes a connection with her beloved trees, feeling like a Douglas-fir connecting with its fellow tree—bound together and cooperating at the roots, but maintaining their separate trunks and branches above the soil.



PART 1: ROOTS—OLIVIA VANDERGRIFF

Olivia Vandergriff wades through the snow, leaving her college campus and heading to her boardinghouse. She only has one semester left of her senior year, and she can't wait to be done. Olivia is studying Actuarial Science, or the practice of finding "the cash value of death." She has taken her preliminary exam three times, however, and failed all of them, partly because of her current lifestyle of drug use and partying. The narrator comments on the unique tree in front of her house, but Olivia has never even noticed it. Olivia enters the dark house and accidentally cuts her ankle on one of the many bicycles piled up in the front hall. She curses and hears her housemates laughing upstairs. She goes up and tells them that she finally got divorced today.

Olivia met her now ex-husband Davy two years previously. They started out lying to each other about their parents and their lives back home, and their relationship was mostly based on sex and getting high together. Now Olivia feels the need to commemorate her divorce by smoking weed and listening to her favorite trance music alone in her room. Olivia was innocent and naïve when she first arrived at college, but now she only plans to be a "semi-bad girl" for a few months, until her real life begins after graduation.

Now very high, Olivia listens to her trance music and then pauses to write down her own musical ideas. Tonight feels like the best internal soundtrack that she's ever come up with. Suddenly, she feels the need for a hot shower. Turning on the water, she is momentarily terrified by the sight of blood in the shower and screams aloud, but then she remembers her cut ankle. As she cleans the wound, a housemate checks on her, but Olivia tells them to leave her alone. When her shower is finished, Olivia lies naked on her bed, still wet and very high. She reaches her damp hand to turn off the lamp by her bed and is suddenly electrocuted. Her hand closes around the socket involuntarily, all the lights in the house dim, and Olivia's heart stops.

PART 2: TRUNK

An unnamed man sits at a desk in a cell. He is in prison because of trees—"trees and too much love of them." He examines the wood of the desk, tracing its grain with his fingers and wishing that he could interpret the lines' meanings. He feels "illiterate," like he could learn everything about the tree that this wood came from if only he could properly understand its language.

The Overstory introduces Olivia as a rather stereotypical, privileged college student: she acts rashly and irresponsibly, is always impatient to move on to the next thing, and pays little attention to the natural world around her. Even her major, Actuarial Science, is described in the most cynical of terms as an example of how humans can commodify and monetize anything, even life and death. She is a thoroughly contemporary human being, but one who is about to have her entire life turned upside down.



The narrator continues to describe Olivia as quite immature and reckless, undergoing a transformation that's not unusual for people who have left home and gone to college for the first time. Unlike many of her peers, however, she takes her rebellion quite far, even getting married in the process.



Olivia feels little connection to others outside of the temporary highs of drugs, sex, and partying, which is why even her marriage was so superficial and short-lived. She is still learning to inhabit her body as an adult, and she relishes all the experiences that are available to her. However, her downward spiral into reckless pleasure-seeking is suddenly interrupted by an electrical surge, as she dies alone in her bed. This abrupt end marks the close of Part 1 of The Overstory, while Olivia's rebirth will begin the process of bringing all these separate characters together.



As in the beginning of Part 1, Part 2 opens with an unnamed character alone with his thoughts. (It's later implied that this man is either Douglas or Adam.) Again, the narrative makes the connection between trees and language itself, as if the grains of wood were letters that could be parsed and understood, like the word "book" deriving from "beech."



The narrative returns to Olivia Vandergriff. She is dead for 70 seconds, and then she falls off the bed, and her heart starts beating again. Davy finds her there—he had come over hoping to have breakup sex—and rushes her to the university hospital. There she revives, and she soon escapes from the hospital while the doctors are busy. She immediately returns to her house and shuts herself in her room for two full days, refusing to let anyone in. In her solitude, she sleeps and tries to remember what happened while she was dead. She can recall large, mysterious shapes calling her and pleading with her, but no more details. She tries to speak to them, asking what they want her to do, and she realizes that she is praying.

Olivia skips her final exams and calls her parents to say that she isn't coming home for Christmas. Confused and offended, they try to convince her to come home. Olivia tries to explain to them what happened to her when she died, and they have the longest conversation they have in years without fighting with each other. Over Christmas break, Olivia gets rid of all the drugs she owns, barely eats, and continues to wait for the mysterious voices to return. When her housemates come back, they seem afraid of her because of how much she's changed.

The semester begins, and at her very first lecture, Olivia senses the mysterious presences again. She follows their signals and heads outside, soon realizing that she's being led to her car. She realizes that she'll need to drive for a long time, so she stops at her house to get supplies, then gets on the highway and heads west. She has no plan and sometimes feels crazy and aimless, but then the presences return to reassure her, and she keeps going. Now in Indiana, she sleeps in her car that night.

The narrator notes that Olivia is following the same path that Johnny Appleseed did centuries before, and that he once even owned the plot of land that is now the parking lot where she's sleeping. When Olivia wakes up, she senses "beings of light" filling her car, just as they appeared when she was dead. They pass through her body and seem to speak to her. She asks what they want, but then the noise of a truck passing seems to drive them away.

Olivia goes into a box store to use the bathroom and walks through a row of TVs, all playing the same news station at once. Suddenly, they show footage of people chained around a giant tree, in front of a bulldozer. One of the people talks to the camera, begging to save these trees that are older than Jesus. Olivia freezes, and the beings of light seem to say "this, this, this." Then the program changes and the beings vanish.

Part 2 of The Overstory frequently jumps back and forth between the main characters rather than following them one at a time. Here, the narrative immediately returns to the moment of Olivia's death. Her experience upon waking—of being visited by mysterious non-human beings—will be the first driver of the plot to bring the many disparate characters together. Olivia is entirely unreligious, but she realizes that she is essentially praying when she finds herself pleading to larger forces that she does not understand.



Olivia has been drastically changed by her experience, and everyone else is concerned by this. For her part, she finally stops distracting herself and slows down, trying to find once more the voices that came to her in death.



Olivia has fully given up control of her life—which now only exists because of an apparent miracle—to the mysterious beings of light. She sacrifices her comfortable existence and immediately starts sleeping in her car and driving west.



Johnny Appleseed was a real historical figure named John Chapman, an American conservationist and nurseryman who famously introduced apple trees to the Midwest, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ontario. That Olivia is following the same path as Johnny Appleseed (unbeknownst to her) perhaps suggests that she is destined for a similar conservationist mission. The beings of light appear on Johnny Appleseed's plot of land and are driven away by the sound of a truck, suggesting their connection to trees and their vulnerability to human technology.



The Overstory often uses the voices of its characters to make arguments against deforestation. It also frequently compares the ages of old-growth trees to markers of human history, like the birth of Jesus. The beings of light seem to want Olivia to join these people protesting the logging of these enormous trees.



Olivia wanders back to her car in a daze, feeling like she must keep going west and find these trees and these people. At the Illinois border, she gets stuck behind a train, all of its cars filled to the brim with lumber. Soon, she loses count of how many train cars there are and starts to think about the endless flow of logged wood across the country at all times. After the train passes, Olivia sits in her car and seems to hear the message: “The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help.” Finally, she starts her car and keeps driving, now knowing what her purpose is.

The narrative shifts to years before Olivia’s trip, following Ray and Dorothy as they come home from a play that they’ve been performing in. They park in their driveway, Dorothy venting her dissatisfaction with her life. She is about to turn 42 years old, and over the past several years the couple has spent tens of thousands of dollars on fertility treatments trying to have a child, but none of them have been successful. Dorothy lashes out at Ray in her anger, while he has learned to just stay quiet.

The couple enters the house, and Dorothy soon breaks down crying. Ray comforts her and suggests that they could adopt a child instead, though Dorothy won’t consider this option. Suddenly she remembers their anniversary custom of planting something every year, which they have forgotten about in recent years. She stands up quickly and accidentally strikes Ray’s face with her shoulder. As she apologizes and he flails, the narrator notes that outside the house all the things Ray and Dorothy have planted over the years are busy growing, quietly “making meaning” from nothing.

The narrative returns to Olivia, who is now specifically heading for Northern California. She crosses into Iowa and stops at a giant truck stop, where she falls asleep in a chair, is chastised for doing so, and returns to her car. The next morning, Olivia finds a pay phone and calls her father. He is shocked to hear that she is in Iowa and begs her to go back to school, but she tells him that she has been “recruited” for important volunteer work in California. Olivia’s father argues and then begs her to at least come home, but Olivia reassures him that she is doing what she needs to do.

As when Duggie first saw the extent of the clear-cut mountains beyond the fringes of the highway, here Olivia also realizes what has been right in front of her all along: the constant stream of lumber that contemporary society demands. This message from the beings of light is a crucial one for the plot of the book, as Olivia thinks it makes her purpose clear: she must save the redwoods.



Dorothy and Ray’s story runs alongside those of the other characters, but on its own timeline and in its own small, suburban world. The two are now frustrated with each other and their life, mostly because of their failure to have a child.



Just like Patricia forgot for several years about her beech tree experiment with her father, the Brinkmans forget about their goal of planting something every year on their anniversary. It is difficult, the book implies, to reconcile the speed of regular human life with the slow pace of trees without actively paying attention. At the same time, the trees outside create their own kind of meaning, one entirely separate from the dramas of the Brinkmans’ marriage. With this, the book again highlights the divide between what is usually thought of as meaningful and a good story (marital troubles in suburbia, perhaps) and what is also a meaningful story: the slow growth of trees.



At this point, the characters exist in different timelines, just as all humans exist in a different timeline from trees. Olivia’s is most immediate at the moment, while the Brinkmans’ story is a years-long summary currently taking place in Olivia’s past (though all the storylines are still narrated in the present tense). Olivia has found a new sense of meaning and purpose from the beings of light, and her father is confused by the sudden change in her character.



Olivia drives through a bleak and beautiful landscape, feeling in love with everything, including humanity. Suddenly, the mysterious presences alert her to a sign on the side of the road, hanging from an enormous, ancient tree: “FREE TREE ART.” Olivia pulls off at the next exit and finds her way to the giant tree. Near it is an old barn, its side painted with an enormous mural of flowering trees. Olivia pulls up and sees a man a few years older than she is, with long hair and a beard. He seems nervous and tells her that she’s the first person to stop because of the sign. He invites her into the barn to see his gallery.

Upstairs in the barn, Olivia is surprised to see an artist’s studio filled to the brim with paintings and sculptures of trees. She asks the man if he’s really giving these all away for free and suggests that he should be selling them in New York or Chicago instead. Olivia keeps looking at the art and then at the man, wondering how he fits into her new mission. The two introduce themselves to each other: the man is Nicholas Hoel. Nick then shows her the flipbook with the 76 years of pictures of the family **chestnut tree**. Olivia recognizes it as the tree she saw from the highway.

Olivia asks Nick why he is giving all his work away, and he explains that he is leaving his family’s farm within two months. He says that giving the art away feels like another piece of art in itself, or as if he’s acting like trees do, since they “give it all away” too. Nick then leads Olivia out to the **chestnut tree**. He explains about the chestnut blight on the East Coast, which is why she’s never seen a tree like this before, and about his family’s project of photographing the tree. She wonders why he’s leaving the tree now, and he shows her its bark—the blight has finally found it, and it is slowly dying.

Now, in the house where his family died 10 years ago, Nick makes tea for Olivia as she tells him all about her recent experience with death and the mysterious beings of light. They discuss the redwoods being logged, and as they talk, they seem to understand each other immediately. Olivia suggests that they were meant to meet each other, and that Nick should come with her to California. As Nick looks at Olivia, he realizes that he wants to follow her wherever she might go, but out loud he says that he’ll need to sleep on it first. That night, Olivia sleeps in his grandparents’ old room. The next morning, Nick agrees to go with her, saying only that he’ll need to clear out the house and dispose of his art first.

This is the first meeting of two characters from Part One: Nicholas Hoel and Olivia Vandergriff, brought together by the Hoel chestnut tree. Nick has clearly still been living in his family’s house after their deaths, and he’s now totally isolated. The message from the beings of light suggests that Nick and Olivia’s meeting is part of their larger plan.



Living alone after his family members’ deaths, Nick has delved into his art, all of it based around trees. Olivia is still entirely concerned with the mission that the beings of light have imparted to her, and she wonders what she is supposed to do next. The important symbol of the chestnut tree and its book of photographs returns here, giving Olivia the same perspective of its growth that Nick also has.



Like Patricia, Nick sees trees as fundamentally generous and altruistic beings, giving away their gifts rather than competing with others. Even hundreds of miles from its native range, the Hoel chestnut tree is finally afflicted by the blight. Humanity’s effect on nature has become ubiquitous, and no corner of Earth is truly safe.



Nick and Olivia share an immediate connection, and Nick in particular feels bound to this stranger who appeared on his doorstep and now wants him to join her mission. Olivia often acts as a sort of Joan of Arc figure, inspiring others with her innocence, beauty, and confidence in her own calling. Nick is also physically attracted to her from the start.



The narrative now shifts to follow Mimi Ma in the aftermath of her father Winston's death. She throws herself into her work, traveling around the world and taking up many hobbies. She has love affairs with both men and women, and at one point she almost gets married. Eventually, she is moved to her company's headquarters in Portland. Her new office has floor-length windows overlooking a stand of pine trees, and the sight feels to Mimi like the national parks where her family used to go on vacation. Mimi hangs her father's arhat scroll on her wall, though it constantly reminds her of him and sometimes causes her to panic in the middle of the day. She calms herself by looking out over the pine grove.

Mimi's colleagues usually use her office to gather during lunch breaks, eating and playing cards together. One day, they are discussing the pines outside her window, and they start debating what their bark smells like. Mimi leaves their card game to go outside and collect some "data." She enters the pine grove and feels like she is returning to her "childhood's only untouched days." She stands for a while, breathing in the smell of the pines and remembering her trips to the national parks with Winston. Mimi turns toward the trunk of a pine and then sees a poster inviting her to a town hall to protest what's about to happen—the city is going to cut down this pine grove and replace it with "cleaner, safer" trees. Mimi turns again and sees her colleagues looking at her and laughing from her office window.

The narrative now turns to Douglas Pavlicek, who is at a bar in Damascus, Oregon, buying drinks for strangers to celebrate planting his fifty-thousandth tree after almost four years of work. He plays pool with the random men at the bar, losing badly but enjoying the company and his own sense of having completed something worthwhile. Several people praise his accomplishment, but then one man says that the logging companies use his work of planting seedlings to raise their own allowable cuts. He is "putting in babies so they can kill grandfathers," the man says. This kills Douggie's good mood, and he ends the festivities.

The day after seeing the poster in the pines, Mimi skips her usual lunch card game and instead returns to her pine grove. There she sees a woman nearby and tells her that the city is planning to cut these trees down. Though Mimi herself hates activists, she can now hear herself sounding like one.

The story again shifts to a different timeline years before Nick and Olivia's meeting, as Mimi is professionally successful but emotionally floundering in the aftermath of Winston's suicide. At last, she finds comfort in the pine grove outside of her office, as the forests of America's national parks are now closely bound to happy memories of her father in Mimi's mind.



Mimi's connection to trees first comes from her father, both through his mulberry tree and their family trips to the national parks. The pine grove outside her office then comes to represent those happy parts of her childhood—memories that are "untouched" by the trauma she's experienced later in life. Right in the middle of this moment of nostalgia, however, Mimi learns that the pine grove is to be cut down. This also shows the practical application of forestry theories like those that Patricia's professors taught—they are eager to clear out the old pine forest and replace it with something more economically valuable and easier to manage.



In planting the seedlings, Douggie has again tried to find redemption through hard work, and he celebrates his accomplishment in his usual way by drinking and talking to strangers. What the man at the bar says ruins his celebration, however. The idea of "putting in babies so they can kill grandfathers" suggests that Douggie has just been a pawn of the logging companies this whole time, and all his hard work is essentially making things worse in the long run.



Mimi's love for these particular trees makes her act in a way that she sees as out-of-character.



Dougie awakens in a motel room, despairing not because of the money he lost the previous night but because of what the stranger said—that all his hard work has only helped the logging companies he was trying to fight. He goes to the local library to look up information and finds that the stranger was indeed right.

Hopeless and depressed, Dougie goes for a walk that continues on for miles, trying to think of what to do next. On a bulletin board at a grocery store, he sees the same poster that Mimi did, advertising the town hall to protect the pine trees. Dougie asks the grocery's cashier for directions and then walks the extra miles to the pine grove itself. The town hall meeting is supposed to be in four days. Still among the pine trees, Dougie lies down on the ground and sleeps, dreaming again of his plane crash in Thailand.

Dougie is awakened by the sound of machinery. It is still the middle of the night, but men have come with chain saws to cut down the pine trees. Dougie tries to stop them, saying that the town hall hearing isn't for several days, but the men insist that he leave. Panicking, Dougie starts climbing a tree until someone pulls him down and strikes him. Soon, the police arrive and handcuff him. Dougie gives his name as "Prisoner 571" as they take him away.

Later that same morning Mimi arrives at work, looks out the window, and howls in despair. All her pine trees are gone. She rushes outside and stands among the wreckage, smelling all the fresh-cut wood and raging within herself over "the old loss that will never, ever be answered."

The narrative returns to Neelay, who finishes his space opera game and now needs to invent a company to sell it. He thinks of redwoods and decides to name his one-man company "Sempervirens." The first game he releases is called *The Sylvan Prophecies*. Soon, he sells out of discs and needs to hire employees and rent an office, and then he has to actually incorporate his company. At night, though, Neelay still dreams of "branching and spreading," thinking of his work's "unlimited growth curve."

This shows just how difficult and complex the problem is—even honest attempts to help can end up doing more harm than good. Under the law, a seedling is the same as an ancient tree, so the logging companies can get away with cutting down old-growth forests as long as they replace them with new trees.



The narrative now starts to bring Mimi and Dougie together, as they both plan to fight to save the pine grove. Dougie is feeling aimless and depressed again, and so he latches onto the town hall meeting as a concrete piece of action that he can look forward to.



The logging companies are willing to do anything—even cut in the middle of the night—to preserve their profits and keep the public from turning against them. Arrested for the first time, Dougie immediately flashes back to his days as a participant in the Stanford Prison Experiment.



Many times, The Overstory lingers on the great tragedy of an old forest being cut down. The idea that this is an "old loss that will never, ever be answered" suggests that cutting down trees is not just destructive in the present moment. It also destroys the trees' long, unique histories and immense potential for growth—the fallen trees will take centuries to be replaced, if they can be at all. And, in the same way, there is no obvious remedy for Mimi's sorrow—the wound may never heal.



Sempervirens is part of the Latin name for the coast redwood tree. Once again, the narrative and Neelay himself compare his work of coding to the branching of a tree. The book also comments on the exponential growth of technology, as Neelay realizes that he cannot even imagine the limits of what he might create next.



Neelay continues working, both learning how to run a company and coding new worlds. His game's sequel, *The New Sylvan Prophecies*, is an even bigger hit with the public. Everyone loves the game's open-ended world, interacting with its environment, plants, and animals as much as following its plotline. After releasing a third game, *The Sylvan Revelation*, a large publishing company offers to purchase Neelay's brand.

Neelay plans to agree to the deal. He can't sleep that night, however, and eventually goes through the ordeal of getting out of bed, dressing himself, and mechanically hoisting himself into his (now joystick-operated) wheelchair. He then makes his way down to his van, which has a hydraulic floor that he can roll onto and pedals that his hands can operate. He drives to Stanford's inner quad, to the wild terrarium where he first experienced his inspiration for his life's goal six years earlier. Tonight, the trees are silent, though he waits in complete silence and isolation for a long time.

