

Richard Powers: In Conversation With Pico Iyer



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On Feb. 23, the renowned novelist Richard Powers gave a lecture organized by UC Santa Barbara [Arts & Lectures](#) at Campbell Hall on campus. In conversation with Pico Iyer, Powers spoke about the beginnings of his unique childhood and early writing career and shared some details about his new work “Playground,” a novel that combines two of the most popular themes of recent times: the environment and the use of artificial intelligence.

Following the discussion, the Arts & Lectures staff hosted a book signing session featuring books provided by the event's organization.

Announced as a "Pulitzer Prize winner and recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship," Powers entered to the audience's applause, who eagerly awaited a copy of "Playground," which had been free to attendees upon entry.

The lecture began with some details about Powers' childhood and early career.

As the eldest of five children in a family from Evanston, Illinois, the author shared how his local high school principal's father eventually relocated the family to Bangkok, Thailand, when the writer was 11 years old.

Powers emphasized how crucial this stage was for his development. He attended the International School of Bangkok, where his father had accepted a job. Later, at the age of 16, Powers and his family returned to the United States.

According to Powers, it was during university that he began to shape his path toward writing. "I ended up majoring in physics," he commented, drawing laughter from the audience. He would later switch his major to English. He mentioned how he always encourages his students to have an area of expertise when writing.

However, his full-time profession for years was as a computer programmer in Boston. Until everything changed on a Saturday in 1980, when Powers visited the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where he was captivated by the photograph "Young Farmers" — a 1914 photograph taken by German photographer August Sander, known for his work during a tumultuous political period.

The photograph so deeply fascinated the writer that he spent the next two years working on what would become his first novel: "Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance," a book containing two parallel narratives told by an abstract figure, presumably the novel's author.

A similar approach is found in his new novel, "Playground," which interweaves the lives of four characters whose paths cross on Makatea, an island in French Polynesia. Once exploited for phosphorus mining, the island is now set for a new purpose: launching autonomous, floating units into the vastest sea on Earth to colonize territories never reached by mankind.

It is a novel that involves environmental issues and resource exploitation alongside technology and AI development. According to literary critic Yagnishsing Dawoor for [The Guardian](#), "Todd [one of the main characters of the novel] is now a digital tycoon, having made his name with a

virtual economy platform called Playground. A measure of the book's suspense comes from Todd's groundbreaking, if unsettling, experiments with AI."

Despite having lived in Silicon Valley and mingled with the influential circles there, Powers fondly recalled his hikes in Santa Cruz. In a quote by [The Independent](#), he stated: "To see a tree half the width of this stage and as tall as a football field...it just changes your whole sense of what life is up to." He affirmed this during his speech about the influence of other life forms on human development. It is from these reflections that the premise of his novel emerged.

In a more intimate moment of the interview, Powers shared that his sister Peggy had inspired this latest novel. He admitted to being a child prone to obsessions. When he turned 10, his sister gave him a book about coral reefs, sparking his new fascination. Having passed away three years ago, Powers dedicated a beautiful inscription to her at the beginning of his novel.

After Pico Iyer and Powers' discussion concluded, Arts & Lectures hosted a book signing session for "Playground" and "Aflame" by Iyer, which had previously been presented as part of the same lecture series on Thursday, Jan. 30 by its author.

As both writers left the stage, a long line formed in front of the signing tables. This successful session, where many attendees could speak with the authors, was the perfect conclusion to an event, full of reflection about the past of the author, the present of AI and technology development and the future of the mother earth.