

Novel Dialogue 6.1: Desolation Tries to Colonize You: Jeff VanderMeer and Alison Sperling (CH)

Transcript

CH

Hello, and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies, and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Chris Holmes, one of your hosts and a producer of this season on Novel Dialogue. Each season we bring you conversations between the writers at the forefront of the evolving novel form and the critics who make legible the meaningfulness of those evolutions.

We are beginning this special themed season on “The Weird” with a novelist who has been dubbed “The Weird Thoreau” by The New Yorker, Jeff VanderMeer. Jeff is the author of the Southern Reach trilogy, a galactically popular series that has been translated into over 35 languages. The first novel in that series, *Annihilation*, won the Nebula Award and Shirley Jackson Award and was made into a movie starring Natalie Portman. More recent works include *Dead Astronauts*, *Borne*, a finalist for the Arthur C. Clark Award, and *The Strange Bird*. These novels set in the *Borne* universe are being developed for TV by AMC and continue to explore themes related to the environment, animals, and our future. In 2021, Jeff published *Hummingbird Salamander*, a speculative thriller of dark conspiracy, endangered species, and the possible end of all things. Jeff frequently speaks about issues related to climate change and storytelling. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida with his wife Ann, cat Neo, and a yard full of native plants.

Jeff will be joined today by Alison Sperling. Alison is Assistant Professor of English at Florida State University. Her research focuses on literary and artistic expressions of aesthetic and affective categories, structuring experiences of climate change, toxicity, and the broader Anthropocene. She works on the science fictional across media, but largely in modernist and contemporary literature, and with a focus on queer and feminist methodologies and politics. She is currently finishing a manuscript on weird modernism and is therefore the perfect person to be in conversation today with Jeff VanderMeer.

Welcome to you both.

JV

Thanks for having us here, yeah, too.

AS

Thanks so much.

CH

And I'm just going to hand it off to you, Alison, to start us off.

AS

Great. Hi, Jeff.

JV

Hi. Great to see you again.

AS

Great to see you as well. I want to start out with a question about the new weird and defining the kind of terms of the new weird. So your work has in part catalyzed, often thought alongside the work of China Miéville and many others, what is now called the new weird. You've, of course, analyzed the weird and weird fiction with Anne VanderMeer on more than one occasion. Do you have a working definition of the new weird? How does it differ from the old weird? What is attractive to you about the weird as a writer?

JV

Well, I think the weird attracts me and the definition that I find most compelling about it is the fact that it is this grappling with the unknown. It can't be a grappling with an existing trope, for example, which is why it's very difficult to write, say a story that has a vampire in it and have it be really weird fiction because all these things already come in with that word that make it known, even if it's a fresh take on it.

It's no diss on any kind of story that uses archetypes or uses particular types of things like that. But for me, weird fiction is unusual, too, in how the unknown may be both horrific and incredibly beautiful or in some way compelling. There's a kind of interesting philosophical question there in that it really is not always even about understanding the unknown, but just simply experiencing it and trying to kind of make sense of the fact of how a character exists in relation to it.

This can mean that some stories of the weird seem kind of open-ended and non-traditional plot-wise, which I also find really compelling because I'm drawn to experimental fiction. And certainly it's also, I think, really compelling in the modern era because weird fiction came out of, at times, a very kind of insular, almost in-bred situation with the original *Weird Tales* writers, some of whom were quite good and some of whom have become quite dated for various reasons.

But a new weird, I think, was more of a moment than a movement and everyone argued as to what it actually meant. What I think it meant, and I think we said this in the introduction to our *New Weird* anthology, was simply that there was this moment in time in the early part of the century where writers were influenced by basically kind of the same thing. They were influenced by the body horror of writers like Clive Barker, the tactile quality of that. They were also often writing secondary world fantasies at the time, even if some of their new weird fiction was set in the real world. And they were also influenced by things like the new wave of science fiction, which was very, I would say, intellectual and experimental.