After a while, the waving of the branches towards the south makes Neelay think of finding a particular gigantic redwood with his father as a child. He feels that this is the tree that he must have subconsciously named his company after, and that he must now consult it. Neelay then drives the van back and forth up a steep road into the Santa Cruz Mountains, finally finding a spot that he recognizes and stopping. He gets out and maneuvers his chair down the trail, but after a hundred yards, the wheels get stuck. Neelay yells aloud, but no one is around to hear.

As his eyes adjust to the dark, Neelay realizes that the redwood tree he was seeking is just in front of him—he missed it because it was too large for his eyes to even conceive of in the darkness. Suddenly Neelay feels like a child again, standing under the tree with his Pita, who reminds him of the banyan fig and all the "code that made this gigantic thing." Neelay is then struck by inspiration again, recognizing that "the branch wants only to go on branching. The point of the game is to keep playing." He realizes that he can't sell his company but must continue to pursue his own dream. He throws his cloak under the wheel of his stuck tire and is able to free his chair, and then slowly makes his way back to his office.

Neelay's games are similar to other world-building and role-playing games of recent years, like Animal Crossing, Stardew Valley, or Minecraft. These games take advantage of the human desire to explore, build, compete, and find new things.



Neelay's rapid success allows him the resources to maintain his mobility even with his paralysis. He thinks of the trees at Stanford's inner quad as his muses and wants to hear them speak again, but now they are silent. Powers thus suggests that Neelay wasn't only inspired by the trees but actually received a message from them—one that they have now stopped sending.



Like Mimi, Neelay has fond memories of his father and childhood that are related to a tree. He has learned to follow his whims and look to trees for inspiration in his work, so he takes this spontaneous nighttime trip that now seems to have ended in disaster.



Once more, the book connects the act of coding and world-building to the growth of a tree, emerging from a tiny seed and then endlessly branching upwards and outwards. It is also notable that Neelay experiences his life-changing inspiration from a direct experience with a tree.



The next day Neelay breaks off the deal to sell *Sempervirens*. He gathers his staff together and describes what the company's new project will be: a game in which players will enter into a "freshly assembled Earth," where they will explore, gather resources, cut down trees, build towns, and construct anything they can imagine. At the same time, players all over the world will be playing in the same game, interacting with each other and competing for the same resources. Nine months later, an early copy of the game makes even the staff at *Sempervirens* stop working—and even stop eating and sleeping—because they are so obsessed with playing it. This new game is called **Mastery**.

Back at the Hoel farm, Nick and Olivia spend two weeks cleaning out and selling the property. Nick still finds the whole situation extremely strange—that he is upending his life to go along with this stranger who randomly appeared just days ago. But he also feels like "their obsessions interlock" and this is the right thing for him to do. At night, Nick reads about the redwoods, and also about mental disorders. He notes a section on schizophrenia that says, "Beliefs should not be considered delusional if they are in keeping with societal norms."

Nick and Olivia have now spent two weeks together in the house. Nothing romantic has happened between them, though Nick is distracted by Olivia's presence, especially when she walks around half-dressed. She teases that she's seen evidence of another woman in the house, and Nick admits that there was someone recently, but she left because of his single-minded obsession with the **chestnut tree**.

Olivia comes up with the idea to bury Nick's art in the yard bound up in bubble wrap, and they do so. The next morning, they leave, heading west and hoping to find the people protesting the logging of the redwoods. As they drive, Nick tells Olivia about coming home to find his family dead, years before. Later they discuss how comfortable Nick is with silence, and how Olivia seems to Nick like she's atoning for her past life—"for the attentive person I wasn't," she says.

Nick and Olivia stop at a motel that night and sleep in separate beds. The next day, they cross through Nevada, awed by its wide emptiness. A snowstorm hits, and at one point they almost crash. Nick is shaken, but Olivia seems sure that they're not meant to die yet. At last, they cross the border into California.

In creating Mastery, Neelay feels like he is pursuing his vision from the trees. But it's noteworthy that he also incorporates an element of competition in the game from the very start. The very name, Mastery, also implies that the player must control and exploit the world of the game in order to be successful. This, The Overstory suggests, is similar to how humans treat the Earth.



The quote about schizophrenia is another example of the book's focus on human psychology and groupthink. According to the quote's author, "delusional" beliefs depend entirely on how well they fit with "societal norms." The point that is gradually developed over the course of The Overstory, however, is that society's beliefs are the delusional ones. Thus, the only truly "sane" thing to do is to go against such norms and risk being labeled crazy.



Nick is very attracted to Olivia but also feels almost in awe of her and her sense of purpose, and for now the two share a spiritual connection that has not yet become physical. Nick also suggests that his obsession with trees has gotten in the way of past relationships.



This passage again emphasizes the importance of simply being patient, silent, and paying attention. Olivia is filled with a sense of mystical purpose after her death, but she also feels like she must make up for the person she was before her accident—"the attentive person [she] wasn't." This means undergoing the slow and difficult process of learning to be humble and observant.



Olivia feels confident in her mission, even if she still isn't sure of its details. Her certainty contrasts with Nick, who has entirely upended his life for someone he just met—and who the book has implied might be delusional.



Meanwhile, Douglas is in court after being arrested. He tells the judge his own story—how he is an injured veteran who has planted 50,000 trees in an attempt to undo the logging company’s damage and simply thought that what the city was doing in the middle of the night was wrong. He is given options for his sentence, and he chooses a fine and three days of labor, planting ash trees for the Portland city arborist. Dougie talks with the arborist about the logged pines, and he considers aloud that the environmental activists might be right about everything.

His sentence complete, Dougie returns to the devastated pine grove. He grows enraged at the sight of the sawn stumps and starts counting the rings of the trees, comparing them to the years of his own life and then years and even centuries before that. With a marker he writes the dates onto the rings of the stump itself, and on the outer ring he writes, “CUT DOWN WHILE YOU SLEPT.”

Dougie is still writing when Mimi Ma finds him on her lunch break. At first, she thinks that he is with the logging company, and she rants at him furiously. For his part, the first sight of Mimi reminds Dougie of a woman he loved back in Thailand. When she stops berating him, Dougie tells Mimi that he was there the night the trees came down and that he was arrested trying to protect them, and the two commiserate over the injustice of it all. Struck by an idea, Dougie asks Mimi if she has some money or a car he can borrow.

The narrative returns to Dorothy and Ray Brinkman again, in the years after their last play. They stop acting and instead take up reading and collecting books. Ray reads hopeful nonfiction books about the rise of technology and civilization, while Dorothy enjoys dramatic novels and old works. Slowly they convert their house into a library, even the room they had once reserved for the child they hoped to have.

At Christmas, Ray and Dorothy give each other books, and at New Year’s they make a resolution to take adventures together. They already have books “full of previous resolutions” about cooking, hiking, birdwatching, or traveling. As they read together at night, Dorothy weeps over the trials of fictional characters and wonders why she does so. Ray and Dorothy’s anniversary passes, and they once more forget to plant something.

This passage makes the point that if what society is doing is immoral and illogical—cutting down old forests in the name of immediate profit and destroying ecosystems in the process—then the right thing to do might be to break with society. This leads Dougie to consider that the environmental activists whom he previously considered crazy might be sane after all.



Once again Dougie is driven to take concrete action in the face of helplessness and despair. He knows that his own small actions can do little against the power of corporate greed, but he feels compelled to act, nonetheless. His examination of the tree rings and comparison to human history also directly illustrates how time can pass in different ways for different beings.



Dougie immediately falls in love with Mimi, in part because of how she reminds him of a past romance. Like Nick and Olivia, Dougie and Mimi are brought together by trees and decide essentially on a whim to take a journey together.



Dorothy and Ray move through various hobbies as they try to fill the void in their lives. Dorothy’s love of dramatic novels shows that she is entirely captivated by the stories of humanity, while Ray prefers a wider and more practical view of the world.



Ray and Dorothy are still close, but they also increasingly live within their own worlds of reading. The fact that Dorothy gets so emotional over the stories she reads suggests that she is longing for aspects of the human experience that she is currently lacking.



Nick and Olivia enter California and arrive at the redwoods, where they are awed into silence at the majesty of the trees. Olivia asks Nick to pull over. She wanders among the trees and soon starts crying, feeling that she is finally where she is supposed to be. They keep driving and eventually reach a group of environmental activists, and from there they make their way to Humboldt County and a ragtag group called the “Life Defense Force.” Nick and Olivia eat with a man named Moses, and the next day they meet a woman named Mother N, whom Olivia recognizes as the person she saw on the TV screens at the store in Indiana.

That night Mother N speaks to the assembled group, encouraging those still volunteering and asking for nonviolent protesting tactics. She then explains about what they’re up against: Humboldt Timber, which used to be a family business who cut trees responsibly, but now has been bought out. The new owner is trying to cash in on every bit of lumber they can cut, trying to log all the old growth before environmental legislation can stop them. As Mother N speaks, Nick looks over at Olivia and sees that she is crying.

Afterward, a group prepares to sabotage some logging equipment, despite Mother N’s discouragement. Before they go, Nick paints everyone’s faces in fantastical designs. Olivia takes his arm and praises his work, saying that she has it “on good authority” that he has done well. Other members of the group have aliases, and that night, Nick and Olivia give names to each other as well. Olivia christens Nick as “Watchman,” and Nick gives Olivia the name “Maidenhair.” Later that night, Nick and Olivia sleep side by side, and Nick can see the tattoo on her shoulder reading, “A change is gonna come.”

The narrative returns to Patricia Westerford, who sits at her table writing. All winter, she has been working on a book about how trees communicate with each other, and how all aspects of a forest are necessary parts of its complex and interdependent system. She writes about mycorrhizal systems—how networks of fungi disperse nutrients between trees and other organisms—and claims that “there are no individuals in a forest, no separable events,” and that forests themselves are like “enormous spreading, branching, underground super-trees.”

Patricia’s husband Dennis lives 14 miles away, and they see each other every day for lunch. Otherwise, Patricia is surrounded only by trees, and she spends her days working on writing her book or articles for scientific journals. This particular night she finds it hard to write and goes for her usual walk, breathing in all the compounds that the trees release and thinking about their many meanings.

The Life Defense Force and other activists in The Overstory are based on real-life groups (mostly “Earth First!”) during the “Redwood summer” of 1990, in which environmental activists tried to prevent logging companies from cutting down old-growth redwood forests in Northern California. Olivia feels like she is now truly fulfilling the wishes of the beings of light.



As in real life, there is disagreement among the activists about the best tactics to achieve their goals. Mother N represents those who are strictly non-violent, although she also doesn’t try to stop her peers who take more direct and destructive action. Here, Mother N’s speech also gives more background about why these redwoods are being logged. A capitalist system has no concept of a forest as valuable other than in the immediate monetary benefit it can provide.



Olivia’s sense of purpose is bolstered by finding these fellow activists and feeling like she is fulfilling the wishes of the beings of light. Olivia names Nick “Watchman” because she feels like he is her protector. “Maidenhair,” Nick’s name for Olivia, refers to the ginkgo biloba tree, which dates back millions of years and has many uses in traditional medicine.



Another real-life figure to inspire Patricia’s character is Peter Wohlleben, author of the bestselling book The Hidden Life of Trees, which covers similar topics to the book Patricia is working on here. Once again, Powers uses Patricia’s narrative to give readers scientific knowledge that they might be otherwise unaware of, as well as the important idea that forests are like one complex, interdependent organism.



Patricia and Dennis have settled into a routine that works for both of them, and they seem very happy in their marriage. Once again, Patricia’s character joins scientific knowledge with a personal and emotional connection to the forest.



Patricia sits down in her usual spot on a fallen log and then realizes what she needs to write next: how when Douglas-firs are about to die, they will send all their nutrients out into their roots, giving their “riches to the community pool in a last will and testament.” She decides to call these trees “giving trees.” This is the phrase that the public will latch onto later when they read her book, because “people see better what looks like them.”

The next morning Patricia rereads what she has written, and then tries to start on her book’s final chapter. She wants to seem hopeful about the future, but she also recognizes that “the truth is somewhat more brutal.” She decides to end her book with the Buddha’s words about a tree’s generosity: how it “even offers shade to the axmen who destroy it.”

Dennis arrives for lunch that day, bringing his latest offering of delicious, foraged cooking. Patricia thinks again how lucky she is to have a relationship like this, with a patient and generous man who lets her spend most of her time alone. At lunch, Patricia reads him her latest chapter. He claps and tells her that he thinks she’s finished with her book. Patricia knows that he’s right, but she’s anxious about what she needs to do next. She can’t decide on a title and is still traumatized from her last time publishing something. Dennis tries to comfort her, but Patricia still can’t tell him about how she almost committed suicide because of her experience.

Patricia finally types up a draft of her book and mails it off to her publisher. Six weeks later, she gets a call from her editor praising the book and all that it taught him about trees. He claims that she’ll become rich from it. But Patricia feels melancholy hearing this. What she really wants is to have her solitude back, though she feels that it is now lost forever.

*Here, the book again makes the point that most trees are fundamentally generous rather than competitive, in contrast to humanity and the way we generally think about nature. Trees give away their nutrients “to the community pool in a last will and testament,” generously donating their resources in a way that we might think of as an exclusively human behavior. This passage also returns to the idea that people best understand stories in their own terms—that is, about other people—and so anthropomorphizing the trees a bit helps Patricia to win over her readers. This is Powers’s project in *The Overstory* as well: to make trees “look like” people, so that we might better notice and empathize with them.*



Though Patricia has perhaps the book’s most positive and complete relationship with trees, her view of humanity and the future is a “brutal” and pessimistic one. She tries not to scare her readers but truly believes (as it seems that Powers does too) that humanity is quickly destroying itself with no remedy in sight. Human competition will “win” against the forests’ generosity, but that victory will lead to our own extinction as well.



Patricia has created a life that she is very satisfied with, but publishing her book will mean finally returning to the public eye—and the last time she was there, she was driven to the verge of suicide. Again, the narrative shows that Patricia and Dennis’s unconventional relationship is actually perfect for them both.



Patricia essentially sacrifices her solitude for what she sees as the greater good: helping the public to better understand and love trees. She has no real desire for fame or fortune—she writes her book simply to share her passion and knowledge with others and hopefully effect some kind of change.



Meanwhile, Neelay's game **Mastery** comes out, and Sempervirens explodes in popularity. Neelay has a new office overlooking the redwoods, high above the rest of the company. He works day and night, usually sleeping in his chair, constantly tormented by new ideas. On this particular day he logs into *Mastery* and assumes a new identity. Though he recognizes the game's many flaws, he still can't help being drawn into its world of potential. At last, he recognizes that back in "Real Life" he is hungry, but he only takes time for an energy drink and a cold chicken puff.

Neelay is still absorbed in the game when a reporter calls to interview him. The man, who sounds not much older than Neelay, introduces himself as Chris and is clearly starstruck to be talking to Neelay. He asks Neelay about the success of **Mastery** and admits that he himself is addicted to the game. Neelay answers his questions while thinking to himself about how the appeal of the game is the simple sense of meaning that it offers: its lack of ambiguity and "human-on-human darkness."

The interviewer Chris asks about the future of Neelay's company, and Neelay promises even bigger and richer worlds to come. Chris then tries to ask Neelay about himself and his immigrant family, but Neelay deflects these questions. The sound of Chris's confident laughter fills Neelay with desire, but he also feels that anyone who sees him would be disgusted by his appearance. Neelay must instead be content to know that the code he wrote "is changing this other man's brain." Neelay ends the interview musing about the future and how he thinks that soon "Real life" will essentially become a game on a screen.

Back in the redwood forest, members of the Life Defense Force block Highway 36 with a row of black coffins. Olivia, dressed as a mountain lion, climbs out along a line strung above the coffins and unfurls a banner that reads "Stop Sacrificing Virgins." Cars stop and people get out, some laughing but most of them angry. Then the coffins open, and more people dressed as woodland creatures emerge, all of them beautifully painted. They start into a wild dance until the police appear, and then all the animals flee into the forest. Two days later, footage of the stunt is shown on the national news. Some people think the activists are heroes, and some think they should be locked up.

Adam Appich is now in his last year at Fortuna College. At his last lecture with Professor Rabinowski, the professor discusses surveys that the current and previous classes took and shows how their answers present consistent patterns that basically show that humans are inherently illogical and operating "in a dense fog of mutual reinforcement."

Even as a child, Neelay felt like his physical body was just an avatar for his mental self. Now, in the world of Mastery, he fully embraces this idea, though it means neglecting himself in the real world. Like Mimi, Neelay's office overlooks a forest—but unlike Mimi, Neelay had the power to specifically choose this position.



Neelay knows what makes his games so successful: they satisfy the basic human desires for control, exploration, and competition, but without the moral ambiguity and boredom that can accompany real-life interactions.



This is the only hint the story gives of Neelay's sexuality, as he is overcome with desire simply by the sound of Chris's laughter but immediately quashes this feeling. He seeks to totally escape the physical world and live only in his brain, and this means giving up his sexuality as well. Just as Neelay predicts that real life will soon be like a game, Neelay's game is a microcosm of real life.



It's implied that Nick played a major role in planning this protest, painting the members of the Life Defense Force to look like woodland creatures. While the stunt divides the public, it also shows how art can be used to shake up people's worldviews and help them pay attention to issues that society usually tries to ignore.



The book again reinforces the idea that human beings are extremely influenced by whatever group they are a part of, and they will almost always choose going along with the group over whatever is actually logical. This is what Rabinowski means by a "dense fog of mutual reinforcement."



Rabinowski prepares to make another point but then suddenly excuses himself from the class, grimacing. He steps out of the room and the students can hear him collapse in the hallway. Adam scans the room—no one does anything. He then leans in to talk to a woman next to him, whispering that he thinks Rabinowski is demonstrating the “bystander effect.” The woman looks concerned and asks if they should go and get help. Finally, someone in the hallway finds Rabinowski and calls for help, but by the time the ambulance arrives, he has died of a heart attack.

Afterwards, Adam gets coffee with the woman from the lecture, and she asks why he didn’t help Rabinowski. Adam defends himself, saying that he thought Rabinowski was just demonstrating the bystander effect and Adam was playing along. Adam gets angry when the woman presses him, but then he deflates and realizes that this really was Rabinowski’s last lesson: that “learning psychology is, indeed, pretty much useless.”

Adam goes on to graduate school in Santa Cruz, where he becomes known as “Bias Boy” because of his tendency to bring up how humans’ cognitive blindness keeps them from acting in their own best interests. Adam is also very attracted to his advisor, Professor Mieke Van Dijk. He meets with her to discuss his thesis, as he hasn’t decided on a topic yet. Van Dijk presses him to figure out what truly interests him, and eventually she narrows it down to a study about “people who support a position that any reasonable person in our society thinks is crazy.” As an example, she lists the people currently risking their lives to defend trees. Adam is skeptical, but something also draws him to the subject of studying trees rights activists.

Mimi and Douglas arrive at the Life Defense Force camp, which has the feel of a party more than a protest. Douggie is delighted, but Mimi is still surprised that she has made it all this way when she never liked activism or activists before. The camp is full of people of all ages and from all walks of life. They gather together for a march that day, and Mimi recognizes that she is now going against everything her parents taught her—she is making trouble and making herself be seen by the world. As the group walks, they sing and chant, passing devastated areas that have already been logged and then entering a grove of enormous redwoods.

The bystander effect (the idea that a person in a group is less likely to take action than if they were alone) was made famous by the case of Kitty Genovese, who was murdered in a public space in 1964. Many onlookers witnessed her murder, but allegedly none of them tried to intervene or call the police. Here, Adam assumes that Rabinowski is faking a heart attack as a way to test his students—but in reality, the heart attack is real, as is the bystander effect that overtakes his students. This is another example of the herd mentality that The Overstory emphasizes as being so crucial to human psychology: if people see that no one else is intervening, they are less likely to do so, even in the case of a clear emergency.



Adam becomes even more pessimistic about humanity after his professor’s death, as he realizes that all his years of study did nothing to help him overcome his natural impulse to apathy. In his mind, psychology is essentially “useless” because it doesn’t prevent the or remedy the phenomena that it observes.



