

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Jeff Vandermeer is a novelist. And I think if I could sum up his works in a word, the word might be “lush”. His books are usually surreal, sometimes scary. Often he transforms nature itself, creating new species, new histories, new mutations with visceral, sometimes magical descriptions. <i>[Music fades out.]</i> If you know his work, you’re probably most familiar with <i>Annihilation</i> —part science fiction, part magic realism, part horror. It’s set in a wildlife refuge, in northern Florida. An alien presence has landed. As it settles into the land, it creates profound, disturbing changes in the plants, animals, and humans that enter the territory. He published the book in 2014. Four years later, it was turned into the movie of the same name, directed by Alex Garland and starring Natalie Portman and Gina Rodriguez. His latest book is called <i>A Peculiar Peril</i> . Like a lot of his work, it’s fantastical and strange and kind of absurd. It’s also very funny. Fans of Neil Gaiman or Terry Pratchett or even Douglas Adams will feel at home with it. Maybe that’s you, maybe that’s a young reader you know. It’s definitely a book teenagers can read, as well. Anyway. My friend, Jordan Morris, was lucky enough to get to interview him. Jordan is a comedy screenwriter. He’s also the cohost of one of my other podcasts: <i>Jordan, Jesse, Go!</i> <i>[Music fades in.]</i> Anyway, let’s get into it. Jordan Morris and Jeff Vandermeer. Easy, relaxed, thumpy music.
00:01:42	Music	Transition	
00:01:46	Jordan Morris	Host	Jeff Vandermeer! Welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:01:49	Jeff Vandermeer	Guest	Thanks so much for having me.
00:01:50	Jordan	Host	So, your new book, <i>A Peculiar Peril</i> , is—it’s aimed at young readers, although I’ll say it’s very entertaining to certain 38-year olds. <i>[Jeff chuckles.]</i>
00:02:08	Jeff	Guest	It made me wonder what kinds of books you were reading when you were the age that this book is pitched at? Well, I was—I would say I was reading things like James Thurber’s <i>The 13 Clocks</i> . And I would say there are other—there—other books like that are things I remember because they’re things, when you go back to them as adults, you find other things to appreciate in them. And so, they kind of change over time. And then, also, a

lot of British classics, which I can't even remember necessarily—besides *Beatrix*—I mean, *Beatrix Potter* is maybe younger than this audience, but since there are so many talking animals in *A Peculiar Peril*, I did think of that a little bit.

But I grew up in the Fiji Islands, and so until the age of nine, I mostly had British Commonwealth type books. So, it's not so much necessarily always influenced by what I was reading as a teenager—although it is a little bit, but also things like *Asterix* and *Tin-Tin* comics and kind of the absurd misadventures in some of the things I was reading then. There's a scene in *Peculiar Peril* where two characters braid their beards, because of a magic spell the beards keep growing and they can't cut them.

[*They chuckle.*]

And that's actually an ode to *Tin-Tin*. And then there's also things like *The Dark is Rising* series, which I thought was a really wonderful teen series that I read as a teenager. More recently I've read stuff like Rory Power's *Wilder Girls*, in the YA genre. And I really enjoyed that.

00:03:26 Jordan Host Actually, this book while I was reading it really reminded me of *The Hitchhiker's Guide* series and kind of its humor. Was that ever something that you gobbled up as a kid?

00:03:37 Jeff Guest Oh, absolutely. I would say that's definitely something that I read as a teenager. And it is true that there is a particularly British sense of humor that I absorbed that I think comes out in this series. And that's just because the main character grew up in this world where he was partly in Florida and partly in the UK. Yeah. So, definitely that. Definitely the kind of absurd sense of humor, which is something that—you know—is present in my other novels, but not to this degree. You know. It's present in *Annihilation* in the biologists having a conversation about whether something's a tunnel or a tower, if you really think about it.

[*Jordan chuckles and agrees.*]

It's a very absurd conversation, but it's not—it's not the primary thing that you're encountering when you read. So, it was really kind of nice to be able to show that side, which to this point has mostly been displayed—I think for whatever reason—on Twitter. So. When you were a kid, was being a professional writer something that you dreamed about or did it come later?