And so it was kind of the melding of this tactile horror, body horror, in a sense, you know, to reduce it down to something simple because that's not all it was, with this kind of intellectual impulse and this experimentalism and this kind of competing, I would almost call it coldness, with the kind of warmth of that tactile experience, and then often wedded to using, you know, secondary world fantasy as like the setting for that. And I think that was extremely powerful because really what you were talking about is a kind of synthesis, sometimes an alchemy of things that had not necessarily been seen in concert one, with one another. And then I think what happened after is simply some of these new weird authors continued to write weird fiction and new weird fiction and also move on to other things because in that

confluence of these different approaches that you were kind of like putting together, I think also what it meant was that you had to learn a lot of different kinds of technique as a writer.

And so that meant coming out of that moment, there were a lot of different things you could do. And that's why it almost didn't stay a movement because a lot of the writers were not doing the same things over time. For example, even China Miéville, if you look at his later work, it's very different from his earlier work. So that's at least a theorem.

CH

So it seems like you're saying that that movement because it diversified so much in the kind of stylistic practices of the novelists is now done in a way. And are you thinking about the weird as more diffusely a quality of a lot of different writers doing a lot of different things, whereas new weird had some very specific stylistic characteristics?

JV

Well, it's a difficult thing to answer only because the idea of what a writer is has changed so much. A lot of the original weird writers were outsider artists, so to speak. And they were kind of embodying the thing, you know, there was an anxiety or something that they were pursuing that was central to their being and also to their writing. And so it was not something they were going to move on from because that was the preoccupation of their lives in a sense. I'm saying this badly because it's not necessarily not true now. It's just simply that the idea of what a writer is and what a writer can be is vastly different. And also the venues in which you can, you know, express that are very different.

But what I would say is I do feel like it's more of an impulse and I also feel like what happens when you have a moment like new weird is that eventually new weird becomes part of the weird, that the weird kind of like, like some kind of mist or fog overtakes the landscape that that somehow got ahead of it. And now we're all wrapped in the same, the same environment again, and maybe some new impulse will break out from that.

AS

Do you want to say any more, Jeff, also about some of the problems that you have personally with being associated with something like the old weird, like what happens between this, this, the old weird and the new weird, and where does that tension lie for you?

JV

Well, the tension lies for me in like, let's just be blunt with a lot of Lovecraft xenophobia and an outright racism and sexism. And, you know, I mean, he kind of blunted the sexism by just simply not having any women characters in most of his stuff. Although Angela Carter famously has a great review, I think in *The Guardian*, of one of his books where she just talks about all the phallic symbols from like, from the [inaudible] in an outrageous way.

And, you know, so, but also I have to be absolutely honest, I just, as a personal difference, I treat the symbolism in my stories very differently than I feel Lovecraft did. I feel like in terms of weird fiction, one thing that Lovecraft does that I don't like is that that symbolism does still seem very, I don't know, Freudian or locked into something, even as he's grappling with something beyond and I run screaming

from any kind of obvious symbolism, I hate anything that smells of Freud or anything that is of an established symbology that you're supposed to like break down in a certain way when you read it.

And so, you know, that's part of how I interpret the weird is that that my symbols have to be semantically resonant, but hopefully they're, they're not familiar, they, I don't know where they get their power from, because I do use a lot of images that have a charged symbolic power, but it's not, it's not from a set, I guess a set place. So there's that as well. And so when I read Lovecraft, I find it to be very inert for me oddly enough, and you know, I know a lot of people like Lovecraft, but, but just on the sentence level, there are very few stories, except maybe *The Case of Dexter Ward*, which structurally reminds me more of a Nabokov story, there's that interesting aspect, they just feel much more inert on the page than I guess people expect from me. And so there's this, this also this weird dissonance in that a lot of people expect that I'm influenced by Lovecraft, whereas in fact, what they're interpreting is probably more weird science, weird organisms on earth that I studied, life cycles. Life cycles are extremely alien. You know, I come from a very scientific family with a lot of people in different fields. And so that's really where that impulse comes from, but it's often misinterpreted as being from Lovecraft or some of the original weird writers.

