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Compared by critics to Borges, Nabokov, and Kafka, contemporary fantasist Jeff VanderMeer continues to amaze with this surreal, innovative, and absurdist gathering of award-winning short fiction. Exotic beasts and improbable travelers roam restlessly through these darkly diverting and finely honed tales.

In “The Situation,” a beleaguered office worker creates a child-swallowing manta-ray to be used for educational purposes (once described as Dilbert meets Gormenghast). In “Three Days in a Border Town,” a sharpshooter seeks the truth about her husband in an elusive floating city beyond a far-future horizon; “Errata” follows an oddly familiar writer who has marshaled a penguin, a shaman, and two pearl-handled pistols with which to plot the end of the world. Also included are two stories original to this collection, including “The Quickening,” in which a lonely child is torn between familial obligation and loyalty to a maligned talking rabbit.

Chimerical and hypnotic, VanderMeer leads readers through the postmodern into a new literature of the imagination.

The Third Bear Details

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Author : Jeff VanderMeer

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From Reader Review *The Third Bear* for online ebook

Kirsten says

This was weird and wonderful. Some of the stories in the first half were hard going, but the book builds this momentum and you start noticing strange connections between the stories and it's ultimately super satisfying.

Allie says

I haven't read VanderMeer's short fiction in a while (though I remember the excellent "The Quickening" from an early creative writing class in college), and it was a treat to see him playing with themes and concepts that would later form the backbone of his recent novels.

Leonard Armitage says

The best I've read since *China M* - and a bit easier to understand. Outstanding!

Dawn Paris says

Strange but interesting.

logankstewart says

Jeff VanderMeer's *The Third Bear* has been on my TBR pile for quite a while now. I've never read anything by the author, though his highly acclaimed novel *Finch* has garnered a load of attention. Likewise, his collection of bizarre short stories contained in *The Third Bear* has collected lauds and nods from nearly every review I've read. The book has a strange type of magic that charms the reader and takes him on a journey like never before.

So I made preparations to read this book, curiosity piqued. The library purchased it on my suggestion, and then when the book arrived, I promptly forgot about it. Too many other things to read. Carl (or Stainless Steel Droppings, check out his fantastic blog) posted a review last week on this book, and his eloquence reminded me about my library request. That very day I went and picked up VanderMeer's work. I was immediately stricken.

There's really no good way to describe this book. It defies genres. It defies expectations and normal thinking, subverting tropes and typical story-telling methodology for something unique and unforgettable. There are some stories that, upon completion, I couldn't bring myself to describe coherently, even if the tale was spectacular. This holds true for many of the stories, the inability to put into words what you just read, but it only serves to make the reading experience all the better.

For this reason, there's no way I could give reviews to each story in this collection. I don't know if I could pick my favorite, as nearly all have their own speciality.

The titular tale, "The Third Bear," is a dark and somewhat familiar story. It reads like an old fairy tale, and the growing sense of dread throughout makes for an unsettling read.

"The Situation" is baffling. Part office-life, part post-apocalyptic, part I don't have a clue, this story sealed the deal for me. I read it after reading "The Third Bear" (which I recommend you do as well, even though it doesn't follow the story in the layout of the book) and noticed a few coincidences that I could not ignore. I'm not sure at all how to describe what's going on in this story, but I highly recommend you read it.

"Errata" is possibly the weirdest piece of *fiction* I've ever read. I daresay fiction because the story is about a writer named Jeff VanderMeer and he's working on a story around Lake Baikal. The thing reads as a letter written by VanderMeer to an editor and seems to be taken as a true story. Suffice it say that this story unfolded beautifully and still lingers in my mind.

"The Surgeon's Tale" is probably the longest piece in this collection, but one of my favorites. It's reminiscent of *Frankenstein*, but it's also much more. This tale was emotional and beautifully written. I could smell the sea salt on the pages. I could watch the sargassum dance beneath the surface. The protagonist's longing was tragic, but his love was uncanny.

