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*None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (2018) by Benjamin J. Robertson

Review by Kerry Dodd

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# **NONE OF THIS IS NORMAL: THE FICTION OF JEFF VANDERMEER (2018) BY BENJAMIN J. ROBERTSON**

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Robertson, Benjamin J. *None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 208 pp.

In our era of cataclysmic climate shifts, wide-spread species extinction, and such problematic terms as 'post-truth' entering current usage, the very suggestion of a 'normality' would seem so estranged from contemporary existence that its very definition has been fractured at the foundations. For many humans, the disruption of personal, cultural, and political norms – or that which has been accepted as a consistent reality – is a moment of shock, one which causes them to re-calibrate their perception and realise a far more alien 'real' than the one they were previously cognisant of. Such moments are not only ones of confusion, but can equally incite ontological terror; a concept perfectly encapsulated by Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman in *Global Weirding* (2016) who suggest that the apparent weirdness of the current ecological moment causes a situation in which we

"are now, all of us, in the dark about the precise nature of the world in which we live, still waiting for the empirical data, charts, and statistical trend-lines to confirm what we all know, that things just aren't the way they used to be, something has gone *wrong*" (10, original emphasis).

It is in precisely this aperture that Benjamin J. Robertson positions Weird Fiction as a strand of Fantastika that engages and challenges the very notions of normality. Indeed, it is not any natural or ecological measure that has been transgressed here but rather human perception that is undermined. Robertson suggests that the Weird is almost predisposed to such an inquiry, that its "defining feature may well be its refusal to assume any norm" (1). To elucidate and explain this proposition, the author turns to the work of Jeff VanderMeer as a mediation of all that is strange, weird, and uncanny. Given VanderMeer's escalating status as a prime auteur of the Weird – not only due to the commercial success of *The Southern Reach* (2014) trilogy but also the popularity of the Netflix adaptation of *Annihilation* (2014) – and as an author who is distinctly interested in engaging with non-human incommensurability, it would seem a crime that there has, until now, been no extended study of his fiction. It is precisely into this void that Robertson steps, offering a critical, considered, and generally well-balanced discussion of each of VanderMeer's milieus. *None of this is Normal* (2018) highlights not only the salience of the author to the Weird, but also the vital urgency of challenging what humanity even considers to be 'normal.'

Although this is a commendable study of VanderMeer's fiction, it is worth noting that this is not an exhaustive discussion of his work and its critical relevance. Rather, Robertson's focus is all the stronger for picking a particular lens through which to reflect upon such a wide corpus of literature, one that he defines in relation to "fantastic materiality" (4). Although briefly alluded to in the introduction, the interrogation of this terminology forms the main component of the first substantial chapter: "Ambergris Rules: Genre and Materiality in the Anthropocene." Opening with a brief literature review of the Weird, Robertson highlights an engagement with "a materiality that manifests by way of weird fiction, fantasy, and horror rather than one assumed to be represented or representable in fiction of realist or mimetic leanings" (4). This definition guides Robertson's interrogation and is applied to VanderMeer's milieu through ruminations on the Anthropocene, the genre hybridity of the Weird and New Weird, and speculative realist or new materialist thought, where each attempts to challenge anthropocentric dominance. While a compelling argument overall towards both VanderMeer and the Weird, this is a particularly impressive range of topics to discuss alongside the fiction itself and sadly, at times, their very capaciousness outstrips sufficient discussion. For while Robertson does provide a compelling contextual introduction, the reading of the New Weird as a form of Anthropocene fiction risks a blinkered view. Certainly, there is a particular resonance between an ecological concern and such fiction that proposes many insightful suggestions, yet such an approach should not be afraid to appreciate that there are many other multivalent and vibrant engagements with such texts. Finally, while the terming of "fantastic materiality" is undeniably a cogent rumination on VanderMeer's fiction, there is little consideration of material culture or object ontology studies and, consequently, the overt anthropocentric critique here feels divorced from wider materialist studies. Despite this, Robertson's introduction is an engaging reflection on the legacy and impact of the Weird and one which helps provide a rigid guide to the upcoming negotiation of VanderMeer's work. The prime intent here is to propose other ways of thinking; this is not an all-encompassing discussion of VanderMeer but rather one which is chiefly interested in how "VanderMeer's fiction suggests that there may be other ways to proceed" (11).

This paradigm is put to the test in the second chapter – "Let me tell you about the City: The Veniss Milieu and the Problem of Setting" – where Robertson engages with VanderMeer's first major fictional creation, Veniss. Robertson praises the heterogeneity of this work that "resists setting and the critical and historicist assumptions on which setting depends" in order to encourage the reader to composite an overarching comprehension by actively reading between the texts and the structural order in which they are situated (43). Focusing on a far-future city or region, topographies which are concurrent throughout VanderMeer's work, any concrete understanding of setting is riddled with discontinuities – moments of dissonance which "resists ordering weirdly" (50). Given the longer anthropocentric critique at the heart of Robertson's response, this engagement with the fluidity or non-human incommensurability of setting is a fitting negotiation that does not seek to impose a static interpretation of Veniss but rather highlights how "[the city] only recedes, leaving in its wake the formerly marginalized and forgotten material world that previously existed beyond human concern even as it conditioned humanity's every action and thought" (69). A powerful rumination on non-human engagement indeed, but one where, due to the absence of a more protracted materialist critique, the chapter fails to offer an interrogative discussion of the after-effects of such contact.

