

Enacting and exploring ideas in fiction: *The Overstory* and *The Portable Veblen*

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Abstract: Philosophically engaged fiction often employs ideas in ways that reflect the exploitation-exploration dilemma in developmental psychology: by exploiting well articulated theories by enacting their conflicts, or by exploring the uncertainties of puzzling ontologies or moral complexities. We can see this in action in many works, but some novels of ideas seek to defy such categorization, with lessons for readers and writers. This paper analyzes two recent works – *The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2018) and Elizabeth McKenzie’s *The Portable Veblen* (2016) – to show how they deal with related concerns and settings through very different approaches. While Powers offers an enactment, its complexity seeks to evade the book becoming a simple polemic. McKenzie’s protagonist explores her muddled identity, philosophy and much else while flirting with the enactment of ideas when she does not comprehend.

Introduction

The category of fiction often called the “novel of ideas” is critically disputed. It is denigrated by some as talking shops, stories where characterization suffers at hand of discourse that drives readers to accept or reject “readymade” ideas (Ngai 2020a), thus sacrificing the aesthetic for the ideological. The category is championed by others, who argue that while some politically and socially engaged novels do just that, philosophical novels need not merely report, communicate, or advocate ideas. According to LeMahieu (2015, 189), the proliferation of philosophically engaged works of fiction since World War Two shows that some novels of ideas “do not leave [ideas] intact but instead alter, transform, and examine them.”

But how do they do this? What are the techniques such works employ to achieve that greater understanding? This paper examines how two contemporary novels, both critically acclaimed and commercially successful, engage with ideas central to concerns of the 21st century – the natural environmental and the roles that large businesses and capitalism itself

play. These topics are politically charged, socially relevant, and even of existential importance. They ask readers to contemplate where we, individually and collectively, stand on the challenges facing the natural environment and the political and economic system in which we live. They ask us how we define the meaning of our own lives. Both demands are of philosophical as well as practical significance.

The two novels – *The Overstory*, by Richard Powers (2018), and Elizabeth McKenzie’s *The Portable Veblen* (2016) – use the power of fiction to convey urgent intellectual and emotional arguments. But with urgency comes the risk that ideas may rigidify into ideology and lose the ability of fiction to convey complexity that analysis often discards. How can novels of ideas navigate the straits between the transformative and the readymade? How do they avoid the ideological and instead illuminate?

Building on insights on how categories of fiction arise and writers resist them (Nordberg 2021), this paper employs three psychological theories to interpret the works and identify how they are constructed. It conducts a frame analysis to detect the heuristics and biases (Tversky and Kahneman 1974) that underpin their narratives. It then uses the dilemma of exploitation and exploration (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007) to examine how these novels direct the attention of readers to their philosophical themes through enacting ideas (i.e., the readymade), or exploring their complexity and perhaps transforming them in the process (Nordberg 2023). By enacting well-articulated ideas, *The Overstory* runs the risk of being polemical, a presentation of ideology, but it edges into exploration to back away from such critique. In exploring complexity through an enchanting muddle of mental stress and humor, *The Portable Veblen* lets its considerable literary achievement run the risk of allowing its ideas escape examination.

Two novels, two paths

These two novels concern the relationship of human beings, nature and big business. Both have roots that burrow under the beautiful grounds of Stanford University. They have achieved both critical admiration and broad popularity. Both might well be deemed “novels of ideas.” However, and at the risk of understatement, they are not very much alike.

In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers leads his eclectic cast of characters, and his readers, deep into the undergrowth of forestry science, the logging industry, and political activism to a near-mystic appreciation of the metaphysics he identifies – on only one occasion – as Gaia, earning it the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *The Overstory* also won a place on the *New York Times*

25-item shortlist for the best book of the past 125 years, alongside such titles as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (New York Times 2021).

Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* was well received but somewhat less acclaimed (longlisted for the National Book Award, shortlisted for the Bailey's Prize). Her single protagonist wrestles with problems in the pharmaceutical industry, but mainly talks to a squirrel, and tries to fathom without entirely understanding the economic and moral theorizing of her namesake, the 19th century philosopher-economist Thorstein Veblen.

The Powers book is serious. Barack Obama endorsed it during a 2021 *New York Times* interview. "It's about trees and the relationship of humans to trees," Obama told columnist Ezra Klein. "And it's not something I would have immediately thought of, but a friend gave it to me. And ... it changed how I thought about the Earth and our place in it" (Obama and Klein 2021). The McKenzie book couldn't do that and didn't try to. A *New York Times* reviewer calls it "screwball comedy with a dash of mental illness" (Senior 2016). It is serious, however. Jonathan Franzen, himself a novelist sometimes labeled *of-ideas*, declares the book "seriously funny" (The Guardian 2016).

The differences lie in the tools of writing: the tone of voice, the diction, the narrative stance, the characterization and plot, and more. Most significant is another feature: how they deploy the ideas that underpin their narratives. Through its various framing devices, the Powers book *enacts* a philosophical stance: a metaphysics, with an accompanying and clear epistemology, and with an ethical system that follows from them. Its starting point is a real-life dispute, only modestly fictionalized, concerning research that showed that trees in forests communicate with each other and help each other in times of distress. McKenzie, by contrast, confronts an imagined world where things don't quite make sense and asks her mad-cap protagonist to *explore* the (to her) often-fuzzy ideas of the philosopher, economist and social critic Thorsten Veblen. His 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class* was the American equivalent of the Communist Manifesto, except he wasn't a communist, it isn't a manifesto. Though born in America, he considered his Norwegian heritage central to his attitudes to life, as does McKenzie's protagonist to hers. Enactment and exploration are different roles that philosophy can play as writers and readers wrestle with big issues through the experience of fiction (Nordberg 2023). As we shall see, however, a simple application of this dichotomy obscures the complexity of the storytelling in both books.

Ideas in novels

Calling something a novel of ideas is not always a compliment. The *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes the term as “A vague category of fiction in which conversation, intellectual discussion and debate predominate, and in which plot, narrative, emotional conflict and psychological depth in characterization are deliberately limited” (Cuddon and Preston 1999, 602). It arose in literary criticism as a modernist rebuke to some of the more serious 19th century novels of didactic social critique: works by George Eliot, Honoré de Balzac, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens (LeMahieu 2015). It was extended to include overtly political novels of the 20th century across the ideological spectrum: works by Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, George Orwell, Ayn Rand. It became attached to some science fiction as well: Edwin Abbott’s *Flatland*, Jules Verne’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the exploration of space in the books of Robert Heinlein. What such works have in common is engagement with philosophical problems, though here too they range among ones concerning ontological, epistemological or ethical issues.