00:04:30 Jordan Host

00:04:38 Jeff Guest It was pretty early on. When I was in Fiji, you know, my mother was a biological illustrator. My dad was a research chemist who was study rhinoceros beetles. And so, we were very invested in the natural world. And I started keeping a birdwatching list as we were going around various places for my dad's research. And that eventually morphed into telling stories about birds. [*Laughs.*] Because I began to get a little bored with just listing birds in my journal.

[*Jordan laughs.*]

And that coincided with encountering, like, *Aesop's Fables* and stuff. So, I would retell those. And kind of—that became kind of a

learning process for me. Because I would read the story and then I would try to tell my own version from memory of the story. So, that's how I began to learn how to—how to write, and it was mostly through these animal tales. And I think that also is something that kind of comes through in *Peculiar Peril*.

00:05:31 Jordan Host

I'm really curious about growing up in Fiji. You know. Nature is a big part of your work and it got me wondering about the kind of flora and fauna you were experiencing when you were growing up there.

00:05:45 Jeff Guest

Well, I mean, my mother would—there would be sea turtles on our front lawn, because she was doing illustrations of them.

[They laugh.]

And we were literally a ten-minute walk from the beach, in Suva. And we would go up into the mountains during the winter because it's a volcanic island. And you would have a totally different terrain with kingfishers and just a light misting of snow for, like, half a day. *[Laughs.]* Which is kind of unexpected in that setting. I felt like I was outdoors all the time. And it was a very wild experience and a lot of my fiction reflects that. It reflects things like getting lost on a reef at night, when my dad was off doing something. And almost walking out to sea, as opposed to back to shore. So, there's a lot of experiences like that that I consider—have informed my writing.

00:06:32 Jordan Host

In your writing, nature is very beautiful, but it can also be very scary and deadly. You mentioned getting lost. Do you remember any other times, as a kid, where you were scared of the natural world?

00:06:46 Jeff Guest

Well, I mean, there was one time—in Kenya—where my dad decided he wanted to get close to these water buffalo. And they almost charged us. And I definitely *[laughs]*—

00:06:56 Jordan Host

Yeah! That'll do it!

00:06:57 Jeff Guest

—felt pretty scared—

00:06:58 Jordan Host

That'll do it. *[Laughs.]*

00:06:59 Jeff Guest

[Laughing.]—of that. Not so much as a child. Now, as an adult I was once charged by a wild boar. And that was—that was pretty scary.

[Jordan agrees.]

But at the same time, once you're in a situation like that, time kind of slows down. You kind of take stock in a way that is actually happening very fast, but you don't realize it. And so, it's weird. It's like, you realize afterwards you were scared, but you don't necessarily realize in the moment. And a lot of times, also—you know, there's a difference between me and the protagonist. So, the biologist probably is the least scared of people in my books of nature. But then, also some of the weirdest things happen in that book, so there's people who are scared for the biologist even though she thinks what she's looking at is really beautiful. So, I find that this issue of scary versus non-scary is often something that lies with the reader and not so much with me. Because there's very little that I find scary except for cockroaches, which is something that I encountered as a child. Because there was a Fijian cockroach that would burrow into your ear, at night.

[Jordan makes a sound of awe.]

00:08:03 Jordan Host And so, I would wake up to this crunching sound. *[Laughs.]*
00:08:06 Jeff Guest Oh. That's a terrible thing wake up to.
[Laughing.] Exactly. And, you know, it was a tropical paradise, but I also had allergies from the flowering trees and also asthma. So, there were days when I would wake up and I wasn't sure if I could breathe and I would hear this crunching sound.

[Jordan makes an "oof" noise.]