The third chapter – “No one makes it out, there may be a way: Ambergris as Words and Worlds” – may from the outset seem like a confusing backtrack to the texts discussed in the first chapter, but rather provides a more protracted analysis of the Ambergris setting through materiality and textuality. Focusing on the chasm between material and textual representation, Robertson proposes that the Ambergris milieu offers “a materiality not opposed to textuality but one based on it, a materiality and textuality that are one and the same thing” (74). Authorship thus emerges as a core tenant to this series, particularly as it is only the final novel – *Finch* (2009) – that is notionally authored by VanderMeer and equally framed through the diegetic inference that the Grey Caps – fungoid creatures that used to inhabit Ambergris – are influencing human action from the subterranean depths. Robertson argues that such inferences outline the negation of human questioning – a topic that returns in *The Southern Reach* trilogy – and that “Ambergris undermines the humanist assumption that questions can be asked and answered” and that “any question presupposes a materiality conditioning a subject who asks a question” (85). The overt textuality of the Ambergris series thus becomes a form of materiality, one which Robertson reads against the supposed “naivety” of characters such as Sam in *The Lords of the Rings* (1952) – who self-consciously voices his own position in a much longer story as a recognition of Fantasy’s grammatical construction (81). The postmodern juxtaposition of the title – of there being simultaneously no way and a possible way out of textuality – is thus an appropriate conclusion to appreciating the challenge of thinking outside anthropocentrism without retreating from confronting such practice.

The final chapter – “There is nothing but border, there is no border: Area X and the Weird Planet” – from the very outset extends such a call to the influential *Southern Reach* trilogy, which is centred on ‘Area X’: a voracious topography that appears on Earth and slowly subsumes anything it encompasses into “pristine wilderness” (*Acceptance*, 95). The *Southern Reach* organisation epitomises the redundancy of understanding such a phenomenon through anthropocentric framing. Indeed, the repeated dispatching of expeditions into this space results in far more questions than answers. Robertson reads such a failure alongside Area X’s ‘defeat’ of delineating borders between ‘this’ and ‘that,’ of being “an adifference or abdifference,” of “an uncontainable space that is nothing but a bordering without border, a limiting that cannot be limited” (116, 117). As compelling a reading of Anthropocene anxieties as this is, Robertson’s analysis feels limited in scope and fails to either engage with such features as the prominent ‘tower/tunnel’ or how such aforementioned conceptual beyondness may be sufficiently engaged. Certainly, the latter is not a failure on Robertson’s behalf *per se*, but rather one embedded in the very anthropocentrism of representative systems. The omission of discussing wider materialist or object-orientated theories alongside Robertson’s “fantastic materiality” however again re-surfaces and becomes a noticeable absence.

VanderMeer’s *Borne* (2017), and its accompanying novella *The Strange Bird: A Borne Story* (2017) are thus left to be discussed in Robertson’s reflective conclusion. Both take place in a future in which humanity has already been defeated; a moment which, for Robertson, represents a “human disappointment” encapsulated by the non-human dethroning the human as “the ruler of the earth” and “the disappointment of ever being humans at all” (144). What is arguably the most political of VanderMeer’s fiction responds to the very crisis of climate change deniers and the consequences

of such a world view. As Robertson cogently suggests, “they tell the story of what happens after aftermath, after the loss of solution no longer poses a problem because the form of life for whom such a loss represents a problem has become impossible” (157). Amongst such a landscape it is rather the non-human that takes centre stage. This section is, however, noticeably the shortest and thus – while punctuated with such rewarding insights – noticeably struggles to both negotiate the complexities of *Borne* and *A Strange Bird* while sufficiently reflecting on the critical development of “fantastic materiality” thus far.

*None of this is Normal* is aptly closed with an “Afterword” by VanderMeer himself. The Weird has a long history of authors critiquing the very field they operate within, from H. P. Lovecraft’s “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927) to China Miéville’s copious reflective essays. VanderMeer himself is no stranger to this process, particularly given that he co-edited two salient Weird anthologies – *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2011) and *The New Weird* (2008) – with his partner, Ann VanderMeer. Including an authorial reflection at the end of such a text is surely a brave move but offers an apposite reflection upon “fantastic materiality.” VanderMeer has hardly been silent to literary criticism, however, and such assertions that “literary criticism is not for the author, but at the same time the author cannot be faulted for rebelling against a clear mis-reading,” cannot help but feel somewhat provocative (160). Yet, in agreement with VanderMeer, certainly “I find much here that fascinates me” (161). Robertson provides an insightful, well-considered, and compelling reflection upon VanderMeer’s work and his notion of “fantastic materiality” is sure to germinate productive critical debate. It is comforting to hear that such reading is central to VanderMeer’s own writing practice and will go on to fuel his subsequent work as well. Yet the omission of connecting this discussion with material culture studies or object-ontology, alongside some rather egregious generalisations regarding Fantastika, meant that while indeed there is “much here that fascinates me,” these are, sadly, brilliant shards in an otherwise fragmented argument.

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## BIONOTE

**Kerry Dodd** is a post-doctoral researcher at Lancaster University, UK, and Acting Head Editor for *Fantastika Journal*. His thesis, entitled “The Archaeological Weird: Excavating the Non-human,” examined the intersection between archaeology and Weird fiction. Focusing on the cultural production of the artefact encounter, his thesis explored how archaeological framings can offer a re-conceptualisation of object ontology through the Weird. Kerry also works more widely in the fields of: Science Fiction (particularly Cosmic Horror and Cyberpunk), the Gothic, and glitch aesthetics.