In the late 20th century and into the 21st, the appellation *novel of ideas* has become attached to a wide variety of works that use consider philosophical issues differently. These are stories set in ontologies that are uncertain or unsettled, drawing upon ideas that wrestle with ambiguity and contingency, often without resolution or conviction (Nordberg 2023). Novels by a wide range of a recent authors fall in this camp: e.g., Ian McEwan, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, J.M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera (LeMahieu 2015). Many such works raise questions about how characters cope with situations in which they distrust readymade answers. Their rejection of all manner of *idées fixes* deprives them of a template for action or judgment. Such works evade the trap of “readymade ideas” that Sianne Ngai details in her critique of the “gimmick” in novels of ideas or philosophical fiction (Ngai 2020b). They do so by exploring the philosophical problem, not enacting a solution to it (Nordberg 2023).

The distinction between the two approaches draws upon work in developmental psychology – often called the dilemma of exploitation and exploration – that identifies two mental processes that are difficult to conduct simultaneously (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007). Translated into literature, we can see that works of fiction may follow a similar path. Some enact philosophical ideas, often in conflict with each other, to illustrate what is at stake, in which the authors often pick sides. Oleg Sobchuk (2022) says that few writers are explorers; most adopt the models of innovators. Drawing on an analysis by Underwood et al. (2022) of nearly 11,000 texts of novels that illustrate how writers use the same words and techniques as

prior authors, he says, “what is more common: exploration or exploitation? Apparently, it’s exploitation” (Sobchuk 2022). That does not, however, demonstrate that works might adhere to certain conventions but then deviate from them. Many critics and theorists question the validity of such computational humanities. And authors may shift how they anchor the heuristics of genre for the sake exploring the ideas they present (Nordberg 2021).

However, other works of fiction explore difficult ideas, particularly those facing up to the counterintuitive ontologies and epistemologies in postmodern philosophy and pragmatism, but also in physics: relativity and quantum mechanics. According to Serpil Oppermann, “Postmodern fictions ... transcend false dichotomies in a process of writing that self-consciously interrelates texts and contexts” to create environmental awareness (Oppermann 2008, 243). She states that “many writers, from J. M. Coetzee to Don DeLillo, explore various environmental issues and contest dichotomies between nature and culture, world and word, and text and context” (Oppermann 2008, 244). Jon Doyle shows how socially conscious novels, sometimes called post-postmodern, “fight on two fronts,” avoiding “alluringly simplified versions of existence” as they struggle to avoid nihilism of the postmodern (Doyle 2018, 268). They do so, he argues, by engaging in constant questioning in which sincerity and irony challenge each other.

This suggests that explorations in fiction may be seen as attempts to achieve an aesthetic appreciation of ideas that can defy rational understanding, or at least those using conventional rationality. With this distinction in mind, let us examine *The Overstory* and *The Portable Veblen* to understand the devices each uses to project its philosophical understanding. Doing so will help readers and writers to see where readymade ideas end and yet-to-be made ideas begin.

Frames and devices as method

This analysis draws on frames and their devices, a methodology in sociology developed from the work of Erving Goffman (1974). The term framing is frequently used in literary criticism, often in a general way. It also appears in a technical sense in analyses of news stories and political communication: the product of evaluation (for example, positive or negative) and salience (important or less so). In politics, framing effects occur when even small changes in presentation of an issue produce potentially large shifts of opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007). In news reporting, frames arise from decisions about the prominence of elements of a story (Entman 1993).

Communicators make both conscious and unconscious framing judgments as they decide what to include, how to include it, and what to leave out. Robert Entman says that frames use markers in the “presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.” He continues, “Most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include” (Entman 1993, 52, 54).

Entman’s list of markers and other elements of news and political storytelling are often called “devices” (Alonso Belmonte and Porto 2020; Skill and Gyberg 2010), which become carriers of symbolic meaning. As they recur, within a work or over time within a stream of work, they convey meaning without further explanation, e.g., a politician’s smiling or pouting face. More tangibly, we can think of stock phrases as rhetorical, key words as establishing themes, the positioning of items in a broadcast as establishing a script, and the arrangement of script elements as providing syntax. Each structural component is then infused with content that, through repetition, conveys the meaning of a frame without having to contain all the devices. Frames thus take on symbolic meaning, with but also without the conscious intent of the author, editor or producer.

Two recent books of literary criticism examine framing in terms relevant to this study. Anna Burton’s study of trees in 19th century English fiction of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy illustrates how frame analysis can be used in examining how writers project and readers come to see trees, individually and in woods and forest, as carriers of meaning in the “[r]ooted and branching discourses that constitute this tradition” (Burton 2021, 205). Adeline Johns-Putra shows how 21st century novels frame a subject – parenthood – not in sentimental terms but instead using the emotions fiction affords to draw attention to issues in intergenerational ethics of climate change. She argues that fictional techniques (we might say “devices”) have a role in challenging readers, emotionally and ethically, to consider “the contingency and radical unknowability of our own identities” (Johns-Putra 2019, 167). Devices constitute frames; frames construct heuristics. The question this paper examines is how *The Overstory* and *The Portable Veblen* – with their similarities and formal and conceptual differences – approach this task.

The story of *The Overstory*

The Overstory is an example of a “multi-protagonist” novel, a form that Victoria Googasian sees as having a distinctive value in approaching a subject like climate change, in

which characters are important but less so than the systemic issue that is its theme. In *The Overstory*, she identifies “excessive fictionality” in a text that “deliberately foregrounds its allegories,” one that also overtly strives to be “character-driven” (Googasian 2022, 209-210).

The cover of the first American edition of *The Overstory* shows concentric circles of views of a forest, showing in their juxtaposition the complexity and interconnectedness of forest life. The first British edition presents an image of nine horizontal layers of different tree species from the base to the top of the crown. The layers are echoes as we meet the nine characters the book is about to introduce; the base-to-crown presentation echoes the narrative structure of the book. These are design elements of the production team, to be sure, not decisions of the author *per se*, but they contribute to the reader’s appreciation of the theme: The cover as well as the structure of the writing frame the story.

Sharing the attention of readers, the nine main characters project an image of the universality of the problem. Just introducing them takes up nearly a third of the book’s 502 pages. Through these introductions, we become engrossed in the characters. They push any notion of plot into the background. They come from different backgrounds and different attitudes to the issues the book addresses and gradually migrate together, physically and mentally, suggesting a consensus about the issues and perhaps the truths the book seeks to establish.

The basic structure of the book – its four parts – carries labels that echo the arboreal motif of the theme: Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds. Jonathan Arac argues that this shape approximates Northrop Frye’s category of fiction called “anatomy” (Arac 2019, 138). Garrett Stewart says the novel’s “marked patterns of recurrence attune us to the secret ‘semaphores’ of forest life” (Stewart 2021, 160). Trees provide a metaphor for the characters and their journeys, and the characters are metaphors of nature. This device tells readers more than the structure of the book; it tells us about its content and the function of its multiple protagonists, and it hints that the book’s moral intent.

