

Annihilation Study Guide

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Plot Summary

A biologist, unnamed, sets off on an expedition with four other female scientists, each in a different discipline. There is a psychologist, linguist, surveyor, anthropologist, and the biologist. They will be the 12th expedition to enter into Area X. On their belts are black boxes that will glow red, they are told, should there be any danger. They are not allowed to carry any current technology with them, with the exception of a camera.

The biologist's husband had been part of the previous expedition, which had taken place two years previously. The psychologist is this group's appointed leader. They are told that they will not be allowed to communicate with the outside world at all while inside the Area. If something should happen, they are told they should go to the lighthouse indicated on their maps, or meet at the edge of the borderlands and await extraction.

They are all told that because of the hallucinations that other expeditions reported, that they will all undergo hypnosis which will allow them to move through the border lands without incident.

It takes them four days to reach their base camp. There they find a mysterious tower that doesn't appear on any of the maps they've been given. The linguist does not accompany them to the base camp, turning back before they get there. The biologist goes down into a tunnel that they find at the tower. The tower, itself, seems partially submerged. While inside the tunnel the group sees an odd writing on the walls, biblical in nature, but not occurring in any known human bible. The letters house a host of living hand-like organisms that glow. The biologist gets too close and inhales some spores that the organisms release. She decides not to disclose this fact to the rest of the group, who've already dismissed her claims of hearing a heartbeat.

That night there is a low moaning noise that they all hear sounding out over the swamps. Later, before they get ready to go to their tents, the psychologist says the phrase, 'Consolidation of Authority'. Immediately, the biologist notes that the surveyor and the anthropologist's faces go slack. Quickly, the biologist mimics them. She then sees the psychologist proceed to 'program' them to think that going into the tunnels is a good idea, and that they will continue to see a structure made of coquina and stone.

When everyone wakes in the morning they learn that the anthropologist has left the camp. The surveyor tells the biologist that something is 'off' about the anthropologist leaving as she didn't take any of her gear or supplies. The surveyor and the biologist go back down into the tunnels, while the psychologist tells them that she will stand guard at the top of the entrance. The psychologist uses a trigger phrase that makes the surveyor instantly compliant, so the biologist plays along.

The biologist notes that the tower seems to be breathing, that the walls are covered with something resembling a gullet, and that she can still hear the heartbeat as she had the day before. As they descend to the next level they run into the body of the



anthropologist, covered in goo and green moss. There are scattered test tubes with samples in them scattered around the body. The biologist picks them up, and then both the surveyor and the biologist leave, quickly.

When they emerge they find that the psychologist has deserted them and has taken most of the supplies and all of the weapons, except one. The biologist puts the samples under a microscope and finds that the cells are a type of brain tissue. When the biologist reports her findings the surveyor says that she's had enough and they should just leave. The biologist wants to make a quick trip to the lighthouse to see if she can talk sense or get some answers from the psychologist. There is someone or something writing on the walls in the tower. She decides to give that being a name and calls it the Crawler.

The biologist reaches the half-way point, which is an old abandoned neighborhood. She decides to go into one and sees a large bushy grouping of plants that in a certain light, look like a family sitting on a couch watching television. She decides to take samples from them.

When she enters the lighthouse she is shocked to see evidence of great violence. There are splashes of blood on the wall, dark with age, and all of the furniture is riddled with bullet holes. The biologist climbs the stairs and goes into the beacon room of the lighthouse. There is a door to the side of the room and she goes in. There, stacked neatly, some of them rotting away from age, are hundreds of diaries and journals from past expeditions. From the looks of them, there had been more than the 12 expeditions than they had been led to believe.

The psychologist's gear is stored there, too, but there is no sign of the former leader. The biologist takes an old photograph on the wall and stuffs it into her pocket. It is an old black and white photo of the lighthouse keeper, another man, and a young girl. The biologist goes out onto the balcony portion of the beacon room and enjoys the view it affords. But then, she recoils in horror as she sees the body of the psychologist hundreds of feet below her on the ground.

The biologist grabs some of the journals and additional supplies out of the room, one of the journals belonging to her late husband, and then rushes to find the body of the psychologist. Shockingly, the psychologist is not yet dead, but it is clear that she will be dead shortly. The biologist asks her what happened, and the psychologist says that she tried to shoot the biologist as she came up the path but that somehow she couldn't do it.

Then, she felt as if she were being chased and she thought that it seemed like a good idea to jump over the railing. She tries to give the biologist a 'commit suicide' suggestion, which is the word: Annihilate. The biologist tells her that the suggestions don't work on her and that they most likely never had.

The psychologist nods and says that she suspected that it wouldn't work since she could tell that the biologist is already beginning to change. The biologist chalks this comment up to brain trauma from the fall. She asks the psychologist pointed questions



about their real mission in Area X. The psychologist will only tell her that the border lands are terrible and that the border is advancing into the city at the rate of a mile each year.

It is nearing dawn when she draws close to base camp. However, before she can get too much further, she feels a sudden brightness engulfing her. She's been feeling this sensation for a while but at this moment it surges through her and compels her to shift slightly to her left. This saves her life as a bullet catches her in the shoulder instead of her heart. The surveyor is shooting at her. She tells the biologist that she's figured out that it is the biologist who's been killing everyone. She tells the biologist that the anthropologist came back to life but that the surveyor had killed her.

The biologist knows that she has been shot and yet the wound doesn't seem to be slowing her down at all. The pain, in fact, is almost gone. She knows that she has been transforming, but she has welcomed it as it has made her more a part of the surrounding environment.

She is able to sneak up on the surveyor and ends up shooting her. The biologist hates that she's had to kill the other woman, but rationalizes that it was a matter of survival. She takes the other woman's body and shoves it into the swamp.

The biologist is hopeful that maybe her husband is alive on an island nearby and determines that she will head that direction, herself, when she is able. The next morning she wakes to find that she is nearly all healed. She takes the samples that she's gotten from the psychologist's things and looks at them under the microscope. The moss she'd taken from the figures in the old ruined town end up having human cells in them. She is certain, now, that the military had been doing some sort of genetic manipulation and that it had gone horribly wrong.

Before leaving to find her husband, she feels as if she should come down into the tower's tunnels one last time. When she does she encounters the Crawler, who motions her forward. The biologist realizes that the Crawler has a partially human face, and that this face is that of the old lighthouse keeper from the photograph that she'd taken from the wall at the lighthouse. The Crawler examines her, then pushes her forward into the deepest regions of the tunnels. Here, the biologist is assimilated into the environment and suddenly understands her connection to it.

Chapter 1, Initiation

Summary

The story opens with an unnamed biologist who is going on an expedition with three other scientists (all in different disciplines). They are going to Area X. They carry black measuring devices on their belts, which will indicate if the area is safe enough to be in. If it glows red they are to leave for a safer zone. They are not allowed to have watches or compasses.

This is the last expedition to be sent, the biologist states, as several other expeditions resulted in mixed results. It has been two years since the last expedition was sent. The biologist's team is comprised of all women: biologist, an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a psychologist. The psychologist has been appointed as their leader. No form of communication would be allowed for fear of irrevocable contamination. No technology of any sort is allowed, though they have cameras, and weapons.

The biologist states that the last expedition was the strangest yet as the entire party had gone missing, then reappeared eighteen months later back at their homes. It is called the 'transference' though no one can remember how it happened, or what took place in the eighteen months that they were lost. The psychologist warns them before they leave that hallucinations are likely and that the hypnosis should help to counteract it.

The expedition's members are hypnotized by the psychologist in order to cross out of the known lands into the areas beyond. Four days into the hike, the biologist and the others see an old lighthouse, which is near where the base camp will be. Situated in the middle of a salt marsh, the biologist is very aware of all of the life that surrounds them, much of it predatory. The lighthouse, itself, is a surprise as it is not on their very detailed map of the area. As it is too dark and too late to do much about the lighthouse, or tower, they all disband and go to their separate quarters for the night.

The next morning, their leader decides that it might be prudent for everyone to be armed, so she hands out hand guns to everyone. None of them particularly want the guns, but feel as if they should have them. The biologist tells the reader that the second and third expeditions to Area X either shot at each other due to the hallucinations, or they committed suicide. They are the 12th expedition to come there.