00:08:40 Jordan Host *[Laughing.]* In my ears. So, I do have a very big phobia of cockroaches. They were harmless. They weren't doing anything. They just—they were just seeking shelter. But still. So, I try very hard to not to have those usual prejudices against creatures just because of stereotypes about them. But it is true that Anne, my wife, deals with the roaches that come into the house.
00:08:58 Jeff Guest *[Chuckles.]* So, after you lived in Fiji—and I think I'm getting your timeline correct—is that you moved to Florida, where you still live now. And a lot of your stories, including *A Peculiar Peril*, are set there or at least part of it is set there. Tell me a little bit about Florida and what makes it fun to write about.
Well, first of all, we came back to Ithaca for two years in the middle of winter, after Fiji. And that cured us of anything very northern.

[They laugh.]

So, Florida I think reminded us of Fiji a bit in that it is semi-tropical, even here in north Florida. And I think one thing that's really amazing about this place is it is one of the hotspots of biodiversity. So, even though we're ten minutes from the capital, we're in this house on the edge of a ravine that scooped out during the last ice age and it's all fully wooded, because you can't build down on the slope, only around the lip of it. And so, we're ten minutes from the capital, and yet down in this ravine are racoons, opossums, box turtles, all kinds of snakes and lizards. And so, it's pretty amazing. And this is kind of what I've experienced the entire time I've been in Florida. And that definitely influences, you know—well, even like your relationship between the inside and the outside. It kind of blurs a bit. And then also, how you perceive the natural world. And there's less separation between yourself and the rest of the world, in that way.

And I think that comes out in *A Peculiar Peril*. You know, I really wanted the talking animals—some of which have personalities that some of the—some of the animals in our yard, even though they're different animals—to not be the stereotypical things that you sometimes see that just perpetuate ideas that are wrong about how animals might perceive things, if they talked.

[They chuckle.]

And then also, the thing I like to do is I do like to take real places that I've lived in and use them in my books. So, Jonathan—this is not really a spoiler, but you find out at some point that he grew up on the edge of one of these ravines, in Florida. And so, I basically just took our house and used it for some of the scenes. And that

works out really nicely, 'cause it gives you a real—you know, it kind of imbues the character with a bit of autobiography.

00:10:51 Jordan Host In the special thanks to your book *Annihilation*, you thank the St. Mark's Florida Wildlife Refuge. I wanted to hear a little bit more about that place—what it's like there and how it inspired the writing.

00:11:03 Jeff Guest Well, you know, we first lived in Gainesville, Florida, and Paynes Prairie is amazing there and I was looking for a place, when we moved up to—when I moved up to Tallahassee—that was similar. And the St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge is just this amazing refuge on the edge of the sea, so it goes from like this pine forest to black swamp to salt marshes to the beach and includes all these amazing ecosystems side by side that you wouldn't normally encounter in such a small space, comparatively. And I think what also really was amazing to me is that the first time I was there, I got lost. I decided, "I'm just gonna bite off more than I can chew, and I'll do the longest, most remote trail here and I'll—and—" *[Laughs.]* Which is not usually the best idea.

And I did the 14-mile trail, not knowing that there was going to be a thunderstorm in the middle of it. And I got so totally turned around and lost my map that I had no idea where I was and it was one of those things where, you know, I don't carry a phone usually—except sometimes a little phone that I can call for emergencies, but nothing that would like have a map. And so, for a good 30 minutes I had this experience that a lot of us don't really have anymore, which was I was totally lost, and I had no idea where I was. And I was in the middle of a thunderstorm. And there were a ton of very aggressive gators around, which usually doesn't bother me, but it was like in the middle of mating season.

[They laugh.]

So—and I had also, on this one—also, this first time, seen wild boar even though they hadn't charged me, which kind of unnerved me because they are really the biggest threat out there. And so, I think that element of the unknown and being lost like that really fed into my imagination and I think it's one reason why *Annihilation* is set there and why it's been so inspirational, because that first experience was so dynamic.

00:12:54 Jordan Host As a—as a proud Floridian, I was wondering if you were familiar with the Florida Man... you know, line of jokes?

[Jeff laughs.]

