

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



BUILDING 903

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reread Chapter One and describe the mood and tone of the story. Then, identify and discuss specific words, phrases, and passages that set the mood you described.
2. The future world of *Building 903* is very different from our current world—or is it? As you read, discuss aspects of the story that strike you as familiar. Conversely, how does the author convey a dystopian sense of the world of 2046? Track and discuss examples of both as you read. (Teachers, if students are not familiar with the hallmarks of dystopian fiction, lead a lesson before beginning *Building 903*. This resource will help in your lesson planning: readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson926/DefinitionCharacteristics.pdf)
3. Throughout the story, we encounter descriptions of state-sanctioned laws, rules, and expectations placed on the citizens of this world. For example, one of the expectations is that group size be limited: "Each day she walked this path, laughing, with Stephanie and the other girls they collected along the way, always careful to maintain the approved group size" (p. 176). Why would the government feel the need to set limits on group size? What other laws seem arbitrary, cruel, or ridiculous? Why do you think these laws are in place? Who do they benefit?
4. On page 163, we learn that, "Almost every adult citizen had one or two inked reminders of their Punishable offenses." Why do you think the author chose to capitalize the P in the word punishable? Draw connections to examples in history that used tattoos as suppression and intimidation, such as Nazi Germany. Then, revisit page 183, where Tessa realizes "...she was beginning, actually, to *question* those laws, but the very uncertainty of that—the possibility that everything she had obeyed and believed in might be wrong—was so unnerving that she tried to put it all out of her mind." Why can questioning long-held beliefs be "unnerving"?
5. Page 25 describes some examples of LifeChange age designations: "age twenty-seven. Twenty-seven was huge. Voting privilege. Marriage, if she chose it. And: work. Her records would be reviewed for each of those events, and she could read them." Discuss the government aspect of control in this description. How does our current world impose similar age restrictions and allowances? Which ones make sense to you? Examples to discuss might include: the legal age to drive, work, drink alcohol, marry, or register for military service. Which laws seem sensible? Which ones seem arbitrary or contradictory?
6. Explain or review the literary device *foreshadowing*. Many examples of foreshadowing appear in *Building 903*, such as this example found on page 80: "Miriam was a person who had committed some serious violations, who had taken risks, and who had wanted Tessa and her family to...*what?* Become aware of...*something.*" Challenge students to identify additional examples of foreshadowing. How does the author use this device to build suspense?
7. A sense of fear looms over this world—a world where no person is safe from the eyes and reach of the government and their leader, Koziris. Discuss examples of how the author explicitly or implicitly creates a sense of fear throughout the story.
8. Theo, like his and Tessa's father, has the highest cognitive status given to the citizens of this world: X-Cogni-Superior. Tessa and Miriam are another status, Cogni-Plus. Other people are Cogni-Av. Do you think that labeling people based on intelligence is good and fair, or the opposite? How does our society place people in categories based on intelligence and/or academic ability? What are the pressures and traps of being labeled based on intelligence?
9. When Tessa's father reveals that he believes Theo has somehow transported himself into a book, Tessa and her mother cannot understand how such a thing could be possible. Discuss the transportive power of story. For a person like Theo, with superior intelligence, why do you think his introduction to the story led him to being on the deck of the whaling ship?
10. On page 71, Ginia is shocked to see the contents of Miriam's boxes. In this future world, books are illegal. Why would a government outlaw the owning or reading of books? Who gets to decide what a person chooses to read? Discuss the rise of book bans in schools and libraries over the past decade.
11. As Tessa's father tries to help Tessa and Ginia understand his experience of reading a story, he focuses on the author's words and use of language: "I think this was a way of trying to make the language—well, rhythmic, and beautiful. It's hard to describe, but I found the words fascinating. I couldn't stop reading it. I lost track of time" (p. 101). Discuss a time in your life when you were so engrossed in a story that you lost track of time. Share titles with classmates that fired your imagination and took you on a literary journey of the imagination. What do you think Miriam meant by telling Tessa and her father that she had given them "access to a journey" (p. 114)?

