

Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance

Short Guide

Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance by Richard Powers

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Characters

Richard Powers's novels are fundamentally novels of ideas rather than novels that depend heavily upon characterization. In this novel, readers learn the history of the three young men in the Sander photograph "Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, 1914" — Hubert, Adolphe, and Peter — but this information is incidental to the author's concern with the social and political crosscurrents that determine their lives and shape their societies.

The narration is autobiographical but only in the broadest terms. One will not learn dependably about Powers's personal life through analyzing the narrator, although the actual incident that generated this novel occurred at a crossroads in his life when, after completing the master of arts degree, he set out, jobless, for Boston. His search for information about August Sander actually did extend over his early months in Boston. The photograph and the implications of its title continued to haunt Powers.

In regular interchapters, Powers writes about historic figures who, in one way or another, helped to direct the course of history that lead the world toward twentieth-century Modernism. Prominent among these is Henry Ford, to whom several interchapters are devoted. Other such chapters are devoted to Sarah Bernhardt, Walter Benjamin, and others who, in their way, are related to the novel's main narrative frame.

Mrs. Schreck, a cleaning woman in Peter Mays's office building, takes a motherly interest in Peter, son of Peter in the Sander photograph, leaving him bonbons and generally showing a maternal interest in his welfare. As it turns out, she knows the Sander photograph and something about its subjects, who lived in the same part of Europe from which she came. She cannot, however, provide Peter with the information about them that he seeks.

Social Concerns

In his first-published novel, Powers deals with nothing smaller than the origins of twentieth-century Modernism. The book, spawned by a haunting August Sander picture of three young Westerwald peasants gussied up for a Saturday night on the town, begins in the Netherlands as Europe hovers on the brink of World War I. The story moves through the intervening years to 1980s Boston with the story of Peter Mays, a computer editor and son of the brightest of the three peasants, also named Peter, in the Sander picture.

Powers's chief concern is with the interconnectedness of human events.

His novel seeks to demonstrate how every drop in the mainstream of history impinges on the other drops. His unnamed narrator, pausing between trains in Detroit, wanders into the Detroit Institute of Arts to pass the idle hours until his train for Boston departs. In the museum, he is transfixed by Sander's haunting photograph, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, 1914.

He becomes obsessed with trying to find out more about Sander, but, mistakenly thinking that this photographer's last name is "Zander" rather than "Sander," his quest for more information leads him nowhere until he accidentally unearths in Boston the information he has been pursuing.

Peter Mays has a similar experience: He stumbles upon a print of the Sander photograph among family items in his mother's attic. He begins a quest that leads to a panoply of historic information, all interrelated, that has meaning in his life.

The pursuits of both the narrator and Peter Mays are personal pursuits; each for his own reason feels the need for information about the artifact (the photograph) he has found. Powers's main social concern is with the interconnections, the convoluted webbing, that make personal history part of the broader march of the history of civilization, in this case Modernism.

Techniques

consists of multiple texts, all interconnected historically. Each set of three chapters is arranged so that the first chapter focuses on the main narrative frame, the story of the three farmers and eventually of Peter Mays. The second chapter is an historical or philosophical essay that reflects the broader social context within which the narrative occurs. The third chapter focuses on a significant historical figure who, like Henry Ford, had an effect on the development of twentieth-Modernism.

Powers approaches time with a simultaneity that helps unify the seemingly disparate elements of his narrative. Either explicitly or implicitly, the three farmers are present in each of the book's twenty-seven chapters; Powers appears to imply by his narrative structure that all things eventually touch, that all human involvement in life and in society exists within some all-encompassing structure. It is this structure and its meaning that Powers seeks to understand and, in this novel (as in most of his other writing), to mimic.

Themes

Powers's themes are intimately connected with the social concerns mentioned above. His obvious quest in this novel is to understand the structure of human existence. As in all his other writing, Powers is concerned with ideas and with their conjoining parts, their necessary connections. His conflicts cannot be stated in simple terms — man against nature, man against man, man against himself. These terms imply divisions; Powers quests after connections.

In two of his characters, the narrator and Peter Mays, Powers focuses on the theme of obsession, not only as a means toward the end of achieving broad cultural understanding but of unlocking as well the secrets of human existence. This book is about the *whys*, *whats*, and *hows* of the world as we perceive it. The quest is more intellectually demanding than many contemporary authors have dared impose upon their readers.

marks the beginning of a quest that Powers continues in all of his subsequent novels. He desperately needs to know what life is about. His obsessive search is the underlying theme of all his writing.

Key Questions

The philosophical and intellectual depth of Richard Powers's writing makes it suitable for group discussions among sophisticated readers. *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* is filled with puns, subtle allusions, and several levels of meaning, all of which dictate that those who wish to derive the strongest insights from the book will discuss it with other knowledgeable readers.

It is a rare author who works so totally within the world of ideas as Powers does. Initially, this may discourage some readers who will not be able in his writing to identify easily the sorts of memorable characters that emerge from a Dickens novel or from the writings of such later writers as Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, or Reynolds Price.

Nevertheless, reading a novel like *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* and subjecting it to the collective scrutiny of a discussion group will do a great deal to expand readers' minds, to nudge them into new areas of literary perception.

1. In a broadly social and philosophical sense, what does the title mean?
2. What specific contributions to twentieth-century Modernism did Henry Ford make according to Powers?
3. How does Powers relate the Sarah Bernhardt episodes to the novel's first and main narrative frames?
4. Are the physical and philosophical landscapes of *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* interrelated? Elaborate.
5. Would the philosophical purposes of the novel have been attained had the novel's impetus been a work of sculpture, an oil painting, or a piece of classical music rather than a photograph?
6. How did Peter Mays get his last name? What are the implications of this bit of information?
7. Toward the end of the book the narrator says that the three subjects of the Sander picture "had led lives as verifiable, if not as well documented, as any of those Great Personalities I had poured over." Given what you know about Powers, what are the broad implications of this statement?
8. Aside from his obvious wish to shorten World War I, why did Henry Ford sail the *Oscar II* to Europe? What did the trip accomplish?
9. Henry Ford once said, "All history is bunk." Is *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* the kind of history Ford had in mind?



10. What major narrative strands do you find in this novel? How does the author interconnect these? Making a diagram may help you.

11. Allusions to the Christmas party in Peter Mays's office recur through much of the novel. Is this a significant point of reference? If so, how?

Literary Precedents

A literary precedent is not identical to a literary influence. Serious writers have universally wrestled with similar problems both thematically and in terms of how to control such matters as time and space. Having said this, one can then observe that James Joyce, particularly in *Ulysses* (1922), and T. S. Eliot, most notably in *The Waste Land* (1922), came to grips with the same structural dilemmas that faced Powers as he set out to write one of the most ambitious novels of the last half of the twentieth century.

Certainly Pynchonesque elements also can be detected in Powers's novel, particularly as it seeks to unify related but strongly disparate forces. William Vollmann has dealt with similar structural problems in most of his novels, as has Rolando Hinojosa in a work like *Becky and Her Friends* (1990), in which a protagonist is presented through the eyes of those who know her with no concern over contradictions in their perceptions of her.

Related Titles

All of Powers's books to date use regularly spaced interchapters to relate the basic narrative frame to its historical context. In *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993), these interchapters span millennia, whereas, in his earlier novels, they are more narrowly focused. Characters do not recur from novel to novel.



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