

# Operation Wandering Soul Short Guide

## Operation Wandering Soul by Richard Powers

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# Characters

Operation Wandering Soul has more memorable characters than any of Powers's previous books. Richard Kraft, loosely modeled on Powers's brother, a physician, undergoes the most significant transformation in the novel. His name, German for "power," is a play of words on the author's family name but also relates ironically to the theme of powerlessness that pervades much of the novel.

Linda Espera does not permit herself to fear — and thereby avoid — an emotional involvement with her patients that might completely undo her.

She realizes that the children with whom she works need love and, despite the hazards of proffering it to children who may soon die, Linda gives unstintingly of herself. She is, of course, the catalyst in Richard Kraft's change of demeanor as the novel progresses.

The children in the ward are particularly touching. Tony the Tuff has had an ear lopped off in a street fight, but he is only surface tough. Underneath he is a frightened child. Ben, a double amputee, faces a bleak future, but Linda gives him hope and through the interaction that she orchestrates with the other children on the ward, she helps him relate to something.

Nicolino suffers from a progressive disease that presents one of medicine's greatest ironies. Progeria accelerates the aging process so that its victims become old while still young. Living his life in fast forward, Nicolino will be dead in his teens. He is, nevertheless, an important motive force in Linda Espera's attempt to give her patients something to look forward to.

Nicolino is essentially the perpetrator and organizer of the scheme to dramatize one of the stories Linda has told them. Nicolino wants these sick children to venture outside the hospital and present dramatizations; he works assiduously to accomplish this. Despite his serious illness, Nicolino, whose sexual development has been heightened by his disease, provides some of the best humor in a book whose dark subject requires such comic relief as its author can provide.

Perhaps the most touching and memorable character in Operation Wandering Soul is Joy Stepaneevong, a twelve-year-old refugee from Southeast Asia, who is hospitalized for a growth above her ankle. Joy is alone in the hospital.

Her mother is dead; her father, an illegal alien, is a genuinely caring parent who cannot expose himself to the possibility of detection and deportation by coming to visit the daughter he loves. Joy adores Richard Kraft, who, when Joy's growth proves to be malignant, has no alternative except to amputate her leg.

Kraft, devastated by this realization, is consoled essentially by Joy, who has utter faith in him and who faces the reality of losing a leg with considerable resignation. Kraft is



forced to become involved in Joy's family situation: He cannot operate without the signed permission of a parent or guardian.

Kraft becomes aware that Mr. Stepaneevong steals into the hospital at night for clandestine visits to his daughter. He lies in wait for him one night and has great difficulty convincing the frightened man that all he needs is a signature. He will not turn the alien in to immigration.

## Social Concerns

Using the children's surgical ward of a large metropolitan hospital in California as his microcosm, Powers populates the ward with a sampling of children who represent the most significant ills of contemporary society. He focuses on how these children interact with a society that essentially has cast them aside. More important, he demonstrates how these children create their own society, a society within a society.

The spotlight Powers aims at the children also encompasses Linda Espera, a compassionate physical therapist in her early twenties, and Richard Kraft, a surgical resident in his early thirties serving a rotation on the ward.

Powers examines what happens to a sensitive young man who initially anticipated a career in music when, a decade later, he finds himself a sleepdeprived medical resident forced on an hour-to-hour basis to deal with insoluble dilemmas.

Kraft reacts by withdrawing emotionally from the maelstrom that is his professional life. He does his job, but, self-protectively, he refuses to know his patients. Linda Espera's approach is quite the opposite and, as love blossoms between the two, Kraft becomes humanized.

Powers does not suggest that his slight softening solves any basic problems. Joy Stepaneevong still loses her leg; Tony the Tuff will not grow another ear nor Ben another pair of legs; Nicolino will surely succumb to his progeria. Perhaps, however, because Kraft has allowed himself to care, these patients will face their clouded futures with more acceptance than they otherwise might have.

Powers has been scolded by critics for writing an apocalyptic novel that seems devoid of hope. His response is that *Operation Wandering Soul* is not apocalyptic: What it reports can easily be documented by examining the medical records of the patients in most children's surgical wards or, indeed, by reading the daily newspaper.

## Techniques

As in his earlier novels, Powers sustains several narrative strands in *Operation Wandering Soul*. The story of Linda Espera's romance with Richard Kraft becomes the convincing pretext for Kraft's eventual change in attitude toward his patients and, indeed, toward life.

Each child in the novel involves a narrative strand, yet these are all part of the broader narrative fiber that deals with them as members of a group. The group story is skillfully connected to the regularly interspersed interchapters, each offering a historic account of major historical events relating to children.