12. On page 117, Theo describes his reaction to being handed a book: "I was curious. I'm always curious. Sometimes it gets me into weird situations. And I felt pretty strongly that this was going to be one of those times, even magnified, possibly dangerous." Being illegal in their world, it's understandable why Theo would be hesitant to open, or even touch, a book. Discuss the benefits of human curiosity, even in the face of danger. Discuss examples in history of how curiosity, even in dangerous situations, has furthered humanity. (Examples could include, the Age of Exploration, the Wright brothers flying at Kitty Hawk in 1903, the first manned space missions, etc.)

13. Reread pages 119 and 120. How do you explain both Theo's and Penn's intense reactions to the passage from page 173? In explaining the experience, Penn tells Tessa and Ginia, "Well, it has to do with the ability to feel yourself inside another situation" (p. 124). How does this description compare to experiencing empathy? How can reading fiction help you learn to empathize with others?

14. Why do you think Miriam directed Theo to pray as a way to get back home? Reread pages 213–216. Describe in your own words what Theo experienced as he prayed on the ship's deck. How is prayer tied to imagination?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Fibonacci Crackers.

On pages 106 and 107, Tessa's father describes a memory of one-year-old Theo putting together a "sequence that first appeared in Indian mathematics in 200 BCE" using a handful of crackers. This is called the Fibonacci sequence. Introduce students to the Fibonacci sequence and its importance in mathematics by conducting math and art activities to connect the sequence to the world. The following resources provide information and suggested activities:

mensaforkids.org/teach/lesson-plans/fabulous-fibonacci/

fractalfoundation.org/resources/fractivities/fibonacci-sequence-and-spirals/

Going on a Journey.

Miriam tells Tessa and her father that she had given them "access to a journey." As you now know, she gave them books. Write a one-paragraph essay explaining how books can take a reader on a metaphorical journey. Use examples from your own reading life to make your ideas vivid and powerful.

Inventions of a Future Science Fair.

In *Building 903*, the author describes everyday items that seem like the stuff of science fiction, such as robotic pet dogs. In a small group, design a product of the future. Create a vision board, using both text and pictures, to display your invention. As is customary in an actual science fair, set the boards up around the classroom and give students time to examine each display. Have groups take turns presenting their inventions to the class.

What If?

Discuss the power of the simple phrases "what if" and "suppose that." Use your imagination to complete five sentences using these phrases, such as, What if every country promised to contribute to ending world hunger? Or: Suppose that every person I meet today might, one day, become a friend. Upon completion, share your imaginings with a fellow student. To extend this activity, choose one line and expand the idea into a one-paragraph essay, poem, or drawing.

A Whale of a Tale.

As students read through *Building 903*, set aside time in the day to read aloud *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. As you read, stop often to discuss the author's use of descriptive language, imagery, and themes. Pay particular attention to passages that relate to Theo's experiences on the ship. At the book's conclusion, students can illustrate a scene that most fired their imaginations. The following links will connect you to the novel in its original form and also an abridged version:

<https://www.harpercollins.com/products/moby-dick-collins-classics-herman-melville?variant=44065185529890>

[waterstones.com/book/moby-dick-kid-classics/ma-t-schmitt/margaret-novak/9781951511302](https://www.waterstones.com/book/moby-dick-kid-classics/ma-t-schmitt/margaret-novak/9781951511302)

Note: For the original, unabridged Moby Dick, the recommended reading age is 14 years and up. For younger readers, illustrated or abridged retellings may be more appropriate.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In a not-too-distant future where the government of an all-powerful dictator controls nearly every aspect of one's life, 14-year-old Tessa is grappling with the sudden and mysterious disappearance of her twin brother, Theo. Many weeks go by until Tessa receives three boxes of books from her 135-year-old neighbor Miriam, just before she is taken away to an ElderCare facility. Tessa learned about these mysterious objects in school, but since the government banned books long before Tessa was born, even holding one is a punishable offense. When she shows her mother the contraband materials, she realizes the family is in danger. What she doesn't know is Miriam also gave her father a single volume of a novel that will unlock a secret that society has long suppressed: that stories power the imagination, and are thus sources of great power. Can this book be the key to saving Theo, and perhaps the world?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lois Lowry is the author of more than fifty books for children and young adults, including the *New York Times* bestselling Giver Quartet and the popular Anastasia Krupnik series. She has received countless honors, among them the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award, the California Young Reader Medal, and the Mark Twain Award. She received Newbery Medals for two of her novels, *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*.



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