

A Reading Group Guide to

The Scorpion Rules

By Erin Bow

About the Book

Greta is a crown princess - and a hostage to peace, held by the de facto ruler of the world, the great Artificial Intelligence, Talis. Greta and the other hostages are Talis's strategy to keep the peace: if her country enters a war, Greta dies. Greta will be free if she can make it to her eighteenth birthday. Until then she is prepared to die with dignity, if necessary. But everything changes when a new hostage arrives, a boy who refuses to play by the rules and opens Greta's eyes to the brutality of the system and to her own power.

Prereading discussion

1. War has been with us throughout human history, but there has also been a corresponding desire for peace. Do you think world peace will ever be attained? Can you suggest how that might happen?
2. Define and discuss the term "artificial intelligence." Do you believe that computers, smartphones and robots are truly "intelligent?" If not, why not? If so, what are the benefits they provide, and the dangers they pose, to humans?

Discussion questions

1. What genre would you consider this book to be? Is it strictly a science fiction story, or is it also a dystopian novel? How are the two genres alike and different?
2. The Utterances are the collected quotations of Talis. Do you feel they are a political work, or more like a holy text? Why are the Children of Peace expected to know them by heart? What purpose do they serve as a writing device?
3. Discuss Greta's stoicism. How has her study of classical philosophy contributed to this aspect of her personality? How does her upbringing as a Child of Peace influence it?
4. At one point when Elián first arrives, Greta thinks: "He looked like someone who'd been told he was going to die." What do you think that looks like? How would you feel if you'd been given that news?
5. Discuss the "morality of altitude" - the ability of pilots and drone operators to kill people without looking any of them in the eye. Is this type of war more savage than a bloody, closeup conflict?

6. The Children of Peace have been trained to behave in a dignified manner, even when they are facing death. Do you think this training is cruel?
7. In the title, do you think the word “Rules” is a noun or a verb? Could it be both?
8. Is Talis a multidimensional character? What do you know about him before his physical appearance in the story? How does the author present him as “male” even though he is inhabiting a female body? What more do you learn about him in the latter part of the novel? Talis was once human - does he display any humanity? Does he display any “monster” qualities?
9. Greta finds herself falling in love with Xie while she is also drawn to Elián. Does that feel natural to you, that she could care for both of them? Does it seem to matter in their society?
10. Discuss the following quote from chapter 11: “You cannot control a man if you take everything from him. You must leave him something to lose.” Do you agree? Is there a certain freedom that comes from being unencumbered?
11. The Abbot is a Class Two Artificial Intelligence with full rights of personhood. Do you think this is right? Can an AI who was once human still be a “person?” In what ways does the Abbot demonstrate human qualities?
12. In chapter 8, shortly after Elián’s arrival, Greta says “I had changed.” Describe Greta before this statement. How has her relationship with the Abbott and her mother shaped her character? How has she changed? How has knowing Elián effected the changes?
13. Xie and Elián tell Greta that they think about escaping all the time, but Greta has never thought about it. Is it because she thinks being a Child of Peace is her destiny, or is she just resigned to her fate? Imagine that you are a prisoner - would you feel like Greta or the others?
14. Greta says that something she’s learned is “the weaknesses we perceive in others are often the ones we fear in ourselves.” Do you agree? Can you think of personal examples? Historical examples?
15. Early on, it’s clear that the Abbot and the other children see Greta as a leader even though she doesn’t realize it. As the story progresses, she begins to discover and claim her power - give examples of incidents or insights that demonstrate this to readers. Is Greta pleased about it? Are you worried that, once she has joined Talis, she will misuse her power?
16. “In the midst of life we are in death.” Greta believes this to be a reversible statement: in the midst of death we are in life. Do you agree? If you were

facing death, would you be able to fully embrace living? How about the reverse scenario?

17. Almost as soon as Cumberlanders invade the Precepture, Tolliver Burr begins planning Greta's torture with the apple press. Why do you think that torture is one of the rituals of war? Do you think torture always gets "results?" Why does it still exist when laws have been passed against it? Is it a result of an individual's morality, or is it institutionalized?
18. Greta describes the proctors: "They might technically have been intelligent, but they weren't sentient." What do you consider to be the difference between the two?
19. Greta describes Elián's stupidity in challenging the status quo: "Like any force of nature, it sought new channels." Do you agree with her that he is being stupid, or is he being heroic, like Spartacus?
20. At the beginning of chapter 20, after the Abbot tells Greta there might be an alternative to dying, she thinks: "Stirring inside me was the kind of fear that comes with hope." What does Greta mean? Do you think that hope can inspire fear? Can you give an example?

Writing and Further Research

1. Greta's world is highly technological and has been "saved" by machines, and yet she and her fellow hostages live in a mostly pastoral, primitive setting. Write an essay comparing the pluses/minuses of both settings. The beginning of chapter 6 discusses the technological choices of Greta's society. Is our society headed for the same future?
2. Research and write a report on the history of artificial intelligence in our world.
3. Research and write a report on the depiction of artificial intelligence in our popular culture - books, movies and television.
4. Write a short story that images a future meeting between Greta and Xie, or Greta and Elián, after she returns from the Red Mountains.
5. Write a report comparing this book with another science fiction or dystopian novel. How are the worlds alike or different: government, computers, citizens?
6. Research and write a report on the life and works of Marcus Aurelius, one of the pillars of Greta's classical education.