



Friday, March 26 at 7:00pm

Discussion Guide: *Annihilation*

By Jeff VanderMeer

About the Author

NYT bestselling writer Jeff VanderMeer has been called “the weird Thoreau” by the New Yorker for his engagement with ecological issues. His novel, *Annihilation* won the Nebula and Shirley Jackson Awards, has been translated into 35 languages, and was made into a film from Paramount Pictures directed by Alex Garland. His nonfiction has appeared in New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Atlantic, Slate, Salon, and the Washington Post. He has co-edited several iconic anthologies with his wife Ann, the Hugo Award winning editor. Other titles include *Hummingbird Salamander*, *Borne*, and *Wonderbook*, the world’s first fully illustrated creative writing guide.



VanderMeer was born in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, but spent much of his childhood in the Fiji Islands, where his parents worked for the Peace Corps. This experience, and the resulting trip back to the United States through Asia, Africa, and Europe, deeply influenced him.

Jeff is married to Ann VanderMeer, who is currently an acquiring editor at Tor.com and has won the Hugo Award and World Fantasy Award for her editing of magazines and anthologies. They live in Tallahassee, Florida, with two cats and thousands of books.

In the Author’s Words

Interview with Brian Slattery of Tor.com:

Brian Slattery: *Annihilation* is getting compared to the work of all kinds of other people, from H.P. Lovecraft to J.J. Abrams to Stanley Kubrick. The closest one for me, though, was *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. In both your book and theirs, people are being sent in to investigate a geographic area that has been... *changed*... by forces that are, pretty much from the get-go, beyond our comprehension. In *Picnic*, though, the forces are overtly alien. In *Annihilation*, they appear to be natural. Putting those two together offers a neat comparison—*Annihilation* seems to suggest that the natural world is like your archetypal alien

civilization in a first-contact book: way more advanced than we are and therefore essentially incomprehensible, at least until we catch up—if we ever do.

Jeff VanderMeer: It's hard to answer in the sense of not wanting to give away spoilers for the next two books by confirming or denying anything. But I do think we often look at nature as being alien or we romanticize it, or we see ourselves, to be charitable, as stewards, or, less charitably, as having the right to take and despoil whatever we like. And yet as you say the natural world is incredibly complex, to the point that it often makes our smartphones and other advanced technology look incredibly basic and clumsy. We also seem to think that we know so much about our world, and yet we're only now discovering that, for example, plants engage in quantum mechanics during photosynthesis and that sunfish and albatrosses have a complex symbiotic relationship. In essence, we live on an alien planet without realizing it—and I mean that in a good way; something to celebrate and relax into, even though mostly the reactions I see are “shark bad, lemur good.” But there is also something else going on in Area X other than a heightened awareness of a basic sophistication we often want to deny. Although some wildlife is eerily changed in *Annihilation*, there's also a lot of animals just walking around, going about their business.

BS: You've mentioned in a couple places—including the acknowledgements of the book—that Area X draws heavily from the St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. How much of Area X is pulled directly from the wildlife refuge? How much are you enhancing or changing what's really there? And is there anything about the refuge in reality that turned out to be too weird to be believable as fiction?

JV: Well, I have met people who believe there are aliens out there. But in terms of the landscape there, the book's very faithful to the topography and the ecosystems you can find there—it's a truly unique and valuable place in how it transitions from pine forest to cypress swamp to marshes with brackish water, and then to the seaside. It's a wealthy and burgeoning ecosystem. I've been charged by a wild boar out there (as happens to the expedition in the novel), seen dolphins in freshwater canals at high tide, had to jump over an alligator blocking a path with water on both sides, seen a Florida panther out there (a long time ago), and much more. So I didn't really make anything up in terms of the natural elements in the novel, except some fudging of the distance between places and adding a couple of additional landmarks. And, of

course, finding that a distance where I don't name places worked very well for how the story is told.

BS: Area X also seems to partake of other places humans have famously closed off—like, say, the Zone of Alienation that surrounds the Chernobyl reactor in Pripyat, Ukraine, or nuclear test sites near military bases in the United States.

JV: That's the urban myth side of things, whereby Area X is kind of hazily known by the outside world. And, of course, the basic dilemma is of having a secret agency sending in expeditions to explore and discover what is going on in Area X, while part of what's happening in Area X is that it's all being purified. In book two, a scientist jokes, "What, should we go in and contaminate it with heavy metals?" And it points at one essential thing, among a few essential things, I wanted to explore: How do we get beyond the human gaze, the human need for our environment to serve us? What if in order to survive we need to imagine the world without us, or to, at the level of heart and bone, acknowledge, and act on, the idea that possibly we, as much as any Area X, are making things tough for this planet?

BS: Despite the fact that I just compared *Annihilation* to *Roadside Picnic*, the thing that the book really reminded me of most of all is your previous books—particularly in the way that the characters become infected or colonized by the area that they're in the longer they stay there, and the way that each of them seem to have individual reactions to their colonization. You find fresh angles to this theme with every book. What keeps you coming back to it?

JV: I'm not really sure. I don't see the book as very much like the prior ones—whereas in the Ambergris books we're talking about that being the central theme in a sense, here it's more part of something larger, of which it's just a small part. I think this becomes clearer in book two. Each book kind of pivots and shows you something different, or some other side of things.

BS: In *Annihilation*, too, the themes that I've come to think of as VanderMeerian appear here in a particularly distilled form. Was this intentional, or did it just turn out that way?

JV: It's hard for me to see it that way, because of this series being more rural and set in wilderness areas. I also joke around that *Authority*, the second book, is set almost entirely in hallways and parking lots, behind buildings, and in abandoned lots and stairwells (and thus far, still a page-turner, according to readers!). Which may seem like it doesn't make a difference, but it really does to me, compared to the ultra-urban settings of the prior novels. That, and the way

in which there's an emphasis on certain aspects of the characters makes it a different entry point for the reader, too.

BS: Then there are these other elements to the book—that the area is closed off and examined by a government agency that appears to have sinister motivations, that the area itself seems to be pushing back against this (I don't want to give too much away)—that I assume are going to be taken up in the next two books. Care to give us a sense of what we can expect?

JV: Whereas *Annihilation* is an expedition into Area X, *Authority* is an expedition, in a sense, into the Southern Reach, following the new director, who has just taken over and has to make sense of both what he finds in the agency and the repercussions of what happens to the twelfth expedition. In doing so, he has to kind of untangle a lot of conflicting impulses within the agency. And then *Acceptance* is split between Area X and the Southern Reach as things kind of come to a head, although across threads spanning the full thirty years that Area X has been in existence.

Discussion Questions

1. What were your initial theories about the psychologist's motives and the whereabouts of the anthropologist?
2. What do you think happened in Area X?
3. What was the expedition trying to do?
4. Was the biologist's introverted, analytical temperament an asset or a hindrance on the expedition?
5. What were the symptoms of the biologist's infection? Does this affect the narrative? What happened to the other members of her team?
6. As the biologist recalled her husband and his role in the eleventh expedition as a medic, what did you discover about her vulnerabilities and about the strength of their relationship?
7. Are there any real-world figures today who take on a role like the Crawler's—a producer of words who controls an audience?
8. The word 'Annihilation' first appears on page 124 – in what context?
9. Do you think that advances in knowledge/science (particularly ecology and microbiology) are of interest to the author?
10. Did you like the book and would you suggest it to others?