

# **Authority: A Novel Study Guide**

**Authority: A Novel by Jeff VanderMeer**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Authority: A Novel Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Part One: 000-001.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Part One: 002.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part One: 003-004.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part Two: 005-006.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Part Two: 007-010.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Part Two: 011-015.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Part Two: 016-018.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Part Two: 000-00X.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Part Four.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">44</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">48</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">49</a>



# Plot Summary

Authority, the second book in the Southern Reach series by Jeff VanderMeer, begins with the protagonist, John Rodriguez arriving at the Southern Reach facility. This facility was developed thirty years prior when a manmade natural disaster created a contaminated area, known as Area X. This area was deemed unfit for human life, toxic. Expeditions were created and sent into the area to take samples and evaluate the conditions. No expedition had returned unscathed. Most returned as empty shells riddled with cancer, or babbling nonsense.

John Rodriguez was given the nickname Control, by his grandfather, Agent Jack Severance. As an agent for Central, his grandfather, as well as his mother, helped get Control his job with the organization. The reader learns that Control has had several assignments over the years, but that one job one wrong has haunted him for the last two decades. He allowed himself to become emotionally involved with one of the people he was supposed to be gathering intelligence from. As a result she was brutally killed. He was implicated and reprimanded by Central, then sent to another assignment. However, in each subsequent assignment he was scrutinized so heavily that invariably something was found to be wrong. Coming to Southern Reach is his last chance.

When he enters the facility he can tell that it is going to be an uphill battle. There is a pervasive rotting honey smell throughout the building, and the assistant director resents his presence. She acts as if the former director, a member of the last expedition, isn't dead and will be returning any day. He assures her that this is not true and that the former director, the team's psychologist on the expedition, has been declared dead. Grace, the assistant director, suggests that he not get too comfortable as she's going to make sure his stay is a brief one.

Entering his new office he is appalled at the rate of decay and the state of disorganization he encounters. There is a locked drawer in the former director's desk, which he manages to get open. He is astonished to see a perfectly thriving plant whose red roots are wrapped around a very dead mouse. He removes the plant and puts it into a pot with soil that he finds hidden in another part of the room. When he opens the door to a closet he sees written on the back wall the same phrase that had been encountered by various expeditions. It still doesn't make sense.

Control goes to interview the Biologist, who is one of three Expedition 12 survivors. He speaks with her, but she tells him that she is not the Biologist. She is Ghost Bird. He humors her and asks her about what she saw when she was in Area X. She says that she doesn't remember much at all (neither did any of the other returnees). All she knows is that she feels fine and wants to leave. Control consults his notes and sees that she was discovered returned and sitting in front of a brick wall in a vacant lot near her home. The other returnees were found at their homes. Before he can interview the other two he finds out that Grace has had them transferred to Central saying that she misunderstood him and thought he didn't want to debrief them. He is angry but decides to let it slide in essence of keeping the peace. Besides, of the three returnees it is only



Ghost Bird whose readings are normal and cancer free. What has made her different he wonders?

The reader finds out that Control's childhood was anything but idyllic. His mother, whom he refers to as a flash of light against a dark sky, was a workaholic and seldom there, and his father was a frustrated artist. His parents divorced when he was still living at home and it was determined that he should go to live with his father and his father's family. In an effort to fit in with his mother, he determined to follow in her footsteps, careerwise. This saddened his father, but he didn't fight him on it. His father had died of cancer many years previous to his transfer to Southern Reach.

Control meets Whitby, Cheney, and a Linguist. They all comment on the writing on the closet wall. Whitby and Cheney take Control out to the border so that he can view it for himself. They tell him that when the 'event' first took place and the border was evident that the scientists took 200 rabbits and tried to force them through the border. Those that were forced through died agonizing deaths, but some of the rabbits simply refused to go through, opting to turn on the scientists and fight their way free. Cheney tells Control that the ancestors of those white rabbits are still easy to see living in the swamps.

Each week Control is required to report to Voice, a disembodied, androgynous voice on the end of a digitally coded phone. Voice is caustic, snide, and unsympathetic to Control and the issues that he is having with Grace. Whenever Control asks for more background information on Southern Reach, Voice shuts him down. He goes to interview the Biologist one more time. She only remembers something from her childhood, and she's not positive that it actually ever happened. She reports that there is a 'brightness' inside of her that she can't quite explain. Control is intrigued, but doesn't want to press her any further. The next time they meet he arranges for her to be outside, where she seems to be more at ease.

She points out a beetle that is on the ground, acting strangely. She tells him that the beetle has been poisoned by an insecticide and that it is evidenced by the white moldy substance on its back. She says that the beetle will continue to run, thinking it is outrunning the problem, but in reality, the seeds for its own destruction are already inside of it. Eventually, it will suffocate. Control feels that there is some important message in this discourse, but he can't understand it fully.

The reader learns that aside from work, Control has little in the way of a life. He has a cat, named Chorry, whom he inherited from his father. The reader also learns that his father, in order to make a living, had started handcrafting original chess pieces. Some of these he has kept as a keepsake and he keeps them on his mantel. He takes a few of the other pieces and places them on his desk at work, adding small cameras onto them so that he can keep an eye on what is going on in his office when he isn't there.

Ironically enough, when he has a meeting with Grace the following morning, she accuses him of breaking into her office and rifling through her things. He denies it, but she is furious and storms off. He finds out later that she's had the Biologist sent away to



Central, and then it is his turn to be furious. He goes to speak with Whitby, and when crossing through the cafeteria hears a noise coming from the janitor's closet. Thinking to have a word with the custodian about the rotting honey smell throughout the facility, he opens the door to discover Whitby, covered in sweat, looking washed out and pale. He is speaking nonsense and Control manages to get him to go to sickbay to be checked out. Later, he began thinking about the encounter and decides to explore the closet, himself.

As he goes through the director's old notes and files, he begins to realize that most of the expedition members had been heavily conditioned and hypnotic suggestions employed to keep them sane and compliant while in Area X. Some of the same phrases, however, are the same phrases that he realizes that Voice uses when speaking with him. He now suspects that he has been conditioned in much the same way. He devises a way to confront Voice and break the hypnotic suggestions. He does so and in doing this calls into question the reason why he's really been sent to Southern Reach. He is also more aware of things that he had simply ignored before. One thing now becomes imperative to him. He needs to explore Whitby's closet, he needs to find out just how far Area X's border is advancing, and he needs to know what sort of faction or conspiracy is happening at Central.

Going into Whitby's closet he finds a trap door in the ceiling and climbs up. There an attic space up there and against the far wall is a fantastical mural. It looks as if Whitby spent decades working on it. It shows various expedition members shifting and changing into mutated creatures. He's even started one that looks like Control. He hears a noise behind him and turns to see Whitby...or what is left of him. Whitby is in the process of transforming. Terrified, Control flees the scene.

Control leaves and tries to make it back to his office but he finds that the walls have all turned to flesh. As he turns to go down another hallway he sees Grace standing with a smile on her face, looking toward the swamp. Emerging from the swamp is Cynthia, the former director. She is also changed. Control runs.

Control goes home where his mother is waiting for him on the doorstep. She tells him to calm down and attempts to use some of the hypnotic suggestions to make him compliant. He angrily brushes her aside and begins packing his suitcase. She warns him that everything she's done has been to protect him. He tells her to spare him the rhetoric that he doesn't believe anything she says anymore. She asks where he is going and he tells her Honduras. However, he purchases a second ticket under a different name...this one to Rock Bay.

Rock Bay is where he has a feeling the Biologist will run. Earlier in the week he'd learned that during her transfer the Biologist had managed to escape. Control, who has changed his name back to John, believes that she will return to somewhere near Rock Bay as this was one of her most cherished memories from when she was younger. He rents a boat and tries to avoid being followed. He eventually finds Ghost Bird, who threatens to shoot him. She is finally convinced of his sincerity when he tells her that he believes what she's been saying about not really being the Biologist. She also tells him



that the 'brightness' that was inside of her is gone. He asks what happened to it, and she says that it exited her body and went into a hole. She thinks that it is another way in to Area X.

Meanwhile, agents from Central have zeroed in on their whereabouts. Ghost Bird (Biologist) tells him that she would rather die than be confined again. Before he can stop her, she jumps into the hole. Looking out at the gathering agents, he realizes that he really has no choice, either, and he jumps.



# Part One: 000-001

## Summary

000

In this very short preamble, the reader is thrust into Control's dreams, where he is at the beach, and is at once a part, and separate, from the wind, waves, and seagulls.

001

Control is the newly appointed director of the Southern Reach Facility, whose task it is to study Area X, a place of great manmade ecological disaster. This is a misnomer for the genetic FUBAR that happened decades previously. There was a barrier that prevented the 'residents' of Area X from moving into the greater world, but the barrier has come down. Control is standing with Grace, the former director, now assistant director, to debrief her about Expedition 12 and their only remaining members. Control's real name is John Rodriguez, but he demands that everyone call him Control. Grace, when he informs her of this, tells him that her new name would be Patience.

The three returnees had not returned to the facility upon exit from Area X. The Surveyor had been found on her home patio, in a chair. The Anthropologist had simply showed up at her husband's medical practice. And the Biologist had been found simply staring at a brick wall in an empty, overgrown lot near her house. None of them had any recollection of how they'd returned, by what route, or what had happened to the Psychologist that had been with them. Since their return, all of their hair had been shaved off, generic jumpsuits issued, so that, at least to Control, all of them looked anonymous and synonymous.

He determines to interview the Biologist first. Grace argues that he should interview them all. Control tears the paper files in front of her, which causes Grace to recoil in horror. Satisfied with her reaction, since Grace has made it clear from day one that she detests him, Control observes her to see if he's made his point. He tells her to send all by the Biologist back to their quarters. Seething, Grace leaves the observation room to do as he's asked.

Control is fascinated by the Biologist. During her interview prior to the expedition, she'd only uttered a sum total of 753 words, as compared to the others who ranged into the multiple of thousands. Why had the other two returnees gone to places where they had emotional attachment, but not the Biologist, choosing instead to sit in an empty lot? Interesting still, is the fact that upon all of the expedition members' return, none of them had uttered more than approximately 700 words, which was odd for the other two women, but was just about average for the Biologist.

