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# GROWING THE LIVING IN THE LAND

## Weird Ecology in Rob Guillory's Comic *Farmhand*

### ABSTRACT

Weird tales are rooted in gothic, science and speculative fictions but they also engage real science. Rob Guillory's comics series *Farmhand* (2018–ongoing) depicts a discordant relationship between science, perception and ideology through themes related to contemporary farming and bioengineering. This article explores how Guillory's comic utilises weird qualities through realism, creation of atmosphere, and the use of layout and seriality. Further, this analysis considers the ways in which the comics form

enables open-ended and multi-perspective storytelling. Weird devices invite a questioning, reflective but unresolved engagement with contemporary issues, which enables Guillory's comics to imaginatively reconsider normative social structures, ideologies, and the frames which reinforce them.

KEY WORDS: comics, agriculture, the weird, bioengineering, Rob Guillory, ideology

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## INTRODUCTION

Weird tales are rooted in gothic, science and speculative fiction<sup>2</sup> but they also engage real science. H. P. Lovecraft, often considered the founder of the form, emphasised that truth in storytelling creates a firm foundation from which the “marvel” of the weird may sprout. This foundation in the real also explains how weird fiction is able to explore contemporary anxieties. Tim Lanzendörfer suggests that socio-economic and socio-political upheaval saturates weird fiction. He argues that the form enacts “ideological deconstruction, by representing the very way in which ideology erects boundaries of perceptibility and constitutes a reality that excludes large parts of what reality ‘actually’ consists of.”<sup>3</sup> The atmosphere or mood<sup>4</sup> of the weird is therefore associated with feelings of discord and discomfort related to irresolvable tensions between real science, perception and ideology.

Rob Guillory’s comics series *Farmhand* (2018–ongoing) plays precisely with such discordant relationships between science, perception and ideology. The narrative depicts a small family farm that thrived within a short span of time due to the farmer, Jedidiah, choosing a path of bioengineering and high-tech, high-risk practices. *Farmhand’s* unnerving closeness to the real and impossible choices of modern farmers however, also uses the genre of the comic to explore the darker, unethical and potentially unsustainable implications of taking such a direction. Guillory maintains a tone of weird, absurd humour through the central kernel of the plot, in that Jedidiah is biologically fused through his DNA to plants, thus making them able to grow body parts.

Guillory’s weird comic explores contemporary issues of agriculture and bioengineering. This analysis is concerned with how contested ideas related to agriculture, technology and ethics are evoked specifically through the formal devices of the comics genre. This paper argues that weird comics are able to simultaneously embrace and struggle with perspectives, making it possible for them to realistically reflect and completely upend perceptions. Weird qualities of truth, or at least plausibility, and atmosphere in Guillory’s work exemplify that weird fiction can imaginatively reconsider normative social structure and the frames which reinforce them.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, *Farmhand’s* weird reconsiders contemporary acceptance of bioengineering, human normativity, and the frames which construct what is often defined as progress.

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Alder, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*, Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science, and Medicine (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 2–3.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Lanzendörfer, “The Weird in/of Crisis, 1930/2010,” in *The American Weird: Concept and Medium*, ed. Julius Greve and Florian Zappe (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 78.

<sup>4</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” The H. P. Lovecraft Archive, Donovan K. Loucks, revision date 20 October 2009, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/nwwf.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Lanzendörfer, “The American Weird,” 88.

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 TRANSPLANTS AND FARMED BODIES

William J. Grassie argues that the human capacity and desire to evolve, to adapt and to thrive, is an ancient one. Agricultural history has particularly “rescaped ecologies and supported a growing human population. Physical anthropologists discovered that agriculture also changes our genetic make-up.”<sup>6</sup> Such a long relationship of human-land husbandry has established an undeniable kinship.<sup>7</sup> Ideologies about farming, biological science and biological engineering have become increasingly complex and politicised in recent years in response to debates as diverse as global food security, sustainable land management, and genetic engineering. Changes in how we do biology, engineering and husbandry have destabilised the identities and roles of those who work in such industries, and provoked new ethical debates.