00:13:05 Jeff Guest The concept being—
[Amused.] I am. I am. And I understand and I do find it humorous. I try not to buy into it, because my theory is just that every other state has just as many boneheaded individuals, they just don't have a hashtag.

[They laugh.]

But it is also true that there are so many different Floridas. You know, like literally politically, socially, and other ways. And we have so many people coming in from out of state that change the dynamic of how things are that I think that does come into play to

some degree. And I cannot deny *[laughing]* it does—it does sometimes—it is hard for me, sometimes, to defend the state. And one reason that I do is because we are still this wild place that is in danger from development and whatnot of going away. And there is so much of value here. And so that, in all seriousness, is why I don't really play into that, because I feel like then people miss the other things that are great about the state.

But I do admit that there is a spark of something there that I really wish was a little less visible.

00:14:15	Jordan	Host	<i>[They laugh.]</i> And also, if there was a #MontanaMan trend, we might see some crazy stuff coming out of Montana.
00:14:21	Jeff	Guest	That's true. That's true. Yeah. Nothing against Montana,.
			<i>[Jordan agrees and laughs.]</i>
00:14:27	Jesse	Host	In case I ever have to move there. But... We'll wrap up with Jeff Vandermeer in just a minute. Does he think a novel with a message can reach people? We'll hear more about that after the break. It's <i>Bullseye</i> from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:14:39	Promo	Clip	Music: Soft, plucky string music. Guy Raz: I'm Guy Raz and on NPR's <i>How I Built This</i> , how a simple splash of color accidentally launched Sandy Chilewich into a 40-year career as a designer, entrepreneur, and creator of the now famous Chilewich placemat. Subscribe or listen now.
00:14:57	Promo	Clip	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> Music: Mellow synth piano plays in background. Brea Grant: Hey! I'm Brea Grant, an e-reader who loves spoilers and chocolate. Mallory O'Meara: And I'm Mallory O'Meara, a print book collector who will murder you if you spoil a book for me. Brea: And we're the host of <i>Reading Glasses</i> , a podcast designed to help you read better. Mallory: Over the past few years, we've figured out why people read. Brea: Self-improvement. Mallory: Escapism. Brea: To distract ourselves from the world burning down. Mallory: And... why they don't. Brea: Not enough time. Mallory: Not knowing <u>what</u> to read.

Brea: And being overwhelmed by the number on their TBR list.

Mallory: And we are here to help you with that. We will help you conquer your TBR pile... while probably adding a bunch of books to it.

Brea: *Reading Glasses.*

Mallory: Every week—

Brea: —on MaximumFun.org.

[Music fades out.]

00:15:41	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. Jeff Vandermeer is a novelist. He wrote the acclaimed book, <i>Annihilation</i> , which was turned into a film of the same name. His newest book is a fantasy novel called <i>A Peculiar Peril</i> . It's a book geared for younger readers, but it's just as wild and fascinating as the rest of his body of work. Let's get back into his conversation with Jordan Morris.
00:16:06	Jordan	Host	I'd love to hear about <i>A Peculiar Peril</i> . I remember reading that you're kind of expanding on a preexisting world that you had created for an anthology series. Talk about the world that this is set in and what made you wanna come back.
00:16:21	Jeff	Guest	Well, it was kind of originally a revisionist Victorian world with this kind of progressive doctor, Thackery T. Lambshead. And the first thing was supposed to be a little self-published chapbook of me and my friends writing some fake disease entries. 'Cause I'm a big fan of using, like, nonfictional forms for fiction. I think that can be a lot of fun. But before I knew it, our friends had told other people and before I knew it, Neil Gaiman was asking me if he could be in this anthology. And we had a 300-page book.

[They chuckle.]

And that eventually found first a small publisher and then a large publisher. And they were literally fake disease guide entries, but everyone had been very ingenious in using the format. So, they—it didn't read like you were just reading a bunch of entries. There was a lot of, like, almost scene-building in much of it. And it was just a lot of fun. So, then we would do readings and we would have like a panel of people. We had one with Neil Gaiman with some other contributor where we were all dressed in lab coats.

