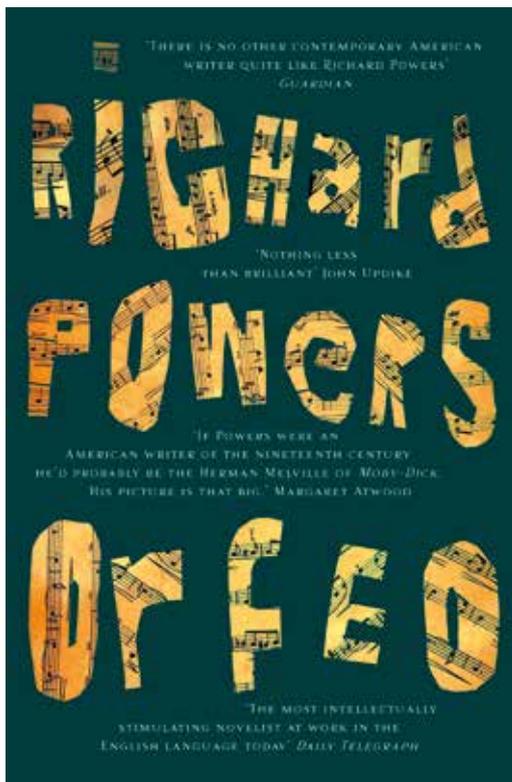


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2014

## Reader's Guide



### Other novels by Richard Powers

*Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985)  
*Prisoner's Dilemma* (1998)  
*Gold Bug Variations* (1991)  
*Operation Wandering Soul* (1993)  
*Galatea 2.2* (1995)  
*Gain* (1998)  
*Plowing The Dark* (2000)  
*The Time of Our Singing* (2003)  
*The Echo Maker* (2007)  
*Generosity* (2011)

# Orfeo Richard Powers

Atlantic Books

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## About the author

Richard Powers has been a recipient of a Lannan Literary Award and a MacArthur Fellowship, as well as a winner of the US National Book Award and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He is the author of eight novels, including *The Time of our Singing*, *Plowing the Dark* and *Generosity*. He lives in Los Angeles.

## Orfeo

In *Orfeo*, Powers tells the story of a man journeying into his past as he desperately flees the present. Seventy-year-old composer Peter Els opens his front door one evening to find the police on his doorstep. His amateur science lab – the latest experiment in his lifelong attempt to discover music in the most surprising places – has come to the attention of Homeland Security. Panicked by the raid, Els flees and turns fugitive, waiting for the evidence to clear him and for the alarm to blow over. But alarm turns to national hysteria as the government promises a panicked nation that the ‘Bioterrorist Bach’ will be found and brought to trial. As Els feels the noose around him tighten, he embarks on a cross-country trip to visit, one last time, the people he loves, those who shaped his musical journey. Through the help of his ex-wife, his daughter and his longtime artistic collaborator, Els comes up with a plan to turn his disastrous collision with national security into one last resonant work that will reawaken a nationwide audience to the glorious sounds and symphonies that lie hidden all around them.

## Discussion points

The story of *Orfeo*, or Orpheus, is a Greek myth about a musician’s descent into the underworld to retrieve his dead beloved and return her to the land of the living. In what ways is *Orfeo* the story of a musician’s journey into death and his attempted act of resurrection?

Is Peter a terrorist? Why is that the case or why is it not? What is he trying to accomplish by his fugitive tweets?

‘All I ever wanted was to make one slight noise that might delight you all,’ Peter says. What does he mean; is he sincere?

What do you think Peter is trying to accomplish on his road trip and does he succeed?

In the final scene, what do you think happens when Peter walks out the door? How is that choice similar to others he has made in his life? In what way does this choice signify his final ‘composition’?

The premise of the novel is based on the true story of the artist Steve Kurtz, arrested by the FBI on suspicion of bioterrorism in 2004. How do you think this affected Powers’ writing of the novel?

## Themed reading

Ann Patchett *Bel Canto*  
Vikram Seth *An Equal Music*  
Ian McEwan *On Chesil Beach*  
Rebecca Rischin *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*  
Alex Ross *The Rest is Noise*  
Thomas Mann *Doctor Faustus*  
Leo Tolstoy *The Kreutzer Sonata*

## Useful links

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