

Alex Klein  
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Essay 3: Borne

### **Filial Love, Human Morals, and Accepting Death in *Borne* by Jeff VanderMeer**

Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* depicts an apocalyptic city ravaged by biotech creatures, most notably a large flying creature named Mord. Narrator Rachel finds Borne, a mysterious creature who has nine senses, rapidly grows as he eats, and can transform into many different life forms. Rachel and Borne form a close relationship, with Borne growing up under her watch and offering her protection from child gangs and Mord's dangerous proxies. Rachel's partner, Wick, is suspicious of Borne, but Rachel denies that he could be malicious. Wick is a drug dealer who previously worked for the Company, a sinister institution responsible for the creation of dangerous weaponized biotech. Wick's competition, the Magician, attempts to claim back the city by firing missiles at Mord, but gets chased away. Rachel finds out that Borne often disguises himself as her and Wick in an effort to help their relationship, so she kicks him out of Balcony Cliffs. Borne transforms into Mord and goes to fight for the city as Rachel and Wick seek refuge in the Company building from rouge Mord Proxies. Inside, Rachel discovers the Magician, and we learn that Rachel came to the apocalyptic city through the Company's supply portal. Wick, who is not actually a human, erased Rachel's memory of the Company murdering her parents upon arrival. Rachel kills the Magician and witnesses the end of the fight: suffering Borne turns into a sea of flesh and absorbs Mord, both of whom disappear. New life sprouts throughout the city, allowing Rachel and Wick to return to Balcony Cliffs to run an orphanage.

An interesting occurrence in the text is the close and personal relationship between Rachel and Borne. This leaves us wondering, what is VanderMeer trying to portray or illustrate about the novel and greater world through their connection? I will analyze three commentaries on *Borne* in order to further explore this topic. Brian Jones, in his essay “Science Fiction Can Change the World: *Borne* by Jeff VanderMeer,” argues that Rachel and Borne are vehicles for VanderMeer to oppose the human and animal divide present in our world. Showing non-human beings as active figures in the novel, VanderMeer asks us to “admit to the true complexity of and importance of [their] life” in ways that literary fiction, with its focus on human stories and human emotions, typically does not (Jones 5). On the other hand, Jessica Langer, in her essay “Apocalypse Soon”, interprets the relationship differently. First establishing the pronounced parent-child connection between Rachel and Borne, Langer then suggests how the story’s plot defies the expected storyline of such a relationship. Specifically, Borne dies fighting for a better life for Rachel, leading Langer to ask: “who would accept the loss of their child to save themselves?” (Langer 4). Langer resolves this by explaining that Borne is an allegory of the human race’s unbridled consumption. Lastly, Benjamin Robertson’s book *None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* ally’s my argument surrounding Borne’s humanization. Robertson says that because Rachel gave Borne “purpose and meaning” when he was young, Borne was more innocent than if Rachel was not present in his life (Robertson 155). However, due to his destructive nature, “attempts to humanize” Borne by Rachel are “rendered impossible” (Robertson 154).

Rachel and Borne form a filial relationship at the start of the novel, much as Langer and Jones suggest. However, Jones exaggerates their bond, which is eventually complicated by Borne’s multiple non-human traits. Langer points out that Rachel accepts Borne’s violent death with Mord, but rather than the given explanation that Borne represents consumption, I will argue

that Rachel feels she was a successful parent and is content with the inevitable closure she receives with Borne. Neither Rachel or Borne are a bad parent or child; they instead both provide meaning and purpose in each other's life. Although Borne is a dangerous biotech creature that threatens the city, Rachel has taught him human morals, promoting Borne to use his destructive qualities for the good of humanity. Robertson is an ally in his commentary with its relation to Borne's humanization and life purpose. My additional interpretation of Rachel and Borne's relationship takes an important step to better understand the divide between humans (Rachel) and biotech (Borne) in the city, which leads to the inspection of the basis of morality in the novel. Rachel accepts Borne's death not because of their complicated relationship, but instead because her job as a parent is successfully complete.

Before examining how Rachel and Borne's relationship complicates as the text progresses, we must first understand their initial connection: the parent-child love dynamic between the two characters, one of the merits of Jones' argument. From the very beginning, Rachel tells us that whenever she "wasn't scavenging for [herself] or Wick, [she] took care of Borne" (17). Once the mysterious creature starts to talk and interact, Rachel acts a playful mother to young Borne. Rachel makes "time to explore" with Borne, when they often play games and run through the halls of Balcony Cliffs (51). She also addresses Borne's questions, with topics ranging from survival in the dangerous city to the origins of the world and the stars. Jones and Langer's commentaries have merit when they agree with this filial connection. Langer describes Rachel and Borne as a metaphor, stating that they "echo precisely the relationship between a parent and their child" (Langer 3). Additionally, Jones describes the relationship as "where the novel's heart is, and where it derives its real power," and that Rachel and Borne speak towards the "lapsed chances for interconnectivity" between humans and

non-humans (Jones 3, 5). We see a merit of Jones and Langer's arguments: the close loving filial relationship between Rachel and Borne that unifies two different species.

