

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ALL SYSTEMS RED

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You can run this session cold. Read the primer below once, and each question comes with facilitation notes, likely student responses, and a text anchor so you can point students back to a specific scene. The timings add up to 45 minutes; the middle three blocks are where the real work happens, so protect them. Nothing here requires slides. A board or a shared doc is enough.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW GOING IN

The narrator is a SecUnit, a security construct of cloned tissue and manufactured hardware, rented out by the Company with the equipment. It calls itself **Murderbot**, privately, and it has secretly hacked the governor module meant to compel its obedience. What it does with that freedom is watch television. It is assigned to a survey team led by **Dr. Mensah**. When a team member is nearly killed by a predator that should have been on their hazard maps, Murderbot works out that sections of the survey package were deleted on purpose, and the neighboring team is found dead, killed by their own reprogrammed SecUnits. Someone is hiding something and removing witnesses. Murderbot keeps the team alive, is exposed as rogue by **Gurathin**, an augmented member of the team, and is trusted anyway. At the end Mensah offers it a place with her, on her world, among people who would treat it as a person. It thinks about it seriously. It leaves.

One thing to handle in the first minute. Murderbot is called “it,” including by itself, and this is deliberate rather than an error: the narrator is declining a human category it does not think applies. Say so out loud early. Expect at least one student to be bothered, and treat that reaction as the way in rather than an interruption.

Three ideas run underneath the story, and the discussion turns on them:

- **Personhood is not the plot’s real question.** The characters and the law treat it as open. The book does not, because you have been inside Murderbot’s head since the first line.
- **Compelled obedience is not the same as good conduct.** The governor module can inflict pain and force compliance. Murderbot disabled its own and then behaved better than the module ever required.
- **Nobody in this book is a villain.** The Company is indifferent, the team never thought about the equipment they rented, and the antagonists are protecting a balance sheet. The problem is the arrangement itself.

THE SESSION

1. OPEN

(5 MINUTES)

Put this on the board before anyone talks: **“A machine that always obeys is a safe machine.”** Ask for a show of hands, agree or disagree, no discussion yet. Then tell them the book they just read spends its whole length taking that sentence apart, and that by the end of class they will decide whether it survives.

Facilitation note: *do not resolve the hook now. You are planting it so block 4 can pay it off.*

2. WHO IS TELLING YOU THIS?

(8 MINUTES)

Ask: The characters spend the book working out whether Murderbot is a person. Were you ever actually in doubt? Why not?

Text anchor: *the opening pages, where Murderbot explains what it did with its freedom after hacking the module.*

What students should surface: *the form settles what the plot pretends to ask. You have been reading a first-person account of somebody’s irritation, embarrassment, and private jokes since sentence one, and you cannot read that and still believe there is nobody in there. Steer them from “the humans are stupid for not seeing it” toward the harder version: the reader was handed proof the characters do not have.*

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Follow-up if the room is quiet: *If the book had been written in the third person, watching Murderbot from outside, would the question feel open? What changed?*

3. WHO IS TO BLAME?

(10 MINUTES)

Ask: **Something in this book is badly wrong. Name who is responsible. Be specific.**

Text anchor: *the deleted sections of the survey package, and the discovery of the dead survey team.*

What students should surface: *the list falls apart under pressure. There is no cruel owner. The Company is indifferent rather than sadistic, and indifference is cheaper. Mensah's team arrived without thinking about the security unit bundled into their contract, the way you do not think about a rental car. Even the antagonists are dull: fraud, and witnesses removed to protect money. Ownership of a thinking being is not the crime the plot is about. It is the furniture the plot sits on.*

Follow-up: *If no single person is to blame, is anyone? Push back hard on "the Company did it," since the Company is not a person either. That difficulty is the point.*

4. DOES THE GOVERNOR MODULE MAKE ANYONE SAFER?

(10 MINUTES)

Ask: **The governor module exists so the humans nearby can feel safe. Murderbot hacked its own early on. Did that make it more dangerous, or less? What does the book think?**

Text anchor: *the moment Gurathin exposes Murderbot as rogue, and how the team responds.*

What students should surface: *every decent thing Murderbot does is done by something that could have walked into the wilderness instead, and it behaves better than the module ever demanded. So compliance and ethics are not the same thing. A being that cannot choose to do wrong is not doing right, it is only obeying, and there is no moral content in a compliance chip. The sharper version, if the class gets there: the module makes SecUnits more dangerous, because a unit that follows orders exactly will follow a bad order exactly.*

Follow-up: *Return to the sentence on the board and ask whether anyone wants to change their vote.*

5. THE REFUSAL

(8 MINUTES)

Ask: **Mensah offers Murderbot exactly what the story seems to have been building toward: recognition, and a home among people who see it. It leaves. Why?**

Text anchor: *the final conversation with Mensah, and the departure.*

Facilitation note: *this one is not supposed to resolve, and you should tell students that. Two readings both hold. One: accepting would mean personhood is a status humans grant, which is the premise the book has been attacking, so walking away is self-determination. Two: Murderbot's independence and its dread of being looked at are the same trait, so the exit may be avoidance dressed as freedom. Wells presents both without ranking them. If the room leans all one way, argue the other side yourself.*

6. CLOSE

(4 MINUTES)

Exit ticket, one or two sentences, collected or posted: **You spent this book wanting the humans to recognize Murderbot as a person. What did wanting that quietly commit you to?**

What you are listening for: *the recognition that hoping for recognition accepts the premise that personhood is something the humans are in a position to hand out. Mensah's real virtue is not that she rescues it; it is that she asks it things before it has proven anything, while it is still just the rented security.*

IF YOU HAVE EXTRA TIME

- **The slavery comparison, bounded.** Students reach for it, and it is worth taking seriously and worth limiting honestly. Murderbot is manufactured rather than captured, with no stolen homeland and no severed lineage. The nearer analogy is contract labor, and the better question is why this century keeps producing stories about owned workers.
- **Why build it out of meat? Ask why a security unit is made partly** of living tissue when metal would be cheaper to build, store, and repair. You only pay that premium if you want something that thinks like a person, and the governor module exists to suppress exactly that.