Adam still has a less-than-ideal relationship with women, much like he did in high school, as he is often presented as sexualizing and objectifying them in his own thoughts. Here, Professor Van Dijk leads Adam toward the thesis that will connect him to The Overstory’s other characters. This thesis is also a distillation of one of the book’s main goals: to show that just because society as a whole considers something to be crazy doesn’t mean that it objectively is, because humans are overwhelmingly influenced by the opinions of others.



Just as Adam decides to start studying environmental activists, Mimi reflects that she has become an activist herself. Her parents always taught her to keep her head down and blend in—essentially to go with the flow of society—but she is finally swimming against the current and taking a position that goes against societal norms. She is now one of those people choosing logic and morality over “mutual reinforcement.”



As Mimi walks beside Douggie, she thinks about their relationship. She knows that he is in love with her, and though she feels very close to him and trusts him, she also considers him “a little wacked,” more like a child than a romantic interest. The group reaches the edge of the logging area, and a woman with a megaphone (who is part of the group) warns them that they are about to trespass, so anyone unwilling to be arrested should stop. Some stay back, but the rest continue on, Mimi and Douggie among them. They can hear the roar of logging equipment nearby.

Now in the logging zone, the protesters quickly lock arms and chain themselves together to block the road. Two loggers approach and argue with them, and one of them kicks mud into Douggie’s face. Soon police arrive, cut the chain, and handcuff everyone, leaving them to sit in the muddy road. Mimi has to urinate and can’t hold it, and she starts crying as Douggie tries to comfort her. Finally, the protesters are arrested and booked.

The narrative returns to Ray and Dorothy. Dorothy, now 44, has taken up singing in a local choir as her latest hobby and distraction. She kisses Ray on the top of his head before she leaves for rehearsal, which she never misses. She asks Ray about what he’s working on, and he says he’s reading a case claiming that trees should have their own rights to intellectual property—that the law is wrong to only recognize “human victims.” On her way out, Ray tells Dorothy to bring a coat because it’s cold out, and the comment makes her freeze up. “I’m not your property, Ray,” she says, and leaves. Ray is left alone, knowing that Dorothy is actually off having an affair.

Dorothy parks her car at the auditorium where her rehearsal will be. She knows that she’s about to do a bad thing, but it also feels exhilarating. She gets into a black car that drives her to her destination, where she has wild sex that she can barely remember. Then the nameless man drops her off at rehearsal, and she sneaks in and joins the choir.

At home, Ray tries to distract himself with his reading. He is intrigued by the idea that other beings on Earth could have rights, rather than just humans. Soon he returns to thoughts of Dorothy, though. She doesn’t know that he knows about her affair, and he wants to keep it that way. Ray feels like his whole life is dissolving as he continues to read the essay’s arguments.

Mimi and Douggie’s relationship is an interesting one, as they have very different goals and personalities but still care deeply about each other almost immediately. Even though Mimi thinks Douggie is “a little wacked” (a bit crazy) and childlike, she’s still instinctively drawn to him. Meanwhile, the woman with the megaphone is likely Mother N, whom Nick and Olivia met when they arrived at the activist camp.



The protesters are technically trespassing but also act entirely peacefully, while the loggers and police treat them brutally, attempting to intimidate them more than to serve any kind of justice. Mimi is now truly invested in her cause, as she’s willing to undergo psychological abuse and arrest to defend the trees.



Ray’s character often portrays the book’s ideas about non-humans having value and rights under the law, and this argument is first brought up in the paper that Ray reads here. Still dissatisfied with their lives, Dorothy is now attempting to fill the void—and making sure that she doesn’t feel like a piece of Ray’s property—by having an affair.



Dorothy feels stifled and boxed in by her life, and she’s now acting out some of the wild fantasies of the novels she loves.



Ray is a strait-laced lawyer, but he is openminded to the idea that the law could be flawed. By ignoring any other kind of intelligent or conscious beings, the book suggests, the law severely limits itself and can even be a destructive force in the world.



Later, Dorothy returns home, feeling disgusted with herself but also very free. She enters and makes her usual small talk with Ray, and then she gets in the shower—though she also showered before she left for rehearsal, as Ray notices. In bed that night, Dorothy asks Ray more about the essay he’s reading. He says that the essay’s author “wants to give rights to everything alive.” As Ray wrestles aloud with this idea and what it would mean for his career, Dorothy drifts off to sleep.

Nick and Olivia, now referred to as Watchman and Maidenhair, are now camping out with the other activists among the redwoods. Nick asks Olivia if she’s scared of what the multi-billion-dollar logging companies might do to them, but Olivia says that she is sure everything will turn out okay—she has it “on the highest authority.” The next day, the two walk among the redwoods until they find a grove spray-painted with numbers, ready to be logged. Olivia starts filming as Nick removes his own set of spray cans and starts painting over the numbers.

Soon Nick has transformed all of the logging numbers into beautiful paintings of butterflies. He and Olivia know that this will only slow down the logging companies, but they will also edit and release the footage to the public and hope that it will spread their message. After the filming is over, Nick and Olivia have sex for the first time there on the forest floor.

Patricia and Dennis still have their usual routine: Patricia lives and works alone, and Dennis brings her lunch every day. Today he arrives with mail from the outside world, including a packet from Patricia’s agent. Patricia is nervous to open it, but Dennis encourages her. Inside among other papers is a check for far more money than Patricia was expecting. She feels like there must be some kind of mistake, and there’s no way that her book has made so much money. Along with the check are also reviews of the book and letters from fans, all of them praising her. Dennis reads them aloud, and next finds an invitation to speak on the largest public radio program in the country. He’s clearly excited and proud, but Patricia worries about losing her solitude and being dragged back into the world of other people.

Back in the redwood camp, Moses asks if anyone feels like doing “a brief stint up top”—continuing the group’s sit-in atop a redwood tree set to be logged. Maidenhair (Olivia) immediately volunteers, and Watchman (Nick) agrees to go with her, knowing that he has no real choice but to keep following this woman who has upended his life. Moses assures them that they’ll only be in the tree for a few days.

Dorothy assumes that Ray is unaware of her affair, and his commitment to keeping things that way causes him to retreat further into his studies. His newfound interest in the idea of “giv[ing] rights to everything alive” clashes with Dorothy’s assumption that Ray is trying to objectify and control her.



In important sections of the book, the narrator refers to characters only by their chosen aliases. This is a kind of literary metamorphosis—like Baucis and Philemon becoming trees in Ovid’s myth, Nick and Olivia become trees in the narrative world of The Overstory. Olivia continues to feel confident in her mission and in the power of the beings who guide her.



Nick again uses his artistic skills to help his cause and attempt to better reach the public. Nick and Olivia’s relationship has previously been based around their common goals and obsessions, but now it finally becomes romantic as well.



Patricia’s new bestseller is again inspired by Peter Wohlleben’s book The Hidden Life of Trees. Patricia’s words have reached many people, showing that the public is willing to hear her point of view and that some people can indeed look beyond humanity and see the value in other beings. Patricia has essentially sacrificed her solitude and peace to achieve this goal, and she must continue to do things that she dislikes if she wants to further her mission.



Nick is hopelessly in love with Olivia, and he has bound his life to hers and to her spiritual mission. This tree-squatting protest—camping out in a tree to keep it from being logged—echoes many similar cases in history, as activists put their bodies in harm’s way to save old-growth trees.



Maidenhair, Watchman, and a man named Loki arrive at the tree, which is called Mimas. Its size and majesty overwhelm Nick and make him think of Yggdrasil, the World Tree of Norse mythology. Olivia approaches it and embraces its vast trunk. High above them, two people are camped out, excited to come down. They lower a rope down, and Loki explains how they will climb up the tree using a harness and carabiners. Nick is anxious about what seems to be a very unsafe process, but Olivia starts climbing confidently upward. She makes it to the top in 20 minutes, and then it's Nick's turn.

A hundred feet up, Nick starts to panic, but then he can hear Olivia's voice in his ear encouraging him, though she is actually far above. He eventually makes his way up. Buzzard and Sparks, the two people they are replacing, are eager to get back on the ground. They climb down the rope to Loki, who assures Nick and Olivia that he'll be back in a few days.

Now alone, Olivia takes Nick's hand and expresses her gratitude to have finally made it to the end of their journey: here, to Mimas. Their living situation consists of two wooden platforms (which Buzzard and Sparks called "the Grand Ballroom"), a hammock, and some supplies. Darkness falls, and they light their kerosene lamp. Olivia calls Nick to her, and they have sex. Nick is then awakened in the middle of the night by flying squirrels scratching at his face. He bolts up and screams, and the creatures scatter. Nick realizes that these squirrels had never had to learn to fear humans, but that he has now taught them to.

At dawn, Nick and Olivia are awed by the view that greets them. They are surrounded by other giant trees, all swaddled in fog. Nick remembers reading about how the trees even help create the fog, while also absorbing its water through their needles. As the fog clears, the whole forested valley is revealed below them. Nick and Olivia then use the bathroom with the bucket available, and they don't look away or try to be private at all. The raw humanness of this feels very intimate.

After a breakfast of nuts and dried fruit, Nick and Olivia go off in different directions to explore Mimas, both of them wearing the safety ropes that they are now tied to at all times. They are amazed by what they find: huckleberries, a tiny pool with a salamander in it, insects they've never seen before, and a hemlock sapling growing out of soil on a branch. Afterward, Olivia writes, and Nick sketches her. He can tell that she is adjusting from a life of constant stimulation and human contact, though he himself has grown used to solitude and silence.

In Norse mythology, Yggdrasil is an enormous ash tree binding the universe together. The Overstory often lingers on descriptions of trees' size and age, trying to convey through language the majesty and power of these living beings. Nick would clearly never do this on his own, but his love for Olivia drives him forward.



Olivia acts like a spiritual guide and inspiration for several characters, but most notably for Nick. Buzzard and Sparks's eagerness to climb down from the trees foreshadows a difficult (and perhaps longer-than-expected) experience for Olivia and Nick.



Nick and Olivia will have to adapt to an entirely new way of life among the branches of Mimas. The presence of the flying squirrels shows that they are in a different world now, one that is much older than humanity.



Nick and Olivia start by embracing their natural functions and trying to rid themselves of the limitations that embarrassment and shame place on people. They are totally alone in nature now, and they want to become a part of it. The book also offers another lyrical description of the forest in order to convey Olivia and Nick's fantastical new environment.



All of Nick and Olivia's discoveries show that they're truly living in a new world, one that seems alien but is also beautiful. This also shows how old-growth trees support all kinds of life in a forest. Cutting down Mimas wouldn't just kill the redwood tree itself, but also the countless other organisms that depend on it. Meanwhile, Olivia continues to struggle to move past her old life and learn to slow down and pay attention.



Later, the two can hear the sound of distant logging, and the crashes of falling redwoods. In the camp's library, Olivia finds a book called *The Secret Forest*. She reads some of it aloud to Nick, starting with Patricia's opening passage about humans and trees sharing a common ancestor. When the sun goes down, they just sit and talk, and they zip their bags together when they sleep. Olivia remarks that if one of them falls the other will be dragged down too, and Nick says, "I'll follow you anywhere."

Meanwhile, Mimi is out of jail with a \$300 fine. Though her job hears about her arrest, they don't seem to mind as long as she gets her work done on time. Mimi and Duggie continue to attend protests, one morning driving to an "action" in the California Coast Range. When they arrive, they are frustrated to see that no TV trucks are there—without media coverage, the protest will have no real effect.

Mimi and Duggie join the group already gathered there, surrounding a crane and facing off against a group of loggers. The loggers start up their chainsaws and threaten the protesters and then threaten to cut down trees so that they fall on them. Duggie and a few others start climbing into the trees. Mimi joins until someone grabs her leg and pulls her down, and then sits on the back of her legs. Mimi begs the man to get off of her, and he says he will if she promises to stay down.

The loggers gather together, trying to figure out what to do next. Then, they start up their saws and make a cut in a tree near to the one where a protester is squatting. Most of the protesters then drop down from their trees, knowing that the loggers mean to knock them down with other falling trees, but Mimi stays on the ground, and Duggie stays in his tree. The police arrive, and all the protesters come down—except for Duggie, who climbs higher and handcuffs himself to a branch.

Despite Duggie's best efforts, the police eventually climb logging ladders and reach him, but he positions himself so that they can't cut off his handcuffs without injuring him. Then, an officer starts to slice off Duggie's pants. Mimi watches in horror as the police expose his genitals to the air and then spray them with pepper spray. Even the loggers call up for the police to stop. Duggie can barely stay conscious, and finally the police cut the handcuffs off of him and carry him down from the tree. After another ordeal of being arrested and processed, Mimi drives Duggie home. His skin is raw and orange, but he won't let Mimi see. She checks in on him every evening for a week.

*The opening passage that they read reveals that *The Secret Forest* is actually Patricia's book, again emphasizing Patricia's point about trees and humans being fundamentally connected. In their stripped-down existence atop Mimas, Nick and Olivia grow even closer.*



The activists recognize that their real power is in getting the public to see their actions and start to care about an issue that they might otherwise not even know about. The logging companies have wealth and power on their side, but they want to avoid any bad press.



The loggers are enraged by these people that they see as threatening their livelihoods. The protestors, however, prove that they will put their bodies on the line to save these trees.



The loggers prove their willingness to use violence to achieve their ends, weaponizing the cutting of trees in order to put the protestors directly in harm's way. Without television cameras there, they have fewer inhibitions about causing physical harm.



This violent passage shows several things: first, Duggie is willing to undergo literal torture for a cause that he sees as fundamentally right and moral. Second, the law defends the loggers, not the protestors: because the law only considers humans valuable and deserving of rights, it treats the activists (who are advocating for trees' rights) as a threat. Thus, the police (the law's defenders) use maximum force to mitigate these threats. (Notably, this harkens back to Ray's interest in extending rights to all living beings, not just people.) Finally, this passage shows that Mimi truly cares about Duggie as she tends to him after his torture, though he still thinks of her romantically and doesn't want to feel embarrassed in her presence.



The narrative returns to Neelay, whose successive games **Mastery 2**, **Mastery 3**, and **Mastery 4** grow ever more successful, profitable, and technologically advanced. Meanwhile the Internet grows alongside it, just as Neelay had predicted years before. **Mastery 5** is as complex as anything yet coded. Neelay is now a multi-millionaire, and he still lives above his company's headquarters, surrounded by screens and constantly working on new ideas. He often visits the Stanford trees that first inspired him, but their voices are silent.

While his digital empire grows, Neelay's physical body decays: he often breaks bones performing simple tasks, and his skin is plagued by bedsores. He has now completed **Mastery 6**, in which players can create entire self-operating civilizations within the world of the game. He constantly sends memos to his team with ideas for how to improve their next game, as employees come and go in his office.

Feeling suddenly depressed one day, Neelay does what he usually does and calls his parents. His mother answers, delighted to hear from him. She quickly brings up the subject of finding a wife for him. Neelay tries to deflect by lying and saying that he is dating one of his caregivers—this elates Ritu. He names his imaginary girlfriend "Rupal." Ritu immediately wants to tell everyone she knows and even plan for a wedding. After hanging up, Neelay strikes the desk in anger, and can tell that he has broken another bone. He wheels himself to the receptionist and says that he needs to go to the hospital.

Meanwhile, Patricia has been invited to Portland to act as an expert educating witness in a hearing regarding "an injunction to halt logging on sensitive federal land." She is reluctant to go, but Dennis encourages her, implying that the forests need all the defense they can get. Later, Dennis drives her the hundred miles to the courthouse.

In her preliminary statement before the court, Patricia describes how trees in a forest all depend on one another. She is nervous, and her old speech disorder of slurring her words comes back. The opposition argues that her findings might be temporary and soon overturned, just as she herself overturned previous science. They claim that a young and managed forest is better than an "old, anarchic forest." Patricia answers with her own knowledge, and the judge seems genuinely interested in learning about what she has to say—Patricia feels like she's teaching again.

Neelay feels that he is still fulfilling the vision he received from the trees, but the trees themselves no longer seem to speak to him, which raises the question of whether or not he has actually gone astray in his work. As the tech world explodes, Neelay stays ahead of the curve and reaps the financial benefits.



Again, Neelay's brilliant mind is contrasted with the body that he entirely neglects. As the worlds of Mastery grow ever more complicated, they also increasingly resemble the real world in all its complexity and ambiguity.



Neelay's mother loves her son and is delighted by his success, but she also continues to pressure him to become someone that he fundamentally is not. There is a divide between them in this sense, though they are otherwise bonded by love and affection. Again, Neelay forgets about his body's fragility, treating it like an avatar in a video game.



Judges may call expert witnesses when confronted with cases beyond the realm of common knowledge. Patricia once more sacrifices her happy solitude in order to speak on behalf of the trees.



Again, Patricia's voice represents the book's arguments about forests and their value, as well as the importance of incorporating scientific information into literary storytelling.



Patricia goes on to describe how everything in a forest is interdependent, and no single part can be removed without affecting everything else. The opposition argues that preserving old growth is not worth the millions of dollars that can be made logging it, but Patricia retorts that “rot adds value to a forest.” She also has the data to back this up: old-growth forests provide more resources, even when speaking in strictly monetary terms. The only reason the market doesn’t accept this is because it demands immediate growth and specialization, not diversity and patience.

The judge says that he has read Patricia’s book, and he questions her further about the nature of forests and how trees communicate with each other. Patricia claims that tree plantations are the opposite of forests, and that “a suburban backyard has more diversity than a tree farm.” She concludes with a market-based argument, knowing her audience. The judge asks one last question about what forests might “know,” and for a moment he seems to Patricia to look like her own father Bill, questioning her about her knowledge of trees all those decades ago.

After the recess, the judge places a stay on the logging that was being contested. People congratulate Patricia, and she leaves the courthouse to face a mass of demonstrators, some supporting logging and some opposing it. The expert witness for the opposing side finds Patricia and tells her that she just made lumber more expensive, so every company that already owns land is going to “cut as fast as they can.”

Up in the branches of the redwood Mimas, Watchman and Maidenhair adjust to a wholly new pattern of living. Sometimes loggers and logging company executives show up at the tree’s base and argue with or threaten them. One logger is struck by Olivia’s beauty and says that she could have any man she wants—so why live in a tree? Sometimes Watchman folds up his sketches and drops them onto the men below, who are amazed to see what he has depicted. Days and weeks go by, and the tree-sitters who were supposed to relieve Watchman and Maidenhair never appear. One day, the loggers grow angrier in their arguments but also press a genuine debate. Maidenhair finally answers that she’s not saying people should end all logging—they should just “cut like it’s a gift.”

The book continues to elaborate on the idea that forests are both complex and interdependent, even adding in the economic argument that old-growth is ultimately more profitable in the long term than clear-cutting. The Overstory uses a variety of tactics to present its arguments, and here it appeals to even the most practical and profit-oriented members of his audience.



The idea that “a suburban backyard” could become its own wild space will return through the characters of Ray and Dorothy. It’s also noteworthy that the judge asks about the knowledge of forests, seeming to recognize that both individual trees and the entire organism of the forest have a sort of consciousness.



Like with Duggie planting his seedlings, Patricia’s best efforts to save the trees ultimately lead to more logging. The capitalist market demands the immediate resources of lumber, and this outcome suggests that until we address the root of this problem, those seeking to profit off of clear-cutting forests will always be able to do so.



Nick and Olivia adapt to a new rhythm of life atop Mimas, experiencing the passage of time differently now that they’re alone in nature. While The Overstory condemns logging companies, this passage does present the individual workers as mostly just trying to do their jobs and survive. However, these particular loggers direct their anger only at the activists rather than the corporations using their labor to destroy the environment. Olivia’s comment that we should “cut like it’s a gift” also seems to reflect the book’s broader idea of how we might improve our relationship to nature. Humans will always need to use wood and cut trees, but with a drastic change of mindset, we could stop cavalierly clear-cutting forests in the name of profit and convenience.