The field of human regenerative medicine is one such area of discourse that creates controversy. Biological inspirations and solutions for human health problems, sourced from plants and animals, are its important focus. The extent to which demand outstrips supply of available organs for life-saving transplant across the world, has led to increased economic investment and enthusiasm for the bioengineering or ‘farming’ of cells, muscles and blood vessels in recent years.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, the very first clinical trials of implanting laboratory grown human organs into living patients were conducted. Children and babies were implanted with artificially engineered bladders grown entirely from human cells.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between this kind of groundbreaking research and farming is both a linguistic and a practical one. Cells can be ‘seeded’ and ‘harvested.’ Two of the species most widely farmed for meat, sheep and pigs, have been implanted with laboratory-grown human organs and used as a medium for developing them to a viable size for human use.<sup>10</sup> Such experiments and progression are however complicated by unresolved ethical considerations in regard to the use of animals for these sorts of practices. In light of concerns about the moral and humane treatment of animals, it is not surprising that researchers are increasingly turning to horticulture and seeking plant-based alternative solutions.

<sup>6</sup> William J. Grassie, “Is Transhumanism Scientifically Plausible? Posthuman Predictions and the Human Predicament,” in *Building Better Humans? Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism*, ed. Kenneth L. Mossman and Hava Tirosh-Samuels (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), 478.

<sup>7</sup> Kinship, argues Stacy Alaimo, is inspired by an understanding of physical relatedness, which may “at the very least, deny us the mental or spiritual exceptionalism that underwrites the untrammled use of the rest of the world.” Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures* offers a more thorough exploration of genetics and posthumanism beyond the realms of this paper. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Hiroshi Nagashima and Hitomi Matsunari, “Growing Human Organs in Pigs—A Dream or Reality?,” *Theriogenology* 86, no. 1 (2016): 422–26.

<sup>9</sup> Gretchen Vogel, “Made to Order,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 2010, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/organs-made-to-order-863675/>.

<sup>10</sup> Habtamu Alebachew, “Trends of Growing Human Organ in Farm Animal’s Body, Review Paper,” *Journal of Nutritional Health & Food Engineering* 8, no. 6 (2018).

In 2017 the feasibility of using “the natural architecture of plant tissue,”<sup>11</sup> specifically the vascular system of spinach leaves, as a scaffold for growing human tissue was first tested. This research concluded that: “Plants can be easily grown using good agricultural practices (GAP) and under controlled environments. By combining environmentally friendly plant tissue with perfusion-based decellularization, we have shown that there can be a sustainable solution for pre-vascularized tissue engineering scaffolds.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, this research has proven that it is theoretically possible and will probably be increasingly plausible for plants to be used as a basis for substitutes for certain human body parts. Rather than engaging with the actual complexities of both horticulture and bioengineering relevant to such an example, what is significant for this paper is that current practices in restorative medicine are rushing headlong into the unknown, opening a rich void of potential and possibility for exploration, a space ripe for weird ideological deconstruction.

The title of the first edition in Roy Guillory’s comic series establishes an openness, an ambiguous unknowingness which pervades as an atmosphere throughout the series. *Farmhand. Reap What Was Sown*, Volume 1 (2018)<sup>13</sup> is a title that implies the inevitability of future consequences and yet is simultaneously emotionally indefinite—it could imply triumph or condemnation. Jedidiah Elias Jenkins is depicted on the front cover of the first edition (Figure 1) in the guise of a farmer. Dressed in denim dungarees, he calmly chews a grain of corn whilst pouring water from a watering can onto his fields. This depiction draws from many stereotypes and imagined constructions of mythical farmers. The details of a gun casually stashed in his back pocket, and the green dollars protruding from his side pocket, contextualise this moment in rural North America. A rooster weathervane on top of the budding barn, outside of which stands a small tractor, further suggests that this sequence is not contemporary, distanced as it is from the more familiar images of industrial scale farms of today. Pastel colours dominate the palette creating a muted effect, an intentional device for separating the past from the bold and bright colours used for the narrative present.

