



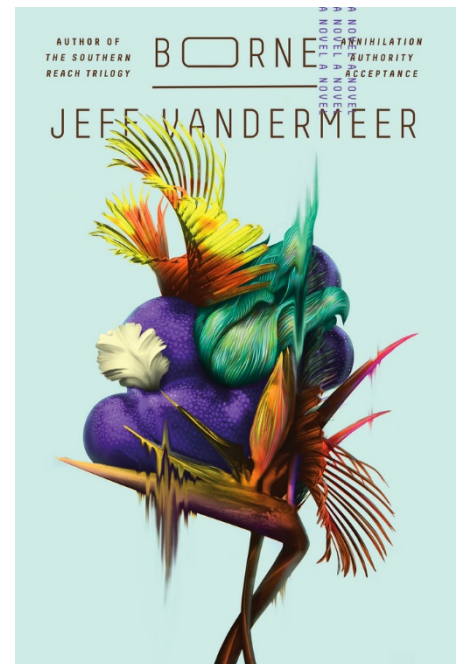
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Borne

by Jeff VanderMeer

Florida-based writer Jeff VanderMeer—“the weird Thoreau” (*The New Yorker*)—won the World Fantasy Award three times, as well as the Shirley Jackson Award and Nebula Award for his bestselling trilogy *The Southern Reach*, which begins with the book *Annihilation* that was adapted to the screen in 2018. His novel *Borne* about a woman and a mysterious creature “is a story of loving self-sacrifice, hallucinatory beauty, and poisonous trust...a tale of mothers and monsters” (*The Washington Post*). Named one of the best books of the year by more than a dozen major news outlets, *Borne* is “a thorough marvel,” writes author Colson Whitehead. It challenges “the way you think about nature, science, and the future” (the *Chicago Review of Books*). It’s filled with “stunning imagery” (*Booklist*, starred review) and “a mix of absurdity, horror, and grace” (*San Francisco Chronicle*). “Think of *Borne* as a retelling of Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.*, or the character arc of Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. It’s the story of humanity making contact with something strange, alien, artificial, but yet possessed of a personality, a sense of humor, a drive to find love and friendship and community” (*The Rumpus*).



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

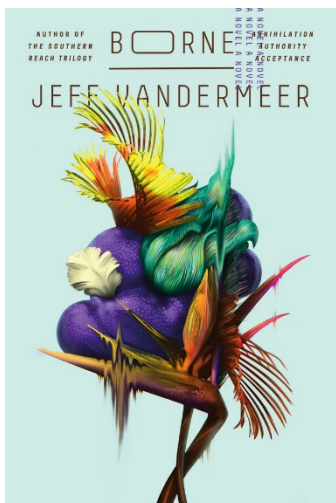
For more information about the NEA Big Read, visit www.arts.gov/partnerships/nea-big-read

For information about the NEA, visit www.arts.gov

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About the Book

"When we think of living things, what is 'product,' what is 'art,' and what is 'entity?'" – Jeff VanderMeer in the *Chicago Review of Books*



In an unnamed city of rubble and ruin stands a building once owned by a biotech company from which hybrid creatures have escaped and are now fighting for survival. They must compete for resources with the remaining humans who came to the city as a last resort, fleeing a decimated homeland, or were brought to the Company before it went defunct. The mix of living things roam the streets, scavenging for food while trying to remain hidden from Mord, a massive, murderous, flying bear. Among them is a young woman named Rachel who one day is inexplicably drawn to a small green living blob that she carries back to the home she shares with her lover, Wick. She names her new charge "Borne" and nurtures him as he grows in size and evolves into a being worthy of her love, and fear. The novel *Borne* by Jeff VanderMeer "begins innocently enough: girl meets strange plantlike creature," writes *Esquire*. But "this is Walden gone horribly wrong."