After three weeks, Loki and Sparks finally appear at the base of Mimas. They say that there's been infighting at the camp, and that Buzzard is now in jail. They ask if Maidenhair and Watchman can stay another week, and Maidenhair eagerly agrees. Days pass, and neither the loggers nor the Life Defense Force returns. Maidenhair and Watchman develop a new rhythm of living, based only around nature, each other, and their own thoughts. Nick worries that Olivia's beings of light have abandoned them, but she reassures him that the loggers "can't beat nature." The next day, Nick asks if Olivia's parents know where she is, in case something bad happens. She says that she hasn't spoken to them since she left Iowa, but she knows that the story of Mimas will have a happy ending.

Nick and Olivia spend hours reading, going through everything previous sitters have left behind. They re-read *The Secret Forest*, amazed by all the ways that trees communicate with each other and other species. One night a powerful storm strikes Mimas. Nick panics until Olivia tells him to stop fighting the wind, and together they ride out the gale along with Mimas, who has survived thousands of such storms. Surfing on the swaying branches, Nick and Olivia start laughing and yelling, feeling wild and free. The next morning, three loggers appear to check on them, saying that they were worried.

Mimi and Douggie are at a new protest at a logging company headquarters, an event that will be filmed and eventually leaked to the public. Mimi tries to convince Douggie to be more cautious this time, but he is easily distracted by the crowd of activists. The group passes onto corporate property, chanting and holding signs. Soon nine people, including Mimi and Douggie, have entered the corporate headquarters and chained themselves around a pillar in the building's foyer. Their arms are inserted into steel tubes and then linked together, and the police can't cut the tubes like they can a chain. Mimi and Douggie are separated, but they're both part of the circle.

The protesters start to sing as a sheriff orders them to depart. He says that if they do not leave, the police will use pepper spray to force them to. Douggie tries to tell them that Mimi has asthma, and that pepper spray could kill her, but the officers only repeat their ultimatum. When the group refuses to unlock their arms, the police go to one of the protesters, dip a Q-tip in pepper spray, and wipe her eyes with it. The woman moans and screams, and the other protesters and many onlookers cry out for the officers to stop, but instead they move on to the next person, a burly man, wiping his eyes with pepper spray as well.

This passage continues to show how time passes differently for different beings, as Nick and Olivia slow down to the pace of the natural world around them. Olivia still wholeheartedly trusts the beings of light and believes that the logging companies are destined to lose. She is even willing to entirely ignore her family to continue with her mission.



Another way that Olivia and Nick adjust to life in the wild is learning to trust Mimas itself and to not try to control or subdue nature. When they stop fighting the storm they become like a tree: flexible yet resilient. The fact that the loggers check on them the next day shows that these men are fundamentally decent and have even come to care about the activists opposing them—but the jobs that they depend on demand that they continue to clear-cut.



This protest seeks to strike closer to the heart of the problem—the corporate power that drives the logging because of its demand for constant growth and profit. Mimi and Douggie again show how willing they are to put their lives on the line in defense of the trees. The protestors link themselves together, becoming stronger as a connected unit.



This passage again shows that the police are willing to use brutal torture to defend corporate interests. The protestors are seen as dangerous because they disrupt the status quo—if they are right, then logging companies are committing fundamentally evil acts while the public stands by. Unable to even consider that this might be the case, the enforcers of state and corporate power will do anything to silence the activists.



When the police come to Mimi, Douggie again begs them to stop because she is asthmatic. Mimi still won't let go, and as they swab her, Douggie panics. He unlocks his arms and rushes at the police officer, but he is quickly subdued. The circle broken, the protest is over—but that night, the person filming the scene leaks the video to the press.

The only thing that Douggie cares more about than the forests is Mimi. While it seems that the protest has totally failed, the fact that it was filmed and leaked to the media actually makes it a success. They have been able to tell a story with their actions, and that story might make the broader public pay attention.



Soon afterward, Dennis tells Patricia about what has happened: the judge's injunction was ruled to not apply to the Forest Service, and cutting is going to begin again. He describes the protests and said he saw footage of one where the police wiped pepper spray in the protesters' eyes. Patricia can't even believe it, but Dennis assures her that he saw it himself.

The characters see their best efforts fail again and again, crushed by the power of greedy corporations, the state, and an apathetic public.



Dennis and Patricia eat their lunch in silence as Patricia despairs, wondering how the forests can survive humanity's need for endless growth. At the same time, she finds the desperate protesters beautiful. She muses aloud to Dennis that humans only know how to “grow harder; grow faster,” and can't seem to live any other way. What she doesn't tell him is what she truly believes: that humans have disrupted the environment so drastically that the entire “Tree of Life” is slowly falling again. Meanwhile, Dennis admits that watching the protest scene made him want to hurt the cops involved.

Patricia again acts as a mouthpiece for The Overstory's author, Richard Powers, as she lays out the argument that human psychology—our need for constant growth—is essentially condemning us to extinction and bringing the rest of the planet down with us. She only hopes that the forests can survive long enough to outlast us. At the same time, Patricia manages to see the beauty in individual people.



After lunch, Patricia continues their discussion, saying that what people are doing now clearly isn't working, and the extinction of nature is only speeding up. She has an idea, then, to at least preserve a few specimens of all the trees that will soon be gone: a **seed** vault. Dennis is intrigued by the idea. Patricia doesn't have a plan for what the future might hold for the vault, but she says that “a seed can lie dormant for thousands of years.”

Patricia's pessimistic view of humanity and the future leads her to begin a hopeful project: starting a seed vault. She recognizes that trees operate on a different sense of time than people do, and that the seeds she saves could potentially outlast humanity itself. Trees are endlessly patient, The Overstory suggests, and the potential life held within seeds can wait as long as it needs to.



In the digital world of Neelay's newest **Mastery** game, two avatars stand together looking out over the sea. One, a blue-skinned god, is being played by Neelay's father Babul, who is 2,000 miles away from his son in real life. Neelay himself is in the character of an old beggar. Babul is amazed by what he sees and delighted to see his son. As Babul exclaims with delight, Neelay leads him through beaches and jungles, past fantastical trees that Neelay says are based on real species. Neelay explains that other players will be arriving in this world soon to start building and exploring, but he wanted to show it to his Pita first.

Neelay continues to thrive in the alternate realities that he creates, and he and Babul are still very close despite their physical separation. This passage also shows how Neelay's love of the natural world is a key aspect of his success, as the worlds of his games feel so fantastical and exciting because they are based on nature itself.



Neelay reminds Babul of their first computer kit, and how all the trees that now surround them came only from the banyan **seed** the size of his fingertip, as Babul had told him years before. Babul thanks his son, and Neelay promises to see him soon, though he knows that he won't—Babul is dying. They bid farewell in the world of the game, and Babul promises that "We'll be home soon."

In the Brinkman home, Ray and Dorothy have just had an explosive fight. Dorothy is in the bathroom as Ray watches the news—much of it about trees being cut down—and thinks about their relationship. He remembers their first date auditioning for *Macbeth*, and then also thinks about the fight that just occurred. He finally confronted Dorothy about her infidelity, saying that he has known for more than a year but still wants to stick with her. She responded that she doesn't belong to anyone, and that Ray needs to let her go.

Still watching the news, Ray has a sudden realization, one echoing the thoughts he had months before when reading the essay about intellectual property rights for trees. He realizes that humanity has always been stealing from its "neighbors" and must eventually repay all of it. As he thinks this, he falls to the ground. Dorothy emerges from the bathroom and screams his name as Ray's brain floods with blood.

After her latest arrest, Mimi arrives at her job Monday morning to find a man waiting for her—he introduces himself as Brendan Smith and explains that he is there to help her leave the company. Mimi expected to be fired, but she is insulted by the presence of the "professional ejector." She angrily packs up her belongings, including photographs of her sisters, her father, and her grandparents in China whom she has never met. At last, she leaves the office, but then she makes Brendan reopen it so she can get the arhat scroll. Mimi exits the building, and Brendan posts himself at the door, making sure she doesn't come back.

That night, Douggie gets drunk by himself at a bar, loudly bemoaning the state of humanity until the man next to him gets annoyed and punches him. Douggie falls and passes out, and when he comes to, he feels a "mushiness" in his head that wasn't there before. He makes his way out to his car and decides to go visit Mimi, though he knows she probably won't want him to. Once, when they were chained together for hours, she had told him about all her past love affairs with both men and women. Douggie doesn't expect her to love him, but he does want to be her "trusted confidant" or even her "manservant."

The image of the seed returns as the source of both the enormous banyan tree and the expansive worlds that Neelay has built: something tiny that contains the potential for endlessly branching possibilities. Father and son say goodbye in this poignant scene, returning to their happy times together many years before.



Ray and Dorothy continue to live on the periphery of the other characters, caught up in their own world of marital discontent and suburban isolation. Meanwhile, Dorothy's assertion that she doesn't belong to anyone connects to Ray's interest in extending rights to all beings. The trees being reported on aren't respected or given rights, and Dorothy doesn't feel that she's respected or free in her marriage either.



Ray's epiphany is another of one of the book's arguments: that trees and other non-human beings have value and should therefore have rights as well, and thus, the law is severely limited in both its scope and its morality. This mindset means that human exploitation of nature is literal theft and should be discouraged and punished as such. As Ray has this thought, he suffers what appears to be a ruptured brain aneurysm.



Mimi has finally gone too far in her activism in her company's eyes, and in response, it deems her a liability and disposes of her. Mimi feels disgraced to be treated this way. The photograph of her grandparents suggests that Ma Shouying and his wife survived the prison camp, though they never met their grandchildren in America.



Despairing at the torture he and the other activists endured, as well as the seeming failure of their protest, Douggie again turns to alcohol to drown his sorrows. He knows that Mimi doesn't return his affections, but he is still entirely devoted to her.



Dougie knows he's too drunk to drive, but now his face is bleeding, and he feels that he has nowhere else to go. As he heads toward town, an empty logging truck starts to follow him—and then suddenly rear-ends him so that he swerves off the road. The truck strikes him again and keeps following until Dougie manages to skid away. Afterward, he idles his car in the middle of an intersection, panicking. The attack feels worse than the police torture, or even his plane crash in Thailand. Finally, Dougie starts driving again, and arrives at Mimi's condo. When she answers the door, she is obviously drunk, her belongings strewn about and a scroll unrolled on the floor. Mimi pulls Dougie inside, and "the trees bring them home at last."

Adam Appich is now climbing the same rope ladder that Nick and Olivia did many months before—he's ascending Mimas. The height makes him panic, but he eventually makes his way to the top, where Maidenhair and Watchman greet him. Adam notes how easily they move about among the branches, to the point that just watching them makes him nauseous with vertigo. When he recovers enough, Adam surveys the view from Mimas's height. Mimas is now the only redwood left in the area—everything else has been clear-cut and burned.

Watchman and Maidenhair have now been camped out for 10 months, and Adam considers them ideal subjects for his psych study. Watchman sees approaching logging vehicles and suggests that Adam ask his questions quickly and then get back down, but Maidenhair invites him to stay the night. As they talk, Adam's nausea suddenly becomes too much, and he vomits off the edge of the platform.

When he recovers, Adam gives Watchman and Maidenhair his questionnaire. They ask him about his research, and Maidenhair notes that instead of studying environmental activists, he should be studying "everyone who thinks that only people matter." That is what is really "pathological," Watchman agrees. Maidenhair flips through the questionnaire and then suggests that Adam just talk to them instead. Adam knows he shouldn't ruin his data, but he really does want to talk.

This frightening scene shows the lengths that people are willing to go to protect their livelihood. The loggers demonize activists like Dougie instead of the system that keeps them living hand-to-mouth off an unsustainable logging practice. Both Mimi and Dougie have hit rock bottom on this night, and in their mutual despair, it's implied that they find comfort in each other and are physically intimate for the first time.



Adam's research has at last united him with some of the other characters, as he plans to interview Nick and Olivia as part of this thesis. The initial beautiful view from Mimas's top is contrasted with the tragic destruction that has occurred in the last few months. Only Nick and Olivia's physical presence has saved this one tree, and they cannot stay there forever.



What was supposed to be a stint of just a few days has now turned into nearly a year, but Olivia and Nick have adjusted to an entirely different sense of time as this experience has gone on—one that's more similar to the slow way in which trees experience time. Adam, however, is still very much a part of the human world on the ground.



This passage reiterates one of The Overstory's most important points: that when society as a whole is doing something wrong or illogical (in this case, assuming that only people matter in the scheme of life on Earth), those who go against the status quo will be labeled as pathological. This is because, for most people, what makes something sane versus insane is based on what their larger group believes.



Adam explains that what he is really interested in is the idea that “group loyalty interferes with reason.” Watchman and Maidenhair look at him like this is obvious, and Adam is again intrigued by these people who have managed to resist “consensual reality.” Maidenhair then makes Adam affirm what they all know: that humans are using resources faster than they can be replaced, and that the rate of this growth is only rising, not falling. There is no way this trend can end except with total collapse. So what Adam is really studying, Maidenhair says, is the few people who are screaming to put out the fire, while the main group has decided that the fire isn’t happening at all.

Adam starts to wonder if Maidenhair is right, and if instead he should be studying “illness on an unimaginable scale.” Maidenhair then tells him that humanity is not alone, and that she can sense the voice of something else: the trees, or a life force, like a “Greek chorus” in her mind. Adam knows he should be skeptical, but then he admits that sometimes he talks out loud to his sister Leigh, who disappeared when he was a child. He feels as if he has been drugged by the tree and given a new perspective. As the three continue to talk, they can hear giant trees falling in the distance.

Late that afternoon, Loki returns to retrieve Adam. He climbs up to the platform and then delivers bad news: Mother N and Moses are dead. Someone bombed their office, but the police are saying that they blew themselves up in a terrorist attack. Maidenhair and Watchman mourn this loss and tell stories about their experiences with Moses and Mother N. Afterward, Loki gets ready to descend, but Adam says he would like to spend the night in the tree.

At night, the flying squirrels arrive to inspect Adam, as Watchman sketches them by candlelight. Adam is amazed by everything he can hear in the darkness. The next morning the three are awakened by the sounds of machinery. A logger yells up at them that “shit’s coming” and they need to get out, and then they hear the sound of an approaching helicopter. Adam, Watchman, and Maidenhair grab their possessions and cling to whatever they can as the enormous machine approaches, the wind from its blades slamming against them. Up close, Adam sees the helicopter as an evil thing and thinks about how many thousands of more there are all around the world.

*Author Richard Powers makes his argument clearer here, as the three characters essentially lay out his main points. His project in *The Overstory* is essentially to convince readers that they, too, are lost in a “consensual reality” that is unsustainable and will lead to the destruction of human life. The activists who are screaming about the metaphorical fire might not be acting in ways that everyone agrees with, but they are at least doing something at a time when inaction means extinction.*



Adam is rather easily convinced, but the narrative suggests that he is also immediately smitten by Olivia, the new perspective atop Mimas, and even chemicals from Mimas itself (via the processes that Patricia studies and writes about). In this strange new environment, Adam lets his guard down and reveals a secret: that he still sometimes talks aloud to his lost sister. He recognizes that most people would consider this pathological, but perhaps no more so than Olivia’s claim of communicating with the trees.



*Mother N is likely based on the real-life figure of Judy Bari. Bari was a leader in the Earth First! activist group (which played the primary role in the *Redwood Summer*), and she was badly injured when a bomb in her car exploded. She was initially accused of setting off the bomb herself but was later found to have played no part. This event is another example of how the police and FBI in the novel automatically take the side of corporate power, assuming guilt on the part of the environmentalists.*



Adam experiences a similar first night to Olivia and Nick, adjusting to the alien environment atop the redwood. The logging companies suddenly escalate their attack here, using a vehicle designed for warfare in order to drive the activists from the tree. Notably, the loggers themselves try to warn Adam, Olivia, and Nick and keep them safe—it is the corporate higher-ups that order the attack.



A megaphone blares from the helicopter, demanding that the three come down from the tree. Meanwhile, bulldozers ram the base of Mimas's trunk. The violence escalates, until finally Adam screams that they are done and will come down. Sobbing, Maidenhair lets go of her branch, and she and Watchman admit defeat. The helicopter leaves, and Adam, Watchman, and Maidenhair are taken down by harness and arrested. As they're driven away in a police car, they can hear the deep crash of Mimas falling.

The narrative touches on what other characters are doing while Adam, Nick, and Olivia are in custody. Patricia gives talks about the **seed** vault she is starting, Neelay sends memos about adding even more complexity and beauty to the world of his game, and Dorothy starts a prison sentence of her own as the caretaker of a man who has just undergone brain surgery. All she can think of is how just before Ray's aneurysm, she had told him that she wanted a divorce.

Adam, Watchman, and Maidenhair are held in a jail cell for several days—longer than they are legally allowed to be held. Watchman notes that the authorities don't want the bad press of a trial, so they are instead just trying to hurt and intimidate them. On his fourth night in jail, Nick dreams of the **Hoel chestnut tree**. In the dream, the tree laughs at humanity for trying to save it, and "even the laugh takes years." Meanwhile, Mimi and Douglas attend a protest condemning a new logging company practice: hiring an arsonist to "lightly damage" forests owned by the Forest Service so that they can then sell them off to be cut.

After five days, Adam, Nick, and Olivia are released from jail without charges. Olivia immediately says that she wants to go see Mimas, and they take Adam's car along the logging road. The loggers are all gone, as there's nothing left to cut. Olivia approaches the massive stump, touches it, and starts to weep. Later the three have breakfast, and Adam asks about their plans. Nick and Olivia are going to head north to Oregon where there is more resistance happening. They invite Adam to come with them, but he says that he has to finish his dissertation.

Adam returns to Santa Cruz, where Professor Van Dijk thinks he's joking when he tells her that his fieldwork led him to spend five days in jail. He works on his data, but he finds that something drastic has changed within him, and his heart isn't in it anymore. That night, he gets drunk and wanders the streets of town until he is struck in the head by a falling eucalyptus **seed** pod. He examines the strange object and then looks up at the tree itself, asking "What?"

Despite all their efforts, Mimas is cut down anyway. This tragic scene seems to undercut all of Olivia's confidence in her mission to save the tree, and it also serves as another example of the wanton destruction brought about by human greed. Again and again, the environmental activists in the novel are defeated, and ancient trees keep getting cut down.



Passages like this one emphasize how each character is both connected and independent, following their individual storylines but also existing in relation to one another. At the moment she tried to truly break away from Ray, Dorothy becomes more trapped than ever.



Again, the narrative shows how the law and its enforcers work to protect corporate interests, even breaking their own rules (like about how long someone can be held in jail) in order to enforce their larger mission, which is that only humans matter under the law. Nick's dream of the chestnut tree is another illustration of the idea that trees experience time at a different rate than we do, as even something as brief as a laugh to them "takes years" in human time. The dream's sentiment is also important: that we need saving more than the trees do.



The loss of Mimas is obviously a huge blow to Olivia and Nick, but they try to remain hopeful and continue in their activist work. Olivia seems especially disoriented after this experience, as everything the voices told her seems to have been wrong. Adam is changed by his brief experience as well, but he also still feels bound to his research and life back at the university.



Adam tries to return to his regular life, but he finds that he can no longer dispassionately research the destruction that he has now witnessed in person. The trees again seem to have agency, intervening in Adam's destiny with the falling seed pod.



Adam gets a year-long fellowship to work on his dissertation, and he immediately heads north to Oregon, awed by the forests that he drives through in the Pacific Northwest. At last, he reaches his destination: a community of around a hundred activists labeling themselves “The Free Bioregion of Cascadia.” Adam drives up and is met by a man who introduces himself as “Doug-fir” and a woman who calls herself “Mulberry.” Adam insists that he’s not a federal agent, and then he introduces himself as “Maple.” He asks if Maidenhair and Watchman are there. In response Mulberry says, “We don’t have leaders here. But we do have those two.”

