

Jeff VanderMeer has explained in interviews that the idea for the *Southern Reach* trilogy came to him in a dream:

There's this tower-tunnel, I don't know if it's underground or not, and I'm walking down the steps, and I'm seeing living words glowing on the wall. And down below I know there's something, some creature . . . I think my writing brain at that point woke me up to write down the words on the wall, because my writing brain knew that if I saw the creature I wouldn't write the story.

When the novels first appeared in 2014, fans pounced on each instalment hungry for resolution, but it was the deftness with which the books kept resolution at bay, their extraordinary negative capability, that made them classics. Despite promises from his publishers that the surprise arrival of a fourth novel in the series would be its 'final word', VanderMeer has kept faith with his dream. *Absolution* finishes the story while keeping the nature of the creature hidden.

In *Annihilation*, the first novel in the series, four nameless women are sent to survey a contaminated exclusion zone located on an unidentified stretch of coastland. Area X, as the region is known, appears to contain nothing but pristine wilderness, a distant lighthouse, and a mysterious passage descending deep into the ground. As their interactions with the zone become progressively stranger, the women begin to realise that Area X is not a site, but a simulation – a virtual reality which imitates the landscape it colonises. But the replications this entity performs are always partial, such that it is impossible to predict just what will be absorbed, reflected or transformed by its touch. Area X resounds with uncanny horrors: doublings and doppelgangers; protrusions of inexplicable violence; scenes in which the boundaries between human, animal and landscape are gorily liquefied.

The *Southern Reach* novels, like all great science fiction, combine the energy of the thriller with the richness of myth. But the force exerted by each of these poles shifts as the

series develops. The second instalment, *Authority*, which focuses on the secret agency (the eponymous ‘Southern Reach’) whose job it is to monitor and repel Area X, often reads like a conventional spy novel, while the third, *Acceptance*, undoes the conventions on which such genres rely. In *Absolution*, however, we seem to be back on solid ground. The first of the book’s three parts, set twenty years before the manifestation of Area X, follows a team of biologists tasked with introducing a population of alligators into the ecosystem of the ‘Forgotten Coast’; the second centres on a hitherto minor character, Old Jim, who is now revealed to be a long-standing agent of the Southern Reach. It isn’t until the book’s final section that we return to Area X, and then only through the stimulant-addled eyes of Lowry, sole survivor of the first mission to investigate the zone and a delightfully dislikeable embodiment of masculine self-possession. The tenor of *Absolution*, which is full of shoot-ups, take-downs and experiments gone awry, is different from that of its predecessors. The dangers of its world are not the cosmic horrors of the Old Weird, but the homelier monstrosities depicted in works such as H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, which its author described as a ‘theological grotesque.’

VanderMeer’s output in the decade since the *Southern Reach* trilogy appeared – three novels and a novella – has leaned increasingly away from the theological and into the grotesque. *Absolution* exhibits the same fascination with biotechnology and psychological conditioning on display in *Borne* (2017) and *Hummingbird Salamander* (2021). But it shares some of the limitations of those books too. None of the writing in *Absolution* has the crisp, restrained quality of the best passages in the original trilogy, and VanderMeer indulges his fondness for dramatic pauses with countless line-breaks, not all of them warranted. Characters in the earlier instalments flickered between individual and function (‘the biologist’, ‘the psychologist’, ‘Control’), but in *Absolution* VanderMeer seems too attached to his creations to do anything but lovingly humanise them. This has the paradoxical effect of

flattening them into bland ventriloquists of their own emotional turmoil, especially in the bloated second part of the novel, where Old Jim is given to laboured musings: ‘What was a person, sometimes, but a wandering fire. But put the flames out, and what was left?’

Things liven up in the book’s final third, the narration of which feels, in its irreverent bombast, like a deliberate foil to the icy serenity of *Annihilation*. (The words ‘simp’, ‘trad’ or ‘fuckling’ couldn’t be countenanced in *Annihilation*, but they all appear in *Absolution*.) Here, VanderMeer reminds us what makes his work truly remarkable: his ability to find new ways to think about some of science fiction’s oldest questions. What would happen if we came across a being that was completely unlike us? Would we recognise it as such, or would we be unable to resist integrating it into an anthropic frame, making it a mirror of ourselves? And how can extreme alterity be represented in language without resorting to a Lovecraftian apophasis, the horror so great it can seemingly only ever be described as indescribable? The *Southern Reach* series approaches these questions by imagining a being whose otherness is expressed in its capacity to simulate our own reality; a being that is unintelligible not because it is radically unfamiliar but because it is somehow too much like us. The late, great Frederic Jameson maintained that the value of speculative fiction lay in its capacity not to represent unfamiliar worlds, but to dramatise our inability to perform such representations. But he also wrote of the ‘android cogito’: the way in which narratives of artificial or alien intelligence make it possible for us to acknowledge the automatic, robotic or unknowable aspects of our most private, most human experiences. We could understand Area X as a kind of unconscious, perhaps the ‘Anthropocene unconscious’, in which humanity’s disavowal of its continuity with nature issues in a monstrous return of the repressed.

