

Book Background: **RADICALIZED**

cory doctorow

"Cory Doctorow is one of our most important science fiction writers, because he's also a public intellectual in the old style: he brings the news and explains it."
—Kim Stanley Robinson



radicalized

Told through one of the most on-pulse genre voices of our generation, *Radicalized* is a timely novel comprised of four science fiction novellas connected by social, technological, and economic visions of today and what America could be in the near, near future.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Radicalized* and watch Cory Doctorow discuss his book.

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Book Description

Radicalized is a timely collection consisting of four speculative fiction novellas connected by social, technological, and economic visions of today — and what the world could be in the near, near future. The four stories involve themes of oppression, capitalism, racism, immigration, and other pressing social issues of the 21st century. Doctorow imagines alternate realities and near futures to inform us about the very real happenings society is experiencing in the present.

The first story, *Unauthorized Bread*, is a tale of immigration, the harmfulness of economic and technological disparity, and the young and downtrodden fighting against all odds to survive and

LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



prosper. It is set in a potential near-future where appliances have authorized third-party suppliers without which the appliance will not function.

Salima is a refugee woman living in a new apartment complex in Boston owned by a corporation with hidden and malevolent intent. The floors in the building are divided by class, and Salima's

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apartment is outfitted with “smart” appliances and devices that feature proprietary technology that serve to enforce class divisions.

Salima grows increasingly frustrated with her household devices, all designed to function with “authorized” products. For example, the elevators in the building are digitally programmed to economically discriminate against the building’s tenants (the low-income residents can only use the elevators if they’re not occupied by anyone from the wealthy side of the building), and the apartments’ appliances are designed to extract revenue from tenants.

When the original companies go bankrupt — thanks to their unscrupulous hedge fund company owners — Salima and the other low-income residents of her

caste-divided apartment complex begin hacking the devices to work for them, instead of for investment capitalists and the building’s owners. For example, Salima’s toaster stops working, she learns how to jailbreak the operating system. She subsequently helps her neighbors “illegally” fix all of their appliances.

Model Minority is the second story and features a Superman-like figure who attempts to fix the corruption of the police forces he erroneously thought protected the defenseless — only to find his efforts negatively affecting their victims. A superhero named American Eagle suffers an existential crisis after encountering a black American man being brutalized by the police, after allegedly seeing marijuana in the vehicle he is driving.

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American Eagle pursues the case and the officer in charge, attempting to ensure that the justice system works fairly to hold the police accountable. He has spent centuries upholding the law and has always thought police officers worked to do the same, but begins to see the failings of the system and how his actions often hurt the very people he is trying to help. His best friend, Bruce the Billionaire Playboy (a Batman analogue), thinks they should stay out of it, but a similar event from Eagle's past makes him demand change. American Eagle discovers how privilege works and how his own 'whiteness' can be revoked from even a mighty being such as himself.

The third story inspires the collection's title and is about a violent uprising against insurance companies

enforced by the dark web, told from the perspective of a man desperate to secure funding for an experimental drug that could cure his wife's terminal cancer.

The main character joins an online forum for people in his situation — people who have lost spouses and children who could have been saved, if not for the insurance policies in place — and who rail against the health insurance companies that deny patients coverage. Members of the group become radicalized and start planning terrorist attacks, and the protagonist is torn between protecting his family and joining the cause.

Masque of the Red Death is the final story and it harkens back to Doctorow's 2017 novel, *Walkaway*,

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taking on issues of survivalism versus community in this retelling of “The Masque of the Red Death” by Edgar Allan Poe. The story revolves the protagonist Martin, a wealthy financier and member of the one percent, who has built a “Doomsday vault”, and what happens when he and his followers confront a disease outbreak, a societal collapse, and a “survival of the fittest” ethos.

Key Themes

 **TECHNOLOGY** – Overall, *Radicalized* examines the socio-economic implications of technology, intellectual property, and the destructiveness of economic and technological division. *Unauthorized Bread*, for

example, explores how society has the potential to force those with the least power to use the worst technology as beta testers for bad ideas.

 **CIVIL RIGHTS/PRIVILEGE** – The novella *Model Minority* looks at civil rights through the lens of cultural dominance and privilege. It examines who has power and what it takes for those with power to intervene in the face of oppression and social injustice.

 **POLICE BRUTALITY** – While dealing with a mass amount of people who are passionately protesting an issue, the police times find themselves in sticky situations that lead to violence. The stories explore the consequences of police overreach and racial violence.

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 **CORRUPTION** – The novellas *Unauthorized Bread* and *Radicalized* in particular explore the inherent corruption of the American justice and health care systems. Overall, the collection explores how things can go awry when corporations prioritize profits above all else.

 **FREEDOM** – The four novellas each explore the ability of individuals to make choices, and the many societal forces that work to oppose their rights and freedoms.