And lastly is "Appoggiatura," a story so twisted and confusing, so different, so essential, that it practically begs to be re-read immediately. Reading this was like catching glimmers of the City out of the corners of my eye, almost as if I myself were somehow involved in the rich tales collected in the book.

I think one of the main reasons I enjoyed *The Third Bear* so much is because Jeff VanderMeer knows his craft. His voice is strong; his imagery is top-notch; his creativity is uncapped. I'm tempted to say I've never read a work that evokes more imagery in the mind than this book (see the remarks regarding "The Surgeon's Tale"). His prose is fluid, flowing through the surreal landscapes he's created with ease, making the reader feel both comfortable and lost. He takes little-to-no time explaining himself, but instead leaves what he's told as fact and we're to accept it and go on. There's no reasoning why the rabbit can talk in "The Quickening," it just can. Once these weird truths are accepted, the stories shine like a reappearing sun after an eclipse, bright and glorious.

After finishing "Appoggiatura" and the Author's Note, I felt the desire to return to some earlier tales, though I resisted this urge. Some other day.

Am I gushing? Perhaps, but *The Third Bear* is worthy of it. The book was so unlike anything I've ever read that it has me wanting to read the rest of VanderMeer's catalog immediately. If you're in a rut and tired of reading the same thing over and over, check this book out. Or, if you're just wanting to experience the thrill of Vandermeer's magical oddity, do yourself a favor and read *The Third Bear*. I can't recommend it enough.

Oh, and do check out Carl's review ([here](#)). Some of these stories are available for free online, and Carl's got all these links collected for your viewing pleasure.

Orsolya says

Sometimes, the best ways to understand the complexities of the world we live in is to look at it in a new way. Jeff Vandermeer does precisely this using short story format in, “The Third Bear”.

“The Third Bear” is a compilation of 14 short stories by award-winning author Jeff Vandermeer. These stories strike off from the norm combining features of folk tales, fantasy, surrealism, and even mysticism mixed in with realism attributes making Vandermeer’s writing quite special. Even those readers who are not generally a fan of these genres/themes will see the high-quality of Vandermeer’s writing.

The initial stories within “The Third Bear” are cohesive and make sense in ordering with each story containing beautiful prose, literary language, with deep nuances; and yet do not overwhelm the reader. The amazing feature of Vandermeer’s stories is that they observe the world and even wander on philosophical/insightful paths but in an effortless and entertaining way making the short stories more compelling than some full-fledged novels.

Naturally, some stories are stronger than others and readers will not enjoy every single one. Yet, even the less-resonating tales leave an impact by being ‘different’ in texture and being well-written. On a negative note, Vandermeer tends to end stories abruptly or anti-climatically. Not sure if this is a weakness or on purpose – but it negatively impacts the overall beauty of “The Third Bear”.

“The Third Bear” noticeable weakens in strength as it progresses in terms of storytelling. Even though the tales are still well-composed in structure; the plots and complexities are thinner and bluntly, “weird” making the reading less enjoyable and less of a page-turner. The entire work becomes less formulated as a whole. In a way, it feels that Vandermeer ‘forced’ his pen to compose these stories and his writing didn’t come as naturally.

Sadly, “The Third Bear” concludes in this more shriveled version of itself lacking the former special essence and charm. In this way, “The Third Bear” ends on a disappointing note.

Vandermeer’s “The Third Bear” is certainly unique and contains elevated prose and writing but unfortunately isn’t maintained in all of the stories throughout. “The Third Bear” is suggested for fans of short story surrealism but more so to pick-and-choose stories to read versus cover-to-cover which doesn’t work as well.

Stefan says

The Third Bear is an excellent collection of Jeff Vandermeer’s category-defying short fiction, filled with stories that are unique, mostly excellent, and often incredibly hard to describe. Asking someone who has read this book (say, a reviewer) what one of the stories is about could well get you a blank stare as a response, or a few mumbled words, or simply “you’ll have to read it for yourself”. Pinning these stories down in a few words is very hard, not to mention a bit unfair to both the stories and the new reader. In that spirit, I’m going to stay as vague as possible in this review, but please, don’t let that stop you from picking up this truly excellent collection.

