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## Beyond Boundaries: Rethinking Human-Animal Bonds in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines human-animal relationships in Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), aiming to contribute to the ongoing discussion about animal portrayals in literature by suggesting that the book challenges the divisions between humans and animals. While the novel has been widely studied for its ecocentric view and its fresh reading of the human-plant link, it argues that Powers's story also makes room for animals as aware, purposeful, and morally important beings. Drawing from critical animal studies, posthumanism, and ecocriticism, this research explores how the novel questions human-centered standards and places animals within a wider web of ecological links. Through characters like Patricia Westerford, Douglas Pavlicek, and Olivia Vandergriff, the novel shows a kind of multispecies ethic where animals are not just background figures but also active parts of the story and important moral players. Powers's animals—both real and imagined—are not just passive victims of ecological problems; they are co-inhabitants whose lives are closely tied to human actions. In doing this, *The Overstory* shows a change in literature toward the more-than-human view that is a focus of environmental humanities. It suggests that literature can be a key tool for ethics, able to shift how we see other species during an age of ecological problems and extinctions. Powers's work presents a chance in modern fiction to imagine connections that move past human-focused ideas.

### INTRODUCTION

The human-animal relationship—long shaped by levels of power, usefulness, and symbolic meaning—is being rethought in both science and the humanities. Academics in many areas now question the old idea from the Enlightenment that sees animals as voiceless beings driven by instinct, which supports what Cary Wolfe calls the “logic of speciesism” (Wolfe, 2003). In fiction, this rethinking has led to many stories that seriously look at nonhuman beings, not just as symbols but as aware participants in shared ecological worlds.

Among current novels dealing with the nonhuman, Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) has been praised for its fresh view of plant life, with trees as key parts of the story. Powers's work has been called a major addition to environmental literature, with critics praising its ecological depth and how it takes focus away from humans (Trexler, 2020; Heise, 2021). But the book's handling of animals—though less obvious—is just as worthy of study. *The Overstory* gives not only a tree-focused picture but a bigger more-than-human ecology, where animals also become morally charged and important to the story.

This article argues that *The Overstory* shows animals not as passive symbols of nature or as tools for human change but as beings with their drive, pain, memories, and ways of fighting back. Animals in the novel work as ethical questioners, emotional sparks, and signs regarding the environment. With connected character stories, Powers puts focus on meetings between species that test human-centered views and ask readers to build what Donna

Haraway (2008) calls “response-ability”—a way of ethical paying attention and mutual duty across species. The novel's large structure—covering many years and lands—mirrors how complex ecological systems are. While much study has centered on the story's look at forests and how plants talk to each other (Gagliano, 2018; Clark, 2019), fewer studies have checked what it means for animal life. Animals in *The Overstory* are often barely seen—met in times of weakness, violence, or when they disappear. Animals killed on roads, bird types that have died off, deer that are hunted, and wolves that are moved from their homes appear at the edges of the novel's human plots, but these animals are never just in the background. Instead, they stay as quiet witnesses and, at times, as moral mirrors for the human characters.

Powers's using animal life shows a growing trend in environmental writing toward stories that cover many species, where the lives of humans and nonhumans are shown as closely linked. Academics like Ursula Heise (2016) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) say that this kind of literature is key for changing ethical ideas in the Anthropocene, a word used to name the current time of human-controlled planet systems. The Anthropocene makes us rethink humanity's importance and the ethical duties that come from it. In this setting, *The Overstory* comes forward as a key piece of writing, giving a view of family that goes across species and redefines what it means to live together. The novel also goes along with Jacques Derrida's thoughts on “the animal that therefore I am,” where he questions the way philosophy has turned away.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

To study *The Overstory* using the idea of human-animal links, this article uses ways that connect writing theory, environmental ethics, and posthumanist philosophy. At the center of this is the question: what happens when writing refuses to see animals as symbols or just background and instead knows them as ethical others and sharing participants? To deal with this question means checking not only how animals are shown but also how story structures keep up or test the levels of species.