Jones says that Rachel and Borne encourage the reader to "finally admit the true complexity of and importance of" interspecies relationships, but I will show that this is not entirely accurate, a flaw in his argument (5). Their connection as the novel opens is severely complicated by the difference between human Rachel and non-human Borne as Borne grows up. The most prominent example is when Rachel discovers that Borne has "pretended to be [her] and pretended to be Wick because he didn't want us to argue, wanted us to be nice" (VanderMeer 190). Rachel is justifiably very angry at Borne for his actions, but knows that he was in fact just trying to help them. She has conflicting feelings towards her child and his worthiness to trust. Rachel wants Borne to "leave and never come back," (185) yet feels conflicted, in part because she knows that "I would never know anyone like Borne ever again, and even if I saw Borne again it would never be the same" (186). Similarly, Rachel finds it difficult to love Borne because of his trait of lacking human ethics. For example, Rachel discovers Borne's "artwork" when she first enters his new apartment: three dead bodies they had previously found are hanging on Borne's wall. When Rachel speechlessly asks Borne about the dead bodies, he states, "I took them from the crossroads. I thought they would look nice in here... they look peaceful to me... I have rescued them. Now they are safe" (142-143). Rachel asks they be taken down, but Borne never does. Although Borne seems to have compassion in this scenario, his ethics are incompatible with Rachel's empathy for other human beings. Rachel and Borne's relationship falters because of their natural differences. Here we see the flaw in Jones's commentary: their relationship does not fully portray an "interconnectedness of nature" as he initially describes (Jones 5). While still loving Borne for who he is, Rachel is unable to fully embrace her child because of the multiple human ethics and emotions that he lacks.

In order to arrive at a very important point in Rachel and Borne's complicated relationship, and to probe at why Rachel was a successful parent, we must examine Langer's flawed interpretation of Borne's death. At the end of the novel, Borne fights Mord until they both violently disappear, bringing back greenery and nature to the city. Although Rachel is initially "filled with grief of [Borne's] absence," we see that she soon accepts the outcome: "All I wanted is for there to be no great power in the city at all. No Company. No Mord. No Magician. And, in the end, although I loved him, no Borne" (VanderMeer 314, 318). Rachel is optimistic about the future of the new city, living happily with Wick and their orphans. With this in mind, Langer states a very logical and important question: "who would accept the loss of their child to save themselves?" (Langer 4). Langer believes that "it is here the parenting metaphor breaks down," and then going on to explain that Borne is an allegory of the human race's unbridled consumption (4). However, I disagree that showing a message about consumerism is the only answer to the question. Although it may seem that Rachel and Borne disconnect as their relationship complicates, Rachel is still a loving parent until Borne's death. Even though Borne has destructive traits, Rachel is proud of her successful parenting because she was able to instill moral values in Borne to use his power for the common good, which gave Borne a meaningful life and a rewarding time for Rachel.

We must first examine Borne's destructive qualities before exploring his morals. When first obtaining Borne in his lifeless state, Rachel and Wick try to figure out where the creature is from and what it is. One thing is for certain: "it is from the Company," an organization that Rachel describes as "a white engorged tick on the city's flank, the place that had robbed us of resources and created chaos" (11, 19). Wick becomes wary of Borne as Rachel gets more attached to the biotech, arguing that Borne is "concealing its capabilities from you. Already. You have no idea what it might do next. You're telling me its organized and possibly as intelligent as

a dog, and we still don't know" (19). It appears that because of his biotech origin, Borne is thought to be dangerous and destructive, which ends up being the case. Borne gains power similar to Mord and threatens the city for some time. Speaking to Rachel for the last time, Borne admits: "I've stopped trying to be good... It isn't in my nature. I was made to absorb. I was made to kill. I know that now. And it's no use... I'm not *built* like you. I'm not human. I'm not a *person*" (260). Borne, a biotech invention from the Company, clearly can be a dangerous creature.