Jeff Vandermeer has been compared to Kafka, Borges and Nabokov, and the first two of those are definitely appropriate comparisons for this collection. (I couldn’t attest to the third one because I’m not much of a Nabokov expert, but I’m sure those critics wouldn’t just make it up.) A story like “The Situation” reads like

something Kafka might have written if he'd had easy access to the more popular Sixties-era recreational hallucinogenics. And as for Borges - "Finding Sonoria" is a little gem of a story about a stamp collector, a down and out private detective, and their attempt to find a non-existent country on the basis of a mysterious stamp. If this story were a student, it would probably want to sit next to Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in the back of the class, so they could pass notes back and forth and fuck with the teacher's perception of reality. It also includes one of my favorite lines in the entire book: "Bolger snorted. "You got that right." It was the kind of snort Crake would've expected from a sausage, if a sausage could snort."

These precise, surprising word choices that make you blink, think and then nod somehow help the reader adjust to, and be drawn into, each story's particular brand of strangeness. Be prepared for mostly gradual, but occasionally jolting, changes to your expectations. "The Quickening" features a talking rabbit that adamantly insists it is, in fact, not a rabbit - which is not the most interesting thing in this story. "Predecessor" reads like the final scene of what would be a chilling - and very bizarre - horror/action movie. Trying to puzzle out what the rest of the movie looks like is part of the enjoyment of this chilling story, and its lack of context enhances the surreality of, well, everything in it.

This is also one of those collections where each reader will have his or her own favorite story, and one person's favorite may be someone else's least favorite - and, maybe more importantly and the entire point of this terribly convoluted sentence, someone's least favorite story may turn into a favorite upon rereading, which happened to me twice as I browsed and re-browsed through the collection for this review. And so, because I don't want to have to eat my words later, I won't list the few stories I currently consider the weaker ones (where "weaker" is anyway meant to be taken as relative to the generally mind-blowing quality of the others) and only list those that, after a few readings, are my favorites:

- "Lost" is a gorgeous prose poem that packs a mighty punch in just five short pages.
- "The Goat Variations" gave me the same kind of existential chill, and almost physical sense of discomfort, as some of Philip K. Dick's better novels.
- the collection's final story, "Appoggiatura," pulls together its bizarre and disparate elements so stunningly at the end that you're almost forced to reread it.

Those 3 stories are listed here in the same order in which they appear in the collection, and after reading every one of them, I quite literally thought: "Okay, this has to be THE story of the collection - it can't get possibly much better than this." Until the next one, and then the next one, and in between each of them, my mind was quite thoroughly blown more than a handful of times.

If you're looking for adjectives and categories, the two on the back cover are as good as any: "surrealist" and "absurdist". Despite fantasy elements in many of the stories, and a few touches of horror, I'd definitely shelve this one with literary fiction rather than SF&F. Whatever box you try to put it in, it's simply an excellent collection of short fiction that you're guaranteed to think about long after you turn the final page. Highly recommended.

(This review will also be published on fantasyliterature.com)

Latanya (CraftyScribbles) says

Medieval fantasy about a bear that's unlike any, terrifying and causing havoc amongst local villagers. Good tale, bested by its ending and how the "bear" lives his or her mark on the chaotic village plagued by him or her.

3.5/5

kari says

I tried to enjoy it, but VanderMeer's concepts just feel hollow and emotionally flat. It's not you, Jeff, it's me.

Nate D says

I don't always have a lot of patience with contemporary sci-fi and fantasy, but Vandermeer here tempers forays into pulp with a better-than-working-familiarity with the more postmodern and surreal threads running through 20th-century fantastic fiction, as well as that formative dread of the turn of the century weird. Which I suppose encapsulates all of what the New Weird sub-movement he's a part of promises in general, though I don't often find it so elegant in execution as in the three or four especially standout stories here, which push into genuinely strange, memorable, and original territory.