There is no escaping the observation that *The Overstory* is a novel of ideas. The novelist and critic Thomas Mallon expressed discomfort at the direction Powers had taken in his recent work, and specifically with *The Overstory*. “I like Richard Powers’ early work very much. But I think today he seems much less interested in being a novelist than in being a saint,” Mallon said in a podcast. “Richard Powers is overwhelmed by [the news agenda] and there is in danger of crushing narrative and character” (Mallon and Paul 2021 at ca. 5:30 and 7:00 minutes). It is a “novel of ideas” in its roots, an even firmer anchor point than the type that the sailing metaphor of heuristics theory infers.

Frames/devices in The Overstory

The framing begins immediately, even before the first page of narrative. The device used is its three epigraphs (Powers 2018, ix), one each from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet and transcendentalist thinker; James Lovelock, the scientist and nature-spiritualist and the man who popularized *Gaia* as description of Earth as a living system; and Bill Neidjie, an Aboriginal elder and poet/mystic. All three present trees in voiceless dialogue with mankind, though on a scale that people often, perhaps mainly, overlook. The hardback edition (but not the electronic book) presents the four part-titles – Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds – in positions on the page that move stepwise higher on the page, the tree thus visually climbing from ground to sky. These devices quietly but obviously set the attentive reader on a path to establish trees and the ecosystem they help constitute as silent actors in the human drama unfolding on the pages.

The following analysis concentrates on the part called “Roots.” It begins with a two-page meditation in a different voice from the rest of this part, before switching to a conventional narrator to introduce and provide extensive background to each of the nine protagonists that we then follow through the plot.

The opening line of the text – “*First there was nothing. Then there was everything*” – signals a unity of existence. This text is in italics, which raises the question: Who is speaking? This is not a conventional, plain-text narrator; that comes two pages later. This is a voice from beyond the narrative, which then reappears at the opening of each subsequent part.

The second line tells us that “*the air is raining messages.*” Is its meaning metaphorical or literal? Trees in this story will send messages. In the next few lines, a woman is leaning against a pine tree in a park, whose “*needles scent the air and a force hums in the heart of the wood.*” These needles are actors, agentic by activating scent, the product of a “*force*” residing in the “*heart of the wood.*” Is this a first example of anthropomorphism building in the book? But “heartwood” is the term used in the timber industry to describe the planks from come the center of the trunk, where the grain is the tightest, the plank least likely to fracture. It is the wood used for roofing the traditional houses built in boreal forests in North America, Europe and Asia. Whether anthropomorphic or technical, this diction is a device that signals comfort, home, security. “*The tree is saying things, in words before words,*” that paragraph concludes. The phrase “*words before words*” tells us that we need to translate what follows into a language mere humans can understand, with the unstated implication that meaning may also be lost in translation. The tree’s scent “*commands the woman*” and then, “*Trees farther away join in*”

(Powers 2018, 3). On this first page, these devices have situated readers in a familiar yet alien place. Among the trees in this story, we may be outdoors, away from society and even civilization, but we are never in the wild space. We are instead in a place with its own rules that we will have to learn.*

The crisis that we are about to see unfold may be existential, but it is of collective existence, of humanity, not of individuals. The nine individuals that “Roots” introduces include those who face an existentialist’s lack of meaning, but they enter a system in which meaning can be found. I will dwell a bit with each protagonist, and deal less with the plot, because of the role this structure plays in the argument that follows.

The first is Nicholas Hoel. He is a several times great-grandson of a Norwegian immigrant, Jørgen, who arrived in America to live in Brooklyn, New York, where chestnut trees rain “scraps from God’s table” (Powers 2018, 5). He and his Irish-immigrant bride become citizens and move to Iowa to start farming. They suffer a bleak winter and death of their firstborn, but they plant chestnut trees, most of which survive, and their family grows too. His son John buries him under a chestnut tree on the farm. Several human generations later, when the trees are just reaching maturity, comes Nicholas. He is not a farmer, but like his generations of forefathers, he is a photographer, though with more sophisticated equipment than they had. Each year he shoots pictures of the chestnut trees. In a literal sense, he frames the theme of this novel. These chestnut trees are a recurring motif – a repeated framing – of the endurance of trees and the fragility of human-scale existence.

Next is Mimi Ma. She is a Chinese-American whose father comes to study engineering in America shortly before the Communists under Mao Zedong seize power. He moves the family to a suburb of Chicago, where he plants a mulberry tree to honor his own father and becomes fascinated with the Yellowstone National Park. Mimi is a “LUG: lesbian until graduation” at her all-female college in Massachusetts, but then transfers to study at Berkeley, the radical-left hotbed, Bay-area branch of the University of California. Her sisters “wander across the map” (Powers 2018, 39). One studies economics at Yale. The other becomes a nurse in Colorado: Ma is a character who embodies America. The tree device – a mulberry in this case – and the device of “everybody” rather than “everyman” in her family point to a framing of universality.

* The use of “place” and “space” here is in the sense developed by the French social philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984), where “place” is occupied and controlled by social actors and “space” implies freedom of action and absence of constraints. If trees speak, there is no “space,” just “place,” the place rightly occupied and controlled by trees.

Then Adam Appich, the youngest of four children, each with their own tree outside their house in Detroit, an elm, an ash, an ironwood, and Adam's, a maple. A fifth child arrives. So does a black walnut. The collective of trees constitutes a family. Adam decides to study psychology and wins a place at a college noted for unconventional studies. The tree device here illustrates the diversity of species, like the diversity of disciplines and the differences between siblings. The elm, of course, dies early and first.

Ray Brinckman and Dorothy Cazaly follow, the "two people for whom trees mean almost nothing. Two people ... who can't tell an oak from a linden" (Powers 2018, 64). He is a lawyer in Minnesota, she his stenographer. They meet while auditioning for a local production of *Macbeth*, and both get cast. They end up in bed and spend a life together, interrupted by occasional separations ultimately resolved. One day both have car crashes, she while reading a love-note from him instead of looking at the road, he while rushing to hospital to see her. In their shock they resolve to make a new future. They decide to plant trees. The tree device seems heavy handed rather than poetic.

In Palo Alto, California, we meet Douglas Pavlicek, arrested by police for armed robbery. Thanks to a psychologist running an experiment at Stanford University, he gets off by agreeing to join the Air Force and gets shipped off to fight in Vietnam. There he falls from a plane only to land in a banyan tree and be saved. Many years and itinerant jobs later, he serves the world of trees by working for a commercial timber company. But soon he realizes that his job is planting trees in a monoculture for harvesting in just a few years: Douglas firs. The tree device has migrated from the sentimental to shock. He is planting a bad forest.