However, even if Borne is destructive and has an instinct to kill, he is a morally pure creature, uneducated about right and wrong in the world. After giving Borne a disguise so he would be safer, Rachel takes him to look out over the city from Balcony Cliffs. She sees the view as disgusting, but Borne is unaware of the deadliness in the city, prompting Rachel to realize:

*"Borne didn't know it was all deadly, poisonous, truly disgusting. Maybe it wasn't, to him. Maybe he could have swum in that river and come out unscathed. Maybe, too, I realized right then in that moment that I'd begun to love him. Because he didn't see the world like I saw the world. He didn't see the traps. Because he made me rethink even simple words like disgusting or beautiful" (56).*

Rachel understands that Borne is innocent from the beginning, meaning he does not yet know the difference between disgusting and beautiful. Although his destructive qualities liken Borne to an antagonist, he also has not yet been taught about *what to use his destructive qualities for*. Contemplating Borne's killing of the children that attacked her, Rachel reveals an "essential question that kept coming to me out of the darkness... [what] good and decent in Borne could I bring out?" (62).

Through growing up under Rachel's parenting, Borne is humanized in regards to his morals. Here Robertson's interpretation is an ally to my argument. In his commentary, Robertson states that "if Borne lacks the monstrous hardness necessary to fight and defeat Mord, such is the case because he possesses a tiny amount of something else, something from which the planet has turned away from in this age of giant monsters: humanity" (Robertson

155). Robertson alludes that Borne has taken on the ethical knowledge of the correct usage of his destructive power. Ethical and moral are in regards to Rachel and the human reader, as I will later discuss. As a child, the main influence on Borne was Rachel, who, as a human being, taught Borne to use his power towards a moral purpose. We see this is true in multiple cases in the novel, resulting in Borne continually trying to save Rachel. When giving one last plea for Rachel to let him come back to Balcony Cliffs, Borne clarifies: "I try to only kill evil people... I'm getting it under control" (VanderMeer 221). Borne also explains to Rachel that he likes "Mord proxies more now... I'm hunting them down because they want to kill you" (223). From his time looking up to Rachel, Borne has gained the characteristic of having human morals. This unique characteristic of Borne culminates at the end of the novel, when turns against the destructive and powerful Mord. Waking up Rachel in the middle of the night on her and Wick's trek to the Company building, Borne explains that he knows "how to make everything right again" (262). He then runs off to fight Mord, saving Rachel and the rest of the city. While Borne cannot escape his biotech trait to be destructive, Rachel thankfully instills the correct knowledge on *when* to be destructive and/or kill others, which ends up saving her. Borne is not a person, but has the morals of a human.

Now we have all the evidence, claims, and information we need to answer my original question: Rachel accepts Borne's death because her parenting was successful, leading to a life purpose for both her and Borne. There are two parts to this, the first being Borne's purpose. After hearing about Borne's dream of a white light, Rachel asks him his purpose, "the reason... the point of being alive. Were you made for a purpose?... everything has a purpose" (64) Borne cannot answer the question, let alone fully grasp the concept of a life purpose. But as we see, Borne's purpose, as he determined it, became to save humanity and renew the city. As a creature with human morals, Borne knows that fighting Mord is the best way to use his

destructive qualities; Borne is the only power strong enough in the city. Borne says “I can do it. I can make things right,” proclaiming his purpose and final act in life (262). Rachel is a successful parent because she gave Borne this meaning, it was her who taught the child most of what he knows about the world. Here we reach the second part of why Rachel is content as Borne dies. After asking Borne of his life purpose, Rachel ponders her own. Is it simply “to just survive... and wait?” (64). Rachel, as a grown adult cannot contextualize her purpose, until Borne comes along. Not only did Rachel give Borne meaning, but parenting the creature gave Rachel meaning too. Rachel is content that Borne, her child, was able to grow up and change the city for the better, all because of the human morals that she instilled in Borne.

As we have seen, Rachel and Borne’s filial relationship complicates as Borne’s destructiveness evolves. We see Rachel accepting Borne’s death, but not because she is a bad or unloving parent. Instead, Rachel is pleased that she taught Borne human morals and ethics, giving both characters meaning in life. But what exactly are morals and ethics in the novel? What is their basis? In a city ravaged by biotech and mysterious creatures, resided in by humans and Company employees, and fought over by the Magician, it is hard to determine what exactly are morals or ethics in the story. It appears that each species or entity in the novel has its own definition, but one stands out. The novel is told from the perspective of a human: Rachel. It is human morals that the basis of Borne’s choices arise. He learns not to kill “good” people, where “good” is those that Rachel thinks are “good” from a human perspective. This specific view on the city is what causes Mord and the Company to appear evil, because they are evil in the eyes of Rachel. Jeff VanderMeer leaves a clear theme left open for evaluation, detailing that “we all just want to be people, and none of us know what that really means” (320). In *Borne*, this concept is blurred, but we as readers are encouraged to further contemplate what it means to be human and have human morals beyond the text.

Works Cited

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