They have breakfast, then go to explore the tower. When they get there they see that there is a stairwell, or tunnel, leading down from the base. They go in one at a time, using a rope to lower themselves down until they reach some stairs. The biologist sees some writing on the wall that is created out of bio-luminescent plants. It says: "Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that..." The biologist can't read the rest of the passage. When she gets closer to it to try and make out what it says, some spores are released. Before she can back away she inhales some of them. As they leave the



submerged portion of the tower, the biologist has a fleeting thought that they are moving out of the gullet of a flesh and blood animal.

The biologist reports her findings to the psychologist, their leader, who shrugs it off as merely 'interesting'. None of the rest of the group think it merely 'interesting' but as if the psychologist had somehow flipped a switch in their minds, all of them dutifully turn away from the tower and follow her back to camp where each dedicates the rest of the day to their own disciplines and collecting specimens.

That evening everyone has a few beers around the campfire and the biologist takes stock of the team. She dislikes the psychologist, who seems to have some sort of ulterior motive, some additional mission notes, that none of the rest of the team are privy to. The anthropologist is a wimp and why she came on the trip is beyond comprehension to the biologist. Of all the team members, the surveyor seems the most trustworthy and amiable, knowledgeable, and capable. All of them stop their talking when a low wailing moan lifts onto the breeze and reaches them in the camp. The moan had occurred on their first night there, but they had shrugged it off. Now, they are certain that there must be some scientific reason that it is occurring.

After the howling stops, the psychologist tells everyone that tomorrow's task will be to head down into the tower's tunnels once again. This time, she adds, everyone will wear breathing apparatus and masks. Then, the biologist notes, the psychologist stands and says: "Consolidation of authority." The biologist notes that the surveyor and the anthropologist beside her suddenly go slack and their eyes glaze over. The biologist mimics them hoping that the psychologist hasn't noticed. Clearly, thinks the biologist, the psychologist when she'd hypnotized them, had programmed them all to enter into a hypnotic state when she uttered those words. The psychologist begins to tell the team that they will follow her orders, that they will not argue about the decision to go into the tunnels, and that they will remain calm when going into the tunnels. She orders them to have a good night's sleep, to not dream, and to forget this particular conversation, but will follow her directives. Everyone was brought out of it when the psychologist snaps her fingers and the biologist plays along. Later, in her tent, the biologist wonders how much control their leader could really exert over them, and what it means that she has not taken to the programming. Maybe the spores had somehow made hypnotic suggestion impossible?

The biologist realizes that now she harbors two secrets, and that these secrets will serve to estrange her from her comrades. She believes that for some reason, it is imperative that she remain detached from them, an observer, and if need be, a savior.

Analysis

This first section sets the stage for what will unfold in the rest of the novel. The reader is introduced to the nameless four women who comprise the expeditionary group. They are the 12th expedition to go into the mysterious Area X, a place that seems to befuddle, bewitch, and bewilder all who have gone there over the past decade or so.



Their sole mission is to learn all they can about the area and to return back to the mainland with information about it.

That this is set sometime in the future is evident, but how far in the future is questionable. They still use cell phones (though they had to leave them behind), and much of the technology that they had to leave on the mainland are devices that are in use in today's world. However, something has happened and this 'area' is strange and unknown to the people in this time and place. They wear black boxes that dangle from their belts. It is to let them know that levels of something are too high and they must leave the area. What these 'levels' are, or what the 'substance' is, the reader is not told at this time. The black box devices are symbolic of their ties to the mainland and the greater human race. The biologist doesn't care for it but understands that it is part of the mission's protocol to wear one. This may suggest that the biologist will be the one to challenge the norm.

The lighthouse is a known landmark, but the tower that they come upon is not. While the team members seem to draw strength from the lighthouse, making their base camp near it's doors, the tower has the opposite effect on them, causing them to be wary and uneasy around it. The biologist likens the tower and its caverns as a living, breathing organism, whose gullet they have traversed.

The writing on the walls is literally symbolic as is the saying. Though the scientists do not know it now, it is the manifesto of nature, herself. As of this point in the novel, however, it is a curiosity, and a biological oddity since nothing of this sort has ever been seen before. It is nature's proclamation to always reclaim what it has given life to.

The spores in this first section are not only a 'wake up call' for the biologist, as it inoculates her against her leader's post-hypnotic suggestions, but it also begins to separate her from the rest of the group. In essence, these spores are 'awareness' and 'knowledge'. Her eyes are clear and she sees everything, not just what the psychologist wants them to see.

Hypnosis, itself, is symbolic of the control that leaders and those in power attempt to exert over those they work with, and who work for them. The control must be complete and unchallenged, and as a result, the people on the expedition, with the exception of the biologist, follow orders blindly.

The moaning that occurs in the middle of the night unnerves the group, but on the second day or so the biologist finds an almost calming aspect to the sound, as if it is something calling to the deepest part of a primal part of her. She doesn't share this with the others, however.

The theme of Rationality surfaces early on as the scientists are crossing through the border lands into Area X. The biologist continually reminds herself not to drift off into an appreciation of the natural beauty around her, but rather to focus solely on the scientific data that she can gather. This indicates and sets up the author's premise that mankind



removes itself from the natural world on a regular basis, and that doing this, of thinking that mankind is separate from the natural world can eventually lead to distraction.

The theme of Isolation is also evident in the fact that once they've left the city they are all alone. The biologist, especially, contemplates how foreign it feels to be the only people in the middle of nowhere. She also reflects on the demise of the previous expedition members, and feels very small and insignificant. She is not only isolated physically from the civilized world, but she's also isolated emotionally and mentally from the other members because she is able to withstand the hypnosis.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Rationality.

Discussion Question 2

Who are the expedition members and what are they like?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism of the spores.

Vocabulary

omnivorous, anthropologist, linguist, clumsily, physiological, bravado, consolidation, compulsion, demeanor, undue, deplorable, hypnotic, coquina, conditioning

Chapter 2, Integration

Summary

The biologist and the surveyor wake in the morning to find that the anthropologist has left in the middle of the night. The psychologist is limping and favoring her ribs, and her boots are caked in mud. She tells them that the anthropologist was so upset by what she saw in the tower the day before that she decided that she needed to leave the expedition, that she would be a hindrance to the mission. The psychologist tells everyone that the anthropologist will be waiting for extraction at the meeting point.

The surveyor notes that the anthropologist has left without all of her gear, or her gun. The psychologist says that the anthropologist left those for them to use, so that we would have more resources for the continued mission. It is clear to the biologist that if they were to go and find the anthropologist that the mission might be abandoned all together. She feels consumed by the need to go back into the tunnels under the tower. So, she stiffly agrees to continue the mission, though neither she nor the surveyor believe the story they are being given.

The question that comes to the biologist's mind is why the psychologist hasn't used her hypnotic suggestions to make them compliant, as she had the night before. And later, when everyone goes back into the tower's tunnels, the psychologist stays behind to stand guard. When the other two argue against this, telling her that she must come with them, the psychologist does employ a suggestion, saying: the 'reward is worth the risk'. This makes the surveyor compliant almost instantly, and as usual, the biologist plays along. Still, it unnerves her to think that the psychologist is standing at the top of the entrance with a semi-automatic rifle.

The first impression that the biologist has when they reach the initial landing from the day before, is that the tower is 'breathing'. She asks the surveyor if she can hear the breathing sounds, or hear the heartbeat in the walls. The surveyor tells her that she should go to the surface at once. She tells the biologist that she's seeing what isn't there, while the biologist thinks that the surveyor can't see what is plainly in front of her. They agree to continue the mission.

The biologist shares with the reader that as a child there was a neglected pool in her backyard that her parents never maintained. After a while it naturalized itself and egrets and other birds came to the pool. Frogs laid eggs and tadpoles hatched. It was no longer the chlorinated antiseptic environment for humans only, but a reclaimed bio-diverse habitat.

The biologist and the surveyor find that with each new level there are more words to complete the initial phrase. The next level says: "...to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives while from the dim-



lit halls of other places forms that never could be writhe for the impatience of the few who have never seen or been seen..."

The biologist carefully takes pictures of everything, including the phrases. She notices that there are faint outlines below the plant writing, like remnants from earlier phrases. She also documents that. The heartbeat in the walls continues to swell to the point that the biologist has to put in earplugs. The surveyor doesn't see her do this.

The writing becomes more frequent and the surveyor notes that the writing looks 'fresher'. They both turn off their lights and it is apparent that the new writing that they are coming across is brighter and slicker, as if it has just been painted on there. They both agree that something or someone below them is creating the writing. They both take the safety off of their weapons.