[Jordan chuckles.]

And that would be hilarious, because like if you were doing that in a—in a Barnes and Noble or something, people would be walking by who weren't there for the reading, and they would hear the details of something like Ballistic Organ Syndrome. They wouldn't really—*[laughs]* they wouldn't really know what was—whether it was real or not. And then also—

00:17:38	Jordan	Host	Yeah, they'd just be thinking to themselves, "I hope don't that! Jeez!" <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:17:41	Jeff	Guest	Right, exactly. Well, Ballistic Organ Syndrome, by the way, was used in the defense of Constantinople, at one point. But anyway, <i>[laughs]</i> so—so—so there was that, and then there were the details

of Dr. Lamshead's life. And that was set up as kind of a mystery across the two anthologies. Like, his wife had mysteriously died in a car crash, there had been other things that had been going on that were left as unknowns. And I think it's because of that that my imagination eventually turned to his grandson, Jonathan Lamshead, and a situation in the novel where he inherits his grandfather's mansion after his grandfather's death.

You know, the only way he can get his inheritance is by cataloguing the cabinet of curiosities in the mansion. And then everything kind of goes nuts from there. *[Laughs.]* And he winds up finding this alt world—alt Earth called Aurora where Alistair Crowley rules a Franco-Germanic empire with the head of Napoleon as his *[laughing]* military advisor. And on a pneumatic pedestal, no less, 'cause he still has to be—he has to be *[wheezing with laughter]* above everyone else.

00:18:44 Jordan Host
00:18:46 Jeff Guest

Ah, well, naturally! *[Laughs.]*

So, that's kind of where it came from. And you can still find the disease guide, the fake disease guide, in a lot of medical libraries. Some places it's under humor, some places it's actually with the real disease guides, and I get a lot of pleasure out of first year medical students emailing me and saying that they just cracked up when they were looking for a medical guide and they found this beside it. So.

00:19:09 Jordan Host

I think the audience probably can guess this at this point in the conversation, but I'll just go ahead and say that *A Peculiar Peril* is really funny. And it has a very high joke per page ratio. It's legit impressive. And it seemed like this was really, really fun to write.

[Jeff chuckles.]

I wanna ask, is it more fun than writing something that's a little more—you know—moody and horror derived? And the humor, was it—was it part of the DNA all along or did that kind of come out more naturally?

00:19:44 Jeff Guest

That's a really good question. It was naturally part of the DNA. I always thought of it as this absurdist misadventure that would be kind of commenting on quests to some degree, because I just couldn't see writing a normal, serious quest.

[They laugh.]

And I have to say, the writing of it was very intense, because when you have—as you say—that kind of high ratio of jokes and whatnot and kind of like spinning plates, where you're putting another one on top of another one, it's exhausting. So, it was very fun to write, but I wrote it slower than a lot of things. Like, if I wrote a chapter, I was done for the day. *[Laughs.]* I was exhausted. And in this particular case, I did obviously revise for certain things, but that kind of comic density was there from the very beginning and it was kind of the engine that drove things.

And it was something that, in some cases, felt a little more serious and sometimes less so. Like, Crowley is not serious. But the bombast of him feels familiar from the real world, now. And so, it was a joy to write. It was a different kind of satisfaction. Like, I just

finished *Hummingbird Salamander*, this eco-thriller, and I had to channel a lot of dark things into it, but it was very cathartic to write. There was something satisfying in the catharsis. But here, yes, it was a joy. It was just an exhausting joy.

00:21:06 Jordan Host

One of the very *[laughs]* weird, unexpected things in this book is that the villains are kind of alternate universe versions of historical figures. You mentioned—

[Jeff laughs and agrees.]

Alistair Crowley and, uh, Napoleon's head. Talk about using these historical figures as villains and why you thought to do that instead of just, you know, creating an all new evil wizard.