AS

One of the themes that I always come back to in *Annihilation* is the way in which scientific tools in Area X become almost obsolete. So certain foundational ways of coming to know the world are suddenly not useful or come in some way to be questioned. What, so this is, yeah, this is a question about the weird's relation to science and the sciences and particularly in the Southern Reach trilogy. What's happening in this novel, this trilogy and beyond, because I know you're working on it now, that unsettles certain culturally specific, scientifically foundational ways of understanding life on the planet?

JV

Well, I think that coming from a science family, basically, and even my mom who was a biological illustrator was kind of in that mode, and my dad, you know, ran various entomology labs in various places, including he was at Cornell for two years. You know, you see both the rigor of the scientific process and you see the kind of inability of the human mind to always be that rigorous as the process. So you know, a lab is a combination of a lot of different personalities, for example. As a kid, I would see how those personalities would come together and how research could be affected by those personalities. And so as I grew up, I think I really had kind of like an absurdist and kind of, the human mind is irrational point of view that I thought was interesting to explore in fiction. And so, you know, it's not just simply that science is a living thing that continues to change. You learn new things. You realize that some of your foundational assumptions are no longer relevant, you know, in the non-human space, a lot of that is we have to rigorously not be anthropomorphic. So we actually throw out data that indicates that these species may be more intelligent or whatever than we thought because that can't be true because we are applying our own biases to it. But in fact, we're applying a different set of biases.

And so that kind of thing fascinates me because that's where narrative lives. It doesn't live in the scientific fact, it exists in the space between the scientific fact and the scientist in a way. And so that's what I like to explore.

And then on top of that is simply my experience outside of the scientific world applied to this as well in a weird way, which is working for a lot of government agencies as a contractor and seeing the absurdity of how decision making is made. So again, it's like it's almost like it's built into the process. It's built into the human brain. And so some of that is exploring irrationality in general and like not necessarily in a bad way, just acknowledging that we don't really make as many decisions the way we think we do, which I think is also supported by science.

So that then also kind of like changes the dynamic between the human and the non-human if you think about it in how they interact and the relationship between them. And I don't know if I'm answering the question, but that's what comes to mind.

AS

Yeah, you did.

CH

Did you see that article that asked whether humans are smart enough to know if animals are smarter than us?

JV

Well, that is a really interesting question. It does come down to, again, these foundational assumptions. And even in rewilding our yard and interacting with the neighbors, you find still these foundational assumptions exist across all kinds of things. And they often get ingrained for completely random reasons.

And so, yes, and it also is funny to me because we hear a lot about the search for extraterrestrial life and these bemoanings of like why haven't we found it? And in the Southern Reach, I actually have kind of a running joke where they're talking about SETI experiments and how they're just doing it in the radio waves, which is like the backwater of most intelligences in the galaxies. So of course, they're not seeing anything because that's not how they communicate. And so the same thing does apply very seriously to space colonization and this idea that all these livable planets out there are just empty. They're just somehow empty and we can just go have them.

And that also does apply to even in classic science fiction tropes, what would we recognize? And that does, I think, tie back into the weird little bit. What do we recognize? What do we understand? What do we not understand? Or worse, I think the worst thing is the misunderstanding in the attempt to understand.

AS

What are some strategies that you use to write something that is unrecognizable or completely defamiliarized?

JV

It's a good question. And it's something I've been trying to do ever since the *Ambergris* series that was first connected with the new weird, where literally at one point, this character Duncan Shriek is trying to find a sixth sense with which to view this kind of alien, fungal-based organism and failing, but keeps trying. And in a way, it kind of directly references my search and I think other writers search for ways to

express what's not expressible. And you always fail because it's just not possible, that's the whole point of it. But in the failing, I think there's interesting things that occur.

