

# **Acceptance Study Guide**

## **Acceptance by Jeff VanderMeer**

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# Plot Summary

Acceptance, by Jeff Vandermeer, is the third book in the Southern Reach Trilogy. The story opens with Saul Evans, a lighthouse keeper, going about his daily rounds. After having a personal crisis about his true gender orientation, he left his job as a preacher in the North and traveled to the far South. Once there, he had taken a job as a lighthouse keeper. His lover, Charlie, works on a fishing boat in the nearby town.

Henry and Suzanne, two researchers, visit the lighthouse often. Their visits irritate Saul. He is certain that they were the ones who damaged the lens on the beacon a few days earlier. Gloria, a 10 year-old local girl, comes by to see him almost every day. She helps him do chores or plays by the water's edge.

The focus shifts to the present day and Ghost Bird. Ghost Bird and Control are main characters who jumped through a portal and landed in Area X at the end of the last book. Now they are walking toward the island. They head there because they believe that the biologist and her husband may have found a way to exist there. She can tell that Control is showing symptoms of an infection. He is feverish and paranoid. She feels protective of him. That amazes her.

In order to escape Southern Reach and her work, the director (Cynthia) routinely goes to Chippers Lounge and pretends to be a long haul trucker so people will treat her like one of the regulars. While she is sitting and drinking, she begins to think back to when she had first asked Whitby to help her pull off an unsanctioned crossing into Area X. He had readily agreed. However, once they returned, poor Whitby had never been the same. It was then that she realized that Area X infected people with a 'brightness'. Even now, she knows that she is fighting off the infection.

Meanwhile, in the past, Saul is cleaning up in the area around the base of the lighthouse. He sees some shards of glass and a beautiful white flower growing near it. He goes to investigate and gets a sliver of the glass embedded in his finger. He thinks nothing of it and goes about his routine chores.

Control lies there in the dark with Ghost Bird's arms around him. He is thinking about jumping through the portal to come to Area X. They almost drowned. He feels that he is changing, and he does not know if he is strong enough to fight it. He has so many questions. His greatest fear is that he will never know the answers. He sometimes shoves his hand into his pocket to find the carved chess piece that his father had made for him so many years before.

Back at Chipper's Lounge, Cynthia sips on her drink and thinks about the last time she saw Saul. She had been leaving to stay with her father, someone she personally detested, and Saul had asked her not to forget him. She suddenly misses the old man terribly. She had not told Whitby that the burned out cottage that they had gone through had been her childhood home.



Meanwhile, Saul feels ill. He agrees to see a doctor after Gloria shows concern. Not wanting to worry the child, he goes to see a doctor in town. The doctor tells him it is the flu, but Saul feels that he is wrong. He is disconnecting from other people, and he feels numb.

Ghost Bird spots a floating bag in the sky and immediately throws Control to the ground and covers him with her own body. He asks her what is going on, and she explains that it is scanning for anomalies. He is the anomaly. A storm comes but she shelters him from it most of the night. In the morning, they start walking for the island. At the edge of the mainland, they can see the island and find a rowboat stashed nearby. They hope that the biologist and her husband might have made it to the island and have found a way to survive in Area X. They get in the boat and push away from shore.

The Director thinks about when she had confronted Lowry about Southern Reach. He had invited her up to his secret facility where to her amazement she found that he had recreated Area X in a large concealed area. She learned that Lowry was afraid of Area X and has always seen it as the enemy ever since he returned from Expedition 1. Cynthia is appalled that he would consider Area X an enemy.

Control and Ghost Bird spend the night on the island. When they wake up, there is someone staring down at them. It is Grace, the former assistant director. She tells them that she has been there for two years after escaping Southern Reach's breach. This confuses them as they have just come into Area X after Southern Reach's demise. The distortion of time is evident.

Grace gives them the Biologist's journal when they ask if she has seen the biologist. They read that the biologist, upon escaping from her incarceration had come to Area X looking for her husband. She chronicles the survival techniques that she used, samples of the area that she took, and her observations about the 'brightness' in her. She writes that in order to keep the change at arm's length, she inflicts pain on herself every other day, something that Grace, too, has adopted. The pain makes her remain human. She is convinced that the owl is her husband who has undergone a transformation. It does not act like a typical owl and brings her food regularly, opting to roost near her at night. She indicates at the end of her journal that the owl has died and that she has been there for many years without hope of meeting up with any other human being. She says that she will no longer hurt herself and will allow the change to occur. The journal ends.

Saul wakes in the middle of the night and runs up into the lantern room of the lighthouse. He finds Henry, Suzanne, and another woman up there. He threatens them all with a hand ax and makes them leave. He learns that Henry made the hole in the lens because he believed that he was letting out a paranormal anomaly.

The Biologist has changed into a large amorphous creature of a thousand eyes. She breaks down the door to the old lighthouse where Control, Grace, and Ghost Bird have been staying the night. Control has some of the creature's body wash over him and he begins hallucinating. The next morning the Biologist is gone, but Ghost Bird says that

they reestablished their connection, that no matter where the biologist is now, Ghost Bird will know and they can avoid her.

Meanwhile, Saul is feeling horrible. He knows that he is most likely not going to make it until Charlie returns from his fishing trip. They have had their last meal together at the diner, and then Charlie had left Saul to continue drinking and listening to a band. Saul has a psychotic break and thinks that he sees all sorts of horrific images and actions by the people in the diner. He drives the truck as far as he can. Then, he gets out and stumbles into the woods.

Ghost Bird, Grace, and Control go to the tunnel. Ghost Bird says that she and Control will go into the tunnel, while Grace stands at the top guarding the entrance. They go into the tunnel, and Ghost Bird stops in front of the Crawler. She gently embraces the light that circles his head. Control walks past her to where he has seen a large white flower surrounded in a brilliant white light. Setting the carving from his father on the last step, he steps into the white light and is gone. Grace, fearing the worst, comes down the stairs and sees Ghost Bird with the light. Grace panics and shoots her. Ghost Bird is unharmed. Grace leaves and goes back up the stairs.

Meanwhile, in the past, Saul has pulled himself back into his truck and has managed to make it back to the lighthouse. He climbs the stairs and finds Henry there. They fight, and both men go over the railing and land on the ground. Both are unharmed. Saul gets up, confused. Henry gets up and walks to the top of the lighthouse, once more, and Saul can tell that he is communicating with something alien. He no longer cares. He gives in to the brightness in his chest.

The director sips another drink. It is the past, and she is a day away from Expedition 12. She is hopeful that the Biologist will help them discover some of the questions that plague them about Area X. In the end, the director knows that they have been terribly wrong about Area X and its purpose. They have been wrong about their place in the universe. She finishes her drink and leaves.

# Part One: 0001-0003

## Summary

0001

Acceptance, by Jeff Vandermeer, opens as Cynthia, the former director of Southern Reach and the leader of Expedition 12, takes her last breath. Cynthia narrates how her body dies and assimilates into Area X. She recalls seeing a biologist, with whom she exchanges a few words. Then, she disintegrates peacefully into her surroundings. Her human qualities have changed, but she is still alive.

The story line shifts back several decades to focus on Saul Evans, the former lighthouse keeper. Presumably, he is Cynthia's father. Saul had once been a preacher up North. One day, he realized that he had been living the life of a hypocrite. After this epiphany, Saul took the job as a lighthouse keeper and chose to live a solitary life.

In the present, Saul wakes up beside Charlie, his male lover. Saul appreciates Charlie's body, which Charlie's job aboard fishing boats has sculpted. As Saul dresses, he thinks about his happy life. He loves the predictability of his work.

Saul leaves the cottage and walks to the lighthouse. Once there, his good mood disappears when he sees the Seance and Science car waiting on him. Its occupants, Henry and Suzanne, are both in their twenties. Saul is not happy that they frequently visit the lighthouse to document various things. Saul thinks that they should spend their time and money on other pursuits. When he asks them what they are documenting today, Henry tells him that they suspect that a doubling effect exists. It is possible that the origin of the effect is necrotic. They have the appropriate permit to be there, so Saul must let them in the lighthouse. He leaves them to their foolishness and goes down to work in the yard.

As Saul is working, Gloria, a 10-year-old girl, sneaks up on him. Her sudden appearance does not surprise him because she has shown up unannounced for the last year or so. Her mother and father work long, odd hours. Saul knows that the young girl is responsible for her own entertainment. Gloria and Saul have strange conversations as she follows him around while he does his chores. She asks Saul about the people (Henry and Suzanne) in the lighthouse, and he tells her that they are running some tests.

When Saul walks past the base of the lighthouse, he notices something shiny in the grass. Bending down for a closer look, he sees that the object is gleaming. With a gloved hand, he brushes leaves from it. The light penetrates his glove, piercing it like a shard of white-hot glass. He recoils, screams, and stands. He yanks off his glove and examines his hand. It looks fine. Henry appears behind him and asks what happened.

Saul is confused. He does not like how Henry is observing him, as if he were a lab rabbit.

0002

The story shifts to present day. Ghost Bird and Control have made a desperate move and jumped into an energy vortex that they predicted would take them to Area X. Their prediction was correct. Now, three days into Area X, it is winter. Ghost Bird sees a skeleton in the reeds next to the shore. They ignore it and keep walking.

Control shed his nickname toward the end of Book Two. Consequently, in Area X, he felt exposed and vulnerable. He requests that Ghost Bird call him Control again. She respects it, saying that all snails need a shell. With her binoculars, she is studying something that is a strange shade of orange in the distance. She goes to investigate. Reluctantly, Control follows her. He knows that something has changed in him. He has a fever. Also, there was a feeling of 'lightness' or 'brightness' inside of him. It was the same feeling that Ghost Bird reported when he had interviewed her the previous week. Maybe, he was transforming, too.

The point of view shifts to Ghost Bird. She brushes aside the notion of heading to the lighthouse. She tells Control that they will go to the island, instead. She is shocked when Control does not argue with her. She realizes that her desire to go to the island comes from the borrowed memories of her original copy, the Biologist. She is plagued with the notion that she does not know her own identity. By going to the places she knows the original biologist would have gone, she hopes to find out who she is.

As they reach the scrap of orange material that they saw earlier, Control says that he thinks it is a surveyor's orange flat. Looking around, Control sees another skeleton. It is half submerged into the mud in the reeds by the water. Ghost Bird calmly tells Control that the skeleton belonged to a creature that they'd called 'The Moaner' during their expedition. Control thinks she must be mistaken as the skeleton is highly decayed and yellowed, as if it had been there for decades. Ghost Bird tells him that it died only 18 months ago. Control is fascinated by the skeleton and the fact that it is half human. He asks her if she knows who or what it was.