00:21:31 Jeff Guest

Well, you know, ironically I don't usually like historical fiction where we meet, say, President Roosevelt or something. I feel like there's people where you have this image in your head of what they're like. And it's hard then to encounter a novel that has a different image of what they're like. But because it was an alt Earth—so, you're basically dealing with alternate versions of them, alternate personalities—that kind of gave me the in that I was able to write about them. Like, I literally don't think I would have been able to write about those characters in a straight-forward historical novel. But because they're existing in a place with this very wild magic and because they're transformed, that kind of gave me license. It also gave me license to play around with history.

So, I actually know a lot about European history, and I know a lot about European literature and, like, the decadent movement and all these ridiculous writers—some of whom are actually in the text, like Alfred Kubin. And then, of course, more famously and not ridiculously, Kafka. But I didn't worry too much about adhering to, "Well, how would this split off from this in our Earth to create something in an alt Earth like that?" It was more like, "Oh, Napoleon's head is in it. Well, he's not at the same time period as Crowley, but that's okay because they kind of, like, kept him in cold storage as a head."

[They laugh.]

Charlemagne is fine because they've resurrected him from a bog, right? So... and I think one of the—

00:22:53 Jordan Host

[Amused.] And it all makes sense. It all makes sense.

00:22:54 Jeff Guest

Yeah. And Kafka is not a writer. That's another thing I thought about, is I thought about, "Well, what are they doing instead of what they were doing in this world?" So, Kafka is not really a big surprise, but Kafka is actually writing the magical scripts on a wall that defends Prague instead of writing stories. And he's amphibious. Which I thought would just be—I mean, that just seems like a no-brainer.

[Jordan agrees humorously.]

But yeah, so I think it's mostly because I have absorbed so much of this history that I was able to just kind of like come out with the absurdist versions. And I was waiting for reviewers to take me to task for that, but I think it must be working. Because they just kind of went with it.

00:23:34 Jordan Host Your book, *Annihilation*, was turned into a movie. And if the trades are to be believed, there's more adaptations of your work coming. Yeah. And I'm just curious what it's like doing an adaptation of your work? I mean, novel writing is—I imagine—a pretty solitary endeavor, although you know, you have editors and friends helping, obviously. But what is that like, taking something that you did largely on your own and then opening it up to a lot of other cooks?

00:24:06 Jeff Guest Well, first of all, it's extremely surreal that it's even happening. The way my career went is I self-published my first collection after having published maybe 60 stories and selecting what I thought were the best ones. And then my early work—my early novels were published by small presses that were then eventually picked up by commercial presses. And now I'm published by FSG. So, the idea back in the day—like, if someone had come back in time and said, "Eventually there'll be a movie made of one of your books." I would have been like, "I am just working towards being on the remainder table at a chain bookstore."

[They laugh.]

So, there's this unreal element to it still, for me, where I just cannot believe this stuff that got rejected for so long, in many cases, before it got published is even potentially gonna be on the screen. Then, with regard to collaboration—famously, on *Annihilation*, I did not have anything to do with it. But what I did do is I observed the process as much as possible from as many different angles as possible, because I really learn very well from mimicry and I don't like involving myself until I know what it is I'm—you know, what makes sense, how I'm not getting in the way, and things like that. So, the thing that is happening now is that *Borne* has been auctioned by AMC for a series and it's, you know, going out to potential showrunners. And there I'll be more of a creative consultant. So, I'll be creating like the bible, depending on what the showrunner actually has as a vision for the show.

And also, potentially down the line, I might write an episode. But there again, I need to see someone else beginning to turn into something. And then there's another thing where—you know—*Annihilation* was *[laughs]*, hilariously enough, not something where I could track how that process worked, because there was like—literally like almost no lines of dialogue from the novel in the—in the movie. *[Laughs.]* So, I couldn't exactly, you know, track how that happened. So now that process is ongoing, and I will become gradually more submerged in this. But at the end of the day, I'm a novelist and I like to tell stories. And so, it's unlikely that I will become a screenplay writer or anything like that.

00:26:12 Jordan Host I heard you on a podcast called *10 Things That Scare Me*.

[Jeff affirms.]