One way that I use is just literally using the non-human, but the non-human having been altered in some way by humans, like the blue fox in *Dead Astronauts* where, and I've said this a lot, so it's probably a cliché at this point, but if you wrote from the fox's point of view, it would just be a bunch of smells and tastes, and you'd have to [inaudible] seven thousand pages long. So you can't write from a fox's point of view, but you can write from an altered fox's point of view and still convey something about a fox and why that's important to have that differentiation from the human.

So I use that a lot. I use a lot of things that you might call tricks, but there's a lot of things, for example, in *Annihilation* where you're walking up something, like up a tower, up a, and I use words you usually associate with down or vice versa. So I look for ways for the language to really disrupt you on a level where you're not aware of it necessarily, but you feel like something is wrong. And there's a real trick to that because if you don't do it the right way, it just seems like continuity errors, right? Things like that.

So ways to kind of, you know, and then using things that are like cliches, like I really don't like the rule of three, which is to describe something like three times or whatever or use three descriptors, but the rule of three in weird fiction is really useful. The first two times that somebody encounters something, it's normal. The third time it's not. And that's really a basic one. It's just a basic craft thing, but it can really be useful in unmooring the reader from reality because they have been so moored to it before that.

And so, you know, a lot of people focus on how weird my fiction is. But if you look at something like the Southern Reach, 90 percent of the scenes or 85 are just scenes you could find in a contemporary fiction novel. It's the other 15 percent that they remember, but they only remember those because they're anchored by the rest of it.

CH

Now that I know that you were a government contractor, the weirdness of the bureaucracy in volume two of the Southern Reach trilogy makes so much sense. And I love it even more now.

JV

Well, what's interesting about that is because when I was in DC on the *Authority* tour, I did have someone high up in the EPA tell me that it was the funniest dark bureaucratic novel they had ever read, which I was very happy about because it's actually meant to be very funny in places, once you get past the weirdness. But I was also horrified. This was someone from the EPA telling me that it was very much like their working conditions, so.

AS

Yeah, I'm also struck by this question you just posed, Jeff. What kind of weird is this? Because one of my questions has been about the weird and its relation to form and formal qualities. You know, what is this relation between weirdness and experimental, the experimental for you? You know, how do you assess this? How do you think about this? Not just in craft, but also in yeah, in content.

JV

Well, I think that the weird is oddly a way to allow an experimental thing to sometimes be invisible. There's actually a lot of experimental technique in the Southern Reach that because it's applied within the context of a familiar trope, becomes much less experimental. It's kind of like in the *Ambergris* books, a lot of the found object exercises and kind of post-modernism, weirdly becomes modernism in support of a fantastical city, whereas it would stand out much more as being non-traditional narrative, if it was a contemporary novel. So, so there's that.

And then there's things like *Dead Astronauts* where it's just like I'm going to just basically dive into a variety of formally experimental techniques, including deployment of poetry in unconventional ways and prose poetry in pursuit of trying to say something unique about the non-human. And I'm just going to take my chances.

So it's not that I don't, I don't, it's just basically, you know, am I doing a renovation or am I doing an innovation? That's like one of the key things when I'm looking, when I'm like halfway through a rough draft, it's really important for me to know, because it lets me know how I'm how I'm basically going to be writing certain scenes. And there's nothing wrong with a renovation. It's not any better or worse than an innovation novel. But it definitely is a different approach.

Although what I would say is that I think almost all of my novels in terms of weird fiction never really return to the norm at the beginning of a novel. Maybe *Borne* is the closest to that. You're not going to really return home again. In any of them, for better or worse.

AS

Right.