Ghost Bird replies that most likely it was a failed double, or clone, of Expedition 11's psychologist. She has no way of knowing though. Ghost Bird has the comforting thought that copies can be mistakes, but sometimes copies are better than the originals because they have a second chance to not make the same mistakes. She also tells him that all of her memories have returned since being in Area X, that she remembers everything up to the point where the Crawler (The lighthouse keeper) had duplicated her.

Ghost Bird questions the decisions that her original made when on the Expedition. Why had she done some of the things that she'd done, when they were so obviously counterproductive as well as counter intuitive? She knows that had she been the

original, she would not have made the same missteps. And she certainly would never have consented to live in the city like her original did, even for love.

003

This section is told in second person and focuses on the former director, Cynthia, prior to her disappearance and Expedition 12. She says that on her days off she pretends that she's a long haul trucker, dresses the part, and goes to the local bowling alley where she plays miniature golf, pick up games of bowling, and then sits in the bar drinking beer. No one knows her there and that's how she likes it. In fact, the only troublesome person, both in the bar, and at Southern Reach, is Lowry. Lowry who knows and, for now, keeps her secrets. He knows that she grew up in what is now called Area X.

She jots down notes on a napkin in the bar. There are questions that Whitby posed to her that keep teasing at her mind. His idea of a holistic and synergistic macro organism are tantalizing. She feels that he is possibly right, but they have no proof. More to the point, she thinks, they have no understanding. Still, over the years they'd made progress. More of the expedition members were coming back intact and only slightly damaged. And the toxicity of Area X, itself, was returning to normal parameters.

The only place she can go, besides the Stardust Bowling Alley, and get away from everyone is Beyond Reach, the name she's given to the rooftop at Southern Reach. No one but Grace knows she goes up there. And, only she, Grace, and the janitor even have keys to the door leading up there. Grace, she thinks to herself, is her one true moral compass, though they are not involved in any other way than co-workers at Southern Reach. Grace, Cynthia thinks to herself, should never be allowed to go into Area X. She has too much connection to the outside world. Maybe Whitby should accompany her, she thinks. She also knows, as she continues to doodle on the napkin, that she needs to make the excursion solo, or with only one other person who is good at keeping secrets.

She writes about going into the entrance to Area X, how it feels, how it looks. She is the only one not hypnotized, as she's put Whitby under and he silently plods along next to her, oblivious to the terrible beauty of the corridor. She loses a sense of where she is in relation to her own body. Finally, they stumble clear of the corridor and find it difficult to breathe the pure oxygen at first. Then they orient themselves and head for the topographical anomaly (the buried tower).

They reach the tower, only it isn't made of stone. It is living and breathing. Still, Cynthia feels compelled to enter, but Whitby refuses to follow her. She says that she will go alone, but dons a breathing mask just to be safe. As she descends she ignores the writing on the walls, and ignores all of the various things that vie for her attention. She inherently knows that to give them any attention would disorient her, make her forget her objective. Reaching the bottom she sees a figure, a familiar figure. It emits a blueish glow and seems fused with the side of the wall. She walks up and asks out loud if he is real. She reaches out to touch Saul Evans' face. He tells her that she shouldn't be there.



A growing light begins to emanate from just beyond where Saul is. It grows closer. From above her, Cynthia can hear Whitby screaming.

## Analysis

One of the themes that is expressed early on through these first three chapters is that of Isolation. Saul is isolated not only by choosing to leave his pastorate to come to a remote island as a lighthouse keeper, but also as someone hiding his homosexuality.

The reader sees that Gloria is also isolated, as a child. Growing up on the island, there aren't that many playmates, her parents aren't around much, and she's very curious. Meanwhile, back in the present, Cynthia is isolated, and chooses isolation, in that she sneaks away from Southern Reach, assumes a different persona, and loses herself in the mediocrity of the small town rural life. She also shares with the reader that she is isolated even when at Southern Reach because she escapes to the rooftop, sometimes with Grace, and that no one but Grace and the Janitor have access to the roof. She is both physically, and emotionally isolated from everyone.

Ghost Bird and Control are also isolated. They've jumped into Area X and have left behind a 'normal' world. Already Ghost Bird is regretting Control's decision to come along. They are both together, but alone, in their thoughts, motivations, and goals. Control especially feels the disconnection and is beginning to question everything he's ever been told.

It should be noted that Saul Evans, whose backstory the reader is given in this third book, functions symbolically in dual ways. First, he is the lighthouse keeper. A lighthouse keeper's function is to make sure that things run well, and that, most importantly, the light shines to protect the ships and keep them off of the dangerous shoreline. Now, as a different type of lighthouse keeper inside of Area X, he is doing much the same thing. This is evident in the warning that he gives Cynthia when she touches him in the tunnels. The very name, Saul, may be borrowed from the apostle Paul's story in the Christian Bible. In the conversion story of the apostle Paul, whose former name was Saul, he was stricken with a great light that changed him, convicted him of his transgressions. This is exactly what happened with Lighthouse keeper Saul.

The point of view shifts with each section. The first section 001 focuses on the Lighthouse Keeper, Saul Evans. The second section continues the action where Book Two left off (Ghost Bird and Control), while the third section focuses on Cynthia. Each of these sections gives the reader a little more information. What is particularly confusing at this juncture is who, exactly, Cynthia is in relation to Saul. The reader was led to believe in Book Two that Cynthia was Evans' daughter, and yet, in this book, there is a young girl named Gloria who befriended Saul decades before. Could Gloria and Cynthia be the same person, or are they two distinct individuals? This is yet to be resolved.



## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the theme of Isolation.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Compare Control to Ghost Bird.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the symbolism surrounding Saul Evans as the lighthouse keeper.

## **Vocabulary**

acclimate, maw, fragmentary, necrotic, dormant, tendrils, destabilize, elusive, glowering, engulf, existential

# Part One: 0004-0007

## Summary

### 0004

This chapter is told from the point of view of the lighthouse keeper, thirty years prior. He discusses what he thinks about the type of 'light' that exists within every human being. When he left his church he'd felt like a lighthouse drained of most of its light, except for the small glimmer still in his heart. Now, living in the lighthouse, he knows that despite his isolation, that he is the message. Somehow.

The small cut on his hand from the strange plant/glass shard left by the Science and Seance people is still bothering him. He begins filling in armadillo holes when Gloria joins him. They talk and she asks if she can go to the top of the lighthouse to look over at Failure Island as it is burning. This is the first he's heard of it and drops his shovel. Taking her hand, they quickly go to the top of the lighthouse and look through the telescope. The other lighthouse on Failure Island is on fire. It has been in ruins for years, so he wonders how it could be on fire. Maybe some of the Science and Seance people had set it?

Henry and Suzanne join them at the top of the lighthouse shortly thereafter. When questioned, they tell Saul that they did not touch the lens in the beacon. But Saul has found some glass fragments on the deck and he's sure that they've been chipping away at the lens. There is something about both Henry and Suzanne that gives him the creeps and suddenly he doesn't want Gloria anywhere near the strange couple. He makes her leave the telescope and follow him down into the lighthouse kitchen. He gives her a snack and tells her that she needs to go home and stay away while the S&S people are at the lighthouse. Brad, a young man who has been assigned community service at the lighthouse drives up. Suzanne and Henry take a picture of the two men with Gloria standing by the lighthouse.

### 0005

As Control and Ghost Bird make their way to the island, they discuss the potentials of what Area X really is. Control refers to it as 'the enemy,' but Ghost Bird does not see it that way. She suggests that Area X is so far advanced that it pays little attention to human beings. They are inconsequential and primitive to it. Suddenly, they see something rippling through the sky. It looks like a piece of plastic bag, elongated and floating. Only it is alive, and it seems to be searching. Ghost Bird throws Control onto the ground and covers his body with her own. Control realizes that he is actually frightened and totally out of his element here. They stay this way, even after the 'bag' disappears, until a storm rolls in. Once it clears up, they begin walking toward the island, again, but this time, they walk closer.

006

This section focuses back on the former director. She is still sitting at the Star Lanes lounge, she is thinking about the time when she and Whitby first made their unsanctioned venture into Area X. They made their way to the remains of her mother's old cottage. Whitby demanded to know why they were there. She had wanted to tell him that this used to be her old home, but she couldn't bring herself to tell him that. She recalls that her mother sent her to live with her father in the summers, away from the island. Then, she simply wasn't allowed to come home anymore. She never learned any more of her mother's demise, or even if she still lived.

007

The focus switches back to Saul, the lighthouse keeper. Gloria visits and immediately tells him that he's different. He had been feeling not quite himself lately, ever since he'd pricked his finger on the shattered glass from the S&S group. Gloria tells him that he should go to a doctor. He tells her that he has been seeing things out of the corner of his eye. After she leaves he decides that it is probably very good advice. He remarks that lately he has been feeling strange in his own skin.

The next day he goes to see Gloria's mother, who is a pediatrician (or used to be). She examines him and make conversation. Saul tells her that Gloria called him the Defender of the Light, which makes both of them chuckle. She tells him that other than a slight fever and elevated blood pressure, he's fine. He is reassured and leaves, but the anxiety returns shortly. Later that night he turns the beacon on and settles in for the night. He's not supposed to sleep when it is a beacon night, but he dozes off. He dreams an apocalyptic dream about the death of the moon and the total pollution of the planet. He dreams that Henry joins him and they go down into a submerged tower, where Saul speaks and the words grow onto the wall. When he wakes the next morning he feels slightly disoriented. The words from his nightmare come back to him:

"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."

## Analysis

In these chapters, several symbols become apparent. First, there is the reference to the lighthouse as a physical and metaphorical point of light. Saul states that he felt as if he'd been drained of 'light' the last few years of his ministry. Literally, Saul becomes the lighthouse for the area. The lighthouse IS the truth. Interestingly, later, Ghostbird and Control determine that they should try to reach the lighthouse, because they feel that this is where the answers are.

Saul is 'stung' or cut by something that Henry and Suzanne dropped in the grass at the base of the lighthouse. Though he does not know it yet, he has been infected with the 'brightness' that others will report feeling when entering Area X. This represents the

'infection' of the idea of Area X. It is the connection that mankind needs to come to terms with.

The reader finally figures out who took the picture that was featured in the earlier books; the picture of Gloria standing with Brad and Saul beside the lighthouse. What is puzzling is Gloria's name change. Clearly, the former director, whose name is Cynthia, is also Gloria who grew up in Area X. This points to the theme of Identity.

