

AVALON

MINDEE ARNETT

ABOUT THE BOOK

Most of the star systems that make up the Confederation lie thousands of light-years from First Earth—and out here, no one is free. The agencies that govern the Confederation are as corrupt as the crime bosses who patrol it. Jeth Seagrave and his crew of teenage mercenaries have survived in this world by stealing unsecured metatech, and they're damn good at it. Jeth doesn't care about the politics or the law; all he cares about is earning enough money to buy back his parents' ship, Avalon, from his crime-boss employer and getting himself and his sister, Lizzie, the heck out of Dodge. But when Jeth finds himself in possession of information that both the crime bosses and the government are willing to kill for, he is going to have to ask himself how far he'll go to get the freedom he's wanted for so long.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel begins and ends with Jeth longing for freedom. How does he define freedom? How does his understanding of freedom change over the course of the novel? What does freedom mean to you?
2. What is the significance, both explicit and symbolic, of the title of the novel? What does "Avalon" mean to Jeth, and how does this change over the course of the novel?
3. Jeth seems to consider Avalon's crew to be his family, but he still mourns the loss of his parents and cherishes his sisters (one of whom he has just learned about). In your opinion, what is a family? How is his definition of family similar to or different from your definition?
4. The ITA (Interstellar Transport Authority), a for-profit organization, controls "all aspects of space travel" in the world of AVALON (3). What are the benefits to society when a single organization wields this much power? What are the downsides to this model?
5. A common maxim states that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." How does AVALON explore this idea?
6. In the world of AVALON, two methods exist for travel through metaspace: the first, with ITA-controlled gates, like toll roads through space; the second, with devices called metadrives, installed on individual ships. Though the metadrives are not as powerful as the gates, they offer a significant perk: the ability to travel anonymously. How important is the ability to operate anonymously and the right to privacy? Who should have the assurance of privacy protections? What parallels can you draw to our real world?
7. How does Jeth describe the brain implants worn by the Malleus Brethren and the Malleus Guard? Why does he find both types of implants terrifying? Hammer presents Jeth with an ultimatum: prove his loyalty to Hammer, or be fitted with a Guard implant. What would you do if you were in Jeth's shoes?
8. The brain implants worn by the Malleus Brethren supposedly give these elite soldiers "a form of swarm intelligence" (48). What benefits can you envision for this sort of collective intelligence? What are the drawbacks?
9. Jeth and his crew are a band of teenage thieves who have had to work from a young age. How does the novel explore the theme of lost childhood? What marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence? When does adulthood begin?
10. Science fiction stories set in outer space often explore how space can seem both liberating and cage-like. How does AVALON explore this tension?
11. In the world of AVALON, humans have colonized far-flung parts of the universe. What are some of the consequences of this colonization? What do you imagine human settlement beyond Earth might be like?
12. In AVALON, human contact with extraterrestrial life results in the exploitation of an alien lifeform for human needs. We also learn that the ITA plans to breed Cora to replace the failing metatech. What is your reaction to Marian saying that the use of the Pyreans in metatechnology is slavery? In a universe of alien or bioengineered lifeforms, who is entitled to human rights?
13. Since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), science fiction has explored the relationship between the human and the monstrous in the technological age. Who are the monsters in AVALON? What role does technology play in creating and sustaining the monsters?
14. With science fiction, as with many other genres, readers are often well-versed in the conventions of the genre. What other works of science fiction have you read or watched (for example: movies, television shows, books, video games, graphic novels)? What science fiction conventions does AVALON revisit and reimagine? How did your previous exposure to science fiction affect your reading experience and interpretation of the novel?
15. Science fiction imagines what-if scenarios about scientific or technological developments. In other words, it is a genre primarily about ideas. For scholar Farah Mendlesohn, this means that readers can interpret works of science fiction in many different ways, depending on their beliefs and points of view. From what different points of view can we interpret AVALON? What evidence does the novel provide for these different readings?
16. According to the Mexican science fiction writer Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, science fiction is "an artform that, paradoxically, analyzes and criticizes the technoscientific era from which it comes. In reality, science fiction is . . . about contemporary man, about what we are . . . here and now." How does this statement apply to AVALON? What contemporary issues, technological or otherwise, does the novel grapple with?

SLJ Best
of 2014!

