

## FICTION

## Virtual Reality, Identity Imposters

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After a nearly fatal accident, Mark Schluter, the protagonist of Richard Powers's National Book Award-winning ninth novel, *The Echo Maker*, wakes up from a coma to find he is being cared for by a woman who claims she is his sister Karin. Mark is convinced that she is not but is instead an almost-exact duplicate of her, an imposter. In psychiatry we call this delusion Capgras syndrome, a rare form of misidentification usually seen in schizophrenia, dementia, or brain trauma. Two French psychiatrists, Joseph Capgras and Jean Reboul-Lachaux, first described the disorder in 1923. Their 53-year-old patient believed that her husband, her children, her house, her neighbors, and even she had been replaced by exact doubles and that everyone was plotting to steal her property.

In his paranoid state, Mark begins to believe that there is a government-hatched plot against him. When he finally reaches home after the rehabilitation center, he feels that his property has been replicated. Neurologists call this reduplicative paramnesia, a variant of Capgras syndrome, in which a building or home is replaced. Even his dog seems to be an imposter. According to the theory that he concocts to explain these changes, the government is experimenting by dropping him into a different, but very similar, environment to monitor his reaction.

Mark's attempt to discover who wrote a mysterious note found at his hospital bedside drives the story forward. It read:

I am No One  
but Tonight on North Line Road  
GOD led me to you  
so You could Live  
and bring back someone else.

No one seems to know who snuck in and delivered the scrawled note, Mark's only real clue about what happened.

The novelist, a professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, explores the recognition of the self and others, segueing into the nature of the self. If Mark's loved ones and his property have changed, who is he? By not acknowledging Karin as his sister, Mark enters a new dimension and alters

his own history and memory. At the same time, he induces a change in his sister. She jokes about being a replica and discovers how freeing not having to follow an established identity can be. The changes the principal characters experience provide a dynamic story of substantial transformations. Mark starts out almost brain dead but finds himself and his intellectual capacity again. Karin loses her job and former life to care for Mark. She regresses to a relationship with one old boyfriend, flirts with another, but eventually emerges a renewed individual.

The only changes that strain belief are those that occur in Dr. Gerald Weber, a physician-author in the mold of Oliver Sacks, who is the cognitive neuroscientist brought in on Mark's case. Weber suddenly starts experiencing some of the same neurological and psychological disorders he writes about in his

### The Echo Maker A Novel

by Richard Powers

Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
New York, 2006.

459 pp. \$25, C\$31.

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Heinemann, London,

2007. £17.99.

ISBN 9780434016334.

Picador, New York,

2007. Paper, \$15.

ISBN 9780312426439.

popular books. How simple to portray a psychiatrist as crazy or a cop as a killer. Hollywood movies constantly entertain us with polar opposites like these, but Powers is too talented a writer to have to venture into

this clichéd territory. Weber's interactions with his wife—who calls him “Man,” while he calls her “Woman”—are unnatural. Nor is the doctor's eventual straying from his marriage psychologically believable. Weber is a neurologist, not a psychiatrist. So why does Mark call him “Shrinky”? I've never heard neurologists or cognitive neuroscientists referred to as a shrink.

Although the novel shifts its point of view several times from Mark to Karin to Dr. Weber,

Powers is a gifted writer who is able to delve into these different perspectives seamlessly. His lyrical style includes hauntingly beautiful descriptions of the sandhill cranes that visit the Nebraska flatlands, symbolizing the unending sequences of nature and the ecosystem. In the opening scene, he writes of one: “The blood-red head bows and the wings sweep together, a cloaked priest giving benediction.” In addition, the novelist knows his sciences. His comprehension of neurology, psychiatry, and other branches of medicine is impressive.

Unfortunately, the women characters are relegated into one extreme category or another. They are either weak and hysterical victims, like Karin and Sylvie (Dr. Weber's wife), or they seem unrealistically strong and mysterious, like Barbara (a minor player who looms large late in the story). In contrast, the men are multidimensional and more realistically depicted. Powers's love scenes are unusually well done. His descriptions of birds and nature are awe-inspiring, easing readers into philosophical musings without inducing boredom.

I kept turning the pages trying to solve the mysteries of Mark's accident and the note, but I was slowed down by excessive neurological descriptions—which I, as a psychiatrist, should have enjoyed more. Nonetheless, overall *The Echo Maker* strikes me as a superb melange of science and poetry.

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Sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) in the Platte River valley, Nebraska.

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