

Notes for Podcast: *Borne* Part 1

The first novel I read by Jeff Vandermeer was *Finch*. I was planning to teach the first version of this genre fiction course. I was doing detective fiction, fantasy, and science fiction. *Finch* is basically a noir science fiction detective novel, so it combines two genres. The human city of Ambergris has been invaded by fungal beings called “gray caps” who came up out of the ground. All of their technology is fungal. Our protagonist, Finch, is a human policeman who works for the gray caps. His boss is a gray cap he calls “Heretic.” They gave him a gun that shoots fungal bullets that kill humans but not gray caps. It also leaks fluid in his pocket. A dead gray cap, or rather half of one, has been found with a dead human in an apartment. Finch is trying to figure out what happened. The city is literally covered in fungus and rot. Sam Spade would feel right at home.

*Finch* is out of print and used copies are very expensive, so I don't assign it any more.

Vandermeer has been very active as a science fiction and fantasy writer. He has also edited a number of collections of short stories. His writing handbook, *Wonderbook*, is beautifully illustrated and cleverly written. I used to assign it in this class, but this time I decided to make it recommended rather than required. It makes a good coffee table book. It is full of good writing advice.

In the past, I have also assigned the first book in his Southern Reach trilogy, *Annihilation*, about people attempting to explore an area that seems to have suddenly been taken over by something alien. A movie was made, which I have not seen, but I have heard was not very good. Apparently, the director did not bother to read the other books in the trilogy, so he did not know where he was going. This trilogy has sections in first person, third person, and even second person.

*Borne* is dystopian science fiction. Lets look at the first paragraph or so.

Read on pages 3-4

This beginning generates lots of questions.

Who or what is Borne?

Who or what is Mord?

Who is our first person narrator? Where is she? What is she doing?

Why are mutilated, burned bodies dangling from streetlamps?

Then we get a couple of pages of exposition that raises new questions.

Who is Wick?

What is the Company?

And a little later, who is the Magician?

Rachel finds Borne tangled in the fur of the giant flying bear Mord. When Mord sleeps, scavengers dare to climb in his matted fur to see what they can find that might be of use.

Rachel shows Borne to Wick. At this point Borne looks like a sea anemone. Wick wants to take Borne apart to see what he is. Rachel won't let him. Rachel seems already to be quite attached to Borne and protective of him.

Now we get some backstory about Rachel and her partnership with Wick. We learn about Balcony Cliffs, a ruined building that they have made into a living place, a kind of fortress with traps and other sorts of defenses. We learn more about the world. Apparently it rains salamanders. It does not seem like a nice place.

And we watch Borne develop. At first he is like a plant. But then it becomes apparent that he can move. He eats, or at least living things and organic waste disappear. He reacts. He changes shape. And finally, he talks, which Rachel does not tell Wick.

Rachel enters Wick's apartment and searches it. She finds a telescope that is covered with images. Wick seems to have been some sort of bioengineer who worked for the company. We learn about a project called "the fish" and lots of conflicting stories about it.

Rachel recounts probably killing a woman over some salvage. Then some feral children breach all of their defenses and torture Rachel for a long time. When they leave, they take Borne. When Wick finally arrives and begins to take care of Rachel, Borne is back again. Wick can never find the attackers. When Rachel is able to return to her room, Borne speaks to her, at first in the voice of one of the children. She wants to know why he didn't help her. He is confused by the question. He says that it was because he didn't yet "know" the boys. It is unclear what he means by "know." We have suspicions.

Rachel tells Borne much of her life story, in a sort of confession to Borne. She talks about having parents, living on an island that had to be evacuated because of rising sea levels, and war and refugee camps. For us, it is a big chunk of exposition handled in a rather clever way. We learn how Rachel became Rachel, and why she might want to stay in a city as weird and dangerous as this one dominated by the Company and its failed projects. Perhaps there is simply no place better.

Borne can talk now and take on any shape he wants. Rachel dresses him in cast off clothing and takes him outside. Rachel thinks that she has begun to "love" Borne.

Read on page 56.

Questions for part one:

1. Wick doesn't trust Borne. He thinks Borne is dangerous. He still wants to take him apart and analyze him. Is he right? Do you think that Wick would be able to take Borne apart if he tried?
2. What is Borne to Rachel? Is he a pet? Is he a child? Is he a friend?
3. If you lived in a world like this, what goal would you have beyond survival? How would your values change? Do Rachel and Wick seem like rational, moral humans, given the circumstances? Or have they lost their humanity?