Watchman and Maidenhair greet Adam excitedly and say that the group usually has a ceremony when someone new joins. That night, everyone dresses up and sings songs, as Adam tries to tamp down his natural cynicism regarding anything overly earnest. Still, he goes through with the ceremony, and as “Maple” he pledges to defend “the common cause of living things.” When he’s done, everyone applauds. Around a fire later, Maidenhair asks him what his advice is, as a psychologist, for changing people’s minds. Adam says, “The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story.” Afterward, Olivia tells her own story of dying, and a Native Klamath man chants and teaches everyone a few words of his language.

The next day, the group works hard digging trenches and securing the makeshift wall around their encampment. At night, Adam eats with Doug-fir, Mulberry, Watchman, and Maidenhair, observing to himself that together they seem like a “Jungian archetypal family.” He especially watches Maidenhair and notes that she is like the glue holding everyone together. That night, he joins their group as a “fifth wheel” and officially becomes “Professor Maple.”

The occupation of Free Cascadia lasts for many days, as sympathizers send supplies and journalists visit to interview them. Eventually, two men from a congressional representative’s office come by and promise to bring the group’s demands to Washington—this seems like a hopeful turn of events to everyone, even Adam. Yet someone also shoots at the group one night, and three days later, someone leaves deer entrails just outside the encampment as a threat.

Adam officially breaks with his previous life and decides to join the activists, just like Nick, Olivia, Mimi, and Douglas all did in their own way. Adam takes his name from the maple tree planted at his birth. It’s implied that “Mulberry” is Mimi (because of her father’s mulberry tree) and “Doug-fir” is Douglas, both because of his name and his job planting thousands of Douglas-fir seedlings. Again, the paths of seemingly disparate characters begin to overlap and move toward a common goal of conservation, which is a testament to humans’ interconnectedness with one another and with their environment.



Again, the narrator refers to the characters by their tree aliases as they leave behind the human-centric world and instead try to fight for “the common cause of all living things,” particularly trees. Furthermore, Adam’s quote here is crucial to understanding The Overstory’s message. The book has made it clear that human psychology means that we are very unlikely to go against our group or change our minds once they are set. But here, Adam provides a potential way out: storytelling (and other forms of art) can sometimes get through to people when logic or reasoning won’t. This, then, is what Richard Powers himself is trying to do through The Overstory: present his arguments in the form of a “good story.”



Adam still sees everything through a psychologist’s lens, comparing the group he’s a part of to a “Jungian archetype.” Psychiatrist Carl Jung was the founder of analytical psychology, and the concept of “Jungian archetypes” refers to universal themes and symbols that Jung theorized were part of humanity’s collective unconscious. With this comparison, Adam is combining the science of psychology with the more spiritual idea that all beings are interconnected. At the same time, Adam is no longer trying to be detached and objective, instead joining the people he once studied. Despite the loss of Mimas, Olivia seems firm in her convictions and still holds a kind of spiritual power that affects those around her.



There is once again hope that something will change, as the activists’ failures have at least become well-known around the country. At the same time, they face immediate threats from those who see them as an enemy of humanity.



One day, a truck pulls up with two men in hunting jackets. They argue with the activists, and the elder man says that he lost his arm cutting trees. Maidenhair talks to them, finally saying that people need to “stop being visitors here” on Earth and “become indigenous again.” One man shakes her hand, but as they drive off, the driver calls out insults.

The protest continues into its second month. There are even rumors that the President has heard about it and is ready to take action. One morning, however, a guard for the activists warns them that federal agents are on their way. Everyone takes action as they’ve trained to do, raising the drawbridge over their moat and manning their walls. A caravan of massive equipment arrives, and a Forest Service man gets out and demands that the protestors exit. Everyone shouts, and then Adam tries to tell the man that the President himself is going to make an executive order. The men ignore this, and Adam suddenly realizes that Washington isn’t going to help them—in fact, Washington is behind this sudden invasion.

When the protesters refuse to leave, an enormous excavator rolls up and smashes down the wall, taking seconds to destroy months of work. It then rolls into the camp, and the activists scatter. Douggie and Mimi try to stay, each having chained themselves down, but soon even Douggie admits that they’ve lost. Mimi has been locked atop a tall tripod of poles, and when she won’t leave, the excavator tears at the poles themselves. Mimi falls and impales her cheek on the end of a pole, then tumbles all the way to the ground. The driver of the excavator jerks the machine back and it strikes Douggie, who collapses to the ground. Suddenly the action ceases, and everyone rushes to Mimi and Douggie’s aid.

Adam finds Watchman and Maidenhair afterward. Maidenhair is convinced that they haven’t lost yet, and that Washington will soon take action. Adam doesn’t have the heart to tell her the extent of their failure. Mimi and Douglas are airlifted to a hospital and treated, and no one is charged except for four women who manage to remain locked down for another 36 hours. The rest of the Free Bioregion of Cascadia disbands, and “the extraction of wealth continues.” Yet despite this, the narrator notes, four weeks later a shed full of logging equipment is burned down.

Olivia is a mouthpiece for the book’s arguments here, offering possibilities for a way that humans might survive on this Earth. She suggests that people should respect the environment as their home rather than acting like “visitors” who mistreat Earth. This passage also points to Indigenous societies that were able to thrive without destroying their natural environment.



Once again laws—here represented at the highest level by the President himself—are only designed to protect human systems, not anything non-human like forests. This also means that the full military power of the law is against the activists, so they don’t stand a chance of really doing anything other than offering a “story” to the media that others might see.



Mimi’s face is scarred in this attack. It is much easier to destroy than it is to build, the narrative suggests, as the excavator immediately destroys their encampment—similarly, a tree that took centuries to grow can be cut down in seconds. The book once again pits humanity’s brutal machinery against the natural world.



All of the activists’ work ended up being just a blip on the radar for these gigantic corporations and their need for constant growth through the destruction of nature. With this latest disaster, it seems that the characters’ efforts have truly failed once and for all. In the end, “the extraction of wealth” through harvesting the forest’s resources prevails. The ensuing arson is not immediately connected to the characters themselves but described as if it were a detached and spontaneous event.



The narrative follows only the aftermath of this event; the perpetrators are Olivia, Nick, Mimi, Douglas, and Adam. It feels unreal to them to see the damage on the news, but they all feel like they needed revenge against the equipment that has wounded them and the people who have tortured them.

This act of arson leads to more, as the group next targets a sawmill in California. They all work together, using their respective skills to burn down the building, with Nick leaving behind a painted message: “NO TO THE SUICIDE ECONOMY; YES TO REAL GROWTH.”

Afterwards they sit together at Mulberry’s table, discussing how disillusioned they’ve all become. Adam knows that there are many psychological biases at play among them, but that he, too, has “thrown in his lot with the need to save what can be saved.” This, he realizes, is his ultimate thesis. Olivia, who still holds everyone else under her spell, says that they really have no choice—if they’re wrong, they only lose their lives, but if they’re right, they should be doing everything they can to help “the most wondrous products of four billion years of creation.” As she speaks, Adam realizes that the group will do one last job and then part ways.

Adam finds the subject of their last attack: thousands of acres of public forest across multiple states being sold to developers. In planning their mission, the group never writes anything down, talking only face-to-face and paying for everything with cash. Watchman and Maidenhair surveil the site they plan to hit: construction equipment at a patch of forest in Idaho that’s scheduled to be cleared for a four-star resort. Watchman sketches everything, and later the five work together in Mulberry’s garage, building explosives and finalizing their plans. They hope to at least plant a **seed** with their actions—“the kind that needs fire to open.”

On the night of their mission, everyone is prepared and dressed in black, their van loaded with explosives. As they drive, they talk, quiz each other, and listen to a tape of Native American myths and legends. They reach the Bitterroots of Idaho at night and pull up to the site. Mimi stays in the van with a police scanner, while the rest set to work setting up their devices and timers.

The activists’ latest defeat is the last straw for them. Feeling like they have nothing else to lose, they turn the physical destruction of their enemies against them. The book doesn’t explicitly condone their actions, but it does encourage readers sympathize with them because of all that they’ve been through and what is at stake.



Nick’s words are an encapsulation of one of The Overstory’s central ideas: that our current economy, which is based on ceaseless growth and exploitation of natural resources, will ultimately lead to our own destruction. By killing the Earth for profit, humanity is slowly committing suicide.



Here, the characters justify their actions as the logical conclusion of what they believe. If the planet and humanity itself is being destroyed, then they should do everything they can to “save what can be saved”—and if violence is the only way to achieve anything in that regard, then that violence is justified. The Overstory leaves it up to the reader whether or not to agree with this argument.



Each member of the group uses their unique skills to carry out their plan. This passage brings back the image of the seed, here as something resilient and hopeful but also requiring some kind of “fire” or violence to achieve its full potential.



Though they are on their way to carry out a violent act, the group members try to remind themselves of their cause. That they listen to Native American myths in the van hearkens back to Olivia’s point that contemporary people should strive to be more like Indigenous cultures that respected and lived in harmony with nature.



Watchman's job is to paint messages that will hopefully soon be seen by millions of people. On a trailer's wall he writes, "CONTROL KILLS; CONNECTION HEALS" and "COME HOME OR DIE." Meanwhile, Adam accidentally spills fuel all over himself and suddenly panics, wondering what he's doing—there's no point to their actions, he thinks, as humanity's need for "property and **mastery**" will always win, expanding until the last forest is gone.

Watchman keeps working, now painting a poem about five trees that he composes on the spot. Suddenly, something explodes at the detonation site, long before the timers should have gone off. Watchman and Douglas rush toward the blaze and see two figures on the ground. One of them is Adam, who gets up. Olivia is the other. Nick picks her up and sees that her whole torso is bleeding. Her voice slurs, and she can barely speak. Douglas panics, spinning around and cursing to himself. Adam pulls Olivia away from the approaching flames, and Nick bends down beside her again but then has to turn away and vomit. Mimi appears and gives Adam the keys to the van, urging him to go get help. Olivia protests, trying to say that they need to finish the job, while Adam weighs his options.

Mimi tries to snap Douglas out of his panic and then bends down to tend to Olivia. Olivia asks for water, and Nick and Douglas rush to find some. They gather up a bag full of water from a nearby stream, knowing that it's probably toxic but that Olivia just needs the immediate comfort. Olivia drinks the water as Mimi cleans her face and cradles her. Olivia then locks eyes with Mimi and seems to share thoughts with her, saying that "I've been shown what happens, and this isn't it."

Two new explosions go off, and Olivia again seeks out Mimi's gaze, staring desperately into her eyes. Adam reappears—too soon to have gone to get help and returned—and Nick attacks him in a rage until Olivia speaks Nick's name. Nick goes to her side as she cries out, bleeding from her mouth. At last, she asks him, "This will never end—what we have. Right?" Nick cannot answer, and Olivia dies.

These messages are the kind of "story" that, as Adam previously said, can possibly change people's minds. In his slogans, Nick emphasizes the idea that we need to entirely rethink our ways of interacting with the natural world: instead of trying to control it (which leads to the "suicide economy"), we must recognize how connected we are to all the other kinds of consciousnesses out there.



This tragic accident is the climax of the book's plot, as something goes wrong and an explosive detonates early, severely injuring Olivia. Olivia herself is still focused on their mission, even as most of the others panic. Nick has devoted his life to Olivia, and his body physically cannot handle seeing her like this.



In this time of crisis, Mimi is the only one who remains relatively calm and decisive, perhaps because seeing the aftermath of her father's suicide desensitized her to this type of situation. As she stares intently into Olivia's eyes, messages seem to pass between them without words. This is an example of a different kind of consciousness and communication, similar to the signals that Olivia herself received from the trees.



Olivia's last words are this haunting question. It is unclear if she is asking about her and Nick's relationship, the group's commitment to saving the forests, or life on Earth itself. She never gets an answer either way, and she dies tragically without ever achieving the victories that she believed were her destiny.



PART 3: CROWN

An unnamed man in the far North lies with his head sticking out of his tent, looking up at the tops of five white spruce trees. He thinks about all the messages the trees are constantly sending out, and he can even sense some of them himself, from these spruces and others all through the valley where he is camping. The man rolls over, still communing with the trees, who seem to subvert his sense of despair. The man wishes that he himself were more like a tree, and that slow growth and light, water, and soil would be all that he needed in life.

The narrative jumps to 20 years after Olivia's death but describes the group's memories of that night. Nick collapses, and the others place Olivia's body in the flames. They have to force Nick into the van, and then they flee the scene. As they drive Adam and Nick argue, and Douglas suggests that they surrender themselves. Adam insists that they all keep quiet. Back in Portland, the group disperses.

Nick immediately returns to Mimas and camps atop its stump, longing for Olivia and the life they shared in the redwood's branches. Mimi and Douglas strip down and deep clean the van they used for the mission, and then sell it. Mimi also puts her condo up for sale, and tells Douglas that they can't see each other anymore, as they'll give each other away if they do.

Investigators find Olivia's bones among the ashes, and what would have been a mundane crime becomes a major story. The police can't identify her body, and the only clues are Nick's cryptic painted words on the side of the trailer. Most people decide that the tragedy is the work of a "deranged killer."

Adam returns to Santa Cruz, knowing that doing otherwise would only seem suspicious. He hides away in his sublet apartment, riding out waves of excitement and anxiety. Sneaking into his department to get his mail one night, he is confronted by a fellow student, who playfully asks him about his absence. Adam tries to use all his knowledge of psychology to best deceive her, and so instead of fleeing he invites her out to eat. The narrator notes that using these same tactics, in 20 years he will be a tenured professor and famous in his field.

While Part 2 is called "Trunk"—when most of the characters come together as one unit—Part 3 is called "Crown" after the branches and foliage of a tree. Just as a tree's branches continue to divide and grow in their own way yet remain connected to the trunk and roots, so too do the book's protagonists split apart in this next section while still being bound together in the narrative and in their individual lives. It's later implied that this passage's unnamed man (as this introduction echoes the beginnings of the previous two parts) is Nick, living alone in the forest after Olivia's death and trying to change his very self to become more tree-like.



Time shifts suddenly in the narrative in the wake of Olivia's death. The group splits apart just like a tree's branches, no longer a trunk but now all growing in their own separate directions.



Nick feels lost without Olivia and returns to the site of their happy time together. Mimi is again the most practical member of the group, while Douggie tries to cling to her despite the suspicion his presence might generate.



Even the group's environmentalist message is obscured by the fact of Olivia's death, though the tragedy does at least make the story spread nationwide.



Adam quickly learns to live a lie, to essentially trick everyone he meets using what he knows about how human beings think. Having studied humanity's tendency toward herd mentality for years, he now uses this knowledge to blend into society. This mindset ironically leads him to become extremely successful in society.



Nick knows that he can't stay in the area, but he still feels the need to wait for some kind of message from Olivia. He rents a cabin at the foot of the logged mountains, where he and Olivia lived atop Mimas, and lives there in total isolation. One day, after a downpour, a landslide comes down the mountain. Nick manages to escape in time, but his cabin is flooded with earth, and his neighbors are only saved by a thin row of redwood trees that stop the avalanche. One of Nick's neighbors points to the trees that just saved their lives—they are all marked with X's, meaning they are slated to be cut down next.

Douglas keeps returning to Mimi's condo, no matter how often she tells him to stay away. He has a recurring dream of Olivia telling them that everything will be okay, and he feels the need to tell Mimi about it. Finally, she tells him that she is selling her condo and leaving, and that he needs to disappear too. Douglas is shocked, and that night he dreams again of Olivia. The next morning, he goes to tell Mimi about his dream once more, only to find her condo sold and vacated.

Without Mimi, Douglas feels totally aimless. He abandons his job at the hardware store, loads his possessions into his truck, and starts driving east. When he makes it to Idaho that night, he feels a need to see the site of Olivia's death. He knows this is a bad idea, but he can't help himself. As he approaches, he sees construction work going on—nothing has been changed by the fire. Douglas lingers for only a few seconds and then drives on. He passes into Montana and sleeps in his car that night.

The next day, Douglas keeps driving at random, generally headed east. He stops at a grove of trees that seems to emerge in the middle of nowhere. As he explores the area, he realizes that it used to be a town. Now nothing is left of its buildings, but the trees planted by the people who lived there remain.

Mimi gets her father Winston's arhat scroll appraised by an art gallery run by a man named Mr. Siang. He has had the scroll for weeks, and now he is late to his meeting with Mimi. At last, he appears and leads her to a back room. As Mr. Siang talks about the scroll, Mimi worries that getting it appraised was a bad idea. Then he tells her what the ancient inscription says: it is a poem about three trees. Mimi suddenly gets goosebumps, remembering her father's words, which she now realizes were echoes of this poem—though Mr. Siang says only a scholar or calligraphy student would be able to read it.

This passage is a literal example of how old-growth forests provide value other than just their wood—here, for instance, by maintaining the integrity of the land itself. In relentlessly pursuing immediate profit, people have caused future tragedies that they cannot even imagine. It's assumed that even these last trees will be cut down as well, despite having just saved human lives with their mere presence.



Douglas is aimless once more, clinging to Olivia and her sense of mystical purpose even when everything seems to have fallen apart. Mimi, however, takes the situation seriously and acts quickly to preserve both herself and the rest of the group.



What Douglas sees in this scene reiterates the tragic fact that seemingly nothing can stand in the way of humanity's need for constant growth and mastery. The characters have tried peaceful protest, direct action, arson, and even (accidental) manslaughter—but the march of human progress continues on unhindered.



Despite the scene's eeriness, The Overstory presents this lost town as an almost hopeful image: a potential future in which humanity and its destructive power have faded away, yet the rest of nature continues to thrive.



The poem that Mr. Siang translates echoes Winston's words when he first showed Mimi the three jade rings, and they themselves were an echo of his own father's words when Ma Shouying sent Winston off to America. Even years after his death, Winston remains a mystery to his daughter, as Mimi wonders if he could actually have translated the ancient text on the scroll.



Mr. Siang finally puts a price on the scroll: a figure much higher than Mimi was expecting. She meets his gaze and holds it—after experiencing Olivia’s dying stare, she is an expert at eye contact. After only a few seconds, Mimi realizes that Mr. Siang is underselling her, and he has discovered that the scroll is a “long-lost national treasure.” She offers to take the scroll to a museum instead, and Mr. Siang immediately offers a much higher sum, enough to ensure financial security for Mimi, her sisters, and their children.

Mimi calls Carmen and Amelia to ask their opinions on selling the scroll. She says nothing about losing her job, moving, or the scar on her face, saying only that she “hit a rough patch.” Carmen suggests that they keep the scroll, just like Winston did, as a family heirloom. Amelia says to not get sentimental about it, and to go ahead and sell it. That night Mimi seems to hear her father’s voice telling her to prune the past like a tree so that it might grow.

In the Brinkman house, Dorothy now tends to Ray every day. He lies in a mechanical bed, only his eyes moving, barely able to make noises. Dorothy uses her acting skills to seem exaggeratedly cheerful as she feeds and cleans him, all while trying to interpret what he might be saying with his eyes. She initially thought she could never live like this, but weeks have passed, and she has settled into a routine.

Today Dorothy starts to read the newspaper aloud to Ray, but he seems agitated. Then he manages to make two sounds that she can interpret: “crossword,” his morning ritual for years. Dorothy gets the crossword, reads the clues aloud to him, and tries to interpret his noises and eye movements. One of the clues she gets stuck on is “Bud’s comforting comeback?” Later she serves him lunch, which is always an arduous event, and then reads to him. After his dinner, she finally goes out to have her own meal with Alan, the man she’s now engaged to.

Dorothy returns to Ray two hours later. She expects to find him sleeping, but instead he grabs at her and tries to speak. At last, she realizes that he’s asking to write something down, and she gives him a pen and paper. Very slowly he scrawls out a word: “releaf.” Dorothy is confused at first, but then realizes that it’s the answer to the crossword clue she was stuck on earlier—“bud’s comforting comeback.”

