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University of Minnesota Press, 2018. 207pp.

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With a title that conveys the New Weird's subversion of even Speculative fiction's generic tenants, *None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*, by Benjamin J. Robertson, considers Jeff VanderMeer's distinct brand of New Weird fiction, and its hallmarks and importance in a late capitalist, anthropocentric world that every day becomes less habitable and weirder for humanity. Robertson's scholarship, through careful consideration of genre tenants as well as the usage of VanderMeer's (and others) fiction as an authorial grounding, tackles the New Weird and Weird's relationship with Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror, all under political auspices that attempt to explain these genres and subgenres in terms of borders, spaces, and an ever-changing environmental worldscape.

Through his text, Robertson takes on the idea that VanderMeer's fiction is distinct even among the fantastically unique realms of the New Weird fiction genre. Weird fiction has morphed and transformed with the culture it is situated in, from Edgar Allan Poe to China Miéville, and Robertson places VanderMeer as the newest in a line of New Weird icons with his *Southern Reach Trilogy* comprised of *Annihilation* (2014)*, Authority* (2014)*,* and *Acceptance* (2014). VanderMeer's New Weird, argues Roberson, does more than just subvert cultural norms. Indeed, VanderMeer does not even take these norms themselves for granted and thus his subversion is one step removed. The fantastic worlds conjured by the author, in Robertson's estimation, can help the audience glimpse beyond anthropocentric humanity and realize a world of possibility beyond the human, beyond a species seemingly hellbent on destroying the aspects of this Earth that make it habitable for not only our life, but for any life.

VanderMeer's fiction, Robertson contends, "cannot be reduced to any generic framework" (21). Yet, he admits, the parameters of the Weird and New Weird can help explain and frame VanderMeer's novels in ways that Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror cannot. Unlike these other genres, the New Weird is marked by unexplained occurrences, moments of extreme confusion, and ultimately a disavowal to ever explain such fantastic occurrences, preferring instead to muse on their fallout rather than their origin. Robertson uses VanderMeer's unique brand of genre-fusion prose to comment and argue on the place and purpose of such writing in our modern, Anthropocene era. Robertson utilizes this current epoch to periodize VanderMeer's fiction as well as situate it in terms of a reaction to humanity's dominant and acquisitional influence on both the climate and environment.

Finally, Robertson argues that the author's fiction displays "fantastic materiality, a materiality that manifests in weird fiction . . . rather than one assumed to be represented . . . in fictions of realist or mimetic leanings" (4). In other words, VanderMeer's worlds do not represent an established reality but rather one constructed on its own terms that does not necessarily have direct allegorical connections to our world. Yet, these fantastic realms allow a reader to understand human thought and modern history under newly considered vantages by relating the fantastic to borders, liminality, and the inherent irrationality of climate change ignorance in the face of overwhelming evidence. Robertson contends that fantastic materiality is woven throughout VanderMeer's novels and is one of the important artistic inherences of their work.

Robertson is particularly well suited to present this argument about VanderMeer's fiction. An Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado, Robertson's writing has appeared in publications such as *Science Fiction Studies* and *The Journal for the Fantastic in the Arts*. His work and teaching focus on genre fiction, specifically in terms of the fantastic. Robertson writes from the perspective of a scholar who has a deep and abiding interest in the Fantastika genres. This evident consideration for Weird Fiction serves to support his scholarship.

The book itself is divided into four primary chapters, with an introduction and an afterword by VanderMeer himself. The first chapter engages with conventional norms, seeks to define and explain fantastic materiality, and goes on to relate the Anthropocene to genre hybridity, particularly to consider how this notion arguably represents a reaction from artists to the epoch. In so doing, Robertson explains that the New Weird acts in opposition to the "the Tolkienesque heroic fantasy" (23). Steph Swainston, a Weird fiction practitioner upon who Robertson frequently relies to comment on VanderMeer and the genre as a whole, considers Weird fiction to have one foot squarely in modern street culture and the other foot in ancient mythologies. Indeed, Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) serves as such an example. Additionally, setting in primary and secondary worlds is considered with special relation to the monsters that might occupy such spaces in the New Weird.