### Critical Animal Studies and the Question of Voice

The area of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) gives a base for studying how writing uses animals as subjects and not things. According to Cary Wolfe, critical animal studies goes against both using animals as tools and trying to fit them into human ideas of value. In *Animal Rites*, Wolfe (2003) says that Western philosophy and writing have long needed the leaving out of the animal to name what is human. Writing, then, is involved in what Derrida (2008) calls “carnophallogocentrism”—an idea that brings together putting speech (logos), being male, and eating meat first as linked ways of showing human power.

In *The Overstory*, Powers clearly goes against this custom. The novel does not talk for animals, nor does it make them human-like for human feelings. Instead, animals live next to humans—often quiet, frequently at risk, but always having strong effects. The fox that appears at Olivia Vandergriff’s death, for example, stays hard to read, but its being there has a clear weight, asking the reader to pay attention to it without turning it into a symbol. As Susan McHugh (2011) says, stories can become a place where species lines are made “strangely able to be passed through,” mainly when writers let animals change human view, memory, and action. Powers’s using cut-up, many-sided telling makes this more able to be passed through by refusing one human-based look. Each character’s view is shaped by meetings with nonhumans—some quick, others changing—and these meetings often shake up the characters’ identities and ideas.

### Posthumanism and Interspecies Ethics

With CAS, posthumanist theory gives a key base for studying *The Overstory*’s ethical view. Posthumanism, as spoken of by academics like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, tests the humanist perfect of free will and instead puts weight on being linked, mixed, and depending on each other. Haraway (2008) brings up the idea of “companion species” to catch the shared changing links between humans and animals—links that are not just for use but deeply about feelings and what is real.

In *The Overstory*, this idea of depending on each other is key. Patricia Westerford, maybe the novel’s most thinking character, speaks of a view where humans are not at the center of creation but are “a kind of fungus on the bark of the tree of life.” Her scientific studies—first seen as odd—mirror new study in plant and animal talk, blurring the lines between species and testing Cartesian dualisms.

Her respect for animal life is not made to seem better than it is but based in ecology: animals are other lives in complex systems that are being taken apart by human want and not thinking about the future. Rosi Braidotti (2013) takes posthumanism into ethics and politics, saying that the “posthuman subject” must build new ways to be responsible that include nonhuman players. This “traveling ethics” goes against set identities and asks for knowing our being mixed with the animal, plant, and mineral worlds. In this way, *The Overstory* does posthumanism through its structure—a connected story that copies ecological link and takes focus away from the human main player.

### Ecocriticism and Narrative Empathy

While posthumanism tests human-centered ideas in philosophy, ecocriticism checks how writing adds to environmental knowing and action. Academics like Ursula Heise and Serenella Iovino put weight on the part stories play in shaping ecological sense. Heise’s (2016) idea of “multispecies justice” is mainly right for Powers’s novel, which puts focus on the wrongs done not only to forests but also to the animals who live in them. Story form plays a key part in growing feeling for the nonhuman. As Nussbaum (2006) says in *Frontiers of Justice*, writing can be a very strong way for ethical learning, mainly when it gives voice to those—like animals—who cannot talk in normal political places. In *The Overstory*, animals are not given inner talks or told to speak, but they get feeling through being there, looking, and being lost. Animals killed on roads, cutting down forests, extinction—these are not background events but problems that shake the novel’s emotional and moral structure.