Mimi has gained an almost mystical power to communicate entirely through eye contact ever since her experience with the dying Olivia. Here, she uses that power—an example of another kind of consciousness than what people are used to—to see through Mr. Siang’s deceptions.



Though it’s never directly stated, the books implies that Mimi does indeed sell the scroll with her father’s blessing. Winston’s advice to her further suggests that she may use these funds to start an entirely new life.



Ray and Dorothy’s arc at this point is a story of two ordinary people adjusting to a new lifestyle and sense of time. Though Dorothy previously wanted to divorce Ray, now she remains as his steadfast caretaker.



Dorothy and Ray must also learn a new way of communicating, something analogous to the signals other characters receive from trees or Mimi and Olivia communicating through eye contact. Now, after Ray’s aneurysm, everything in the Brinkmans’ life is slowed down.



Ray’s consciousness is clearly still functioning, but it is now operating on a different sense of time, slowing down and becoming tree-like in its patience. Even the crossword answer is tree-related and connects to the idea of trees dying and being reborn, when their leaves fall in autumn and when they produce new life through their seeds.



The narrative briefly touches on Patricia, Douglas, Nick, Adam, and Mimi as 20 years go by. Patricia continues to write as more species go extinct, and Nick “hides and works.” Time keeps passing, but as Adam proves in one of his studies, humans cannot see “slow, background change, when something bright and colorful is waving in our faces.”

The narrative again plays with the passage of time while also commenting on how humans are limited in our perceptions of time and change. Massive changes are taking place across the world, but because they are not immediate, it is easy for us to ignore them as “slow, background change.”



Neelay is now playing **Mastery 8**, experiencing the world anonymously among the millions of other players. At a market exchange within the game, Neelay’s avatar encounters another player who is mocking everyone. The man complains that he used to love *Mastery*, but now it has become just like real life—all about building, competing, and spending money. Despite Neelay’s protests, the man claims that *Mastery* has a “Midas problem”—all it can do is endlessly grow until it fills up. Neelay can tell that the man is right.

In Neelay’s Mastery games, the players inhabit new avatars of themselves, a type of consciousness that they control but that’s digital rather than human. Subduing the world of the game (like exploiting nature in the real world) leads to immediate satisfaction but no long-term happiness, just as the mythical King Midas could turn anything he touched to gold but ended up destroying his family and dying of starvation.



Adam Appich is now about to become an associate professor in Ohio. One night while watching the news, he sees a report of an arson in Washington, accompanied by the words: “CONTROL KILLS; CONNECTION HEALS.” The newscaster says that investigators are linking the fire to other attacks from years ago, and Adam suddenly feels like he’s an arsonist again. He suspects that Nick or Douglas might be behind this new attack. The camera then pans to another spray-painted message: “NO TO THE SUICIDE ECONOMY.”

At first, it seems likely that Nick is behind these new attacks, as the painted slogans exactly echo his words from years before. All the characters connected to the arson have similar experiences to Adam’s here, where it seems like their present self is suddenly stripped away to reveal a past self—the one who watched Olivia die—that is still very much there. This experience resembles the rings of a tree, which contains all its past selves even as its outermost ring lives in the present.



Three months later, there is another attack, accompanied by similar slogans. Mimi reads about it as she sits in a park in San Francisco, where she is now earning a degree in counseling. Reading the article and seeing the paper’s accompanying “Timeline of Ecological Terror,” Mimi feels sure that she will be arrested soon. Nevertheless, she continues on with the life she has now made for herself and heads to class.

All of the characters have made lives of their own but are still connected by the traumatic event of Olivia’s death. Here, Mimi has a similar experience to Adam’s, feeling like the last decades never happened at all.



Nick never hears about these new fires. He has recently found a job as a forklift operator at a massive book “Fulfillment Center” in Bellevue, Washington. Nick enjoys the hard and mindless work, though he knows he is working for a company that is preying on people’s endless desire for convenience, and that his job will soon be performed by machines. All around the world, new “Fulfillment Centers” spring up every month.

It’s quickly revealed that Nick wasn’t actually behind the new fires and isn’t even aware of them. Here, the book uses Nick’s job to comment on the rise of Amazon (though it never names the company directly) as something similar to Mastery. Both capitalize on the human desire for immediate satisfaction.



At night, Nick paints murals on bare walls around town. He knows that it's risky to draw any kind of attention to himself, but he feels compelled to keep making art. Tonight's project is painting an enormous **chestnut tree** on the side of a law office building. Next to it, he paints the words of a poem by Rumi—one that Olivia first read to him in the branches of Mimas.

Ray and Dorothy continue their routine. Ray frequently tries to tell Dorothy to leave him and go live her own life, but she either can't understand him or pretends not to, and he also can't help feeling happy every morning when she arrives. On this particular day, she feeds him and then turns on the news, which is showing footage of protesters clashing with police in Seattle.

Dorothy turns off the news and reads aloud to him, as is their usual routine. Over the years, they've been making their way through "The Hundred Greatest Novels of All Time." Ray loves fiction now (though it used to make him impatient), but he has learned that all the novels share a single core: they assume that humanity and its character are all that matter in the universe. This, the narrator suggests, is why the world is failing—"because no novel can make the contest for the world seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people."

Ray drifts off to sleep and wakes to find Dorothy asleep as well. He looks out the window into the backyard, as he now does for most of each day. He can see all the trees that he and Dorothy have planted over the years and the creatures living among them. Living as he does, Ray has now slowed to the pace of the world outside his window, so that what was once happening too slowly for him to notice now seems dramatic and exciting. Dorothy wakes up and apologizes for abandoning Ray, but Ray now feels that no one can ever be abandoned—life is always occurring all around them.

The year 2000 arrives, and Douglas is living in a remote BLM (Bureau of Land Management) cabin in Montana. He is working as a caretaker for "the Friendliest Ghost Town in the West." In the summer, he gives tours to the occasional visitors—but in the winter, he is snowed in and totally alone. To pass the time, he has been working on his own "Manifesto of Failure," writing down the events of his life as a defender of trees. He doesn't use anyone's real name, only their tree-name aliases. He has just written about how it felt to watch a police officer wipe pepper spray into Mimi's eyes.

Nick continues to both live in the past and to use his art to try and continue the mission that he once shared with Olivia. Making public art brings him a sense of purpose, as he might even be influencing someone else who sees it.



Dorothy has her freedom now, but she still chooses to stay with Ray and comes to enjoy their routine together. The couple now live detached from the hectic pace of life that they watch on television.



Here, Richard Powers makes his own goal explicit: in The Overstory, he is trying to make the struggle for life on Earth as interesting and "compelling" as a drama that exists solely between people. Ray, then, is presented as an example of someone who has achieved this wider view of life and humanity's place within it. He enjoys the novels that Dorothy reads to him, but he also recognizes their limitations.



Only at this time in their lives do Dorothy and Ray become truly close to trees. Having played out their own dramatic interpersonal story, they are now learning to appreciate the stories of other kinds of life beyond the human. Ray can better sense the interconnectedness of beings in their backyard because of his many long hours of patient observation, and perhaps even because of how his brain functions since his aneurysm.



Douglas has returned to a life of isolation among nature, just as he was living before going to Portland and meeting Mimi. He also feels that all of the actions he has taken on behalf of the trees have failed, as evidenced by his manifesto's title. This physical document will become an important plot point later.



Today Douglas writes about what he perceives as humanity's mass blindness to the fact that "we're cashing in a billion years of planetary savings bonds and blowing it on bling." He thinks that it's easy to recognize this truth while living alone in a cabin, but it seems insane when surrounded by other people going along with the status quo.

Douglas tends to his fire and then makes his usual rounds, walking through the snow in snowshoes and examining the buildings. Looking out over the forested valley below, he walks to the edge of a ridge and the ground suddenly collapses beneath him. Douglas tumbles downward, flying off the edge of a cliff and only saving himself by catching onto the trunk of a tree. He lies among the snowy branches for a while, his nose broken and his shoulder dislocated. He wants to give up and just fall asleep in the snow, but then he has a vision of Olivia telling him that he's "not done yet." He gets up and starts the long slog back.

Patricia is getting older, but she works harder than ever. She regularly travels around the country giving talks and asking for funding for her **seed** vault. She uses every tactic she can to convince her audiences that humanity's current way of life is unsustainable. The other part of her job—the part she loves—is traveling the world and gathering seeds. Her actual vault is a bunker in Colorado filled with thousands of canisters, all kept at -20°. Inside the vault, Patricia can feel all the potential surrounding her, like the seeds themselves are singing. Reporters sometimes ask her why doesn't focus on the most "useful" plants first, but she knows that "Useful is the catastrophe."

Patricia visits the Amazon rainforest in Brazil and is overwhelmed by the sheer mass of life before her. She spends a week there taking a census of all the trees she can find, working long days but continuously awed by the diversity of life she finds. She is accompanied by a group of men who make their living harvesting from the rubber trees, including two named Elvis Antônio and Elizeu. They carry rifles, and at night tell stories about people they know who been killed in disputes over the rubber trees. Elvis Antônio and Elizeu "tap" the rubber—a sustainable practice that can last for generations—while others poach it, which kills the tree but makes more immediate profit.

Again, Powers's own voice seems to be speaking through his characters here, reiterating his argument that humanity's short-sighted greed is causing devastating long-term consequences. He also admits that it can be hard to reach this conclusion when living in the midst of a society that rejects it.



Douglas is saved by a tree again, just as he was after falling out of the plane in Thailand. For him, at least, Olivia still acts as a spiritual guide and source of continued hope and purpose in life.



Patricia recognizes that humanity's limited sense of what is useful and valuable is what has caused the environmental crisis in the first place. We can only consider the nature of value in our own terms, and so we don't tend to think about exploiting or destroying what might be valuable in its own right or useful to other beings. Patricia is more connected than ever to trees, as she can sense the patient potential in all the seeds around her as a kind of language.



Again, the book lingers on descriptions of the untouched forest and the vast, complex web of life that we will never be fully able to comprehend. In this environment, gathering immediate profit from the forest is sometimes a life-or-death matter, and people often don't even have the choice to act sustainably and wisely—it's either kill the trees or die themselves. This is mostly the result of economic demand from wealthier countries like the U.S., who want their rubber to be cheap and readily available but don't think about the consequences of its extraction.



While Patricia is camped out in the Amazon, Dennis is back in Colorado working at the vault. He hasn't been quite convinced by Patricia's project yet. She tells him about **seeds** that have germinated after thousands of years in the frost, but she knows that his real worry is that there will be no one around to plant her seeds in the future.

The next day in the Amazon, Patricia and her men come across a patch of forest that has recently been logged. The men are immediately on alert—there must be rubber poachers nearby. Patricia hears a gunshot and then a motorcycle driving away.

Later that same day, Elvis Antônio finds something extraordinary that he immediately shows to Patricia. It's an enormous tree of a species unknown to Patricia, and its trunk has grown into a remarkable image of a human woman. Patricia knows that human brains naturally find patterns in random places, but she feels like the tree really does look exactly like a woman, her branch arms uplifted to the sky. Walking around the tree-woman, Patricia remembers reading the myths of Ovid in her youth, and the stories about people turning into trees. She has found similar myths all around the world in her recent travels. Everyone gets out their cameras to take pictures of the tree.

When Patricia returns home, she doesn't show the pictures of the tree-woman to any of her colleagues or staff, knowing that they are only concerned with data and have no interest in myth. She does show Dennis, however, and he is delighted by it. He suggests that Patricia should use the image to make posters. That night, Patricia wakes up to find Dennis slack and limp, and she turns on the light to see that he is dead.

More years of the same routine have passed: Dorothy tends to Ray day and night, only spending a few hours with her fiancé Alan. Finally, Alan grows impatient in his desire to get married and live together, but Dorothy is still unwilling to leave Ray. She knows that they were on the verge of a divorce before his aneurysm, but she still feels that she must keep her promise to take care of him now that he can't sign any agreements or even talk. Faced with a choice to have Dorothy as she is now or not at all, Alan chooses to end their relationship. One morning afterward, Dorothy hears Ray crying out in the other room. She rushes in to see the news footage of planes striking the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and together they watch in horror.

Patricia and Dennis aren't concerned about their seeds' survival or the limit of trees' patience, but rather about the humanity's capacity to ever change—or even to survive.



Again, economic conditions and demand for cheap and readily available goods drive this wanton destruction of the forests.



Powers continues to use Patricia's storyline to mix science with fantastical elements like this tree-woman, who recalls the myth of Baucis and Philemon being rewarded by being transformed into trees. The Overstory draws attention to the prevalence of this myth in other traditions as well, as many cultures recognize and celebrate our connection to trees. This, the book suggests, is something we have largely forgotten in the modern world. If we saw trees as being like people, we would not cut them down so cavalierly.



With Dennis's death, Patricia loses her only real emotional connection to the wider human world. She will probably still continue her project of the seed vault, but in terms of close personal connections, she only has the trees now.



The narrator quickly summarizes the passing years as time starts to change for the Brinkmans. In a change from her younger self, Dorothy now chooses to prioritize the patient generosity she has learned with Ray over the immediate pleasures of her engagement with Alan. After her engagement ends, the Brinkmans are even more disconnected from the outside world, but they still cannot escape it or avoid the horrors that humans continue to inflict on each other and their world, here in the form of the 9/11 terrorist attack.



Mimi Ma now lives in San Francisco and works as a therapist. Her reputation as an “unconventional” practitioner has grown quickly, and now she is usually fully booked. She only sees two clients a day, because the sessions take so much out of her. On this day, she sits recovering from her first client and preparing for her second. To calm herself, she looks at the old photo of her Chinese grandparents and thinks about her family and her own past. She is interrupted by the sound of a chime—it’s time for her next patient, whose name is Stephanie.

A red-haired woman enters, and Mimi makes sure that Stephanie has left all her electronic devices at the front desk and has already eaten and used the bathroom. Then she has Stephanie sit down. Stephanie wants to talk some first, but Mimi tells her that soon they’ll both know all they need to know without speaking. Mimi stares into Stephanie’s eyes, and tells her to just keep their gazes locked. This is very uncomfortable at first, but Mimi and Stephanie already seem to be sending messages between them with only their eyes.

Time passes as the women continue to stare into each other’s eyes in silence. In their internal dialogue with each other, Stephanie first seems friendly and easy-going, then defensive. Mimi, meanwhile, reveals her real name—she’s changed her name to “Judith Hanson” since moving. Stephanie continues with her therapy, all while staring into Mimi’s eyes: she remembers her high-school girlfriend, a fight with her mother, and then her mother’s death.

Mimi then seems to let Stephanie into her own memories, showing her family and their mulberry tree. After half an hour, they are both revealing secrets to each other, and two hours later their most terrible secrets of all. Finally, both of them start crying. Stephanie asks what’s wrong with her, and Mimi says (still in their silent dialogue) that she is mourning something that she doesn’t even know she has lost: “a great, spoked, wild, woven-together place beyond replacing.”

Stephanie jumps up and hugs Mimi, crying, and when she recovers enough, she leaves the office. Out on the street, Stephanie feels entirely changed and tries to remember everything she has just learned, but the feeling quickly fades as she is distracted by the noise of the city and the “irresistible force of other people.” Then a tree branch scrapes her cheek, and again she remembers.

The narrator doesn’t immediately reveal what is so “unconventional” about Mimi’s therapy practice, but she has at least become successful in her new life while still keeping some connection to her old one, here via her photograph of her grandparents.



Mimi has honed her skills over the years since Olivia’s death, and she’s now able to communicate directly with another person’s mind through only eye contact. This is another fantastical element of The Overstory, but it fits with the different kinds of consciousness and communication that the book illustrates as taking place between trees.



This therapy is based in a very different kind of psychology from what Adam studies. Mimi’s practice is anything but detached and scientific—instead, it involves an intimate connection between two people that goes deeper than words.



Mimi reveals as much of herself as Stephanie does in this raw and emotional exchange. The Overstory implies that all human beings are mourning something that we cannot even explain, the wild world that we have destroyed and now long for. This, the book suggests, is the source of so much depression and anxiety in the modern world.



The scene of Stephanie leaving Mimi’s office briefly illustrates the difficulty of taking these lessons into the “real world” of other people. It is so easy to be distracted and to go along with the group, but we can be reminded of the truth by continuing to interact with trees.



Nicholas Hoel drives through Iowa on his way to his family's old farm. When he reaches it, he sees that the farm is now a factory. The **chestnut tree** is gone. Nick parks his car and approaches the dead stump, forgetting that he no longer owns this land. From the stump's base he sees dozens of new chestnut shoots sprouting up; the sight makes him hopeful, but then he remembers that these trees too will inevitably be struck by the blight. The house is still there, though it's fallen into disrepair and no one is living there. He looks into the windows and considers breaking in just to sleep in a bed, but instead he just sits on the porch and waits.

When the sun starts to set, Nick gets a shovel from his car and finds the place where he and Olivia buried his art. He unearths the carton and opens it, looking at his old paintings of trees. Seeing them reminds him of Olivia, and he thinks of how hopeful and whole they felt when they first met. Now that she's dead, Nick is "sleepwalking" again, and nothing they did has stopped the cutting of trees all over the world. Nick digs up another box and finds what he is really looking for: the book of photos of the **Hoel chestnut tree**.

Nick loads half of the art into his car, but as he returns for the rest, he sees a police car approaching. The car pulls up and a voice orders Nick to get down on the ground. The cops immediately handcuff him. Nick is worried that they'll run his fingerprints, but when they see that he only has homemade art with him, they call the manager of the property and then let him get the rest of the art—including the **chestnut** photo book—and leave.

At his office in California, Neelay calls a meeting with his five top project managers: Nguyen, Rasha, Kaltov, Boehm, and Robinson. All of them are dressed like teenagers, and they're all millionaires now, thanks to Neelay. Neelay lays out what he sees as the problem at the core of **Mastery**—its "Midas problem." The others object, giving examples of how incredibly successful the games and the company have been. Boehm suggests adding new technologies and a new continent to *Mastery's* world, but Neelay says that this just feels like postponing the problem.

Everything about Nick's past life has been destroyed, most importantly the ancient Hoel chestnut tree. As he notes here, even the hope of saplings growing up into new trees can never be realized because of the prevalence of the chestnut blight. Like many of the other protagonists, Nick has learned to live with great patience and attention. His natural reaction to this situation is just to sit and wait.



All of Nick's memories reiterate the tragedy and failure that he has lived through, and how nothing much has changed in the wider world despite all of his and his companions' efforts and losses.



This close call with the police builds tension in the narrative, as each member of the group is constantly at risk of arrest even so many years later. The police and property manager see Nick's art and the photo book as entirely without value, so they don't care if he takes it all.



Mastery's project managers only know how to keep growing and expanding the game and company, just as Mastery's players act within the world of the game itself. Neelay, however, is now trying to change the entire mindset of the game so that it's no longer really about "mastery" at all.



Neelay presents the issue as a disconnect between the Earth itself (a massive living biome of infinite complexity) and the game (a series of flashing pixels on a screen). Neelay then holds up a book: *The Secret Forest*. The others start arguing with Neelay, trying to come up with ideas to avert what they see as his final point. They feel that Neelay is going to destroy the company, and with it their own wealth and success. Neelay reads a passage from *The Secret Forest* and then lays out his plan; he wants a new game that is about “growing the world, instead of yourself.” Neelay goes around the room, and everyone else votes no on the idea. Neelay realizes that he has lost control of his own creation.

Ten years have passed since Douglas’s fall on the mountainside. He still lives in his same cabin and now regales tourists with an exaggerated tale of his adventure. One particular woman, an Eastern European backpacker named Alena, seems extremely interested in his story. She stays behind after everyone else leaves and asks Douglas if he has anything to eat or knows of a place to camp. Soon she is in his cabin flirting with him, and then she starts to kiss him. Douglas finds himself crying as she touches him. She lets go, saying that he is a strange old man.