Before interviewing the Biologist, he looks over her file. All of the expedition members had been given intense military crash courses, had endured physical conditioning, and



were made pliant to hypnotic suggestions which the psychologist would use to induce certain behaviors and effects. He enters the interrogation room where she's already seated waiting on him. He asks her name and she says, "Call me Ghost Bird."

He interrogates her but finds her responses puzzling. He consults his files and sees that, compared to most human beings, the level of toxins in her system are lower. In fact, she's healthier now than when she went into Area X, which is something different from previous expeditions. She refuses to accept his statement that she is 'disoriented'. He reads her an earlier statement that she made about thistles, but she only shrugs and doesn't give him anything more on that.

## Analysis

In these initial sections the themes of Identity and Isolation are touched upon. The theme of Identity is introduced in the initial 000 section, where John Rodriguez demands that everyone at Southern Reach facility call him Control, instead of his real name. This is a nickname that his grandfather gave him and it makes him feel powerful and in 'control'. It is clear that everyone finds the nickname dictatorial, and Grace, especially, openly detests him. From internal musings, the reader realizes that Control, has chosen to use this name because most of his life he has felt marginalized in comparison to the rest of his family. He refers to his mother as a streak of light against the dark sky, and in short, feels that he never quite measures up, or can reach the same heights as she has in the military. His maternal grandfather has made him feel the same, whereas his actual father, who was an artist, constantly strove to make him perceive things differently. Caught between these two warring and disparate factions, John simply adopted a name that he could build a persona around: Control.

Likewise, the Biologist who has returned, no longer acknowledges her own real name but prefers to be called Ghost Bird. This is a direct reference to the first book. This was a nickname that her late husband gave her, a name that she cherished. It was also very appropriate given her childhood history of neglect. They found her, upon her return, in an abandoned lot, staring at a brick wall. However, based on the first book, this was exactly a spot of emotional significance for her, because as a child, this place was her whole world, a place where she would go to forget and escape the real world of impoverished fathers, and distant mothers.

What makes the Biologist different, besides the fact that she doesn't speak many words, is the fact that she is, and has been in her past pre-expedition life, perfectly happy with isolation, preferring it, even. Thus, she is not disoriented upon her return, and her health is better than it was prior to the expedition. What the author is suggesting is that isolation, when viewed through a different lens, is not a bad thing, but may have restorative effects.

The significance of ripping the files up in front of Grace served to show and demonstrate that Control was, in fact, in control, and the real director. It is apparent that Grace dislikes John, and that she is going to do whatever she can do, covertly, to make his





work there difficult. When he first arrived she tried to send him to a different part of the facility to find his office. Control figures it was because she couldn't stand seeing him in the former director's office, which he found all on his own. When she'd come in to remove the former director's things, he wouldn't let her. He is constantly having to remind Grace that she is not in charge, nor will she have as much say or sway over procedures as she once did. It is truly a battle of the wills.

It is also significant that Control views his mother as a flash of light against a dark sky. This indicates that his mother was never in his life for very long, that she was brilliant, talented, and distant. This has shaped him in many ways, some which he acknowledges and others that he prefers to reject.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the theme of Identity.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the theme of Isolation.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What makes the Biologist infinitely more interesting to Control than the other returnees?

## **Vocabulary**

smudged, replicated, deflection, stewardship, ascension, animosity, contemplate, diminishment, suffused, halfheartedly, generic, inexplicable, restoration, postscript, defiant, surged



## Part One: 002

### Summary

Control is remembering his father's last words to him. He'd told him that he only needed to close his eyes to remember him. Control reflects on the fact that these days, when he closes his eyes, all he gets is a sense of falling and the memory of past failed assignments. He opens his eyes, now, to look out over the compound that comprised the large U-shape of the Southern Reach facility. He states that a U shape is a terrible shape, as it represents something not completed...undone.

Beyond the facility was wilderness, and shortly beyond that, Area X, where people went and didn't (for the most part) come back. He wonders just how much has been divulged to the public, to him and those administering the project, and how much as been withheld. He suspects that quite a lot has been suppressed over the years. It makes him itch to know all the more. Grace's disdain for him is palpable. She tells him that when he's been there as long as they have, that he will also adopt a fatalistic view of the endeavors thus far. This disturbs and irritates Control. He likes to imagine himself flying free above the mire of whatever mess he's been sent in to 'fix'. He finds that already his 'wings' are mired in goo.

He takes advantage of a break between tours and interrogations to explore the old director's office (now his office). He finds a small grotto behind some bookshelves where some photos are hung. One is of a lighthouse, taken in the 1880s and shows a young girl with two men standing in front of it. The other is a watercolor showing reeds by the water, and then another was a color photograph of the lighthouse, beacon lit up. There was a drawer in the desk that was locked, and he can't find the key, but something inside of it has begun to stink. Everywhere he looks there are piles of hardcopy files, bits of paper, maps taped at odd angles, everything to suggest that the former director had gone feral. He turns his mind to his original task: finding surveillance bugs in his office. He finds nearly 22 bugs, in all, but puzzling him is the fact that none of them are from the same time era. Most of them had been decommissioned for decades, and he's sure that most of them weren't even functional. Instead of throwing them away, he sweeps them into a drawer and leaves to go to the science wing.

A scientist named Whitby shows up to give him a tour. Control asks him if he knew any of the members from Expedition 12, especially the Biologist. Whitby says he 'knew' them to recognize them, but didn't 'know' them as colleagues or friends. Still, he tells Control, the Biologist was always different, as if the work wasn't what really mattered to her, as if she were seeing something else, past the work assigned. He also tells him that no one but the former director had wanted the Biologist to go along on the expedition.



## Analysis

The theme of Decay is demonstrated in this section. First, most notably, Control continues to smell a rotting smell. He describes it as rotting plant matter, and later he likens the smell to rancid honey. He smells it the strongest in the science wing, and when he is exploring his new office, in particular a locked drawer. This would seem to indicate that something, or some concept, is old, decaying, and rotting from within. This would also seem to suggest and give rise to the other theme, which is that of Nature.

Just as in the first novel, Nature is a very focused and prevalent theme. The smell of rotting plant material suggests that Nature is still fighting back, and will, eventually win. The cancer that is in each returnee, with the exception of the Biologist, also indicates that those people carried the seeds of their own destruction with them because of their inability to recognize their place in the scope of Nature. The Biologist, however, has always been a child of Nature, from her earliest memories, and thus, she does not have cancer. Symbolically, she has been found acceptable by Area X.

It is interesting to note that some objects return from the first book, most notably pictures of the lighthouse, the three people standing in front of the lighthouse, and a picture of the reeds by the water. In the first book, the lighthouse was the scene of many revealing truths about the actual nature of the experiments, as well as offering the reason that modern tech could never be allowed in there. Control does not know it, but the former director is helping him through her gathering and hoarding of materials. Making certain that nothing was digitized, she has preserved the information since it is clear that the government doesn't want the real answers to Area X known.

Deception as a theme is also introduced. It is clear that those in authority over Control, have neglected to share certain pieces of information with him that would have been vital to his success. That he's been able to obtain the answers anyway shows that he has a curious and driven mind to understand things. He knows that the expedition members who were sent into Area X were deceived as far as what they might encounter, which is why they had such rigorous training. But Control has read the original reports and knows that previous expeditions had met with untold horrors.

Whitby, a new character, is introduced, and would seem to fulfill the role of giving Control more information and the reader insight into how isolated the workers at the facility are. The theme of Isolation is demonstrated when Whitby tells him that he likes it well enough at the center, which in fact, Control knows that Whitby has routinely asked for a transfer each month for the last ten years, up until the last year or so, however. Control figures he had just grown too tired to ask anymore. Everyone around Control seems resigned to some sort of fate.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Isolation.



## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Decay.

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the author's theme about Nature.

## Vocabulary

decline, precipitous, thwarting, intermittent, flatlined, initiative, desperation, embedded, backwater, hazarding, cantilevered, flaccid



# Part One: 003-004

## Summary

003

After his meeting with Whitby, Control returns to his new office, sweeps it for bugs one more time, then settles in to make his required phone report to the Voice. He muses that he doesn't even know where the Voice is calling from, what the Voice's gender or age is, and whether or not Voice is observing him clandestinely or not. He finds it disturbing and irritating. His own mother had warned him that Voice had the power to remove him from his current position without prior approval from anyone. The Voice is always modulated, electronic, so that there would be no chance of obtaining any information about him or her.

He reports to the Voice that his meeting with the science division was not that informative. He cloaks his report in vagueness, but in reality, he'd been very disappointed with his initial overview of the area. All of the scientists seem demoralized, disheartened, as if they were all going through the motions, but had no hope of arriving anywhere meaningful. He reports that they watched the infamous 'rabbit film'. In this film about 200 white rabbits were herded toward the border of Area X. As the rabbits neared the border, they rebelled, screamed, refused to go any farther. Still, the scientists hadn't given them a choice and those that crossed the threshold simply disappeared. Vanished. And even the cameras that had been strapped to some of them, disappeared. The rabbits that didn't cross the threshold, rebelled and turned in quite un-rabbitlike fashion and attacked the scientists. Clearly, they were not going to cross the line. What he doesn't tell Voice is that most of the scientists were now certain that the man-made toxins were no longer present in Area X, and that they weren't all together certain whether it should be 'fought' any more. The Voice grows impatient from the non-information and warns Control that he needs to have something more for him next time, or else.

Control also hadn't mentioned that one of the scientists had suggested that the infamous border wasn't being produced by Area X, itself, but was generated from elsewhere. When Event One happened, which was the creation of Area X, quite likely, they reasoned, Event Two happened to create the border. But, neither are related. Control had asked about the one entrance that they'd all been using for years. They all looked baffled and told him that they had no idea how it got there, only that it simply 'appeared' one day. It occurs to Control that perhaps the opening wasn't to let them in, but was designed to let something out.

