

Lit Guide for *Illuminae*, by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff

Written by Blair Lee

1. There are several interesting creative techniques used in the book *Illuminae*. Once again this was mixed-media lit. This book uses illustrations and plays with the way words are displayed. What do you think of playing with the words for effect this way?
 - *Illuminae* is “Told through a fascinating dossier of hacked documents—including emails, schematics, military files, IMs, medical reports, and interviews.”
 - In addition, some pages are black with white type and some are white with black type.
 - In some places, the way the words are structured on the page is used to convey meaning, pages 536 to 545 are examples of this.

How did these techniques affect the story from your perspective? Which technique(s) did you like best?

Have you used any of these techniques in your own writing?

2. Genre and literary style: Let’s figure out what genre this book is. Circle all that apply, even if they are in the same grouping.
 - Fiction or non-fiction
 - Comedy, drama, horror, romance, satire, tragedy, tragicomedy
 - Classic, crime/detective, fable, fantasy, fairytale, folklore, historical fiction, humor, legend, mystery, mythology, realistic fiction, picture book, science fiction, short story, Western, suspense
 - Biography, essay, journalism, lab report, memoir, narrative nonfiction

Through their use of design and the way they conveyed the story through email schematics, etc, Kaufman & Kristoff were trying to create something “insanely different,” perhaps even genre. Do you think they succeeded.

3. The authors cite many influences: *Battlestar Galactica*, *Firefly*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke, [interview Kaufman & Kristoff](#). Have you heard of all of these? I was reminded of *2001 Space Odyssey*, which means some of these were probably influenced by that film.
4. One of the themes of the book is an exploration into the emotional evolution of artificial intelligence and humans. Initially I thought the story lines with Kady's and Ezra's struggling romance was separate from that of AIDAN's struggles with “humanity” and emotions. It is an interesting juxtaposition, the way the two sets of emotions evolve and grow. Kady and Ezra are young and just figuring out how to handle the emotions that occur in relationships. There is a lot of growth that occurs for the two of them. How did you feel about this weaving theme through the story?

The emotional effects from the virus are interesting too. In the case of the virus the people’s impulse control and emotional maturity devolve. It was a very effective compare and contrast between the evolution and devolution. What did you think the virus added to this theme?

5. Both General Torrence and AIDAN had to kill others “for the greater good.” How do you feel about this? Do you think anyone should ever be killed “for the greater good?”
6. I am always torn by the question of emotional development for artificial intelligence. It is a social issue explored regularly in books and movies, and I know it will resonate with some of you, but is it really an issue that is important enough to be regularly explored? What are the benefits to creating computers that have the ability to evolve emotionally?
7. I am a scientist. As I read I thought the science of how the virus was transmitted was problematic. What did you think of the virus as a part of the story? In some ways it reminded me of a weird human version of mad cow disease. So I had to go in search of information from the authors about the method of transmission.

“The original biological weapon released on the Kerenza hermium mine was designed as a kind of paralytic for the purposes of urban pacification in areas where direct attack was difficult, or assets might be damaged (ie, a large mineral processing facility). Essentially, it was an airborne virus which attacked the fear centers of the brain – namely the sensory cortex and amygdala. It would kick in 12-24 hours after initial infection, and initially provoke minor fear responses intended to make people group together, thus increasing the chances of greater infection. So, you get infected, you feel scared about You’re Not Sure What, you call up your parents/friend/partner, or go somewhere well-lit and public with lots of people, thus infecting them too.

“In phase 2 of infection, the fear becomes so pronounced that physical action is impaired. Shakes/heart palpitations/and even catatonia. At this point, the enemy military rolls in, and seizes whatever objective the infected people are guarding, with most of them unable to fight back since they’re so paralyzed with terror.

“The mutated virus, however, shifted its attack from the amygdala to the synaptic gap and serotonin reuptake mechanisms of the brain, essentially destroying them. This pushed victims into a third stage, where they’re essentially suffering complete inability to distinguish fantasy from reality, severe paranoia and psychosis. If you’ve ever seen someone suffering a psychotic break under the influence of methamphetamine, that’s what we’re talking about. Cranked up to 11.

“So yes, the virus did mutate. It wouldn’t really serve BeiTech to turn the civilians they’re trying to pacify into a flock of psychotics who don’t feel pain, think virtually everyone is out to get them and are capable of almost superhuman feats of strength!”

[Interview with Jay Kristoff](#)

8. I wondered more than once if the virus was included to move the story along. It did very effectively control the pacing of the story. Why do you think the virus was included?
9. Have any of you collaborated on a written work? If yes how does/did it work? Do you both write text? Or was one of you the graphic artist person and the other the text person? If you haven’t collaborated before, do you think you could?
10. What an ending! I expected Kady and Ezra would be together, but I had no idea that Ezra’s mother was head of Beitech. There were a couple of clues early in the book, but I never saw it coming. Did any of you?