The cover image works to exaggerate a notional, idealised agricultural idyll, thereby amplifying the effect of the internal contrast it contains. The crops growing in the foreground of the image around the farmer’s muddy boots are green, human hands connected by blood red vines snaking across the soil, depicted as growing across the field in the way that pumpkins might. Their similarity to a familiar crop, and yet simultaneous strangeness as entirely something other creates “weird juxtapositions,” a form which Mark Fisher frames as “montage—the conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together*.”<sup>14</sup> The montage effect constructed by the

<sup>11</sup> Joshua R. Gershlak et al., “Crossing Kingdoms: Using Decellularized Plants as Perfusable Tissue Engineering Scaffolds,” *Biomaterials* 125 (May 2017): 13–22.

<sup>12</sup> Gershlak et al.

<sup>13</sup> Rob Guillory, *Farmhand. Reap What Was Sown*, Volume 1 (Portland, OR: Image Comics, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, Third edition (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 11.

front cover establishes a form and an atmosphere<sup>15</sup> of the weird, which Guillory sustains throughout the series. Guillory's weird particularly works to construct awkward, difficult and intractable relationships, uncertain alliances and amoral consequences in the storyworld of the comic, many of which parallel existing contemporary debates. "Weird creatures are explorations of the organic basis of life, problematising traditional assumptions about the nature of life and about the relationships between different types of organism."<sup>16</sup> Guillory's fantasy of growing bodies, weighted by social, emotional and ethical dilemmas, interrogates the very constructions which separate humans from other organisms.



Figure 1. Cover of *Farmhand. Reap What Was Sown*, Volume 1 (2018). Reproduced with permission, copyright owned by Rob Guillory Inc.

<sup>15</sup> "Atmosphere entails a dual perspective that describes both the mood of an artistic production and the experience of an environment, whether natural or built. That is to say, atmosphere characterizes the affective quality of environments both internal and external to a text, and the possible relations between them." Graig Uhlin, "Feeling Depleted: Ecocinema and the Atmospheric of Affect," in *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, ed. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer K. Ladino (Lincoln London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 280.

<sup>16</sup> Alder, 160.

The concept of a body-farm growing human organs and limbs offers a wonderfully disorienting, visual reading experience. The imaginative prosthesis-plants offer unlimited *transplants* to those in need, an idealistic fantasy not too distant from the aims of the research outlined earlier in this paper. Although the hand plant creates an unsettlingly weird visual effect, it is not initially threatening, as implied by the relaxed attitude of Jedidiah on the front cover. The hand plant is revealed as just one of many genetically mutated varieties, the result of human stem cells having been interwoven with plant DNA. These plants have a unique connection to Jedidiah. Their growth and transplantation into humans require his presence and they appear to respond to his will. In the comic, the realisation of horticultural solutions to human bodily frailty is depicted in a fanciful way, trees growing arms and bushes growing noses or teeth, and the scientific knowledge related to how such a thing is possible remains a closely guarded secret. Knowledge here offers power, both economic and social, but it also brings responsibility, raising questions of how and for whom should this power be exploited. The instability of secrecy and ethical choices fuels the turmoil surrounding the character of Jedidiah in the comic.

#### ROOTED IN TRUTH: THE FRAMING OF CONTEMPORARY FARMING

H. P. Lovecraft's concern with the plausibility of the weird emphasised the necessity of "careful realism in every phase of the story except that touching on the one given marvel."<sup>17</sup> The "given marvel" in *Farmhand* is the prosthesis-plant. Everything else in the comic, the world and the people around the plant, is grounded in a sense of believability and reality through its insistent connections with contemporary life.

