

# RICHARD POWERS

## GAIN

'One of the few younger American writers who stake a claim to the legacy of Pynchon, Gaddis and DeLillo'  
*The Nation*



## Gain

*Richard Powers*

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# Gain

*Richard Powers*

## Gain Richard Powers

Richard Powers' novel is a fascinating and profound exploration of the interaction of an individual human life and a corporate one. It tells two stories: the first that of an American company, which starts as a small family soap and candle-making firm in the early 1800s, and ends as a vast pharmaceuticals-to-pesticides combine in the 1990s. The second is that of a contemporary woman, living in the company town, who during the course of the novel is diagnosed and then finally dies of cancer, a cancer that is almost certainly caused by exposure to chemical wastes from the company's factories.

Richly intellectually stimulating, deeply moving and beautifully written, *Gain* is very much a 'Great American Novel', an exploration of the history, uniqueness and soul of America, in the tradition of *Underworld*. But it is most reminiscent of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, another novel that combines history, both public and private, with contemporary lives, showing how individuals are both the victims and shapers of large-scale historical and economic forces

## Gain Details

Date : Published November 1st 2001 by Vintage (first published 1998)

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Author : Richard Powers

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# From Reader Review Gain for online ebook

## Umberto Rossi says

Togliamoci subito di torno l'unico difetto di questo romanzo: il titolo. Ma non quello vero, che Richard Powers gli ha attribuito nel 1998, ovverosia Gain (guadagno, profitto). Mi riferisco al titolo di questa prima edizione italiana, ben tradotta da Luca Briasco (che di Powers aveva già tradotto Galatea 2.2, sempre per Fanucci). Forse alla casa editrice di via delle Fornaci volevano ironizzare sul fatto che, tra le altre cose, questo romanzo narra la storia di una multinazionale statunitense che nasce come fabbrichetta di sapone ai primi dell'Ottocento, e diventa un colosso della chimica. Be', è un'ironia un po' fiacchetta. Non vedo cosa c'era di male a tradurre il titolo seccamente con "Guadagno". Che è il vero tema della storia, molto bella, molto ben raccontata, e a tratti decisamente straziante, ma sempre senza compiacimento e sentimentalismo facile.

Se c'è una cosa in particolare che vorrei elogiare di Sporco denaro è l'architettura del libro. Intendo dire le grandi strutture, non tanto il singolo personaggio o la singola scena; ma il modo in cui la vicenda procede nel suo insieme. Powers ha una tecnica estremamente sofisticata, e che ben s'attaglia alle sue capacità decisamente virtuosistiche: prende due generi narrativi del tutto diversi e li fa sposare. In Galatea 2.2 la fiaba e l'autobiografia; qui la storia della morte di un'americana di mezza età, Laura Bodey, agente immobiliare nell'insignificante cittadina di Lacewood; e la storia della vita di una grande multinazionale immaginaria, la Clare, fondata nel 1832 da un candelai irlandese e due commercianti inglesi male in arnese, i fratelli Clare. Niente di più incompatibile, in apparenza, che la vicenda di una persona in carne ed ossa, con due figli, un ex-marito, un amante, un lavoro, una casa con giardino amorevolmente curato, e quella di un'organizzazione grande e impersonale, fatta di gente che va e viene, di macchinari, di conti, e soprattutto di soldi. Ebbene, Powers dimostra ancora una volta le sue capacità di romanziere (probabilmente il più interessante nella generazione dei quarantenni americani con Vollmann) dimostrando senza molta fatica la storia della donna americana Laura Bodey non si capisce senza la storia dell'industria chimica americana Clare (simile ai veri colossi del settore come Colgate e Procter & Gamble), che in realtà è la storia del capitalismo americano, quindi degli Stati Uniti in quanto tali.

