WHEN EARTHLINGS WEEP

A Reading Guide for Book Clubs

Summaries and discussion questions for every part of the book

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About the Book

Mickey Thorn is an ordinary man living a quiet life in San Antonio until the morning he wakes to blood on his floor and a loaded syringe beside his bed. Mickey isn't who he thinks he is. A long-buried secret military program knows it. A rogue general will stop at nothing to own him. Two alien species, the shapeshifting Jengu and the brutal Bruxians, have crossed the stars to claim him. And a girl who shouldn't exist yet is sending warnings from a future that may never come.

Central themes: identity, and what makes someone human; power, and who gets to control it; love and loyalty under pressure; and time itself as a battlefield.

How to Use This Guide

- The book has 65 short chapters arranged in twenty parts. To keep your discussion manageable, this guide groups them into eleven sections that follow the book's own parts. Each section has a short reminder of what happens and a set of questions. Choose the ones that spark the most conversation.
- The summaries contain spoilers for each section. The last section discusses the ending, so save it until everyone has finished.
- For a group that meets several times, a natural split is four meetings: sections 1–3 (chapters 1–21), sections 4–6 (chapters 22–37), sections 7–8 (chapters 38–48), and sections 9–11 (chapter 49 to the end) with the big-picture questions.
- A word of care: this is an adult thriller with strong language, graphic violence, and the destruction of whole worlds. Some members will want to dig into those scenes, and others may prefer to focus on the characters.
- The cast is large. The Who's Who on the next page is a quick reference during your discussion.

About the Author

Michael Barnett grew up in San Bernardino, California, and Lafayette, Indiana. He earned a full academic scholarship to Purdue University and served in the U.S. Air Force, where he met his wife of 47 years while training in San Antonio, the city where When Earthlings Weep begins. After a long career in information technology, he began writing at his brother's urging. His first book, Eden Fading, was drawn from his own childhood memories. When Earthlings Weep is his second. He is finishing his third novel, Raine Rising, and lives in the Dallas area.

Who's Who

Mickey Thorn: A software developer in Medina Lake, outside San Antonio. Born Michael Carson, a former Air Force sergeant, and known to the military as Subject 29.

"The other": The alien presence living inside Mickey's mind.

Patience Lebeau: Mickey's fiancée, a schoolteacher.

Cassie and Ari: A girl and a boy in bright blue bodysuits who arrive from the year 2022.

Kit, John, Angel, and Sol: General Christopher "Kit" Buna, Colonel John "Crazy Eagle" Raybuck, Captain Angelina "Angel" Gale, and Captain Solomon "Sol" Ze': a secret military team sent to find Mickey.

General Kerr: The four-star general running the hunt for Mickey.

Colonel Rockson and Lieutenant Mathis: Parker Rockson and Michelle Mathis, "Trackers" at an underground facility in South Dakota who detect the first event.

Jason and John Taylor: Two brothers caught at a 7-Eleven bus stop. Jason uses a wheelchair; John is his protective older brother.

The Jengu (the "Grouchos"): Shape-shifting, telepathic aliens who wear Groucho Marx disguises among humans and go by numbers: Jengu-1, Jengu-3 ("Jen"), Jengu-9, Jengu-15, Jengu-23, and others.

Koku Kwee: A prince of the Bruxians, a seven-foot warrior race. The Farsans, invisible "Whisper Cats," hunt beside them.

Sergio Torres and Kelly Peterson: An Air Force staff sergeant and a young waitress who meet on a dark hill-country road.

Places: Saturna Luna, a methane moon of Saturn; Bellerophon, Mickey's "Green Planet"; the planets Jengu, Brux, Kreedok, and Sparcee; and Meramec Caverns in Missouri.

1. Parts I–II: Arrival at Saturna Luna and The Refuge of Bellerophon

Chapters 1–7

What happens: On a frozen moon of Saturn, Mickey Thorn meets an alien friend he calls Jen. In the Texas hill country, Staff Sergeant Sergio Torres finds a road covered in dead birds and a house glowing with light from other worlds. A whispering grackle drives Kelly Peterson to speed over the hill, and both of them die. Mickey wakes in a dungeon, where a girl warns him that "there are two of you, and one must die." He fights a Drogo, and when three kidnappers try to drug him, he carries two of them to a too-green planet and tells them they are now cattle.

