

PILLS AND STARSHIPS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

CHARACTER

1. Nat and her little brother, Sam, live in a setting that's at once more sheltered and more dangerous than the lives many American teenagers lead now. How have they responded to this dramatic dichotomy in their lives?
2. Have the siblings' responses to their world been similar or dissimilar, and if so how? Do you think you'd react more as Nat does or more as Sam does to being confined to an apartment complex amid great cultural and climate chaos?
3. Considering the seriousness of what's happening in the world outside, Nat seems fairly even-tempered and emotionally healthy. Do you think that's believable? Why or why not?
4. Sam and Nat's parents, like other older people in the book, decide to take out a "contract" on themselves, assisting—and even paying for—their own "managed" deaths. It's a dark decision, and one fairly alien to us as readers. How and why can they possibly do this? Do you see anything like it today, in the real world?
5. The sister and brother react to the news of their parents' death contract, and the company-guided events of the "final week" as they react to their world, in different ways. Yet Nat joins Sam rather than be left behind. What does this say about her? What does it say about Sam that he seems willing to suddenly leave his sister, forever, for a new life?
6. The character LaTessa is almost an antagonist—but not quite. In what way does she seem/not seem like an antagonist when they first arrive at the Hawaiian resort? And later, after the storm, how does that change?

SETTING

1. In Nat and Sam's complex, before the family sails off to Hawaii, the siblings live without much contact with other people their own age. Most of their human contact is virtual—through their computers, their Faces. One of Nat's friends through her Face even enters her life and then dies without the two ever meeting. How do you think it affects them to know people onscreen but not in the flesh? Would you be comfortable in a social world like that? Why or why not?
2. Nat appears not to have understood just how extreme the poverty is in her world until she's told about it on the Big Island. Yet Sam even knows about the massacres the corporates have carried out. Is it possible to live alongside someone and have a radically different view of reality? To what degree do we see what we want to see, in the world outside—and in our homes?
3. "Dystopias" are more common than "utopias" in today's speculative fiction, and arguably in most Sci-Fi/Fantasy Fiction—from hard science fiction novels to Hollywood blockbuster movies. Why do you think that is? Why is there such cultural demand for bleak or disastrous visions of the future?
4. If you had to design your own dystopia, what would it look like? And what about your personal utopia?

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DISCUSSION GUIDE (CONTINUED)

PLOT AND IDEAS

1. Unlike, for example, *The Hunger Games* or *Harry Potter*, *Pills and Starships* doesn't contain too many direct conflicts between characters—even its climax has to do as much with a “natural” event—a Category Six Hurricane—than with a battle between human characters. Much of the action occurs off the page and in the mind of the narrator. Why do you think the author made that choice? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
2. Can you imagine a future world where having babies is illegal? Why/why not? Discuss the idea that powerful authorities—whether governments or corporations—might regulate something as basic as human reproduction. Can you think of any real-life examples of this type of regulation being enforced?
3. In this world, individuals' carbon footprints—that is, how much they contribute to the climate change crisis—are the most important measurement of their physical and social impact (at least to the powers that be). What is a carbon footprint? What would a world look like if carbon output was generally accepted to make the difference between “moral” and an “immoral” person? What do you think are the measures of morality we live by today?
4. How might a society governed by corporations differ from one governed by elected officials? How is the online voting Nat describes different from how we now choose our public representatives?