

Frameshift

Robert J. Sawyer

Pierre Tardivel, a young French-Canadian geneticist, knows his life will be cut short by Huntington's Disease. But even though he will be dead soon, someone is trying to kill him. Meanwhile, Avi Meyer, a Nazi hunter, thinks that Tardivel's boss, an expert on Neanderthal DNA, might be the infamous Ivan the Terrible from the Treblinka death camp.



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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. The John Demjanjuk trial really happened as outlined in *Frameshift*. With the exception of Avi Meyer, all the characters portrayed in the Jerusalem trial scene are real people, saying things they actually said during the trial. Is it appropriate to blend fact and fiction like this? And are the parallels Sawyer raises between the Demjanjuk trial and both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Judgment at Nuremberg* fair? Likewise, how appropriate was Sawyer's invoking, elsewhere in the novel, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech?

2. The novel makes the case that it is in fact cruel to diagnose someone with the gene for a serious genetic

disorder that hasn't yet manifested itself if there's nothing that can be done to prevent the onset of the disease. Would you want to know if you had the gene for Huntington's disease?

3. Sawyer seems to believe strongly that socialized medicine is the only solution that makes sense in the genetic age. Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?

4. A few critics have suggested that Sawyer is unfair to men in this book, since the isolated glimpses of some of their minds that we see through Molly's telepathy are quite distasteful. Does Sawyer's take on men's private thoughts about women ring true?

5. The novel's structure is unusual: it starts with neo-Nazi Chuck Hanratty's attack on Pierre Tardivel, and then about half the book is a series of flashbacks, going as far back as 1944, leading up to that event. Was this an effective way to structure the book? In interviews, Sawyer has said he tried drafting it three different ways: (1) in straight chronological order, starting with the Treblinka scene, and without the Hanratty attack occurring until its natural point in the narrative; (2) with the Treblinka scene as a prologue preceding the attack by Hanratty; and, (3) as presented in the final book, beginning with the attack, then flashing back to Treblinka. Did Sawyer choose the most effective sequence? On a related note, there are chapters that were cut from the novel detailing Pierre and Molly's lives before they met; the full text of these chapters is at www.sfwriter.com/frlc.htm. Was Sawyer right to cut these chapters from the book?

6. *Frameshift* has several different plot elements: the Treblinka/Demjanjuk arc; the Klimus and Amanda-clone arc; the insurance-company arc; Pierre's Huntington's disease; Molly's telepathy; and the discovery of a new layer of information coded in our DNA. Do you think they intertwine well? Were all of them necessary? (Hint: see the *Frameshift*

structural analysis on Sawyer's web site at www.sfwriter.com/frstruct.htm for the author's own take on this question.)

7. Molly wanted to marry Pierre despite knowing that he would become extremely disabled in only a few years. Would you have made the same choice Molly did?

8. The novel touches on some of the moral quandaries raised by human cloning, in particular the question of who owns a clone. What impact do you think the ability to create clones will have on society? Should human cloning be banned?

9. Many readers assumed that because Pierre is a geneticist, he will find a cure for Huntington's disease before the novel is over, thereby saving himself. This doesn't happen. Did Sawyer make the right decision? Is the end of the book a downer or is it uplifting?

10. There's a religious subtext to the novel, especially in the notion that the broad strokes of humanity's development had been planned out by a creator. Can the hard scientific worldview portrayed in the novel ever be reconciled with matters of faith?

Robert J. Sawyer — "the dean of Canadian science fiction," according to *The Ottawa Citizen* — 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**, **Illegal Alien**, **Factoring Humanity**, **Calculating God**, **Starplex**, and **The Terminal Experiment**, which won the Science Fiction Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of the Year; he's also won an Arthur Ellis Award from the Crime Writers of Canada. Born in Ottawa in 1960, Rob lives in Thornhill, Ontario (just north of Toronto) with his wife, poet Carolyn Clink.



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