

Cosmic Fragility, Earthly Responsibility: Reimagining Ecological Ethics in Richard Power's Bewilderment

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Abstract

Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021) intertwines intimate human grief with planetary crisis, situating ecological consciousness within the emotional bond between a father and son.

This research paper examines the novel from an Eco critical perspective, foregrounding how Powers dramatizes planetary fragility, ecological ethics, and political apathy through literary form. The narrative juxtaposes Theo Byrne's astrobiological imagination with his son Robin's heightened ecological sensitivity, presenting Earth's uniqueness against the backdrop of imagined exoplanets. Robin functions as the novel's ecological conscience, whose empathy for endangered species reflects a radical ethical attunement to nonhuman suffering. The novel further connects private mourning—the loss of Alyssa, Theo's wife and Robin's mother to what scholars identify as “ecological grief,” extending bereavement across personal and planetary scales. Against a background of climate denial and authoritarian populism, *Bewilderment* critiques political indifference and underscores the necessity of ecological resistance. From a literary standpoint, the novel blends scientific discourse with lyrical prose, using narrative intimacy to render environmental crisis emotionally legible. Powers' novel demonstrates that ecological ethics must be both planetary and personal, grounded in vulnerability, compassion, and wonder.

Keywords: Richard Powers, *Bewilderment*, ecocriticism, planetary ethics, ecological grief, eco-cosmopolitanism, dark ecology, Anthropocene

1. Introduction.

Richard Powers has established himself as one of the most significant contemporary American novelists, whose works often explore the intersections of science, ethics, and human meaning. His Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018) was hailed as a masterpiece of environmental fiction, dramatizing the interconnected lives of humans and trees. Following this ambitious ecological epic, Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021) narrows its lens to the intimate bond between a widowed father, Theo

Byrne, an astrobiologist, and his neurodivergent son, Robin.

Yet this domestic narrative is never detached from planetary crisis. Instead, Powers entwines private grief with ecological despair, situating the vulnerability of family life within the broader context of mass extinction and climate breakdown.

From a literary perspective, *Bewilderment* is an excellent example of how ecological issues of how ecological issues are woven into story structure, symbolism, and emotional impact. The novel invites readers to contemplate planetary fragility through Theo's cosmic imagination and Robin's ecological conscience. In doing so, it reimagines ecological ethics not as an abstract principle but as an embodied, emotional, and narrative reality. This paper argues that *Bewilderment* redefines ecological consciousness in contemporary literature by entwining personal grief with planetary mourning, dramatizing political apathy, and insisting on ecological ethics rooted in vulnerability and wonder.

One of the novel's central strategies for foregrounding ecology is its juxtaposition of cosmic imagination and earthly fragility. As an astrobiologist, Theo tells Robin stories of planets with unique ecosystems, atmospheres, and life forms. These bedtime stories function as metaphors for the improbability and preciousness of Earth's biosphere. Powers writes, "Everywhere we looked, the sky was full of worlds. But this one was ours. And we were throwing it away" (54). This text depicts ecological deterioration as an existential issue and emphasizes how rare Earth's life-supporting circumstances are.

The literary function of these exoplanetary tales is twofold. First, they dramatize the scientific reality that Earth is not the center of the universe, decentering anthropocentric perspectives. Second, they remind readers that despite cosmic abundance, Earth remains uniquely fragile. This aligns with the "Overview Effect," described by astronauts who experience a cognitive shift when seeing Earth from space as a small, delicate sphere suspended in darkness

Rather than framing ecology solely in terms of local place or national identity, *Bewilderment* positions planetary survival as a universal ethical imperative. The imaginative contrast between exoplanets and Earth underscores that no technological escape or cosmic alternative absolves humans from ecological responsibility.

Robin, who is neurodivergent and extremely sensitive, is profoundly impacted by stories of animal abuse and extinction. Powers describes him as unable to understand why others are not equally outraged: "He couldn't understand why everyone wasn't in a state of emergency over the vanishing animals" (102). Robin's bewilderment at societal apathy mirrors the ecological bewilderment of the Anthropocene itself.

Literarily, Robin's character challenges conventional portrayals of disability. Rather than presenting neurodivergence as deficiency, Powers reframes Robin's difference as heightened ecological attunement. His empathy for endangered species becomes a form of ethical insight that exceeds the numbness of so-called normal society

Robin's ecological conscience is also political. He urges his father to join protests, demands accountability, and resists resignation. "Dad, why can't we save them? Why don't people care?" he asks (145). This child's question reverberates as an indictment of adult inaction and societal complacency. Robin's role as ecological conscience challenges readers to inhabit a moral perspective unclouded by denial or distraction.

Ecocritical scholars have increasingly emphasized the concept of "ecological grief." Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis define it as "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes" (275). *Bewilderment* dramatizes this form of grief by binding the loss of a mother to the extinction of species and collapse of ecosystems. The narrative demonstrates that mourning is not limited to interpersonal relationships but extends across scales of life.

From a literary perspective, the novel uses grief as a structuring affect that shapes both plot and ecological imagination. Robin's mourning of animals, Theo's mourning of Alyssa, and the novel's mourning of Earth converge into a shared affective landscape. By entwining grief with ecology, Powers renders environmental crisis emotionally legible, transforming statistics of extinction into visceral experience.

From an ecocritical perspective, *Bewilderment* is a prime example of how dark ecology and eco-cosmopolitanism may coexist. The book also criticises neoliberalism's monetisation of science. Theo's work, which could inspire ecological awareness, is dismissed because it lacks immediate economic utility. This is indicative of a larger trend to disregard ecological understanding in favour of corporate objectives.

Powers' stylistic fusion of lyrical prose writing with scientific discourse shows how literature may unite emotional reaction and logical understanding. By narrating ecological crisis through the intimate lens of a father-son bond, *Bewilderment* embodies the principle that ecological ethics must be both planetary and personal.

Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* contributes profoundly to contemporary literature by intertwining personal grief with planetary crisis, neuro divergence with ecological conscience, and cosmic imagination with earthly fragility. From a literary perspective, the novel demonstrates how ecological themes can be embedded within narrative form, character development, and symbolic motifs.

By foregrounding ecological fragility, Robin's conscience, grief as ecological mourning, and resistance to political apathy, Powers redefines ecological consciousness as both intimate and expansive. The novel insists that planetary ethics must emerge not only from science and politics but also from affective bonds, vulnerability, and wonder.

In the age of the Anthropocene, where climate change and mass extinction reshape human futures, *Bewilderment* stands as a literary work that dramatizes ecological crisis in emotional, ethical, and narrative terms.



Works Cited:

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