The repeated calling up of species that have died off—mainly birds like the passenger pigeon—works as an emotional and ecological echo through the text. These losses mark the ethical failing of today and the need to feel sad not only for human lives but for whole species. In this way, *The Overstory* puts itself within what Deborah Bird Rose (2011) calls an “ethics of witness,” where feeling sad for nonhuman death becomes a political and story act.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Using a qualitative research method, this article conducts textual analysis through symbiotic lens of ecocriticism. It takes library materials, books, research journals, and articles as the secondary sources to critically examine the primary text. Insights from scholars such as R. Braidotti, T. Clark, Jacques Derrida, and M. Gagliano are considered to explore concepts of equality and the importance of maintaining the equilibrium. The narrative is analyzed with a focus on the rhetoric of biospherical egalitarianism. The human tendency to establish a binary between humans and animals, a practice rooted in ancient times, is critiqued as being illogical, artificial, and superficial. A closer analysis reveals significant similarities between humans and animals concerning their origins, evolution, and psychological and physical attributes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While *The Overstory* has often been studied through the idea of tree knowing, it also makes a full and detailed picture of human-animal meetings. Animals appear in the novel not just as background to the environmental problem but as sharing players in a shared ecological story. Through the lived times and ethical awakenings of its human characters, Powers questions how breakable, honored, and unable to be changed animal life is. The novel's key people—mainly Patricia Westerford, Douglas Pavlicek, and Olivia Vandergriff—each meet animals in ways that test human-centered ideas and reshape ethical duties across species lines.

Patricia Westerford is likely the thinking center of the novel. A tree expert by training, her first being left out by the science world—because of her idea that trees talk to each other—shows a wider cultural going against nonhuman power. But her ideas, based in both science watching and feeling knowing, are shown to be right over time. What makes Patricia mainly right in this idea is that her ecological ethics are not just for plants. She feels the forest as a many-species home, and her feeling sad over its taking apart includes feeling sad for animal life. In some parts, Patricia thinks about the going away of birds and the extinction of the passenger pigeon, once the bird type with the most numbers in North America. The text says: “The pigeons blacked out the sky for days. Now they are gone. And we don't even remember what it meant.” This moment puts focus on the knowing break that extinction causes: a species' vanishing does not just take away from being different but also takes away ways of knowing, seeing, and living together. Using Deborah Bird Rose's (2011) idea of “extinction as silence,” we can read Patricia's feeling sad not just as looking back but as an act of ethical seeing—a try to keep in memory what has been taken from the world. The pigeons, though long dead, stay ethically there in Patricia's mind.

Patricia's wider view mirrors Donna Haraway's thought of becoming with—a way of real lowliness that knows humans as just one species among many. Her feeling to the pain of animals caught in logging areas or moved by clear-cutting shows a many-species feeling sad that goes against capitalist and mechanical pulling away. Her science ethics are joined with an emotional and thinking promise to nonhuman life, which includes animals as family, not things to be sold.

Douglas Pavlicek's story gives a different view: he is a war veteran and traveler who becomes a tree planter after living through a fall from an airplane—only to be saved, in story and real ways, by a tree. His journeys across a changing American land are marked by animal meetings that cause times of thought, guilt, and link. Early in his story, Douglas sees many animals killed on the road as he drives through logging towns—an image that comes back through the novel. In one mainly moving scene, he stops to move a dead deer off the road and watches the eyes of a living fawn near, frozen in fear. Here, the animal look works as what Jacques Derrida (2008) called

a “ghostly stopping”—a moment when the nonhuman being is there puts the human subject face to face with its weakness and not able to be turned into other words. The deer does not talk, does not act in any human-like way, but Douglas feels this moment as a way of ethical being open. This goes along with Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of the *Other*, which, when taken by academics like Wolfe and Nussbaum, can include nonhuman others whose weakness asks for an answer.

Douglas's emotional way is deeply shaped by being near animal pain, much of which is not seen by the human-focused economy he works for. While he starts as a passive watcher, his later promise to plant trees becomes a way of ecological fixing—not just for trees cut down but for the animal lives that depend on them. His care is quiet, not heroic, and fully about being linked, going with Braidotti's (2013) view of “yes ethics” based in being connected.