For discussion

1. The book opens with Mickey and Jen beside a methane lake under Saturn's rings. Why do you think the author began here, before the dead birds and the crash in Texas?
2. Sergio and Kelly both die on that road. Sergio thinks of SeaWorld with his three boys; Kelly thinks of a Sunday cartoon with her son, Eric. What did their small, ordinary hopes add to the scene?
3. The grackle whispers lies about Kelly's coworkers and turns her mood black. Have you ever watched someone's anger get fed until it took over? What does the book suggest about the voices we let in?
4. The girl in the blue bodysuit says, "There are two of you, and one must die." What did you make of this warning the first time you read it?
5. On the Green Planet, Mickey tells the kidnappers, "Now, you are cattle," and quotes Dante: "All hope is abandoned, ye who enter in." How did your feelings about Mickey change in this chapter?
6. Mickey loves Bellerophon ("Isn't it beautiful?") even as something in the trees eats a giant ladybug. What do these beautiful but deadly worlds say about the universe of this book?

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2. Parts III–IV: Event Tracking and Rural Virginia

Chapters 8–18

What happens: In an unnamed facility under South Dakota, the Trackers detect a tear in space-time near Medina Lake. In Virginia, General Kit Buna passes through layer after layer of security to reach a hidden underground city. There General Kerr briefs Kit's team on Subject 29: a soldier whose brain was implanted with Jengan tissue, and who regrew his arm and erased his laboratory. A Jengan "Groucho" sacrifices himself to mark the base's location, and his second bomb kills the guards who come to inspect the crater. A giant drunk in the woods turns out to be Koku Kwee of the Bruxians.

For discussion

1. The security underground is extreme: cavity searches, gas in the sprinklers, and "de-animating" anyone who fails. Did it make you feel safer or more uneasy? What does it say about the people who built it?

2. Kit Buna is “an ordinary man” who wishes he had become a farmer and lies to his wife about his job. What does the book say about the cost of secrets?
3. General Kerr explains eminent domain and says that from the moment the target opened the wormhole, “he ceased to have any personal freedoms.” Does a government ever have the right to “take” a person for the good of all?
4. The scientists cut off Subject 29’s arm to watch it grow back. How did this history change the way you saw Mickey?
5. Kerr links “Kefitzat Haderech” (the shortcut) to Philip in Acts 8 and to Jesus calming the sea. How did you feel about faith and Scripture appearing in a science-fiction thriller?
6. Jengu-7 smiles before he dies, glad that he will “step off the path” rather than “go away.” Koku laughs at that belief: “When you die, you are just dead.” Which view of death do the other characters live by?
7. Chapter 17 is told like a deer hunt: the first deer falls, and its friends come to check on it. How did this darkly ironic narration affect you?

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3. Part V: San Antonio, Texas

Chapters 19–21

What happens: Jengu-1 watches from an invisible saucer beside a Little League game. He staged the car crash to hide Mickey’s house, and he helped plant a homing device in General Buna’s head. Mickey wakes on his bloody bedroom floor with no injuries and a loaded syringe under the bed, and tells himself it was a nightmare. Over breakfast at Jim’s, Patience begs him to see a doctor. Two “ordinary” agents at the next table take notes, and a grackle watches from a fence post.

For discussion

1. Mickey finds blood up the walls and a syringe under the bed, and “chooses” the explanation of a nosebleed. Why do people choose the explanation they can live with?
2. The breakfast at Jim’s, with the pretend phone call to Patience’s mother, is light and funny. What does this scene give the reader before everything falls apart?
3. Patience makes a doctor’s appointment without asking Mickey: “I don’t want to lose you.” Was she right to go around him?
4. Mickey is being watched by Agents Smith and Jones, by a grackle, and by Jengu-1. Who in this story is not watching Mickey? How does constant surveillance shape the mood of the book?
5. Jengu-1 calls Mickey “the quarry” but also worries about provoking him or harming him. Are the Jengu protectors, hunters, or both at this point?

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4. Part VI: The Cavern

Chapters 22–26

What happens: Angel wakes from one of her dreams certain that the cavern is about to collapse. Five Jengan ships begin turning the rock above it to sand, while the generals on the

ground order everyone back to work. In South Dakota, two guards obey a coded order from General Kerr: they gas the Trackers and save only Rockson and Mathis, and a Jengan then rescues those two. Jengu-15 flies his damaged ship into the target. The cavern falls on 831 people, and John Raybuck dies in the escape tunnel.

For discussion

1. Kit has learned never to ignore one of Angel's dreams. The one time he did, he lost half a team. What part do intuition and premonition play in this book?
2. Two generals outvote Kit and keep the train from leaving. Have you seen rank or procedure win out over common sense? What would you have done in Kit's place?
3. The Trackers are gassed on their own commander's order. How did learning that the danger came from "our side" change the story for you?
4. Jengu-15 thinks of his mate and children, then flies into the target: "Stepping off the path isn't so bad at all! Why did I fear this for so long?" How did you feel about an enemy pilot's sacrifice?
5. Before the ceiling falls, General Smithson thinks of his schnauzers, and General Clark of his grandson's baseball game. Why do you think the author gives these small last thoughts?
6. Kit prays to the Lakota fathers to welcome Crazy Eagle home. What did this prayer show you about Kit, and about John?