The surveyor notices something that the biologist noticed hours ago, and didn't remark upon: there is a thick viscous slime covering the stairs. They also notice that there are boot marks, not belonging to them, on some adjacent stairs. The marks are fresh. The surveyor curses and begins to panic. The biologist calms her down. They continue downward.

The biologist shares with the reader that her husband had been a part of the eleventh expedition that had come to Area X. She says that she hand't wanted to mention it because it would skew her credibility in relaying the account and that none of the other expedition members knew about it. She states that her husband had come home, but not really. He was diagnosed six months after his return with inoperable cancer...just like the rest of the 11th expedition members. Whatever they explored or encountered there, they were never the same, and they all died at the same time.

The downward climb becomes more difficult as the slime beneath their feet grows thicker. They shine their lights on it and see that it is golden in color and that there are small red filaments swimming in the goo. Suddenly, the surveyor recoils and pushes back into the arms of the biologist. She's seen what she thinks is the body of a person. But upon questioning, she can't be sure what she saw. She just wants to get out of there. The biologist assures her that after they find out what the form on the floor is they will leave. The surveyor agrees and they cautiously approach.

The biologist approaches the form on the floor. It is a very desiccated remnant of the anthropologist. The psychologist has obviously lied, both of them agree. The biologist deduces, based on the evidence in the corridor that the psychologist, for reasons only known to her, woke the anthropologist up in the middle of the night, and then using hypnosis made her go into the tunnels to get samples at great personal risk. There are many test tubes lying on the ground. One of them has a sample in it. The biologist takes it and puts it in her vest. They agree that they will go to the surface and confront the psychologist together.

The biologist concludes as they make their way back up the stairs of the tower, that the extent of the hypnosis had been quite comprehensive. That, now, as she looks back



upon their earlier training, everything had been designed to keep those on the expedition calm, compliant, and obedient in every way. Now, of course, the biologist finds herself asking questions that should have been asked from the beginning, such as why this particular stretch of coastline, and why had everything always been oriented to the lighthouse, but their base camp was closer to the tower (which was never placed on a map at all). All of it points to a far larger agenda, one that both she and the surveyor are not privy to.

They emerge from the tower tunnels and find that the psychologist has left. She has taken half of the supplies and more than half of the weapons. They decide that they will develop photos and look at the sample they retrieved from the anthropologist and then they will make the four day hike to the extraction point. They look at the sample under the microscope and find to their shock that it is akin to brain tissue. But not human brain tissue. None of the photographs developed as anything more than darkness.

That night it rains heavily. Each woman takes turns standing guard in case the psychologist were to return. And still the moaning started in the evening and continued throughout the night, even through the storm. Several hours into her turn at watch the biologist notices a small faint light in the lighthouse's peak. It repeats the flashing, and then goes dark.

While she stands guard she reflects back to the time when her husband returned from the expedition. He was changed. He had an inner solitude that he seemed unable to cope with. Normally outgoing and energetic, now he was thoughtful and low key. They came to take him away four days after he arrived. She would visit him in the medical facility where all of expedition 11 returnees were housed and treated. He would never leave there.

The morning comes and the storm blows over. The two women try to decide their next course of action. The biologist wants to go to the lighthouse to see if the psychologist might be there. The surveyor puts this notion aside, pointing out that the psychologist is armed, and has the high ground in that situation. The thought that the woman would share any information with the two of them is laughable, the surveyor points out. And, she states, there is no way she's going back down into the tunnels. The mission is over, she declares. The surveyor also makes an astute observation: everything they have is fifty years old, including the weapons they are using and the clothing they are wearing. Nothing is from the current time, as if they are both part of some reenactment. Why?

The biologist decides that she is going to go to the lighthouse to do some recon. She asks if the surveyor will wait for her at base camp. The surveyor swears at her but says that she will stay put. The biologist sets off with supplies, a weapon, and a microscope.

Analysis

The theme of Deception is explored and demonstrated in this section as the members of the team begin to suspect that they haven't been told the full extent of the mission or



parameters. The psychologist is suspect from the beginning as the biologist catches her in several lies, as well as using hypnotic suggestions to control the group. The fact that the biologist has lost the ability to be controlled because of the spores, and is able to see the extent of the deception being perpetrated by the psychologist. Later, the surveyor notices that everything that they have is fifty years out of date; that everything from their weapons to their clothing is outdated. What they don't know at this point is why that would matter. The discovery of the anthropologist's body further underscores the theme of Deception in that the psychologist clearly deceived the poor anthropologist and forced her to enter the tunnels after everyone else was asleep.

The theme of Isolation is prominent as well when the biologist realizes that they are truly alone with their dilemma. She and the surveyor realize that they are in the middle of something larger than they have been told and that they are alone in determining their next course of action. With a four days' march ahead of them to get to the extraction point, there is nothing around them for miles that represents human civilization.

The theme of Isolation is also demonstrated with the biologist's memories of her husband's return from his own expedition. He was distant, and it seemed as if some integral part of himself, that part that made him unique, was gone. He didn't seem to remember much of what made him who he was. In the end, the biologist realized that he was isolated in his own mind, and that she was isolated from him because of it.

The theme of Identity ties in closely to this loss of personality and identification with the civilized world. Additionally, none of the scientists were allowed to keep their own names, but were to be known only by their occupation. The biologist states that the first week of their training they all knew each other's names, but that by the following weeks, that was stripped away. Now, the biologist can't even remember what their names had been.

The theme of Nature is focused upon heavily in this section, as well. First, the author shows that nature will eventually win out over civilization, every time. This is first shown in the biologist's memories of her childhood pool-turned-pond. This theme is also reinforced in the various stages of the tunnel that they work their way through. At every turn it is as if nature is telling them that it has been allowing them a fragile moment as a species to enjoy living, but that at any point that can and will be taken from them. Nature is shown to be as beautiful as it is savage. The perception that mankind is in control of any of it is laughable.

The symbolism of the material that the two scientists find down in the tunnels represents the attempt by mankind to understand Nature, and how alien the study becomes when one begins to truly appreciate how alien it seems in comparison to the human species. This is also reiterated when the biologist tests the samples from the tunnels and finds that one of the samples resembles brain tissue, only it had been collected from the extremity of the organism, not from within. That the anthropologist was totally consumed by the 'nature' of the walls and the tower also underscores the fact that the samples and the tower are alive, a living organism.



The rifle that the surveyor clings to, as she discovers, is out of date and practically useless. It is a panacea at best. This would seem to symbolize the things that mankind holds on to in a pathetic attempt to nurture the idea that they are in charge and the dominant force on the planet, when, in reality, they are not.

The theme of Perception surfaces in this section as well when the surveyor and the biologist perceive different things while down in the tunnel. Neither can understand the other's way of seeing things, or not seeing things, and the biologist, in particular, views the surveyor as archaic and stupid to not be seeing all of the details in the tunnels. They also are beginning to create a narrative that is not based as much on reality, facts, and data, but on emotion and fear. This is shown to affect even the most stolid of perspectives.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Identity.

Discussion Question 2

What is the symbolism of the rifle?

Discussion Question 3

Compare the surveyor's attitude and perspective about the tunnel to the biologist's perspective.

Vocabulary

refreshed, favoring, reverie, assertion, extraction, stamina, dysfunction, blatantly, ingratiated, surly, audible, paranoia, inflection, enormity, phosphorescence, gullet



Chapter 3, Immolation

Summary

The biologist strikes out for the lighthouse. As she walks she forces herself to set aside her emotions to focus on the known facts. She concludes that what she knows is this: some living organism is writing words on a wall using technology far more advanced than her own species is capable of, she has also inhaled the spores of an unidentifiable species which has caused her to see things more clearly than the rest of her team, that the anthropologist was sacrificed for a greater mission that neither she nor the surveyor are aware of, and that they are isolated and alone in this beautiful, yet savage, environment.

She decides to give the unknown tower writer a name. She calls it the Crawler. What was the Crawler's purpose in writing on the walls? Maybe it was a form of symbiotic communication between the Crawler and the Tower, itself? And, as she walks toward the lighthouse..that never seems to grow any closer...she wonders at the meaning behind the phrases. No frame of reference or connection is there for her to latch onto and it frustrates her.

