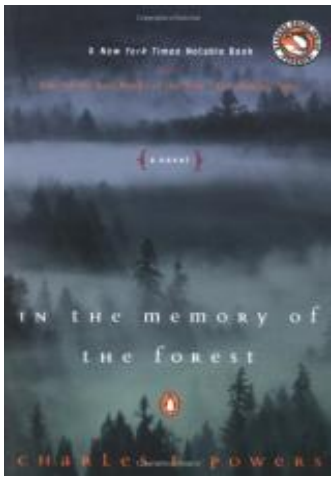
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In The Memory of the Forest

by Charles T. Powers



About the Book

In the Memory of the Forest opens with a mystery?the murder of Tomek Powierza. And when his friend, Leszek, decides to find out who killed Tomek, he touches off a wave of secrecy, corruption, betrayal, and shame that envelops the entire small Polish town of Jadowia. But this is not your typical murder mystery, self-consciously plotted to incorporate the stylized images we find in genre novels. From the town's puffed-up apparatchiks to its determined priests, from its rugged farmers to the workers who doggedly operate the town distillery, Powers tells the stories of simple people struggling to survive in a singulary unglamorous and decidedly unjust world. Their hardscrabble lives offer little in the way of excitement, but they are witnessing a momentous revolution. And as easy as it would be to bury Tomek without asking questions, so it would be easy to forget that a once-thriving community was decimated in a heartbeat. The murder of one young man is overshadowed by the atrocities that came before him?the murder of millions of their countrymen during the Holocaust.

Charles T. Powers has set his haunting novel in Poland?a country that has been wracked by war, government upheaval, economic devastation, and ethnic persecution for most of its existence. Although the history of its people stretches back a millennium, Poland has not been recognized as an independent country for more than a tenth of that time, its barriers having shifted widely to the east and west as neighboring forces annexed, partitioned, and occupied its fields and deep forests. When we meet Leszek, Poland is recovering from yet another upheaval?the defeat of Communism. The dismantling of the country's dense and intricately structured bureaucracy has hit Jadowia particularly hard. The economy is in a turmoil, as is the town's power structure. Powers's decision to set his novel in a small farming town is also significant. Most of Poland's political dramas were played out in the cities, between the workers and the government. The majority of Poland's farms were individually owned, and so the inhabitants of towns such as Jadowia did not figure prominently in the overthrow of the Communist government. But they have suffered nonetheless. In Powers's brilliantly structured and sensitive portrayal of a town and its people, this small, unremarkable village becomes a place where the major themes of Poland's recent history intersect.

The forest holds the answer to many of the town's mysteries. But it is a silent witness, and it is up to the people of Jadowia to seek out and proclaim the truth for themselves. Fortunately, there are those who choose to do so?Leszek's grandfather, Father Tadeusz, Staszek Powierza, and Czarnek?and it is their stories of courage and determination that make this novel a compelling and important reminder that we have a responsibility to the past, to the future, and to each other.

A time line of historical twentieth century events in Poland to enrich your reading of In the Memory of the Forest:

World War I 1914-1918
Poland is taken by Austro-German armies.

November 1918
Poland declares its independence.

September 1939
Germany and the USSR invade Poland, dividing the nation.

World War II 1939-1945
Under Nazi rule, six million Polish citizens, many of them Jews, are murdered.

1947
Communists sweep national elections. Under the shadow of the Soviet Union, industries are nationalized, production on farms drops.

June-August 1980
Labor strife brings the country to its knees, before the government grants concessions to striking workers. Workers earn the right to form unions and the right to strike.

December 1981
Solidarity leaders propose a nationwide referendum that would establish a non-Communist government if the current government did not accept a series of labor demands. The government in turn imposes martial law, and the union leaders, including Lech Walesa, are jailed.

December 1982
Martial law is lifted.

April 1989
The government reaches a historic accord with opposition factions on a number of reforms, including free elections.

June 1989
In free elections, candidates with the backing of Solidarity are clear winners.

December 1990

Lech Walesa becomes president of Poland.

Discussion Guide

1. Leszek is troubled by something his father told him: "History is like a force behind us, pushing us along, unacknowledged or even unknown, but dictating the way we live our lives" (p. 13). Why is Leszek disturbed by this attitude toward history? Why does he perceive his father's comments as a "warning"?

2. The forest is central to many of the story's themes, and represents different things for different characters. Discuss the impact of the forest on the lives of Leszek, Powierza, Leszek's grandfather, Czarnek, Father Tadeusz, and other characters. Also, discuss the imagery a forest invokes.

3. Although Jola and Leszek aren't very far apart in age, they seem to represent different generations. Why is this? Why would Jola choose to leave town with Karol rather than stay with Leszek?

4. Discuss the relationship between the two priests, Father Tadeusz and Father Jerzy. What do these two men have in common? How do they each go about pursuing their responsibilities to their congregation?

5. Many characters in the novel?Father Tadeusz, Father Jerzy, Leszek's grandfather, Czarnek, and Powierza?are attempting to correct the injustices of the past. Compare their personal struggles, and the different kinds of history they represent.

6. In his distillery, Czarnek ruminates on the process that converts grain into alcohol?a cycle of breakdown and decay that produces a product called a spirit, but that is also poisonous. Is Powers making an analogy to the collapse of Communism? Which do you think triumphs in this story?decay or growth?

7.What role does Andrzej, the plumber, play in the town? Father Tadeusz describes him as "ubiquitous," and, indeed, he plays a part in each of the novel's many stories. What does he represent to the novel, and to the structure of the town itself?

8. Compare the impact of Communism and of the Catholic Church in the town of Jadowia. How are these two institutions similar with regard to their structures, their history, and their leaders? Which, if either, is more powerful?

9. Why do you think it is so hard for the people of Jadowia to accept and remember what happened to the Jews in their town? Do you think Czarnek's and Leszek's grandfathers' tributes to the past will help them come to terms with that part of their town's history?

10. Has capitalism been a good thing for the people of Jadowia, or do you think they were better off before the defeat of Communism? Before the Nazi invasion? How have the forces of history affected the town?

11. What has this novel taught you about the history of Poland? How has it changed your impressions of the country and its people?

Author Bio

A native of Missouri, **Charles T. Powers** (1943-1996) started his career writing for The Kansas City Star. A former Niemen fellow at Harvard University, he spent twenty years as a journalist for the Los Angeles Times, twelve of those as a correspondent in Africa. Powers served as the newspaper's Eastern European Bureau chief in Warsaw from 1986 to 1991, where he fully immersed himself in Polish culture. For the last five years of his life, he lived in Bennington, Vermont, where he completed In the Memory of the Forest, his only book.

Critical Praise

"A rich and largely satisfying novel. . . . Skillfully written. "

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