It's bits like the mostly unexplained conceptual tendrils, for instance, permeating "Three Days in a Border Town", which could be set in an ordinary post-apocalyptic world were it not for its yearning towards a de-localized, ghostly, there-but-not-there city promising something better than dusty present life. Or the reconfiguring of Pale Fire, reinvented autobiography, and rewritten bits of other stories, in "Errata". Possibly best of all, the otherworldly office politics of "The Situation", which remains unpredictable throughout by never totally resolving its terms, even as many scenes familiarly recapitulate drab contemporary day job existence. Not so incidentally, that story also offers prototype and sub-variant of Vandermeer's stellar most recent novel, Borne. Or the multiverse-spanning political nightmare in "The Goat Variations".

Other stories do fall more neatly into their categories, and suffer for it -- there's a steampunk piece, a myth retelling, a few bits of surrealism creeping into normal life basically in line with the original weird templates of the past. These will fade down in my memory before long, I'm sure. But then you have a story of a bear plaguing a small town with the techniques of a serial killer, that soon expands from horror yarn into a bleak commentary on how society treats its outsiders. Something familiar here is turned unfamiliar, then smarter and more knowing -- even as it basks in the pulpiest pulp it can offer. Which I can get behind. Sometimes I like to be entertained, it's just that so much ostensibly purely entertaining storytelling, and especially unfortunately horror writing, for me, feels limited and uncreative or else tips over into mawkishness, and I can't really enjoy it. This, more often than not, avoids these pitfalls.

Jillian says

I felt really luke-warm about this series of stories in the beginning (and really did not like the title tale) but it got much better as it went along, and became great. "The Situation" was my favorite, but I loved many of the stories toward the end as well. Wonderful ideas live in this book, just not at the beginning of it?

Dreamerrambling says

Jeff VanderMeer.

Your imagination knows no bounds.

This is a collection of the strangest, most wonderful, weirdest, loveliest, most imaginative stories I have ever read.

In the middle of a sentence, of a story, I've literally stopped breathing just to bask in the creative genius of it all.

Surreal. You know what these stories are? They're stories that show you a brief glimpse of other dimensions, other worlds, a brief, haunting glimpse of magic that leaves you changed, leaves you knowing more and knowing less and feeling all the more imbued with a sense of wonder.

Take one of the best stories, "The Situation". While reading it, I truly felt such a place to be a real. And, considering that there are probably an infinite number of universes out there, there's a high possibility it is. Either way, Jeff VanderMeer made something that seemed to have come from another dimension feel real and possible, through our limited words and our limited comprehensions. If that's not genius, I don't know what is.

Pure wonder.

Pure magic.

Alex DiDonato says

A really excellent collection of weird stories. It felt a bit like VanderMeer's Twilight Zone at times. If you've read the Southern Reach Trilogy, most of these stories are much weirder. Having finished, I do think it would have helped to have been provided a little context for some of the stories. Specifically, "Appogiatura" was a writing exercise for a magazine where authors were prompted to write a story based on choosing a word from a list of final words given in spelling bee contests. VanderMeer decided to take on the whole list! Knowing this helps make more sense of that story. Highlights were "Fixing Hanover", "Errata", "The Third Bear", and "Finding Sonoria".

Fiona says

Review is just for the short story, "The Third Bear".

People like to feel they have control. If I do x, y happens. Y used to be terrifying and unknown, but now I know I don't need to fear it, just as long as I do x. People spend their whole lives solving for x. But what if y has it's own plans?

This is classic Jeff Vandermeer in that it's completely original, doesn't concern itself too much with explanations, and it will make you think. It's available free here: <http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/vande...>

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I set out to give this collection four stars. I was arguing to myself that because it didn't make me clasp it to my chest and sigh romantically, it didn't deserve it, but I couldn't get some of the stories out of my head. For a short story to stick with me, for me to remember it past when I start the next one, it has to be really something. And several of these had that kind of niggling memory.

I still feel disturbed that *The Situation* reminds me of my work place, although we don't have genetically engineered sea creatures or creativity cockroaches. Or do we?!?

These stories are bizarre and memorable and potentially disturbing, but only if you see any of it as non-fiction. I forgot they were stories at times. Aren't they? ;)
