

A Reading Group Guide to

Thunderhead: Book #2 of Arc of a Scythe

By Neal Shusterman

About the Book

Rowan and Citra take opposite stances on how to deal with the corruption of the scythedom in the chilling sequel to the Printz Honor Book *Scythe* from *New York Times* bestseller Neal Shusterman. The Thunderhead cannot interfere in the affairs of the scythedom. All it can do is observe—and it does not like what it sees. A year has passed since Rowan went off grid. Since then, he has become an urban legend, a vigilante snuffing out corrupt scythes in a trial by fire. His story is told in whispers across the continent. As Scythe Anastasia, Citra gleans with compassion and openly challenges the ideals of the “new order.” But when her life is threatened and her methods questioned, it becomes clear that not everyone is open to the change. Will the Thunderhead intervene? Or will it simply watch as this perfect world begins to unravel?

Discussion Questions

The following questions may be utilized throughout the study of *Thunderhead* as targeted questions for discussion and reflection, or, alternatively, they can be used as reflective writing prompts.

1. In the novel’s prologue, the Thunderhead explains that it is the “child who has become the parent” and that it “serves humankind.” How does the personification of the Thunderhead also stand as a greater metaphor? What is your reaction to these statements? Is there anything about them that you find disconcerting?
2. The Thunderhead is described as the “ultimate voyeur of death.” In what ways is that an accurate assessment? Can you think of an example in which it’s no longer comfortable in that role?
3. Scythe Brahms is accused of abusing his position and committing crimes against humanity. Why does Rowan as Scythe Lucifer feel it is his duty and right to seek justice against Brahms for his actions? Why do you believe he ultimately lets Brahms live?
4. How does knowing that some scythes extremely enjoy their gleanings add to your view of the scythedom? In what ways is that in stark contrast to the work done by Scythe Curie and Scythe Faraday?
5. While examining his reflection after his encounter with Brahms, Rowan asks himself, “Who am I?” Why do you think Rowan asks himself this? Do you believe his role as a fallen apprentice helps to shape his choices? Consider his training time with Scythe Faraday and Scythe Goddard. What did each of these mentors ultimately teach him?

6. The Thunderhead acknowledges that “under no circumstances may I take action against the scythedom . . . the scythedom rules itself, for better or worse.” While the Thunderhead recognizes its inability to intervene, how does it attempt to do so anyway?
7. In your opinion, why does Rowan choose to adorn himself in robes of black? In what ways is this decision intentional? What does his color choice symbolize, and why has the color never been utilized by the scythedom in the past?
8. Rowan as Scythe Lucifer states, “I burn those I remove from service, leaving nothing but unrevivable ash.” What makes this decision particularly noteworthy? Do you think this decision is an appropriate one?
9. Scythe Xenocrates calls the Thunderhead a “glorified computer program.” Why does he seem so frustrated with the Thunderhead? Why do you believe the Thunderhead chooses not to act against Rowan?
10. How do Citra’s and Rowan’s work as scythes shape them as individuals? Do you feel they’ve changed from who they were as apprentices? How has their work impacted their relationship? In what ways do Citra and Rowan act differently when they are functioning as Scythe Anastasia and Scythe Lucifer?
11. In this futuristic world, how is gleaning not seen as killing? Why does this society believe it’s not socially or morally correct to call it such? Do you agree with this? How does the scythe’s role fit into that complex system?
12. The Thunderhead offers, “I am always correct. This is not a boast, it is simply my nature.” How does this awareness serve to help and also hinder the Thunderhead? In what ways does the Thunderhead recognize that though it has been created by humans, it is not human?
13. From all that you’ve observed in *Scythe* and *Thunderhead*, what are the biggest challenges to serving as a scythe? Can you think of any benefits the position offers a scythe?
14. When questioned on her decision to allow those she gleans to choose when and how they die, Scythe Anastasia offers, “If a subject is allowed to choose, don’t you think that subject is going to choose the method that is the least offensive to them? Who are we to call their choice barbaric?” Do you agree with her sentiment?
15. Mr. Hogan tells Scythe Anastasia, “I want to thank you, Your Honor, for allowing me these past few weeks to prepare. It has meant the world to me.” Unlike most other scythes, how is she so able to understand what goes into the act of dying?
16. Consider the role of the Nimbus agents as the bureaucracy of the Authority Interface for the Thunderhead. Do you believe these agents are necessary?

17. While describing Citra, the Thunderhead states, “I have always had a preoccupation with those who have a high probability of changing the world. I can never predict how they might accomplish the change, only that they are likely to . . . What she will do is unclear, and the outcome hazy, but whatever it is, she will do it. Humanity may very well rise or fall by her decisions, by her achievements, by her mistakes.” In your opinion, why do you believe the Thunderhead has such a strong opinion of Citra? Why does the Thunderhead feel frustrated that it can’t interfere or guide her? Why do you think the author had the Thunderhead tell us this?

18. The Thunderhead acknowledges that it could have created a physical presence for itself in the form of a robotic body. In what ways would this have changed humankind’s perception of the Thunderhead’s role in relationship to humanity? Do you think the Thunderhead made the right decision?