These accounts, all of them gracefully interspersed as a part of Linda Espera's storytelling, cover a broad chronological range. Notable among them is King Herod's massacre of the innocents in early Christian times. A reproduction of Peter Brueghel the Elder's renowned depiction of this massacre, painted in 1565, appears on the book's dust jacket. The stories told in the interchapters include accounts of the Children's Crusade of 1212-1213, of the Vatican's use of street children for protection during the sixteenth century sack of Rome, of the ill-fated evacuation of children from London to Canterbury during World War Two, and of other historic events that affected children.

The story the children on the ward are to dramatize for extramural audiences, however, is the Pied Piper of Hamelin. This story emphasizes the trust children have in adults and implies the responsibilities adults have toward the children who trust and follow them.

# Themes

A major thrust of this novel is that even in the face of incredible adversity, humans work together to make what they can of their situations, however impossible those situations may seem.

By focusing on the children's ward in a hospital that continually confronts most of the social predicaments and upheavals that afflict contemporary society, Powers reveals in vivid, realistic terms an ugly underbelly of modern civilization whose existence most people would prefer to overlook.

Powers helps readers understand this seeming unconcern by demonstrating that, ironically, it is Richard Kraft's sensitivity that fuels his seeming insensitivity: Richard Kraft is afraid to expose himself emotionally to a situation that, as both a human and a physician, he deplores yet can usually deal with only palliatively. He wants to cure his patients, to send them home whole, but he can not. A theme of powerlessness pervades the novel but this powerlessness is shown as merely an impediment to be overcome, not a condition that spells defeat.

A theme of impending death hovers over the children's ward, but as the novel progresses, a theme of reconciliation, based upon genuine human caring, emerges. This is a theme that many readers, shocked by the gruesome situations the novel depicts, fail to glean on first reading *Operation Wandering Soul*.



# Key Questions

Operation Wandering Soul continues to be a somewhat misunderstood book. A careful reading of it will reveal that it is not without hope. A discussion group will necessarily deal with the problem of trying to move beyond the depressing physical conditions from which the children in the novel suffer to viewing them within the context of a society they have, with Linda Espera's help, created to meet their immediate needs.

Among Richard Powers's novels, this one places the most emphasis on characterization. It is still a novel of ideas, but the major characters in the book emerge as more rounded characters than those in his previous novels. It is productive to compare his characterization in this novel with that in some of his earlier books. The novel that comes closest to Operation Wandering Soul in terms of characterization is Prisoner's Dilemma (1988).

1. What is the significance of Powers's title?
2. What purposes are served by the opening scene in the book in which Richard Kraft is stuck in freeway traffic?
3. Does the knowledge you gain about Richard Kraft's early years help you to make implications about him?

Explain.

4. Are any of the names in Operation Wandering Soul of special significance?
5. Richard Powers is given to making puns. What puns do you find in this novel? What are their effects?
6. Do you ever see Linda Espera and Richard Kraft outside the microcosm of the hospital? If so, what might be Powers's literary purpose.
7. What broad social commentary do you find in Operation Wandering Soul?

How does such commentary relate to the interchapters?

8. What is the purpose of the interchapter (pages 254-266) that recounts incidents from Richard Kraft's early life in Thailand?
9. Do you accept Powers's belief that Operation Wandering Soul is not apocalyptic?
10. Randomly select any three recent issues of a major urban newspaper and scan both the local and national news it reports. What problems do you find that are common both to the newspapers and to Powers's novel?
11. What roles do parents play in this novel?



# Literary Precedents

Charles Dickens was the first writer in English to present children as literary characters meant to be taken seriously. His depictions of David Copperfield, Little Nell, Oliver Twist, the Artful Dodger, and numerous others uncovered a fertile literary field.

Among the scores of notable novelists who have capitalized on this field either by using child protagonists or by presenting their stories from children's points of view are Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), J. D. Salinger in *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Paul Zindel in *The Pigman* (1968), Jack Schaefer in *Shane* (1949), and countless others. *Operation Wandering Soul* is clearly a part of this tradition, although it in no way apes the books mentioned above.

Powers's novel is also one of a substantial number of novels that select hospital settings as their microcosms.

Thomas Mann's use of tubercular sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*, 1914) and Alexander Solzhenitzyn's *Cancer Ward* (1968, 1969) are striking examples. Hospitals become worlds within worlds, as Powers demonstrates amply in *Operation Wandering Soul*. As such they present a controlled yet socially representative environment within which novelists can work.

## Related Titles

Operation Wandering Soul employs Powers's basic structural technique of setting the historical context for his stories in regularly placed interchapters. This novel's interchapters cover a time span that extends from Roman times (the ruler's order that the twin sons of the Vestal Virgin and the God of War be drowned in the Tiber) to the last half of the twentieth century. Their purpose is to illustrate how children have been used by society throughout history. Powers employs this technique in his other novels.



# Copyright Information

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