

Upper School Summer Reading 2021

The Overstory by Richard Powers

Summer Reading Assignment for 9-12 English

Assignment One: Analysis

Choose THREE of the ten analysis questions below, and answer them in thoughtful, thorough responses.

1. Adam initially builds his career on studying the faults in human brains, such as confirmation bias and the conflation of correlation with causality. Meanwhile, Douglas is convinced that humans' greatest flaw is mistaking agreement for truth. What questions does this book ask about human failings?
2. What does Powers mean when he describes humans as "trapped in blinkered bodies"?
3. What do you make of the voices Olivia hears, and her sense of conviction that "the most wondrous products of four billion years of life" need our help?
4. It is a difficult moment for Douglas when he learns that all of his years of planting trees have only allowed companies to increase their annual allowable cut. How did the book depict the logging industry, generally, and the practice of clear-cutting, specifically?
5. Patricia describes trees and humans as being "at war" over land and water and the atmosphere, and that she can see "which side will lose by winning." What does she mean by that?
6. The book is divided into four parts: "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds." What is the significance of each section, and how do the four parts work together to form a unified whole?
7. *We the Corporations* by Adam Winkler is a book about the ways corporations have gained many of the same rights as individuals. In *The Overstory*, Ray is moved and upset by a legal argument that suggests trees should also share those rights. Does the novel take a side in this argument; if so, what side?
8. Describe the lengths that Adam, Olivia, Nicholas, Mimi and Douglas went to in their attempt to wake people up to the destruction of forests. Does the book seem to advocate for these sorts of tactics?
9. What is the significance of the worlds Neelay creates within his game, "Mastery"?
10. Why do you think Richard Powers chose the title *The Overstory*?

Assignment Two: Reflection

Choose TWO of the eight reflection prompts below and respond in thoughtful, thorough academic paragraphs of at least 250 words each.

1. What was your experience with trees as a child, and what has it been as a young adult? Have trees shaped your life in any meaningful way? Do you have a favorite tree?
2. Which character's story from *The Overstory* do you identify with the most, and why?
3. What did you learn about trees that you didn't know before reading *The Overstory*? Did some of Patricia's research surprise you, either about the "giving trees" or the ways dead trees contribute to forests? Did any of it change the way you see trees?
4. What have you read in the news lately that mirrors the stories in *The Overstory*? How is *The Overstory* playing out in "real life" in your own community?
5. What was your opinion of "direct action" as a means of effective activism before the book? What is your opinion after reading it? Do you think it should play a role in addressing the destruction of our planet?
6. Toward the end of the book, Dorothy is arrested for her determination to let her yard grow wild. Did this book change how you see your own backyard?
7. As the book closes, Mimi seems to say that the world as it has been is ending and a new one will begin. Does that ring true to you? How does that make you feel?
8. Richard Powers writes: "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story." Do you agree? Did any part of this story change your mind?

Questions for assignments one and two were adapted from "Discussion Questions for 'The Overstory,'" PBS Newshour (pbs.org).

Assignment Three: Creative Application

Several of the characters in *The Overstory* mark the passing of significant events by planting trees. One of the families, in fact, plants trees to mark the births of their children. To this family, each tree becomes a symbol or emblem of the child whose birth it marks.

Create a visual in which you connect each member of your immediate family (including yourself) to a unique species of tree. Include a picture of each family member, a picture of the tree to which you've connected them, and an explanation of the way(s) that this particular species of tree symbolizes the qualities/characteristics of this person. Be prepared to share this visual with your classmates.

All assignments will be due on the first day of English class.