The theme of Nature is demonstrated in the sections that feature Ghost Bird and Control. In these sections, Ghost Bird suggests that nature, as a greater and far more advanced consciousness does not have any more regard for human beings that it does for the other life on the planet. One is not more elevated than the other.

Another symbol is the appearance of the anomalous floating bag. It shouldn't be there at all..but it is. This is what makes it stand out against the sky so strikingly that Control notices it. However, it is not as innocuous as a flimsy plastic bag and both Ghost Bird and Control realize this. Interestingly, Ghost Bird shields Control from the bag's scrutiny, using her body as a shield. It is as if, as a creature of Area X, she knows that she shouldn't allow the 'scanner' to view Control as apart from the landscape.

The burned out cottage that the former director (Cynthia/Gloria) originally took Whitby to explore was her former childhood home, though she doesn't tell him that. It is symbolic of how gutted and reclaimed Gloria, herself, is.

The reader is finally offered answers to questions that were posed back in the first book in the series. The main questions concern the strange phrases written on the walls of the submerged lighthouse/tunnel in Area X. The reader now knows that it was Saul who put that phrase there and that these words came to him, first in a dream.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the symbolism of the burned out cottage.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the theme of Nature.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why didn't Cynthia tell Whitby that they were in her childhood home?

## Vocabulary

elevated, bilious, premonition, rebuke, pulsing, obliterated, scrutiny, hemorrhaging, remnants, visceral



## Part One: 0008-00010

### Summary

0008

Ghost Bird and Control find a rowboat pulled up past the high tide mark. They decide to use it to row to the island before dark. They reach the island and decide to try and get to the ruined lighthouse, where they would make camp for the night. They both feel as if something or someone is watching them. They reach the lighthouse and decide that they had better explore it a little further before settling in so there will be no surprises. When they turn the corner, a woman is sitting on the steps with a rifle pointed at them. The woman is Grace Stevenson, the assistant director from Southern Reach.

0009

This chapter features Cynthia, the former director. She and Whitby were escorted back from Area X. She has gone to Lowry's headquarters where he has recreated many of the objects from Area X. The director notices that there is a submerged tunnel, a lighthouse, and various jeeps strewn about the expanse of a lawn leading down to the ocean. The director knows that Lowry has been given free reign with his experiments. If the rumors are true, the experiments involve some sort of neuro research on animals. He offers her a drink. When she refuses, he pours her one anyway. He throws it at her.

While he rants and raves at her, Cynthia retreats into her memories. She recalls how her father was finally forced to tell her that her mother was most likely dead in an area called Area X. She thinks forward to her first years in college, how she'd decided that she wanted to work for Southern Reach, to be near her forgotten coast once more. In order to do that, though, she'd had to change her name and her identity. She was no longer Gloria. When she was first interviewed by Lowry with Central, he figured it out. He held it against her as a requirement for hiring her. When she asks why he is not turning her in, he says that he knows she grew up in Area X and that makes her very interesting to him.

He introduces her to someone: Jackie Severance. Jackie grills Cynthia about what she experienced and saw while at Area X. At the end of the interrogation she leaves, telling Cynthia that she gets to keep her job, but that she will be watched. Once she is dismissed her mind shifts to some of the events that she hadn't put in her report. Whitby had gone up into the lighthouse ahead of her. She'd gone running when she'd heard a struggle. By the time she'd reached Whitby he was down in the watch room with tons of journals covering him. He claimed to have seen his own twin. He killed his twin, and in the copy Whitby's backpack had been a damaged cell phone and a strange little plant with red roots.

00010



Grace talks to Control while Ghost Bird sleeps. It is morning and Control wakes to find Grace reading Whitby's pages. Control sees that Grace is rattled and nervous. She tells him that she drugged Ghost Bird last night because she didn't know if she was the real biologist or a copy. Control keeps his knowledge about this to himself. He asks what happened after she fled Southern Reach. She tells him that she once she determined that the 'thing' emerging from the swamp wasn't really Cynthia, she'd shot it. Then, she'd gathered supplies and anyone that wanted to come with her had crossed in Area X and made for the lighthouse. No one but she made it.

Grace tells them that there is no opening in the border any more. Then, she tells Control that she's been stuck in the lighthouse for three years. Ghost Bird wakes up and she and Control stare at her in disbelief. Ghost Bird doesn't believe her and Grace throws a sheaf of papers at her feet. They are the last will and testament of the Biologist.

## Analysis

In these sections, the theme of Isolation is prevalent. When Control and Ghost Bird run into Grace, they are shocked to learn that she believes herself to have been there three years by herself. Additionally, though they have each other, both Ghost Bird and Control keep many things to themselves while they are walking. This is most notable from Control's point of view. He is aware that Ghost Bird is a copy, and not the real Biologist. So he is always hesitant about what he should tell her.

In Chapter 0009, the reader learns about Gloria's name change, and why she'd felt compelled to change it. Her father was a low level grifter, a con man, and when she distanced herself from him and went to school, she made certain that she had no ties to him whatsoever. She'd thought that she'd covered her tracks, but Lowry dug deeper than most and discovered her secret.

The damaged cell phone and the strange little plant that were found in false Whitby's backpack are referenced earlier. This is undoubtedly the damaged cell phone and odd plant that Control found in Cynthia's desk. This is the plant that appeared to have eaten the mouse, and had red roots.

Lastly, the theme of Reality surfaces finally. No one has a very firm grasp of what is real and what is an illusion or a copy. Are the copies real? Ghost Bird seems real enough to Control. If Grace has been in Area X for 3 years, then the Grace who was in charge at the Southern Reach facility when Control arrived, must have been a copy. There are many questions and not enough answers in Chapter 00010. It is certain that copies seem more valid than the originals. It is as if the author is suggesting that the concept of reality is largely based on perspective, distance, and experiences. All of these things suggest to the human mind what might be real and what might be false.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the author suggesting about the theme of Reality?





## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Isolation.

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Grace distrust Ghost Bird?

## Vocabulary

stressor, horrific, obscure, schism, cautionary, protocols, groggy, doppelganger, gecko, stance, etched

## Part Two: 01-03

### Summary

#### Part Two

In this initial couple of pages, the reader is thrust into a stream of consciousness. The unnamed narrator is, after many attempts, finally writing down a chronicle of the journey in Area X. After the first page, it becomes evident that the narrator is the missing Biologist from books one and two. She's been resisting the 'brightness' inside of her for years, she reports, but has finally decided to let it in. She wants to write everything down, just in case, in being consumed by the brightness, she never fully returns to herself.

#### 01

The Biologist reports that she initially followed her husband's trail, that her only purpose was to get to the island and to find him. Now, though, she's less sure of her purpose at all. She makes a base camp for herself for the first time in a long while because she's determined that it doesn't matter if Area X, or any other creature, should see her. She feels connected to everything and has felt a type of unconcern washing over her as the brightness in her swelled and grew. That night, as she sits by her fire, she hears the moaning of the creature she'd encountered before (Book Two). Instead of running from it, however, she stands to face it.

#### 02

The Biologist finds that the creature is not as close as she thought. She wades into the thick muck, the reeds and water plants grabbing at her, but she doesn't care. She follows the moaning sound to a small sandbar where she finds the creature lying on its side, sleeping. She draws her gun and trains it on the creature, just in case. She draws nearer and examines it. Area X clearly made mistakes, she thinks to herself. This creature is a combination of a wild boar, manatee, and possibly a dolphin. What it resembles, unfortunately, is a large grub with a small, almost human head. When she walks around to view the face, she can see that it is blind, and that there are enough facial features to tell her who it once was. It is the psychologist from her husband's expedition. The Biologist feels fear for the first time, but not from the creature. For herself. What if she is changing into something similar?

#### 03

The Biologist finally makes it to the island. She goes into the ruins of the lighthouse and makes that her base camp. She stays long enough to plant a garden, to keep it weeded and fertilized, and is able to forage for enough other food to sustain her. She's continually curious about the lighthouse. It seems an exact replica of the one on the

coast. Other than this, she sets up camp and attempts to exist, which she states is the prime directive of any living organism.

## **Analysis**

The theme of Purpose is fully introduced in this section. The Biologist poses the question about purpose and how skewed it seems from her newest perspective. In the end, and stripped of all convention, the only purpose a living organism has is to live, to exist, to be a part of the total convergence of other life on the planet. This, she is sure, is due to the 'brightness' that is growing inside of her. This 'brightness' that many of the characters are feeling seems representative and parallel to a new-found awareness, an awakening of sorts, to the other life around them, and of mankind's interconnections to that life.

When the Biologist finds the Moaning Creature, she sees that Area X hasn't been kind to it. She recognizes the creature as originally being the psychologist from her husband's expedition. It seems to be in pain, but then, again, the Biologist reasons, perspectives in Area X are different. And, not knowing how this creature somehow contributed to its ecosystem, she decides not to put it out of its seeming misery. Symbolically, one could suggest that her incomplete transformation is a result of not fully embracing the brightness when it was introduced to her. Fighting against it, reasoning against it, ignoring it, left the psychologist conflicted, locked into a body that was both grotesque and painful.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the theme of Purpose.

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the symbolism of the Moaning Creature?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is the 'brightness'?

## **Vocabulary**

consistency, pseudopods, appendages, slumber, harbinger, assimilated, writhing, smudge, leviathans, guttering

## Part Two: 04-06

### Summary

04

The Biologist explores down by the beach and sees the remnants of an old pier. A long line of cormorants is perched there. What strikes her as odd is that perched in a lone black pine by the water's edge, is a horned owl. The cormorants take off when she approaches, but the owl simply stays. The Biologist feels drawn to the owl, partially out of curiosity and partially because with her new found awareness. She believes that this owl may have been someone she once knew.

The sun sets and, eventually, the owl turns its gaze on her, opens its wings to fly, and takes off. She is standing so close to the owl that when he takes off, he gently grazes her cheek with his flight feathers. Later that night she eats a rabbit that she caught, then settles in to sleep. Just before falling asleep, however, she looks across the fire to see the owl, perched on her backpack, with another rabbit in its talons. It drops the rabbit and flies off.

She stays three more days just to see if the owl would continue its oversight of her. Each day he stays within sight, getting a little closer with each passing day. She discovers some old expedition equipment, a tent, pistol, and discarded clothes. She leaves all of it where she finds it. When she leaves her little camp she doesn't know if the owl will follow her or not. He does. By the end of the second week, the owl has become tame and eats from her hand. She wonders if this owl could be her husband, transformed.

