

Wake

Robert J. Sawyer

Caitlin Decter is fifteen, a math genius, and has been blind since birth. She has an experimental device inserted behind one eye. But, instead of seeing our world, she sees the World Wide Web as if it were a real place. Caitlin detects an emerging intelligence on the web. She decides to be Annie Sullivan to its Helen Keller and bring it up out of the dark.



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The following questions should stimulate an interesting group discussion. Please note that they reveal much of the novel's plot; to preserve your reading pleasure, please don't look at these questions until after you've finished the book.

1. Do you think a Webmind could evolve on the World Wide Web?
2. *Wake* is structured in a series of parallel, thematically resonant storylines. Did that structure work for you? How was Hobo like Webmind? How was Sinanthropus like Caitlin?
3. Why do people adopt different personae on the Web? (Caitlin is Calculass, Wong Wai-Jeng is Sinanthropus). We see how these personae can be used for good. But in real life, too often we see how they can be used by sexual predators and con men. If

we could, should we make the Web no longer anonymous?

4. Do you agree with Caitlin that all information should be free? The University of Tokyo funded the development of the eyePod and paid for Caitlin's operation. Are they entitled to a return on their investment?

5. Do you use the Internet for banking? Shopping? Gambling? Do you use it to download movies, music, or software for free when you know you should really be paying for it?

6. How successful are the characters at communicating with each other even though they may not be the same species? (Hobo and Shoshana, Hobo and Virgil, Caitlin and her dad, Sinanthropus and his blog readers, Caitlin and Webmind.)

7. ApeNet, Steven Pinker, Stephen Wolfram, and the National Science Foundation (NSF) are all real — Harl Marcuse and his Institute are not. Does the mixing of fact and fiction, in an area you may know nothing about, worry you? Given this book is fiction, do you think that Sawyer makes it clear when he is stating fact?

8. Sawyer touches on the politics of science. Are you surprised at the infighting, money grubbing, and the “cult of personality” that exists underneath the impartial surface of the scientific community?

9. We see what a boon the Internet is to Caitlin, who has been blind since birth. What other groups benefit from the interconnectivity of the Web?

10. Do you believe that Homeland Security or other organizations are reading all your email? If so, are you careful about what you say in your email, or on your blog or website?

11. *Wake* takes place in China, Japan, Israel, the USA, and Canada. Very disparate places, and yet in instant contact with each other on the Web. Has

the Web made the world a smaller place? Has the Web made the world a safer place?

12. There's a lot of science in *Wake*. Were you able to follow Sawyer's explanations for concepts like: Zipf plots, Shannon Entropy, and cellular automata? Did the science make the book more interesting, or did you find it distracted from Caitlin's story?

13. Have you used the websites Sawyer refers to in *Wake*? (Wikipedia, Project Gutenberg, Cyc, YouTube, Google Images.) Are there any others you think that the Webmind should be shown?

14. Do you relate to the *Apollo 8* references at the end of the book? Was it before your time? Or, perhaps of no interest to you? Or, do you get choked-up, like Anna Bloom does, when you see a picture of the Earth taken from space? If you don't feel the emotion yourself, is it enough that Anna does?

15. Caitlin wants to be Annie Sullivan to Webmind's Helen Keller. In *Wake*, Caitlin turns 16 at the end of the book. How likely is it that she will be a guide/friend to Webmind for the rest of her life, as Annie was to Helen? And given that Webmind is not human, what will happen after Caitlin dies?

Robert J. Sawyer — “Canada's dean of Science Fiction,” according to **Booklist** — is one of only seven writers ever to win all three of the science-fiction field's top awards for best novel of the year: the Hugo, which he won in 2003 for *Hominids*; the Nebula, which he won in 1996 for *The Terminal Experiment*; and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, which he won in 2006 for *Mindscan*. He's also won the top SF awards in Canada, France, Japan, China and Spain. A popular keynote speaker as well as a bestselling author, Rob lives just west of Toronto with his wife, poet Carolyn Clink.



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