Infatti la vita felice di Laura s'interrompe quando scopre di avere un tumore alle ovaie, e l'ex-marito Don le mette la pulce nell'orecchio: parecchie, troppe persone di Lacewood hanno sviluppato tumori, e la cittadina campa grazie a un grosso impianto per la produzione di fertilizzanti della Clare. Laura recalcitra a fare due più due, nonostante gli indizi a sfavore della Clare si accumulino nel corso del romanzo. Fino a una conclusione che forse è lieta (non tanto per la protagonista), forse no.

Va comunque segnalato, siccome la letteratura statunitense ha sempre il vizio, dai tempi di Hawthorne e Melville, di essere allegorica, che il cognome di Laura, Bodey, nasconde ovviamente il termine body (corpo); e che al disfacimento del corpo della protagonista (descritto senza nascondere nulla) si contrappone l'"incorporation", ovvero la costituzione della Clare come società per azioni. Nel termine inglese (da cui il nome delle grandi multinazionali, dette corporation) c'è ancora la parola latina *corpus*, perché la società è giuridicamente una persona, con proprie responsabilità e diritti. Insomma, da un lato Powers racconta la distruzione di un corpo umano, dall'altro la costruzione di un corpo immateriale, ma potentissimo.

L'interazione dei due corpi è devastante per la povera Laura, e il romanzo lascia capire che questo è un problema generale (anche da questo lato dell'Atlantico).

Ma se leggiamo bene il romanzo, c'è una terza narrazione intrecciata alle prime due: tra un capitolo e l'altro Powers ha inserito una serie di testi pubblicitari della Clare, dall'Ottocento a oggi. Essi sono praticamente la voce della corporation, con cui la grande azienda si rivolge al suo pubblico, che è anche la sua preda e vittima. Una voce che, pagina dopo pagina, si fa sempre più agghiacciante e mostruosa.

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### **Jeanne says**

One more book for our summer reading program, Read Green, Live Green!

Let me begin by stating that a novel by Richard Powers is not a beach read. That having been said, it probably should not be recommended for a summer reading program. This is a dense and slow novel, and it is not for amateurs!

In *Gain*, Powers tells two stories: the story of the Clare family and their soap business and the story of Laura Bodey, a woman who has just found out that she has ovarian cancer.

As the stories move along (alternating voices), we learn how the Clares failed as merchants, but turned to candlemaking and soap, which was a brilliant business decision. Their story begins in the early nineteenth century. Their story is dry. None of the Clares is developed enough for the reader to care about them. And who, except for a maker of soap, cares about how soap is made?

Laura Bodey's story really drives this novel. She is a forty-ish realtor with two kids, Ellen and Tim, and an ex-husband, Don. Her experience with cancer and chemo is horrific. When she finds out that many people in her town, Lacewood, also have cancer, she cannot help but to wonder about the culprit, namely Clare Soap & Chemical.

The two storylines really don't come together as one would expect. With such an elaborate history of soap and its makers, the connection between Clare and Bodey should have been more complex. Still, I couldn't stop reading this book, mostly for the compelling story of Laura Bodey.

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### **Michael Kerr says**

*Gain* tells parallel stories: one about the history of a manufacturing corporation, the other about a woman discovering she has cancer. Shockingly (sarcasm) the two stories merge. Unfortunately, the merger of the two stories was incredibly predictable.

Between the two stories, I found the history of the corporation to be more interesting and entertaining. Powers describes the evolution of the corporation and its employees marvelously, blending the fictional history of the company with world/U.S. history.

The other story, in my opinion, was a bit trite. I didn't care about any of the characters, which is never a good sign.

All-in-all, *Gain* is worth a read if you have time.

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### **jordan says**

With the critical acclaim piling onto his most recent novel, "The Echo Maker," one can only hope that

Richard Power's other superb works will cease to languish undeservedly in the ranking of sales. One of the finest American novelists currently working, Mr. Power's work stands out for the author's deft prose, careful plotting and complex approach to issues of modern identity, science, and the self. Those put off by the sheer size of Powers' novels (the breath taking "Time of Our Singing" comes in at a back bending 640 pages, the recent "Echo Maker" at an only slightly less intimidating 464) may do well to look to begin exploring his work with the rich and thoughtful "Gain" a shorter novel of substantial depth.

