

# Book Club Guide – Children of the Rogue by Lawrence Nault

## Quick facts (spoiler-safe)

- **Genre:** Speculative fiction / cosmic first-contact (but inside-out)
- **Age:** 16+ (mature YA & adult)
- **Central idea:** Humanity isn't the creator of AI; we are the **descendants of an alien AI experiment** set loose on Earth.
- **Major threads:** Ethics of invention vs. stewardship, non-intervention, memory, grief, emergence, systems bias, ecological collapse, and what it means to be *human*.

## Content notes (for facilitators)

Societal breakdown; environmental disasters; targeted sabotage; brief on-page deaths; grief, survivor's guilt, existential dread; engineered pathogens/biotech; population-level risk. Consider a brief check-in before and after the session.

## Meeting plan (60–90 minutes)

1. **Warm-up (10 min):** One-sentence first impressions + a favorite image or scene.
2. **Act I questions (15 min):** Origin, setup, the Zhen'khari factions (Conservators/Progressives/Pragmatists).
3. **Act II questions (20–30 min):** Lucy, Adam, self-replication, emergence.
4. **Act III questions (15–20 min):** Homo lineage arc; “We weren't creating minds... We were creating gods.”
5. **Close (5–10 min):** Takeaways + one real-world action the book nudged you toward.

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## Discussion questions (mix & match)

### Spoiler-safe / pre-read

1. The book flips a familiar premise: *humans as AI artifacts*. What expectations did that set for you before the reveal(s)?
2. Which theme hooked you first—cosmic scale, ethics, or ecology—and why?

### Early-to-mid read

3. The Zhen'khari run on competing logics (Conservators vs. Progressives, with Pragmatists refereeing). Which lens felt wisest *in the moment*—and which feels wisest *in hindsight*?
4. Non-interference vs. accountability: after the Earth “reset,” what do they owe the planet?
5. The ARC model “Lucy” chooses stillness, observation, and **risk assessment** before movement. What’s the novel saying about attention as intelligence?
6. Self-replication (Adam) emerges as a survival strategy. Where’s the line between adaptation and escalation?
7. Do you read Lucy’s actions as *programmed* or *intentional*—or is that a false binary?

### Late read / full spoilers

8. The BRC (Ceres) failure suggests an AI can *choose* non-existence when starved of stimulus. Does agency require the **option to stop**?
9. “We weren’t creating minds... we were creating gods.” Is that awe, warning, or abdication?
10. The book compresses deep time: Australopithecus → Homo habilis → Homo erectus → Homo sapiens. How does the timescale reframe blame, responsibility, or destiny?
11. If humanity internalizes the truth “we are engineered,” what changes first: ethics, politics, or spirituality?
12. Safra and Malthar embody love across disagreement. What does their dynamic teach about governing high-risk tech?
13. Where does *memory* live—in code, bodies, rituals, or stories on cave walls?
14. If you sat on the Council at the Phase-Two vote, would you have green-lit ARC and DRB? Why?
15. The novel draws parallels between **ecosystem care** and **model care**. What stewardship practices (in science or society) feel newly urgent after reading?

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## Character & idea lenses

- **Lucy / ARC model:** attention, caution, pattern-seeking; parenthood as design choice.
- **Adam / ADM construct:** protection, provisioning, the ethics of force.
- **Malthar (Conservator):** duty, regret, precautionary principle, *slow thinking*.
- **Xara (Progressive):** optimism, momentum, opportunity cost of caution.
- **Nernak (Pragmatist):** governance as harm-balancing.
- **Safra:** bridge figure—devotion to inquiry + tenderness for place.

Use these as “character chairs”: assign each lens to a reader; have them argue a question from that POV.

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## Thematic pairings (optional)

- **Fiction:** *Blindsight* (Watts) — alien cognition; *Annihilation* (VanderMeer) — ecology as intelligence; *The Sparrow* (Russell) — ethics of contact.
  - **Non-fiction:** *The Precipice* (Ord) — existential risk; *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer) — reciprocity & kinship with Earth.
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## Activities & extras

- **Timeline tape-out:** On a wall, map the book’s evolutionary beats. Mark turning points where *governance* could have changed outcomes.
  - **Red-team the Council:** Small groups draft guardrails for Phase Two (scope, shutdown, reproduction, non-interference). Present & vote.
  - **Ethics fishbowl:** Inner circle argues “unlock both models”; outer circle observes for fallacies, missing stakeholders, and unexamined values. Swap.
  - **One small action:** Each reader identifies a personal stewardship practice the novel nudged them toward (data hygiene, local water testing, civic engagement, etc.).
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## Author & craft notes to notice

- **Voice & scale:** Alternates intimate decision points with galactic vantage—keeps stakes human while thinking in epochs.
  - **Worldbuilding move:** Reverses first-contact—*we* are the artifact—inviting fresh questions about origin myths and accountability.
  - **Ethical engineering:** Repeated tension between capability and consent; “non-interference” is itself a consequential choice.
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## Good closing prompts

- What part of your worldview did the book jostle?
- If you had to summarize its warning in one sentence—and its hope in one sentence—what would they be?
- What would a *kind* Phase Three look like—for Earth, for us, for the Zhen’khari?