So the weird has been engaged now as a kind of theoretical mode that's broader than a literary genre or aesthetic, some of which we've already been talking about. What, one of the ways that weirdness has developed that I know interests us both is its relation to ecology and environment. *Annihilation* and the trilogy more broadly is, of course, a deeply ecologically minded novel and is a touchstone for what some call weird ecology. What I've seen you call elsewhere actually weird biology. In 2010, Thomas Friedman calls our current ecological moment one of global weirding, a concept you've also been interviewed about in a 2016 issue of *Paradoxa* by the same name. Can you talk about what weirdness is as a specifically ecological framing in your writing?

JV

It's a good question. It's a sometimes a tough question for me because it feels like it's an element that's always been there, even in the *Ambergris* books, there's some element of it, even though they're more interested in kind of interrogating history. But I think it's just, it's inherent. It's actually kind of inherent in weird nature writing sometimes, too. I think one of those earlier views referenced Walt Whitman and also even some of Rachel Carson's more ecstatic passages.

And so you find this this kind of ecstatic moment in nature writing that is very similar to the weird encounter with the unknown. You find yourself on a long hike and something about the weariness and the way you're feeling and all of that and the fact that you're so isolated leads you into a moment of re-recognizing the landscape so it becomes both strange, but also incredibly beautiful to you. And you do feel like there's some larger thing moving through you or that you're viewing.

And so I think that that that is a really powerful link to how weird fiction works, this moment of the ecstatic. And I think that that's one, one thing that I think about when I think about that question. I think also, you know, it's funny how things get kind of retconned because I never really thought of the Southern Reach as being about climate change. But once people started talking about how, you know, Area X is kind of, humans as we are to animals and things like that, then the larger question became, you know, climate change is something or climate crisis is something that you can't see all of it once, that seems to move in mysterious ways, that that we react illogically to became very, very clear.

And I think the other thing for me is, you know, there's a history in weird fiction of like finding the dusty old book or finding the mysterious tome of knowledge or damnation or wherever you want to call it. And for me, that's actually writings about my work in the eco realm. Which is to say I devour all of these religiously because that then becomes a substrate or a layer in the back of my mind when I'm writing the next book. And so, kind of a weird feedback loop where I see it as potential for narrative and additional stuff that's going to influence the writing. So it becomes a little, I don't know if it's self-referential, so much as I'm not really sure I can be outside of it because I feel like I'm permeated by it.

AS

Yeah, maybe this is a good place to ask you a little bit more about Florida, the actual context that you are in. People who aren't from here, I'm also residing in Florida now, love to make jokes about Florida, a phenomenon I think that's increased with a sobering intensity recently because of the surge of right wing political legislation here, including things like book bans, trans exclusionary health care, the shutting down of DEI and the rolling back of certain environmental protections or in the guise of something else. I know that ecosystems here in Florida and the wealth of biodiversity here have been an enormous influence on your writing. Can you talk a little bit more about how the complications of the physical and political spaces of Florida have influenced your thinking and your nonfiction writing as well about this very weird state?

JV

Well, there's, I guess, two points. One is about our yard and the second one I'll do first, which is the nonfiction. I actually did kind of start writing things like the "Annihilation of Florida" in *Current Affairs* and the latest *Time* article on DeSantis and the environment, in part because of that whole "Florida man" vibe, which, unfortunately, I think even some Florida journalists like have begun to kind of buy into because it's so popular and it's a way of getting eyes on something. And I wanted to push back against that by not buying into that in a series of articles that still were evocative of landscape, evocative of place. And that, you know, oddly, were kind of evocative of place in an ecstatic way, almost like some of my weird fiction.

So the *Time* article has kind of an evocation of a North Florida ravine in a way that I would say is fairly similar to how I would write it in a piece of fiction if someone was encountering the unknown. And that's because there's a truth to that. There's a real truth to how landscape affects you and a truth to what you kind of feel when you see or experience a landscape that's functioning the way that it's supposed to. And I think that that can be powerful, a powerful thing for people to read and hopefully help with their activism, maybe at a local level. By recognizing that what's around them is remarkable, not ordinary, but remarkable. Which is, I think, something the weird can do, too.