Anxieties about the other have always haunted expansionist cultures. VanderMeer dramatises the paranoia that infuses America’s fascination with the alien: what if another being was to do to us what we have done to others? In *Absolution* Lowry is appalled by the

idea that ‘what they called Area X wanted the past, too,’ wanted it ‘in an automatic, thoughtless way’, so that ‘there could be no future but its future, no ability to adapt.’ If Area X ‘colonised the past’, Lowry thinks, then there would come ‘across the face of the Earth such change, such decay and stillness and absorption that how could the violence of that. . . the sheer negation of human life, not be understood as an extinction event.’ An event which would be an extinction of both past and present, an obliteration of the very means with which to construct a history, is an intolerable prospect – and yet such extinctions have, of course, happened many times in the course of human existence. ‘The fucking invaders had fucked it up to begin with,’ thinks Lowry, ‘with their pogroms and their shitty forts dumped on the landscape like they fell from the sky as alien spaceships.’ The descent of a real alien might seem like karmic retribution, were it not for the fact that, throughout the *Southern Reach* series, the question as to who the intruder really is here – Area X, or its human assailants – is never wholly settled.

The ten years since the *Southern Reach* trilogy first appeared have done little to blunt the horror of its vision. The region of northern Florida that inspired VanderMeer’s conception of the Forgotten Coast has become a microcosm of 21st-century delirium: an epicentre of environmental catastrophe, climate denial and the growing menace of fascism in America. The simulations that teem through our virtual worlds – chatbots and deepfakes, automated accounts, content ceaselessly generated by black box neural nets – constitute an Area X of our own making, a distorted mirror of our collective thought. And we seem to have learned little from a global pandemic that might have been our last, best hope of coming to terms with the precarious realities of ecological interdependence. Like many others, I first came across the *Southern Reach* trilogy in the burnt-out lockdown summer of 2020, but it was only while reading *Absolution* that I realised quite how prescient VanderMeer’s vision of alien virality had been. In *Acceptance*, one character suggests that Area X might be a kind of

communication device sent out by a long-extinct extraterrestrial civilisation – a signal written in a language which, rather than symbolically encoding a message, invades and transforms its recipient directly. VanderMeer continually asks us to think of language as just one means of information transfer among many, replicating ideas as a cell replicates its genetic data. In a world understood this way – not bisected into (unnatural) signs and their (natural) referents, but composed of various systems of information transfer – all communicative behaviour, indeed all living processes, might be modelled as forms of infection or infestation. Area X certainly acts like a virus, invading and transforming its host to survive, but it is also a kind of defensive body, fighting foreign elements by engulfing and eliminating them. Once again, we cannot be sure who is colonising whom.

In the early days of the pandemic, the much-echoed meme ‘humans are the virus’ was condemned for its embrace of environmental nihilism, even perhaps eco-fascism. Towards the end of *Absolution*, VanderMeer too flirts with the idea of extinction as a sublime release. Lowry looks out across the simulated wilderness of Area X and feels that ‘it was the imperfections of the reals that stood out, that was . . . inhuman, wrong.’ The most ‘cracked, fucked-up thing’, he realises, is that ‘if granted the wish of any other reality . . . it would be worse . . . than there.’ But Lowry’s depiction of his fellow brigadiers as ‘inhuman’ should alert us to the fact that this is not a crude anti-humanism, but a suggestion that what we value most about humanity might have nothing to do with our ontological primacy, our status as more real or more ‘perfect’ than the beings we live alongside and co-create. The problem with the idea that ‘humans are the virus’ is not, *Absolution* suggests, that the comparison is dangerous, but that it’s trivial. Of course we are virus-like, because to be alive is to invade others, to contaminate.

In the ten years since the publication of *Annihilation*, ‘New Weird Fiction’, once a fringe genre, has congealed into a respectable province of literary culture – thanks in no small

part to the influence of the *Southern Reach* novels. VanderMeer is sceptical. He sees the proliferation of conferences, commentaries and homages as analogous, in its mollifying way, to the branch of popular climate fiction he refers to as ‘The Author Just Discovered Trees’. ‘All fiction is political,’ he wrote last year in an essay for *Esquire*, ‘But it is not a policy map.’ *Absolution*, in its bawdiness, its goriness, its persistent lack of subtlety, feels – deliberately or not – like a snub to the solemnity of the seminar room. ‘Fiction as an art form,’ he writes, has ‘other obligations to fulfil than, say, those embodied by a scientist, who does not make things up for a living.’ The horrors of the present confer many kinds of obligation on us, but fiction can’t bear them all. In the aftermath of the original trilogy’s success, VanderMeer founded the Sunshine State Biodiversity Group, a nonprofit dedicated to rewilding the Floridian landscape.