Olivia Vandergriff is the novel's most strange person—a young girl who lives through a near-death being shocked by electricity and then starts getting messages from trees. She reads these voices as God-given or from the universe and becomes a strong, even careless activist. Though her story is more openly a symbol, it still centers key animal times that shape her change and suggest a easiness between species lands. One of the most bringing up scenes in Olivia's story happens just before her death during a protest staying in a redwood top. As she lies at the foot of the tree, hurt and alone, a fox appears. The fox does not act in a big way—it just appears, looks at her, and leaves—but its look is said in close, charged words. The fox is never made clear. Is it a dream, a messenger, a real animal? Powers on purpose leaves this not clear. But what the text makes clear is Olivia's strong feeling of link. She reads the animal's being there as a kind of final church, an knowing that she is no longer apart from the forest but of it.

This scene echoes Derrida's famous thinking on being seen without clothes by his cat, where he asks what it means for an animal to watch a human—not as thing but as subject. The fox, like Derrida's cat, goes against being turned into symbolic meaning. Instead, it becomes a limit case, a moment when species lines melt and a different kind of ethical paying attention is asked. For Olivia, the fox is not a person of wisdom or guide—it is just there, and that being there is enough to cause wonder and giving up. Through Olivia's meeting with the fox and her strong link with the forest, Powers puts on what Haraway (2008) would call a “contact zone”: a space where beings meet, not to power or know each other but to know the sheer fact of living together. Olivia's story tests using thinking and puts feeling, weakness, and mystery as good ways of being linked across species lines.

With these character-based meetings, *The Overstory* often calls up the ghost of animal not being there—a story way that puts focus on the lives that have been lost or forgotten. The not being there of species that were once normal, the shrinking of homes, the silence where

songbirds once were—all of these mark the wiping away of many-species groups that once did well. By calling attention to what is no longer there, Powers goes with environmental critics like Thom van Dooren (2014) who say that extinction must be known not only in biology but in feeling and culture. The ethical power of *The Overstory* is not in giving answers but in asking for a new direction of seeing. Animals are not lowered to symbols of nature or show of human feeling; they are strongly powering beings that test, worry, and redirect the human look. Powers makes his readers know—not only human pain or ecological drop but the quieter, more lasting pain of animals whose lives have been made less worth by human growth.

### CONCLUSIONS

Richard Powers's *The Overstory* has been rightly praised for its strong new reading of trees as active players in a shared ecological world. But, to read the novel only through the idea of tree knowing is to miss the wider ethical view it makes—one that includes animals as just as important players in its many-species story. Through character-driven meetings with animals both there and not, Powers puts on a redirecting of ethical paying attention: from human-centered seeing to what posthumanist academics call many-species being mixed. By placing animals within a web of ecological, emotional, and thinking links, *The Overstory* goes against the leading writing custom in which animals work as symbolic parts or emotional starts for human growth.

Instead, Powers goes with academics like Cary Wolfe, Donna Haraway, and Susan McHugh in showing animals as ethically important beings that test the lines of the self and ask for new ways of duty. Whether through the feeling sad of birds that have died off, the seeing of deaths on the road, or the not spoken sharing with a fox, Powers makes a story that knows the unable to be changed being of animal life, even in its silences. In a time marked by fast extinction, home loss, and climate problem, writing that puts first meetings between species is more than pretty—it is strongly needed in politics. As academics such as Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren have said, feeling sad for animals are not just feelings but a strong ethical act. Powers's novel shows that feeling sad, knowing, and being responsible can be been between through story form, giving readers the mind space to

reshape the human-animal link as one of family and not power. *The Overstory* suggests that animals are not off to the side to human stories—they are part of the moral cloth that holds those stories together. In centering animals not as copies but as beings with their own drive, Powers adds to a changing writing ethics in which species lines are not walls but meeting points. Reading *The Overstory* through the idea of animal studies opens new ways for thinking about writing's part in shaping environmental and ethical sense in the Anthropocene. The novel's test is clear: to see, at last, what we have refused to see for so long—not only the trees but the eyes of animals looking back at us.

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