

## The Terminal Experiment

### Robert J. Sawyer

Peter Hobson is a biomedical engineer who discovers “the soulwave” — the actual physical manifestation of the human soul. But his world begins to fall apart when he learns that his wife Cathy has been having an affair with a coworker . . . and suddenly people in Peter’s life, including that coworker and Cathy’s father, begin to die . . .



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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 Terminal Experiment*** discusses various legal and clinical definitions of death, before arriving at the notion that death is defined by the departure of the soul from the body. Do you share this definition? If not, what constitutes your own personal dividing line between life and death?

**2. Although one crazed critic of *The Terminal Experiment*** tried to construe the book as being anti-organ-donation, the author, Robert J. Sawyer, is in fact an advocate of organ donation, and has pledged all of his organs after death. Are you an organ donor? Did the book change your attitude towards organ donation?

**3.** The novel was rejected by Sawyer’s original publisher, because of its direct discussion of the abortion issue. Is the discussion gratuitous? Does the question of abortion ultimately come down to one’s religious perspective? How did your feelings towards Peter and Cathy change, if it all, when you learned that they had had an abortion?

**4. *The Terminal Experiment*** came out in 1995, and was the first of Sawyer’s books to be set mostly in Toronto, where he lives — something that has now become his trademark. If you’re a Torontonian yourself, how did you react to this setting? If you’re not a Torontonian, did you feel you got a good sense of what Toronto was like from this novel? Did the fact that the setting wasn’t the typical American city surprise you? Delight you? Put you off? Also, it’s now several years since the book was written. Do the now-dated references bother you?

**5.** The author has stated from time to time that he doesn’t particularly care about whether his characters are likable, only whether they are believable. Some have observed that Peter Hobson is indeed not particularly likable. What do you think? Either way, is he believable?

**6.** Much of the novel deals with Peter’s reaction to his wife Cathy’s affair. Note that Peter Hobson is the principal viewpoint character, and we really only hear his perspective on the affair. Do you think that Peter is in denial about his own possible contribution to Cathy’s straying? Or is he the innocent victim he claims to be?

**7.** Periodically, readers like to crow that they had figured out before the end which sim was responsible for the murders, but — let’s face it — with only three suspects, one out of every three readers should guess right by chance, anyway. The real question is: did you foresee why the guilty sim had committed the murders? What do you think of the reasoning Sawyer presented in the novel about why that sim might feel it would get away with murder?

**8.** What did you think of Sawyer’s conception of a human mind devoid of a physical body, as personified by the Spirit sim? What did you think of his conception of an immortal human mind, as personified by the Ambrotos sim? Would the lack of a body, or the lack of an eventual death for the body, really have the psychological effects Sawyer described?

**9.** Sawyer’s original title for this book was **Hobson’s Choice**, underscoring the alternatives offered: living forever, and therefore never discovering if there is an afterlife, or going to an afterlife, the existence of which is assured but the nature of which is unknowable. Which would you choose? Why?

**10.** The character of Sarkar Muhammed is both Peter’s best friend and, in many ways, his conscience. He’s also presents some Islamic views about the philosophical questions underlying the novel. What did you think of the portrayal of Sarkar?

**11.** The conception of the soul given at the end of the book — “an atom of god,” using the word atom in its classical sense of meaning the smallest indivisible part — is not the traditional notion. The soul Sawyer portrays is devoid of memories of its time on Earth and of normal sensory inputs. What is your conception of the soul? Do you believe in life after death? Could science ever prove the existence of the soul?

**12.** This book won the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America’s **Nebula Award** — the “Academy Award” of those fields — for Best Novel of 1995; the award is voted on directly by the members of SFWA. What qualities do you think led to ***The Terminal Experiment*** winning the Nebula?



**Robert J. Sawyer** — “the dean of Canadian science fiction,” according to *The Ottawa Citizen* — is the author of 15 novels, including **Calculating God** and **Hominids**.

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