The second chapter takes the fictional city of Veniss—from VanderMeer Veniss cycle comprising of the novel *Veniss Underground* (2003) and a number of short stories—as a symbolic point of reference in a discussion about setting. Much of *None of This is Normal* follows the thread of place or location in VanderMeer's novels and this chapter tackles that consideration most directly. Veniss is unfixed in time and unfixed in space,

even within its fictions, and so as a point of reference, it is an ironic choice. Robertson challenges and explores "setting" on a conceptual level. Next, he relates setting-related plot limitations with characteristics of the historical period of the Anthropocene. Above all, he argues that what he calls the "Veniss Milieu" illustrates fantastic materiality in its representation as cities and people as incomplete, blurred figures. They may interact in ways that cities and people in our world cannot, and thus serve to show a world both divorced from our concepts of the Anthropocene as well as wrapped up in a climate-apocalypse of its own.

Ambergris, a fictional city that is the center of three of VanderMeer's novels—*City of Saints and Madmen* (2002), *Shriek: An Afterworld* (2007), and *Finch* (2009)—is the subject of Chapter Three. Generic Fantasy and concepts of secondary worlds are discussed in relation to postmodern fiction. Ultimately, Robertson compares and contrasts the fantastic materiality displayed by Veniss and Ambergris. Building off the Veniss Milieu of Chapter Two, Robertson compellingly argues that Ambergris is a unique setting that manages to combine Fantasy with postmodernist fiction—a feat that the foundational fantastic genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror cannot manage.

Chapter Four centers on the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, mentioned above, books that explore Earth and humanity's intersection with a weird space called Area X. The humans who encounter Area X are inherently unable to understand it, but similar to the recently-made-weird wildlife and vegetation surrounding them, begin to transform in accordance with these impossible phenomena. Robertson shows that the *Southern Reach Trilogy* explores the gap between human understanding and utterly alien ontology. Monsters are again taken up in this chapter in perhaps a less effective manner, especially in that Robertson does not utilize Noël Carroll's conception of the monster from *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), a text that confronts monstrosity in terms of borders and liminality in a similar fashion as *None of This is Normal*. The conclusion looks at VanderMeer's novel *Borne* (2017), where Robertson contends that *Borne* is the author's most explicitly political statement on climate change.

The strengths of this book lie in Robertson's understanding of VanderMeer's work and that of important authors in the surrounding speculative genres. Robertson has an encyclopedic ability to call upon and reference other authors in the New Weird and its surrounding fields. The delineations and edgings of the New Weird are ill-defined and thus it takes a significant depth of to connect authors who, on the surface, seem to be occupying different generic spaces entirely. Robertson cites authors as diverse as Clive Barker and Stephen R. Donaldson, a grounding which enables them to show VanderMeer's locale within this fantastic world. Yet, as Robertson points out, the genres Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror all bring to bear fantastic worlds or spaces that create, or help to create, literary conversation with modern culture. He alleges that the difference in the New Weird is its relation to our contemporary anthropocentrism and the genre's push to de-anthropomorphize our world. Succinctly, the Earth will go on without humanity, without even the vaguest suggestion of humanity, and that this species-centrism is successfully dispelled within the New Weird in ways that other fantastic genres struggle with.

Robertson's work examines, argues, and ultimately recontextualizes Jeff VanderMeer's fiction in *None of This is Normal*. Not only is this text a strong work of scholarship in argument, structure, and clarity, but it is also written with an attention to detail regarding VanderMeer's fantastic worlds that can only be borne of evident admiration for the author's craft. After reading Robertson's book, one cannot help but think that, like the sentient fungal gray caps in Ambergris, VanderMeer's fiction "infiltrates and fills the spaces between worlds, spaces no one else has thought to navigate for fear of falling into the abyss" (104).

About the Author

Jake Brewer is a is a PhD candidate at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he teaches creative writing, British Literature, and composition. His research focuses on the interplay between subgenres in speculative fiction.