

Discussion Questions

The Webs of Varok by Cary Neeper

How can a society thrive across millennia? What defines a family? Author Cary Neeper explores these issues and more through an alien family's adventures on a hidden moon of Jupiter in [*The Webs of Varok*](#).

We hope you'll find this pool of discussion questions a useful starting point for your book club or other reading group to mix, match, and adapt to your interests. Please feel free to [contact Cary](#) with questions – or [invite the author to talk with your book club](#). Enjoy!

Story and Style

Question 1. What was your overall reaction to the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into" the story? How did you feel reading it – amused, sad, uncomfortable, motivated? Were the challenges faced by the characters relevant to you?

Question 2. How does the book fit into or contrast against fiction genres you've read (e.g., Western, mystery, thriller, space opera, adventure, romance, young adult)? Which aspects of the book remind you of other books you've read? How is it similar? How different?

Question 3. Which character do you identify with or like the most, and why? What makes the main characters sympathetic or unsympathetic?

Question 4. If this book were made into a movie, which actors would play the main characters? How would you adapt the story line for the big screen? What scenes would you include or exclude?

What's in a Family?

Question 5. Have you read a well-known story that confuses or challenges standard notions of family? How did the members of the family differ from the typical family in your neighborhood? How were they similar to Tandra's mixed family? How different? What challenges did they face? How do these compare to the challenges facing Tandra's family?

Things to consider:

What are some ways to define what a family is? For example, which factors below are sufficient to define a family? Which (if any) are necessary? How do legal definitions of family differ from common perception or practice? How does Varok's legal definition compare to common definitions on Earth?

- shared home

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- shared economic support
- mutual emotional and/or spiritual support
- shared genes (blood relationship)
- legal and/or church marriage or contract
- procreation or adoption
- sexual relationship
- joint childrearing
- dependent animals (or, on Varok, other species such as ellls and ahlorok)
- other?

Question 6. How real and believable does the relationship between Tandra, Orram and Conn feel to you? How do you relate to each of their predicaments and concerns?

Things to consider:

Orram's attraction to Mahntik; Tandra's reaction to Mahntik and to living on an alien world; Conn's feelings when Tandra and Orram communicate nonverbally.

Human, Alien and “Other”

Question 7. What did you find unique or interesting about the mix of alien species and cultures on Varok? Did you find them convincing? How did their alien characteristics play into the story action? Which details were helpful in setting the backdrop for the story?

Things to consider: How do Cary's aliens compare to depictions of aliens in other books you've read? How about science fiction movies?

Question 8. Cary's novels include many examples of deep connection and communication among alien species. How did that strike you? What commonalities helped them connect? How did their differences affect their relationships?

Things to consider:

The ahlorok Nidok may not be much more communicative than some parrots like Alex, the famous African Grey, with his vocabulary of 100 words, or gorillas like KoKo, who uses around 1,000 signs in American Sign Language to express herself.

Question 9. How does Cary compare the varoks' mind-link with human ways of understanding one another? Is it similar to ESP, human intuition, body language, facial expressions? How does the patch sense influence varokian culture? What difference might it make in human society?

Question 10. What drives the main characters' actions? How are their choices affected by each alien species' particular characteristics and talents? How would you have made different choices – and what would have happened as a result?

Question 11. Varok's population has remained stable for thousands of years. What factors in the history and races of Varok are depicted as having brought that into place?

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Question 12. How does the novel contrast varoks to humans? To various human cultures? What differences and similarities do you see? What characteristics make varokians alien to humans? How are they similar?

Sustainability

Question 13. Many recent nonfiction titles discuss ways to secure the future on Earth with efficiency and conservation. (For examples, see *The Webs of Varok* Bibliography and [Recommended Reading on ArchivesofVarok.com](#).) But what about fiction? Have you found other stories illustrating long-term solutions? How are they like Cary's story? How are they different?

Question 14. What did you think about the depiction of Varok's sustainable economy in the story? Which elements made the most sense to you? Which would you question? What did you find to be the most vivid image of the varokian lifestyle?

Things to consider:

At the opening of the novel, Varok's economy has endured for millennia using only the finite resources of a single planet (a moon of Jupiter). Recent nonfiction books propose that such long-term sustainability requires many social changes, including:

- Minimal throughput: using renewable resources no faster than they are replenished, minimizing use of nonrenewable resources, and minimizing garbage and pollution.
- Population stability: maintaining a steady human population size, so for example an average couple would have no more than two children (replacement level).

Question 15. Which of Conn's suggestions for Earth at the end of *The Webs of Varok* can you affirm? Which would be the most difficult? Why?

Things to consider:

Together, try listing some ways to ensure a pleasant standard of living for all people and animals on Earth, for as long as possible. What actions should come first? What barriers would be most challenging?

Question 16. Cary depicts Varok as maintaining a sustainable culture through a synergy between regulation (rules set by government) and consensus (informal agreement among people as to what's best). How does that affect the plot? What loose ends, if any, did the author leave?

Things to consider:

Traffic laws are a good illustration of the same principle at work on Earth. The rules of the road work in good part because people agree they're important to avoid accidents. There's a workable balance between the traffic laws (regulation) and people's feelings (consensus). Too many stop lights irritate us. Too few make it difficult to cross the street. What are some other examples where consensus works in balance with regulation to good effect, on Earth and/or on Varok?

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Question 17. How is the economy of Varok similar to current social or political systems on Earth? What are the major differences? What can you affirm in Varok's solutions? What would you challenge?

Things to consider:

A steady state economy like Varok's means no growth and a minimal use of resources. In contrast, classical human economics and the familiar political “-isms,” like socialism, communism and capitalism, all depend on economic growth. Possible areas to compare:

- How are natural resources managed on Earth and on Varok? Who owns the land, water, air, and minerals? Who gets to use them, and who decides how much is used?
- What criteria are used to determine which new technologies are developed and used?
- What is the role of banks – the services they do and don't provide – and practices in lending and debt, income, and currency?
- What is the role of government: what is done globally, regionally, and locally? (On Varok, the global and regional governments do nothing but resource accounting, auctions and elections, global problem assessment, safety, and security support.)

Meaning & Philosophy

Question 18. How does Orram's understanding of Varok evolve through the book? Does Tandra undergo an evolution of her own? What does she learn? How do their relationships with their family and with Varok change?

Question 19. Why do you think the author wrote this? What is her most important message? If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask?

Question 20. Did this novel present new information you hadn't seen before? Did it lead you to consider any new ideas or perspectives you might not have thought about before?