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5. Parts VII–VIII: The Planet Jengu and The Planet Brux

Chapters 27–32

What happens: The book steps back into history. The Jengu evolved on a violent world where the Vraks hunted them for food, and once they learned to teleport, they wiped the Vraks out. Rockson and Mathis wake in cocoons on Jengu and are rebuilt, without their consent, as Jengu-27 and Jengu-28. The Bruxians, endlessly at war among themselves, unite only after alien hunters arrive. On the planet Kreedok, the nearly indestructible Kree tend the Pit of Souls, which the Bruxians hunted to the edge of their own ruin.

For discussion

1. The peaceful, spiritual Jengu once destroyed every Vrak, young ones included, "with a cold-blooded detachment." Can a people be both victims and perpetrators? Does knowing their history change how you judge them?
2. Rockson and Mathis are changed into Jengu without being asked. Jengu-9 promises the change is temporary, and Rockson senses "a flicker of guilt." Is a kind lie ever justified?
3. The Bruxians unite only when an outside enemy forces them to. Where have you seen the same thing in human history?
4. The Bruxian obsession with the Kree costs them three warriors for every Kree killed, yet they keep going. The narrator compares it to an addiction. What "Kreedok" do people or nations sometimes refuse to walk away from?
5. The book keeps returning to life after death: the Glen of Spirits, "going away," and the Pit of Souls. How did these ideas compare with your own beliefs?

6. Parts IX–XIII: Medina Lake, Biloxi, Sylmar, the Grand Canyon, and Mulholland Drive

Chapters 33–37

What happens: During a storm, Mickey falls asleep in his recliner and travels into his own past. He walks the glowing jellyfish shallows of Biloxi Bay in 1969, thirteen days before Hurricane Camille. He lands in his family's yard during the 1971 San Fernando earthquake. On a bridge in the Grand Canyon, Cassie repairs his brain and tells him the truth: "The other person is you." In a burned-out future he meets his dying "future self," who turns out to be Jengu-23, the alien implanted in him.

For discussion

1. Mickey says he went back to Biloxi and Sylmar to find "pieces of myself" he left behind, "to love life with carefree abandon like I once did." Is there a place and time you would go back to? What would you hope to find?
2. At the pier, Mickey grieves that Camille will hollow out the bay "so no one can walk out as we did…ever again." Why are places from childhood so precious once they're gone?
3. In 1971 the boys at the window are angry, and not because of the earthquake. They are angry about losing their slip-n-slide. Mickey calls it "the last morning he remembers feeling invincible." What did this tell you about childhood?
4. Neighbor Ralph sees Mickey rip a hole in the air and is taken away to a mental hospital. Only young Stevie quietly notices the same stranger at Biloxi, Sylmar, and the Grand Canyon. Why do children so often see what adults won't?
5. Cassie says that in 2022 every child attends "the Mickey Thorn School" to study "the destroyer of worlds." How would it feel to learn that you will become history's villain? Is the future fixed?
6. Jengu-23 says, "I became corrupt with the power of being a god." Is Mickey a victim of the implant, a partner in what it does, or both?
7. These memory chapters feel very personal. If you know the author grew up in Southern California and served in the Air Force in San Antonio, how does that change your reading of them?

7. Parts XIV–XVI: Fugitives, A Place of Monsters, and Avoiding Being Lunch

Chapters 38–41

What happens: Hunted by their own side, Kit, Angel, and Sol hide in a cave until a Farsan finds them. Mickey rescues them with the code words his future self taught him. On Bellerophon, Angel reveals that she was born on Sparcee, a world the Bruxians destroyed. At a 7-Eleven, a Farsan kills John Taylor, and his brother Jason slays it with a flaming sword. Mickey nearly dies, then travels back in time to bring Jason, and this time John too, into the team.

For discussion

1. Angel has lived among humans for more than sixty years, hiding her grief for Sparcee. She still feels guilt about the two human pilots she shot down. How did her story change your view of her and of her hatred for the Bruxians?
2. The three officers debate whether to save Mickey, knowing he may destroy worlds. What would you have decided?
3. Kit refuses Mickey's offer to go back in time and save John: "He is with his family and tribe." Was he right?
4. Jason has never walked, but in Mickey's suit he stands, runs, and fights. What does his story say about what people can do when they are given the chance?
5. When Mickey grabs Jason, the crowd sees a man snatching a disabled child and attacks him. Were they wrong to act? How does this scene compare with the bystanders who did nothing elsewhere in the book?
6. After the time jump, Kit remembers losing his arm, and a dead Herxes still lies on Bellerophon. Mickey says, "Maybe the universe keeps the receipts and throws away the reasons." What do you make of how this book handles time travel and paradox?

