

## Richard Powers's Anxious Neuroscientists

Natalie Roxburgh, University of Oldenburg ([natalie.roxburgh@uni-oldenburg.de](mailto:natalie.roxburgh@uni-oldenburg.de))

The term *neuronarrative*, used by critics Harvey Blume in 2001 and Marco Roth in 2009, designates a new body of fictional narratives -- novels -- which ask questions about human cognition by borrowing from research in the cognitive sciences. According to Roth, recent interest in the brain (instead of the mind) demonstrates that novelists have "ceded their ground" to science, allowing the cognitive sciences to take the place usually occupied by the humanities. Roth's reading of the neuronarrative indicates a general anxiety about the role of the sciences in what was considered to be the province of the humanities.

Richard Powers's novels seem to share the anxiety described by Roth even despite the fact that, as critics have pointed out, his novels are replete with scientific erudition and display a real fascination with research in various fields. One way of accounting for his positive critical reception within the science community is through the erudition of his various scientist characters. However, these characters also tend to possess a drive for knowledge that leads them to discover something that repels them from science. (Dr. Ressler in *The Gold Bug Variations* [1991] is one such character.) My paper will ask the question of whether Powers's neuroscientist characters help us to confirm or reject Roth's hypothesis that novelists are abandoning their former territory.

In *Galatea 2.2* (1995), cognitive computer scientist Dr. Lentz pairs up with a humanist, 'Richard Powers,' in order to build an AI machine. Lentz, whose wife suffers from dementia, is able to simulate human consciousness through 'Powers's' help, creating a machine they call Helen. Dr. Weber in *The Echo Maker* (2006) confronts a patient, Mark Schluter, who has Capgras syndrome. Weber's explorations of how brains function, of how narratives are essentially lies the mind requires for basic functioning, leads to his having a breakdown. Power's anxious neuroscientists help the reader to see that gaps or failures in decoding narrative are part and parcel of human cognition. This questions the explanatory purchase of the brain model by itself, for it is the epiphenomenal mind -- writ: narrative or narrated layers -- that has the capacity to make sense of human experience.