Small-scale family farms today are facing many challenges, both practical and political. Capitalist global models of food distribution pressure farmers to produce more from less land, whilst reducing profit margins for producers. This model is enabled by a "concentration of power"<sup>18</sup> in which strong corporations have established fruitful relationships with largescale, monoculture farms empowering them to control market values and distribution. This "structural overproduction, globalized competition, and externalized costs of industrial processes"<sup>19</sup> unequally control prices, disadvantaging small scale farmers. Simultaneously, farmers are having to negotiate the unpredictable impact of climate change, and respond to the social pressure, driven by both governments and consumers, to increasingly invest in more sustainable practices.<sup>20</sup> The continual pressure to respond to these complex

<sup>17</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction," 20 October 2009, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/nwwf.aspx>.

<sup>18</sup> "A strong bifurcation has emerged between about 65,000 farms making over \$1 million in sales and 1.6 million farms earning less than \$100,000 (USDA ERS, 2018b)." Carlisle et al., 3.

<sup>19</sup> Carlisle et al., 4.

<sup>20</sup> "[S]ustainable agriculture is critical to reducing our carbon footprint, sequestering more carbon in the ground, curbing air and water pollution, conserving water and energy, stemming the loss of topsoil and biodiversity, and restoring habitat for pollinators and

demands, and the high pace at which new agricultural knowledge is developing, is driving forward a high-tech modernisation process. Initial investment in such solutions or research is expensive, whether it is genetically engineered seed, technologically precise monitoring equipment, or labour reducing machinery. Particularly small family farmers are vulnerable to the burdens created by this situation, forcing them to make difficult and potentially risky decisions. Through exploration of precisely these tensions, the comic *Farmhand* visually depicts negotiation of impossible choices and facing the consequences of untenable, high risk practices.

Jedidiah's impossible choices are particularly associated with the question of his authority and control, or lack of, over what the farm yields, and the impact of wider social expectations and criticism over what and how the farm works. Although it is his family farm, what he produces there and how it is managed is not shown to be a personal or individual choice. Rather, the narrative highlights how his responsibility for the land impacts the surrounding community through labour, status and economics.

The interrelation tensions echo moral tensions in the comic. The long-standing rift between the father and the son due to Ezekiel's choice not to be a farmer emphasises the familial and heritage expectations associated with family farms. The notional association of a family being bound to their farmland is made literal through the comic as Jedidiah's DNA is connected to the body plants he grows. The strange uniqueness of his crop provokes both competition and suspicion. The high-tech farm needs security to protect it from research stealing spies. However, the farm also has a visitor centre designed to appear open and reassuring to the public, promoting organ farming as both safe and ethical, "able to deliver safe, transplant-ready farm-grown organs, without the expensive limitations that hampered past bioengineering techniques."<sup>21</sup> The wider moral suspicion of Jedidiah's strange DNA plant, and uncertainty associated with the notion of growing organs, is illustrated particularly through his loss of friendship over his work. The cost of ensuring a successful future for his farm is the loss of a good friend, a priest, who is unable to endorse the ethics of such a project. As a consequence of his work, Jedidiah is depicted as forced to live in an isolated, secretive and confined way. Despite his own belief in the positive benefits of his work, and his own ethical principles, he is surrounded by suspicion and distrust.

*Farmhand* depicts a regular, discordant, sore, farming family struggling to adapt to a contemporary context of rapidly changing agricultural practices and economies, due to unprecedented and unpredictable scientific progress. Particularly important for creating rich and complex realism in the narrative is the interplay between past and present in the storytelling. The historical decisions which led to the

other keystone species (NRC, 2010)." Liz Carlisle et al., "Securing the Future of US Agriculture: The Case for Investing in New Entry Sustainable Farmers," ed. by Anne R. Kapuscinski and Ernesto Méndez, *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 7 (2019), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.356>.