She goes back to the lighthouse and the owl takes up residence inside, preferring the rafters. Surprisingly, the cormorants also show up and join the owl in using the upper rafters for their perches. This was uncommon behavior in any book, but the Biologist puts that observation aside, glad for the company. She remarks that even the owl's soft snoring during the day reminds her of the way her husband used to breathe as he slept.

05

In her daily explorations the Biologist comes into what used to be a small town. Most of the buildings have been reclaimed by nature, but she rummages through various items as she finds them. What interests her the most are the instruments and discarded items with the initials S&SB on them. She calls them the Seeker and Surveillance Bandits as it fits what she's been able to piece together about them and what they must have been up to prior to the Area X creation. All she can glean from the materials and journals that she finds is that these people were initially just a bunch of amateurish ghost hunters, but later, were infiltrated by more scientifically minded individuals, whose own agenda didn't include ghosts or the paranormal.

The Biologist continues her daily routine, and by her count, months stretch into years. She attempts to keep track of the seasons, and still feels the brightness wanting to spread into her entire being. She is able to keep it at bay by inflicting pain on herself, reminding herself that she exists. When she allows the brightness to swell in her, she reports that she can spend hours just being a part of the wind, sun, and water. Pain brings her back to herself. The owl, now quite old, dies, and the Biologist laments that she was powerless to do anything to save him.

## Analysis

This small first portion of Part Two focuses solely on the Biologist. At the end of Book Two, the reader might recall that the Biologist had opted not to ever go back to the real world, instead sending her doppelganger back in her place. She has done this because she's been convinced that her husband was still alive and on the island. However, once she reaches the island, she does not find her husband, at least that she can completely confirm.

What she does uncover is that Henry and Suzanne had been involved in scientific studies of the prebiotic lifeforms on the island. From what she's seen, she believes that they may have initially been the start of Area X. The symbolism of the brightness is offered to the reader once more. This time, however, the Biologist remains aware of it, rather than allowing it to overtake her. She is afraid that she will end up like the Moaning Creature if she does. Her friendship with the owl, and her realization that pain keeps the brightness at bay, allow her to remain in control of her own mind. In essence, it is her attachment to her body that keeps her grounded.

There are two themes that are presented in this section. First, there is the theme of Isolation. Aside from her animal companions, the Biologist has no other human around her. She remains sane by talking to the animals, and reading old journals that she comes upon. Her curiosity also gives her motivation to remain focused instead of giving in to the brightness. Secondly, there is the theme of Nature. Nature is shown to clearly be the one in charge, and when she lives in harmony with it, she is able to exist and live in peace. She is also reminded that Nature will eventually win because Nature, as a force, is patient and always forward moving. This is evident in the reclaimed town that the Biologist finds.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of the brightness in this section.

## Discussion Question 2

Why does inflicting pain allow the Biologist to resist the brightness?



## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Nature.

## Vocabulary

refuge, delusion, attuned, solitude, cataclysm, shied, antipathy, glimpse, presaged, rifts, dysfunction, cosmology

## Part Three: 0012-0013

### Summary

#### 0011

Grace, Control, and Ghost Bird consider what is going on in Area X. Time has become distorted, lengthened, then shortened. It is irrelevant, almost. The stars that shine at night, Grace remarks, are not the same constellations that they grew up with. Some of them were missing all together. They all wonder aloud at the 'purpose' of Area X. What is it's agenda if any? Control suggests that the purpose is clear. Area X wants to eliminate the virus that is mankind.

Ghost Bird tells them that she believes that the organism often has a purpose but can also make patterns that have nothing to do with that same purpose. She states that there is a lot of energy that is put off when the the border of Area X is breached. Things disappear when they cross over, but they don't really disappear, Ghost Bird theorizes, as much as they are sent somewhere else...or sometime else. Control can't handle the overload of information as his mind begins to leap to more and more outlandish conclusions. Seeing that he is about to come unhinged, Ghost Bird does something very uncharacteristic; she walks to him and holds him until he is calm. Grace tells her that most decidedly the Biologist is alive, somewhere out there. Ghost Bird suddenly goes rigid and begins peering out of the lighthouse. "She's coming now," Ghost Bird says.

The Biologist has been transformed. She is a great shapeless dark mass, with gills, tidal pools, and with a mass that wraps around the lighthouse. Control and Grace run for the stairs, but Ghost Bird stays behind. When the changed Biologist knocks down the door and part of her enters, Ghost Bird parts some of the liquid portions of the creature and connects with the essence of the biologist. Ghost Bird understands the Biologist better, now.

#### 0012

The focus of this chapter is on the lighthouse keeper. Saul is changing, though he is not fully aware of that yet. He does not feel right and has been to several doctors who only diagnose a winter cold. It is more than a cold. Saul hears whispers in the lighthouse and he gets out of bed to investigate. He climbs the stairs to the lantern room and discovers three figures in the dark, bent over the lens. It is Henry, Suzanne, and another woman he doesn't know. Suzanne tries to suggest that Saul go back to sleep. Saul becomes agitated and swings the ax that he's brought with him. It lands with a thud, embedded in the wood flooring. He tells them to get out. They'd turned off the light, so when he's certain that they've left, he turns the lens back on. He goes back downstairs and hears a boat taking off. He also sees that Henry has stayed behind.



Henry tells Saul that he should be grateful for Henry and not consider him a burden, as Henry is the only one that understands what is going on. He tells Saul that it was he that drilled the hole in the lens because that one place on the lens didn't register on any of his instruments. That was when they'd all decided to liberate that foreign substance from the mirror. He turns to leave, but tells Saul not to worry.

0013

The Biologist's form continues to flood into the lighthouse, pinning Control under it. He feels as if this new Biologist is seeing into every pore of his body. He begins to think about the terrible nature that has been his life thus far and he suddenly doesn't feel alone anymore. Then, the Biologist withdraws and the disconnection that Control feels is palpable. Grace appears by his side and helps him up. He stands and realizes that he's been weeping. They go to the landing.

They try to decide what they do next. They can't stay at the lighthouse as the Biologist is sure to return. Control suggests that they go back to the main lighthouse, find the Crawler, and kill him. Ghost Bird tells him that there's no 'reset' button to be pressed. Control says that he knows that, but he also knows that there might be a way to change the focus or direction of Area X, and that he's betting that the Crawler, or the lighthouse, are the key to doing that. Grace says that they have something that the other expeditions never had....a sentient copy. Ghost Bird.

## Analysis

The theme of Purpose is demonstrated and discussed heavily in these chapters. Grace and Control argue that Area X, as an advanced form of life, inadvertently sets events in motion that it most likely is not aware of, any more than man is aware of the effect they have on ants in the backyard. Ghost Bird suggests that like any top form of intelligent life, Area X has shaped and changed its environment to suit itself, not caring about what happens to whatever is around it.

The significance of the Biologist's final form is interesting in that the nebulous form is covered with many eyes, all of them watching and searching. Her form is also shapeless, shifting, ever changing. The author describes it as being suited to being on land, as well as the deep oceans. In many respects, this, her final form, has freed her and allowed her to become who she was on the inside. One suspects that when the owl died that she lost the will to fight the brightness any longer. Ghost Bird, Control, and Grace are in possession of the Biologist's journal, and so they are aware of the owl, and the Biologist's last thoughts prior to her transformation.

Finally, the reader is given some answers as to what Area X might be, and how it might have happened. From the beginning the reader has been lead to believe that it was a genetic experiment gone horribly wrong, but this seems not to be the case at all. Henry, Suzanne, and an unnamed woman (whom we assume was Jackie) released something alien and ancient from the lens in the island's lighthouse, then brought it to the





mainland's lighthouse. Saul came into contact with some of the filings from the lens, and became 'infected' with the alien DNA.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Purpose in these chapters.

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the Biologist's new form?

## Discussion Question 3

How was Area X most likely created?

## Vocabulary

threnody, incantations, collateral, containment, mottled, sprawled, speck, celestial, goading

## Part Three: 0014-0016

### Summary

#### 0014

The focus is back on the former director. She returns from her meeting with Lowry back to her offices at Southern Reach. When she enters her office, she sees the black and white photograph of her as a child standing with Saul and Brad. A note from Lowry tells her to proudly display it on the wall in her office as a reminder. Cynthia knows a veiled threat when she sees one, but can't bear to throw the picture away. She, instead, calls in Grace and asks her to dig as far and as deep as she can to see if there's a link between the Severances (and John Rodriguez) and Lowry.

When she sees Whitby in the halls at Southern Reach, she can tell that he's as changed as she is, though he hides it well. She senses that the light has gone out of his eyes. She focuses on the plant and the old cellphone that she's obtained. The plant cannot be destroyed. When she confers with Whitby about the plant, his answer chills her to her core. He asks her, "What if it's not a plant at all?" The phone is also an anomaly. The techs take it apart and find no mechanical reason for it not to work.

Lowry calls and tells her that there will be another Eleventh Expedition and that this time they will implant psychological safeguards. But, a year later when the Eleventh Expedition returns, all of the members are zombies, no better off than the last expedition had been. Then, a year from that...they all die. Lowry tells her that the Twelfth Expedition will have some more modifications and Cynthia questions his use of human life so casually. She knows she can't do anything to stop it, but maybe, just maybe she can affect things on her end through the composition of the team, and the type of training they receive before entering the field.

To make matters worse, Jackie Severance routinely pays her a visit. Cynthia figures that she's an extension of Lowry and she always makes sure to remain vague in her remarks to Jackie. She tells her that she wants to exhume the remains of the 11th Expedition. If her suspicions are correct, the bodies will be in an advanced stage of decay.

#### 0015

This focuses on Saul as he continues to 'change'. He goes about his usual chores, but interspersed with this are moments of dislocation, of not being on the same beach anymore. It terrifies him every time it happens. Soon Gloria comes by and the two of them sit on the rocks by the water's edge. Gloria tells Saul that she's sad that she has to go to her father's house. She tells him that this time it is for a longer time because her mother has lost her job. They stand and she starts to scamper off. On impulse Saul calls out after her, "Don't forget me."



0016

Ghost Bird, Control, and Grace take the boat back to the mainland. They are headed for the lighthouse. Ghost Bird notices, but doesn't comment on the fact that she can see that Control has the brightness in him. It radiates out of him like a hundred knives, she thinks to herself. When they stop to rest, Grace shares with them her most recent conclusion on Area X. It is a conduit to another version of Earth, of a small, new, colony, of life. Ghost Bird thinks about the tunnel they had come through, of the pollution that she had seen, and the dead bodies. She thinks that this hypothesis is not without some merit. So, now there is a new question: What is back on Earth, and where are they, exactly?