An excellent demonstration of Powers' versatility, "Gain" tells two different connected stories in parallel. In the first, told in a close third person, the reader watches as Laura Bodey, a divorced mother working in real estate battles against cancer. The second track, told in an omniscient third person, tells the history of the Clare Corporation, a soap company that eventually rose to become a multi national chemical conglomerate, from its beginnings as a family concern at the beginning of the 19th century up to the present day. The connection between the two-stories? Lacewood, where Laura lives is a Clare company town.

Some short sighted reviewers imagine Powers' work as a general condemnation of corporations and capitalism. But not only does such shallow analysis ignore the novel's quite clever ending, they are further far too simple for this complex and thoughtful author. Readers familiar with Powers will know that he is no Luddite, nor political hack pimping an agenda. Instead, Powers offers a deep view of both the strengths and limitations of what corporations offer society. Of course being a work by this particular author, readers will further learn a great deal, part of his gift being how he weaves his research into his writing, in this case with a fascinating history of soap! If that seems uninteresting, wait to read the novel, because in all likelihood you will be enrapt.

The closer story Power tells. Of Laura's struggle with cancer, proves both gripping and human. As with all his characters, readers find here no cookie cutter bits of melodrama but whole people of blood on the page. Children struggling with the approaching loss of their mother, an ex-husband who can neither understand nor console his ex-wife, in short an engaging emotional experience.

Powers' fans may disagree on which is his best work. For me, I lean towards the transcendent "Time of Our Singing." But as with any great author, all his work offers readers a rare opportunity. For the vast majority, "Gain" will surely not disappoint.

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### **Ivy says**

Powers' favored device of alternating two story lines in every other chapter works wonderfully in this novel. The historical rise of the proctor and gamble-like soap company juxtaposed with the contemporary woman struggling with cancer and her familial and social connections in the same city today-ish plays scope against intimacy. It is familiar and surprising, engaging and heart rending. It is my second favorite Richard Powers novel after The Echo Maker.

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### **Troy says**

I love Richard Powers and this is only book I've read that takes a corporation as a protagonist. It's a great idea, since the corporation acts like an incredibly virulent and active family, spanning locations, individuals, actions, laws, countries, products, etc. The story of the corporation is incredibly dynamic and new. In Gain

the corporation is named Claire and is obviously modeled on Johnson & Johnson. The Claire family comes to the U.S. during the birth of the country and quickly takes to importing. During the revolution, Claire turns to making soap and eventually grows and grows, surviving various depressions and turning into a multi-national pharmaceutical company.

However, the story of Claire is only half of the book. The rest of the book focuses on a woman named Laura who gets cancer as a byproduct of living next to the Claire Corporation's headquarters. It's a well told story and it's deeply touching, but for me it smacked too much of a Lifetime channel special. Unfortunately, Laura's story isn't as compelling as the intense global-spanning story of the corporation. It almost works, but the stories never truly mesh together and I imagine most readers will vastly prefer one story to the other and will, like myself, get a little exasperated with the story they consider rote.

Still, an amazing book even if it isn't one of Powers' best.

Click here for a comic book review: <http://uberdionysus.livejournal.com/4...>

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### **Your Excellency says**

Richard Powers' *Gain* exemplifies the kind of book I love to read - a beautifully written narrative combined with a compelling story - in this case two disparate stories that are headed for each other.

*Gain* provides an in-depth, fascinating history of the development of a soap company, from humble 18th-century beginnings to a modern conglomerate. His craft is so good that he makes this story, and those who populate it, compelling, interesting, and worthy of the reader's care. At the same time, Powers tracks the decline of a current-day real estate agent whose life and family are being ravaged by internal and external cancers. This isn't an *Erin Brockovich* tale, though - Laura Bodley is living her life and her death, and we get to know Laura well and care much about her and her family.