And this came out in 2019 and you mentioned that one of your fears is that art with a message can't reach people. You have the great example of someone who listens to the Sex Pistols and yet absorbs no values from the Sex Pistols. So, that was released last

00:26:48 Jeff Guest

year and obviously a lot of things have happened since last year. How are you feeling now about including messages in your work? Well, I'm not really trying to deal with the thing we're in now. I think—and a lot of writers are saying this, and I think wisely—it takes a long time to kind of like absorb the thing that's happening now. And so, anyone who's feeling angst about not including that in their work, I think they should not worry it. It's not something for fiction writers right away. It's something that comes out later. But with regard to the messaging, like, *Dead Astronauts*—the last novel I had was the direct result, in some ways, of talking to a radical environmentalism class and somebody raised their hand and said, "Well, I really liked *Annihilation*, but I would have appreciated a more direct environmental book, a more direct message."

And so, I took that as kind of a challenge. Regardless of whether I feel like it will change minds, I thought that the message I was getting—and I got this a couple of times from the younger generation—is that they wanted something more didactic and maybe if it was more didactic, it would have more of an impact. You know, I've always been somebody who wants to lead you into something where you begin to think about it, not throw it in your face. But *Dead Astronauts* is much more didactic and the way I made up for that is by being more poetic at the same time to kind of distill the didactic quality.

And *Hummingbird Salamander* is another vehicle for that in that it's an eco-thriller coming out next year where a woman living a very ordinary life receives something very extraordinary from a dead woman and is plunged into a whirlpool of wildlife trafficking and eco-terrorism—where, again, it allows me to directly deal with these things. And so, I think—I think the jury's out on whether—how direct this influence is, but even on *Annihilation*, I will say that—especially in the last couple of years, there have been a lot of people who have come up to me and said—well, not during the corona virus. Maybe emailed during the corona virus.

[They laugh.]

00:28:42 Jordan Host
00:28:43 Jeff Guest

But they have—they have—they have—
They told you from six feet away.

They told me from afar [laughs]—very afar. But they have young people going into environmental science, is the biggest one that I get. And the subsidiary thing that happens, which is because I talk about the yard on Twitter, the number of people every week who say, "I stopped using herbicides and pesticides," or "I started planting native plants for the wildlife," or things like that. So, it didn't really show up on that show, but there's this subsidiary thing where the novels are the vehicle. The fact that a lot of people read them is the vehicle for being able to... kind of espouse the same values in the nonfictional world. That's maybe where the influence comes from. So, you can't say the novel isn't part of it, because without the novels no one would be listening to me.

They probably shouldn't be listening to me anyway. Especially after reading about giant, talking marmots.

[Jordan laughs.]

00:29:37 Jordan Host But, you know. You mentioned Twitter. I think this is a good segue into talking about your Twitter presence, which I am a big fan of. I recommend everybody follow Vandermeer.

[Jeff chuckles.]

And you have a lot of wildlife photography on there, just things I imagine you're seeing around your house and your yard.

[Jeff affirms.]

And yeah, and every time I see a new animal pop up I'm like, "Ah, Vandermeer's gonna turn that into monster. I just know it."

[They chuckle.]

00:30:23 Jeff Guest Talk about being online. I think a lot of authors aren't or at least a lot of my favorite authors are not very online. But yeah, you always seem to have a good stream of jokes and observations and talking with fans. Yeah. Why is that something you make time for in your day?

Early on, I really had no choice. Like I said, I came out of small press and so I was my own publicist. I was the person going out and talking to bookstores and whatnot a lot of the time. And in fact, I've had good relationships with people at indie bookstores for a long time because of that. But part and parcel of that is that I have—I have had to kind of put myself out there and I feel like it's been part of the fact that, especially early on, what I was writing was very surreal. So, it wasn't easy to describe in like a line or something. So, I had to put in that extra effort. And I think that it just naturally then—it felt natural to continue that kind of relationship through Twitter and Facebook. But also, to have fun with it.