004

The reader is introduced to the town of Hedley, which is away from Southern Reach, but not too distant from one of the borders to Area X. As a teenager, he and his father had



lived near there and had often come into Hedley for entertainment and distraction. He'd also come into Hedley with his buddies in high school and tried to engage in nefarious activities, most of which always simply ended with a soda and loud music. The house he is currently living in belonged to his father, and they used to live there at one point before they left. His father's old cat, Chorry, has moved with him, and it is the one thing that he seems to be sentimental about.

The reader learns that there have been a long string of girlfriends, none of whom he's felt any special or emotional attachment to. He decides to go for a run by the river and while out jogging considers all of the options, and all of the circumstances that have brought him back to Hedley. The reader also learns that being assigned to Southern Reach has been considered his 'last chance'. What that 'last chance' entails, the reader is not told. He briefly entertains taking his small amount of worldly goods, packing the car, crating Chorry, and just leaving. Now. Before something goes wrong. As he jogs back up his graveled driveway, he realizes that in the morning he will get up and he will return to the facility called Southern Reach.

## Analysis

In these two chapters the reader gains a lot of back story on many of the characters, most notably, Control (John Rodriguez). The reader also learns more about the history of the facility. Apparently, there were at one time, hundreds of scientists that worked at Southern Reach, but now, there are less than a hundred still employed, and those who remain are despondent at best. Whitby, the lead scientist, offers the most information to Control, but in the end, is still just a part of the cog. It is he that suggests that Southern Reach shouldn't be fighting against Area X, but welcoming it, working with it, trying to understand it instead of trying to control or manipulate it. This demonstrates the author's theme of Nature. Area X represents the primal wilderness, raw nature, nature fighting back and showing its strength. There are suggestions, some of them by Control, that the entities encountered within Area X are extraterrestrial, but no one wants to begin to entertain that notion.

From the beginning, and given some of the backstory on Control, it is evident that his mind does not function on the same level as many others. This has made him a bit of an outsider most of his life. Even his own parents and grandfather didn't understand or appreciate him. Everyone, with the exception of his father, wanted him to be what they thought he should be, but not what he knew he should be. But, being a pleaser by nature, he'd followed in his mother and grandfather's footsteps and had become an agent. However, deep inside, he knows, and fears, that he may be a frustrated artist like his father.

The significance of the white rabbits dying in some of the early experiments with the border is as interesting as it is graphic. White rabbits are developed to be used primarily in animal research; in essence, Nature manipulated for man's use. In this instance, these rabbits know that they will cease to exist once they enter Area X, and they are terrified. They also do something that is out of character for rabbits...they attack the



scientists who are trying to make them cross the border. This again demonstrates the theme of Nature, and that when pushed too far, Nature will fight back. It also seems to be suggesting that eventually every sort of tampering with Nature comes with a price.

Lastly, the theme of Isolation is demonstrated in several instances. First, Area X, itself, is isolated from the rest of the world. It is an enigma apart from other areas. Likewise, Control is isolated by his position, personality, and past. Lastly, isolation occurs and is reinforced by the introduction of the character known only as Voice. As a disembodied voice on the phone, Control is left without mental purchase and can't determine who he is speaking to and what their agenda is. He is isolated even from those that sent him there. Seeing his past interactions with his mother, and sometimes his grandfather, it is apparent that isolation is nothing new for Control, and that the fact that he's adopted the nickname Control indicates that he has a need to have some 'control' over his life, information, and the world around him.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the White Rabbit Experiment and what was learned from it.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the theme of Nature.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the theme of Isolation.

## **Vocabulary**

precise, circumspection, wring, chitter, ad nauseum, redoubt, installations, chiseling, prioritize, crescendo, berms, flotsam, excruciation, plaintive



## Part Two: 005-006

### Summary

005

Control has an existential moment when he helps a business woman remove an ant from the back of her neck. Afterwards, when he releases the ant back into the grass beside the parking lot, he pauses to wonder if, where Area X is concerned, he is the woman, with no idea where the ant is, or is he the ant who is unaware that it is on the woman's neck?

He doesn't get the answer to his question, so he goes to his office and spends the first part of his morning looking for the key to unlock the smelly desk drawer. Finally he finds it, and sits there before opening it, observing the stain on the bottom left corner of the outside of it. He opens the drawer to find a plant growing there. It is unlike anything he's ever seen. The leaves are a luminous green with a red series of roots. Disgustedly, he sees that the roots are wrapped around the desiccated brown mouse. He can also tell that someone had been coming in regularly to dump water on it. The file folders underneath it attest to the water damage.

There is an old cell phone lying next to the mouse. He takes the phone out, uses some other files to lift the dead mouse out, then relocates the plant to an actual empty pot that he finds in the corner of the room under some other files. The last thing he wants to do is to finally explore the door that leads to nowhere in the room. He goes to the door, opens it, looks, then quickly closes it again.

006

The reader learns that Control had found the same writing as the expedition found, scrawled on the interior wall of the room that went to nowhere in his office. It said: "Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead..." He wonders if it is referencing the plant that he retrieved from the drawer. He goes to interrogate the Biologist again, but decides to take her file and the potted plant with him. He pauses and pulls the mouse out of the trash and puts it in the pot before going into the interrogation room. Though he tries to get her to give him more information about her time in Area X, she is adamant that she remembers very little. Control knows that she's holding something back; there's something in the way she looks at him. He asks her what she makes of the plant and the mouse and she says that unless she gets a computer and the books that she's asking about, he knows what he can do with his mouse and his plant. He ends the interrogation.





## Analysis

In this section, the reader experiences both the theme of Isolation and that of Nature, once again. When Control assists the woman in the parking lot, he has a moment where his perspective shifts. He begins to wonder that mankind is like the woman, totally unaware of where the ant is (Nature or Area X), or if mankind is like the ant, completely oblivious to the fact that there is a woman (Nature) at all. For a moment he is able to see the disconnect between mankind and nature and it unnerves him; a feeling that haunts him throughout the rest of his day.

This feeling is just intensified when he reads the scribbles on the interior wall in the room to nowhere in his office. When he'd opened the door, there on the facing wall was the exact writing that had been in the tower in Area X in book one. The 'message' or 'passage' seems to be a combination of religious banter, apocalyptic warnings, and environmentalist ravings.

Symbolically, finding the key and unlocking the desk draw illustrates his desire to open things, to find the truth. He sees the 'truth' staring out at him in the form of the plant, though he doesn't know it. He goes further by removing the plant from the dark confines of the drawer, a spot that the plant should not have been growing in at all, indicates his desire to embrace whatever it is that he finds. The roots wrapped around the mouse would seem to indicate that the plant is cannibalistic, but it doesn't seem to faze Control at all. He finds it merely fascinating.

The theme of Isolation comes from the realization by Control that not only is he alone within the confines of his own thoughts, but so too, is Ghost Bird (the Biologist). He would like to think that she is jumbled up in her mind, that she's as mental as most of them when they arrive, but he knows that this is not true. She's different somehow from the rest. He just can't figure out how. It frustrates him.

### Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Isolation.

### Discussion Question 2

What existential revelation does Control have outside the diner, while in the parking lot dealing with the ant on the woman's neck?

### Discussion Question 3

Discuss what the discovery of the plant suggests.



## Vocabulary

devolution, abyss, monstrous, obliterated, militias, murmur, sloth-like, finicky, lunatics, ethereal, manifested, subjugation, meticulously



## Part Two: 007-010

### Summary

007

Control asks Grace, a Linguist, and Whitby to his office. He seats them at a cramped table in front of the small door in his office and reveals the writing on the wall. He asks them what they make of it. Before asking them into the office he'd made sure to readjust the thermostat and now, he notes gleefully, the three workers were beginning to sweat profusely. Whitby says that it was left up there as a memorial to the former director. Grace says that it is not a memorial because the director is not dead. The other two shush her, giving her dirty looks. Control ignores this and goes on with another line of questioning. He asks the linguist what it means.

She states that general consensus places the text as belonging to the former lighthouse keeper, Saul Evans. However, she goes on to state that the phrases themselves, which analyzed strictly on their own, most likely only give half of the meaning. This is because the material used to produce the phrases in the first place were organic in nature, and thus, part of the message is being delivered in some other way that, for now, they don't understand.

008

Control goes on a tour near the border with Cheney, another one of the scientists, and Whitby. As they make their way there, Control realizes that though they called the last expedition the 12th, there had been, in fact, 38 expeditions. For some reason, most of it psychological, he suspected, they had started calling them lower numbers. About the 5th expedition administrators had started lying to the participants. Cheney suggests that it is very difficult for a scientist to study anything that didn't want to be studied.

009

Control thinks about his meeting with Grace, Whitby, and the linguist earlier. He'd finally asked them about the plant and the mouse, just to see what their reactions would be. Grace finally offered the only answer he would get. The former director had been trying to kill the plant, but couldn't find any way possible to make it die, including keeping it out of and away from sunlight. There had been attempts at burning it, introducing disease, cutting, and even verbal abuse. But still, the plant survived. A sample had been sent to Central, but no one new what had become of that. Control's musings come to an end as they near the border. To Control's surprise, there are white rabbits to be seen hopping around near the water's edge. He's told that those are the descendants of the rabbits that managed to avoid being forced over the border.

They reach the border entrance and Control is mesmerized by it. Whitby warns him that to stare at the light of the border entrance would be dangerous, as it has the ability to



lure one to walk through the door. Whitby states that other expeditions would have been under hypnosis in order to enter the border, with only the leader of each expedition remaining fully aware. Reports from those leaders stated that they had felt confined and expanded all at the same time, like walking through an aquarium tunnel at some major theme park. Control relies on the fact that the others will pull him back should he become 'ensnared' by the light at the entrance. When he looks at it, he understands the allure, even if he doesn't understand why. He is very aware that while staring at the light he feels connected to everything, and in the end, feels both small and insignificant, as well as powerful and boundless.