And then there's the writing - I was so glad I had a lot of time, because his writing is to be savored, not rushed. There's an art here that's rare - each sentence is crafted, not just penned. Powers reminded me of why I loved his *The Echo Maker* so much, and it was wonderful to feel that again.

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### **Howard says**

One of the most engaging novels I've read in years. It works on more than one level by combining the story of a divorced woman raising two children who gets ovarian cancer with the history of the multi-national consumer products conglomerate that has a plant in her Illinois town. Powers is always interested in how science relates to culture, and in this case the science is chemistry, but for me the strongest part of the book was the history of the company. Starting with the British immigrant to colonial Boston who becomes a trader and importer, Powers encapsulates just about all of American economic history in the tale. It's not an easy read exactly, but it's vivid and moving and smart and even funny in places.

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### **Neil says**

"Better living through chemistry". This is a book of two strands. In one we watch a company grow from meagre beginnings manufacturing a few bars of soap (selling the first ones at a loss) through to being a huge corporation with multiple product lines most of which are based on the wonders of chemistry as it advances through the decades (we travel from the early 1800s through to somewhere around the 1980s).

In the second, a woman battles with a disease that is destroying her life.

In lesser hands, this could turn into a sort of Erin Brockovich sensational story with sick woman taking on huge corporation. But this is Richard Powers and the story is much stronger than that: it doesn't go down the obvious routes and is, because of that, far more interesting. The story of the corporation growing reads almost like a history book. It examines how natural choices made in the middle of events can gradually develop into something far more significant generations later. None of us can know the consequences of decisions we make and this is amplified when talking about a huge corporation. The story of Laura is the exact opposite as it focuses on the human pain and suffering as disease spreads.

If you want a book that prompts you to think about how we got to where we are and what that might mean for the future, then this is the book for you. It's far simpler to read than many of Powers' books because it is straightforward narrative in each story with sentences that make sense with just one read and fewer really obscure words than some of his other books. To me, it felt like he had something he wanted to say and made a deliberate effort to avoid obscuring it with the complexity of his language.

And I'd just like to say that I loved the ending. It felt very "right".

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### **Lynn says**

This book put me in a really really really bad mood.

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### **Ann says**

"Gain" has twin narratives. In one, the reader learns the story of the Clare brothers, immigrants who started a soap and candle company in 1831. Powers moves through generations, explaining how merchants evolve in corporations, and more and more products are added as technology and 'better living through chemistry' takes place. He delves into the actual making of soap and other products (as well as offering tidbits about existing, well-known corporations)- first with natural materials, eventually with whatever is cheap and accessible. This is a much more interesting history lesson than it might appear. The other narrative strand tells the harrowing story of Laura Bodey, who lives near a Clare factory and uses many of their products. She is stricken with ovarian cancer, previously unknown in her family. Her struggle with the disease and the various 'cures' attempted will make harrowing reading for anyone who has been close to a cancer sufferer. Ultimately, Powers makes the reader wonder just what has been gained by all the 'improvement' products, medicines, etc. in our lives.

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## **Evan says**

This was the second book that I have read by Richard Powers, but I didn't realize it until after I had finished. I read *The Gold Bug Variations* back in college, and remember enjoying it back then -- I can see where Powers' double-strand style flows from one book to the next. Based on this one, though, I'm probably going to go back and re-read *Gold Bug*.

Talking to other people, this book was not a big hit with most, but I enjoyed it -- I thought Powers did a nice job balancing two very different stories that were written in very different styles, and infusing enough into both of them that when the narrative switched from one to the other, I was at the same time disappointed to leave one, and excited for the other. Powers obviously has an incredible vocabulary, and is not afraid to use it -- but once I got used to it, I appreciated his artistry and welcomed his descriptions. It's just an interesting writing style that you have to get used to.