19. Why do you think Scythe Anastasia has such a burning desire to learn to drive, one that she didn’t have when she was simply Citra? What can be inferred by this need?

20. Citra tells Rowan, “I think you’re important, too, Rowan. In fact, I’m sure of it. So whatever you do, don’t let them catch you . . .” Why does Citra recognize that she and Rowan are both equally essential? Predict what role you think they’ll play in the Thunderhead’s ultimate mission.

21. In your opinion, what does it mean to be unsavory? Given what you learn in *Thunderhead*, are there any benefits to this distinction?

22. In your opinion, why do you believe the Thunderhead ultimately selects Greyson for his mission? In what ways is he a fitting candidate? Are there any qualities about him that you find troublesome? Predict what role he will play in the overall story arc.

23. Consider the final actions of Scythe Curie. Do you feel her choice to glean those around her before invoking the seventh commandment and gleaning herself is appropriate? Why did she make these decisions?

24. Discuss the significance of the Great Resonance. Why do the Tonists understand what has happened? What does the shifting of the unsavory category mean when humankind is marked as such and seen as complicit in its actions?

25. Given the exhilarating ending of *Thunderhead*, share your predictions for the next installment of this thrilling series.

Extension Activities

1. Rowan’s decision to extend what he believes is fitting justice by personally punishing dishonorable scythes is one that results in much pushback within the scythedom and possibly beyond. Why is his choice to participate in vigilante behavior so divisive? In

your opinion, is this an appropriate type of justice? Prepare a short speech that supports your position, and share it with others.

2. Citra's choice to allow those she gleans to choose how and when they die is both unconventional and controversial within the scythedom; yet Citra, as Scythe Anastasia, is committed to this practice because it offers victims a degree of free will and control. Write an email to Scythe Anastasia sharing your thoughts about the importance of free will. Do you believe that having a degree of autonomy, free will, and control in terms of ending life is particularly important? Be sure to make a case for your opinion.

3. Vigilante justice is regularly popular in film, TV, and books. Compare Rowan's behavior to a vigilante character from a graphic novel, comic, movie, TV show, or game. Explore ways in which these characters are similar and how they are different. Do you find different genres or formats more receptive to the idea of a vigilante?

4. The Thunderhead states, "To deny humanity the lesson of consequences would be a mistake. And I do not make mistakes." Do you agree with this sentiment? In your opinion, why is living with the consequences of choices critical for individuals as well as society as a whole? In a journal entry, reflect on a personal moment in your past when the consequences of your choices proved to be an important lesson to you.

5. Consider the shift in philosophy from our world today, where the use of a digital network cloud and artificial intelligence tends to be feared, to a future where a Thunderhead provides a "perfect world." Do you believe utopias are possible? Here in the United States, a number of utopian communities have been established over time. Select a community or society and research them, making sure to explore the principles that guided the community as well as the popular assumptions about those core beliefs. Share why you believe this community was ultimately unable to sustain itself.

6. The Thunderhead states, "There is a fine line between freedom and permission. The former is necessary. The latter is dangerous—perhaps the most dangerous thing the species that created me has ever faced." Do you agree? Has history proven this to be true? Consider how the danger of permission from an authority figure is relevant to our current world. Using the examples expressed by the Thunderhead, prepare a personal statement that offers your position on this topic, being sure to offer specific supporting examples.

7. Throughout *Thunderhead*, Shusterman infuses his story with rich and figurative language. Embark on a literary scavenger hunt throughout the book to locate your favorite examples of these phrases or quotes. Create a sharable quote card image to be published on a social media site of your choice, remembering to credit the book and any images appropriately.

8. The Thunderhead states, "Society had a need to be bad. Not everyone, of course . . . Even if there was no injustice in the world left to defy, they had an innate need to defy something. Anything." Consider the Thunderhead's position. Based on what you know

about your current world and this future one, do you agree? Compose a response to the Thunderhead where you share your position.

9. For Citra and Rowan, becoming scythes has had a profound impact on their lives and their relationships with others. As they both learn more about the role and responsibilities of being a scythe, they become increasingly empowered to take control of their lives and choices. After taking a moment to reflect on your most personal challenges, draft a journal or diary entry focusing on the ways you've already worked to overcome obstacles and listing the strategies you plan to use to deal with those you are still facing.

10. The gleaning journal of H. S. Curie shares that "People used to die naturally. Old age used to be a terminal affliction, not a temporary state. There was pain, misery, and despair." How does this future world without diseases, aging, transportation crashes, and "danger lurking in every unseen, unplanned corner" compare to the world you know? After completing your reading of *Scythe* and *Thunderhead*, write an essay that analyzes the differences and the consequences between these two worlds.

11. The novel introduces us to a number of secondary characters who face their own hardships or need the opportunity for self-awareness. Select a secondary character in *Thunderhead* and *Scythe*, and write a letter of advice to him or her. You can choose to be serious or funny, but make sure your advice fits the character's needs.

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