The biologist reaches the old village which signals the halfway mark to the lighthouse. She stops to rest briefly, remembering what she'd been taught about the abandoned village. It had belonged to a small group of people who lived just beyond the adjacent military base thirty years prior. There was a localized environmental catastrophe, the likes of which were still not fully known publicly. That the military and some research they were engaged in caused the catastrophe the biologist is certain. The entire area was quarantined and began being called Area X. It would be two years in quarantine before the first expedition would be allowed in to gather data. Now, as she readies herself to continue her trek, she realizes with startling clarity that the government had selected people for the expeditions, not based on their particular expertise, but based on the fact that most of them would not return alive, or at all.

As she passes some of the houses, she decides to look into one of them. She is shocked at first because the way the moss and vegetation has grown it has created a type of 'tableau' looking very much like four figures reclining on a couch, or standing facing a distant point on the wall...as if they were watching television. She decides to turn off her emotions again, and stoops to take samples of the plants. There is also a dead fox, quite mummified, and a dead rat only a few days old, she guesses.

She reaches the lighthouse quite tired from her exertions. However, once she enters into the lighthouse she decides to do some recon on the lower level just in case the psychologist or others might be lying in wait. She finds most of the bottom floor dusty and in disarray. In one room she finds large oaken tables overturned in a defensive posture, bullet holes riddling their surfaces. The walls still bore the stains from that



violence. The phrase RS WAS HERE is carved on one of the tables. The biologist pulls out her handgun and heads for the stairs.

As the biologist climbs slowly up the stairs, more bloodstains testify to extreme violence. There are words and phrases written on these walls, too, she notes. But, the types of words and phrases were obviously written as last wills and testaments, frightened scribbling of those who feared imminent death. Bullet casings litter the floor, and she finds other cast off items: a shoe, a tattered child's stuffed toy, a clipboard, and glass tubes with rancid samples still in them.

She reaches the first landing which she believes is where she must have seen the flickering light the night before. There is a broken picture on the wall just up the stairs from the landing. She approaches it and sees that it is a black and white photograph of two men and a young girl. Someone had taken a black marker and circled one of the men. Compulsively she takes the photo from the frame and puts it into her pocket.

She reaches the beacon room, the room where the light had been maintained to keep ships off of the rocks. This room was clean and the walls freshly scrubbed. Instantly the biologist is guarded, thinking that the psychologist must have used this room for herself. There doesn't seem to be any evidence of the psychologist, however.

She explores the room and finds a trapdoor under a rug. The biologist turns on her flashlight and shines it and her weapon down the trapdoor's stairs. The psychologist's supplies and backpack are a few stairs below. She cautiously goes down the stairs and stands at the bottom of the stairs, staring at a large collection of diaries, journals, and books obviously written by previous expeditions and taken from them before leaving. Why?

As she approaches them she realizes that the sheer volume of collected journals suggest more than only 12 expeditions...many more. She props a table next to the stairs as an early warning should the psychologist enter the room. Then, she proceeds to rifle through the collection of journals. She reads about attacks, and finds that many of the journals date back decades before the original first officially documented expedition. That she and the others were deceived is evident. Then, she finds her husband's journal. She is unable to read it, and then thinks that she will take his journal and several others with her back to the surveyor and the base camp.

She's anxious to get the surveyor's perspective on what she's discovered. She takes some of the psychologist's supplies, and a better weapon, but leaves the rest of her former leader's things behind. Needing to clear her head and the musty odor from her lungs she goes into the beacon room once again, and steps out onto the balcony. The view is tremendous and she takes it in for a few moments. Then, she sees it.... a boot, a leg, down below, attached to a still form. Hundreds of feet below her in the sand is the body of the psychologist.



Analysis

The theme of Identity is offered in many subtle ways in this section. Not only is the biologist concerned with why they've been chosen for the expeditions, but finds herself reflecting upon who she has been in the past, especially when with her husband, and who she was as a child, and who she is now as a widow and a scientist. The environment that she finds herself in has begun to challenge these assumptions and presumptions of self, and is beginning to offer a more real and exact definition, she feels.

The symbolism of the lighthouse is fleshed out more in this section as the biologist steadily hikes toward it. To her it represents answers, safety, as much as the ships who expected it to guide them away from the dangerous shores. When she reaches the lighthouse she begins to understand that the lighthouse hadn't offered any of the previous expeditions any of these things, that in fact the illusion of the lighthouse was that there was safety in man-made artifice.

The journals are also representative of the human need to make sense and order out of randomness and illogical events. As she leafs through some of the journals that are still legible, she comes to the conclusion that the expeditions were more about throwing bread on the water, a testing of the waters, more-so that gathering data. The journals were hidden and confiscated from the scientists and placed back into the lighthouse where they were obviously being allowed to rot and fade away. The journals, to the biologist, represent the truth about what happened to previous expeditions, and as she takes the journal belonging to her husband, in case it offers her an explanation as to why he was so changed upon his return. Area X, she concludes, breaks minds, though why her mind is unaffected she isn't sure.

The photograph that she finds on the wall, and compulsively takes, represents the history of the building and the fact that the lighthouse, at one point, had been a safe haven and a keeper of human lives. All around her is evidence of extreme violence and death, though there are no bodies. In the middle of all of this violent evidence she feels more isolated and alone than ever.

The theme of Isolation is reinforced throughout this section as the reader sees that the biologist has always been a loner, wrapped up in her own thoughts about what she continually observed around her. From the pool in her childhood, to the social outings she engaged in with her husband, she was never a part of any of it, but a distant watcher, analyzing and musing about the human condition. This may, perhaps, be the very thing that has kept her rational and safe while the others are dying around her.

The theme of Deception is demonstrated in this section as she realizes that they have all been lied to through all of their training. They were test subjects, at best, she realizes. Why and for what purpose she is not entirely sure. Deception is also apparent in the fact that the lighthouse is not a safe-house at all, as many people have obviously lost their lives there...and in the end, the psychologist as well.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Isolation and Deception.

Discussion Question 2

What does finding the journals seem to indicate?

Discussion Question 3

Why hasn't the biologist lost her mind like the others?

Vocabulary

crenelations, fortification, rappel, shards, penultimate, fixation, gauntlet, muffled, quell, brackish, outliers, empirically, assail



Chapter 4, Immersion

Summary

The biologist makes her way quickly down to the body at the foot of the lighthouse. The biologist finds the psychologist's body but is shocked to find that the psychologist is still alive. The psychologist begins screaming 'Annihilation! Annihilation!' Then she asks for water. The biologist gives her some water, understanding that the psychologist will not live much longer. She asks the psychologist questions.

The psychologist looks up at her and says that as soon as she saw the biologist coming up the pathway she knew that the biologist had changed. The biologist asks her to explain and the psychologist says that she 'glowed' like a flame, like the beings in the tower. The psychologist tries to use the hypnotic phrases to control the biologist but the biologist tells her that she is immune to them. The psychologist tells her that she was always a difficult subject.

The action pauses in the narrative to offer the reader an earlier session with the psychologist and the biologist. It is a pre-expedition interview where the psychologist asks about the biologist's childhood and relationships with others. The reader learns that the biologist has been asked to leave many of her field assignments because she was not considered a 'team player'. The reader also learns that the biologist, out of necessity, had become self contained as a child due to the fact that her mother was an alcoholic and her father was a con man.

Back in the present, the psychologist confesses that she tried to shoot the biologist but something wouldn't allow her to pull the trigger. When the biologist presses her to clarify the psychologist says that something was in the lighthouse chasing her, and then it was inside of her and outside of her until it seemed like a good idea to jump. She looks at the biologist and with a moment of clarity tells her that she wonders if the biologist could really handle it if she lifted the deepest of all subliminals that had been implanted. She asks the biologist how many of her memories from childhood are verifiable, and how many of them could have been implanted, challenging the biologist's notion of reality.

The psychologist tells her that she knows that she is dying. She tells her to ask questions before it is too late. The biologist asks her about the black boxes that they wear. The psychologist tells her that the black boxes were to keep everyone calm and that they never measured anything. She tells him that the border is advancing every year, a mile at a time. The biologist asks what the border looks like and the psychologist tells her that she wouldn't want to see it.