## Analysis

The theme of Control is introduced fully in these chapters as Ghost Bird, Grace, and Control discuss the supremacy of Area X and the intelligence that obviously is at work there. Its act of creating also destroys. Attempts have been made to redirect, to communicate, and to force the organism. All attempts were seemingly met with indifference. Mankind only labors under the illusion of control where Nature is concerned, because in the end, It is in control of man.

Saul is changing. He knows that he is and as he continues to have these bouts of dislocation...of being by the lighthouse, and then being on a foreign beach on foreign shores. He feels a closing of a door that is about to happen. He is curious and frightened at the same time. The theme of Isolation is touched upon here as he muses that there is no one he can share any of this with, though he feels compelled to share it with Gloria. He does not. He goes into the transformation on his own.

The theme of Control is raised as Cynthia rails against the control that Lowry has on her. She also realizes that none of them have any control over Area X and that Lowry's decision to view it as the enemy is the wrong approach. She is upset that she has not autonomy to do what she instinctively feels is the better approach. The plant and the cell phone are offered as a metaphor of a type of epic battle between technology and nature. This plant is also the plant that Saul begins to see in his dreams. Whitby comments on the plant as well, stating that perhaps the plant isn't a plant at all. The reader is given enough hints to begin to question these same sorts of things.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Grace think Area X is?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Control.

## Discussion Question 3

What do the cell phone and the plant suggest as a metaphor?

## Vocabulary

bifurcated, cynical, limpets, barnacles, hubris, melancholy, gelatinous, perverse, delusional, lumbering, excised

## Part Three: 0017-0019

### Summary

0017

The director goes outside to pace on the patio outside of Southern Reach. As she does so she sees that Whitby is on the far edge of the patio, where the grass ends into the water. He is squatting at the water's edge diligently working on something. It has been two years since they returned from Area X, and finally she feels that Whitby, if not herself, has begun to recover from the effects. She adjusts this assumption when she approaches him. He is giving a half-comatose mouse a bath. She asks him why he is giving a mouse a bath and he says that it is how he deals with stress and that she should not judge. The mouse is not dead, but has that same far away look in its eyes that many of the returned expedition members have.

Whitby goes on to continue to wash and dry the mouse with extreme care. As he is working he tells Cynthia that the plant they brought back bloomed the night before, but that it bloomed so fast that he hadn't had a chance to photograph it at all. He'd run environmental tests to make sure there was no contamination, but everything was clear. She asks why he isn't washing the mouse inside and he tells her that the water inside is contaminated. This causes her to raise her eyes. She tells him that they all drink that water, including him. He shrugs and says that there's no reason the mouse should have to suffer from their stupidity. Then, in a switch of topics he tells her that 'they' did not take notice of them at first, but since 'we' couldn't stop going, they started to watch. Now, he says, sadly, they know too much. When she asks him to explain himself, he just smiles sadly and keeps drying the mouse.

0018

This chapter focuses on Saul. He is feeling better. Wonderful, in fact. He goes to the bar to meet up with Charlie. Charlie tells him that the strange couple and a few more people he did not know were off on the island burning stacks of papers and books. Saul thinks this is very odd, since as far as he knew no one had ever lived on the island (called Failure Island for just that reason).

Just as Saul is relaxing and enjoying the atmosphere of the bar, it is disrupted by a presence. Henry. Suddenly, Saul is hit with a overly sickly sweet smell, like honey gone bad. As he stares at Henry it seems that the light in the room begins to dim and all of it gathers in a halo around Henry. No one else seems to see this. Suddenly, Saul feels dizzy. When he looks up, Henry is gone, and he is no longer dizzy. Charlie, who has met him at the bar, asks him if he's all right. He lies and tells Charlie that he's going to be late for the night fishing. Usually, Charlie doesn't like to show affection for Saul in public, but for some reason, this time, he pulls his lover close, holds him, then kisses his cheek roughly before striding out of the bar.



0019

Control wakes up and finds that Ghost Bird has slept next to him all night, her arms wrapped around him. He is grateful in ways he can't begin to explain. He knows that he has become infected and is changing. He can feel it. They strike camp and make for the tunnel. As they walk he sees reflections on the surface of the water. Across the surface the reflections take on the tone of a television set in his head and he sees the history of the last expeditions that ventured. He turns away from it, though he tells the others, who can't see what he sees, that it is okay because they are all gone. They reach the tunnel. Grace stands guard. Ghost Bird will lead the way and Control will follow behind her at a distance.

## Analysis

Quite a few symbols and themes surface in these chapters. First, there is the symbol of Whitby's Mouse. The mouse has come from the attic at Southern Reach, his secret attic where he's been creating a mural of the creatures he's seen and the hallucinations that he's conjured. The mouse has that far away look in its eyes as many of the duplicate/clone expedition members had. The director realizes this when she sees the mouse. The mouse, itself, represents Area X and that part of Whitby that has been infected and/or awakened.

The theme of Nature is demonstrated in the scene with Whitby and Cynthia when Whitby tells her that if they'd all just adopted a live and let live symbiotic relationship with Area X that none of this would be happening. Now, of course, he suggests, Area X is aware of mankind and has taken an interest as well as taking notice. In essence, the Author is suggesting that Nature, once awakened to its own defenses can be quite ruthless and aggressive. It also suggests that prior to this 'noticing' mankind was no more noticed than the grass, the wind, or the tiny mouse in Whitby's hand.

The theme of Control is demonstrated in this same scene, as well as the scene with Ghost Bird, Grace, and Control. Whitby and Cynthia realize that they never had control over any of it, and the hubris of this assumption begins to frighten Cynthia. Likewise, Control, ironically because of his given nickname, has all but given all of his own control up to the brightness that is consuming him. The brightness is 'awareness' is 'assimilation' of who he is with all that is around him. He innately understands that he is powerless to struggle against it. The theme of Identity is also demonstrated in this section as all of them struggle to retain their own identity. Control is losing his identity. Ghost Bird may very well lose hers if she rejoins her original, the Biologist. Grace has managed to hang on to her sanity and her identity for a very long time, according to her records. Wounded and resigned, she, too, is losing her grip on who she is.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of Whitby's Mouse.



## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Nature in these chapters.

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of identity.

## Vocabulary

lethargy, estuary, huddled, noncommittal, diffuse, tactical, mimicry, accentuated, billowing, ziggurat

## Part Three: 0020-0022

### Summary

0020

The director finds herself more disgruntled with Lowry's methods. In addition to that, she cannot get the plant's blooming off of her mind. To her it is somehow very significant, but she can't determine why it should be so significant to her. Blooming is the natural progression for many plants. It signals maturity. Still wondering about her obsession with this she goes to find Whitby. He's turned in a report on the blooming of the plant, which she finds to be completely unusable. On her way to find Whitby she decides to visit the biologist one more time, to interview her. She finds the Biologist as belligerent and uncooperative as always.

Lowry has stated that of all the potential candidates for the expedition that he finds the Biologist the least likely of them all. However, the director likes her, not only because Lowry doesn't, but because the Biologist, unlike the others, is self actualized. She knows who she is and more importantly, doesn't seem to need anyone for her survival. This is the type of isolation that Lowry tries to induce with his hypnosis and trigger terms, but the Biologist has come ready made this way. When a person is naturally wired as the Biologist is, there is a chemical shift that occurs in the brain, which may protect her when she is inside of Area X.

The director also shares with the reader that she has ovarian cancer. Because of this certainty of her own mortality, she is adamant that the Biologist be guarded from Lowry, and that she be included on the last expedition. Meanwhile, she has had Grace digging into Jackie Severance's past and current life for any dirt that there might be. Grace comes up with a vague reference to something called. A reference phrase was "serum bliss."

0021

Saul stays until the bar closes, eating ravenously, which is unlike him. He's very aware of a rotting sweetness that he figures must be coming from the kitchen. There is a ringing in his ears and he can hear the beat of his heart loudly thrumming over the conversation and music in the area. Then, in horror, he sees Old Jim playing the piano, his fingers bleeding while he keeps singing. The other musicians start screaming. Someone is standing over him screaming. Confused, dazed, and dizzy, he leaves the screaming and the blood behind him, climbs into his truck, and leaves everything behind.

0022

Ghost Bird and Control start down into the tunnels. Ghost Bird feels as if she is returning to something. While she feels powerless she finds that she is unexpectedly





unafraid. They reach the bottom of the stairs and she turns to Control. She addresses him as John, gentle in her tone. She asks him to stay behind and let her visit the Crawler alone. He says that he will not let her go alone. Seeing his resolve and concern, she does not argue with him any longer.

The Crawler (Saul) is amorphous without a discernible feature, save for one human arm. It is all that is left of his humanity. His bulk fills the large cavern, and there are translucent layers to this new form. Revolving around him are three circles. The first spins under his arm, shooting sparks into his body. The second is above the humanoid arm, and looks like black stones. They seem spongy like tadpoles and bump into one another. The third ring spins above the Crawler's head. It is gold and constructed of moving globes of gold. Ghost Bird steps forward and touches the outer layers. Some of the globes from the halo spin away to hover in front of Ghost Bird, scanning her.

Ghost Bird reaches out and holds one of the golden pearls in her hand. Instantly, a gold green light emits and goes into Ghost Bird's chest. A type of icy calm comes over her. She was immediately connected to everything in Area X. She saw the destruction of another foreign and alien planet by a rain of comets. She saw how one organism had fragmented and dispersed itself for the travel through spaces, between them, and through space to land, lost, buried. Lying in the lens of a lighthouse. And then, awakened, only to find that the architects of its own world were gone. As best it could, it reconstructed its home world, here, on this far away space.

Ghost Bird releases the sphere. As she does a bullet tears through her. She knows that it is Grace. She turns and screams at Grace with the full force of the brightness that is within her. Ghost Bird knows that she, herself, has not been harmed by the bullets. Grace is frozen, standing there, staring at her. She tells Grace to leave, and she does. Only then does Ghost Bird realize that John is gone. She knows that he has gone beyond her, past her toward the white light below.

## Analysis

The plant blooming would seem to suggest that something metaphorical is blooming in the director's mind. Additionally, there is the discovery, by the reader, that the director is also experiencing a 'blooming' of cancer in her ovaries. This is significant for a couple of reasons. First, the ovaries represent fertility and reproduction. Even as her ability to do that is ending, the flower, ironically, is signaling its ability to reproduce (which is what a flower is for most plants). The flower's bloom represents the fact that Area X has fully become aware of man.

