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Democracy Dies in Darkness

ANNIHILATION, by Jeff VanderMeer

By Sara Sklaroff

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About 50 pages into Jeff VanderMeer's new novel, "[Annihilation](#)," I felt the onset of a panic attack. "Annihilation" is successfully creepy, an old-style gothic horror novel set in a not-too-distant future. The best bits turn your mind inside out.

The action centers on Area X, the site of an earlier catastrophe that, while widely known, remains mysterious, "lingering in many people's minds like a dark fairy tale, something they did not want to think about too closely." But our narrator — a biologist who, like everyone else in the book, is never named — *must* think about it. Along with an anthropologist, a surveyor and a psychologist, she has been sent by the government to study Area X.

Their first big surprise is the discovery of a structure not on their maps: a submerged bunker. They can't even agree on what to call it. The other three refer to it as a tunnel, but the biologist says she feels compelled to call it a tower. It turns out to be something else altogether. This failure of perception is one of the central themes of "Annihilation." Things are often not what they seem, whether because of the catastrophe, intentional subterfuge, hypnosis, infection or other, unseen forces. The biologist says she is on the expedition because she specializes in "transitional environments." Area X promises "marine life that had adjusted to the brackish freshwater and which at low tide swam far up the natural canals formed by the reeds, sharing the same environment with otters and deer." This is fascinating in theory, but not so charming in reality when sea creatures start acting like animals, the animals like people, and the fungi seem sentient.

Like the expeditions that preceded them, this group does not fare well. "We were scientists, trained to observe natural phenomena and the results of human activity," the biologist says. "We had not been trained to encounter what appeared to be the uncanny." And as in a classic work of horror, the "monster" they find inside the tower-tunnel is not even as terrifying as the biologist's discovery that almost everything she had been told about Area X was fundamentally untrue.

VanderMeer has already written two sequels, "[Authority](#)" and "[Acceptance](#)," which will be published later in 2014. Amazingly soon, in other words — but, if you ask me, not soon enough.

Sklaroff is a Washington-based writer.

ANNIHILATION

By Jeff VanderMeer

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