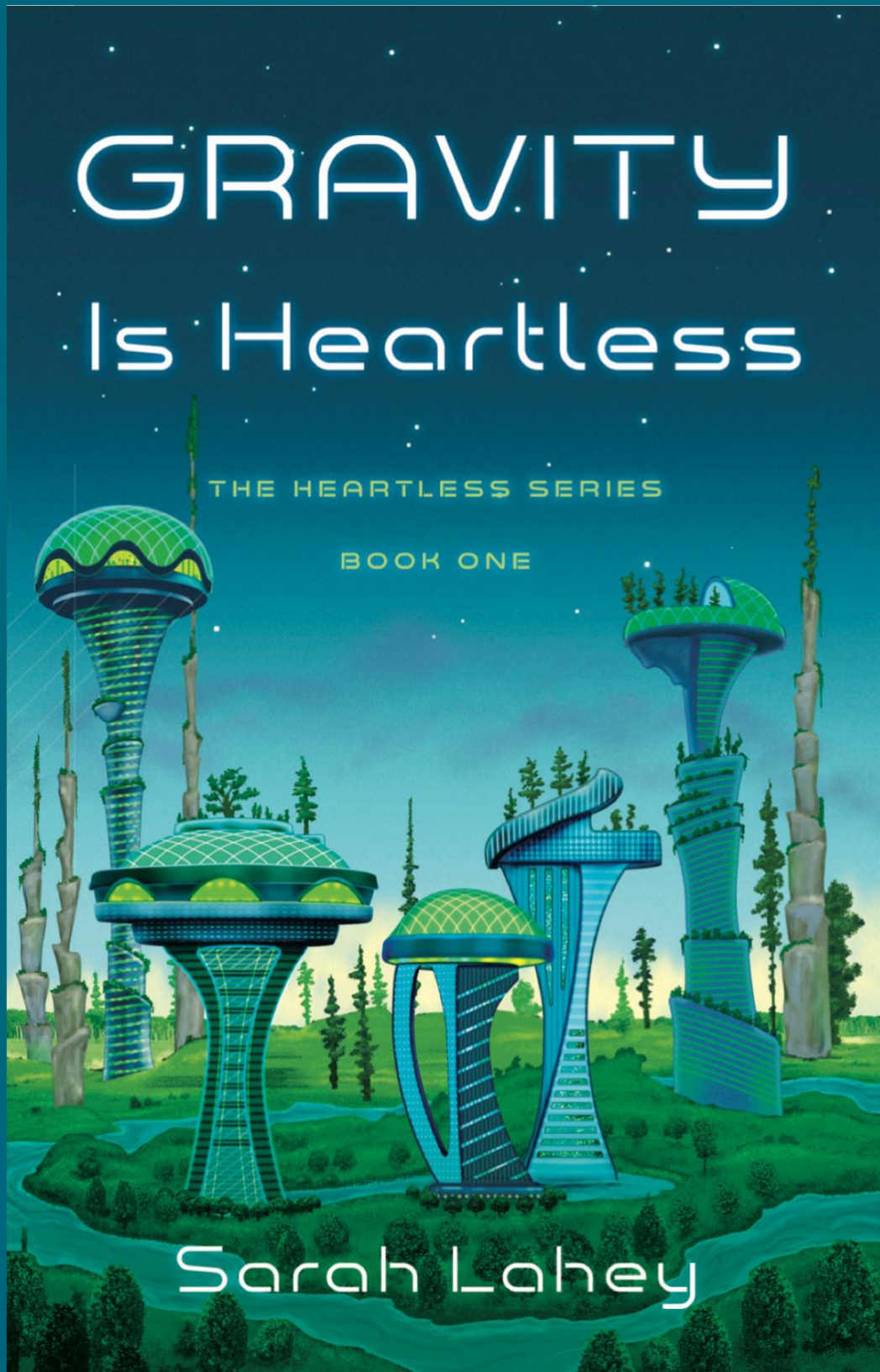


Gravity Is Heartless: Book Club Kit



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About the author

Sarah Lahey is a designer, educator, futurist and writer. She holds a bachelor's degrees in interior design and Communication and Visual Culture and works as a senior lecturer teaching classes on Design, Technology, Sustainability and Creative Thinking for a design college in Sydney, Australia. With over 30 years' experience working in the industry, Sarah is passionate about the designers who are shaping our cities and environments, reflecting the way we want to live in the 21st Century.

