



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Annalee Newitz begins *Autonomous* by dedicating the book to “all the robots who question their programming.” Throughout the book, questioning stands as a mark of freedom, of insight, of ethics, and, ultimately, of what it means to be autonomous. Who takes the greatest risks in the story by questioning their own situation? What is their strongest motivation for doing so—politics? Desire? Compassion? Money?
2. The arc of Jack’s life takes her from the safety of academia, to the questions and challenges posed by the Free Lab and the open pharma movement, and finally to the revolutionary act of piracy in the service of her beliefs as a scientist. Is there one period in her life with which you identify most? When do you think she accomplished the most or was at her most effective? When do you think she was happiest, and why?
3. While the start of the book immerses us in Jack’s life, Eliaz and Paladin—both their mission and their unfolding relationship—soon take center stage as well. Whose story do you feel *Autonomous* truly is, and why? Are there characters whose prominence changes unexpectedly over the course of the narrative? Whose story or personality resonated most strongly with your own life—and was that resonance related to whether or not they were human?
4. In Newitz’s world, pharmaceuticals are in many ways the linchpin of daily life. How did you feel about the ubiquity

of medications in this world—and the normalization of them for constant use? Were there specific medications mentioned in this story that you would ever try, if they existed now? Were there any points in the book at which a character's medication use troubled you, and if so, why?

5. *Autonomous* offers some stunning portraits of the AI of the next century, along with the complicated issues that will invariably accompany them. How do the story's bots illustrate both the possibilities and the potential dangers of AI? What do you think, in particular, of Med's having been autonomous from birth? Who has that made her, and is she different from the other bots, or is she treated differently?
6. Eliaz's homophobia comes up throughout the book, tracing back to his childhood in Warsaw. Does it surprise you that he never grew out of it? How does it figure into his life as a soldier and agent? What do you think about the ways in which Paladin tries to learn about it in order to understand human sexual desire?
7. Torture features prominently in Eliaz and Paladin's work. How did you feel about the use of torture in the story? About the brutality of the search for Jack overall? What were your sympathies toward these two characters early in the book, and did they change as the search for Jack—and the story of their own relationship with each other—unfolded?
8. Eliaz's history in and compelling return to Vegas illustrates the extraordinary dangers of indenture for children. Does it sound as though child trafficking has become more or less of a problem in the twenty-second century? Is it more or less geographically contained, and what is the effect of social systems like indenture, or the inability of a family to purchase a

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franchise for a child? Who is most vulnerable in 2144, and how is that different from 2018?

9. Krish, like Jack, is a fighter against the dominance of “property” as a governing principal, and he calls the drug patent system a form of indenture. Both he and Jack talk and write about how the notion of pharma as property kills people who can’t afford the medications they need for actual health care. How does the system Newitz describes resemble our health care system and pharma industry today, and how is it different? Do you agree with Krish that the patent system itself is at fault? Does any character manage to make a significant dent in it?
10. Many of the characters in *Autonomous* talk about love or desire as neurological mechanisms, and sex often seems casual. In Newitz’s analytical, science-based society, what are the deepest loves in the story? What purposes do relationships serve for various characters and at various times? What do relationships look like a century from now?
11. At the very end of the book, Paladin discovers that true autonomy is the ownership of one’s thoughts and, especially, memories. Did this surprise you? Is our ability to decide whether to share our thoughts and memories at the core of our humanity? Why do you think control of her memories, in particular, is so crucial to Paladin throughout the book?
12. Optimism continues to flow through the often brutal landscape of *Autonomous*. A century into the future, are we better off? Has humanity managed to change structures like economic opportunity, or health care, or climate preservation? Have AI and biotech improved life for the majority of human beings? And how much more or less autonomous are we?