A leap backwards in time shows Saul in some of the final stages before becoming the Crawler. He experiences several breaks from reality. The last one is bloody and horrific and the reader isn't sure whether or not Saul is the one that has perpetrated the acts of violence, or if he is simply imagining them. This scene demonstrates several themes. First there is the theme of isolation. Saul realizes how isolated and alone he truly is. He can't share with Charlie the hallucinations he's been having. He looks at the people



around him and realizes that none of them have a clue about life's greater mysteries, that they are all very base and primitive. Secondly, there is the theme of Rationality. All logical thought has left Saul at this point. He just has enough instinct to leave the bar, get in his truck, and leave.

Lastly, the reader begins to be given some answers to questions that were posed in Book One. Area X was not initially caused by mankind, but was an event that happened on another world centuries ago. Fragments of the civilization were flung into the vacuum of space and finally found themselves lodged inside the lens mounted in a lighthouse, where it remained dormant for thousands of years...until Henry drilled it out and set it free.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Saul's transformation.

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the full story of Area X?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the theme of Rationality.

## **Vocabulary**

fluctuate, resolve, distortion, translucent, polyps, mesmerizing, discernible, wielder, obscurity, tendrils, velocity.



## Part Three: 0023-0025

### Summary

0023

The director renews her interest in the people. As a child she'd never liked Henry, even less Suzanne. She pours through all of the records from pre-Area X to the present and there is no mention of them, specifically. Grace questions her about her fixation on these records and the video footage from the first expedition. They argue about Cynthia's fitness to run the SB. What Cynthia cannot bring herself to tell Grace is that Southern Reach has been a long con from the beginning. Central had, for a long while, she tells Grace, been broadcasting and listening for extraterrestrial chatter on a bandwidth that corresponds to that frequency used by hydrogen, or water. Laughing cynically, she tells Grace that all this time, Central has known what Area X was, and has been trying to contact it. BUT, what they were unaware of was that Area X didn't use the simple 'servants' bandwidth. They used the front door, and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

Cynthia flies out to Lowry's headquarters a month before the 12th Expedition. After a while, and a close tour of his replicated Area X, Cynthia asks him bluntly if any of Central's operatives caused Area X. He denies it, though she can tell that the question has caught him off guard. She also doesn't believe him. She continues to press him by asking him if the abandoned phone she found was his. He denies it. She asks him if Area X has unfinished business with him. HE tells her that there's no unfinished business that would help her. She continues to ask questions until, unsettled, he confesses that it is his phone and that he will never go back into Area X.

And what if Area X comes looking for you, she asks him. Without answering her, he turns on his heels and leaves her standing by the water's edge.

0024

Saul returns to the lighthouse but he can tell something has shifted, changed. He enters the lighthouse and the walls have grown mossy, there is a glow throughout the structure. He climbs the stairs and at the top is a very bright light coming from the trap door in the lantern room. Saul looks into it and sees piles of notebooks, and yet, realizes that these are shadows of things that haven't happened yet. His eyes adjust and he sees within the light there is a white flower with eight petals, of purest white. The roots are wrapped around the notebooks. White light courses through his body and he feels as if the light knows him. He passes out. When he regains consciousness he sees the bodies of Henry and Suzanne, dead on the floor. The desiccated remains of a plant are in the far corners of the room.



Saul climbs out of the lantern room and is surprised that at the top of the stairs there is a man standing there holding a gun. It is Henry. Saul is confused as he was just lying on the ground, dead. Then it dawns on him. Henry had been somehow doubled, cloned. Henry confirms Saul's assertion. He also confirms that he killed Suzanne because she wanted to kill him. Henry boasts that he found what he'd been looking for, but he never had a chance to say what that was. Saul rushes him and Henry pulls the trigger. The bullet hits Saul in the shoulder, but he doesn't feel it. Both men struggle and in a final effort to free themselves from each other, fall over the railing and hit the ground below.

0025

Control continues down the stairs, drawn by a type of music that was within and without him. It pulses inside of him and he knows that he is transforming. He feels connected to everything and there is a peace in this loss of control, of connection. His body is wracked with pain and yet it is exquisite and he can't stop. He stops thinking of himself as Control, and calls himself John, again, even though he now knows that he will never be John again. He drops his father's carving on the last stair. Before him, spinning with a white light, is a large eight-petaled flower. He jumps into it and is gone.

## Analysis

The reader now realizes that Henry was one of the first inhabitants to be doubled (cloned) by the alien intelligence. When Cynthia uncovers the 'secret' to Area X, she realizes that it wasn't created by some sort of genetic experimentation gone awry as she, and the rest of the world, had been led to believe, but that some foreign intelligent form of life had been awakened and loosed upon the Earth. She sees the proverbial (and literal) writing on the wall. Earth is doomed in many respects to be reshaped and claimed by a life form far beyond anyone's comprehension. The argument is, of course, whether mankind will be better off.

Those that have been transformed seem to be happier with their transformation, as if they have finally arrived at their final and desired outcome. This is echoed by Ghost Bird's decision with the Moaning Creature a few chapters previously, as well as the Biologist's changed form. The theme of Nature is presented in a different light through these transformations and discovery of the truth. In its raw and unchained form, Nature is a force to be reckoned with, whether that nature is from this planet or the next. It is a great and terrible process that once started, cannot be stopped, only diverted, or channeled.

The symbol of the eight petaled flower is significant and most likely is drawn from the author's knowledge of the sacred nature of the Lotus flower on Earth. It has been considered a sacred flower by many cultures and has as its meaning that of spontaneous birth or creation. Interestingly enough, it is also thought to be representative of potential, and the flower, itself, grows in stagnant and polluted water, and yet, the flower, itself, is pure and unpolluted. Thus, it is often considered the flower of both resurrection, as well as purity and rebirth.



When John drops his father's carving on the last step before stepping into the white flower, it symbolizes his willingness to leave it all behind, including his human ties, his heritage, and his humanity. This touches upon the theme of Identity.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolism of the white flower?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the author suggesting about mankind and its potential?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Nature.

## Vocabulary

exposed, wheedled, brigade, unbidden, behemoth, singeing, disheveled, intensity, coalesced, engulfed, dissociated, clambered

## Part Three: 0026-000X

### Summary

0026

The director brings Lowry's inoperative cellphone home with her. She's not sure why she does this, but doesn't question it. She sets it on the counter top in the kitchen and goes to rest a little. The medicine she's been taking for her cancer makes her nauseous. And it's making her paranoid. She hears noises throughout the house and imagines intruders. When she goes to investigate a scurrying sound in her kitchen, she finds that the cell phone has fallen onto the floor. She is puzzled as to how it would have gotten there, picks it up, double bags it and puts it into a locked box. Impulsively she gathers up all of the files, notes, papers and journals that she has at her home, piles them into a large pile in her back yard and torches them. It starts to rain. Slowly, she slumps to the ground, becoming completely drenched, not caring. Finally, she goes inside. The cell phone is where she put it, but the next day, she takes it back with her to the office and places it in the drawer.

0027

Saul regains consciousness. He rolls over on the sand and sees Henry lying next to him. It is still nighttime. He turns on his side to look at the sea and realizes that he should be in terrible pain from a fall at that height, but he isn't. Instead, he feels restless. He stands and realizes that he is uninjured. He looks at Henry and realizes that he, too, is alive and is watching him. He walks down to the water's edge and wades in up to his ankles. Henry joins him and Saul asks if he is dead. Henry does not answer, but turns and walks away. Saul falls to the ground, aware that something is happening to him. He feels invincible and weak at the same time.

He stumbles into his truck, feeling sick, and drives to the remotest part of the area that he can find. Inside of his mind there visions that are foreign to him, of comets, a foreign shoreline, a white flower, white rabbits, and Henry receiving a signal from a distant sender very far away. Saul leaves the truck and runs as far as he is able, then collapses to the forest floor.

0028

Ghost Bird and Grace walk out of the tunnel together, but do not speak. Control is gone. When he'd walked into the light, which manifested as an open door to Ghost Bird, something had shifted inside the tunnel. It has convulsed. As she walks she considers that the Psychologist had been correct about Area X being able to be redirected. She thinks that John's sacrifice had done that somehow. Evidence of this was the fact that overnight the season shifted. Always in Area X it had remained spring. Now, it was



summer and the heat is stifling. She and Grace make their way to where the former entrance to the border had been.

They cross without incident and in another day's time reach the old Southern Reach buildings. Everything is overgrown, burned out, deserted. Nature has reclaimed most of the exterior of the building and some storks are nesting on the portico near the patio. The swamp had pushed upwards into the front part of the building and had fully submerged the interior hallways. Ghost Bird shudders as she realizes that the building is breathing, is alive. She knows that Grace cannot see this. Grace wonders out loud how long they've been gone and if there's anything left to come back to. Ghost Bird reaches out in an act of compassion and holds Grace's hand to reassure her. They start walking.

000X

The director sits in the dark at her desk at Southern Reach. the 12th Expedition is getting ready to leave with her as it's leader. She's written a letter to Saul, though she's not sure how or if he would ever get it, or even be able in his current state to read it. Still, she feels that she needs to write it. She tells him that his consistency, his gruffness, and his care mattered to her and that she never did forget him and will not forget him, and that it has taken her a long time to keep her word, but now she is coming back.

## Analysis

Many themes crop up in these last chapters as it comes to its conclusion. First, there is the theme of Control. Literally, the character named Control, is lost. He gives himself up and in doing so, possibly saves the human race from complete annihilation. The author is suggesting with this theme that once mankind wakes up and realizes that it is, and never has been, in full control of Nature, then mankind may yet be saved from complete extinction.

Likewise, the theme of Purpose is explored. Saul suddenly realizes what his purpose is when he stands after his fall from the lighthouse. In surrendering to his purpose he is freed from much of what has plagued him throughout the novel. In the end, it is his love for Charlie that keeps some part of him human, even as he is transformed into the keeper of the light (the plant's light in the tunnel). Just as he was a minister at one time, keeping the light of the sacred, and then later as a literal lighthouse keeper, his new function is to be a keeper of the light of the sacred essence of life, itself, the 8 petaled flower. In this respect, his identity does not change, but merely shifts focus. This is a nod to one of the novel's other themes, Identity.

The cell phone that seems to annoy and haunt the director is shown to be ineffectual and useless. The author is suggesting that in the end, despite mankind's technology, Nature will always win out. The theme of Nature permeates these last chapters, much as Area X seeps into the now defunct Southern Reach facility. Nature is long suffering, patient, and unrelenting in her judgement of the creatures living on the planet. The



flashes and visions that many characters have throughout the novel indicate that the alien life form's former world came to a terrible end because the life there didn't take care of their planet, polluted it, exploited it, and in the end, were destroyed by their own hubris. This is a pointed warning by the author for the residents of this planet not to make the same mistakes.

