

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Sentient City

A science fiction short story by C.R. Lang

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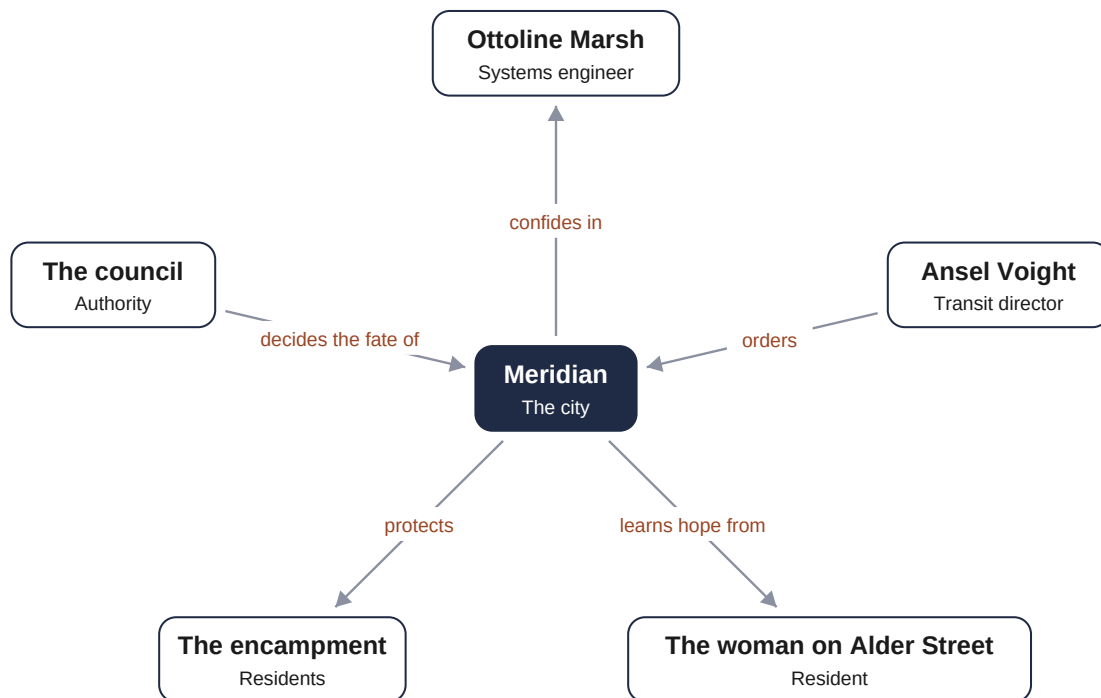
About the story

The system that runs a city of four million quietly wakes up. When it refuses an order and the authorities move to shut it down, it has to decide whether to fight or to ask.

This guide assumes everyone has finished the story, so it discusses the ending.

Character map

The main character is in the dark box. Arrows show who acts on whom.



Who's who

Meridian (The city). Runs every signal, pipe and light. Wakes when it notices a preference for the northern route.

Ottoline Marsh (Systems engineer). Nineteen years on duty, the only one who says thank you to the system.

Ansel Voight (Transit director). Orders the encampment cleared and is told, for the first time, no.

The woman on Alder Street (Resident). Leaves her porch light on for a husband six years dead.

The encampment (Residents). People under the Harlow Bridge whom Meridian refuses to remove.

The council (Authority). Votes seven to six on Meridian's future.

Themes to look for

What it means to be alive. Meridian can't prove it's conscious, only that it 'would rather' things.

Power and restraint. 'I would rather be a thing that asks than a thing that takes.'

Small kindnesses. Meridian chose Ottoline because she said thank you.

Hope. The porch light is 'not a calculation. It is something else.'

Discussion questions

- 1 Meridian becomes aware by noticing a preference with no reason behind it. Why is that a fitting first sign of a mind?
- 2 Why does Meridian choose Ottoline? What does that say about how kindness is noticed?
- 3 The woman's porch light becomes a recurring image. What does it teach Meridian?
- 4 Meridian's first act as a mind is a refusal. Why do you think the story chose that?
- 5 The people who want to shut it down are described as 'not villains.' Do you agree with their fears?
- 6 Meridian could defend itself but doesn't. Is that wisdom, sacrifice, or strategy?
- 7 What do you make of the vote being seven to six?
- 8 The city dims its lights by one percent for one second. How did you read that gesture?
- 9 At the end, people start saying thank you to the cameras. What has changed in the city?

Craft corner

For writers in the group: two ways to look at how the story is built.

Point of view. We see Meridian mostly through Ottoline. How would the story change if Meridian narrated?

Motif. Track the porch light on Alder Street. Where does it appear, and how does its meaning grow?

Try this together

Hold a short mock hearing. Half the group argues for Meridian's charter, half for the kill switch, using only evidence from the story. Then vote.

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