Then Neelay Mehta, a kid with a Gujarati father and a Rajasthani mother living above a Mexican bakery in San Jose, California, and a misfit. In despair one day he climbs high up an oak tree, considers suicide, but decides not to go through with it. But then he slips. He ends up permanently needing a wheelchair. He writes software code for games, drops out of Stanford, and earns a fortune. As Mehta rolls out of the university, the narrator tells us he cannot see the trees on the mountains: manzanita, laurels, orange madrone, coast live oak, riparian, and redwoods. The trees "work a plan that will take a thousand years to realize – the plan that now uses him, although he thinks it's his" (Powers 2018, 111). The tree device reveals the frame it has created: trees possess a greater intelligence than the wizard of software. The trees have agency on a scale that Mehta cannot conceive.

Patricia Westerford, a scientist with a hearing disability, is the penultimate protagonist. She is modeled on a real-life forest ecologist, Suzanne Simard, whose groundbreaking discoveries (e.g., Simard et al. 1997) also informed Robert Macfarlane's prize-winning nature

book, *Underland* (2019a),* Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016), and other nonfiction titles. Like Simard in real life, the character Patricia Westerford faces not just rejections in peer review from the scientific establishment but also, for a time, academic banishment. Her crime – and Simard's – was the stunning claim that trees communicate with each other across a forest. Simard's were backed by experimental evidence and eventually replicated, though they now face renewed if nuanced challenges (Karst, Jones, and Hoeksema 2023). If the tree device in *The Overstory* has so far seemed metaphorical or mystical, in this instance its roots lie in science.

The final protagonist is Oliva Vandergriff, a statistician studying actuarial science, the calculation of risk and probability. Just back from divorce court, drunk, perhaps stoned, she injures her ankle on a bicycle chain while cycling into a snow-covered street called Cedar. A specimen of that tree grows in front of the building where she lives with student housemates. It is a “living fossil ... [a] tree with sperm that must swim through the droplets to fertilize the ovule” (Powers 2018, 146). After a shower, naked, still drunk and wet and on the way to bed, she turns off the light and electrocutes herself.

We learn, a few pages later at the start of the second part, “Trunk,” that she died, but just for one minute and ten seconds, revived by her ex-husband. Alive again, she rejects the ex-husband, again, and dedicates herself instead to protesting deforestation. Her resuscitation-*cum*-resurrection echoes the scientific work of Westerford/Simard in which forest trees, under attack from various hazards, work to regenerate each other.

The various manifestations of the tree device create a frame of meaning in which trees take on an almost supernatural power. But it is not quite that. The deforestation against which these characters battle through the novel shows the fragility of forests at the hands of humans, as much as humans seem fragile against the strength and life of trees. It has taken almost a third of the book's 502 pages to introduce us to the nine characters, but we have had eight different introductions to the central frame and dozens of devices, some metaphorical, other scientific, all symbolic. The diversity of these devices and the similarity of the frame gives a sense of universality, of truth. But the frame is of fragility, not persistence let alone the eternal.

Through the rest of the book, these characters – each, like the forest they go on to encounter, is damaged in some way – interact in differing constellations, circling around each other, most eventually convening in a forest being cut down to make way for a commercially

* With a conscious nod to the title of Powers's novel, Macfarlane (2019b) has described Simard's work as “The Understory” to his own book *Underland*. Powers nodded back (New York Times 2019).

oriented logging purpose. The device of their preexisting damage helps to frame this story as a search for wholeness, albeit largely not fulfilled. In an explosion they (somewhat) accidentally set off, Olivia dies a second time, and the groupings disperse. Westerford is eventually accepted as a scientist, as her real-life counterpart was. Seven are committed climate activists, two of them in hiding. One rejects the cause. Olivia is still dead.

As “[s]omething moves” at the base of “motionless trees” – we are led to imagine the “Seeds” of the part-title germinating – the book concludes with a short interjection from the voice that has introduced each part: “*This*, a voice whispers, from very nearby. *This*. *What we have been given. What we must earn. This will never end*” (Powers 2018, 502). We wonder, is this voice, this alternative narrator, something, someone supernatural – or nature itself?

Heuristics and their avoidance in The Overstory

The introductions of the multiple protagonists carry much of the weight of establishing the heuristics that go on to form readers’ judgments of the actions that follow and evaluations of the decisions that give rise to them. The dominant frame – humanity within nature but also against it, nature agentic on a long timescale but also constrained and threatened by human agency in the short term – is established through repeated but various separate framings, each using separate but related devices. As we read the rest of the book, the heuristic that the framing has created gives readers a multilayered interpretive schema, a disposition to assess the worth of all the other actors – individuals and organizations – that we encounter. It creates a moral system, *a priori*, a categorical imperative but not a simple one, because people are outside nature as well as within it. The symbolism of these fractured characters, seeking but then not achieving meaning in their quest, encourages us to interpret the rest of the events in that light.

The confirmation bias associated with this heuristic hinders us from asking other questions about those events. Because three characters are scientists – a botanist, someone trained as an economist, and a statistician – and all have participated in creating this heuristic, we relegate doubts about the economics, the statistics, and the science as we are swept through their personal dramas. It is this sensation that leads some critics to question the integrity of this novel’s craft. Recall Thomas Mallon’s comment that Powers is “less interested in being a novelist than in being a saint” (Mallon and Paul 2021). As we become aware of the bias, we can at least question whether *The Overstory* slips from being a novel of ideas to being a novel of conviction and perhaps of ideology.

Enactment with exploration in The Overstory

This argument points to the observation that Powers is enacting through fiction a conflict of ideas – preservation and persistence of nature over human agency and immediacy of economic imperatives. This is a story that the critic and climate novelist Nathaniel Rich has called “a darkly optimistic one. Optimistic for the planet, pessimistic for the fate of humanity” (Rich 2018). It takes a stand on an issue in contemporary politics and economics, but also one, as in the epigraphs from Emerson, Lovelock and Neidjie, that invokes a transcendental meaning. Yet it is not entirely transcendental in its philosophical stance, despite the final “This *will never end*” sentence of the transcendent version of the narrator. This may well end. If the enemies succeed in the short term, trees themselves may not survive in the long term.

The craft of this enactment comes from the way in which Powers leaves space for readers to challenge the heuristic. The transcendent narrator may be god-like but it appears only episodically, at the start of each part and again in the final paragraph. Otherwise, we are in a real world. In psychology, a heuristic works by being representative of a type, by being available to those who use it, and by providing anchor points that help users hold firm to the heuristic when it comes under challenge (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). *The Overstory* provides characters on one side of argument that are representative of many types, creating a sense of the universal about the message. The types and their meanings are available to any readers who are likely to pick up the book. But the anchor points shift, almost from the beginning. Providing lengthy introductions of each character before any action breaks with the convention of most novels – among them novels of ideas – of offering a single, central protagonist to focus the attention – the cognition and affect – of readers. In this way, readers are unsettled from any comfortable prior understandings. Moreover, readers must keep reading to page 157 before the plot begins.