The director's letter to Saul is important because symbolically it is the author's suggestion of a return to home, to origins, to a more natural state and way of living. Cynthia/Gloria has long yearned to return back to her former home and was prevented for various reasons. Now, she is returning, damaged, diseased, but determined to keep her word.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the theme of Nature.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the importance of the director's letter to Saul.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss Saul's role as a 'keeper of the light'.

## **Vocabulary**

mutated, allegedly, misanthrope, catechism, cataclysmic, irradiated, febrile, machismo, docile, hubris





# Characters

## Saul Evans

Saul is a former minister turned lighthouse keeper on the island just outside of Southern Reach. He left the ministry because he could no longer live a lie. He is homosexual and knew that he would never be able to be happy continuing on as he had for so many years. Taking a job that would put him in a remote area away from people actually brought him into the arms of a man who loved him for who he was.

Saul befriends a little girl from the island named Gloria and in her he is able to regain some of his former appreciation for his fellow man. When two researchers come and disturb his lens, Saul begins to investigate their actions and ultimately becomes infected by something they release from one of the ancient lenses.

Saul transforms and becomes the literal keeper of the lighthouse, becoming unrecognizable as Area X changes him. His only claim to humanity after his transformation is his human arm which writes cryptic phrases upon the wall.

## Gloria/Cynthia

Gloria is the little girl from the mainland that makes her way over to Saul's lighthouse nearly everyday. She plays on the rocks by the shoreline, helps him with his chores, and runs wild through the swamps. Her mother is a pediatrician and had the misfortune of meeting and marrying a man who ended up being a con man. After the divorce Gloria goes to see her father only during the summer.

When Area X happens, Gloria is sent, by her mother, to live with her father. Gloria is never able to return to the island, to Saul, or to the swamps that she loved as a child. She always vowed to return.

Meanwhile, her father's proclivity for crime does not stop simply because he now has custody of his daughter. Gloria puts up with it as long as she can, and when she graduates high school and receives a scholarship to go to college, she changes her name to Cynthia and hires a private detective to erase her past, and create a new one for her. This works until she comes to work for Southern Reach.

## Henry and Suzanne

Originally, Henry and Suzanne were the two researchers who came to the lighthouse to do research on the lenses in the lighthouses. They were part scientist and part paranormal investigators. However, in the course of their investigations they inadvertently release an ancient life form that instantly duplicates Henry and sends him to do its bidding.

In the end, it is indicated that Henry has become some sort of communication device that Area X uses to search the heavens for signs of its old way of life.

## **Brad**

Brad is a young man that lives on the mainland. He got into some minor trouble and the judge gave him community service to complete at the lighthouse. He also plays in a rock band at the local bar and grille.

## **Charlie**

Charlie is a fisherman and Saul's lover. He is truly concerned about Saul when Saul becomes infected. It is clear that both men have a deep affection and love for one another.

## **Grace**

Grace is the assistant director throughout the entire series. At one point she was the interim director, but was replaced when Control came to Southern Reach. Grace is a very strong woman, emphatic in her convictions, but not inflexible. When she is faced with the reality of her situation, it becomes clear that if she does not embrace change, she will die like everyone else. She is a survivor, something that indicates at the end of the novel that mankind has the propensity to adapt and overcome.

It is symbolic that at the end of the novel she takes Ghostbird's hand. Ghostbird isn't completely human, and is a creature of Area X. In taking Ghostbird's hand, Grace, as the only representative of humanity, is acknowledging the need to walk with Nature, not against it.

## **Control/John Rodriguez**

John takes the name, Control, based on a nickname that his grandfather gave him. Both his grandfather and his mother are federal agents. Though he tries to follow in their footsteps, it becomes evident that there is more of his artist father's sensitivities about him than his mother's cold cruel nature.

Control finds out rather quickly that he has anything BUT control at Southern Reach and with Area X. His intention to discover the answer to the mystery of Area X eventually asks him to make the ultimate sacrifice. When he finally realizes who he truly is, what his true nature is, he is willing to walk into the 8 petaled flower and be assimilated into it. In doing so, the author suggests, he altered the course that Area X was on, which was to completely exterminate, assimilate, or convert all of mankind from the face of the planet, like a virus.

## Ghost Bird

Ghost Bird is the clone of the original Biologist that had gone on Expedition 12, the expedition lead by the director (Cynthia). Ghost Bird possesses the Biologist's memories and knowledge, but she also is an individual capable of creating and making her own life and memories, which she begins to do.

With the insight she's gained from the Biologist's missteps she is, in many ways, an improvement over the original model. She points out that in her she has corrected the Biologist's inability to reach out to others, to identify with humanity, to care, and to be motivated by a need to include others in her life.

Ghost Bird embraces the light in the tunnel without fear, and is not changed, altered, or harmed by it. In fact, it protects her when Grace shoots her, causing her to remain safe. Understanding who she is and her place in things allowed her to remain vital and unchanged in a world that was completely changing around her.

## Lowry

Lowry was identified in the Second Book as 'The Voice', a disembodied voice on the end of the phone that Control reported to. Lowry was the only survivor of the very first expedition. He did not return unchanged, however, as he perceives the threat that is Area X and, in vain, rails against the changes that he knows are coming. Instead of attempting to work with Area X, to understand it, he tries to find ways to control it, destroy it, and in the end, he fails.

## Whitby

In this Third Book Whitby is only mentioned in flashbacks to a former time. The reader learns that he accompanied Cynthia in an unsanctioned trip across the border, a trip that ultimately causes his change to occur.

## Biologist

The original Biologist shows up a few times, but in her changed form. She is no longer human at all. A journal that she left behind for others to find chronicles her slow change into the amorphous creature she becomes.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Birds

Birds are used as continuing metaphors throughout the novel. The author uses them to describe thoughts inside a character's mind, to describe formations of fish, or to indicate a desire for a character's mind and emotions to 'take flight'. They also show up in their literal forms many times throughout the novel, including the name of one of the characters, Ghost Bird.

## Light

Light is presented throughout the novel, too. In most instances it indicates enlightenment, such as the light that is emitted from the 8 petaled flower. Saul's lighthouse beacon is another light, and the light Ghost Bird feels that directs her movements and brings clarity is another light. At one point, Saul remarks that people are like a beacon because they are their own lighthouse.

## Father's Carving

Control keeps a chess piece that his father had carved. It is shaped like a cat and reminds Control of his Chorry, his cat, that he had to leave behind. When he is in Area X, it is this carving that gives him some measure of comfort. It represents his father's love and constancy and his own humanity. When he releases his father's carving before stepping into the flower at the end of the novel, it is clear that he is giving up his humanity to embrace this new self.

## Whitby's Report

Whitby had created a report that suggested that Area X was a larger organism that should be viewed as a living creature, instead of an area made up of different components. When Control goes through the void into Area X, he and Ghost Bird spend some time going back over the report, which he had brought back with him. The report represents an anchor to the real world.

## Lighthouse

The lighthouse represents Saul. When Area X becomes sentient and Saul becomes part of it, he links up with the lighthouse literally and metaphorically. Earlier in the novel he sees himself as a type of human lighthouse, when he was a former minister and now as a lighthouse keeper.



## **Saul's Wound**

Saul is cut by something in the grass. He blames Suzanne and Henry, but the cut begins to make him feel different, as if everything around him is more vibrant and alive. He sees more than he did before. This represents becoming more connected to the greater world around him.

## **The Floating Bag**

Once inside Area X, each character begins to see that the sky is not quite the sky that they remember. Often, something stitches across it, like a plastic bag caught up in the wind currents. That is when Area X is scanning them.

## **The Burned Out Cottage**

Cynthia and Whitby go into the burned out cottage where Cynthia lived with her mother so long ago. The cottage represents Cynthia who is burned out. Lifeless and belonging to a different time, she cannot go back because there is nothing left to return to.

## **The Moaning Creature**

The Moaning Creature is a recurring character from the first two books of the series. This book tells that the creature is what remains of the first Psychologist from the first expedition. At first Ghost Bird feels compelled to put it out of its misery, but then reasons that she is attributing her own understanding to the sounds the creature is making, which may be perfectly normal for it. In the end, she leaves it to live its life unharmed.

## **The Brightness**

All of those who are infected by Area X experience a feeling of lightness and a growing brightness inside of them. Given the environmental slant of the entire series, this probably corresponds to the growing understanding and awareness of mankind's connection to everything in the natural world.

## **The Indestructible Plant/Cell Phone**

This signifies that Nature, in the form of the plant, will not be destroyed any longer. Making sure to place the plant with the phone indicates that the author is showing the struggle between technology and nature. In the end, nature will win.

## **Whitby's Mouse**

Whitby's pet mouse represents his hold on reality. The mouse has already adopted a far away view, which indicates that Whitby has already started to change.

## **Timelines**

The chapter titles have a varying amount of zeroes in front of the designated chapter. This corresponds to the timeline of the previous books. One '0' in front of the number indicates Book One's timeline, and so forth. This is the author's unobtrusive way to let the reader know that the timeline and plot line are written in a nonlinear fashion.

## **8 Petaled Flower**

Only one set of flowers on the planet is described as accurately as the sacred lotus flower. Many people have revered this plant. The flower represents the path to enlightenment, to a conversion experience, or to both.

## **Saul's Letter**

The letter to Saul is important for Cynthia/Gloria to write because she needs closure and a final return to home. Writing the letter accomplishes that for her. Additionally, the letter represents mankind's declaration to come home, to return to the awareness that it once had of its place in the natural scheme of things.

# Settings

## Hedley

Hedley is Control's home while he works at Southern Reach. He leaves it all behind when Southern Reach's facility is breached. Control selects Hedley because this reminds him of his father and how grounded his father made him feel. His father was the only one who ever accepted him for himself. Living in Hedley, in a place similar to his father's older home, gives Control a sense of belonging that he does not enjoy anywhere else.

## Rock Bay

Rock Bay is the area that beckons the Biologist to come to it. However, the Biologist never has a chance to go. Ghost Bird manages to go to Rock Bay, and John finds her there. They both escape to Area X from Rock Bay .

## Southern Reach Facility

The Southern Reach Facility was originally established in Book One as the closest town to the border of Area X. Once the Golden Research Facility, now, some decades later, it has become overlooked, underfunded, and understaffed. Those that work there are disenchanted, and most hide secrets of an ecological and evolutionary kind. The offices of Christine and Control are in the Southern Reach Facility. Christine had decided that she wanted to work there because it was located so close to her childhood home, the only place where she was ever truly happy. Southern Research Facility is finally overcome and invaded by Area X. By Book Three the facility is in ruins.