010

Control sends his potted plant to the samples lab, discards the mouse, but can't help thinking that the former director kept them in her drawer as a type of talisman to ward off danger. He shrugs this off as superstition, but can't seem to shake the feeling nonetheless. He calls Voice to report on the new findings. While he is doing so he notices that there is a squashed mosquito on the front window of his car, which is where he's making the phone call from. It bothers him because he knows it wasn't there in the morning, and he does not recall having smashed one. He has the eerie feeling that someone may have been searching for something in his car.

## Analysis

In these chapters it is clear that the more 'truths' Control uncovers the more questions surface. Additionally, it is also clear that the notion of 'identity' is being challenged as well. Control 'thinks' he knows who everyone is, what their roles are, but as the chapters continue, and Control asks more questions, it is clear that nothing is as it seems. Thus the theme of Identity is offered, once again, throughout these chapters.

The theme of Perception is also offered in these sections. First, there is the notion that some of the rabbits that escaped the forced crossing are still alive, or their descendants are. To Control, upon observing the rabbits, these animals are larger, more feral looking, and they are as unnatural to the landscape as they are in their Jeep. But, he asks himself silently, what constitutes normal anymore?

It is interesting to note that Perception is also introduced in the scene where the scientists are explaining what other expedition leaders (the ones that managed to return) reported in regards to their crossing over the border. They reported that they felt themselves expanded, and at once, tiny and insignificant. Their perceptions were altered so that they were aware of their separateness from that around them, as well as their connection to it. This also alludes to the major theme of the novel, which is that of Nature.

The significance of the Potted Plant appears in these chapters. Literally, he has removed the plant from the dark, where the former director was trying to kill it, and has placed it into a pot where it can grow. He has then had it sent to the samples lab to be



with the rest of the collections. Control is shown to be different in this regard in that he does not seek to destroy the plant, but rather seeks to understand it. This is twice that the author has shown that Control is compassionate towards Nature, and respectful. The first instance was where he refused to smash the ant on the woman's neck, instead rescuing it from the woman and setting it free in the grass.

Additionally, something is going on, though both the reader and Control have no idea what it is. Control is losing small fragments of time. The smashed mosquito on the windshield is the first of many instances where something has occurred and he can't remember doing them. It is all together possible that someone else is doing these things, but Control does not believe so.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the symbolism of the Potted Plant.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the theme of Perception.

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is Control different from the former Director?

## **Vocabulary**

excoriation, swiveling, inexplicable, phantasmagoria, incantations, ziggurats, detonator, carapace, ubiquitous, pratfalls, pantomimed, unfurling, intensified, conspicuously



## Part Two: 011-015

### Summary

011

Back at home Control feeds the cat, then kicks back to reflect on the weirdness that had been his day. The fact that the director most likely made one or more unsanctioned trips across the border did not set well with him. He opens his briefcase to retrieve some files and finds three cell phones in there instead of the two that he normally carries. It is the old nonfunctioning phone from the director's desk. How had it gotten in there? The last he'd seen of it, Grace had confiscated it. Surely she had not returned it.

012

As a point of matter, the next day in his office, Control takes a paintbrush and paints over the words scrawled on the inside of the closet/door to nowhere. It took nearly three coats, but most of it was finally erased. The only thing he was not able to get rid of was the height chart marks. For some reason the former director had been measuring herself. If the marks truly were measurements of her height, then the former director had grown a quarter inch over a period of time.

On his desk Control places some of his father's chess pieces, to take the place of the original potted plant and dead mouse. He pauses to remember how he and his father had giggled incessantly as many of the pieces had been named after family members. When his father was dying from cancer, chess was all they had left. Now, he fitted some of the pieces with a nano camera, so that he could record anyone's presence in his room when he wasn't there. Satisfied that he was thusly fortified, he sits back to read through some of the former director's notes.

There are literally piles of them, so he sets to the task of sorting them into manageable piles by topic. Utilizing the space on the floor, in a few hours he has managed to at least categorize most of the files, scribbling, receipts, and other pieces of paper and material that the director jotted notes down on. The former director's story began to emerge to Control.

The former director had been trained as a psychologist, but she'd also been a lover of nature. She'd vied for the post that she'd taken and had beaten out many other qualified people. She had no ties, resided in Bleakersville (fifteen minutes from Southern Reach), and most often ate alone. Control sits down in front of the most relevant pile and opens up a notebook that is one of the most recent (dated 18 months earlier). She mentions that the Surveyor that she'd assigned for the 12th expedition was very solid and a good foil to the others. Another note indicates that the Linguist that had been chosen for the expedition had left the group at border prep and that the former director had actually been glad to have lost her. The Anthropologist the director mentioned by first name,



which shocks Control. Her name was Hildi and the director states that Hildi will be on board with things. A theory emerges. Control believes, based on what he's reading in the files, that the director had determined that no outside help or consensus would be forthcoming and that she needed to break with protocol in order to reach her objectives. Just what those objectives might have been, however, Control can't fathom.

013

Control goes to meet with Grace to discuss his preliminary recommendations for getting the facility back on track. After giving them a cursory look she throws the papers back to him over her desk. She leans forward and tells him that she'll get right on the changes, but that most things happened excruciatingly slow at the facility (even more so, she says, when morale is low). She hands him a box filled with surveillance bugs that she's found in her office and accuses him of placing them in there. She also accused him of being in her office and rifling through her files. He denies it and resents being placed on the defensive. He then counters with the fact that she, or someone, has done the same thing to him, and wonders out loud why she put the director's phone in his briefcase. It is her turn to be shocked and astounded. Without waiting for anything more, furious, Control leaves the room.

014

The next day Control has scheduled to interview the Biologist again, but he receives a call from the infirmary that she isn't feeling well and can't make the meeting. Control decides to go to the Biologist instead. As he goes down the hallway before reaching the infirmary he sees rows and rows of pictures of happy expedition members. The captions suggest that the pictures were taken after the members' return from their outings, but Control knows better.

The interview takes place with Ghost Bird lying on her side on her bed, asking and answering questions. Ghost Bird states that she will answer questions if he will answer questions that she poses. He agrees. She asks what he does on his off time, what his mother does, and other personal questions. He answers them but is confused about her line of questions. She, in turn, tells him about the lighthouse, finding the pictures, journals, and that all she really has in the way of memories are flashes and bits of memory. Nothing concrete at all. He leaves frustrated, but at least glad that she admitted that she had some memories.

015

Control goes back to his office and resumes going through the director's files. He finds pictures of Saul Evans and some backstory on the lighthouse keeper. He'd been a preacher up north, but stated that he felt 'called' to come to the lighthouse to be its keeper. He was there for two years before the event took place and was never seen after that.

Cheney comes into Control's office hours later. Control asks him about another director, several directors before, named Lowry. Cheney is evasive and says that Lowry was



overrated as a leader, got the spot because he was a hero. Cheney doesn't offer any more useful information and Control dismisses him. Why Cheney had come to his office in the first place, Control can't fathom.

Control goes for a walk and finds himself crossing through the cafeteria. As he reaches the far side he hears noises from inside of the Janitor's closet. Hoping to get some better cleaning supplies and to berate the man and his cohorts for not doing a better job, he opens the door. Whitby, shriveled and disheveled, disoriented, and dazed springs out at him. He grabs Control, pulls him into the closet, and shuts the door.

Nervously he tells Control that he needs to stay in there with him. He begins ranting about parallel universes and the fact that in this universe they haven't figured out what the problem is in Area X. What is the difference, he wonders panicked. Control thinks that quite likely Whitby is having a nervous breakdown. He turns to leave but Whitby asks him if he'd watched the video from Expedition 1. Control tells him that it is scheduled for tomorrow, then quickly leaves. He is more upset by the encounter than he is willing to admit.

As he's getting ready to leave for the day, Voice calls. He had thought that maybe Voice would call, so he'd scribbled down some notes in case Voice should call. He uses his notes to answer and report, and just as he's about to hang up Voice tells him to stabilize things, that paralysis was not an option, and that he needed to remain cogent. As he hangs up he realizes that he feels oddly stabilized despite everything that has happened. With horror he realizes that the post hypnotic suggestions that the director had been using on expedition members, has just been used on him....by Voice.

## Analysis

There are some interesting oddities that occur in these chapters. For example, why was the former director measuring herself? What had made her grow a quarter inch? Why had she felt confident enough to cross the border on her own on decidedly numerous occasions? Learning more about Saul Evans just adds to the list of oddities. If he were responsible for the diatribe on the tunnel walls, then what had he meant? What context could be offered for deciphering it all?

The chess pieces on Control's desk are symbolic and significant in that they belonged to his father. His father created them, and the chess pieces, themselves, were named after family members. That they were a source of connection and joy between himself and his father suggests that Control has them on his desk as a reminder of his father, of his connection with another human being, and as a type of protection. He literally uses them to survey the room when he is not there.

The theme of Deception is very prevalent in these chapters, especially the pictures on the walls depicting happy expedition members, supposedly post expedition, but Control knows was pre-expedition. In many of those pictures, most of the members did not make it home. Later, he has an encounter with Whitby who has clearly suffered some





sort of psychotic break. Controls' interview with the Biologist had not gone well, either, with him gaining little-to-no new knowledge about her, except that she did have memories that she so far has not been willing to share with him.

The Voice's use of hypnotic suggestion at the end of this section suggests that perception has been altered, and that for some reason, he is being manipulated by those above him. For what purpose, he wonders. Being aware of the manipulation, he realizes, has now freed him from its power.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Ghost Bird's interaction with Control. What did each gain from the interview?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why did Control feel the need to place chess pieces on his desk?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the theme of Perception.

## **Vocabulary**

illusion, expressionism, zest, blunt, dictate, membranes, mundane, simultaneous, extraction, retaliation, spasmodic, inkling, choreographed, emaciated, extricate



## Part Two: 016-018

### Summary

016

First on his agenda the next day is to watch the video of the first expedition. He notices as he gets out of his car to go into work that the smashed mosquito has begun to form a white moss on the corner of her window. Disgusted, he wipes it off with a tissue. He realizes as he sits down to view the video that the footage itself was such a high security clearance that most likely only a handful of people at Southern Reach had ever viewed it. Grace has joined him, but only to cue up the ancient video machine. She tells him that she will return in an hour's time and if he is not finished by then, she will turn off the projector. She seems nervous and tells him as she stops at the door that she will be waiting in the hallway should he decide that he is finished early.