<sup>21</sup> Rob Guillory, *Farmhand. Reap What Was Sown*, Volume 1 (Portland, OR: Image Comics, 2019), 13.

climatic events in the comic are revealed through various flashbacks through a range of characters' perspectives. One illustration of this device occurs at the very beginning of the first edition. The sequence introduces the brother and sister characters of Ezekiel and Andrea by showing them as teenagers. They are depicted out at night trying to tidy up after failing to protect their chickens from a bobcat. Ezekiel wields a gun, and neither child is fazed by the brutalised, bloody chickens on the ground around them. These are rural children, confident and comfortable in nature, familiar with its harsh realities and aware of their responsibilities towards it. These are farm children, accepting and unafraid of the natural inevitabilities of life and death.

Past and present is contrasted as the end of the sequence cuts to a now adult Ezekiel waking up, shifting abruptly from the muted pallet of childhood to the full-colour present time. This leaves both the character and the reader uncertain as to whether the sequence was just a dream or rather a memory, an uncertainty which remains unresolved at the end of the edition. This, as just one of the many unanswered questions in the comic, piques the reader's curiosity thereby inspiring them to continue reading and to seek out the next instalment in order to find answers. The depth of backstory, the uncertainty it constructs and the gradual way in which its significance is revealed, maintain an atmosphere of weirdness. Seriality here enables what Lovecraft described as an "attitude of awed listening,"<sup>22</sup> a suspended state of dread, indefinite wonder and possibility.

#### SPROUTING AMORALITY: MOOD, SERIALITY AND PERSPECTIVE

Weird is not a consolatory form; it replaces a fatalistic totality with a cosmos decidedly not organised around the fulfilment of human narratives or fantasies. The "evils" of weird fiction are amoral and generalised forces; the narratives are not arranged around a binary of good and evil or according to a moral code.<sup>23</sup>

The foundation of very real, contemporary framing for the storyworld in *Farmhand* means that the characters are, to some extent, wrangling with very real questions of morality. However, *Farmhand* also exploits the quality of ideological deconstruction that weird fiction creates, through what Emily Alder calls an atmosphere of "amorality." The following section will explore particularly how the seriality of the comic, and the visual use of perspective exaggerate the absence of a singular, human experience and therefore of a clear morality.

Rob Guillory has published 15 issues of the ongoing series *Farmhand* between July 2018 and May 2020. It was first released in 'floppy,' softback magazine format,

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<sup>22</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," accessed 25 January 2021, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/nwwf.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> Alder, 12.

and later in bound trade editions (collections of five comics). Resisting the contemporary trend towards the graphic novel format (singular complete narrative often in hardback ‘book’ format), Guillory instead chose the ‘nostalgic’ form of serialised comics.<sup>24</sup> Comics seriality serves to enrich the themes and narrative of *Farmhand*, predominately through uncertainty and potentiality. It creates a style of storytelling particular to the form. Each instalment serves to offer a discrete narrative in its own right, but also to inspire the reader to anticipate the next edition. Consequently, each comic must balance resolution against continual uncertainty. Arguably, the serial comics format encourages ambiguity and unpredictability, traits which echo neatly the contemporary state of farming, and further, reverberate with the uncertainties of the contemporary weird. The characters exist within a world of multiple possibilities and choices. The action within each instalment leads to an unstable sense of conclusion. This technique is further amplified through the multiple references to the characters’ histories, which remain (as yet) unexplained or unresolved.

Comics panels and gutters invite an inherent challenge to “linear narrative” according to Theresa Tensuan. Their form instead creates “the excess that refuses cause-and-effect argument, the trace that threatens to unsettle the present’s narrative of its own past.”<sup>25</sup> Martha Kuhlman’s chapter on “Design in Comics” takes this further, reasoning that beyond the narrative level of panel to panel reading, the whole “comics page allows for myriad relationships between the relative size, shape, and positioning of panels and their placement on the overall page surface.”<sup>26</sup> The multidirectional temporal and perspectival connectivity enables comics to tell layered and complex narratives. In the series so far of *Farmhand*, continuous uncertainty particularly in relation to which characters can be trusted, and whose motivations are good or moral, establishes a persistently unnerving atmosphere. This discomfort is furthered through the use of panels and layout to shift perspective and draw associations, reinforcing how all behaviour is interconnected and consequent.