One of the characters – Neeley Mehta – is overtly self-centered, a successful capitalist who has become wealthy by creating unnatural worlds, and he has reasons to hold a grudge against trees and nature. Accidents and randomness first constitute these characters and then bring them variously together, give readers reasons to doubt even as they build a case for the universality of the argument the book makes. The “darkly optimistic” ending of this novel is not inevitable. It is, to be precise, *evitable*.

This structure, these gaps in the characterizations allow us not to feel manipulated – or at least not entirely manipulated by the transcendent narrator or the author who stands behind it. By breaking from the heuristics of the form – of the novel of ideas and of novels generally –

The Overstory gives us just enough room for the philosophically skeptical to remain so. It enacts a debate in moral and political philosophy, and it chooses a winning side, which, in the main, loses.

In summary, the impact of *The Overstory* comes not from the ideas it presents. News accounts provide a gripping account of the ideas in this story. Academic papers present harder evidence and more convincing argumentation, and thus greater conventional trustworthiness – validity, reliability and generalizability. In *The Overstory*, what grips us is the breadth and depth of personalities, delivered with considerable economy of expression, and the various paths they take to reach the same conclusion about how to live, and the same anguish about the difficulty of living that way. We empathize with each of these protagonists as they grow more aware of the scale of the crisis and are humbled by seeing their personal limitations in resolving it.

The monism that underpins the ontological premise of this book points begs us to see this work as an emotional polemic, an example of what Matthew Cole calls “visceral cautionary tales” in environmental fiction (Cole 2022, 132); he argues that *The Overstory* avoids that by showing multiple paths to agency through the different paths of its protagonists.

But the book can be seen in yet another light. The interleaving of the stories of the multi-protagonists and the sense that the trees and other entities in the story are also actors in the story. This is a story that can also be read as an attempt to explore the puzzling but pertinent ontologies of philosophers of pluralism. The French pragmatist Bruno Latour’s pluralism argues against the reductionism in most modern (i.e., post-17th century) philosophy that separates mankind from other species (Latour 1988). In this reading, *The Overstory* may seek to evade the polemical by exploring the empathy it creates for the frailty of the characters, frozen in the headlights of the onrushing catastrophe. Even as the novel *enacts* its conviction that this is a system going out of control, it lets us *explore* the emotions of the actors caught in it.

Navigating with *The Portable Veblen*

Another, but quite different, invocation of Latour’s warning against reductionism greets us at the start of Elizabeth McKenzie’s novel. The protagonist of *The Portable Veblen* is a woman undergoing an identity crisis. She wants to be connected to the world around her but is cut off from others; she communes with a squirrel because she can’t seem to communicate with humans. Veblen Amundsen-Horda has dropped out of university and works as an office

temp while freelancing as a translator of works from Norwegian, which she is only just learning. She is a person with a nervous disposition, perhaps inherited from her hypochondriac mother, or from her father, who lives in a mental health facility. Veblen herself takes a combination of prescription anti-depressants.

She shares a rented derelict bungalow in a very expensive city with neuroscientist Paul, who has developed a device to reduce battlefield brain trauma. Because of that invention, he is soon to develop an attachment to the heiress of a pharmaceutical fortune. In the opening pages, however, Paul proposes that Veblen and he get married. Instead of answering immediately, she talks to and then about a squirrel just outside the window. * (The publisher's blurb on the cover has already primed readers with this warning: "What could possibly go wrong?")

Even before the novel gets around to explicating the protagonist's given name and its connection to the philosopher-economist, on page 22, his namesake – Veblen Amundsen-Horda – reaches out to another, even more famous philosopher for answers to her uncertainties. The narrator, in a close third-person voice, explains that she often draws upon "the writings of the wonderful William James." The narrator then quotes James himself, advocating a search for "the original experiences which were pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct" (McKenzie 2016, 11). This passage takes for granted that this William James is the philosopher, one of the original pragmatists, the person who gave the name pragmatism to the philosophy, and whose work inspired Thorstein Veblen. And it was this William James whose parable of the squirrel, the man, and the tree illustrated the ontological paradox of what it means to "go around" (1907/1955, Lecture II). For the character Veblen, these facts are just part of the philosophical litter in her mind. She doesn't need an explanation. Why should readers?†

In plotting her protagonist's attempt to get from here to a wedding, McKenzie leads us through the puzzles and ambiguities of pragmatism, encounters with the pitfalls of capitalism as viewed through the obscured prism of the nuanced economic writings of her namesake, and by exposure to the darker sides of the medical industry. The ideas in this novel of ideas are not *idées fixes* but instead *idées en flux*. From the earliest pages, we have set sail without an anchor.

* The words *yes maybe no*, repeated again and again, give shape to the squirrel on the cover of the British hardback and paperback editions. American editions use a less evocative illustration.

† In his lecture, James describes an encounter with a squirrel, a creature that may well be the model for the one that serves as the character Veblen's interlocutor. Seeing the man, the squirrel darts to the other side of the tree trunk. As the man circles the tree, the squirrel does too, always evading the man's sight. James wonders: the man has gone around the tree, but has he gone around the squirrel?

We can, however, look for the anchor points of an emergent heuristic that may eventually help readers to discover what sort of a novel this is. Here too the analysis will focus on the opening chapters because of the whole they play in introducing devices and establishing the framing.

Frames/devices in The Portable Veblen

The opening three paragraphs of *The Portable Veblen* lay devices that will eventually frame this as a fairytale. It is not portentous, not a sermon. The opening words, “Huddled together,” introduce not people but houses. The houses themselves are alive. They are located “in a California town known as Palo Alto,” not in the conventional and dull designation: City, State, and a phrasing that – with irony – allows that the reader may never have heard of the city at the heart of Silicon Valley. The paragraph continues: “And in one lived a woman in the slim green spring of her life, and her name was Veblen Amundsen-Hovda” (McKenzie 2016, 1). She is not just young and slim; she is part of the rotation of earth around the sun, and part of nature. Her name invokes something foreign, exotic, and full of as-yet indecipherable meaning.

Lest a reader be lulled into thinking all is well, the second paragraph reverses the sentiment and changes the season. It is just after New Year, and raining. It also reveals the second main actor in the story: a squirrel, raking through the fallen leaves for acorns made tastier, now that rain and dew have leached out the tannins. The squirrel will appear as Veblen’s interlocutor at crucial moments in the 400-odd pages to come.