He is finished early. After viewing the devolution of the first expedition, with very little explanation for the rising panic that he'd felt, the nausea he was still experiencing, he knocks on the door and asks to be let out. Grace lets him out and seems almost apologetic, compassionate, even. She offers him her arm to steady himself but he shrugs her off. He believes that her compassion will come at a price. He makes it through the cafeteria but on the edge is overcome with such a wave of vertigo that he sinks to his knees. He sits there for a moment trying to get a grip. After a moment or two, he forces himself to stand and he focuses on the meeting he is to have with Ghost Bird.

Ghost Bird looks very ill to him, still, when he goes into the room. She looks as if she has been crying and inwardly Control feels the same way. He asks her what she wants to talk about, for a change. She says that she is not the Biologist, that Control should go talk to the Biologist. Snapped out of his own lethargy, he asks her who she is, then. She refuses to answer and asks him what it is that he really wants. He tells her nothing, gathers the scattered papers from her tirade, and leaves.

017

Control makes his way to what he's been told is a usual weekly meeting. They have all agreed to meet in the cafeteria. Whitby, Cheney, Grace, and himself are in attendance. However, Grace has an agenda. She blindsides Control with his most devastating mistake while working for Central. However, he's had to justify his mistake and explain himself so much over the last 17 years since the mistake that he's very practiced in speaking about it. He removes the element of surprise from her, tells the story, controls the direction and tone of the disclosure, and makes Grace look like a bully. Whitby and Cheney both excuse themselves when the fireworks start, so that at the end of the story, it is only Grace and Control.



She's basically accused him of infiltrating their organization in order to betray any or all of them, and that he has been proven to be unethical and ruthless. Control finds himself wishing that he were just that and he would be able to send Grace packing. Instead he tells her that she will never be director of the facility and that she'd best make her peace with that. He leaves, goes to the restroom, and throws up.

018

As Control pulls himself together in the bathroom stall, he realizes that Cheney is just outside. Cheney asks if he's okay and Control waves him away. Control's phone rings. It is Voice asking for a report. Control feels himself relax as soon as Voice asks him: Is your house in order? Though his body responds, Control realizes that this must be another hypnotic suggestion. Voice reprimands him severely and tells him to continue to collect data and question the Biologist. Nothing else matters. Voice swears at him, which is something new.

Control has the Biologist brought outdoors to one of the small areas near a holding pond. She is thrilled to be outside again. While they are standing there, she nudges a beetle with her foot. It is acting erratically. She asks Control if he knows why the beetle is acting as it is. He tells her that he doesn't. She states that it is because it has been poisoned with insecticide. She points out the foam on its back. She tells him that it disorients them as it kills them. They can't breathe, and it panics them. In the end, they keep trying to run away from something is actually already inside of them, and in the end, they stop running because they don't have enough oxygen to move anyway. She steps on the beetle indicating that it was a mercy.

He is candid with her, offering that if she didn't give him some actionable information that she would be sent to another place where their methods would not be gentle. She tells him, once again, that she is not the Biologist. She says that there is something inside of her, a lightness, a brightness. It begins to rain and they walk slowly indoors.

## Analysis

Watching the video, Control is stricken with an understanding so deeply registered that he can't make sense of it. Grace offers the first act of compassion when he exits, but later rounds on him with information that she's dug up on his one great mistake with Central. He counters with the truth that she will never be made full director of the center...ever.

His encounter with Grace isn't what makes him ill, however. It is after the video that he becomes slightly disoriented, questioning everything. It is in the scene where Control meets with Ghost Bird that the theme of Decay is offered once again. The beetle, Ghost Bird states, is dying because it is trying to run from something that is already inside of it. This suggests that the seeds for mankind's own destruction is carried around inside. More to the point, she is also suggesting that the expedition members who survived



were already infected. She suggests that killing them earlier, rather than allowing them to die from cancer, would have been the merciful action.

It is highly ironic that Control is anything but in control of the situation at Southern Reach. And, as his increasingly hostile meetings with Voice indicate, he's not in control of his own fate. Voice, as a point in fact, as devolved as well. At first the Voice was formal, authoritarian, and distant. In the last few calls, the Voice has been more insistent, vehement, and demanding. It indicates a type of desperation that the reader, nor Control, understands.

The discussion of his past and largest transgression is shown to the reader to indicate the lengths to which Grace will go in order to upset and unseat Control. It also lets the reader know what happened nearly 20 years ago and why Control no longer entertains the notion of forming attachments with women long term. His job had been to infiltrate and observe various militia cells, not become involved. Instead, he had become embedded and attached, an action that led to the brutal torture and murder of the woman he'd been involved with. The scar from that is evident in his response to Grace's revisiting the event. However, it is also evident that he's had to defend himself over that incident most of his adult life. The theme of Perception is subtly introduced in this exchange in that Control is shown to actually be someone who acclimates and assimilates into whatever culture he finds himself in....much like the Biologist when she would do work in the field. They are not dissimilar in nature, something that Ghost Bird mentions.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Grace's motivation for the attack on Control in the cafeteria.

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the beetle.

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Decay.

## Vocabulary

banal, skewed, wheeled, camaraderie, communique, subcutaneous, interference, contamination, misconstrued, menace, silhouette, murk, innocuous



## Part Two: 000-00X

### Summary

000

In this short two-page section, John is experiencing a daydream. He is in the water looking up at the blueness of the sky. He sees a person leaning too far over the edge of a cliff and he waits below for the inevitable splash of the person falling into the water with him and the rest of the monsters.

020

It's Sunday and the reader learns that a disheveled and despondent Control is at the local diner having breakfast. It has been two days, Control shares, since he last bathed or changed his clothes. Saturday, Control had called Voice. He'd set a timer, taken a shot or two of whiskey, then made the call. Voice asked him, once again, if his house was in order. But Control had something in mind, instead. He had taken a deep breath then started shouting obscenities and expletives at Voice. Voice had yelled 'enough', which made Control stop instantly. It gave Control his answer. He began to read off the hypnotic suggestions that he'd found scribbled in the director's notes and for once, Voice stumbled, breathed deeply, was affected. Control had laughed, and hung up.

Now, sitting in the diner, he plays through what he'd discovered from the surveillance cameras he'd placed in his office. Though Grace had been accusing him of going through her things in her office, he'd denied it for weeks. But there it had been, on his own cameras. He had been going in there. That was when he'd figured out that Voice had used him, hypnotized him into doing his bidding unaware. It had made him angry, very angry. And determined to get even. That was when he'd determined to create a system the next time he talked to Voice, a system that would snap him out of the hypnosis, remind him what he needed to do, and then render him with enough clarity to counter Voice with some hypnotic phrases of his own. And it had worked. And then he'd gone on the mother of all benders. He had lost count of the bars from Saturday to Sunday.

His personal phone rings. He grins as he remembers that he tossed the other phone, the one that Voice called him on. He answers his phone and is not surprised to hear his mother on the other end. His mother, the spy. He has just enough of a hang over to make him grouchy. He accuses her of manipulating him and of allowing others to use him. She tells him that she did him a favor. He tells her that if she wants him to do anything more that she needs to tell him who Voice is. After hesitating, she tells him the Voice is Lowry...the one and only survivor from the first expedition.

He'd hangs up on her, pays the cashier in the diner, then goes home. He immediately pours himself a shot of whiskey and after he downs it, his eyes rest on the former



director's cell phone, lying there like a beetle, he thinks. Mercy killing is just the thing, he thinks, and picking up the phone, chucks it across the yard where it hits a tree, then sinks into the darkness at the edge of the property.

021

It is Monday, but instead of going directly to Southern Reach, Control heads for the former director's home. He takes his gun. While he is driving he fights the overwhelming urge to take a different exit, drive fifty more miles, and go to his father's old home, to see the artwork still rusting away in the backyard. He pushes onward. The neighborhood is surprising to Control as it is very ethnically oriented and very few white faces in evidence.

He picks the lock on the back door and lets himself in. He goes slowly through the home and can see where Central had come in after her disappearance and removed material. However, when he reaches the director's bedroom, everything is pushed away from the center of the floor, the bed linens thrown up over the bed, and all of her shoes stacked on top of the mattress. On the far wall is the exact replica of the phrasing and the map that had been in Control's office closet. The only difference is that there were no height marks. Control realizes as he backs out of the house that there's no way that the drawing on the bedroom wall had been left on the wall by Central. In other words, it had been placed there after the search and removal by Central. Which also means that Grace has been right all along: the director is alive.

Once he is well away from the director's house he calls his mother to tell her what he's discovered. She also shares some information that she'd learned. The places where the returned members from expedition 12 were found, had inconsistencies in the readings. They are different.

022

Back at the office, Control goes to his office and tries to regain some composure. He calls Grace and tells her to bring the Biologist to his office, and that this time he would like Grace to stay during the interview. Grace came into his office wearing a yellow flowered dress, which shocks Control. Grace asks where the Biologist is. Control lies and tells her that she just missed the Biologist, but that the woman had some very interesting things to say about Grace. He accuses her of knowing that the director was going across the border, and that she aided and abetted her on these trips. Grace asks what he wants. He tells her he just wants to know why the director felt as if she needed to break protocol and risk her career. What was so important.

After considering him for a while, she begins to talk. She says that the director, Cynthia, had gone over the border and that, yes, she had been helping with logistics. However, Cynthia never told her what she discovered, what she did at all. Cynthia had told her that it was to protect her. Grace and Control go outside for a cigarette and continue talking. Grace tells him that the only thing Cynthia did tell her was that all of these forays had been to try and get Area X to react. It was her idea that Area X was able to defend



itself, and if that were true, it could be provoked into acting, or reacting to something. Then, Grace leans in and tells Control that the Biologist was removed from the premises on Friday and has not been returned, so there's no way she was just in his office. She smiles at him sweetly and dictates the terms of his surrender. Shrugging, he goes along with it suddenly not caring about anything since the Biologist's departure.