The psychologist dies and the biologist takes the other woman's jacket to drape it over her and a journal drops out. The biologist pockets it for later reading. Then, she takes samples from the contaminated right arm of the psychologist (where the Crawler had assaulted her the night that she and the anthropologist went into the tunnels). There is a



scrap of paper in another pocket with the trigger phrases that the psychologist could use to control them. Most of the phrases the biologist had already figured out. But, when she reads the last one she grows very still. It is a self induced suicide phrase: Annihilation. All of them had been wired to self destruct if given this directive, but the only one capable of pulling that psychological trigger is dead.

The biologist starts back knowing that she's stayed too long at the lighthouse. It will be midnight before she makes it back to base camp. Halfway back to camp she hears the usual low moan, only this time it seems as if it is closer than ever before. She stumbles over something in the dark and when she shines her light on it, she sees that it is a type of shedding, a husk of a previous creature. The shed husk looks nearly human. She hears a thrashing in the marsh and follows the sound hoping to maybe get a glimpse of what has been making the moaning noises. She hears the creature stop and turn toward her and then self preservation kicks in and she starts running away.

She outpaces the moaning creature and finding that she has become disoriented, she makes a small makeshift camp for herself. She sleeps and in the morning before it is fully light she sees that her skin has started to glow on its own. She is almost back to the camp when the brightness inside of her seems to surge. It causes her to step to the left and a bullet hits her shoulder knocking her off of her feet. Had she continued and not stepped aside, her mind tells her, the shot would have hit her heart. Now, instead of feeling the pain of a gunshot, she feels the skin and muscle knitting together. She knows that the surveyor laid in wait for her and was most likely trying to find her to finish her. She calls out to the surveyor, trying to reason with her.

The surveyor makes it clear that she is going to kill her and that she blames the biologist for their entire situation. The biologist knows that she has the advantage because she isn't as hurt as the surveyor thinks she is. The biologist distracts the surveyor and then shoots her. Feeling terrible remorse for having killed her, the biologist takes the woman's body out into the swamp and lets the water take her. The biologist falls back into the dirt and experiences a type of delirium.

When she wakes she makes her way back to the base camp where she sees that the surveyor has destroyed much of it. Still, there is still some food and water that the surveyor, in her fury, hadn't destroyed. The biologist eats and drinks, and then sleeps. She thinks before resting that the only way to keep the brightness from overtaking her all together is to have her body shocked, or injured in some way. When she wakes and eats again she sees that the surveyor's journal is intact, though it is blank except for one statement. She writes that the anthropologist tried to 'come back' but that the surveyor took care of her. The rest of the day the biologist takes inventory of what she has left and decides that she can easily live there for as long as she needs to, and finds that she has no real desire to return to civilized living anyway.



Analysis

The theme of Identity is demonstrated in this section as the biologist must confront who she is becoming with who she thought she was. When she meets the psychologist, the dying scientist suggests to her that memories are fragile things and can easily be implanted into a mind as a hypnotic trigger can. If this is true then the biologist's terrible childhood was a mere figment and what really happened to her as a child is a blank. Her mind rejects this, but at the same time, it makes her more fully willing to embrace the new species she is evolving in to.

The symbolism of the black box is fully revealed in this section as the biologist learns that the black box was nothing more than a panacea to keep everyone calm. They had been in danger since they entered Area X, the psychologist confesses. This is why the psychologist pushed the surveyor to enter the tunnels. She knew that they were about to run out of time and that the mission had been compromised because two of the team members were already infected by the spores.

The spores become a symbol of truth. Two of them had begun to realize the truth about Area X: the anthropologist and the biologist. If one stops to consider that an anthropologist studies culture and ritual, and the biologist studies life, then the fact that these two scientists have been infected with the 'spores' in other words, the truth, then they already know, or have begun to discover the truth about Area X. This is why the psychologist couldn't allow either one of them to live.

When the biologist and the psychologist square off at the lighthouse the comments and half-truths that the psychologist reveals challenges the biologist's grasp on reality. Then later, when the biologist is making her way back to the base camp and she sees the husk from a creature's shedding, her grasp on the known and the unknown slips even further. All of these instances demonstrate the theme of Perception and Reality.

The husk that the biologist finds is symbolic of a 'shedding' of her old perceptions and beliefs about nature. The theme of Nature emerges through this symbol and shows a 'merging' of the wild and the domesticated, the known and the unknown. Instead of fearing whatever it was that shed the skin, the biologist is drawn to it, to know what it is. Later, after she is too close to be safe she realizes that she should be running instead of observing.

The theme of Nature is most prominent in this chapter as the author's suggestion is made clear: Nature wins every time. He suggests that it may take centuries to do it, because time is of little consequence to Nature, but in the end, the mechanism called Nature will always win out over man-made contrivances and arrogance. The reason that the journals are confiscated by the authorities is because inside of the journals the people confess to being happier living in a natural state, rather than living in the confined spaces within the civilized borders. This is why when the expedition 11 members returned, they were shadows of their former selves. Most of them still had their heart, mind, and soul living and enjoying life in the natural world. In this natural



world they didn't have to pretend to be anything other than what they were, and most of them found a freedom in this.

The theme of Deception is also explored in this section as the reader learns that the team members were selected, not because of their abilities, but because of their psychological landscape and proclivities. The biologist's tendency to be 'self-contained' led the organizers of the expedition to believe that she would be unaffected by Area X. Instead, she embraced what the area had to offer, and as a result is thriving while the others, who fought their own inner nature, didn't survive.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of the husks.

Discussion Question 2

What has allowed the biologist to be the sole survivor of this expedition?

Discussion Question 3

What seems to be the overall 'directive' of the tower and the spores?

Vocabulary

disassociation, improbable, frenzy, intel, grimaced, reliquary, vanguard, guttural, sloughing, remnant, visage, ponderous, keening, interregnum



Chapter 5, Dissolution

Summary

The biologist feels the 'pull' of the tower calling to her to come back into its depths, but she resists, deferring to the logical side of her nature. She wants to run tests on the samples that she has. When she looks at the infected skin of the psychologist, and then the uninfected skin she is shocked to find that they are both human skin cells. She then places the moss that she retrieved from the tableau figures in the old homes and finds that in the moss, and in the sample of the dead fox that she'd found, there were also human cells. It becomes clear that between these samples, the creature in the swamp shedding its skin, and the other strange creatures she saw in Area X that the military had been possibly experimenting with genetic manipulation of some sort.

The biologist takes her husband's journal and slowly begins to read it. He had also encountered many of the same things that the biologist had. His group had been comprised of all males. They also had found the Tower, but had opted not to explore it right away. They had decided to take the surveyor's advice and map the extent of Area X. They walked for more than fifteen miles in one direction and never found the end of it. This and other discoveries lead her husband to also surmise that they had all been lied to. The group split up to better cover more area and to run tests. When they reached the meet-up point, the lighthouse, they saw the carnage there. The linguist and the biologist's husband were the only two remaining, except the psychologist, whose body was never discovered. They also observed clones of themselves walking in single file into the tower.

The biologist flips forward a few pages and reads that her husband was the sole survivor and that he repaired a boat and was going to live on a small island beyond the swamp. He writes that if anyone finds and reads his journal that they should look for him there. Was he still alive, she wonders?

Her injuries, she notes, are nearly all healed. The compulsion to go to the tower is so great that she gives in and goes. As she enters the tower she is immediately aware of the fact that she no longer needs a flashlight. She also is aware that the heartbeat that she had heard when they first entered the tower, was now louder and more distinct. She descends until she comes to the Crawler and a very bright light. As if drawn to it, the biologist tries to fight the will to approach, but she can't. The Crawler, alien as it is, reminds the biologist of a starfish that she'd once seen, one that other scientists call the 'destroyer of worlds'. That starfish had the same sort of look about it as the Crawler does up close.

The Crawler enters her mind and her being and the biologist reports that it is like being sucked up and strained then poured back into oneself. When she is released she stumbles to the staircase and moves upward. On compulsion she turns to look back over her shoulder at the Crawler and sees that it has a face. It has the face of the



lighthouse keeper whose face had been circled in the picture. Though he was gravely misshapen and overtaken by whatever else he had become, he hadn't aged in the thirty years since the photo was taken.

The biologist realizes that none of the members of past expeditions were really gone. Somehow, this alien being, this creation of a vast experiment gone awry, did not let anything go to waste. Its ability to mimic, to replicate, to use every square inch of material offered to it makes it certain that in some way or shape, all of those who entered the area were reborn and transformed in some way. The eyes in the dolphins that the biologist sees, the call of the birds, and the words on the wall of the tower are all part of one larger organism, one that will survive, and eventually spread until it assimilates everything.