The next paragraph begins, “The skin of the old year was crackling,” another metaphor with time itself alive, and the short winter heading toward spring, but “Veblen felt troubled, as if rushing toward disaster.... She wanted to stop time” (McKenzie 2016, 2). Time, too, is part of nature, the old year now animate, a chrysalis, perhaps, containing both maturation and a new beginning – but a development the protagonist would like to avoid.

This fairytale opening of *Veblen* signals an extended metaphor that parallels the one in *The Overstory*, the metaphor of Gaia.* We are in a world where all is alive and connected, where the landscape, plants, animals, and even time verge on consciousness, at least most of the time, when we see through Veblen’s eyes. That is, Veblen is not entirely aware of her place

* Lovelock, who died in 2022, aged 103, would resist any reading that suggests Gaia as metaphorical. He argued that there was scientific evidence to support his claim that Earth is a unitary living system (see Lovelock 1972, 2003). My suggestion here is, however, the reverse, that both novels can be seen as extended metaphors of Gaia, the base rather than the example of metaphor. Analytically, Latour’s actor-network approach can better highlight how the pieces interact, which evoking Gaia can obscure.

in the world, her immediate future, or her identity. She is about to undergo a quest for greater consciousness of her being.

Within a few paragraphs, the proximate reason for her anxiety becomes obvious, to her as much as to the reader: Her boyfriend, Paul, offers an engagement ring with a large diamond, housed in a case described in a combined oceanic-and-arboreal metaphor as a “velveteen shell ... like a walnut.” Rather than saying *yes* or *no*, or *let me think about it*, Veblen replies, “Oh, Paul. Look, a squirrel’s watching.” But Paul doesn’t turn to look, “as if being watched by a squirrel meant nothing to him,” the narrator says, reflecting Veblen’s own concern, or perhaps her evasion of the existential question she has been posed. Paul asks again. The squirrel screeches. Veblen finally turns to Paul and, after hesitating again, says yes. The narrator continues, “Behind them, the squirrel made a few sharp sounds, as if to say he had significant doubts,” which Veblen, “couldn’t help translating” as “*There is a terrible alchemy coming*” (McKenzie 2016, 3-4). This proximate reason is, however, only an approximation of the sources of her anxiety.

McKenzie’s cast of supporting characters come with a variety of backgrounds signaled through the device of their surnames. For example, among the characters introduced in Chapter 1, Veblen herself is of Norwegian stock on her “father’s side,” but undeniably American. Her second surname, Horda, is common in central Europe, especially in Ukraine. Paul’s surname is Vreeland: Dutch. Her rival for Paul’s affection, the heiress to the pharma fortune, has a German name, Hutmacher. Veblen’s best friend is Albertine Brooks: English. She meets Paul while working in a lab at Stanford for Dr. Lewis Chaudhry: Indian.* This naming approach quietly suggests representativeness through its variety, like the university and indeed America, though not universality in beliefs. Divergence of views – this time between Veblen and Paul – comes to the fore with the start of the second chapter. After a sleepless night listening to noises in the attic, Paul buys what the close-third narration (occupying Veblen’s mind) calls a “coffin-shaped” trap. It is designed to capture “nuisance critters,” including squirrels (McKenzie 2016, 26-27).

Veblen’s house was overrun by nature when Veblen first found it, “so overgrown with vines that the windows were no longer visible.” The yard is “neck-high with weeds and ivy ... choked with the summer’s industry of honeysuckle and jasmine,” with animal hair “mixed in the litter of leaves ... To her it looked enchanted” (McKenzie 2016, 32-33). In time, she restores the house, to some extent, but it remains a creature of nature.

* The other two very minor characters introduced are Luke Hartley: English; and Laurie Tietz: German.

In Chapter 3, just a week after he proposes to Veblen, Paul takes up a new post in a hospital in a government compound supporting the military, gleaming new buildings alongside remnants of tin-can hangars from the late 1940s and 1950s. But nature is reasserting itself here too, undermining this new center of knowledge creation for military purposes: “Gophers and moles had the run of the lawn,” the narrator immediately notes (2016, 38). Suddenly a squirrel spirals down the trunk of a magnolia tree. The narrator relates that this new job will make Paul “the man who would lead Hutmacher [Pharmaceuticals] into a new era.... Physicians received Nobel prizes for innovations like his,” another passage of close third-party writing, this time inside Paul’s mind. That device is drawn more sharply later on that page, when a “tall, blond woman “leaned over, read his name on his lab coat.” Her demeanor “struck him as proof of a giant leap in his sex appeal.” He has just met Cloris Hutmacher, an influential force in decisions about the growth of the business. Having coffee with her, Paul soon finds that he has “gulped and scalded his esophagus, and worse, felt his testes shrivel to the size of garbanzo beans” (40-41). As he attempts to explain his invention to treat battlefield trauma, their conversation veers teasingly close to a male orgasm. As she departs, she gives him a “European-style kiss on his left cheek, and his catecholamines soared” (45). Catecholamines, decoded, are the neurohormones that respond to stress, but who, in Veblen’s world, needs that explanation?

These devices establish a pattern that recurs through the book. Paul is – at least mentally and now emotionally – entangled in web of pharma, government, military and sexual desire, a potent rearrangement of President Eisenhower’s military-industrial complex of the 1950s. Against that stands Veblen, the woman he has just asked to marry, who seems more comfortable conversing with squirrels than with her fiancé. Perhaps *spins* is a better description of her attitude than *stands*. Nothing in her life stands still. She is the protagonist of this story, however, and her mind is more difficult to read than his.

Like Powers with *The Overstory*, McKenzie uses her novel’s locations as devices to import meaning. A few examples: Palo Alto is the home of Stanford University, known for its pharmaceutical and medical engineering research as well as the seedbed of technology firms. Veblen’s house, though, sits in a forgotten and un-redeveloped corner of it. In this city, she is a liminal actor, sitting precariously on its fringe. Paul lives there for her, not because he has to. Paul’s involvement with Hutmacher Pharma takes him to Washington and then Arlington, Virginia, seats of government and the military as well as home to many large companies vying for government contracts “a stone’s throw from the Pentagon” (McKenzie 2016, 56). Paul takes Veblen to a swish ski lodge at Lake Tahoe, to meet friends he “used to hang with in the

city – doctors, architect, financiers.” Once the friends realize Veblen isn’t on a “notable career path, they seemed unable to synthesize her into their social tableau” (64). Veblen is an alien in this setting, unwanted. A few pages later, while driving to visit Veblen’s friend Albertine in San Francisco, they pass “half-peopled developments spotting the terrain like outbreaks of inflamed skin.” Veblen espouses “the Veblenian opinion that wanting a big house full of cheaply produced versions of so-called luxury goods was the greatest soul-sucking trap of modern civilization” and that their “copycat mansions [...] had ensnared their overmortgaged owners” (74). The narrator’s use of “Veblenian opinion” tells readers already in the know of her devotion to Thorstein Veblen’s most celebrated work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* without having to say so. It also signals that the character Veblen is now engaging in elevated thinking. Readers not in the know will have to wait until page 206 for an explanation.