\*\*\*Spoiler Ahead\*\*\*

The best writing, I thought, was saved for last. The end of Laura's story was heartbreakingly, from the perspective of any of the characters we had watched develop. The descriptions of her last struggles with ovarian cancer, from my experiences with cancer, were spot on, and took the reader into the mindset of a person going through chemotherapy and an eventual physical and mental wear-down. We learned about Don and the children through the eyes of Laura, biased in the beginning and through gaps of lucidity at the end. I can only assume Powers either had someone close to him die of cancer, or did a ton of research. I'm by no means an expert, but I can appreciate the message that comes through the story. Live every day, appreciate your health, and love your friends and family. In the end, to anybody, that is all that matters.

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## **Krok Zero says**

Massively disappointing. I assumed I would dig this, because a) I liked/loved the other two Richard Powers books I read (coincidentally both also starting with *G*), b) Mike Reynolds raves about this one and c) the opening grafts are gorgeous as hell. But the chapters about the corporation read like a fucking textbook, and the ones about the sick woman are mainly just boilerplate coping-with-cancer drama. I respect the ambition of commingling the epic history with the close-up human story, but this just doesn't work, not even on a language level -- Powers seems to be holding back stylistically on this one. I am not soured on Rick P., though. *Generosity* and *Galatea* earned him a lifetime pass and I still want to maneuver through the rest of his catalog.

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## **Ryandake says**

Powers' novels are never about one thing--as a reader you have to take the two or three narratives and twine them together to see the shape he has constructed. in this novel, we watch a corporation grow and a woman wither in twinned narrative.

Clare Soap starts out in 1802 with the first Clare arriving on the US' eastern shore. Laura starts out in May of an unspecified but 1980s-ish year, planting her spring garden. Clare is about to begin a business which will lead his sons to start Clare Soap. Laura is about to discover that she has ovarian cancer. the only things they

share in common are life in Lacewood and an inevitable chemical collision course.

in the hands of an inferior novelist, this book would be about the triumph of a lone woman against a monstrous corporation. fortunately, we are in Powers' vastly more capable hands.

how does a corporation get to be what it is? we live and breathe corporate air, now; but the Clares beginning their soap-making venture do not. business was not the only occupation of people at that time--a majority of the US still lived an agrarian life and put their own food (and soap) on the table all by themselves, thank you very much.

so how did we come to be incorporated? i keep thinking about that word's etymology: from Late Latin incorporatus, past participle of incorporare "unite into one body," from Latin in- "into, in, on, upon" (see in-(2)) + corpus (genitive corporis) "body". have we been taken into an amorphous, metastasizing corporate body, or have we taken business into our own selves? the book might surprise you in its answer.

there's a great quote in the book:

"Business has destroyed the very knowledge in us of all other natural forces except business.--  
John Jay Chapman

some passages of this book are rather tedious--at a certain point Laura's narrative becomes vastly more compelling than Clare's, and it takes (a not-always rewarded) discipline to keep going through the Clare narrative. in general, however, Powers pretty much pulls off the impossible: making the narrative of a corporation as fascinating as the narrative of a person.

highly recommended for anyone interested in how we got where we are, and what it will mean for our future.

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### **Aaron Arnold says**

I have a complicated relationship with contemporary American fiction. Actually, I flat-out despise most of it. Give me a period novel about Edwardian English gentlemen, Second Empire French coalminers, post-Petrine Russian nobles, or even Depression-era California fruit pickers, and I will be happy, but it seems like I loathe anything set in the modern United States. Why does the life of a person in the recent past seem so full compared to the bland epigones who populate our shelves? Such small characters, such vitiated lives, such small epiphanies. Charles Portis was right: "We're weaker than our fathers, Dupree. We don't even look like them." At the helm of the mightiest empire the world has ever seen, ordinary Americans are the least interesting people on Earth, yet the most willing to over-document their sluggish swirls through the stagnant pond that they call home. It's either self-indulgence or a simple absence of anything real to talk about.

