

Overstory View

Jonathan Damery

Record tags at the Arnold Arboretum are as much a record of human lives as the plants. The oldest living accession—the sole remnant from 1872, the year the Arboretum was founded—comprises three shrubby winterberry hollies (*Ilex verticillata*, accession 147*A, C, and E), tucked near the North Woods. These were collected near Boston by Jackson Dawson, the Arboretum's first plant propagator, who was then overseeing greenhouses for the recently established Bussey Institute. If you indulge philosophical predilections, it is awe-inspiring to eye these wane suckering shrubs, which bore a smattering of red fruit this year, and realize that the shrubs have now persisted more than a century beyond the man who collected the original seed. As a rule, the Arboretum's oldest plants have all outlived their collectors, and at least some members of the subsequent plant generations, even material collected on our four expeditions this year, are destined to do the same.

Richard Powers explores this premise in his new novel, *The Overstory*. The narrative structure flexes time and space, at first introducing characters that exist in different decades (and centuries) and in different parts of the United States. All of the characters develop affinities for specific trees. In some cases, the relationship becomes a family legacy, as with the introductory characters: European immigrants named Jørgen and Vi Hoel move from Brooklyn to the Iowa prairie in the mid-nineteenth century. Jørgen plants an American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) from seed he brought west. After Jørgen's death, his son buys a Kodak No. 2 Brownie—the classic model once used by hobbyist photographers—and, in 1903, he begins photographing the now prospering chestnut from the same location each month. A grandson continues the tradition, even as chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*) sweeps through the eastern population, and the lens finally passes to a great-great-grandson named Nicholas. When Nicholas looks at the photos his family has produced, “three-quarters of a century dances by in a five-second flip.” Moreover, he sees a compression of human existence: “the holidays of his childhood, the entire clan gathering for turkey or carols, midsummer flags and fireworks.”

This generational project, in the nonfiction realm, is reminiscent of Chinese botanist Kaipu Yin's rephotography of trees and landscapes that Arboretum plant collector Ernest Henry Wilson documented in China in the early twentieth century. The resulting side-by-side comparisons were published in a collection, *Tracing One Hundred Years of Change: Illustrating the Environmental Changes in Western China*. The passage of a



A sixteen-foot slab of this giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) was harvested from Kings River Grove, California, in 1891, as part of the Jesup Wood Collection, a project overseen by Charles Sprague Sargent. The slab can still be viewed at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, where the annual growth rings reveal the tree began growing around 550 AD. Sargent, the founding director of the Arboretum, died in 1927.

century is evident in the landscapes and, more specifically, in the form of individual trees. Some have survived and, given their size at the time Wilson photographed them, likely survived at least the century before that. Others, however, have gnarled to a fist of limbs, broken and beaten. Still others are ghosts, replaced with glowing storefronts.

This effort to showcase non-human time is even more dramatic with Rachel Sussman's photography collection *The Oldest Living Things in the World*, because she only includes organisms (mostly plants) that are more than two thousand years old. Of course, one automatically thinks of bristlecone pines (*Pinus longaeva*), growing as bony skeletons in the White Mountains of California, where some specimens are more than five

thousand years old—a duration that pre-dates the invention of Sumerian script. But Sussman also directs attention to a colony of quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) in south-central Utah, which has been spreading via underground roots for an estimated eighty thousand years. This marks the approximate time when humans began to successfully migrate from Africa—an astounding timeline, especially considering evolutionary anthropologists have shown that Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*) persisted in Eurasia for another forty thousand years beyond this.

Incidentally, Powers doesn't miss this ancient colony of aspen. One of his characters, Patricia Westerford, flees academic pariahdom (after publishing a controversial article about plant communication) and drives to the magisterial forests of the Pacific Northwest, but not before stopping to see the Utah aspen. "The thing is outlandish," Powers writes, "beyond her ability to wrap her head around." Likewise, Powers uses narrative to force readers beyond their personal footsteps—to literally view human existence from the overstory of time—which many environmental theorists suggest is essential for conceptualizing issues like climate change, with implications stretching far into the geologic future. Plants at the Arboretum—even lowly shrubs like Dawson's winterberries—provide a legible reminder of organismal time, a scale beyond ourselves, and as Powers demonstrates, narrative has potential to do the same.

Books referenced

- Powers, R. 2018. *The Overstory*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.
- Sussman, R. 2014. *The Oldest Living Things in the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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Jonathan Damery is the associate editor of *Arnoldia*.

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