Douglas apologizes and offers to let Alena sleep in his bed, while he’ll sleep in the other room on the floor. Alena seems excited by this offer, and Douglas notes that her light is still on late that night—he assumes that she’s reading. Two months later, Douglas has already forgotten about her—but he remembers when federal agents arrive, tear up his cabin, and find his journal. Douglas is arrested and feels like he has become “Prisoner 571” all over again. His journal is essentially a confession, but the investigators now want the real names of his associates.

More years have passed, and Dorothy brings Ray his breakfast as she does every morning. Today he seems preoccupied, and he slowly asks Dorothy about a tree in their backyard. Dorothy returns to their old library, filled with all the guidebooks for adventures they once planned to have and finds a tree identification book. She opens the book and finds a handwritten poem from Ray. She brings him the book and starts flipping through it, explaining all her thoughts aloud as she goes through the steps of identifying the particular tree that Ray asked about.

Neelay has now been influenced by Patricia’s book as well. Like most of humanity, the project managers want to keep their wealth and keep increasing their immediate gains, despite recognizing their current model as unsustainable. Neelay is determined to try something that won’t be as popular or immediately entertaining, but that really is sustainable and might have a positive impact on the world.



Douglas still feels broken by his past heartbreak over Olivia, and so he finds himself rejecting any human connection beyond conversation.



Alena clearly read Douglas’s “manifesto” and later went to the police about it. Douglas has experience in jail—both real jail and the Stanford Prison Experiment—and knows how it can break a person mentally. Notably, the authorities don’t yet have the names (only their tree aliases) of any of Douglas’s accomplices.



Most of The Overstory’s protagonists eventually move toward their own kind of enlightenment. For the Brinkmans, this means finding joy and peace in their backyard, just being attentive and patient together.



The process takes Dorothy several trips back and forth between the room and the backyard to examine the tree's needles and cones. At last, she has an answer: eastern white pine. By now Dorothy can essentially read Ray's thoughts through his eyes and movements, and she can tell that he's thinking "A good day's work." That night Dorothy reads to Ray all about the pine and its history of use around the world. A storm picks up outside, and the Brinkmans feel like they, too, are alone in wilderness, just like the early settlers they read about. Ray thinks about all the old forests that are now gone.

Ray and Dorothy find great joy in this small activity of just identifying a tree in their backyard, but this is also an example of how attention, humility, and patience (characteristics of trees that can also be applied to one's relationship to trees) can bring happiness. Dorothy's growing ability to communicate with Ray entirely without words is another echo of Mimi's practice and the signals from the trees themselves. This passage also returns to the idea of grieving for all the forests that have been destroyed and can never be replaced.



Even after Dennis's death, Patricia still speaks aloud to him as she writes alone in her cabin at night. She is finishing a new book, a shorter work that is also rather bleak. She has tried to be optimistic about the forests' chances of survival, including stories of her own favorite trees, but she can't escape what she believes to be the inevitable. She keeps returning to one particular passage about how trees can sense that humans are near and pump out certain chemicals. They've always been trying to talk to us, she writes, just in "frequencies too low for people to hear."

Patricia remains pessimistic about humanity's future but continues to learn more about the forests and tries to make as much positive change as she can. Her words about trees trying to talk to us is another example of nonverbal communication between two kinds of consciousnesses. Furthermore, her writing about trees talking in "frequencies too low for people to hear" harkens back to the book's opening passage, when the unnamed woman (presumably Mimi) heard trees speak to her in "the lowest frequencies."



Just before mailing off her draft to the editor, Patricia revises her final sentence. The book was going to end on her hope that her **seed** vault would allow future people to plant the seeds someday. Now she adds: "If not, other experiments will go on running themselves, long after people are gone." Patricia then gets in bed and reads, finishing with the same Wang Wei poem that Winston Ma left behind after his suicide. Patricia says goodnight to Dennis and falls asleep.

Patricia doesn't have much hope for humanity, but she does hope for the continuation of life beyond us. Now connected to other people primarily through her memories of Dennis, Patricia loses herself in the wider view of life and time that The Overstory also tries to illustrate—one in which humanity is not very important at all.



Adam is in New York, where a rapidly growing movement opposing the corruption of the wealthy has risen up. Adam wanders among the protesters as they chant, sing, and offer various services for free. Adam comes across a free "People's Library" and looks through it, finding his childhood favorite: *The Golden Guide to Insects*. Flipping through it takes him back to his youth and his first fascination with observation and study.

Here, The Overstory touches on another major historical event: though not specifically named, it's heavily suggested that this is the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011. The Occupy movement (which protested economic inequality) is another example of people trying to use whatever power they have to go against a system that is inherently destructive and unsustainable.



As the crowd chants the word "Occupy!" Adam recognizes a familiar face. Doug-fir and Maple greet each other and embrace, though seeing Douglas immediately makes Adam feel like an arsonist and murderer again. They start to walk together, briefly catching up on the past decades. As they walk, Douglas, who keeps fiddling with his baseball cap, says he hasn't seen anyone in the group since the accident, but Adam says that he feels like he keeps seeing Watchman's art everywhere.

For all the characters involved in the arson, the moment of Olivia's death remains within them like the rings of a tree, not left behind in the past but still there beneath the outermost layer of their present selves. The mention of Douglas fiddling with his hat is suspicious, especially as the reader knows that he has already been arrested by federal agents.



Douglas asks about Adam’s research, and Adam says that he is essentially studying what “keeps us from seeing the obvious”—and the answer is usually just being around other people. They also both consider the other side of the equation—why some people *are* able to see the obvious, despite society’s conditioning. Douglas then brings the conversation to their activist days, and Adam admits aloud that they set buildings on fire thinking that they were the only ones who could see the truth and save humanity from destruction. They ask each other if they would do it all over again, and Adam says that none of it makes up for Olivia’s death.

Douglas accuses Adam of being in love with Olivia, and Adam admits that he probably was. Douglas then asks Adam why he came back that night instead of going for help. Adam gets angry and says that he was doing what was best—if he’d gone to the police, she still would have died, but they’d all be in prison too. Parting ways, the men hug, but it’s more like a test of strength than a show of affection.

Neelay sits in the terrarium at Stanford’s inner quad, the site of his first inspiration, but the trees now refuse to speak to him. He feels alone and considers calling his mother, who is now dying as well, but decides not to. His phone buzzes—a message from his own personal artificial intelligence. He helped to make this bot, and now it scans the world for anything associated with his latest obsession: *The Secret Forest* and its ideas about tree communication and “forest intelligence.”

Neelay opens the latest message from his bot, which is a video called “*Words of Air and Light*.” The video shows a hundred years of a **chestnut tree**’s growth over the course of twenty seconds. Neelay is fascinated by the sense of purpose in the tree’s growth and branching, and he watches the video again. Following the last frame of the chestnut tree, the screen shows a Transcendentalist poem. Afterward, Neelay himself feels transcendent.

Now living in the Great Smoky Mountains, Patricia receives an invitation from Stanford to speak at a conference called “Home Repair: Countering a Warming World.” Patricia is immediately opposed to the idea, knowing that what these people want is some new technological breakthrough or ingenious idea, but when she looks at the guest list—scientific luminaries, writers, venture capitalists—she realizes that she’ll never have an opportunity like this again. She doesn’t reply yet and instead takes an evening walk through the woods. She feels clearer and better among the trees and animals, and she places her bare feet in a stream. In her mind, she asks Dennis if she should do the “Home Repair” talk, but she already knows that she must.

Both Douglas and Adam reiterate a point that’s been repeated throughout the book: that in the face of such a crisis and so much apathy, the only moral response is extreme action. At the same time, they feel that they have failed because of Olivia’s death—and also because nothing they fought for has seemed to make much of a difference at all.



Adam is sometimes presented as selfish, but he also recognizes the harsh realities of many situations that other characters refuse to see. Here, Douglas lets some of his anger at Adam show, as he still hasn’t forgiven him for coming back that night instead of getting help for Olivia.



Through Neelay’s character, the book offers another potential way forward through the environmental crisis: using technology. Neelay has converged on the same obsessions as most of the other characters, but he goes about them in his own way, mostly through coding. His AI bots represent another kind of intelligence beyond that of humans.



It’s implied that Nick made this video, and that the tree is the Hoel chestnut tree. Nick has continued to use his art to spread his message, and here it inspires Neelay in a profound way.



Again, Patricia must give up her happy solitude and return to the human world that seems more and more foreign to her as the years go by. She also recognizes that the kinds of answers she has to offer are not what people want to hear. They want something immediate that fits into the status quo of continued growth, development, and innovation. The answers she has are based in the opposite of this: humility, patience, and attention.



Adam is now at his university and giving a lecture when he sees three armed FBI agents appear in the back of his classroom. The men make their presence known but also don't disrupt the class, and Adam knows he must finish his lecture. Though he has dreaded this moment for years, he also finds a kind of relief that it has finally arrived. Adam, who has won multiple awards for his teaching and his research, realizes what really happened during his meeting with Douglas, and the reason for Douglas's constant fiddling with his hat; Adam was recorded confessing to their crimes.

Adam delivers a statement to his class: "You can't see what you don't understand. But what you think you already understand, you'll fail to notice." After a few more remarks Adam dismisses the class and walks up to shake hands with the FBI agents. They arrest him and lead him away, as his students watch in shock.

As the agents lead Adam toward the car, he smells something both rancid and familiar. From inside the car, he looks out the window and sees a tree: the prehistoric ginkgo tree, or "maidenhair." All its leaves drop at once as the car drives Adam away.

Ray and Dorothy now have a new daily game: Dorothy brings in various leaves, **seeds**, and twigs from trees, and then together (with Dorothy reading aloud) they identify the trees that they came from. One day Dorothy feels that they must have made a mistake—they've identified one of the trees in their yard as an American chestnut, but they are far outside of its native range and there aren't supposed to be many mature chestnuts remaining.

Dorothy finds *The Secret Forest* at the library and slowly reads it aloud to Ray, taking an entire day for only a page or two. They sit together quietly, just looking at their backyard and finally appreciating it. Watching nature unfold, Dorothy feels the same sense of drama that she once did when reading Victorian novels. As she's about to read more, Ray slowly speaks, telling a story in the few words he can manage: he says that their own daughter planted the chestnut tree from a seedling on their windowsill.

Patricia goes through airport security on her way to California and is questioned about her sample collecting kit and a jar of liquid in her bag. Patricia is particularly nervous about the liquid, but she says that it's just vegetable broth, and the agent throws it out. On the plane, she reviews her speech, knowing that this one is too important to improvise.

It now becomes clear that Douglas turned Adam in (and he was wearing a wire during their conversation at the Occupy protest), but it's not yet revealed if he named any other names as well.



Knowing that this is his last teaching moment, Adam chooses to end his lesson with the importance of paying attention and staying humble. His lesson is just like the one Patricia learned at a very young age: that "the only dependable things are humility and looking."



Maidenhair was Olivia's alias name, and the ginkgo's appearance here suggests that she, too, has now become a tree, mourning Adam's arrest by dropping all of her leaves at once.



The Overstory now returns to the chestnut trees that began the novel. The Hoel chestnut is gone, but somehow another has survived in the Brinkmans' yard, planted decades before when they still planted something every year on their anniversary.



As their lives have changed and their sense of time has slowed, Dorothy and Ray are now better able to perceive the story of life beyond just the stories of people's interactions with each other. Now they start telling each other a story of the daughter that they wanted but could never have, and how her life is intimately connected to the chestnut tree in their yard.



Building suspense, the narrator doesn't explain what Patricia is carrying or why she is so nervous about it. She is clearly uncomfortable and out of place in the hectic world of human society.



At the San Francisco airport Patricia is supposed to be met by a driver, but she doesn't see anyone holding up her name. She sits down in the corner, overwhelmed by the constant flow of human activity. She spots several house sparrows flying around inside the building and crumbles up a piece of bread onto the seat next to her. The sparrows approach and gradually grow bold enough to eat, and Patricia sees that they are wearing ankle bracelets reading "Illegal alien." Patricia laughs at this.

Patricia finds solace through nature even in the sterile environment of the airport. The birds were here first, of course, but people imposed borders and walls that have now made them intruders, or "illegal aliens."



Patricia's driver finally finds her and is incredulous that she doesn't have her phone on (Patricia doesn't even have a cell phone) and has packed so little for a three-day trip. Slowly they make their way through traffic to Patricia's lodging at Stanford. Patricia then spends the afternoon wandering through the campus terrarium, marveling at the variety of trees and collecting extracts to replace those that the TSA confiscated. Standing amid the alien-seeming trees, Patricia stands and listens to them "whispering to each other."

Patricia has become almost enlightened by this point, communicating directly with the trees and leaving the world of humanity behind. The observation that she has packed so little for her trip shows how frugally she lives, but also suggests that she might not be planning to stay the whole time.



Adam is placed in a cell and processed. All his family members are dead now except for his brother Emmett, whom he doesn't speak to anyway after Emmett stole his inheritance. The only people he has to tell about his arrest are his wife Lois and their young son Charlie. Adam calls Lois, who first thinks he is joking when he explains where he is. Once she accepts the truth, she immediately takes action to find lawyers and try to get him out, assuming that he must be innocent. She visits Adam in prison, and he tries to tell her what happened, but she hushes him and assures that she knows he could never do the kinds of things he's accused of.

Adam's decades of disguising himself through psychological tricks mean that he is essentially a stranger, even to his own wife and child. Further, anyone who really knew him before his time as an activist is now dead, so the only people close to him are those who met him after he began his new life.



Douglas is in his own prison cell across town. Every night, he closes his eyes and tries to find Mimi in his mind, to explain to her what he did and why he did it. He knows she'll find out that he betrayed Adam, but he wants her to know *why*. Douglas remembers his questioning: the agents said they had all the information they needed and knew who all his accomplices were—they just needed him to identify them. However, some of the pictures they showed him were of people he had never seen before, and he had never heard of some of the arsons they were investigating.

This is another example of people trying to communicate with other consciousnesses in unusual ways, as Douglas seeks out Mimi's mind. The fact that there are other arsons unrelated to the group shows that new people have been carrying on the same fight, repeating the group's words in their actions. This suggests that the group's deeds were not entirely in vain, as they have at least inspired a new generation.



After two days of silence, Douglas's captors told him that if he confirmed the face of just one co-conspirator, he could have a reduced sentence, and they would close the case on any fires he admitted to. Douglas thought about this—he knows he won't last long in prison no matter how long his sentence, but he wanted to save Mimi at whatever cost. Then he saw the investigators' picture of Adam, whom Douglas always felt was like an outsider to the rest of them, and who had refused to go get help when Olivia was dying. Douglas then decided to identify Adam as "Maple." This is the message Douglas is now trying to send to Mimi—that he did what he did for her sake, and for Nick, and "maybe the trees."

Patricia stands at the podium, ready to deliver her speech and looking out over the crowd. She begins, saying that though we've learned an incredible amount about the lives of trees in recent years, "our separation has grown faster than our connection." She then shows various slides showing forest destruction over the years and quotes Rockefeller as saying that he always wanted "just a little bit more." This, Patricia says, is the problem with humanity that is spelling doom for the planet.

Patricia pauses, suddenly very nervous, and pours some water into an empty glass on her podium. Then she takes out a vial of liquid, saying that it is composed of plant extracts that she found there on campus the day before. She places the vial on the podium and continues her speech, describing all the incredible chemistry that makes up trees, and then showing slides of some of the strangest and most incredible trees she knows of. She declares that forests have brains of their own, ones that scientists won't let themselves see because humans only acknowledge intelligence as a human trait.

Patricia continues, veering from topic to topic, and she can tell that the audience is nervous about where she might be headed. She describes the wonder of "thinking green," and says that if we truly could understand plants, we wouldn't have to be at war with them; all our interests would be aligned. Then she describes a tree called the "suicide tree" that gives up its life to provide nutrients for its own seedlings. Patricia says she has tried to see the conference's keynote question—"What is the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world?"—from the perspective of the trees, rather than humanity. Then she pours the vial of extracts into the glass of water.

Meanwhile Adam is back in his apartment under house arrest, thanks to Lois's efforts to get him out of jail. He has an ankle bracelet on and isn't supposed to leave the house. His son Charlie is at Lois's parents' house because it distresses the boy to see Adam like this.

Douglas made a hard decision, not just sacrificing himself (as he was already lost and knew that he wouldn't survive prison for long) but also a fellow person in order to save what he considered more valuable: Nick, the trees, and especially Mimi. At the same time, Douglas was also biased against Adam because of Adam's actions on the night of Olivia's death.



Patricia's final speech to this crowd of luminaries is essentially The Overstory's closing argument, as it ties together many of the book's major ideas. She begins with the notion that human psychology—most notably our constant need for more—has wreaked havoc on our world when it is put into action.



Again, Patricia's words introduce more facts about trees to readers. Here, she also reiterates the argument that trees, and even entire forests, have consciousness of their own—and that non-human consciousnesses are just as real and just as important as human ones. We must learn to expand our ideas of what consciousness and value really are, the narrative suggests, because our current limited view is causing untold destruction.



"Thinking green," the book implies, is to think communally rather than competitively, like the "suicide tree" that gives up its life to support those around it. This goes against most human societies and even our ideas about nature and survival of the fittest, but Patricia's findings have proven that there is another side to nature, one that is generous and interdependent. The suspense builds as Patricia continues talking and adding her mysterious extracts to the water.



Again, the narrative implies that Adam's wife and son don't really know him at all, likely because of the psychological façade he has maintained for so many years.



On the second day of his detention, Adam looks out the window to see a mural appearing on the street below. Cars drive by, drop pools of paint, and then drive through them to make streaks. Slowly an image of an enormous tree appears. Adam wonders why people would do this in his relatively out-of-the-way neighborhood, but then he realizes that they're doing it for *him*. Adam goes downstairs and steps outside, wanting to show himself to the artists, but his ankle bracelet goes off and he returns to his apartment. When Lois comes home, she sees the mural and finally realizes that Adam might actually be guilty.

As she often does lately, Dorothy enters Ray's room to find him enraptured by the view outside his window. She climbs into bed beside him, takes his hand, and looks out at the backyard, though she knows Ray is seeing much more than she is. Finally, Dorothy asks Ray: "tell me about her." In a few words, Ray starts to describe their hypothetical daughter. This has been their game this winter, one that Dorothy knows is dangerously close to madness.

Together Ray and Dorothy think about their daughter and her life, silently envisioning her all through college, back to high school, back to planting the chestnut seedling with Ray as a child. Ray then says, "Do nothing [...] no more mowing." Dorothy remembers a passage from Patricia's book saying that the best thing someone can do for the land is to do nothing at all—to just let it grow.

Adam decides to refuse to name anyone else involved in the arson, though doing so would considerably lighten his sentence. Lois argues with him about this, saying that their son Charlie needs a father as he grows up. Impatient, she asks if Adam would really put someone else's well-being above his own son's. Adam realizes that this is the heart of the problem—people are wired to always protect their own at the expense of everyone and everything else. Adam again refuses and Lois storms off, enraged.

That night Adam wakes up and sees a huge moon out the window shining down on Manhattan and the Hudson. He looks out over the street and is surprised to see wolves and deer running among the cars. The sight makes him jerk forward and he hits his head against the glass, then falling again and striking the windowsill. His mouth is bleeding now, but he gets up and looks out the window again to see that all the buildings of Manhattan are gone—instead there is just a vast forest, and the Milky Way above.

Adam starts to realize that his actions and arrest have become a story that might inspire others. As with the other arsons repeating the group's words, this street art shows that new people are being inspired and will continue the work, whether through art or with more direct action.



Ray and Dorothy continue to tell a human story—their musings on the daughter that they never had—that is closely connected to the story of trees that they observe in their backyard.



The Overstory's characters offer several possible responses to the environmental crisis, but Ray and Dorothy's is one that almost anyone can replicate: "do[ing] nothing" and just letting things grow. This may be counterintuitive to how human society usually functions, but the book suggests that just letting life be, rather than trying to control it and hem it in, can have a surprisingly positive impact.



