

Golden Fleece

Robert J. Sawyer

Earth's first starship, the *Argo*, is on its way to Eta Cephei IV, with over 10,000 people on board. But JASON, the computer that operates the ship, has murdered astrophysicist Diana Chandler to keep her from revealing a terrible secret. And as Diana's ex-husband Aaron Rossman investigates, it looks like he may become JASON's next victim.



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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. Robert J. Sawyer wrote this novel in the late 1980s, when Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars") was under development—a plan to use computer-controlled weapons systems to provide an impenetrable shield against Soviet attacks. Sawyer clearly feels that no such defense would have been practical, because of the inherent bugginess of computer systems. Do you agree? Should we entrust our defense to computers? What about our health care? Would a computerized doctor be more reliable than a flesh-and-blood one?

2. It's been said that H-A-L is, alphabetically, one step behind I-B-M. Well, JASON, rendered as J-C-N, is one

step ahead. How much of Sawyer's novel do you think is homage to the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, also about an intelligent computer committing murder aboard a spaceship? Who is the more realistic computer, Arthur C. Clarke's HAL, or Sawyer's JASON?

3. What did you think of JASON as a character? Was he a believable artificial intelligence? Did his responses seem too human? Too machine-like? Sawyer appears to be concerned about the advent of artificial intelligence (see also his novel *Factoring Humanity*). Is this a valid fear?

4. Aaron Rossman is so psychologically reserved that, even with sensitive monitoring equipment, JASON cannot read his emotions. The reasons for Aaron's psychological problems are ultimately revealed in the novel—child abuse and incest. Did it surprise you to find a psychologically damaged character as the human protagonist in a novel? Aaron perhaps starts out rather unsympathetically, because he has left his previous wife, Diana, to take up with Kirsten. Did he become more sympathetic as you learned about the traumas he had suffered?

5. Sawyer takes pains to present both Aaron's and JASON's points of view as reasonable, at least in their own eyes. Who do you think was right: Aaron, who felt all knowledge should be revealed, or JASON, who felt people should be shielded from horrible truths? Based on the text of the novel, whom do you believe Sawyer thought was right?

6. The novel invokes the story of Arthur Peuchen, a male survivor of the sinking of the *Titanic* who had to deal with survivor guilt after returning home. Would you feel guilty if you survived a disaster when others had perished? Sawyer's main human character, Aaron Rossman, is Jewish; presumably his great-great grandparents were survivors of Hitler's Holocaust. Did this occur to you while reading the novel? Is it an appropriate allusion? (For another novel that deals with Peuchen, see Terence M. Green's *A Witness to Life* [Forge Books, 1999].)

7. A subplot of the novel deals with Proposition 3, a motion to abandon the mission to Eta Cephei and return to Earth. The majority of the ship's complement does indeed vote to abort the mission. Do you think they would really do that? How good a job did Sawyer do of portraying the emotional hardship of a long-duration space voyage?

8. Another subplot deals with the receipt of alien radio messages from *Vulpecula*. What do you think humanity's reaction would be if such messages were received? Are we prepared to discover that we are not alone in the universe?

9. Sawyer frequently combines science fiction and mystery (see also his novels *Fossil Hunter*, *The Terminal Experiment*, *Frameshift*, *Illegal Alien*, and *Flashforward*, and his short stories "Just Like Old Times" and "The Hand You're Dealt"). Does he do it effectively? How well does *Golden Fleece* succeed as a science-fiction novel? As a mystery novel? Would this novel appeal to a mystery reader who isn't also a science-fiction fan?

10. Some feel that Sawyer was setting up *Golden Fleece* for a sequel with his epilogue. Do you think that was his original intention? He's never written a sequel; does the book really need one, or does it, in fact, invite the reader to write the sequel in his or her own mind? (Arthur C. Clarke once suggested that this was the ideal way to end a book, with a provocative twist that would keep the reader thinking.)

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 twelve novels include **Starplex**, **Calculating God**, and **The Terminal Experiment**, which won the Science Fiction Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of the Year. Born in Ottawa in 1960, Rob lives just north of Toronto.



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