Borne reminds Rachel of the marine life from her island home, before it was devastated by rising seas and she found herself adrift and alone in an unfamiliar city until Wick took her in. They live in the Balcony Cliffs, a secret sanctuary overlooking a poisoned river at the edge of the city. There Wick grows psychoactive biotech beetles that he and Rachel use to barter with those who want to put them in their ears and rid themselves of bad memories. Like everyone else in the city, Rachel and Wick live in fear of Mord who was once the company's human henchman and is now as big as a five-story building with claws and fangs and a hunger for death and destruction. "He's very literal and real, but also a little like the freak storm on the horizon or the missile that explodes and levels a city: the unexpected force that rips away the world you thought you knew in a blink of an eye," VanderMeer told *Tor.com*.

To Rachel and Wick, Mord's most powerful and power hungry human rival is in some ways just as threatening. Known only as the Magician, she wears a biotech cloak that

renders her invisible and lords over a roving posse of vicious, genetically altered children. "I felt not that she was inhabiting the role of the mad scientist, but that she was definitely of the opinion that we could mold the world around us to make it a better place," VanderMeer told *PowellsBooks.blog*. "Sometimes, when you think that too strongly, or it becomes too much like a religion or an ideology to you, then you lose sight of the inhumanness of what you might wind up doing."

Rachel tries desperately to remain safe from Mord and the Magician and other threats, but she also desires more from her existence, like love and companionship. She finds them with Wick and then with Borne, for whom she develops maternal feelings once he evolves from something akin to a potted plant to a childlike being with an insatiable appetite and senses beyond the five that humans possess. In time, he learns to communicate, but also acts mischievously, craves attention, and makes mistakes. "As improbable a task as it may seem to make a faceless, squid-like creature lovable, VanderMeer does it," writes *The New Yorker*. "He asks the thousands of maddening questions familiar to any adult who has spent much time with a four-year-old (Why is water wet?) and many that are unanswerable for reasons peculiar to Borne himself ('Am I a person?'). Yes, it's a bit creepy that Borne, for all his weirdness, has obviously been engineered to appeal to Rachel, but the same could be said of human babies, with their oversized eyes and adorable cooings." "I had so much fun writing Borne's dialogue as he evolved," VanderMeer told the *Chicago Review of Books*. "Rachel's conversations with Borne, especially early on, are like my conversations with my daughter or my grandson."

"'You are a person,' I told him. 'But like a person, you can be a weapon, too.'" – from *Borne*

The more Borne develops, the more independent-minded and powerful he becomes. He "incorporates" living beings into him that don't ever come out, and uses his polymorphous abilities to change shape and spy on others. While Wick is cautious and cold to Borne from the outset, Rachel's awakening to his darker nature and her own vulnerability is, at times, slow and painful. As Borne struggles with his conflicting motivations, he threatens the safety of Rachel and Wick's sanctuary just as Mord, the Magician, and other threats outside the sanctuary gain momentum.

"We are so ignorant of life on Earth it is painful sometimes," VanderMeer told Gulf Coast. "If we are less intentional than we think, but a bee, for example, might be slightly more intentional than we think, then suddenly the gap between us and animals, which was always artificial anyway, becomes much reduced." At the back of the paperback version of *Borne*, as well as online, one can find a bestiary of illustrated imaginary creatures described in the novel. "We hope you enjoy this exclusive peek behind the scenes

of *Borne*," writes VanderMeer in the introduction to the online bestiary. "And by 'we' I mean 'me and whatever form of biotech has already colonized that me.'"

"There are a lot of horrible things that happen in the book," VanderMeer explains, "but I do see it ultimately as a hopeful novel" (*PowellsBooks.blog*). "I wanted to examine...how we carve out a place for the good that is within us, even as we have to deal with the bad" (the *Chicago Review of Books*).

