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Book Review

Jeff Vandermeer (2021), *Hummingbird Salamander*. NY: MCD-Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Readers might, instinctively so, wish to compare *Hummingbird Salamander* (H/S) with Vandermeer's own Southern Reach Trilogy (*Annihilation, Authority, Acceptance*). H/S reads as a faster paced and condensed version of the Southern Reach Trilogy only insofar as the themes of pre-apocalyptic imminent chaos and subsequent disruption force various characters into dire situations of physical and psychological reckoning—confrontation and possible transcendence.

The devil is, however, always in the details. Vandermeer's superbly disciplined prose takes the notion of our collective disregard and duplicity toward natural systems and each other, a "fatal adaptation" of not caring or paying attention to the beauty and complexity of life, to its logical disastrous conclusion: "The world that week seemed to be dying in flame and famine and flooding and disease. The things meant to help us were hurting us and the things meant to hurt us continued to get better at it" (p.185).

Echoing contemporaneous pandemic events, Vandermeer describes the slow-moving but irreversible preamble to full-fledged dystopia, of not just the proverbial frog bathing in an increasingly hot pot, but of the total disintegration of "ecopsychological" interrelated systems (2021:327):

Impossible to tell how fast society was collapsing because history had been riddled through with disinformation, and reality was composed of half-fictions and full-on paranoid conspiracy theories. You couldn't figure out if collapse was a cliff or a gentle slope because all the mental constructs obscured it. Multinationals kept their monopolies, shed jobs or even their identities, but most did not go under. Governments became more autocratic, on average.

The motivations of the two main female characters are shaped and even determined by family abuse, physical and psychological. An eco-feminist perspective is both necessary and balanced. In a more psychologically real fashion, and unlike the many versions one reads about "eco-anxiety" that ignore early childhood instances of trauma, Vandermeer's female characters, astutely and severely, identify the correspondence between their pain and ongoing ecological pandemonium as an opportunity to acknowledge and the possibility to embrace both dimensions into "ecopsychological" integrity: "Silvina wrote that even through the poisoned landscape, we must love it. We must love what has been damaged, because everything has been damaged. And to love the damage is to know you care about the world. That you're still alive. That the world is alive" (2021:101).

Early in the book near-Zen wisdom is proffered with reference to the restructuring or doing away with a false sense of "self:"

[Silvina] I want to be lost ... I want to be so far beyond anything that there is no map, and the compass spins wild. And when I come back, if I come back, you need to know I've changed, and with that change it means I carry 'lost' with me everywhere, even in the heart of a city. That I am

lost forever, and that's how we need to be. So the systems can't find us, can't wreck us. So our heads are clear (2021: 24).

The animals, 'hummingbird' and 'salamander,' are clues to the mysteries in the plotline, and equally represent indicator species vanishing as a result of ongoing environmental degradation and human exploitation. Inert actors, nevertheless, they bring potentiality to pressing demise.

Their fictional natural histories are true enough in that they represent countless other species that most people will never know about--our ignorance a contributing factor to our *fatal adaptation*.

Vandermeer, once again in H/S, embraces the existential ambiguity inherent in impossibly complex interactions, but particularly, when transformative events force us to make life and death choices, moment-to-moment. To apply Gunderson's and Holling's (2001) ecological *panarchy*, it is appropriate that Vandermeer focuses on the *release* and *reorganization* phases of systems faltering and then reorganizing in several of his books. Indeed, chaotic circumstances and our response to these uncertainties test our mettle and make for more exciting fiction.

Apropos, Vandermeer's H/S is equally an ecological dystopian thriller, ecological science fiction, a mystery with an abundance of mayhem, a tandem eco-feminist saga, and a natural history of several animals including humans, hummingbirds, salamanders, foxes, raccoons, "tigers, tigers, tigers," and crocodiles—worth reading for, oh, so many other reasons!



Gunderson, L. H., and Holling, C. S. (2001). *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.