The biologist tells the reader that she has written everything down and placed it into a journal of her own, which she has bundled with her husband's. She is going to retrace his steps, to see what he saw. If she finds him then she is confident that they will have no desire to leave anyway. She leaves the journals as a warning and a welcome to the next expeditions that will inevitably follow.

Analysis

The theme of Nature is fully realized and demonstrated in this section. First, there is the awareness of the biologist of her own inner nature, that nature that was domesticated for the sake of community, something she never really cared for to begin with. She realizes that the inner struggle that mankind has always had, that yearning to return to nature was part of a larger 'pull' that no one ever explored, and that it is magnified in Area X.

Secondly, Nature is shown to be beyond the reasoning or comprehension of mere human beings, that its machinations seem foreign and alien when viewed in its raw state. The author suggests that man's interference in the cycles of Nature and of the Earth will one day serve up an apocalypse of epic proportions. The suggestion that the Earth is returning to its own form of equilibrium at a slow but steady rate is hinted out when the biologist's husband writes in his journal that Area X is bigger than anyone knew.

The theme of Rationality is challenged in this section as the reader is confronted with the very nature of truth, perception, and what reality really is. This is evident in the conversation between the biologist and her husband regarding what is real and what is not, and it is also reinforced with the fantastic sights and sounds that the biologist sees when she goes down into the tunnels.

The theme of Isolation is touched upon in contrast to the total integration and oneness that the biologist now feels since completing her transformation. Before, she felt separate and alone, disconnected and unwanted, even as a child. Now, as part of the



vast landscape that she finds herself a part of, she experiences a type of euphoria that she's never known before.

The symbolism of the Crawler appears as do the journals in this section. The Crawler is the vast unchecked and primal force of Nature, examining and weighing the worth of the being it comes into contact with. The fact that the Crawler is determined to have been the old lighthouse keeper from three decades previously indicates that the Crawler performs much the same function as the lighthouse keeper; they are both keepers of the balance.

The journals serve as reminders to upcoming expeditions that they are not expected to remain unchanged and that they should not fight it. They are the last reminders and vestiges of those that went before, a connection to what was and what is.

Discussion Question 1

What ultimately happened to the biologist?

Discussion Question 2

What is the author's message about Nature and the environment?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Identity.

Vocabulary

assuage, stark, monolithic, intercession, obfuscation, chronicled, cowardice, corroborate, terse, claustrophobic, coerce, tenuous, euphoria, emphatic, impinging



Characters

Biologist

The biologist has a name but it is never given to the reader, nor the other members of her expedition team. As part of their mission they are stripped of their names and identities, given posthypnotic suggestions, and given specific mission parameters. However, because of the biologist's interior landscape, feeling separated from the rest of society, her mind only partially accepts the conditioning given to them.

Her husband, who was a botanist, was a member on the previous expedition (11). The mission failed and all of them were thought to be dead. However, 18 months later the biologist goes into her kitchen to find her husband eating ravenously out of their refrigerator. However, he was changed and was never the same. The biologist saw her husband taken away by the government for study. She was told some months later that he had died. This turns out to be untrue, but she spends much of a year thinking that he is dead.

His 'death' is part of the reason that she decides to volunteer for the next expedition. The reader finds out, through a series of pre-expedition interviews, that the biologist has been let go from many field jobs that she's had because she lacked discipline and academic rigor necessary to complete the task. Plus, she is not a people person, and this is evident in her thought processes.

However, it is just this type of thinking, of integration into her environment, her appreciation of all things wild and natural, that eventually saves her life and allows her to remain lucid and sane when everyone else loses their minds and experiences hallucinations.

Biologist's Husband

The biologist's husband is presumed dead at the onset of the novel. However, as the novel progresses the biologist, and the reader, learn that he may yet be alive and living on an interior island in Area X. His journal, that the biologist finds, gives the biologist insight into her husband's experience, his feelings for her, and what happened to their expedition.

Psychologist

The psychologist of expedition 12, is the designated leader. She has been told to use hypnosis to control the group and make sure that the mission is not compromised. Many of the suggestions that she's implanted into their mind are designed to keep the group from being frightened or violent.



When the psychologist realizes that the mission has been compromised, she uses her control over the anthropologist to force the other scientist to engage in a risky mission to obtain samples from the tunnels. She eventually abandons her entire team and goes to the lighthouse to await extraction.

When the biologist goes to find her at the lighthouse the psychologist tries to shoot her with a rifle but finds that something will not let her. Then, the psychologist believes that something is chasing her and throws herself off of the lighthouse roof. As she is dying she answers many of the biologist's questions.

Linguist

The linguist starts out with the team but when they begin to cross the border lands, all of a sudden the linguist turns back, claiming that she's changed her mind. They never hear from her again.

Surveyor

The surveyor has military training and so has a very disciplined mind. She rejects out of hand anything that can't be explained with testing, facts, and known laws. She does not bend easily and does not deviate from standard protocols set up for them.

When the biologist tells her that they have all been given post hypnotic suggestions, with trigger words that only the psychologist can use, the surveyor doesn't believe it at first. However, when the biologist demonstrates, the surveyor begins to believe the biologist's theories about their mission and the place they are in.

When the biologist goes to find the psychologist at the lighthouse, the surveyor stays behind to guard the camp. However, when the biologist returns, the surveyor tries to kill her, claiming that the biologist is the one that has killed everyone. In the end, the biologist shoots her in the head and then drags the body into the swamp.

Anthropologist

The anthropologist is the most timid of the group, aside from the linguist. She does not think it is a good idea to go into the tunnels and when she is forced to go down there she becomes almost incapacitated. The psychologist has to use her trigger words in order to keep the anthropologist calm.

Later, the psychologist uses the trigger words to compel the anthropologist to go down into the tunnels to take samples. They are attacked by the Crawler who infects the anthropologist. The psychologist suffers minor injuries, which she hides from the group.

Later, after the body of the anthropologist is found in the tunnels, everyone assumes that she is dead. However, the new life forms that exist in the tunnel simply repair and



change the anthropologist's body. When the anthropologist tries to return to the base camp, the surveyor shoots her.

The Crawler

The Crawler is the name that the biologist gives to the entity who is writing words on the walls in the tunnel. While it is humanoid in shape, it is also changed and resembles more of the morphology of a starfish that the biologist once saw.

Later, the biologist encounters the Crawler up close and realizes that the Crawler is actually the lighthouse keeper from three decades prior. She recognizes him because of a black and white photograph that she took from the wall in the lighthouse when she went to find the psychologist.

The Biologist's Mother and Father

They are only mentioned in flashbacks by the biologist. They were not very good parents, according to the biologist. The mother was an alcoholic and was not emotionally available. Her father was a con man, and constantly placing the family into a state of poverty. Neither of them were happy with each other.

However, the biologist, when asked by the psychologist about her parents, only tells the psychologist that her mother was an artist and her father is an entrepreneur. Though in her mind they were useless as parents she still feels loyalty to them. It is their lack of parenting skills, however, that allowed the biologist to develop her own self-contained happiness, to draw her happiness and support from the nature that surrounded her.

The Swamp Creature

There is a low moaning that comes across the swamp each night that the expedition is there. The last few days of the mission, the biologist stumbles upon the creature as it is molting. Though she doesn't see it completely, she can tell that it is humanoid, in nature, but that it is also a part of the wild creatures in the area, too. She begins to suspect some sort of DNA tampering by the military.

The Linguist Expedition 11

The biologist's husband is the sole survivor along with the linguist from their expedition. In the husband's journal, he writes that both he and the linguist observed clones of all of the mission walking down into the tunnels. They both decide at that point that the mission has been compromised and that they were never intended to succeed.



Symbols and Symbolism

Measuring Devices

When the expeditions go into Area X they are given monitoring boxes that they wear on their belts. Supposedly, these black boxes will tell them when there is danger. They are told that if the boxes flash red, then they are to move to a safer zone. However, later, the biologist learns from the psychologist that they are simply placebos and don't really measure anything.

Lighthouse

The lighthouse represents safety, but it is a false sense of safety, as the biologist finds out. The psychologist tells them that the lighthouse is an extraction point, that it is where all of the other expeditions met to leave. However, when the biologist gets there she sees the evidence indicating horrible and prolonged violence.