The dream/flashback sequence described above introduces this kind of connectivity. The teenage children notice an eye peering out from the soil, and realise it is a person, later revealed to be their father, buried alive. The page (Figure 2) where the children find the eye has a layout which creates the effect of lingering in that moment. Through the sequence of different panels the characters remain still, emphasising their shock. Rather than panels linked by a sense of consecutive action, they show the characters’ response in the moment from different perspectives. This creates a disorienting collage effect, evoking what comics theorist Thierry

<sup>24</sup> Bart Beaty, “European Traditions,” in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, ed. by Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 59.

<sup>25</sup> Theresa Tensuan, “Difference,” in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, ed. by Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 141.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Kuhlman, “Design in Comics Panels and Pages,” in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, ed. by Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 177.

Groensteen calls “multilayer.”<sup>27</sup> This comics device manipulates panels and layout to emphasise the inexplicable and the uncomfortable. It uses multiple panels to collage chaos, forcing the reader to remain in the disrupted moment and to wrangle with the feeling and experience of uncertainty. Guillory’s pause in action here, not driving the narrative onwards to escape discomfort but to linger in the weird, seems intentionally to emphasise the uncertain atmosphere which pervades the whole series. The possibility of inexplicability is relished. Panel layout is used to encourage reflection, to simultaneously delay and to complicate through multiple perspectives, creating a weird space of potential and wonder.



Figure 2. Page 3 of *Farmhand. Reap What Was Sown*, Volume 1 (2018). Reproduced with permission, copyright owned by Rob Guillory Inc.

The incongruity and weirdness of this sequence offers an open space for interpretations, a suspension of explanation which seriality enhances. Guillory’s depiction visualises an intimacy between humans and biology which we all share. Through the perspective of contemporary ecocriticism, agricultural practices and

<sup>27</sup> Thierry Groensteen and Ann Miller, *Comics and Narration* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 63; quoted in Martha Kuhlman, “Design in Comics Panels and Pages,” in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, ed. Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 183.

bioengineering are both examples of human interference with complex biological systems. New Agrarianism for example, a philosophical branch of ecocriticism focused on farming as a social relationship, fundamentally resists a rural-urban separation, and rather argues that all people and communities have a bond with the land which sustains them, a bond of responsibility, dependency and exploitation.<sup>28</sup> Recognising that earth and the life it bears is one whole, complex, messy network draws attention to the often invisible socio-cultural constructs which serve to impose an illusion of order on this relationship. Guillory's storytelling engages with ethical discourse but resists binary perspectives and resolution.

Implanting living, growing body parts into humans raises ethical controversies for a range of reasons. Jedidiah views himself as a healer and demonstrates conscientiousness through his choice to grow only body organs and not brain-cells. His reasoning for this separation is their potential unpredictability. This self-imposed division between acceptably and unacceptably risky experimentation speaks to the intractable ethical debates which continually factor into scientific research.

Although we are told that patients undergo transplantation willingly, the grown organs in *Farmhand* connect to their new bodies at the command of the farmer, evoking uncomfortable power dynamics. This is particularly drawn attention to through a sequence where they catch a spy who only has one arm, his other is a prosthetic within which he was hoping to hide the samples he stole. He is given a new arm, seemingly against his wishes. In keeping with the prevalence of moral ambiguity, it is unclear whether this is a punishment or a kindness on the part of Jedidiah, but either way it is illustrated as an invasive and painful process. Having been chopped from the arm-tree the arm prosthesis follows the command of Jedidiah. It is able to drag itself across the field towards the patient, leaving behind a trail of blood, before growing teeth at the head of the shoulder which it then uses to attach itself. Whilst the growing of plants for food is generally not concerned with ethical questions, the growing of organs, even from plants, raises rather complex debates. Human organs are associated with humanity and therefore identity and agency, even when they are grown from animal or plant surrogates.<sup>29</sup>

#### SPREADING SEEDS: WEIRD POTENTIAL UNRESOLVED AND INCONCLUSIVE

Modern farming is technologically sophisticated. Increasingly referred to as 'precision agriculture,' be they the latest innovations in GPS controlled tractors, automatic milking robots, or systems for monitoring soil nutrients, these high-tech

<sup>28</sup> W. Major, "The Agrarian Vision and Ecocriticism," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 14.2 (2007), 54.