Watch Cory Doctorow discuss his book:
www.curio.ca/canadareads



About the Author

Cory Doctorow is a Toronto-raised science fiction novelist, blogger, and technology activist. He holds an honorary doctorate in computer science from the Open University (UK), where he is a Visiting Professor, and is a

Media Lab Research Affiliate at MIT. Doctorow has won the Locus, Prometheus, Copper Cylinder, White Pine and Sunburst Awards, and been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula and British Science Fiction Awards. *Radicalized* is his fourth collection.

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Other Books by the Author

- *Poesy the Monster Slayer* (2020)
- *Walkaway* (2017)
- *In Real Life* (2014)
- *Information Doesn't Want To Be Free* (2014)
- *Homeland* (2013)
- *Little Brother* (2008)
- *Cory Doctorow's Futuristic Tales of the Here and Now* (2008)
- *With A Little Help* (2011)
- *The Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow* (2011)

Notable Quotes from Reviews



"Doctorow's combination of cutting edge speculation and deep interest in the social and political possibilities of the future make this collection a must-read." – Booklist (starred review)

"As an author and activist Cory Doctorow's fiction often takes up the same political subject matter as his advocacy and opinion pieces. In recent years, the two have been drawing ever closer together, to the point where the four novellas in his latest collection, *Radicalized*, might almost be thought of as dramatic essays. – Alex Good, Toronto Star

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Doctorow captures the mix of hope, fear, and uncertainty felt by those in precarious situations, set against the backdrop of intriguing futuristic landscapes. The characters are well wrought and complex, and the world building is careful. This is a fine introduction to Doctorow's work, and his many fans will enjoy its exploration of his favourite theme.”
– Publishers Weekly



CBC Links

- Book Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4987294
- Author Page: www.cbc.ca/1.5081071
- 7 books Cory Doctorow loves (text): www.cbc.ca/1.4127238

- Cory Doctorow on auctioning off character names for charity (text): www.cbc.ca/1.4088215
- Cory Doctorow on *Radicalized*, the problem with superheroes and writing speculative fiction in a jaded world (text): www.cbc.ca/1.5080939

Other Links



- Opinion – Science fiction and the unforeseeable future: In the 2020s, let's imagine better things (text): www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-science-fiction-and-the-unforeseeable-future-in-the-2020s-lets/

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Critical Thinking Questions



Students will need to read the excerpt from *Radicalized* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. A utopia is an imagined community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities. The term was coined by the English social philosopher, Sir Thomas More, in 1516 and is taken from the Greek word, meaning “no place”. What is your vision of an ideal society? What are the principles at the core of your utopia?
2. Our socioeconomic background is determined by our parents’/guardians’ level of education, income,

occupation, and geography; our personal life experiences are defined by factors such as our race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, physicality, appearance, etc. These facets of our identity shape our status in society and reflect our degree of social privilege. Consider these aspects of your own existence and consider your level of privilege or lack thereof. How might these factors intersect to increase or decrease your social status? What are some examples of how your socioeconomic background and life experiences have determined your success or failure?

3. Any form of technology is an extension of the human body, designed to improve our way of life. It is, however, dualistic by nature, with the capacity to

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help us and to hurt us. What are some examples of technology's upside and downside?

4. In *Model Minority*, American Eagle discovers that his actions against police brutality and discrimination, in some cases, actually harm the very people he is trying to help. How is this sometimes true of the systems in our society, like the legal system? Can you think of an instance in your life where you thought you were having a positive impact, but ended up having a negative one?
5. *Radicalized* is a story about the moral ambiguity of breaking the law as a matter of life and death for the protagonist's wife. Can you think of some instances in your own life, or from popular culture,

where you or someone else had to do something normally considered bad in order to achieve something good?

6. Read the excerpt from *Unauthorized Bread* at www.curio.ca/canadareads. What motifs and themes can you infer from this passage? How do these contribute to what might be Doctorow's message to the reader?
7. When asked about his inspiration for *Radicalized*, Cory Doctorow says, "I decided a few years ago to reorient the way I see the world — but not around pessimism or optimism. Instead, I like to think human beings have agency in the world and that the future changes based on what we do." Do you agree with Doctorow's perception of humanity's

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control over their own future? To what extent does our agency control our outcome as a species? To what extent is our future outside of our control?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students might visit www.futuretimeline.net/, select a decade from the future, and research predictions about what human society and culture might be like, before presenting their findings to their classmates.
2. Students might select a science fiction short story by Ray Bradbury about a technological dystopia, such as “The Veldt”, and write a literary

paragraph in which they compare elements of storytelling, such as motif, theme, and message to one of Doctorow’s novellas.

1. Students might select a controversial technology in development and participate in a class debate about whether the technology should go to market and/or how governments to maximize its positive impact might regulate it.

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