

The Charlotte Observer

The Echo Maker By Richard Powers

Review by Mindy Friddle

On the wetlands along the Platte River in Nebraska, half a million sandhill cranes are preparing for their annual migration, "floating in from all compass points...dropping with the dusk." Suddenly, sounds from a horrific traffic accident on a nearby highway shatter the tranquility of this placid scene. Mark Schluter, a 27-year-old who works as a machine repairman for a slaughterhouse, has rolled over his pick-up. When he awakens from a coma, he claims his sister, Karin, has been replaced by an actress or a robot. In fact, Mark has developed Capgras syndrome, a rare neurological condition in which loved ones are seen as imposters.

So begins *The Echo Maker*, a suspenseful narrative that weaves in themes of neuroscience, psychology and ecology, and wrangles with the meaning of human consciousness. Esoteric themes, perhaps, but this novel delivers a good old-fashioned mystery along the way. What really happened to Mark that night he rolled over his truck? Who wrote the cryptic note found at his bedside? Will he ever recognize his sister again? And what's with the overeducated, saintly nurse's aide whose dedication to Mark seems a little suspicious?

Mark's only kin, 32-year-old sister Karin, leaves behind her settled life and a good job in customer relations to care for her brother. His memories of her are vivid, though he doesn't recognize Karin, and begs her to find his sister. Karin is distressed by her brother's disorder, although "she felt a sick fascination at the chance to learn what Mark really said about her when talking to someone else."

Enter Gerald Weber, an Oliver Sacks-like neuroscientist and renowned essayist from New York, who arrives in Kearney, Neb., after being emailed by Karin about her brother's strange symptoms. Weber, who has made a career of writing about his patient's case histories and "the human brain musing on itself," is himself approaching a crisis. His latest book is panned, "all his literary cures turned to circus acts and Gothic freak shows."

Brain scans and new byways in neurology have relegated Weber's "stories" to a bygone era, and new theories that question the sovereignty of the self are emerging. In one of the novel's humorous scenes, Weber, at a speaking engagement, looks out over his skeptical colleges and "waited to see them comb bugs out of each other's scalps and eat them. The evolutionary psychologists had that much right, at least. Older creatures still inhabited us, and would never vacate."

No wonder Weber is fascinated with Mark's struggles--or, rather, Mark's brain's struggles--to reconstruct himself and, as the saying goes, find himself. Karin, too, feeling disconcerted by her brother's affliction, has her own identity crisis and begins to suspect the entire human race suffers from Capgas: "No one had a clue what our brains were after, or how they meant to get it."

Set in 2003, this character-driven novel is shadowed by terrorism worries, the war in Afghanistan and the threats of war in Iraq. There's an interesting subplot about the endangered cranes, pitting environmentalists against developers, (a plot in which Mark's conspiracy theories appear eerily prescient), and several romantic dalliances. Dovetailing nicely throughout is the symbolic power of the migratory cranes—the "echo makers" of the title. Observing them, Weber realizes what a burden human consciousness can be: "Something looks out from the prehistoric bird, a secret about him, but not his. A look of pure wildness, all the hard intelligence of simply *being* that Weber has forgotten."