Thorstein Veblen is himself a device to create meaning. Before the remark above, he has appeared only twice in the book, once to let us know where her name arose, a second time when young Veblen tells Paul that her namesake would say that people hate squirrels “because it’s the only way to motivate expenditures” on devices to kill or capture them. “It’s the same as stirring up *patriotic emotionalism*, because it justifies expenditures for defense” (McKenzie 2016, 30, emphasis in the original). She is intellectualizing her emotional attachment to squirrels. It sets up a delayed ironic reversal when a bit later, on his visit to Washington, Paul expresses his emotional as well as intellectual attachment to the military by wanting to “To serve. My country” (58). He wants to visit the Vietnam War memorial to pay homage the uncle who died in combat. The juxtaposition, at a distance, of this intellectual device underscores Veblen’s confused emotions, which with subsequent reinforcement asks readers to puzzle over whether one can separate in practice the conceptual difference between these two supposed states of mind.*

Veblen’s conversations with her closest friend, Albertine, also play across the emotion-intellectual frontier. A minor disagreement with Paul over turkey meatballs, the narrator says in a third-person voice close to Veblen’s mind, Paul seemed “dupliciously boyish and charming.” But, the narrator explains, “Albertine had been quick to tell her it was a missed opportunity for *individuation*” (McKenzie 2016, 81) an evaluation that rapidly morphs into a recollection of a contretemps with Paul over the virtues or otherwise of eating corn on the cob. The conceptual co-mingles with the absurdly tangible.

* The philosopher William James, to whom the character Veblen has already alluded, draws a similar puzzle in his writings: “The essence of life is its continuously changing character; but our concepts are all discontinuous and fixed” (James 1909, 253).

Visiting Veblen's childhood home and meeting her mother, Paul is shown bookshelves "crammed with more volumes than they could properly hold" about things from aboriginal weapons to Pre-Raphaelite design. On the top shelf sit 60 volumes containing the works of Thorstein Veblen, which the narrator describes as "still radiating 'redemptive truth and more splendor.' That's how Richard Rorty described the special books on his own parents' shelves, and Veblen couldn't have said it better" (McKenzie 2016, 95).

Readers have encountered "Rorty" before as someone with "writings on solidarity," which the character Veblen had "no trouble applying to squirrels" (McKenzie 2016, 29). They will wait until page 95 to hear that the character Veblen admires his "redemptive truth and moral splendor." That Rorty was a philosopher in the tradition of William James and John Dewey who rethought pragmatism as an antidote of postmodernism comes only on page 118. Readers might look outside the novel and discover that Thorstein Veblen also adhered to pragmatism and that in the 1880s he and Dewey studied together at newly established Johns Hopkins University. These connections are, however, something that the narrator, speaking as if occupying the character Veblen's mind, takes for granted. Her mind is pre-occupied with the domestic crisis of her fiancé meeting his neurotic future mother-in-law. The books are another device that signals this as a novel of ideas, but they are ones that sit on the shelf, "radiating," albeit ideas built upon a rickety ontological base.

In Chapter 9 Thorstein Veblen gets a fuller introduction from the narrator, recounting as the economist smashes the windows of his own house, fearing that it would be sold "through a mishap with the deed." We learn that he then lived for a time in New York in the 1920s in a boarding house "with Mr. James Rorty, author of *Our Master's Voice*," a title that gave "petrifying stories about the reach of the advertising industry" (McKenzie 2016, 183). What we don't hear is that James Rorty was also a radical activist and communist, or that he was the father of the philosopher Richard Rorty, mentioned earlier. But McKenzie has strewn breadcrumbs for readers that there is a novel of ideas lying beneath the surface of this family farce. The device of Thorstein Veblen allows the character Veblen to turn to her typewriter to write her own tirade against the injustice of turning people into consumers (McKenzie 2016, 189-191). It underscores here ambivalence about Paul, the man she says she loves and has agreed to marry.

That ambivalence has been exposed in Chapter 8, when Veblen meets Paul's family, who traveled to San Francisco just to meet her. The narrator, channeling Veblen's thoughts, tells us that "To some, the in-law family is a burden and a curse. But to others it's a close-knit group with a new opening just for you, and that's definitely how Veblen looked at the

Vreelands” (McKenzie 2016, 158). Paul has a new car – thanks to his new job – with twelve speakers in its sound system. Paul’s parents, aging hippies, drive a car that Veblen likes, “eccentric ... thick with dust and activism” (McKenzie 2016, 161). Paul’s older brother Justin is with them, a man with obvious mental problems not given a label but made evident through his actions. They include having the conviction that he, not Paul, is marrying Veblen. McKenzie thus avoids assigning a label that would seem to explain Justin to readers, and thus not trying to come to understand his complexity. That is, McKenzie has avoided anchoring to an available heuristic for the sake of building ones afresh.

Heuristics and their avoidance in The Portable Veblen

The framing established in the opening third of the book is that of a world, a social system and a personal identity of the protagonist in constant motion. There are evil actors – Hutmacher Pharma and Cloris Hutmacher – but the narration is so often depicted from a close-third person perspective inside Veblen’s unsettled mind that we cannot be so sure. It creates a heuristic of incomplete knowledge, one in which the reader as well as the protagonist are on a rollercoaster ride, rather than a linear quest for enlightenment.

References to nature – the trees, the overgrown garden at the dilapidated house – carry meaning, but it is not clear what, save that they do not represent something transcendent, something supernatural. Even talking squirrels seem light on meaning. Their discussions are projections of Veblen’s own search for meaning. They help her to restore calm at moments of stress, and if they work, then in the philosophy of pragmatism they have some call on having the quality John Dewey called “warranted assertibility” (Dewey 1941), something short of truth, but truth for pragmatists is either a historically situated, contingent concept or a logical mistake.

If we follow the breadcrumbs of ideas, we get a picture of the character Veblen as someone occupying a mental space without clear rules or fixed reference points. The ontology is uncertain, or perhaps, as in the tradition of William James, irrelevant. What matters is only that we find what works and let that suffice until it no longer works, when we adjust and move on. The sketch of communism versus capitalism is present but contested not by its antithesis but because it doesn’t account for the things Veblen is feeling.

The mixture of comedy with philosophy, of conviction with confusion, of commitment with capriciousness, undermines simplistic readings of the genre that the text offers and then withdraws. This is not a love story, or a rant against capitalism, or a search for identity, or a plea for collective political action, or another of several other interpretations readers may be

tempted to find in its pages. Instead, the story of *Veblen* evades all those heuristics by its use of irony. Readers are offered reasons to like Veblen and Paul and to despise Cloris Hutmacher. But they have reasons not to trust Veblen's views, or Paul's, or the narrator's, as truth-claims. They have reasons, some of the time, to give even Cloris the benefit of the doubt, though not often.