## Lowry's Center

Lowry, after his return from Area X, reconstructs from memory all of the terrain and items that were encountered. He uses Lowry's Center as a place to train new recruits.

## The Lighthouse

Saul lives at the lighthouse, and 10-year-old Gloria visits there frequently. The lighthouse has an ancient lens in it, which is where the alien life form has been living for centuries.

# Themes and Motifs

## Purpose

Throughout the series, most of the characters struggle with finding a sense of purpose for their occupational, emotional, and spiritual being. Cynthia realizes that the Southern Reach facility is just a big cover up because the government has realized that it is no match for the overwhelming superiority of Area X. When she understands this, she wonders what her purpose is at all.

Saul questions his own purpose as well, and in the end, his answer is that mankind is to carry and share the brightness of understanding and awareness, much like a lighthouse does. In the end, Control, Ghost Bird, and Grace realize that their purpose is to exist, to not only survive, but merge with the natural world that has always been around them.

In stark contrast is the fact that none of the animals surrounding Southern Reach, or the transformed animals in Area X, have this question any longer. They know their purpose, and aren't bothered with considering if they have a purpose at all. They simply know that to live and function to their best capacity is all that is required. The author would seem to be suggesting that mankind often falls into a trap comprised of mundane semantics.

In the end, the author suggests that one's Purpose lies with the discovery of one's own true nature and how that underlying tendency fits into the world. When Ghost Bird reaches up and embraces some of the light from the Crawler, it is clear that she has taken this step, something that none of the others have, until Control steps into the light.

## Control

As a literal and figurative symbol, Control's name is ironic because he is not in control from the beginning. Although he is appointed the director of the Southern Reach Facility, he controls nothing.

Control, as a concept, is an extended metaphor and theme running throughout this novel, suggesting that mankind is arrogant (much like Control was at the beginning) to think that he is ever fully in control of Nature. To direct it, redirect it, work with it, is the only alternative as nature is the one that is, ultimately, in control.

The attempt by mankind to dominate, change, use, and manipulate nature is illustrated by the attempts that Southern Reach engages in throughout the entire series. And, in the end, nature wins. The author is suggesting that unless mankind learns to work with, instead of against nature, that there will be no measure of control.

The characters who come to the realization that the only control they have is to give up their illusion of control are the only characters who seem to come to a good ending in



the novel. Though Control, himself, is consumed by the light, the author implies that it is the happy union that John has been looking for his entire life.

## Nature

Nature continues to be an unstoppable, ancient force to be reckoned with in *Acceptance*. While it is a similar force in the previous books in the series, in this story Nature indicates what will happen to those civilizations that fail to acknowledge its superior machinations and processes.

Whitby's assimilation, as well as the Biologist's transformation points to this transformative power of Nature. Both of these characters were unhappy in their present form, and both sought purpose and reason. Nature transformed them into better versions of themselves, in a circumstance that appears to have made them completely at peace with themselves.

This dire consequence of underestimating Nature is evidenced in the flashbacks, flashforwards, hallucinations, and visions that the characters all experience at some point in the novel. All of them see what most likely happened on the planet where the alien presence came from, how pollution, wars, disease, and famine were the death of all life on the planet. That even as the planet was torn apart by comets, some form of life, of Nature, survived and made its way to Earth, lying dormant until it was reanimated by Henry.

Nature shows up in this book to be judge and jury, weighing the fate of mankind in her hands. It is not clear as to what the final verdict is as far as Nature is concerned, and this is a purposeful statement by the author about the continuing, and often contentious, relationship that mankind has with the natural world, and with his own natural self.

## Identity

Everyone's identity is challenged throughout the series. Control has changed his name to hide his true identity, so has Cynthia. Grace is the only character that remains true to her nature, herself, and her resolve to survive.

Even Ghost Bird questions her own identity which is quite the situation since she is a clone of another personality. She must not only reconcile the personality of her original, but make a decided choice to create her own life beyond that of her former original's tenants and notions about life.

The reader is challenged to revisit the perception of Nature as a whole and to view Nature as both a creator and destroyer of worlds. The full identity of Nature is offered for the reader to examine, which will force many readers in adjusting their views of mankind's place in the scope of the realm of Nature as well as Nature's overall purpose.



In the end, the author suggests, everyone does return to their own inner nature. This is true for all of the creatures who 'transform'. Most of them are transformed into a better shape, size, and freedom than they ever knew as full humans. This is certainly true of the Biologist and her husband.

## Isolation

Most of the characters in this novel are isolated in some way. Arrogance, low self-esteem, and guilt isolate John Rodriguez. He is isolated in his own emotional morass.

Cynthia is isolated from others and her own true nature. She was a child of the island. If things had turned out differently, she might never have left it. The entire series shares her attempts to return to a happy childhood when she knew herself.

The Biologist is isolated by her inability to reach out to others, including her husband. She is selected by Cynthia because of this propensity to not need anyone else to survive or feel complete.

The Southern Facility is isolated in its location and its hopeless purpose to hold back Area X's advances. Likewise, many of the people who work there, Whitby for example, are also isolated in what they have experienced and what they know.

Lastly, Saul is isolated because he is homosexual. Also, his choice to be a lighthouse keeper keeps him physically isolated from people. Once he is infected by Area X, he feels a type of communion that he has never felt with another person, even Charlie.

# Styles

## Point of View

This novel is told from varying points of view. Each chapter focuses on a different character in. Ghost Bird, Control, Cynthia, Saul, and a Biologist are the primary focus of each chapter.

Each chapter focuses on one character and their assessment of their situation, but is told for the most part in first person. The only digression from this is when the director is speaking about something that she did in the past. In these chapters she addresses herself in the second person, as if she is reminding another version of herself how she acted or felt.

## Language and Meaning

Language and meaning are advanced in this novel, and should be attempted for those that read on a collegiate level. This is due in large part to the upper level vocabulary, psychological and scientific terminology, as well as deeply philosophical and esoteric in nature.

## Structure

This novel is structured in a fractured storyline. The author has eased this somewhat by titling each chapter heading with a designation. The "0" in front of the chapter number indicates which book, and thus timeline/timeframe, it is referring to. Thus, the reader can keep track of whether what is happening has already happened in the past, or is currently happening.

# Quotes

Preaching had been projecting out, imposing himself on the world, with the world then projecting onto him. But tending to the lighthouse— that was a way of looking inward and it felt less arrogant.

-- Saul Evans (chapter 0001)

**Importance:** Saul thinks this as he is leaving his lover's cottage in the village, a man named Charlie. When Saul had left the larger world behind, he had done so because he had realized the hypocrisy of what he was preaching and how he was feeling.

You guard the light. And light sees everything.

-- Gloria (chapter 0001)

**Importance:** Gloria says this to Saul as they discuss the S&S people in the lighthouse, and how outsiders were not really welcome on the island.

You've never walked through an ecosystem that wasn't compromised or dysfunctional, have you? You may think you have, but you haven't. So you might mistake what's right for what's wrong anyway.

-- Ghost Bird (chapter 0002)

**Importance:** Ghost Bird explains to him why everything in Area X 'looks' perfectly normal to the untrained eye, but that to her as a Biologist, even a copy of a Biologist, there was so much opportunity for connection and revelation.

A lighthouse was a fixed beacon for a fixed purpose; a person was a moving one. But people still emanated light in their way, still shone across the miles as a warning, an invitation, or even just a static signal.

-- Saul (chapter 0004)

**Importance:** In this quote Saul is not only validating the symbolism of his position, but his personal philosophy about mankind. This philosophy translates into Saul's function in Area X. The 'brightness' that everyone that returns from Area X is part of this 'awakening' that Saul believes in.

Freedom could take you farther from what you sought, not closer.

-- Control (chapter 005)

**Importance:** This is Control's conclusion just after he jumped through the portal to Area X with Ghost Bird.

Would that not be the final humbling of the human condition? That the trees and birds, the fox and the rabbit, the wolf and the deer ... reach a point at which they do not even notice us, as we are transformed.

-- Control (chapter 0005)



**Importance:** Control and Ghost Bird are looking over Whitby's report and this is a phrase from that report. In fact, Whitby may be correct.

Hellfire and apocalyptic visions, the coming destruction of the world by demons, could not sustain a man for long without robbing him of something, too.

-- Saul (chapter 0007)

**Importance:** Saul is reflecting on the last few years of his time as a minister and how he began to realize that the religious dogma he'd been brought up with was lacking, and in many respects more harmful than helpful.

Patterns could suffice as purpose, and the synchronicity of their rowing reassured her.

-- Ghost Bird (chapter 0008)

**Importance:** Ghost Bird says this when they are rowing to the island. She's trying to calm her fears about what she and Control might find on the island.

If human language meant anything, I might even recount it to the waves or to the sky, but what's the point?

-- Biologist (Part Two)

**Importance:** In this quote the Biologist is reiterating the theme of Nature, that it communicates in different ways and that only those who bother to learn the language can hear it.

But what if you discover that the price of purpose is to render invisible so many other things?

-- Biologist (Part Two, 001)

**Importance:** This quote demonstrates the theme of Purpose.

We must trust our thoughts while we sleep. We must trust our hunches. We must begin to examine all of those things that we think of as irrational simply because we do not understand them. In other words, we must distrust the rational, the logical, the sane, in an attempt to reach for something higher, for something more worthy.

-- Whitby (Part Three, 0013)

**Importance:** The author is suggesting that mankind's survival in the future will not lie with rational thought or technology, but with the ability to embrace a higher sacred connection.

Perhaps so many journals had piled up in the lighthouse because on some level most came, in time, to recognize the futility of language. Not just in Area X but against the rightness of the lived-in moment, the instant of touch, of connection, for which words were such a sorrowful disappointment, so inadequate an expression of both the finite and the infinite.



-- Ghost Bird (Part Three, 0016)

**Importance:** Ghost Bird is talking about the incredible beauty in the world and how words, no matter how intelligently rendered, can actually succeed in capturing it. She suggests that the language of all life is not written down, but experienced.

If you don't know your passion, it confuses your mind, not your heart.

-- Control's Father (Part Three, 0016)

**Importance:** John's father is suggesting that his 'higher self' or his 'heart' never wavers from who he really is or what his purpose truly is. The mind often confuses the issue with rationality.

The words aren't important but what's channeled through them is. Maybe the important thing is getting it out on the page so it can be there in your mind.

-- Cynthia (Part Four)

**Importance:** Cynthia is suggesting that when heart and mind agree, that this is where a person finds peace, purpose, and their true self.