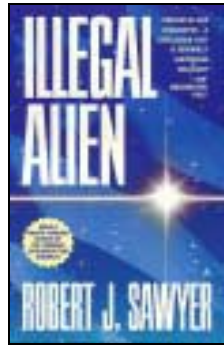


# Illegal Alien

## Robert J. Sawyer

*Illegal Alien* is a courtroom drama with an extraterrestrial defendant. An alien starship arrives at Earth. Its crew is welcomed by humanity, until one of them — Hask — apparently kills Cletus Calhoun, the popular host of a PBS science show. Dale Rice, a civil-rights attorney, defends Hask in a parable about racism in the courts.



ACE BOOKS, New York

US\$5.99 • Cdn\$7.99 • ISBN 0-441-00592-6

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. *Illegal Alien* clearly takes as its inspiration the O. J. Simpson criminal trial (indeed, Simpson prosecutor Marcia Clark makes a cameo appearance in the book). In what ways does "the trial of the Centauri" differ from "the trial of the century"? Are the parallels only on the surface, or do they run deeper? Defense attorney Dale Rice argues that the not-guilty verdict for Simpson was just. Do you agree with his analysis?

2. When Hask is questioned by the forensic psychiatrist, Dr. Lloyd Penney, he presents the Tosok party line about religion, even though, as we subsequently discover, he personally does not share those views, and even though

no other Tosoks are present. Why does he do this? Tosoks can tell when humans are lying, because they see into the infrared. It's never said if Tosoks can tell whether they are being lied to by another Tosok. Does the evidence suggest that they might have this ability? Is Hask deliberately lying to Penney?

3. Who presents the more compelling case in *Illegal Alien*, the prosecution (Linda Ziegler) or the defense (Dale Rice)? How much does slick lawyering matter in the search for justice? Hask is both a celebrity and a minority; the former traditionally gets preferential treatment under the law whereas the latter often gets poorer treatment. What does Hask get?

4. The jury in *Illegal Alien* decides on jury nullification: they deliver a verdict clearly at odds with the law and the evidence presented. Real juries do in fact have this power, although, as the novel explains, it is rarely made known to them. Should juries have the right to disregard the law for the sake of what they see as a higher justice?

5. Tosok religion figures prominently in the novel. It includes the proposition that the Tosoks themselves are the non-divine product of evolution, but that divinely created beings must exist elsewhere. Does the Tosok religion seem internally consistent? Also significant in the novel is the unusual Tosok body plan, especially the strong front hand and weak back hand. Does the Tosok psychology Sawyer portrays seem reasonable given Tosok religion and physiology?

6. Sawyer is a Canadian author, and usually sets his novels in Canada. But *Illegal Alien* is set in Los Angeles. Canada does not have the death penalty, but the U.S. does. Would the novel have played out differently if Sawyer had set it in his homeland, and the only threat to Hask had been imprisonment, rather than execution? Does the novel seem to take a position on the righteousness of the death

penalty? Does Sawyer's outsider's view of U.S. justice seem fair?

7. No dates are given explicitly in the novel, but it's possible to determine when the book is set from the action portrayed. When does *Illegal Alien* take place? (Hint: the solar eclipse shown in Chapter 5 is a real one.)

8. The non-human Hask stands trial during the book, and, at the end, we learn that the other Tosoks will be tried by the Twirlers and other aliens. Recently, immigrants to North America have been charged with assault after hitting their children, even though that is normal parental discipline in their homeland, and we've read about the outrage when a U.S. student was caned in the Philippines. Is it reasonable to try members of one culture by the standards of another culture?

9. What did you think of the characters? Is Dale Rice an ethical lawyer? Did Cletus Calhoun seem like he'd make a good TV host? Did Frank Nobilio adequately represent the needs of the American people? Was Drucilla Pringle a fair and impartial judge? By the end of the book, Hask was obviously pretty sympathetic — but was he so during the trial?

10. When all is said and done, is *Illegal Alien* a condemnation or a celebration of the legal system?

**Note:** *The Globe and Mail*: Canada's National Newspaper named *Illegal Alien* "the best Canadian mystery of the year."



**Robert J. Sawyer** is the only writer in history to win the top SF awards in the U.S., Canada, Japan, France, and Spain. His novels include **Flashforward**, **Factoring Humanity**, and **The Terminal Experiment**. Born in Ottawa in 1960, Rob lives in Toronto with his wife, Carolyn.

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