And then, you know, our yard, I think, has been really useful because, you know, we had this chance to move and we could have moved out of town because it would be cheaper, you know, you get more land to have a house on. And instead, we moved into this house that was built in '79 that's based on, you know, old tobacco barn designs built by a family architect on a half-acre that, yes, is wooded, but it is only 10 minutes from the state capital. And there are neighbors all around. And as the piece I just had in *Esquire* indicates, you know, sometimes you come into conflict with people just because of what you want to do in your own personal space.

So I guess what I'm getting at is that by taking on a house with a yard like this and rewilding and being attentive to wildlife in a basically suburbia or an urban context, it, again, it kind of makes you have to engage with these issues. You know, there's a more anxiety and there's more stress, but it also makes you engage, it makes your writer brain engage. It makes you much more aware of the effect of local politics on everything. Including just the, you know, the amount of feet for an environmental easement in Tallahassee, which has decreased steadily over the last 30 years, even though the original stuff in place was there for a reason, for example.

So, I think it's made me more political in writing this fourth Southern Reach book. I had to stop myself from including a lot about zoning loss, historic preservation, that the locals want at one point, which is reduced down to a line where it's really useful because it explains why they're so antithetical to these biologists taking up a residence in this abandoned county seat that they actually want to declare it as an historic district. You know, so I think that in a way it's kind of, it makes me wonder how I would write the Southern Reach books now, the first three, probably the middle one the most, because you still have to focus on, you know, two or three things. You can't do everything. That's why there's no corporations in the Southern Reach because the government has to fulfill kind of that role symbolically because you can't, it's just too much to juggle.

But yeah, but definitely that stuff is kind of coming into, like there's a point, there's a really, I think, dramatic point in *Absolution* where there's a discovery made in a county ordinance. [all laughing] That's critical to one of the spy subplots that I would not have thought of before, but that's actually what you have to do now as an environmentalist. You have to scrutinize all this stuff at the county and city level, some of which doesn't even come before the commission, and get all these decisions made very swiftly and quietly sometimes that affect a lot of people.

And so, you know, that puts a layer also on the whole irrationality of the human mind, the way I view systems in these novels, because these novels may not be considered systems novels, but they are definitely about systems. So those are some of the things that I think about.

AS

Yeah, this is sort of a continuation of that, I think, about how, you know, your fiction, how the weird in particular maybe informs or might inform actual practices of conservation and our relation to environmental issues, particularly here in Florida, but perhaps more widely as well. Maybe you want to approach this question through the new environmental nonprofit that you founded in Tallahassee, which I'm also a part of, the Sunshine State Biodiversity Group. Maybe not. Is there some relation for you between making material change in this region and your fictional imaginaries of weird ecologies?

JV

Well, I do think that the defamiliarization, or defamiliarization followed by appreciation, in this case, as opposed to maybe cosmic horror, is useful. And it's something I think about a lot in terms of messaging. And, you know, the Sunshine State Biodiversity Group on the face of it does a few things that other organizations do, you know, conserve land, you know, educate about the environment. But, you know, for example, you know, the Tallahassee Film Festival, where we sponsored these experimental short films, I think that was a different way of viewing the environment. It was almost akin to, you know, without putting on airs to, you know, the attempt at novel form in *Dead Astronauts* to say something about the non-human. You know, I really related to a lot of the films that were shown, you know, which was, you know, it was a really great curation, that, you know, they were trying to push boundaries and say something about the environment in not the usual ways. They weren't like a documentary about the Panther, which is something that's really sympathetic and useful. They were kind of like making you see some of North Florida differently and the people in North Florida differently.

And I think that that's really important for this region. Like, for example, we have Wakulla Springs, which is the deepest, largest freshwater spring in the world. It should be a UNESCO heritage site. We really take this thing too, too much for granted in Florida. It should be like one of the world's wonders, and yet it's under, kind of, under known. And so that's what we're kind of working against here is trying to do fresh and unique messaging that isn't the same thing that you usually see.