023

Going back inside he crosses the cafeteria, heads to his office, grabs a flashlight, and returns to just beyond the cafeteria where he locates the closet that Whitby had been in the other day. There is something 'more' about the closet that had been bothering him, and since it is clear that his time at Southern Reach was coming to a close, why not at least gain some answers.

He finds a trapdoor hidden in the ceiling and climbs up into the space. There, in an attic area is a huge mural depicting human mutated grotesques. The creature that dominates the scene is a sluglike creature with human qualities. Suddenly, Control realizes that the breeze he is feeling is not something that should be present up there. Whirling around he sees Whitby, lying on his side, panting. The man's body is frozen and it is as if he is transforming into something else. Horrified, he leaves the space quickly. It is only after he hides the ladder in the storage closet that he realizes that somehow Whitby had gotten up there without benefit of the ladder.

Control decides he is going to leave the facility all together and goes into the parking lot. He runs into Cheney who tells him that he looks terrible, like he's seen a ghost. Resisting the urge to tell Cheney anything, he leaves and goes to a local bar. He drinks, flirts with the barback, and then goes home. Tomorrow he will deal with the Whitby creature.

00X

It is Tuesday morning and just as he steps outside, there on the doormat is the director's old cell phone. He can't help thinking that it must be a sign, of what he's not sure. His landlady had left him a note with the phone telling him to properly dispose of cell phones. Sneering, he throws it into the bushes.

He goes to work, and at the end of the day, after countless emails and phone calls to Whitby, he heads to the science division to find the man. This craziness would end today, and Whitby would have to be quarantined. However, when he reaches the area where he should have found two double doors, there are no handles. It is just a wall. He reaches out to touch it and realizes that it is not a wall at all...it is flesh. He screams.

## Analysis

Most of the themes are present in this third section of the novel. Primary among them is the theme of Deception. Control realizes that he has been under hypnotic influence for his entire time at Southern Reach. His mother has been complicit in it, and the identity



of the Voice is none other than the lone survivor from Expedition 1, Lowry. Discovering the truth about their manipulation of him makes Control willing to go against all of them, to forge his own way. Likewise, they have all been deceived, with the exception of Grace, that the former director, Cynthia was missing, dead, or a victim of Area X. Clearly, she has been crossing back and forth from Area X and has been in her old home.

The theme of Rationality is demonstrated in the last few chapters in this section when Control climbs into the storage closet's attic and finds the fantastical murals done by Whitby. Worse yet, he sees Whitby in the process of transforming before his eyes. Not knowing how to deal with what he has seen, he leaves the area, and the facility, only to return the next day as if nothing has happened. Later, when he determines that he must quarantine Whitby he finds that he has reached the end of a corridor with a wall that seems to be living flesh.

It is clear that at this point in the novel, Control is isolated, another theme. He has been disavowed by Central. His own mother has given up on him, though she continues to listen to him and give him intel, and even Cheney and Whitby who'd been somewhat good allies are removed from the scenario. The Biologist has been taken, which was the only other person in the facility that he cared about.

The theme of Perception is also brought into examination in these chapters. Cheney asks Control if sometimes he sees what isn't there, or with a trick of the lighting would see a bird that was a bat, and a bat that was a bird. In other words, he challenges Control, suggesting that sometimes the brain and the imagination don't play nice with one another.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Deception in this section.

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Perception.

## Discussion Question 3

What are the implications revolving around Cynthia?

## Vocabulary

seaward, refracted, apparatus, conceivable, recursive, constituent, alluded, ceaselessly, resurrect, encroach, fatalistic





# Part Four

## Summary

This section does not have delineating chapters as it is written as a stream of consciousness from Control. The wall in front of him is breathing, he realizes. He wants more than anything for someone to just wake him up, so his life can return to what constituted normal for him. He runs. Crossing the cafeteria he slips and falls. Recovering he spies Grace standing by one of the entrances to the holding swamp. He starts to approach, but then realizes that she's looking at something on the edge of the water. It is Cynthia, the former director. Behind her are green plumes and Control knows that this is the border, and that it has extended into Southern Reach.

Somehow Control makes it to his car in the parking lot. He jams in the keys, starts up the engine and gets out of there as fast as he can. Overhead two jets speed toward Southern Reach. As he rushes toward home he realizes that Southern Reach may have become not a research facility, but in fact, a nursery, an incubator. The news on the radio begins to report that something is going on at the military base.

He attributes it to the massive amount of adrenaline coursing through his system, but he realizes, without knowing how he knows, that the little girl standing next to the lighthouse keeper, had been Cynthia, the former director. He pulls into his driveway and sees his mother standing on the front porch. He brushes past her and goes straight to his bedroom where he begins to pack. His mother makes him stop, hands him a pill and tells him to take it. He refuses and she slaps him. He takes the pill. Then, as she directs, he goes into the bathroom and takes a shower.

He comes out and learns from his mother that the Southern Reach has been lost. All of the workers were now contained in the new Area X. Control tells her that she has no idea how fast or far the border will spread. She doesn't argue with him. She apologizes for everything and tells him that she'd like to make things right because they may never see one another again. They briefly embrace, but John feels as if it is too little too late. She tells him that the Biologist escaped and has gone AWOL. Inwardly, John is ecstatic. His mother leaves and so does John. He goes to the airport and gets tickets to Honduras.

Sitting on his flight he reflects on some of the last statements his mother had made. She had told him that he, John, was her secret weapon; that he now knows everything. She warns him that the Biologist is the director's weapon, and to be careful. His plane lands, but it is not in the Honduras. He's made a detour to a place called Rock Bay. It is where he thinks the Biologist will be.

The next morning he rents a car and heads to the cliffs where he is certain she will be. When the woman at the rental agency asks his name, he tells her John, and realizes that somehow the name Control was laughable, and had been all along. He treats



himself to one last nice meal just outside of Rock Bay. A family of four comes in, obviously wealthy, and inwardly John laughs. They have no clue that their mundane lives are about to change. He makes friends with the bartender who is also able to hook him up with a boat. John has decided that he will take a boat to Rock Bay.

He boats to Rock Bay, but pulls into an inlet where he ties up the boat. He starts hiking to the Biologist's cottage but when he gets within a mile of it he notices that all around there are camouflaged snipers. He knows that the Biologist wouldn't be coming here. He is disappointed, and goes back to the boat. The next morning, he feels the compulsion to sail north. He does. As he goes he thinks about finding the Biologist. As he does, he finds that all of the stresses that he'd experienced over the years, simply didn't matter any more. Another day up the coast and his boat runs into some submerged rocks. He abandons the boat, taking anything useful with him. When he reaches the shore he realizes that someone has been eating the mussels from the shoreline. He hopes it might be her, but if not, he reasons that things will work out.

The second day he sees a figure and using his binoculars knows that it is the Biologist. She has hiked out onto a jutting portion of the coast. He tries to find her, but she gets the drop on him and holds him at gun point. He starts laughing hysterically, which confuses her. She tells him to throw away his gun, which he does. She says that she's not the biologist, and he tells her that he knows she is not. He has figured out that Area X cloned or reproduced duplicates of those that came into the area. Then, it had sent them back out, for what reason he can't imagine. She lowers the gun and tells him that she wanted to build the life that the Biologist never had, but had always longed to. She also says that she was a fool to think that she could.

John tells her that he's more than certain that Central is looking for them both. She looks scared and tells him that the brightness that was in her was gone, that it came out of her last night and is in a hole on the other side of the ridge. He asks her what it is and she says that she's not sure but that she thinks it is another way into Area X. In the distance on the water there are a growing number of lights. He tells her that they are nearly here, that they need to hide. She tells him that she will not go back. He understands what she means to do. He begs her not to, but before he can argue with her, she jumps into the hole with the opening to Area X. And, holding his breath, he jumps too.

## Analysis

The theme of Perception is demonstrated in the early portion of this section. Control's hand is on the wall, a wall that should have had double doors and handles, and instead, is touching something living and breathing. Control's perception has been challenged and what is presented to him, as proof, is that he must accept that everything around him is living, and has always been living, and now is demanding to be noticed.

Cynthia has returned (the former director) but she is changed, just like her father, the lighthouse keeper Saul Evans, had been in the first book. She is now fully a creature of



Area X, but is also still able to comprehend and communicate coherently. It is implied that she will be the liaison for Area X. Control doesn't stick around to ponder the situation, but fearing for his life, turns and runs. Grace, meanwhile, trusting her old mentor, waits patiently for her to approach. She shows Control her sidearm as he is leaving, implying that if Cynthia proves dangerous that she will 'do the right thing'. Control doubts her impartiality in this situation.

It occurs to Control that his adoption of that nickname has been a joke, since his Grandfather's day. He has never, not once, ever been in control of anything. Symbolically, he changes his name back to simply John. Relinquishing his name, and control, of the facility.

His mother meets him at his home and urges caution. She manages to calm him down, but in the end, she cannot deter him, especially once he learns that the Biologist has escaped. In fact, learning this helps him make up his mind: he will find her. It becomes clear to him that of all of them, she's been the clearest and the one most understanding of what they would be dealing with. He must find her, and this time...listen. Building upon the theme of Nature, the author is suggesting that the Earth has given mankind many wakeup calls, which mankind has ignored. And, just like Southern Reach, there are only so many warnings that can be issued. This is reiterated with the scene involving the wealthy vacationing family near Rock Bay. They worry about things that John knows are trivial, and in the scope of things, meaningless.

His search for the Biologist sees John beginning to reacquaint himself with his own inner nature, the side of him that was always there, just suppressed. He follows no more than intuition which suggests he go farther north to find Ghost Bird. And he does. She tells him that she is not really the Biologist that went into the swamp. He says that he actually believes her. The data in the reports were all pointing to the fact that Area X duplicated material, perfected it, then sent it out into the greater world to spread itself. What the author is suggesting with this is that awareness of Nature, of the right way to interact with Nature, can be found in many people, and eventually, if given the proper circumstances, can take hold. In essence, the 'seed' of man's own destruction is within them, but also the possibility of their own salvation is as well. In book one, the Biologist was turned into a Ghost Bird after meeting her husband. Thus, this version of the Biologist that is with John, is her replication, a better version of her, had she chosen to live more fully.

