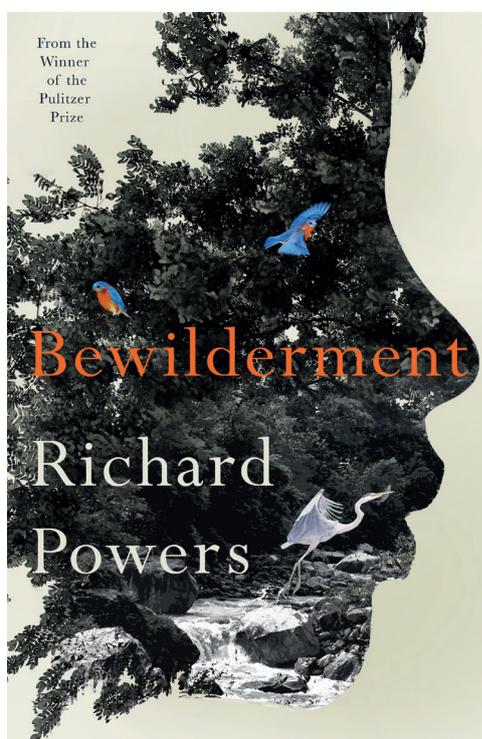


The
2021
Booker
Prize

From Judging Room to Living Room A Discussion Guide for Readers

Featuring discussion prompts from this year's judging panel



Bewilderment

Richard Powers

Hutchinson Heinemann

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What the judges decided

'Theo is a widowed astrobiologist raising a troubled nine-year-old son tagged with a 'special needs' label. On his mission to help the boy, Robin, he is prepared to engage with experimental treatments. He dares to decode his son's mind in order to save him, thereby drawing us into the claustrophobic relationship of a grieving man playing solo parent to a vulnerable child. Theo's determination to protect Robin from becoming a prisoner of bureaucracy, something of a high wire act of its own, is beautiful and truly inspiring. That, and his willingness to venture beyond the known world into the cosmos make this book a clarion call for us to wake up and realise what our minds might be truly capable of if we were less obedient to the status quo.'

- Natascha McElhone

What the judges discussed: ideas to explore

- The narrator, Theo, can seem truculent at times. Why do you think this is, and does it make a difference to you as a reader?
- In theory, Theo is the father and is guiding his son Robin. But is he, in a way, following him?
- Describe how the author evokes the complexities of parenting a non-neurotypical child.
- How does the science in the novel affect your understanding of the human characters?
- How does Alyssa's absence influence Theo and Robin's thinking about death?
- Did your ideas about nature evolve as you read this book?
- How did you feel at the end?

About the book

An astrobiologist thinks of a creative way to help his rare and troubled son in Richard Powers' deeply moving and brilliantly original novel, *Bewilderment*.

Theo Byrne is an astrobiologist. He is also the widowed father of a most unusual nine-year-old. Robin is loving, funny and full of plans to save the world. He is also about to be expelled, for smashing his friend's face in with a metal thermos. What can a father do, when the only solution offered is to put his boy on psychoactive drugs? What can he say, when his boy asks why we are destroying the world? The only thing to do is to take the boy to other planets, while helping him to save this one.

About the author

Richard Powers is the multi-award-winning American author of 13 novels, who has now been shortlisted twice for the Booker Prize.

The Overstory, shortlisted in 2018, won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, among other honours. Powers says he is partially indebted to Booker-winner Margaret Atwood for his 2021-shortlisted novel *Bewilderment*, which explores the anxiety of family life on a damaged planet. He lives in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains and is currently delving into 'what social media, deep learning, hidden algorithms, and surprisingly intelligent marine creatures have to do with one another.'

The author says...

'For me, the astrobiology and neuroscience in *Bewilderment* – two fields undergoing rapid and dramatic revolutions – are really ways into much older and more intimate human passions. Beneath the immense technologies and intellectual achievements of those pursuits are some primal questions built into human beings: Is life a one-off fluke, or is it inevitable and ubiquitous in the universe? What is consciousness? Can we know what it is like to be someone or something else? How do we land back on Earth and make a home here among the neighbours? Can we find contentment despite our bottomless hunger? How do we surrender the increasingly isolated self to the terrifying diversity of 'endless forms most beautiful'? All these questions form the time-honoured heart of fiction. *Bewilderment* is Plato's Allegory of the Cave. I've just updated the fable for the age of pandemics, exoplanets, and mass extinction.'

Further reading

- Richard Powers, *The Overstory*
- Richard Powers, *Orfeo*
- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*
- David Eagleman, *Livewired*
- Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*