Another reason I get annoyed is that a lot of those kinds of novels make "consumerism" a theme, which I find incredibly boring. What is interesting at all about people consuming goods, talking about consuming goods, or thinking about talking about consuming goods? Nothing. How many novels have we been subjected to where authors try to make "points" about consumerism by including all of those things, lulling the reader into an ostentatiously branded coma so that no one catches on to the complete absence of any

action or humanity that would interest a normal person with full control of their faculties? What in the name of God are you trying to SAY? Yet somehow Gain takes both of those themes that otherwise bore me and makes them great. It's two interrelated stories: one, the gradual growth amidst all the turbulence of American history of a small colonial-era soap-making factory called Jephthah Clare & Sons into Clare Inc., a Johnson & Johnson-esque corporate behemoth; and two, Laura Bodey's struggle against ovarian cancer in the modern-day town of Lacewood, IL, where Clare has a factory.

As a big economic history nerd, I confess that I found the first story far more interesting for the most part. In long stretches of sometimes-overwrought prose, Powers has concocted probably the most engrossing life story of a fictional corporation you'll ever read (which may not be a crowded field). Parts of it were easily on the level with a real corporate history like Marc Levinson's superb *The Great A&P*, or a magisterial economic history like William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, which Powers clearly alludes to in the part set just prior to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Watching the fledgling soap company make its first deals, improve its production process, and slowly expand into other markets to eventually become a titan of industry is honestly enthralling; you can almost see Adam Smith nodding approvingly during the sections on how the various Clare family members improve their firm's ability to truck and barter. There are also plenty of great parts about the chemistry of soap (no really).

Clare is intended to be both a parody of "better living through chemistry"-type companies, particularly as its story moves into the present-day, and also a serious study of how companies become both legal people and also "good corporate citizens", and enmesh themselves in our lives. Think of the sinister Bland corporation in Gravity's Rainbow, or Ambrose Bierce's definition of a corporation as "An ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility", or Milton Friedman's infamous arguments in "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits" that companies have zero responsibilities to society beyond enhancing shareholder value. While Clare is presented as a fairly benevolent company, taking early Progressive-era steps to bring their workers on board with the company and prevent the labor troubles so typical of the era, it slowly begins to seem like Just Another Company, especially when the narrative gets to the 80s. What starts out as a hagiography subtly becomes a much more nuanced picture.

This is made a little less abstract by Laura's story. She's a divorced mother of 2 kids who's seeing a married guy in her spare time. I expected to be bored stiff by her life, and initially I was, since she spends a lot of the beginning doing mundane ordinary complaining or snarking about consumer products, but Powers eventually won me over by giving her cancer, a time-tested method of increasing reader sympathy dating back at least to Charles Dickens. I've never had or known anyone close to me who had cancer so I don't know how accurate his depiction of it was, but it seemed pretty real and engrossing to me. While a lot of her story was used to present the reader with some Themes (e.g., the growth of Clare is implicitly analogized to the metastasis of cancer cells, the company's efforts to disavow any link between the chemical outputs of the Lacewood factory and the illnesses of the townfolk are contrasted with their equally assiduous efforts to seem like they Care About the Community), the changes in her relationships with her kids and ex-husband came off as genuine and moving. Powers also namedrops *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, a cool Walt Whitman poem.

Overall I liked the book, especially the capitalist cheerleading parts, which I would definitely read more of. While the modern characters occasionally threaten to become as boringly loathsome as their counterparts in a Jonathan Franzen novel, Powers does about the right amount of tearjerking to make them relatable and sympathetic.

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## **Kelly says**

This is a dense read, mixing the fictional story of a woman with cancer and a history lesson in the Industrial Revolution in America. It's depressing and scary and insanely thought-provoking. That being said, I'm glad that I read it, but would have a hard time recommending it, unless to someone who was already interested in the topic. Primarily reads like non-fiction.

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## **David says**

a tale told from both ends. somewhere in the middle we see how innocuous steps up can result in the creation of monstrosities, and how the machine will devour us all if we are not careful.