<sup>29</sup> Eliza Goddard and Susan Dodds, "Ethics and Policy for Bioprinting," in *3D Bioprinting: Principles and Protocols*, ed. Jeremy M. Crook (New York, NY: Springer US, 2020), 43–64.

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solutions for farmers strive to succeed through automation and information control.<sup>30</sup> From assessing weather conditions, monitoring soil nutrients or even recording animal welfare, big data, artificial intelligence and technological interventions are often touted as the only way to gain an edge and secure a future in this vulnerable and complex industry. In such tumultuous times for those in the farming profession, progress is necessarily rapid and often controversial. For example, the use of genetically modified crops is increasing whilst their ethical and environmental impact continue to be debated. Similarly, fistulated cows are being used to further our knowledge of animal nutrition, both for the benefit of animals and humans, despite strong criticism from animal rights activists. As farming takes giant leaps forward thanks to the sparkling new machinery currently making precision agriculture possible, it seems apt to remember that as insightful as looking through a microscope might be, such a precise focus is unable to appreciate the value of a wider network.

As the narrative of *Farmhand* moves into the present, where the majority of the story takes place, Jedidiah Elias Jenkins has modernised his old farm. It is no longer anything like the rustic idyll depicted on the cover of the comic, rather it conforms to the highly modernised, technologically advanced ideal of future farming. In the first edition (July 2018), the adult Ezekiel takes his family back to the farm after a hiatus of what seems to be many years. The discord behind this separation is emphasised as the reader learns that this is the first time the grandson will meet his grandfather, connoting a longstanding rift within the family. The reader shares in Ezekiel's surprise at the gleaming new buildings, the security gate and the parking for field trip groups, as they contrast with the tone set by the front cover, and perhaps with Ezekiel's memories of the farm. This is no ordinary farm but rather a progressive, futuristic, high-tech laboratory. Even the hayride doesn't use real hay. These subtle ironies which poke at the incongruity between traditional and modern agriculture are intentionally playful and humorous, but also unsettling. For example, their guide for the tour invites them to "sit back and enjoy this one-minute highly expensive theatrical retelling of our farm's rise from its humble beginning—to its current place as a trailblazer on the frontier of pharmaceutical stem cell research."<sup>31</sup> The intentional pun and the explicit reference to the tour as expensive theatre encourages the reader to laugh at the irony and ridiculousness of the situation.

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<sup>30</sup> James E Addicott, *The Precision Farming Revolution: Global Drivers of Local Agricultural Methods* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Guillory, 11.



Figure 3. Page 11 of *Farmhand: Reap What Was Sown*, Volume 1 (2018). Reproduced with permission, copyright owned by Rob Guillory Inc.

One of the ways in which the irony and tensions within this sequence are further highlighted is through Guillory's use of the splash page (Figure 3). Rather than panels, the track for the hayride guides the reader's eye along the sequence, which uses the convention of a procession<sup>32</sup> to imply the gradual movement of the tour, and to contrast the hayride pace of motion with the barrage of colour and information produced by the virtual tour projected onto the walls. The images both illuminate through their colour, and construct through their shape, the sense of the tunnel which they seem to be driving through. Their large scale, towering over their audience, emphasise the ideologies constructed by the narrative they present as dominant. The conversation between the family peters out as the voiceover takes over. The tour retelling of the farm's history includes a fictional, idealised family and Jedidiah proudly announcing: "I'll never let anything come between this family. By God, I swear it."<sup>33</sup> As the reader already knows about the divide within the family, we distrust

<sup>32</sup> Evan B. Thomas, "What Else Is a Comic?: Between Bayeux and Beano," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies*, ed. by Frederick Luis Aldama (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Guillory, 11.

