

The Gold Bug Variations Short Guide

The Gold Bug Variations by Richard Powers

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Characters

The ages of the characters in *The Gold Bug Variations* are significant. Jan O'Deigh is about thirty-four; her former lover, Franklin Todd, is about thirty. When Stuart Ressler was twenty-five, he had an affair with Jeanette Koss, a twenty-nine-year-old married woman.

It is not accidental that Powers elects to make his two pairs of major characters each four years apart in age. This double pair suggests the double helix to which the number four is fundamental. The novel's double love story reinforces this notion and relates it to Johann Sebastian Bach's inventions as well as to such disparate details as the four chambers of the heart, the four winds, the four seasons, and the so-called four corners of the earth.

As in much of Powers's writing, the ideas in *The Gold Bug Variations* overwhelm the characters, who serve largely as vehicles for the complex ideational structure of a book consciously shaped to reflect the natural, scientific, and musical structures the author constantly alludes to and explores. Unlike many novelists, Powers does not gossip about his characters. He essentially bypasses that level in his effort to construct his intricate, searching, philosophical context.



Social Concerns

In *The Gold Bug Variations*, Richard Powers is fundamentally concerned with the place of science in contemporary society and with interconnections between science and other disciplines. The novel explores in flashbacks the life of Stuart Ressler, whose death is the pretext for much of the novel. Ressler, a promising researcher on the University of Illinois team that worked on discovering the genetic code of the DNA molecule, is seen twenty-five years after he left Illinois.

Having worked with something as mysterious and eerie as DNA, Ressler questions whether humans, who are products of DNA, can ever truly understand it. Having achieved sufficient celebrity to have once had his picture in *Life* magazine, Ressler now works nights as a computer hacker. He lives the most minimal of existences, on the surface a drop-out from society, but Powers makes no value judgments about this.

Rather, he shows that Ressler has reached the end of his ability to explain human existence. Something as complex as human consciousness is probably too arcane and complicated for humans to understand. Jan O'Deigh, a reference librarian who knew Ressler and, after his death, researches his life, deals with smaller understandings than Ressler pursued.

She can accomplish her task of documenting a life; Ressler has been unable to accomplish his task of documenting *Life*.

Techniques

The title of this novel, *The Gold Bug Variations*, is the first of the many puns interspersed throughout its pages. It brings to mind immediately two fundamental clues to what the book is about, combining an allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug" (1843) and a suggestion of Bach's *The Goldberg Variations*.

It is not accidental that the book has thirty chapters, exactly the number of variations in Bach's composition.

It will not be lost on knowledgeable readers that Bach's variations were based upon four notes or musical phrases. A great deal of this novel is similarly based.

Alert readers will also realize that Poe's "The Gold Bug" is about a piece of paper covered with cryptograms written in invisible ink that become visible only when held close to a source of heat. Powers's novel is filled with such cryptograms, the first of which occurs on a dedicatory page that lists initials of thirtytwo sets of people to whom the book is dedicated.

Themes

The basic theme of *The Gold Bug Variations* is a question: What is the role of humankind in the universal scheme?

Ressler went as far as he could to answer this question through understanding the physical components of human existence.

He could not, however, move beyond the physical, and therein are found the seeds of his withdrawal from the world in which he had, as a twenty-five-year-old suggested the promise of an ability comparable to that of J. D. Watson and Francis Crick, who led the DNA research that resulted in the discovery of the double helix.

The novel's four main characters—Jan O'Deigh, Franklin Todd, Stuart Ressler, Jeanette Koss—have fallen short of the fulfillment usually linked with success.

The two women are unable to bear children, which even liberated society, however reluctantly, views as women's fundamental function. Both men have voluntarily stopped short of their potential, Stuart by abandoning his university research and Franklin by discontinuing doctoral studies short of the degree he sought.

None of the characters appears to have significant regrets about what society might view as their failures. They go about living the lives they have carved out for themselves. Powers is searching for the answers to universal questions about the meaning of existence. Possibly this is his partial answer: Do not bemoan that which you are unlikely to attain.

Key Questions

The Gold Bug Variations is Powers's most intellectually demanding book to date. For most readers, an adequate understanding of it and of its subtleties require more than one reading. As multiple readings are progressing, discussion groups can be extremely helpful. Understanding a book of this complexity, like understanding Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), is best approached as a collective undertaking.

Realizing the difficulty of his novel, Powers overcame his reclusiveness sufficiently in 1991, around the time of the novel's publication, to grant some interviews. Among the items listed in his biographical essay, the most useful are the articles by John Baker in *Publishers Weekly* and Helen Dudar in the *Wall Street Journal*, although both are sketchy.

1. The title of this book, as it appears on the title page, is: *The Gold Bug VARIATIONS*. Does this communicate a different impression than *The Gold Bug Variations* or *The Gold Bug: Variations*? Elaborate.

2. Knowing what you do about Powers and his work, why do you think he cast Jan O'Deigh as a reference librarian?

Does this in any way contribute to his theme?

3. Itemize as a group occurrences of the number four in the novel.

4. Look at the dedicatory page. Does it in any way relate to the number four?

5. In this novel, Powers deals with both the world of aesthetics and the world of science. Does he seem to have a preference?

6. Do you find religious overtones in Powers's quest for an understanding of the meaning of life? Defend your answers.

7. Do the names of the characters in *The Gold Bug Variations* have meaning(s)?

If so, what meaning(s) do you ascribe to them?

8. The term architectonic has been applied to Powers's fiction, particularly to *The Gold Bug Variations*. Do you think this designation is appropriate? Why or why not?

9. Jan O'Deigh speaks of her childhood curiosity, illustrating it by recalling a time when, age six, she asked her mother why people cry. The mother answered with a discourse on sorrow when what Jan actually wanted to know was what made tears flow from the eyes. Does this confusion remind you of a popular joke (Powers is renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge of jokes) and does it reveal anything about his thoughts concerning human communication?



10. Does Powers suggest his attitude toward conventional morality? If so, how and what specific instances do you find in this novel?

11. Does Ressler's death serve artistic purposes in the novel? Defend your answer.

Literary Precedents

The Gold Bug Variations is unique in contemporary metafiction. It deals less with questions of simultaneity than Powers's two earlier novels did and, although it depends upon flashbacks to the 1950's for the development of the narration, it is more sequential than such works of contemporary fiction as, for example, Ursula Le Guin's Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea (1990; see separate entry) or much of Thomas Pynchon's writing (see separate entries).

Powers's debt to Edgar Allan Poe is amply acknowledged simply by the title he has chosen for his book, but this debt is minimal and his titular acknowledgement is cryptic more than revealing.

Certainly this novel does not imitate Poe; rather it uses him as one of his two most important points of departure. More important than Powers's literary predecessors in this context are his musical and scientific predecessors, notably Bach, Watson, and Crick. He looks to their work as he attempts to discern some illusive order in the universe, sometimes seizing fragmented and nebulous ideas but, like any good scientist, examining the most scant suggestions that might lead him toward the broad understandings he is seeking.

Related Titles

The Gold Bug Variations asks the same basic questions that Powers's posed in *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985; see separate entry) and, perhaps less persistently, in *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988; see separate entry). The profusion of puns in *Prisoner's Dilemma* continues in *The Gold Bug Variations* and is reminiscent of much of James Joyce's fiction.

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