Adam sees in his wife's attitude the human tendency to protect and defer to one's immediate group. In this case it means saving his family over his friends, but on a larger scale, the in-group can mean an entire species, as humanity prioritizes itself over the rest of life on Earth.



Again, using vivid and poetic language to describe the wilderness, the book offers a vision of the past that was lost and the glory of a world without humans. At the same time, this could also be a vision of the future, long after humans are gone.



Adam knows that he must be hallucinating, but he can't stop staring in awe at the massive trees of the forest. He can see owls, bears, and sea turtles all going about their business here on the island of "Mannahatta." Adam pauses to check his mouth and sees that he has chipped a tooth in his fall. When he looks up again the vision is gone, replaced by the usual lights and movement of New York.

Mimi Ma is in the audience for Patricia's speech. Mimi remembers reading her book with the others decades before, and Patricia seems very old to her now, but her speech has been piercing and clear. As Patricia nears the end and pours the vial into her glass of water, Mimi immediately knows what she means to do—it's Patricia's answer to the same drastic situation that led Mimi herself to arson. All around her, hundreds of people watch in disbelief as Patricia raises her glass, but no one moves or tries to stop her.

Patricia looks down and suddenly catches Mimi's gaze. As she does in her therapy, Mimi immediately begins exchanging messages with Patricia through her eyes. Mimi begs her not to go through with her plan, but Patricia tells her that she's thought it through, and that this will at least get people's attention. Mimi tries to hold her gaze, but Patricia looks back up at the rest of her audience.

The narrative returns to Patricia's point of view. She has one regret—she would have liked to see again the beech tree that she and her father planted, with its little notch four feet above the ground. Patricia raises her glass in a toast to the audience. Everyone is silent and still, but then someone starts shouting. A man in a wheelchair, thin and tall with a flowing beard and hair, rolls up the aisle toward her. Neelay's shouts don't make anyone else move, but Patricia feels as if time splits into two branches. Down one branch she toasts to the "suicide tree" and drinks. But down the other—the branch she actually follows—she shouts, "Here's to unsuicide," and tosses the cup out over the audience. Then she stumbles off the stage.

While Adam is finally brought to be tried in federal court, Dorothy, now almost 70 years old, looks out her window at the jungle that has appeared in their backyard. Saplings have popped up everywhere, and the grass is thick with weeds. The whole neighborhood hates them for this. People complain and offer to mow their lawn for free, and the city has written twice threatening a fine. She and Ray have decided to just keep paying the fines and let their little jungle grow. She's amazed that a little wild greenness can be perceived as such a threat to society.

Mannahatta is the Indigenous Leni Lenape name for what is now Manhattan, New York. The narrator describes all the wonders of life that do not include humans at all, yet still have their own unique consciousnesses and stories.



This speech finally brings Patricia in direct contact with some of the other protagonists. Here, Mimi recognizes that they are both trying to solve the same problem, to which there is no good solution. Mimi has already been driven to arson, and now Patricia seems to be moving in an even darker direction: suggesting that the best course of action is simply to kill ourselves and thus hasten humanity's end so that the rest of life might survive.



Mimi and Patricia have learned similar lessons from their connections to trees, but they take different paths in response to those lessons. Mimi now tries to use her power of wordless communication, which Patricia seems to immediately recognize and understand, but also knows how to escape.



This is Neelay's only direct connection with another of the book's protagonists, as he confronts Patricia about her impending suicide. Time again acts like a tree here, branching into two at the moment of Patricia's choice whether or not to kill herself. The branch she chooses in the world of the narrative is to follow the idea of "unsuicide" rather than suicide. Part of this is saying no to the "suicide economy" (as Nick wrote) of endless unsustainable growth. This will mean making drastic changes, but The Overstory suggests that it is the only thing humans can do if we are to survive.



The Brinkmans' suburban neighbors echo those who saw the environmental activists as enemies to humanity. Here, this animosity takes place on a smaller scale, but it seems to come from the same subconscious belief system. Again, anyone who dares to place any other kinds of life on equal footing to humans is seen as a traitor to the species.



There is a knock on the door, and Dorothy opens it to see four young men unloading lawn equipment from a truck. One says that the city is offering to “clean up” her yard for free. Dorothy tells them not to, playing the part of the mad old lady who can’t be reasoned with, and the confused boys leave. Dorothy knows this is just a delay, but that she and Ray will outlast them. After lunch they work on the crossword and then sit in bed together, look at the trees, and think about their daughter.

At Adam’s trial, the prosecution shows pictures of the charred buildings and Nick’s painted words: “COME HOME OR DIE.” They argue that this means an attempt to intimidate the government, which means a charge of terrorism. Adam’s lawyers’ arguments are morally sound but the law itself is clear, and he is found guilty of domestic terrorism. The narrator notes that “the law is simply human will, written down,” and it is human will to destroy every forest, so Adam never stood a chance. When asked to deliver any final words to the court, Adam says, “Soon we’ll know if we were right or wrong.” He is given 140 years in prison.

PART 4: SEEDS

The narrative describes the history of Earth as if it all happened in one day, from midnight to midnight. Life doesn’t begin until three or four in the morning, and plants and insects don’t arrive on land until ten at night. Humanoids appear just seconds before midnight, and what we think of as humans only in the last second. Yet a few fractions of a second after that, most of the planet has been irreversibly changed, and the tree of life begins to fall.

Nick Hoel wakes up in a tent in the middle of the woods. He rises with the dawn and sings to himself and to the birds, making a fire and then coffee. Meanwhile Mimi Ma sits in Dolores Park in San Francisco, reading the news about Adam’s prison sentence. She knows that Douglas is the one who betrayed him, and Mimi feels like she should be in prison too. As Mimi searches for terms related to Adam Appich, other “invisible eyes” read along with her, absorbing every pattern they can find.

Douglas is in his prison cell, though it’s the nicest place he’s lived in decades. He is listening to an audio course called “Introduction to Dendrology.” Douglas loves listening to the professor on the tapes, who has a speech impediment. The woman explains the “Day of Life,” imagining all of Earth’s history as taking place over the course of a single day. When she gets to the last second of the day, with humans and their factory farms, Douglas yanks out his earbuds and screams out loud.

The Overstory’s characters take many different drastic actions to save the trees, but the Brinkmans’ is one that many people can act on in their own lives. Rather than arson, suicide, or artificial intelligence, people can instead just reign in their desire for control and instead let nature grow wild.



Here, the book reiterates the point that the law is only about human interests, so the powers that enforce the law will always oppose those who seek to protect the interests of other kinds of life. Adam chooses to take his stand here, arguing that the law itself is immoral and illogical because it upholds the human desire to destroy nature, which is leading to our own extinction. His prison sentence is almost comically long for a human being, but not much compared to the patient growth of a tree.



Part 4 is called “Seeds,” the products of the figurative tree that has structured the book and that in themselves hold potential for the future. Opening this section, the narrative now zooms out to an even broader sense of time. The imagery in this passage also recalls Patricia’s words about the tree of life, suggesting that she may be the speaker.



Nick’s experience here echoes the passage at the beginning of Part 3, implying that he was the nameless man described there.



This passage seems to show that Douglas was the unnamed man from the beginning of Part 2, and the woman discussing the day of life is Patricia. Faced with all the tragedy of humanity’s destruction of nature, Douglas simply cannot cope and has to scream.



While Mimi, still in Dolores Park, feels like she will be arrested any minute, Adam waits to be sent to federal prison. Lying in his bunk, he thinks about how everything that he and his fellow activists hoped to save is already gone: “Humans are all that count, the final word,” and their endless hunger for more cannot be slowed. Adam knows that there is a catastrophe coming for humanity, though it likely won’t come soon enough to exonerate him of his actions.

As he listens to his audio courses, Douglas longs to see a tree again. He closes his eyes and waits until they appear in his memory; thinking of them feels that he has lived a very rich life after all. At the same time, he feels the “seed” of a tumor growing in his side. Meanwhile Neelay works on his new project, with new coders using all the information that his “creatures” can find. There is no need to write anything from scratch—the world they live in is already the most complex game there is.

More of Neelay’s bots (described as “learners”) watch Mimi as she searches related topics on her phone, finally coming to a video that holds her attention. It focuses on a massive stump that Mimi recognizes as Mimas. Gas burners then inflate an enormous balloon in the shape of a tree, rising from the stump and set against the background of countless other massive stumps—a single ephemeral tree in the wasteland.

The balloon-tree lingers for a moment, and then around its base Mimi sees the arhat from her father’s scroll, and the words of the scroll’s poem. Mimi is stunned, and then she remembers Nick Hoel spending hours sketching in her house. He must have been drawing the arhat scroll as well. In the video, the balloon tree starts to go up in flames, ending with just a wisp of smoke over the clear-cut hillside. Seeing it, Mimi feels an old desire to “bomb something.” The video ends with a verse from the Bible about trees—how they can always regrow from the roots, while humans waste away and disappear.

Nick himself is working on another art project out in the northern woods, but this one will not be for any cameras. He is constructing an enormous sculpture in the middle of nowhere, to eventually fade away into nature. His materials are only fallen wood, some pieces small enough for him to carry by hand, while others that require a block and tackle. As he works, Nick thinks about how the sculpture must look when seen from above. He stops for lunch, and then is surprised to see another human being, a man in a red plaid coat who says he had heard that there was a “crazy white man” working nearby. Nick says it must be him, and the stranger shakes his head and starts helping him to move the wood.

Adam feels that he is on the right side of morality and life itself, though he might be on the wrong side of society and the law. Here, he comes to the same conclusion as others in The Overstory: that there is little hope for humanity’s future, as we seem incapable of making drastic change at the societal level, and the status quo is rapidly leading us toward extinction.



Despite his apparent failures in life, Douglas gains joy just from thinking of trees and all the valuable moments he has shared with them. He recognizes his tumor as another type of life growing inside of him, a kind of seed that might be killing him but that also has its own value as a living thing. Neelay’s project also grows clearer in this passage: he is trying to use AI to gather information for a game based on the web of life on Earth.



This is another of Nick’s videos, as he has continued to make art in different mediums to share his message with others. The image of the tree as a balloon illustrates how fragile even these massive, ancient trees really are.



Here, Nick becomes another character connected by the poem and the arhat scroll. Seeing the beautiful image of the balloon-tree destroyed makes Mimi feel all the old rage and frustration that led her to arson so many years before. Nick, like others in the book, takes comfort in the fact that trees will outlive humanity. As individuals the trees might seem fragile in the face of human destruction, but as a whole they will survive and thrive once again.



Nick continues to use art in many different ways to try and reach viewers through a story rather than an argument. This particular piece is meant to be seen from above, in an echo of The Overstory’s general goal of trying to take a wide view of humanity and the web of life. Like Patricia and other enlightened characters, Nick, too, has learned to look beyond himself and even beyond his species.



Neelay's bots travel the world, looking through the eyes of phones, cameras, and satellites, learning about forests and the clear-cut lands that grow every minute. As Neelay absorbs the information they gather, he feels a sense of grief that he will not live long enough to see the future that his creations will make. Neelay thinks of the sci-fi story he loved as a child about the aliens who moved so quickly that "human seconds seem to them as tree years seem to humans."

Mimi still sits under the same pine tree, twisting her **jade ring**—Fusang, the tree of the future—around her finger, but unable to remove it. Then she remembers Adam saying that the only thing that can change people's minds is a "good story," and she realizes what he is trying to do: "he has traded his life for a fable that might light up the minds of strangers." Meanwhile, Adam himself replays his latest fight with Lois and wonders what exactly he has saved by taking the actions that he has. All the while, Neelay's watchers cross the world, trying to learn "what life wants from humans."

Mimi looks around at the trees of the park and the city surrounding her as the day fades. She leans back against the pine tree and tries to reach Douglas in her mind. Suddenly she realizes that he, too, has made a sacrifice for her sake, one even more terrible than Adam's. Douglas gave up his own life and incriminated Adam as well, just to save her. Mimi wants to scream upon realizing this. She knows that Douglas will torture himself if he doesn't hear from her, but she has no way to reach him and say what she now wants to say: "that his heart is as good and as worthy as wood."

Douglas returns to the audio lectures, as the professor describes **seeds** that only open when exposed to fire and then returns to her theme of the tree of life. At one point she says, "Let me sing to you, about how creatures become other things." The professor then asks why we didn't do more to stop the tree of life from toppling again. At this point, Douglas has to stop the tape and lie down. Again, he feels the tumor in his side and feels guilty for sending Adam to prison for the rest of his life. He cries out aloud and apologizes, though he knows that no forgiveness is coming.

Neelay connects the sci-fi story of his childhood to his own experience, recognizing that it illustrates how humans perceive time versus how time passes for trees and other kinds of life. He, too, recognizes his smallness and temporality in the larger scheme of life on Earth.



Adam gives up the rest of his life to tell a story that might catch the attention of others. Nothing else seems to be working, so here he makes one last desperate sacrifice to try and save humanity. As non-humans themselves, Neelay's bots can better observe other kinds of life and consciousness beyond the human. They see nothing foreign about the idea that life itself might have its own conscious desires.



Mimi and Douglas search in their minds but cannot find each other, yet Mimi has at least come to realize that both Adam and Douglas are truly good and have tried to do the right thing.



This passage returns to the image of seeds that require some kind of trauma to open. It also brings back the quote from Ovid's Metamorphoses, which could be interpreted as referring to life itself changing and adapting beyond humanity. Many characters in the book come to a relatively tragic end (like Douglas here), as the book continues to emphasize the bleakness of humanity's future.



The man in the red plaid coat continues to help Nick with his project. They don't exchange names, but only work together to roll the logs into place. They stop for dinner and finally Nick comments on how much the trees speak when one is simply quiet and open to hearing them. The man laughs and says, "We've been trying to tell you that since 1492." Nick then remarks that he'll need to restock on food soon, and the man laughs again, looking around the forest as if it is full of food for the taking. Nick suddenly understands what the beings of light were trying to tell Olivia: "the most wondrous products of four billion years of life" that need help are not the trees, but humans.

The mention of 1492 (the year Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas) suggests that the nameless man has Native heritage. The Overstory mentions Indigenous culture several times but doesn't go into much depth about it, other than offering examples of a different way of interacting with nature—one not based on capitalistic exploitation but connectedness and sharing. Just as in his dream where the chestnut tree laughs at humans for trying to save it, Nick realizes what the beings of light meant: humans are the ones that need saving. While The Overstory seeks to decentralize humans and shift people's focus onto other forms of life instead, ultimately the book is for humans—and so we must recognize that we are the ones that truly need help.



Neelay continues his work, sending his watchful algorithms everywhere to absorb everything about nature that they can. Elsewhere Adam is finally sent away to federal prison, where he meets his new peers. These men will beat Adam up many times, the narrator notes, "not for being a terrorist, but for siding with the enemies of human progress." As Adam enters the prison, he imagines all the destruction and extinction that will happen beyond the building's walls during the time of his sentence. Adam checks in with an official and notices a **seed** stuck to his own shoulder. Somehow it found its way there, though he has only moved from one prison to another. Adam feels that he, along with his four co-conspirators and all of humanity itself have always been like this: vessels for life to use.

Like the police, loggers, and the neighbors in the Brinkmans' suburb, Adam's fellow prisoners find themselves hating him for apparently being a traitor to humanity by defending other kinds of life against "human progress." Adam is now facing a different perspective on time as well, but he also knows that people will continue to operate at the same frantic pace beyond his prison's walls. Again, life itself (mostly through trees) is personified as something much greater than humanity, and as having its own desires for what is best for humanity.



Eventually Neelay's creations begin the process of translating between "human language and the language of green things." Neelay himself watches them, knowing that he will not live to see the end of this new game—a game about life itself beyond the limits of humanity—but that he has at least helped it grow. Overwhelmed, Neelay drives his wheelchair out to his usual grove of trees and breathes in all their various aromas. At last, he hears them speak again, in his father's voice, asking "what might this little creature do?"

This passage shows other kinds of life—Neelay's bots—translating for humans. Neelay is trying to make a new kind of game that's not about mastery, but about connection. Neelay too sees himself as something small and temporal, like the banyan seed or the first computer processor his father brought home. The trees at last speak to Neelay again, using his father's voice and the language of seeds and their limitless potential.



Dorothy reads aloud the news about Adam's sentence to Ray, who moans in anguish. "Self-defense," he says, and Dorothy asks him how that could have been Adam's legal argument. Ray cannot say all the words he wants to, so tries to relate his argument only through his eyes. "If you could save yourself, your wife, your child, or even a stranger by burning something down, the law allows you. If someone breaks into your home and starts destroying it, you may stop them however you need to." Dorothy cannot understand him, though Ray tries his best to communicate: our collective home has been broken into, and so we are allowed to use all necessary force to defend it.

Ray's old job as a property lawyer has been leading up to the realization that he has here. This is, again, a way for The Overstory to make the point that the law should encompass a broader view of property and rights beyond the human world. If this were the case, then it would be legal and justified to defend one's property—that property being the Earth, which would have rights beyond its ownership by people—using any means necessary, even violence.



Ray reaches a new realization, that the law must judge “imminent harm” not using human time, but at the rate of trees. As he thinks this his brain floods with blood once more, and he can see all the trees in his backyard growing through the interval of “two life sentences,” racing towards the sky and endlessly branching out into new possibilities. Dorothy calls his name, but it is too late, and Ray is dead. The narrator notes that atop the pile of books at her feet is Patricia’s last work, *The New Metamorphosis*, containing a passage about Ovid’s myth of Baucis and Philemon turning into trees. “What we care for, we will grow to resemble,” she writes, “and what we resemble will hold us, when we are us no longer.”

Mimi still sits beneath the pine tree as darkness falls over Dolores Park. She manages to remove the **jade ring** from her finger and places it in the grass. At midnight she achieves a kind of enlightenment and is able to understand some of the signals constantly being passed between everything green that lives. They tell her about **seeds** and how some seeds need fire, or ice, or to be smashed open before they will germinate. Mimi then recognizes that the planet is transforming into something else, and that the seeds and the forests will survive, but only once the “*real world*” ends. Mimi stays there until dawn, finally awakened by a police officer, but is unable to speak aloud.

The day after Nick meets him, the man in the red plaid coat returns with three other strong-looking men and some equipment, all ready to continue the work of moving logs and finishing Nick’s sculpture. They work for hours, and then stand looking at the thing they’ve created. “It’s good,” says the man in plaid, and then he and the others start to chant in an old language. Nick can only add “Amen.” High above, satellites are already taking pictures of what they have created: the word “STILL,” made of fallen trees and visible from space. In the eyes of the “learners,” the word is already growing and blossoming, forming new connections that no human eye can see. Nick bids the men farewell and senses a voice from the trees saying that “*What we have been given. What we must earn. This will never end.*”

Here, the book makes another logical leap, suggesting that the law should address not only other kinds of life and property, but time as well. “Imminent” to a tree might seem very far away for a human, but that doesn’t make the “harm” any less real. In her final book, Patricia fully leans into the idea of metamorphosis and returns to her childhood love of Ovid. As an example of this kind of transformation, the characters who care most about trees (like Patricia herself) have grown to resemble them in their patience, awareness, and selflessness.



This passage calls back to the scene that opens The Overstory, suggesting that it was Mimi being described there. Like several other characters, Mimi is now able to actually communicate with trees. She, too, comes to the realization that the natural world will be okay, but only once the human world—which is the only one that we think of as “real”—ends. All the destruction we are causing is also unlocking new potential for life, as things are always changing into other things, and some seeds require violence to open.



Nick’s last message is just about being still and aware, letting go of our limited view of life and time and taking the perspective of the trees. Neelay’s bots can already see the sculpture and are learning from it, a new form of life adapting to thrive beyond humanity. Nick, too, can now hear the trees’ signals as they answer Olivia’s dying question: the “this” she was asking about were the gifts from life itself, which humans have been freely given but also must give back to in return. Life itself will never end, no matter the fate of humanity, and The Overstory implies that readers should take comfort in this fact.





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