

The Gold Bug Variations

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Stuart Ressler, an up-and-coming molecular biologist, finds his career sidetracked by the turmoil of the sixties, and a young couple of the 1980s tries to discover why the biologist abandoned his scientific pursuits

Richard Powers is a MacArthur Fellow. He lives in Urbana, Illinois. Powers (*Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* ; *Prisoner's Dilemma*) is a recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant , and it seems appropriate: this strange, overwritten, often infuriating, manically intelligent and sometimes deeply moving novel could hardly have been produced by a writer of mere talent. Powers has woven an extraordinary knowledge of music, of science (particularly of the search for genetic coding, and of computer programming), of the mysteries of language and art history, into a saga that is dazzling and wearying in almost equal measure. The novel jumps back and forth between the late '50s, when brilliant scientist Stuart Ressler is involved with an Illinois research team trying to break the mysteries of DNA coding, and the '80s, when librarian Jan O'Deigh and computer programmer Franklin Todd get to know Ressler, now holding an insignificant night job at a massive computer database operation in Brooklyn, N.Y., and try to figure what derailed his promising career. Not a great deal happens, in a conventional narrative sense. Ressler has an affair with one married fellow scientist and learns music from another; his scientific career is, in fact, aborted by his resulting passion for music. O'Deigh leaves her glib Madison Avenue boyfriend, takes up with Todd and is then abandoned by him in his vain search for information about an obscure 16th-century Flemish artist. Toward the end the three principals are involved in a massive computer scam to help a stricken colleague. Despite occasional bewilderment at arid patches of scientific jargon and interminable displays of arcane knowledge for its own sake, a reader persists with *The Gold Bug Variations* (the title, obviously, is a play on Bach's *Goldberg Variations* , which have a key role in the book's intellectual structure, and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold Bug* , about the solving of a puzzle). For there is a perpetual air of surprise about the book, of intellectual excitement, a passionate involvement with words that expands into delightfully witty dialogue and profoundly evocative description. Reading it is hard work, but it's also deeply enriching; the decade is not likely to bring another novel half as challenging and original.

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Other Books

Generosity. FROM THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE ECHO MAKER*, A PLAYFUL AND PROVOCATIVE NOVEL ABOUT THE DISCOVERY OF THE HAPPINESS GENE When Chicagoan Russell Stone finds himself teaching a Creative Nonfiction class, he encounters a young Algerian woman with a disturbingly luminous presence. Thassadit Amzwar's blissful exuberance both entrances and puzzles the melancholic Russell. How can this refugee from perpetual terror be so happy? Won't someone so open and alive come to serious harm? Wondering how to protect her, Russell researches her war-torn country and skims through popular happiness manuals. Might her condition be hyperthymia? Hypomania? Russell's amateur inquiries lead him to college counselor Candace Weld, who also falls under Thassa's spell. Dubbed Miss Generosity by her classmates, Thassa's joyful personality comes to the attention of the notorious geneticist and advocate for genomic enhancement, Thomas Kurton, whose research leads him to announce the genotype for happiness. Russell and Candace, now lovers, fail to protect Thassa from the growing media circus. Thassa's congenital optimism is soon severely tested. Devoured by the public as a living prophecy, her genetic secret will

transform both Russell and Kurton, as well as the country at large. What will happen to life when science identifies the genetic basis of happiness? Who will own the patent? Do we dare revise our own temperaments? Funny, fast, and finally magical, *Generosity* celebrates both science and the freed imagination. In his most exuberant book yet, Richard Powers asks us to consider the big questions facing humankind as we begin to rewrite our own existence.

★★★★★ . The National Book Award-winning author of *The Echo Maker* proves yet again that "no writer of our time dreams on a grander scale or more knowingly captures the zeitgeist." (The Dallas Morning News)."