About the Author

Jeff VanderMeer (b. 1968)

"I think a lot of life on earth seems very beautiful, but also very alien. I like to examine it because I think it's important and because it's sometimes underappreciated." – Jeff VanderMeer in an interview with *PowellBooks.blog*



Photo by Kyle Cassidy

Jeff VanderMeer was born in Pennsylvania but lived much of his early childhood in the Fiji Islands—1,100 nautical miles north of New Zealand in the South Pacific Ocean. His father is an entomologist and research chemist who went to Fiji to study rhinoceros beetles until he turned his attention to fire ants; his mother was a biological illustrator before computers took over. His stepmother is a leading researcher on Lupus and even his daughter now is an environmental sustainability consultant. "I'm the least educated person in my family," claims VanderMeer (*PowellsBooks.blog*).

A lifelong birdwatcher, VanderMeer began keeping a birding journal as a young child, then turned his attention to other types of journaling, which led to writing poetry and retelling fables and folktales. Many of his early experiences in Fiji have influenced his writing, including getting lost on a reef at night and visiting the island's botanical garden, where there were "eels going through the mire and all kinds of other creatures that you couldn't figure out what they were" (*PowellsBooks.blog*). After six months of travel throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe, his family moved back to the U.S. and settled in Gainesville, Florida, in a house with an overgrown pool in the backyard. Nature, VanderMeer says, has always been part of his world, albeit too close for

comfort at times. "Being charged by otters and wild boars, stalked by a Florida Panther, and jumping over an alligator have certainly been memorable experiences" (*Tor.com*).

VanderMeer published his first poem at the age of 13. "I had sent out 99 poems to 99 literary journals and they'd all come back with form rejections just a few months before" (*PowellsBooks.blog*). In his teens he was introduced to the work of author Angela Carter—his "patron saint" (*The Atlantic Monthly*)—and got inspired. "I wrote and published a lot of poems, some short stories, started and edited a literary magazine, ran a community reading series, and wrote two terrible fantasy novels" (*Bookish.com*).

After a series of day jobs "that often were *like Lord of the Flies* with middle management," he became a full-time writer (*PowellsBooks.blog*). Since then, he has published numerous books, including the critically acclaimed *Southern Reach Trilogy: Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance* (FSG, 2014), which won the Shirley Jackson Award and Nebula Award and sparked a movie in 2018 starring Natalie Portman based on the first book. Other books include *Borne* (MCD/FSG, 2017); *The Strange Bird* (MCD/FSG, 2018), a novella set in the world of *Borne*; and *Wonderbook: the Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction* (Harry N. Abrams, 2018). A three-time World Fantasy Award winner and 15-time nominee, VanderMeer and his wife Ann teach, give lectures, and have coedited such anthologies as *The Time Traveler's Almanac* (Tor Books, 2014), *The Big Book of Science Fiction* (Vintage, 2016), *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (Tor Books, 2012), and *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology* (PM Press, 2015). Together they began and still support Shared Worlds, a teen science fiction/fantasy writing camp in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

"My best time to write," says VanderMeer, "is right after coffee and breakfast—four eggs because, full disclosure: I'm really a komodo dragon—and that's because then I'm

energized but not so awake that the critical voice clicks on, the voice that sometimes says, ‘Don’t write that,’ or ‘Man, that sentence is terrible—you should give up and go pet the cats’” (*Buzzfeed*). “I write longhand usually, then type that up, print it out, edit it with a black pen, and then rewrite that in longhand, type it up—and repeat” (*Lit Reactor*). He might take a break to read through heartfelt letters from readers or examine fan art and other items readers have sent him, including “pounds and pounds” of dried squid and a “stuffed-animal meerkat head glued to a plate” (*Bookish.com*). Asked once what fictional character he’d most like to have a drink with, VanderMeer pointed out that characters are just words on a page. “They don’t have the proper digestive tract to imbibe any liquids. No doubt you’d have to hold the glass up to their faces and the stuff would

just dribble out the back of their mouth-holes to the floor” (*Lit Reactor*).