About the book

What will the world look like in thirty years' time? How will humanity survive the oncoming effects of climate change? Set in the near future and inspired by the world around us, *Gravity Is Heartless* is a romantic adventure that imagines a world on the cusp of climate catastrophe.

The year is 2050: automated cities, vehicles, and homes are now standard, artificial Intelligence, CRISPR gene editing, and quantum computing have become a reality, and climate change is in full swing—sea levels are rising, clouds have disappeared, and the planet is heating up.

Quinn Buyers is a climate scientist who'd rather be studying the clouds than getting ready for her wedding day. But when an unexpected tragedy causes her to lose everything, including her famous scientist mother, she embarks upon a quest for answers that takes her across the globe—and she uncovers friends, loss and love in the most unexpected of places along the way. *Gravity Is Heartless* is bold, speculative fiction that sheds a hard light on the treatment of our planet even as it offers a breathtaking sense of hope for the future.

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Interview with the author

What inspired you to write a book set in the 2050s? Were you inspired by your own life at all?

I have three adult children and I wanted to consider what the lives of their children, my potential grandchildren, would be like. So, I set the novel one generation ahead, and asked myself, what would it be like if I went to sleep tonight and woke up in 30 years' time?

I'd recently read William Morris' novel *News from Nowhere*, and HG Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, which were both written in the 1890s. Both books explore the same idea; suppose you were to go to sleep and wake up in the future. What would the world be like? In Morris's novel the sleeper is transported to 21st Century in England, a utopic future society where there is no common ownership and no private property. In Wells' story the sleeper wakes in 2100, in a futuristic society filled with wonderous technologies, and due to compound interest, he becomes the richest man in the world. Of course, both scenarios have problems.

2050 posed a lot of questions; I asked myself, how will humanity survive the oncoming effects of climate change? What do we need for survival in the 21st Century? Would we still be living in a democracy? What technologies and communication platforms would we be using?

Your world building and concepts are very well described within the book. What research did you do for this book?

I studied, and now teach, art, architecture and design, so urbanisation, the growth of our cities and how we live in the 21st century are fundamentally important to me. Today good design is affordable, and it's accessible—maybe not to everyone, but it's certainly available to most people living in the 1st world. What we design and construct is not limitless, but it's pretty amazing, and we need to harness these technologies for human comfort and advancement. So, my research coincided with my knowledge and love of houses and architecture, and that spilled over into the book. Most of the new technologies and world building ideas are based on real world scenarios. Many of the ideas are already in place, or not that far away, and it will be interesting to see what gets adapted into mainstream culture.

There is a focus on climate change throughout. Was this a way to explore and express your own opinions on this global issue?

Yes, definitely. The first drafts of the novel were finished in late 2016, long before the wonderful Greta Thunberg inspired a whole generation of youth culture, and much of the world, to get on board with climate change. Teaching sustainable design, I was a climate change advocate often surrounded by sceptics. So, I thought if people read my novel, they might understand more fully what life would be like in a world affected by massive consumption and the impact of burning fossil fuels for energy. But I also wanted the novel to be accessible to the youth culture of today, so it needed to be fun, an adventure, and above all optimistic.

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Can you tell us a bit about your writing process? Are you a planner or a “pantser”?

Often the story will come by itself in a true “pantser” style, and sometimes I feel I have no control over this—as if it were a pre-existing thing revealing itself. But saying that I spend a lot of time mapping out scenarios and story arcs with a black Artline on heavy white paper. But mostly what I aim for is to get up every day and try and find some time to write. That might be at 5 am writing reams of self-indulgent nonsense in a journal, or a morning of productive editing on a new draft. I wish the process was more organised, and maybe that will come, but at the moment it’s a consuming juggle between working and spending time with the people I love (including my 2-year-old working dog).

Are there any creators that influence your work?