The lightness that was within the Biologist, she states, is gone and was actually another gateway into Area X, which has centered itself in the bottom of a hole. Her determination to escape capture and subjugation one more minute makes her jump through the hole when capture was imminent. And John, grasping at a budding understanding, follows her.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Perception.



## Discussion Question 2

Compare this 'new' Biologist to the old one.

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Control change his name back to John?

## Vocabulary

constructs, vast, balsamic, scrimmage, terroir, viselike, burnt umber, taut, intermittently, incubator, elude, topographical, anomaly, chic, sanitizer



# Characters

## Control (John Rodriguez)

This is the new director of Southern Reach. He's just entered into the position and he's gathering intelligence on Area X, mostly from transcripts, reports, and Grace's debriefing. He doesn't think that Grace's former paranoia against taking modern technology into Area X should be continued, as well as her protocols regarding internet and email archiving. He is widely influenced by the memory of his artist father, who was his greatest influence growing up.

Father was part Hispanic and part Indian. His own coloring is dark like his father's, but his features are more like his mother's. They divorced when he was young and he always envisioned his mother as a streak of light against a dark sky. He wanted to be in the sky with her, but never was.

The name, Control, was given to him by his Ex-agent Grandfather, Jack Severance when they'd been on a vacation in a summer cottage. Reluctant to ever use it much, and especially to replace his real name, he'd held that back for the perfect moment, which was when he became the director of Southern Reach.

Control disgraced himself 20 years previously by disregarding orders to simply observe and collect data on a militia group he'd infiltrated. Instead, he'd slept with one of the women and it had ended up with her fellow members finding out about who he was and the death of the girl.

## Grace

She was the assistant director during the last expedition's outing. She was very close to the psychologist that had been on the expedition (who was also the director of Southern Reach). Grace resents Control for his position and the fact that he's changed things from the way that the former director had things. She does as much as she can to derail and undermine his job at Southern Reach.

## Jackie Severance

Jackie is Control's mother. She was an agent for the military, just like her father. She had a kind of casual cruelty, and expectation of high performance, and a calculating nature.



## Voice

This is the disembodied, androgynous person that Control reports to. They seem frustrated, driven, and completely oblivious to the value of Area X, or of Control.

## Séance & Science Brigade

Nearly 20 years previously, this was a group dedicated to finding empirical evidence for paranormal phenomenon, especially in regards to Area X. They were responsible for taking one of the only photographs of Saul Evans, the lighthouse keeper.

## Chorry

Control's cat that he inherited from his father, Chorry is also a symbolic connection of father to son, though Control would like to believe that he is more like his mother.

## Whitby

Whitby is the senior scientist at the facility. He is the first one that takes Control for a tour of the facility and goes with him to the border of Area X. Whitby slowly reveals much of the interior conflict that plagues most of the workers in the facility. He becomes a great source of intel for Control.

## Cheney

Cheney is a mechanical scientist, but acts in more of a security capacity than anything else. He is a liaison with the military who have outposts all the way around the perimeter of Area X. He also goes with Whitby and Control to visit the entrance to Area X and to view where the border used to be.

## Saul Evans

A former lay minister, Saul had 'heard the calling' and left his ministry to take the position as the lighthouse keeper. He was there for two years before the 'event' took place. The photographer that snapped the infamous picture in front of the lighthouse, supposedly died when the border went up. Saul Evans is credited for having written the long apocalyptic verse on the walls of the tunnels.

## Ghost Bird (Biologist)

Ghost Bird is a returning character from book one. She was the biologist who was sent into Area X. Unlike the other returned members, she doesn't have cancer and seems

actually healthier than she has ever been. However, just like the others, her short term memory, and literally most memories, of her time in Area X are jumbled and nonsensical.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Flash of Light

Control always likens his mother to a flash of light against the night sky. During his growing up years she appeared like a flash, here and gone, from his life. Still, her brilliance and energy fill him with a sense of awe.

## File Ripping

Control is showing Grace that he will not be following the previous director's protocols. This enrages Grace as she believes that the former director is not dead and that she must keep everything just as the director left it.

## Sense of Falling/Flying

This is what Control feels when he closes his eyes. It corresponds with his dream of flying, then falling to the ground. In many sections he feels as if he is flying high above everything going on, like a seagull over the waves.

## Cancer

Most of the returnees have nothing organic on them when they come back, nothing for scientists to test. The only thing they have is a slow growing cancer, that finally does end up killing them. The author is suggesting that mankind, as a general rule, carry about the seeds of their own destruction by their indifference and continued mindset that they are apart from nature. Eventually, like a slow growing cancer, it will kill mankind.

## Rotting Scent

Control describes this smell as a rancid honey-like smell. Control smells it, but no one else seems to smell it at the facility.

## Father's Chessboard and Pieces

in the last decade before his death, Control's father had turned away from his art sculptures and had started to carve chess pieces to sell at the local stores. They'd done better than his art. Control has one of the boards with his father's pieces on it, frozen in the middle of their last game together. He keeps in on the mantel at his father's old home, and also has some of the pieces on his desk at work.





## White Rabbit Experiment

When the border first went up, after the Event, 200 white lab rabbits were forced to attempt to cross the border. Most of them died, and all of them would have, except that some of the rabbits rebelled and fought the scientists to escape into the woods. This represents several things. First, nature will fight back when it is being forced to do something against its character. Secondly, it indicates that some human beings have wakened to the reality of Nature's message to mankind and all life on the planet, and that these people are the true survivors, the next evolution or generation of man.

## Potted Plant with the Mouse

The potted plant was a plant that was originally found in the desk of the former director. When Control finds it, he takes it out of the dark and puts it in a pot. The plant had wrapped its roots around the body of a mouse, which was also in the drawer. This potted plant had been subjected to all sorts of hideous attempts to destroy it, including burning, burying, cutting, and other such acts. Still, the plant refused to die. This represents the utter futility of mankind to try and destroy Nature, that in the end, it will adapt and overcome even mankind's attempts to suppress it. It also represents the fact that Control has a healthy respect for Nature.

## Ant on the Woman's Neck

There is a woman that begins hopping around and screaming about an ant being on her somewhere. Control observes this and decides to rescue the ant from the woman before she located it and killed it. This indicates that Control has respect and cares about life, even that of an ant.

## Dread Gloves

When he's taking a tour of the facility, Whitby takes him past a long rack of disused shoulder length rubber gloves. They hang there like desiccated corpses, Control thinks. Each time he has to walk past them they make him uneasy, as if they suggest 'the end'. They represent mankind's separateness from nature, and their fear of it.

## Lighthouse Photographs

These were found in the director's things, and they give Control more information on Saul Evans.



## Holding Pond Beetle

Ghost Bird squashes a beetle when she and Control are walking near the holding pond. She explains that it has been poisoned, and that it doesn't realize that what it is trying to run away from is already inside of it. She says that eventually, it simply dies because it doesn't have enough oxygen to survive.



# Settings

## Southern Reach Facility

Many decades ago, this facility was created as a way to study Area X. At one time it had hundreds of scientists, but as time passed, the numbers were lowered to all-time lows of only 50 or so scientists, all suffering from low morale. This is where Control is sent to bring everything back into an efficient model. It is also Control's 'last chance' according to his mother.

## Hedley

This is where Control now lives. He and his father used to live there. It is also where, as a teenager, he and his friends would come to hang out.

## The U

This is a section of the Southern Reach Facility that houses the scientific wings. Control observes that it is less a symbol of luck than of the incomplete: thoughts, conclusions, reports.

## Area X

A place where a man-made ecological disaster happened decades previously. Genetic mutations occurred, and the Southern Reach was created to not only contain the growth of Area X, but to send expeditions in periodically to monitor its return to normalcy (or not).

## Controlled Samples Storage

This is a deep underground storage laboratory where live and preserved specimens from Area X are stored. This is where Control sends his potted plant after removing it from his desk. Control thinks that the Samples Storage room resembles a Cathedral with its lighting and all of the protections and precautions taken.



# Themes and Motifs

## Rationality and Perception

The theme of Rationality is presented quite a few times throughout the novel, *Authority*. Control comes to Southern Reach to impart some 'control' over what has been deemed an inefficient use of governmental dollars. However, all of the characteristics that have worked for him in the past, such as organization, hierarchy, and manipulation, don't work. Lastly, there is no rational explanation for many of the things that he continues to discover.

For example, the archaic writing on the wall inside of a closet in his office, defies translation. Not even the linguist can make sense of it. She suggests to Control that the language is undecipherable because the words, themselves, are only half of the meaning. This is not rational at all, Control concedes.

Then there is the potted plant that Control finds in his drawer. According to Grace, the plant could not be killed or destroyed. Despite being subjected to all sorts of horrors, the plant refused to die, and in fact found a way to thrive in conditions that should have killed it.

In this novel, just as in the first, rationality is challenged by the author, and shown to be faulty on many occasions. Relying solely on what is known does not leave room for the unknown to be explored, he seems to be suggesting. Of the last expedition, only one person has survived without cancer in their system: the biologist. This is because her grasp and understanding for the necessity for the unknown and the irrational were intact.

Additionally, the scenario with the white rabbit rebellion is shown to be illogical given the nature of rabbits. And yet, it was well documented that the rabbits, normally peaceful and compliant, were so fearful of the border that they became something they normally would not be: aggressive.

Lastly, when Area X begins to overcome Southern Reach, John witnesses the very walls of the buildings becoming living tissue. This challenges all that he knows, all frames of reference, and as such, overloads his senses to the point where, in terror, he runs away from it.

The author is suggesting with this theme that the true irrational act is to continue to make excuses for abuse of nature, for the polluting, the exploitation, the overpopulation, and the lack of regard for other life on the planet. That the true 'authority' on the planet IS nature.