the tour version of the farm's development all the more, enhancing the feeling that the hayride is heading towards a sense of foreboding. This feeling sits in contrast however with the tone set by the event of the hayless-hayride as a playful, ridiculous theme-park ride. The dramatic, visually dominant depiction the reader experiences is not the one the characters share. They sit rather comically disorientated, in the trailer of the tractor listening to and watching the tour through what seem to be virtual reality goggles. The discord and unreliability of past and present, truth and spin, safety and uncertainty cohere through this unnerving and yet comically inappropriately whimsical ride.

The tour continues onto the following page (also a splash) where the full wonder of the farm is revealed. The hand-vines from the cover image are exposed to be part of a much greater variety of hybrid species. A tree able to grow arm-branches, kidney-tubers growing like potatoes, and teeth-tulips and nose-roses are in bloom. The farmland however, is well contained. Constructed beds separate the different varieties, and are surrounded by clean, white walkways. The farmers tending these crops are similarly divided, some are dressed in the distinctive nostalgic dungarees from the cover image, while others wear white coats and carry clipboards. Modernisation of the farm has distanced the plants from the land, depicting them instead inside what seems like a high-tech scientific research laboratory.

This modernisation corrupts the notion of farming, bringing the character and the morality of Jedidiah particularly into question. It serves to frame the sequence within the contemporary developments in farming such as those described earlier of high-tech precision resource management and monitoring, and laboratory engineered genetic design. Reinforcing the constructed separation from the past and from what is depicted as old-fashioned farming also serves to expose an unsettling separation from the notion of truth as an idealised but impossible singular interpretation. From the outset, the reader recognises that the welcome tour to the shiny, modern farm is an untrustworthy spin. This is just one of the many ways in which the comic draws our attention to questionable, uncertain, amoral or conflicted ideologies. It is precisely in such spaces between what is certain and what is not that the potential playground space for the weird resides. The comic's story arc continues in an unresolved narrative, just as ethical and social concerns around agriculture and genetics remain unresolved.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis has attempted to explore just some of the ways in which the comic *Farmhand* exploits devices of weird fiction. Framed by specific, controversial and intractable debates in wider society related to scientific 'progress,' Guillory's comics create an atmosphere which feels both unnervingly plausible and entirely fantastical. Playing surprisingly in the space between these binaries is fundamental to the creation of weirdness in the comic. In her summary of the history of the contextual development of weird fiction, Emily Alder asserts that: "At stake was the question of

the validity of different kinds of knowledge; borderlands existed in the gaps between confidence that the scientific method led to truth and establishment of what that truth was.”<sup>34</sup> Weird fiction grows in the fissures between different ways of thinking, querying their boundaries through its imaginative exploration of this boundary space.

Paraphrasing Jason Dittmer, Filippo Menga and Dominic Davies argue that “in comics, formal infrastructures such as [m]ontage and the gutter provide disruption and reconfiguration of meaning through their radical Openness; they literally create geographical space for the reader to produce their own narrative.”<sup>35</sup> Consequently, weird comics are able to ambiguously and impishly occupy the edges of familiar. They thrive by prodding brutally and ferociously at tender topics and feeding off the collisions this creates, and yet weird comics resist confrontation because they only exist in uncertain spaces of potential, in the borders. Contemporary farmers are caught in a mesh of conflicting and complex economic and ideological challenges, which bring to the forefront tensions between tradition and future, family and business, and between social and environmental demands. Rob Guillory’s inventive and weird *Farmhand* presses upon many tender debates connected with contemporary land management and scientific bioengineering. These debates will rage onwards in an incomprehensibly complex and ultimately unanswerable way, just as I personally hope that the comics series will too. ▣

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<sup>34</sup> Alder, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Filippo Menga and Dominic Davies, “Apocalypse Yesterday: Posthumanism and Comics in the Anthropocene,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 3, no. 3 (September 2020): 663–87.

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