I think everything I do, see, hear and read influences me and my work. My ideas come from music, art, literature, film, nature and everyday—so everything. Ideas are everywhere—the universe if filled with them. But you need to put yourself in a good place to find them, so they come to you and you don’t have to search too hard to find them. You need to have a proper look at the world around you. Everything is interesting. A bus trip can be full of character ideas. An early morning walk can be exciting, and it doesn’t matter if it’s along the beach or through the city streets.

Do you have a favourite genre to read yourself?

I read everything, all genres, but I do love disturbing tales. I’m a big fan of Ian McEwan, and I loved *The Cement Garden*, and his early series of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*. Some of my other my favourite unsettling novels include *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky, *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, and *The Metamorphosis*, by Kafka.

You have a background in education and design. Did you always want to be a writer or is it something that developed overtime?

Writing and journalism were strong career paths in my family. But I didn’t have a great education, and my childhood was a bit unsettling, and these things can take a while to overcome. I also married young and had children, so there never seemed to be the time or the opportunity to pursue writing as a career. But I did write a few small (not very good) romance novels. In my early 50s I completed my second degree in communication, and I knew writing was what I wanted to do. I could write all day, every day.

***Gravity is Heartless* is the first book in a series. Are you currently working on the sequel?**

The second book *Nostalgia Is Heartless* is due out in Fall 2021, and I’m close to finishing it. After that there will be at least one more novel in the Heartless Series. Then I think I might write a book about my dog Desmo.

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Book Club Questions

1. *Gravity Is Heartless* (GIH) is set in the year 2050 and climate change is in full swing. Sea levels are rising, and the world is rapidly heating up, as Quinn notes, “The heat is here and it’s here to stay.” For many regions of the planet, there are long more frosts, no ice-covered puddles, and no more flurries of snow. Life is one long, continuous never-ending summer. What would you miss the most in this climate-change effected world?
2. Quinn jumps from high cliffs and mountains because it releases adrenaline, and this is where she finds freedom—it’s her escape from reality. Can you relate to this idea? Is there an activity that you are addicted to? How do you escape from the world?
3. It’s estimated that in 2050 there will be 10 billion people living on the planet, and this is not sustainable, the Earth simply cannot support this many people. How do you feel about capping the birth rate? Would you consent to an infertility implant if you were of child-bearing age?
4. As humans, unconscious biases and prejudices are part of our nature—making assumptions about people who look different to us keep us safe from perceived threats. So, most prejudices are linked to fear. But we are able to use our conscious brains to realise and override our reactions. Dehumanisation, on the other hand, is said to be linked to disgust. Disgust is different to fear as it elicits a stronger emotional reaction, where our responses have evolved to protect our bodies from harm. It’s much easier to dehumanise a robot or a cyborg. Do you agree? Do you see this as a form of racism?
5. In the future premise of the GIH, the Authentic Human Alliance (AHA) believe fusing with a machine negates natural biology and gives an unfair evolutionary advantage to individuals. Their motto is “We draw the line.” And they draw the line at 50 percent. If you are over 50 percent tech, then you cannot technically call yourself a human. At one-point Quinn notes, “Sex with a cyborg is okay, but sex with a robot, that’s just too weird.” Would you have sex with a cyborg? If so, would you draw the line, and where do you draw it? 30 percent, 50 percent, 70 percent?
6. How do you feel about Quinn’s treatment of the meerkat? Quinn is firm with him, often to the point of oppression or harassment, and constantly justifying her behaviour because he’s AI. Is her treatment defensible?
7. Quinn reads the *Epic of Gilgamesh* on board Tig’s boat *Nanshe*. The ancient poem describes the fundamental elements of life as: sex, death, love, friendship, beer, good food and clean clothes. How would you re-order this list, with the first element being the most important to you.
8. The novel ends with Quinn leaving Unus, and fleeing to Hobart, but she gives Tig permission to follow her. Do you think this is necessary? Would it be acceptable for him to just turn up at Matt’s place and declare his love for her? (Note, this was the original ending, but the publishers thought it confronting, like he was stalking her.)
9. Jin, Quinn’s best friend, is on the verge of death, having contracted a severe case of Feline Flue. She sees CyberSleep as her only option for survival. But CyberSleep is only available to the very wealthy. Is this ethical? Would you commit yourself to an experimental procedure to prolong your life?