## Decay

From almost the moment he arrives, Control smells a dead and rotting smell permeating the entire structure. At first he believes that it is faulty custodian work, that the janitors are so shorthanded that they aren't able to keep up with the task of keeping things sanitized.

There are numerous words that are selected by the author that point to this theme as well. Words such as 'devolve', 'rot', 'decay', and 'dissolution' are used throughout the work. There are numerous images as well, such as the desiccated mouse with the plant, the beetle dying from insecticide, and the prevalence of mold, mildew, and general break down of anything man made.

While there is physical decay happening all around Control, he is also suffering from a mental, emotional, and even spiritual, decay. Everything he has told himself about his family, his allegiance, his work, begins to come unraveled at the end. This revelation sends him into a tailspin for a while and he spends an entire weekend in a drunken stupor. It is only when he embraces the truth, that he is more like his father in his sensibilities, than his mother or grandfather with their ruthless disregard, that he is able to find his own inner resolve.

## Identity

From the beginning nothing has been as it first presented itself. Most notably is John Rodriguez's determination that no one should call him by his legal name, but rather his nickname, Control. However, as the novel progresses, it is clear that 'control' is not really John's true self, nor his true nature. He seeks to understand, rather than control, to make sense of the senseless, and in that respect, he is more his father's child, than his mother's.

Ghost Bird, the Biologist's chosen name, continues to tell everyone that she is not the Biologist. Finally, she is able to convince John that she is a replica of the real Biologist, whose true self is flying in the air over Area X, mingled with her husband in the swampland. Ghost Bird states that she has many of the Biologist's memories, and knowledge, but that in this iteration, she wants to live a better life, to be a better Ghost Bird than the original. This is why she goes to Rock Bay, in the hopes that she will be able to do the things that the original Biologist never had the time or personality to do.

What becomes apparent, and is a continued thread from book one, is the lack of need for identity for most of the life on the planet. Only mankind wonders who they are and what their role is. This is why Ghost Bird is so unconcerned with what anyone calls her.

Voice is another vehicle for the theme of Identity. As it turns out, the only surviving team member from Expedition 1 is none other than Voice, working for Central. However, it is apparent that Lowry (Voice) has a vendetta against Area X for what it did to his team, for



beating him, and for attempting to change his perspective. This struggle against the inevitable has made him nearly rabid.

In the end, Control changes his name back to John, and literally, makes the leap to follow Ghost Bird through the hole to Area X (or so he hopes). At this point, his identity is both known and irrelevant as he's been able to grasp the concepts that Ghost Bird has been stating all along.

## Deception

John has been deceived from the beginning, the reader learns. He was not sent to Southern Reach to 'fix' anything, but rather to do reconnaissance, to spy on the workers there, and to most notably find out what could be done to halt the advancement of Area X.

When John realizes that he has been placed under hypnotic suggestion, from the beginning, and with his mother's full sanction and knowledge, he is both hurt and angered. From this point on, he seeks to uncover the layers and layers of deception by everyone surrounding him.

His mother deceived him by leading him to believe that she ever cared about him more than her work. She was willing to sacrifice him on more than one occasion in order to further Central's goals. Her flimsy excuse about working at Southern Reach in order to be closer to him when he was young didn't hold up to scrutiny. Likewise, when she shows up just as Southern Reach is breached, he realizes that she has also been using hypnotic suggestion and conditioning on him to control him.

He's also been deceiving himself by naming himself Control. Ironically, he realizes, he never had any control at all. The illusion of control is a direct parallel to the statement that the author is trying to make throughout the entire novel: mankind deceives itself into thinking they are in control of Nature and the planet....but it is just an illusion.

## Nature

Nature is one of the prevalent themes in the novel. In book one, Nature was shown to be a force to be reckoned with. In book one, Nature had been interfered with by man and the resulting genetic mutations had run amuck.

Now, in book two, Nature has given warnings but they have gone unheeded. A major correction and an evolution is in order. Nature is about to press the giant 'reset' button and mankind is shown to be ineffectual in stopping the forward progression of the changes. What is interesting to note, in book two, is that the scientists now know that the toxic residue that used to be prevalent in Area X is no longer there.

The wilderness in that area of the world is pristine, clean, supercharged with the highest quality of oxygen, and that the creatures there all work together within a giant



homogeneous gathering of life. Rather than living as parasites on the land, the new creatures live in a symbiosis with it. This is the overall goal of Area X, and it has begun its forward march into Southern Reach.

The author suggests several things with the theme of Nature. First, interfering with the structure and perfect machinations that Nature has developed will always end in 'tears' so to speak. Secondly, Nature will resist change until it is necessary, and then the change will be one that works symbiotically for the whole, not just the one. Nature is also shown to be nurturing to new life forms, and to those that attempt to understand and work with it and not against it. This is evident in the character of Ghost Bird, and in the end, John.

# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view in this novel is first person, told from the perspective of John Rodriguez (Control). It is a limited first person, whose biases and past problems cloud his perspective as a narrator. The reader receives information about most of the events and what is going on in Area X through his interaction with those working at the facility, and with Ghost Bird, the former expedition member, as well as the huge amount of files that the former director kept on Area X.

## Language and Meaning

The language and meaning are often hidden or nonsensical, which is a device that the author uses in order to give the reader the same sense of confusion as Control. The information that Control gains is received piecemeal and through many different sources, which means that very often the language is jumbled, out of sequence, and not related to anything being talked about. The vocabulary is upper level, often peppered with scientific jargon.

## Structure

The book progresses in a linear manner, sprinkled with flashbacks, information from old files and videos. Each section progresses through the stages of decay and change, arriving at a type of evolution, or devolution, depending. The title, itself, suggests that there is a struggle to determine just who is really in charge, who is the authority.





## Quotes

The Southern Reach had become a backward, backwater agency, guarding a dormant secret that no one seemed to care much about anymore, given the focus on terrorism and ecological collapse.

-- Control (chapter 001)

**Importance:** This is Control's initial assessment of the Southern Reach, and he believes that he's been sent in to make the facility more successful, or to dismantle it.

Never do something for just one reason," his grandpa had told him more than once, and that, at least, Control had taken to heart.

-- Control (chapter 001)

**Importance:** Control is contemplating and rationalizing his reasons for interrogating ONLY the Biologist from the expedition. His ex-agent grandfather had always told him that in order to be successful that he needed to shut off his emotions and focus on the facts.

The border extended about seventy miles inland from the lighthouse and approximately forty miles east and forty miles west along the coast. It ended just below the stratosphere and, underground, just above the asthenosphere.

-- Control (chapter 004)

**Importance:** As he's out jogging, various facts float into his mind. In particular, he is wondering about the nature of the Area X border. This shows that the border pretty much encapsulates Area X.

The night the border had come down, it had taken ships and planes and trucks with it, anything that happened to be on or approaching that imaginary but too-real line at the moment of its creation, and for many hours after, before anyone knew what was going on, knew enough to keep distant.

-- Control (chapter 004)

**Importance:** The reader learns that the border came down, and at the time that it came down, it made its might known. This event nods its head to one of the main themes, which is that Nature is a force to be reckoned with, and when it wants to fight back, eventually, it will win.

This was what most people wanted: to be close to but not part of. They didn't want the fearful unknown of a "pristine wilderness." They didn't want a soulless artificial life, either.

-- Control (chapter 004)

**Importance:** This reiterates one of the themes of Isolation. As a collective, the author is suggesting how mankind views itself in relation to all other life on the planet.



Sometimes you had to keep things from people just so they wouldn't do the first thing that came into their heads.

-- Control (chapter 005)

**Importance:** He's watching a woman dancing around in the parking lot because an ant has crawled onto the back of her suit. He knows that if he told her where it was, she'd simply kill it. Instead, so that it is a win/win for everyone, he offers to remove the ant from her clothing. This indicates that his mindset is also different from most. He respects nature, even an ant.

Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead...

-- Control (chapter 006)

**Importance:** This was part of the writing that was found in book one by the expedition. Control finds it scrawled on the wall inside of the room that went nowhere.

Maybe "superstition" was what snuck into the gaps, the cracks, when you worked in a place with falling morale and depleted resources.

-- Control (chapter 007)

**Importance:** Control said this after his meeting with the linguist, Grace, and Whitby to discuss the writing on the wall in his office. It was the linguist that suggested that the more fanciful theories as to the creator of the writing was nothing more than superstition.

What if the fate of the first expedition in particular had been sealed by a kind of interference they had brought with them that had made them simply unable to listen, to perceive?

-- Control (chapter 007)

**Importance:** This is the thought that Control has after he's debriefed the linguist. She suggests that because the phrases were written in living organisms, that the message is at least half lost, because the use of living entities IS part of the message. This is a direct correlation to the author's theme of Nature and mankind's continued insistence on Isolation from it.

A circle looks at a square and sees a badly made circle.

-- Cheney (chapter 008)

**Importance:** Cheney is talking about the fact that not all of the life on the planet has even been discovered, yet, so it is high arrogance to believe that mankind understands all of it. When people stop using their own criteria as the yardstick to all life, then mankind will begin to understand more, he suggests.

The gist of these comments was that when they looked away from the microscope, the samples changed; and when they stared again, what they looked at had reconstituted



itself to appear normal.  
-- Control (chapter 009)

**Importance:** Control thinks this to himself as he's wandering through the samples room in the science division. They are wearing biohazard suits because for some reason, the air in the samples room is 100% pure oxygen. He asks how it could be that there were no more contaminants in Area X, and how it is that it is still unsafe to go there if there is no toxic threat. Then he realizes that depending on who is looking at the results, the results, themselves, change.

He was here to solve a puzzle in some ways, but he felt as if it were beginning to solve him instead.  
-- Control (chapter 017)

**Importance:** Control says this after viewing the video footage of Expedition 1. He has begun to experience dissociative moments, moments of clarity juxtaposed with utter confusion. He isn't sure what is going on. This is also a direct nod, by the author, toward his theme about Nature and mankind's reintegration back into a more natural state.