VanderMeer moved to Tallahassee, Florida, in his mid-20s and has lived there ever since. “A three-minute drive and I’m at a public park that has a biosphere that includes owls, tortoises, and hawks and fish and turtles,” he explains. “A fifteen-minute drive and I’m in the wilderness.... You are always part of your environment, and that environment is full of plants and animals” (*Chicago Review of Books*). Today, he likes to spend most of his time “puttering around in the yard” where there are a “very polite possum and raccoon that come by at night and help clean up any extra bird seed.” Writing and books, he says, and “my life with my wife Ann and the yard are what make me happiest” (*Chicago Review of Books*).

Discussion Questions

1. We are introduced to the world of *Borne* through Rachel, a protagonist who tells us from the start who she is, where she lives and why, and what she’s found that will “change everything” (p. 3). How would this story be different if it were told from the point of view of a different character (e.g., Wick or the Magician)?
2. The title of the novel—a past participle of the verb “to bear”—is also the name that Rachel gives the being she finds and brings home to Wick, who once said of a creature he created at the Company, “He was *born*, but I had *borne* him” (p. 17). What do you think Wick meant by that? Why is the name significant in the context of the novel?
3. Some beings and places in the novel have names (e.g., Rachel, Wick, Mord, Balcony Cliffs) while others just have generic labels (e.g., the city, the Company, the Magician). Why do you think VanderMeer chose to present each of these beings and settings this way? What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of having a name in this dystopian world?
4. Once Borne is able to communicate, he bombards Rachel with existential questions: What does it mean to be complete? To be a machine? To be aware? To be safe? To be helpful? “What are you?” she asks. “I don’t know,” says Borne. “Do you know what you are?” (p. 45). If you were Rachel, how would you have answered these questions?
5. Rachel projects onto Borne a male gender role. Why do you think she chooses to do that? How would you view Borne differently if Rachel saw Borne as female or genderless?
6. Besides his inquisitiveness, what are some of Borne’s other behaviors that make him seem childlike? Where do you think these behaviors fall in the realm of nature-versus-nurture?
7. Did you find yourself aligning with Rachel’s actions and reactions to Borne and the world around her or did you relate more to the way Wick thought and acted? Can you give some examples?
8. Borne is described as having more than five senses. Can you think of instances in which he uses those extra senses and to what effect? If you were to imagine a character with more than five senses, what might those senses be?
9. Rachel asks herself whether her relationship with Wick is symbiotic or parasitic (pg. 12). What do you think? Why? Which word would you use to describe Rachel’s relationship with Borne? Why?
10. VanderMeer told *PowellsBooks.blog* that he saw Rachel and the Magician “as being a little similar, in some ways, in terms of their strength and stubbornness, but having come to completely different conclusions about what was good for the city.” Do you agree? If not, why not? If so, what might those different conclusions be? What other comparisons could you make between Rachel and the Magician? What do you think would be good for the city?

11. The novel is filled with characters influenced by the manipulation of memory—whether it’s erased, replaced, stolen, manufactured, or merely absent to begin with. Can you think of some examples? What is the link between memory and compassion? What about memory and survival?
12. Were you surprised by any of the events and/or revelations at the end of the novel? Did they change your view of any characters and/or prior events? How so?
13. VanderMeer, like many science fiction and fantasy writers, create futuristic, fictional worlds by first examining our present culture and environment and then imagining where we might be headed. Did you know much about biodiversity before you read *Borne*? Do aspects of the novel strike you as plausible? If so, which ones and why?
14. The last chapters describe three days of rain and its aftermath of rebirth with Biblical language and imagery, more joy, and much hope. If you were to imagine the city 50-100 years hence, what do you think it would look like?
15. Since the publication of *Borne*, VanderMeer and his fans have continued to imagine what creatures might have emerged from that world, i.e., their backstory, their capabilities, and what they might have looked like. He describes one of them in his novella *The Strange Bird: A Borne Story* (MCD/FSG, 2018). What kinds of biotech creatures can you imagine? What are their characteristics and abilities?



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.

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