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10. How do you feel about the use gender neutral pronouns; ze (for he/she), zirs (for his/hers)? Do you see this becoming common place by 2050?
11. In a hypothetical future scenario, our planet is dying, it can no longer sustain human life and you have the choice to leave; to start a new colony, maybe on Titan or Mars, would you go? Do you see the future of humankind in the stars, like the Transhumans? Or, do your ideologies align more with the Humanists, who believe they are connected to every living thing on the planet, and will stay to the end? Humanist or Transhuman—if you had to choose one which would you be?
12. Uncanny Valley describes the dip in our emotions when we see weird things that we can't categorise, we recoil and shy away from creepy-looking things. This is why the Mori, the AI Assisted Living Companion, takes the form of a meerkat. Humans are attracted to cute, fluffy things—why do we find them so adorable and enchanting?
13. What makes us human? Are we just computers in a complex form? Our brains are full of electrical signals and energy, which we use to process bodily functions. Our lungs take in oxygen, our hearts take in blood and this regulates the body. The meerkat makes a case for joining the human race, stating that he has attained the five senses of self: he is unique, he recognises his reflection in a mirror, he has empathy, he has awareness of past, present and future, and he is capable of private thoughts. Does he have a case?
14. Server climate change is imminent. We'll need a united ecological mind set to preserve our future way of life. Do you think ecology is a spiritual necessity, and spiritual experiences are an important fundamental human need?
15. How are you individually addressing sustainability and climate change in your everyday life?

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Reviews:

“Loved it. An adventure romp . . . set in a not too distant future and played for high stakes. Gravity Is Heartless is packed with insightful and oft heart-warming observation about what makes us human in the first place. It’s fun, witty and endlessly inventive . . . Bravo.” Peter FitzSimons, journalist, commentator and author of over 20 books, including, Kokoda, Gallipoli and Nancy Wake.

“The author’s Earth of the not-too-distant future is an intriguing, alien place, and readers will delight in watching Quinn move through it. Lahey’s prose is lush - describing a deeply imaginative world - and on the whole, the story is thoroughly engrossing. An engaging adventure set in a deftly illustrated future.” Kirkus Reviews

“The first volume is a new *The Heartless* series, *Gravity Is Heartless* is an inherently fascinating and fully entertaining read that showcases author Sarah Lahey's impressive flair for originality and the kind of narrative storytelling style that keeps the reader's attention fully focused from cover to cover.” Midwest Book Review

“Infused with wonder and the brilliance of the real world, Lahey excels in Quinn’s narration, breathing life into the dying world while giving Quinn a unique, knowledge-based personality. The nuclear engineer’s fascination with the periodic table, in particular, was a narrative delight that strengthened relationships while showing off Quinn’s science-honed mind.” Paperback Paris

“Sarah Lahey’s realistic science fiction novel *Gravity is Heartless* is set in the near future; it involves a mystery, political intrigue, and romance. Launching a new trilogy well, the futuristic science fiction novel Gravity is Heartless is a fun trip through a climate-changed world.” Forward Reviews

“In the aftermath of the tragedy, which included losing her scientist mother, Quinn is left to fend for herself and grows tremendously as a character. The supporting cast, including her best friend, a robotic meerkat, and a tough yet witty guerrilla fighter, are interesting in their own right, and almost steal the show. Lahey's debut is the beginning of a trilogy, so it is fitting that it ends with a cliffhanger, leaving readers unsure of Quinn's next steps in an increasingly unstable world.” Booklist

“The amount of research that went into this is unbelievable. The way the author describes certain things and goes into detail is amazing. This world feels so real and I was quite shocked while reading this. The novel is set in 2050, which is only 30 years away and it felt like I was there in the year 2050 with those characters. Everything Lahey exquisitely describes feels so realistic. If you would tell me that this is how the world will look in 30 years, I would believe you. And that again shows how much thought and research went into this.” Heavenly Bookish

“A highly entertaining read about the effects of global warming. I found the book utterly entertaining. The setting was (sadly) realistic, and the characters and story were very creative.” Pondering the Prose.