Additionally, the lighthouse represents the old civilization which is giving way to the new order of life that is developing in Area X. Nature is reclaiming most of the manmade structures, including the lighthouse. The lighthouse keeper, even, has been claimed by the new lifeforms and is the being that the biologist calls, the Crawler.

Tower

The tower is a partially submerged building that extends deeply into the earth. All of the team were hypnotized to see the structure as being constructed of coquina and mud, but the biologist doesn't quite believe it when she sees it. To her, even the first time she descends into the tower, the tower is alive. She hears its heart beating. Symbolically, the tower represents Nature who has decided to fight back against mankind's continued interference in her systems.

However, when the biologist shares what she's experiencing with the others, they shut her down and discount what she's saying as early stages of paranoia or hallucinations. Because she fears being removed from the mission, the biologist does not mention any of the other experiences that she begins having with the tower.

The tower has a being, whom the biologist calls the Crawler. The Crawler writes esoteric, almost biblical, sayings on the walls. The writing is written in living organisms, making the words seem to glow and move.



Writing on Walls

The writing on the walls in the cave symbolize the new life form's decision to warn and educate the continued expeditions that come to explore the area. In essence the writing spells the end of the current life forms on the planet, that their unbridled misuse of the planet has caused it to wake and defend itself.

Spores

The spores which the biologist inhales come from the organisms living on the writing on the walls in the tower's tunnels. Symbolically, the spores represent the truth. It is only after the biologist has inhaled them that she is able to see the truth about the hypnosis that they've been subjected to, and it allows her to remain resistant to it. The spores, or the truth, eventually change the biologist's perception and body.

Hypnosis

This is used by the psychologist in order to control the group, to keep them calm, motivated, and obedient. However, the hypnosis didn't work as well on the biologist, whose mind was already somewhat wired differently to begin with due to her childhood. One of the trigger words is: annihilation, which was the trigger word for all of the members to commit suicide.

Moaning

There is a low keening that sounds out over the swampland at night. All of the mission participants can hear it, and it is written about in most of the journals. Later, the biologist finds that the moaning belongs to a half-humanoid creature who sheds its skin every night.

Test Tubes with Samples

The test tubes with samples in them allow the biologist to discover that the tower is, indeed, alive, and not something dead or inanimate. This is the author's message about the earth, that it is not a thing, but a viable, living entity.

Brain Tissue Samples

The samples that the biologist takes from the psychologist have samples from the tower's walls. She is shocked to learn that the samples are human brain tissue cells. This represents the fact that the earth has its own type of cognizance, of processing and producing life.



Rifle

The rifle, the surveyor points out eventually, is useless, and is just another panacea to keep them calm. The rifles do work, but they are from earlier eras, some of them more than fifty years ago. The biologist theorizes that the government feared the new life forms in Area X and didn't want them to get their hands on any of the newer technology lest it use it against them.

Tableau of Figures

When the biologist goes to the old ruined village she finds several mossed over figures that look like a group of people sitting on a couch watching television. She takes samples from all of them and finds that they are actually human, only changed. Symbolically, the author may be suggesting that simply sitting and watching something passively leads to a complete assimilation of the problem, rather than being part of the solution.

Journals

The journals that the biologist finds stacked up in the lighthouse midden indicates that there have been more than just 12 expeditions. The journals not only represent the truth, and the extent of the government's deceit, but also it is the biologist's only link to the outside world and to the people who were there before her. They are, literally, a link to the shared knowledge of the area.

The Old Photograph

There is an old photograph hanging on the wall in the lighthouse. It is of the lighthouse keeper, a friend, and a young girl. The lighthouse keeper's face is circled in black marker. This indicates that the man is significant. As the biologist finds out later, it is the lighthouse keeper who is really the Crawler. The photograph represents a life and time that used to be, and is forever changed. There is no going back.

The Heartbeat

When the biologist enters the tower's tunnels for the first time she hears a heartbeat emanating from deep within the structure. Later, she realizes that it was truly a heartbeat and not a figment of her imagination. Symbolically, the author is stating that the earth is alive, has a heartbeat, and that if one will stop to listen, it can be heard.



Settings

The City

The city is where all of the scientists come from. Though the biologist lives with her husband in the city, because of his job, she hates it. She would rather be in the natural world, and often she escapes and goes walking by herself to an empty and overgrown lot not too far from their home.

Area X

This is an area past the border that has been deemed unfit for human habitation after an undisclosed military research accident. The reader is never told completely about what form that catastrophe took, but it is evident that whatever it was that the military was involved with, it did involve genetic experimentation of some sort. That the experiment went wildly out of control is an understatement, and it would seem that the continued forays by expeditions are not to assess the viability of the area, but to continually check and see if people can survive, and just how far the border is being extended toward civilization. None of the expeditions, the biologist determines, were ever expected to return.

The Tower

The tower is a partially submerged structure that extends deeply into the earth. It is not listed on any of the maps, and yet all of the journals of previous expedition members state that they camped near the tower. Thus, the biologist concludes that the government knew about the tunnels, but did not care to tell new expeditions about it. The tower is where the Crawler lives and where the living writing is found on the wall.

The Lighthouse

The lighthouse is the only remaining manmade structure that is still fairly intact. The old homes in the area are dilapidated and uninhabitable. They are told in their mission briefings that if something should happen to just gather at the lighthouse.

The Ruins

The ruins are what remains of an old village of some sort. The biologist finds a tableau of figures seeming to sit on a couch watching tv in one of these ruins.



Themes and Motifs

Rationality

The theme of Rationality surfaces many times throughout the novel as each character, as scientists, try to employ logic and rationality to provide context and answers for what happens around them. However, it becomes apparent that without all of the information about what transpired in Area X so many years prior, the questions are not answerable by any rational means.

Additionally, the biologist, on numerous occasions states that she hears the tower breathing, hears a heartbeat, believes that they aren't entering a tower, a man-made structure, but rather a living breathing organism. This goes beyond any rational explanation, and yet, the biologist feels that it is true.

In this novel, rationality is shown to often be a crutch, one that cannot save them from their own destructive natures, nor from the forces that they face. Strict adherence to those old ways is what gets many of the expedition's members killed, as well as those expeditions who had come prior to the 12th.

Rationality is shown to be useful only to a point, and then one must use intuition, sense, and emotion to provide the rest of the answers to the questions. Many of the scientists are unable to make this transition, fight against it until the end, and as a result, die. Thus, it is shown that rationalizing something to the point of being ridiculous is a certain way to hasten one's own death.

In a larger context, then, the author is suggesting that as a species, mankind needs to stop making excuses and providing rationales that make it okay to continue doing the same things that have been done to the earth and the environment, because to do so would spell mankind's annihilation.

Isolation

The author makes use of many forms of isolation in this novel. First, there is the isolation that the protagonist, the biologist, has always felt, even since childhood. The biologist always felt more connected to the outdoors, to nature, than she ever had to human beings, let alone her parents who were neglectful and emotionless.

This emotional isolation follows the biologist into her adulthood and is a chief reason given for her not being able to complete assignments in the field. She would often go off on her own, not including the others of her team, and then when confronted would become belligerent.



The team is physically isolated from the main civilization by the borderlands. The borderlands are supposedly so horrific that all of the team members must be hypnotized before they can cross it.

The team is also technologically isolated. They are told from the onset that they will not be allowed to bring cell phones, watches, or any other sort of technology, such as a compass. They are told that this is to avoid contamination of the outside world by Area X.

Identity

The notion of identity is offered from the beginning as the biologist tells the reader that none of the members of the team knew the other's real name. In fact, once they had gone through training, and then entered Area X, none of them could really remember what their names had been anyway, and names seemed unimportant. However, this lack of a name also seems to have stripped them of their personal identity, too.

The author would seem to be suggesting that the only creature wrapped up in personal identity is mankind; that once in the wild, no other animal worries about itself in that manner. Once the biologist's perception begins to shift, she begins to understand that the ONLY identity is the one that connected her to all other living things, of which is was an integral part.

At one point in the novel, the biologist experiences the Crawler, and for a moment, in an almost trancelike state, the biologist feels that she's herself, and not herself, that she's the trees, the wind, the birds in the sky, everywhere at once, and nowhere at all. She just IS.

When the biologist reads her husband's journal she begins, too, to realize her connection to him in a way that she has not been able to before. This spurs her on to try and locate him or find out what truly happened to him. Her need for identity is gone, at this point.