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## **Philippe says**

In this novel, painfully and tentatively, two worlds entwine: the idiosyncratic fabric of an individual's life and the managed, efficiency-driven footprint of a global company. But the entanglement is more than a mere conflict between powerless consumers and machiavellian corporations.

Because, ultimately, we live in a world that is populated by fallible humans. Also globe-spanning businesses emerge from the entrepreneurial impulse of an individual, or a small group of individuals, with a particular set of skills and beliefs.

One main thread in the narrative is a story about the growth of a modest soap making operation, a family business established in the 19th century, into a diversified, multinational company that seems to produce every fertilizer, food ingredient, hygiene product and cosmetic under the sun.

The development is propelled forward by myriads of interacting forces: regulation, science and technology, competition, war, changing mores. At a certain point the dynamic changes: formal incorporation creates a compound organism that cuts itself loose from the original entrepreneurial energy and starts to behave according to its own, financially driven logic: *"The days of people working for other people were over. The company was no longer a band joined together for a common purpose. The company was a structure whose purpose was to make more of the same."*

The company unleashes an endless stream of innovations into the market. And, whether it's fertilizer or toothpaste, these products' constituent molecules end up in consumers' bodies.

And so Powers zooms in on the life of an average American woman who lives in the town where our global company has its headquarters and a number of production units. As all of us she is busy keeping together the pieces of her and her family's fractured lives. Obviously, in that process she consumes, and just as the rest of us, she is 'rationally ignorant' of the dense meshwork of practical and moral implications of her consumer behavior. Time and again she is confronted with dilemmas she is unable to handle.

*"Paper or plastic? the fifty-year old bagger asks her. What is she supposed to say? Liberty or death? Right or wrong? Good or evil? Paper or plastic? The one kills trees but is one hundred percent natural and recyclable. The other releases insidious fumes if burned but requires less*

*energy to make, can be turned into picnic tables and vinyl siding, has handles and won't disintegrate when the frozen yoghurt melts. She panics. "Whatever is easiest," she tells the bagger, who grimaces.*

These unresolved dilemmas and dimly articulated desires are sent back into the supply chain where they engage in a murky chemistry with the laws of corporate management, bringing to life a world in which hyper-personal desires and dry accounting rules are inextricably fused into hazy, hybrid 'actants' (to borrow a term from Bruno Latour).

At one point, the book's female protagonist is diagnosed with ovarian cancer. There is reason to believe that industrial pollution has triggered the illness. Now the stakes of the entanglement are raised to the existential level. But she realizes that things are not that simple. She has been guilty too, and willingly so:

*Who told them to make all these things? But she knows the answer to that one. They've counted every receipt, more carefully than she ever has. And wasn't she born wanting what they were born wanting to give her? Every thought, every pleasure, freed up by these little simplicities, the most obvious of them already worlds beyond her competence.*

She dimly understands that in innumerable ways her fate is intertwined with the corporate leviathan's. And so where is the basis for retribution and action?

*It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else. Taken her life and molded it in every way imaginable, plus six degrees beyond imagining. Changed her life so greatly that not even cancer can change it more than halfway back.*

There is no ending, least of all a happy one. At one level there is life that stretches far beyond the law of supply and demand. At another level "there is nothing but a series of chemicals, each distinctly shaped, stretching on forever in the Void." And at yet another one, there is human energy and purpose, tainted, fallible, prone to confusion and the seductions of greed and security.

*"People want everything. That's their problem."*

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### **Michelle says**

For whatever reason, this for me was the least memorable of Richard Powers' novels. It's about corporate greed, and cancer, and of course it's beautifully written and wildly intelligent. But I couldn't give it the full five stars that I gave all of his other novels ... it just didn't grab me like his others did.

However, a not-great Powers novel is still better than 90 percent of all the other stuff out there, so I gave it four stars.

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### **Olivia Williford (LivTheBookNerd) says**

UGH THIS BOOK IS THE WORST.