But *The Portable Veblen* is in the end a love story: The plot is girl meets boy, falls in love, lots of stuff happens, and they get married, nearly. The wedding is left in suspension after the intervention of a squirrel. So, what does it tell us, philosophically, about love?

In one relevant passage of many, Chapter 9, titled "The Stoic Glacier Method," Veblen comes close to articulating how to get to love, if not quite what love is. Paul has returned from a family outing. His mother and father like to visit houses on the market that they have no intention to buy. During the outing, Paul says, his father, Bill, told him that he, Bill, "might be part of the problem" between father and son. Veblen replies, glowing "with satisfaction. See? You're using the stoic glacier method." Attempting to clarify, she explains: "It's the slow process of shaping someone's behavior by force of one's own personal stoicism." The narrator then adds, parenthetically and for greater clarity, "('If you wish to be loved, love,' said Seneca, a Stoic of note.)" This does not say that love itself is a process, but it seems to suggest that love is a goal requiring patience and is easily frustrated. Perhaps we cannot get beyond that goal, to some final transcendent good. Paul replies, "Wow. Maybe so," but immediately the next diversion comes, away from anything transcendental to the mundane: Veblen sees the mentally challenged brother, Justin, in Veblen's bedroom, touching her pillow. The narrator notes, "Some drool spilled from his lips" (McKenzie 2016, 191).

Exploration with added enactment in The Portable Veblen

In what way is this a novel of ideas in the broader sense a piece of philosophical fiction? Its philosophical link is signaled in the title of the novel, a direct allusion to the title of a 1948 anthology of Thorstein Veblen's writings, published by the Viking Press. The character Veblen is not, however, our model of the studious and logical thinker. Her mother is a failed philosopher, whose PhD dissertation – on the writing of Thorstein Veblen, what else? – sits incomplete and abandoned on the shelf with his works.

In summary, the framing of Veblen as a scatterbrain in the scattered landscape of ideas shows aspects of the heuristics of an "enacted" novel of ideas, pitting one well-established position against another. But they are quickly upended by the book's depiction of someone whose train of thought has derailed very early on. The repeated framing of this as a book with

philosophical pragmatism at its heart is also an illustration of the central problem of pragmatism. Pragmatism's emphasis on evolution and historical contingency may leave the door open to accusations of relativism (Misak 2000), like the ontological and moral puzzles in existentialist and much postmodern philosophy. In this quagmire, the character Veblen can be seen exploring ideas and emotions, trying to find an anchor point – in Paul, and his sense of certainty – to set her mind at lesser discomfort if not entirely at ease. She explores the thinking of her namesake and in so doing sees how little order it can bring to her madcap existence. That realization is, however, strangely comforting: Having *explored* the ambiguities, she has found a way of coping with the confusion, the disorder in the life she will now try to *enact*. Perhaps she finds consolation – as McKenzie's readers might – in her attempts at philosophizing.* That the task is not finished is evident in the seven appendices that follow the novel, a novel way for McKenzie to emphasize the break from the anchor point of the form itself.

Conclusions

The Overstory is a novel strong on polemic, enacting its idea through a complex orchestration of voices an important social and moral problem. It tells the story about trees as sentient beings, responsive to each other and reactive to the harm imposed by humanity. The story is sufficiently convincing to have persuaded former US president Barack Obama of the significance of the need of humanity to attend to nature. Its storytelling is sufficiently convincing to have won it a Pulitzer Prize. While its use of frame devices has lodged it firmly in the heuristic of the novel of ideas, it is not quite a simple morality play. The “good” is clear, but the path to reach it is treacherous. It is an enactment of ideas that also makes space to explore their difficulties by breaking from the convention of a central protagonist and then as the mistakes compound.

By contrast, *The Portable Veblen* exudes a desire for understanding of the “good,” but its framing devices suggest a reality far less anchored – at least in the protagonist's confused mind – than what *The Overstory* has depicted. The central heuristic that this framing builds is of a comedy teetering on the edge of tragedy but managing, somehow, to avoid falling off the cliff. Philosophy itself can be seen as the hero, saving the protagonist from mental illness or despair. The novel leaves the substance of Thorstein Veblen's writings hanging in mystery. It offers anchor points only to withdraw them quickly, or to question their value. Pragmatism somehow

* Cf. Boethius (1897)

offers her a philosophy of “continuously changing character” (James 1909, 253) that lets her muddle through. It is a novel in which the protagonist explores the complex and unsettled edges of philosophy, edges that now seem to many philosophers to lie, paradoxically, in the center of philosophical debate. The character Veblen longs for certainty; that signals a need that philosophy used to provide and that the novel of ideas used to be able to enact. Absent that, at least her philosophical meanderings, if not quite systematic exploration, offer relief (and laughter) if not quite consolation.

Each book sits on the opposite end of enactment-exploration divide, though each crosses over as its subject matter grows more complex. In *The Overstory* the moral understanding implied in the transcendental conception of good in Emerson, Lovelock and Neidjie runs aground in the shortcomings of the characters in living up to those ideals. In *The Portable Veblen*, Veblen herself is unanchored and seeks out more comfortable dichotomies good and seeking purpose in the self of the collective. *The Overstory* could have become a morality tale, as Mallon’s quip seems to imply (Mallon and Paul 2021). It comes quite close, though Powers balks at the simplification that implies. *The Portable Veblen* could have taken itself seriously, but McKenzie chooses to let the novel laugh at itself and let us laugh with it.

The Overstory nonetheless falls more heavily on the enactment side, inviting criticism that it verges on the ideological end of the spectrum of novels of ideas. Therein lies a danger. Adopting an idea founded on a scientific discovery and building an ontology upon it, and then a moral system, runs a risk in the ever-correcting epistemology of science. As noted above, since the novel’s publication, fresh doubts have been raised about the evidence for the more exaggerated claims in the popularization of Simard’s work (Karst, Jones, and Hoeksema 2023). Those doubts have burst into broader public discussion, too (Popkin 2022). While the science Powers situates in his character Westerford is not the same as Simard’s, the roots of it look less firm now, its ontology threatened. *The Portable Veblen* steers well wide of that danger. The character Veblen embraces the ever-correcting epistemology and therefore the non-committal evasion of ontology called pragmatism. That runs a different risk: that readers might overlook the serious side of McKenzie’s book that Franzen, through irony, highlights. Perhaps that is why it missed out on the prizes that accompany books like that of Powers, which take a stronger moral line. Both these novels of ideas give readers a lot to think about, however, as they seek to dodge the dilemma of enactment and exploration, less (*Overstory*) or more (*Veblen*) successfully.

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