Deception

The mission has been deceived from the beginning. One of the earlier indicators of this is the use of the black boxes that they wear on their belts. These were supposedly to indicate if there was danger. However, as the novel moves forward, the reader, and the biologist, learns that the black boxes were merely props to keep everyone calm. They had been lied to, the biologist concludes, about the dangerous nature of the mission.

They were also lied to about the actual depth and scope of the mission. It becomes clear to the biologist, especially after she returns from the lighthouse, that none of the missions, past, present, or future, were expected to survive. Why they were sent out to this place in the first place the biologist can't fathom.



The psychologist deceives them as well. She knows that they aren't supposed to survive the mission, and goes along with it. She also has done more to their psyches than they have been told, including the use of trigger phrases meant to make them obedient, compliant, and calm.

The fact that the tower isn't on any of the maps they were given, but was clearly something that the other teams experienced, also speaks to great deception. The psychologist, at one point, reinforces hypnotically, that all of the team members should still view the tower as being made of coquina and mud, which means that what they were seeing was not actually what was there.

Nature

One of the major themes of this novel is that of Nature as a force to be reckoned with. It is inferred that the military, engaging in some unknown genetic research, created a catastrophe that rendered Area X uninhabitable. Each mission team sent in is given the directive to take samples and make a map of the area, but in reality, they are being sent there to see if they can survive living there yet.

In essence, Nature is fighting back. This is evident in the tower's existence, itself. Whether this is a large creature that was the result of a genetic experiment, whether it is an organic space ship, or if it is some combination of human beings and another foreign entity, the reader is never told. What is clear, however, is that it is organic in nature and that it's primary goal is to assimilate everything organic back into the environment, to create a symbiotic relationship. The author would seem to be suggesting that this is a more natural state for people to live in, rather than living as parasites on the land.

Nature, as a nurturing hand, is also shown in the scenes concerning the biologist's childhood. Deprived of her parent's love or care, the child that the biologist was, turned to the outdoors where she found her 'friends' in the backyard pool turned pond. It is also shown that her continued return to Nature is what has kept her sane and given her a sense of peace her entire life.

Nature is also shown to be a terrible judge and jury when it comes to defining who should be a part of the natural order of things. Nature will win out, is the key point in all of the scenes where various members of the group face their own inner natures and their ability to view themselves as part of the greater living organism, or apart from it.

Perception

The notion of perception is challenged in this novel. At first, the belief is that the team is going into Area X to conduct field research. However, this perceptive and perception shifts as soon as the biologist inhales the spores and begins to see the truth of the situation. Because of her ability to see the truth without the hypnotic suggestions that have been introduced to everyone else, the biologist is able to perceive things that the others aren't able to.



For example, the first time everyone goes into the tunnels, it is the biologist who feels as if the tower is 'breathing' and that there is a 'living heartbeat' there. The others look at her as if she has lost her mind, but in reality it is their limited perceptions of the situation which keep their field of vision and understanding of the situation so narrow.

As the biologist is infected by the spores and begins to change, her perception of everything around her also shifts. She reports that nearly all of her senses are now heightened, and that without too much trouble she simply has to think of what it would be like to be one of the animals that she sees on the marshes, and suddenly she 'knows' what that is like. This ability to empathize and coexist on a level playing field with everything around her is what allows her to survive where the others fail.

The perception of most people, the author seems to be suggesting with this theme, is to believe only what they are told by the predominant and prevailing loudest voice in reference to the environment and the earth, in general. Everyone suffers from a type of delusion or hypnosis, and until more and more people begin to change their perception of how man truly fits into the living scheme of things on the earth, mankind has its own kind of writing on the wall.

Styles

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is told from the first person, limited perspective of a biologist who is the member of a five person, all female, team tasked with going into Area X and doing field research. However, the reader also receives information about the character by flashbacks to her childhood, and her interaction with her late husband. These earlier experiences shape her perspectives and thus offer the reader only the point of view as shown through this character's interior landscape, which may or many not be reliable at times.

Language and Meaning

The language and meaning are often occluded, such as the writing on the wall in the tower. At one point the author suggests that sometimes it isn't the meaning of something, but the use of the language all together, the act of communicating, that matters. The vocabulary used in this novel is upper level and complex, with scientific jargon utilized.

Structure

The book is structured in fairly linear fashion, with several flashbacks to give dimension to the main character. There are five sections, each with its own title, acting as a progression of assimilation or annihilation.



Quotes

Desolation tries to colonize you."

-- Biologist (chapter 1 paragraph 7)

Importance: This is the biologist's first initial thought when entering Area X. It is so abandoned and human habitation so thoroughly obliterated that it makes a person want to reach out and make friends with those near enough to be called friends. It brings out the primal instinct to find others.

I had the sense that they now saw the world through a kind of veil, that they spoke to their interviewers from across a vast distance in time and space."

-- Biologist (chapter 1 paragraph 45)

Importance: The biologist is relaying the experiences of the most recent returnees from the expedition prior to their expedition. The members all reported feeling the compulsion to return home, abandoning everything at their camp. All of them seemed calm, even those who were military experts and high energy personalities. It was as if the people who returned from Area X were changed inwardly.

I liked most of all pretending to be a biologist, and pretending often leads to becoming a reasonable facsimile of what you mimic, even if only from a distance."

-- Biologist (chapter 2 paragraph 27)

Importance: The biologist is reflecting upon the circumstances of her childhood and how even as a young girl she would pretend to be a scientist. As it turns out, that's what she became.

There are certain kinds of deaths that one should not be expected to relive, certain kinds of connections so deep that when they are broken you feel the snap of the link inside you."

-- Biologist (chapter 2 paragraph 10)

Importance: The biologist is remembering a childhood pool that had been neglected to the point that it became a thriving pond. Later, when her family left the home, she worried that the new owners would tear it down and turn it back into a pool. She says that she never went back to find out because she couldn't bare to see it.

Sometimes you get a sense of when the truth of things will not be revealed by microscopes."

-- Biologist (chapter 2 paragraph 33)

Importance: The biologist is frustrated by the writing on the walls and realizes as she's taking pictures to analyze later, that perhaps the understanding of them will not come from an academic understanding, but one of intuition.



This was really the only thing I discovered in him after his return: a deep and unending solitude, as if he had been granted a gift that he didn't know what to do with. A gift that was poison to him and eventually killed him."

-- Biologist (chapter 2 paragraph 14)

Importance: In this passage the biologist is recalling how her husband, who'd been on expedition 11, returned to her changed from the experience. This passage also illustrates one of the novel's themes: Isolation.

That's how the madness of the world tries to colonize you: from the outside in, forcing you to live in its reality."

-- Biologist (chapter 3 paragraph 12)

Importance: The biologist has just entered the lighthouse and found the large stack of journals. This directly demonstrates the theme of Perception. The biologist is beginning to believe, at this point, that she has been lied to.

It was inside me. Inside you. I was trying to get away. From what's inside me."

-- The Psychologist (chapter 4 paragraph 17)

Importance: When the biologist finds the psychologist she asks her former leader why she jumped over the railing. This is what the psychologist tells her. In essence, this supports the theme of Nature and how mankind tries to deny that they are a part of it, and it is a part of them.

You can either waste time worrying about a death that might not come or concentrate on what's left to you."

-- Biologist (chapter 4 paragraph 61)

Importance: She says this shortly after she's shot and killed the surveyor. It makes her introspective on the meaning of life and living it.

But soon enough I banished this nonsense; some questions will ruin you if you are denied the answer long enough."

-- Biologist (chapter 5 paragraph 19)

Importance: The biologist thinks this when she has finished reading her husband's journal. There are more questions that she has answers for and she realizes that to continue to ask them were going to drive her mad.

When we wake, it is because something, some event, some pinprick even, disturbs the edges of what we've taken as reality.

-- Biologist's Husband (chapter 5 paragraph 23)

Importance: This is a conversation that the biologist's husband had with her prior to leaving for Area X. He challenges her perception of reality, and this phrase acts as a foreshadowing of what will happen to both of them.



If I don't have real answers, it is because we still don't know what questions to ask. Our instruments are useless, our methodology broken, our motivations selfish."

-- Biologist (chapter 5 paragraph 61)

Importance: The biologist has transformed and realizes that what has happened in Area X is a reaping of the arrogance of mankind's delving into areas and mysteries he was not ready to learn.