I really don't want to be pitching you my novel 24/7. I want to be engaging in a kind of creative play and having a conversation with people. And what's really hilarious to me is when I started posting pictures from the yard and animals, I thought for sure I would lose *[laughs]* thousands of followers, 'cause it'd been mostly like book recommendations before that. And instead, I'm getting—I think I have 46,000 followers now. And that's like 30,000 more than two years ago *[laughing]* when I started posting the yard photos. So, that was like astonishing to me that people would care.

So, now it's just like finding the right balance. Like, I know some days I post too many photos of baby racoons.

[They laugh.]

00:31:50 Jordan Host You can never have too many photos of baby racoons! I dispute that premise!

00:31:55 Jeff Guest *[Laughs.]* Or like—but then sometimes things kind of suggest story. Like, last week when I discovered that I—there's this rabbit called the—the hashtag is "the traitor Jesse Bun". *[Laughs.]* 'Cause this

traitor was eating my wildflowers. But then last week, as I was videoing the bunny, I realized that it was not the same bunny that I had just seen in the front yard. And that I had been talking to multiple rabbits this entire time.

[Jordan chuckles.]

And so, there's things like that that also feed back into the fiction. Like, that made something click in my head about a story. And knowing the individual animals in the yard, the individual racoons and you know—this house is ridiculous. It's like a treehouse with so many windows that you're always seeing the lives of the wildlife around you. And then the trail cam at night. So, those personalities I find slip into like the talking animals in *Peculiar Peril*, but also sometimes into some of the human characters as well. Because they are individuals and there's something that captures the imagination.

So, it becomes this kind of amazing loop of things where, yeah, I'm kind of entertaining people, but I'm also—in a way—beginning to write.

00:33:07 Jordan Host It must be interesting to be doing your book tour for your new book virtually, in the time of a pandemic. I was wondering what that was like for you? Do you miss book signings and Comicons or is, you know, doing these interviews from the comfort of your home a plus to you?

00:33:28 Jeff Guest Yeah, it's a really interesting question. And it's influenced by the fact that I did a whirlwind tour in December of last year for *Dead Astronauts*, where I hit like seven or eight cities in like two weeks. *[Laughs.]* And... and then went from that to... this.

[They laugh. Jordan affirms.]

And I think it's weird because I like doing live events a lot, but I'm not an introvert so they kind of drain me. I don't get energy from them. So, I thought it would be fine doing things remotely, but it turns out that I really—I really like that live audience reaction. Like, even for serious books, I usually tell funny anecdotes ahead of time or I read a funny bit. And so, you usually get some kind of reaction from that unless you've really tanked.

[They laugh.]

And so, I really do miss that. And I find that things like Zoom actually, in some ways, exhaust me more. Like—or exhausts me in a different way. At the same time, it has opened up so many opportunities, I think. People who... are introverts and don't tour much or don't like doing those things probably feel a lot freer and more liberated doing something on Zoom. So, I don't know. It's something you're still—I'm still in the middle of figuring out. But I did a Zoom thing yesterday where I got to see some writers I really like and have known for a while and it was like—this is just an excuse to see old friends that I can't see otherwise. *[Laughs.]* You know? So.

00:34:56 Jordan Host Well, Jeff Vandermeer, thank you so much for talking to us on *Bullseye*.

00:35:00	Jeff	Guest	Oh, thanks so much for having me. It was a lot of fun.
00:35:02	Jesse	Host	Jeff Vandermeer. His newest book, <i>A Peculiar Peril</i> , is on sale now at independent bookstores all over the country. Jordan Morris, who conducted the interview, also has a new thing out. He's a writer on the brand-new Disney+ space Muppet talk show, <i>Earth to Ned</i> . So, go check that out.
00:35:20	Music	Transition	Thumpy, synth-heavy music.
00:35:23	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is produced from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where our coworker, Kira, just installed fun disco lights in her bedroom. And now, all of her video conferences totally rule.
			The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kawling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.
			You can keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> . I'm on Twitter @JesseThorn . I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.
00:36:14	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>