

Annihilation

BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) To me, the novel reads like an ecological horror novel, challenging the idea of humans as the advanced species serving as stewards of the earth. Area X seems to be a place where we're just one of many species. Very creepy. Did you feel this way, and how did VanderMeer write to your feeling of creepiness?
- 2) We read another sci fi based that focused on a team. In *Angry Planet*, the team was highly functional and cooperative. In *Annihilation* the team is dysfunctional and self-sabotaging. Why do you suppose the biologist, surveyor and anthropologist were chosen for this mission? What exactly is the mission? What's the psychologist doing there?
- 3) Early on the narrator tells us that "nothing that lives and breathes is truly objective". At another point she tells us, "Curiosity could be a powerful distraction." Distraction from what? I usually think of curiosity as engagement. Is this different? Are living beings capable of observing or being observed objectively? Is curiosity just a prelude to our minds creating an order that doesn't exist?
- 4) Throughout the book there are references to only seeing what we're hypnotized to see. Does being a psychologist, surveyor, anthropologist or biologist influence (hypnotize) the team's observations? Are all observations objective? Is seeing our observations as objective a form of hypnosis?
- 5) Why does the narrator insist on calling the tunnel a tower? Is she serious, or is this simply to create friction within the group. What is it that makes her experience it as a tower?
- 6) The characters don't have names. They are described by their functions, as explained on page 9: "We were meant to be focused on our purpose, and 'anything personal should be left behind.' Names belonged to where we had come from, and not to who we were while embedded in Area X." What is the effect of the characters being known only as their assigned functions? Both in the story and in their mission? Does it make them seem more expendable?
- 7) Besides the team members being defined by their functions, there are other references to understanding a thing by its purpose/function. On page 22, the biologist asks about the tower, "But what is its purpose?" on page 28 "Even though I didn't know what the words meant, I wanted them to mean something so that I might more swiftly remove doubt." And in the biologist's flashback about the biopool from her youth on page 46—"Would the new owners see the beauty and the importance of leaving it as it is (overgrown), or would they destroy it, create unthinking slaughter in honor of the pool's real function?" Does seeing a thing only as its purpose limit our understanding of it?
- 8) How much of Area X is shown as is, and how much is shown from the biologist's unique perspective? In a more general way, is anything objective, or is everything an interaction of two objects creating a shared experience?
- 9) About ¼ of the way into the book we find out that the biologist's dead husband had been the medic on the previous expedition. We see scenes of their marriage from when they first married, before his expedition, and after his return. What do these scenes of their marriage tell us about the biologist? Is she a reliable narrator? Why did she join the 12th expedition—for personal reasons, or was it strictly scientific?

- 10) When the husband does return, he is “not himself”. Did the book ever explain why Area X seems to duplicate visitors who then re-cross the border?
- 11) What do the Crawler’s words mean? Are these words alive? Are they a virus? (William S Burroughs: language is a virus from another planet). Do they mean anything? Or is each word “a building block inside its serpentine pattern, like a twig in a bird’s nest”, as the biologist observes at one point. Why did the biologist decide “it was important to assign a name to this maker-of-words” (p91) and call it the Crawler? Do words create meaning, capture meaning, or distract from meaning? Does naming something (assigning it a purpose) make it more real, or simply make it familiar? Or do words just “crawl” like the aria inside the biologist’s head as she approaches the lighthouse?

Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives while from the dimlit halls of other places forms that never were and never could be writhe for the impatience of the few who never saw what could have been.

- 12) Back to the idea of “purpose” and understanding of *Annihilation* as an ecological horror, is purpose something humans need so we can understand our environment? Or does it reinforce our sense of dominion at the top of the environmental pecking order?
- 13) Until the last 25 pages, it seems like that biologist’s realization is that we are merely a part of the environment, but not its gods. The environment physically changes her. It changes the way she sees her husband. It changes her glow and her perspective on her previously failed field trips, and seems to give her a purpose she had never felt before. But then I feel the whole thing goes off the rails in the scene where she’s accosted and eventually freed by the Crawler. If she is integrated, why does the Crawler attack her? To me, the book broke its spell at this point. Did this scene (about 170 pages in) work for you?
- 14) The story concludes with the biologist’s commitment to remain in Area X, following in her husband’s footsteps without necessarily finding him. By simply seeing what he saw, she feels she can be close to him. It’s probably the most “human” we’ve seen her. What do you think of this ending? Does it make the point? Does it work, or cop out?