And that means kind of narrative. That means really kind of storytelling, even about the places we conserve. You know, this ravine is literally on the border between what were two plantations. This ravine, I don't know, you know, behind our house. I don't know who was part of one of the plantations. I don't know if it was literally the demarcation point where like no one went. You know, so it has that kind of like history or anti-history. It has also the natural history of never having been surveyed by a biologist, as many of these ravines have.

CH

Wow.

JV

So it's kind of like there's also there are all these historical and educational opportunities in this area and layers that I think that we can bring to extensively what is what you might be familiar with from an environmental organization, but also very different.

AS

Would you say that that might be one of the ways that we might imagine the new weird as having a kind of politics that's purposefully distancing itself from that of the older weird? In other words, there's a kind of approach of the cosmic horror or the horrific and the older weird, and what you're describing as a kind of defamiliarization, which is towards something, right, towards a form of often social, racial, or environmental justice or something. Would you say that there's a kind of inherent politics to the, to new weird or the kinds of defamiliarization that you're talking about?

JV

I would, I would kind of hope so. I would say that there's a strain of what new weird or what's identified as new weird that maybe is more in the Mervyn Peake mode that can be either that way or can be

neutral or regressive because it's also drawing on gothic, the gothic in a way that's kind of neutral or maybe even conservative, I don't know.

I'm always curious about this question because even when you pull in certain tropes, can you be sure that you're destabilizing and subverting them or are they always going to bring in something that you don't want them to bring in?

AS

Right.

JV

And so, you know, it's funny when you first said that I, the for, two words I wrote down were punk and decadent. And I feel like those two things are really inherent in new weird, which is strange because new weird is such a lush, like associated with like lush pro stylists, you know, pro stylists who want to make you see things and paint a picture in a way that's, you know, immersive. But I do think there's like a punk and a radical aesthetic there or a sensibility behind the pretty picture, you know, that's very important. And so, you know, part of the new weird might also be the ratio of how you disguise that and don't, with the way the pro style interacts with it.

I like to think of the nonprofit as being kind of a stealth organization in some ways. You know, not in a not in a bad way, obviously, or a weird way. Just that, you know, maybe we can like do a lot of different things with our messaging with the layering and this kind of attitude.

CH

Thank you for this wonderful conversation. And I want to close us out. We end each season with a new signature question, and you will be the first person to answer this signature question, which is, Jeff, what is your weirdest source of writing inspiration?

JV

Well, I mean, they're all pretty normal, like taking long walks and reading stuff, getting lost. But I think the weirdness is just that I really love nonfiction books that are really not that nonfictional. Like one of my favorite books that I pulled inspiration from is a penguin book called *Penguins* from 1967, which is just basically a penguin researcher stabbing another penguin researcher in the back over a different evolutionary theory about a hind claw. But he's using this entire general book about penguins to do it. And like, after a while after the first couple chapters, every other page is about this other researcher. And it is the most magnificent nonfiction book I've ever read. And I just I collect those kinds of books because again, they suggest fiction.

CH

It sounds like *Pale Fire*.

JV

It's hilarious. It is. It's like, it's like a bunch of, I've got a collection of books that are basically like *Pale Fire* just by nonfiction science writers who hated other people.

CH

Well, that is a great answer. And we were really lucky to get to start this season off with you, Jeff. And and Alison, you're just the perfect interlocutor. And I can't thank you both enough for this really rich conversation.

JV

All right, well, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

AS

Thank you.

CH

As always, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, Public Books for its partnership, and Duke University for its continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. And Rebecca Otto is our social media maven.

Check out past and upcoming episodes with Ocean Vuong, Alejandro Zambra, and Lauren Groff. From all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening. And if you liked what you've heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you find your podcasts.