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## ANNIHILATION: A BOOK REVIEW

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Samantha Bolf, Uncategorized. ·

This article first appeared in The Narrative Issue.

Written by: **Samantha Bolf**

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We were neither what we had been nor what we would become.”  
—*Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer

The narrative of *Annihilation*, novel one in the Southern Reach trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer, is difficult to summarize in an article or less. It would be difficult to summarize in multiple articles: the harder you try to unravel the machinations behind the mythology of *Annihilation*, the faster the task begins to feel insurmountable. Much like H.P. Lovecraft’s Eldritch monsters, or the never-ending labyrinth in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, VanderMeer inspires terror and fascination in equal measures by playing on our instinctive fear of the unknown. *Annihilation* begins with the members of the twelfth expedition put together by the mysterious Southern Reach agency. The select few are to be sent into Area X, a site of ecological disaster surrounded by a border that can only be crossed

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under hypnosis.

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There is a tower that is also a tunnel, and there are monsters, and there is a lighthouse, but nothing else is discovered that tells a story the reader can decipher with certainty.

The expedition team is made up of four women, all identified by their professions: a biologist, an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a psychologist. All four members are given journals with which to record their experiences while exploring Area X, but the narrative is told solely through the biologist's viewpoint. That is all the information the reader has at the start of the novel. It is about all the information the reader has at the end of the novel. As the expedition begins to witness the horrible and wonderful mysteries alike that lurk within Area X, so do we. There is a tower that is also a tunnel, and there are monsters, and there is a lighthouse, but nothing else is discovered that tells a story the reader can decipher with certainty. Any form of concrete comprehension remains elusive to the final sentence.

The biologist, whose name is never revealed, leads the reader through the ecological landscape of Area X. She states at the beginning of her journal that she is following in the footsteps of her late husband, a member of the eleventh expedition, who died of cancer months after arriving back from Area X. The same fate befell the rest of the eleventh expedition—all came back unharmed, and died from cancer months later. This is not nearly as violent as the fate that awaited the members of the first expedition, or the second, or the third.

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The questions that continue to pile upon the readers of *Annihilation* are much scarier when they are left for the reader to obsess over.

But the biologist never seems outwardly wary or afraid of what could befall her, nor is she seeking vengeance or answers regarding her husband's demise. Her voice remains clinical in spite of, or perhaps because of, the events she describes. She hardly ever falters in her

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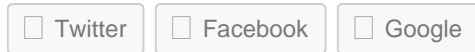
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steadiness, slowly revealing pieces of her backstory as she traverses and attempts to understand Area X and the potential monstrosities within it. The identity of the biologist, the motivations of the biologist, beyond what they need to be in Area X, are barely touched upon—despite our status as inhabitants of a narrative she is crafting. Instead, as she leads the reader through Area X, both guide and reader travel deeper and deeper into the unknown, and both the biologist and Area X become more and more unknowable.

This does not detract from the experience the novel provides, however. In fact, it is the experience meant for the audience. Similar to the Minotaur at the center of the labyrinth in *House of Leaves*, the questions that continue to pile upon the readers of *Annihilation* are much scarier when they are left for the reader to obsess over. After all, *Annihilation* is the first in the Southern Reach trilogy, and we have a lot left to read and understand.

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