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8. Part XVII: The Extinction Chessboard

Chapters 42–48

What happens: Every player converges on Mickey's house at Medina Lake. Koku Kwee and two Farsans seize Patience. Rockson and Mathis, now Jengu, fight the Farsans. Mickey's team gives chase: Jason runs in his suit while the rest fly on a hovercraft. General Kerr watches from a hidden tent with artillery ready and a captive boy from the future named Ari. Patience slashes Koku with the Drogo tooth, and Jason runs him through with the flaming sword. Koku claws Cassie, and she dies in Mickey's arms, smiling: "At least I got to meet my Daddy."

For discussion

1. Patience searches the bloody bedroom alone and pockets a silver tooth "for reasons she doesn't understand." What does this tell you about her? Did you expect her to become one of the book's heroes?
2. General Kerr tells the brass this is about national security, but his heart is failing and he wants Mickey's healing for himself. Is Kerr the true villain of the book? How does his fear of death compare with the Jengu's faith?
3. John stands in front of Angel: "He's my responsibility, and he needs me; I need him." Later, Jason says he will do whatever it takes to save his brother. What does the book say about brothers?
4. As he dies, Koku sees in Jason's face "commitment and utter fierceness," and asks only, "Please be true." Why do you think the author gave this enemy a moment of respect?
5. Cassie's last words are "I'm so sorry I failed my mission, but at least I got to meet my Daddy." How did this scene affect you, knowing that her mother is lying unconscious a few yards away?
6. Mickey believes Patience is dead, and his grief becomes rage. Was there a moment when he could still have been reached?

9. Parts XVIII–XX (first half): Revenge, Revenge Again, and The Battle Goes On

Chapters 49–53

What happens: Mickey lifts every Bruxian and Farsan off Brux and drops them on Kreedok, where the Kree destroy them. On Jengu he offers the people a choice of deaths; they choose "stepping off the path" and pray for his soul as they die. Kerr fires a stolen Bruxian cannon at Mickey, and Ari, Mickey's son from the future, dies in the counter-strike. Fully taken over now, Mickey flies around the Earth, burning it with radiation.

For discussion

1. These are the hardest chapters in the book: two species destroyed and most of Earth burned. How did you keep reading? Did you still hope for Mickey?
2. On Jengu, Groucho tells him, "Your soul we pray." Mickey replies, "I am a good god indeed." What do you make of a people praying for the one who is killing them?
3. Ari, held captive, says calmly, "I am happy that I will soon be out of my misery…and so will you." He broke the rule that only one person may time-travel at a time, hoping to save his sister. How did you feel about Ari?
4. Flying over Texas, Mickey slows for a second, "as if he has forgotten why the shape of its shoreline hurts." What does that flicker mean? Is any of the real Mickey left?
5. Kerr's weapon was Bruxian technology, a gift the Bruxians thought would never be used. What does the book suggest about weapons we "never meant to use"?

10. Part XX (continued): Second Home and the Valshavi

Chapters 54–63

What happens: From orbit, the team watches Earth burn, and Michelle, now Jengan, recites the poem that gives the book its title. The survivors take refuge on Jengu and rescue 157 people. Their plan depends on Patience: she must win Mickey's trust and take him to see the Valshavi on Saturna Luna. In the end Michelle speaks to her as the Valshavi, and Patience drives the needle home. Mickey is sealed in a containment zone in Los Angeles, and Patience learns she is pregnant with twins. She names them Cassiopeia and Aries: Cassie and Ari.

For discussion

1. "When earthlings weep, the end is nigh, / When earthlings weep, the Earth does die." Michelle calls it a bad poem; Angel calls it beautiful, sad, and prophetic. What do you think the title means now?
2. Sol pulls his gun on Michelle to make her fly to Boulder, where his family lives. Kit refuses to let himself cry for Cheryl and his daughters. How do the three soldiers carry grief differently?

3. The survivors are offered several futures, including becoming Jengu or living on a monster-filled planet. All 157 vote to return to a ruined Earth underground. Would you have chosen the same?
4. Inside Mickey's bubble, Patience begins to believe "the old Mickey is here right now." Was her love a weakness, a strength, or both?
5. Michelle pretends to be the Valshavi to reach Patience's mind. In the end, it is the memory of a little girl in a blue bodysuit that makes Patience act. Was that deception justified?
6. Patience names her twins Cassie and Ari, the same names as the children from the future. What does this suggest about fate and about the loop the story has drawn?

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11. Chapters 64–65 and the Epilogues: The Intersection of Realities

Chapters 64–65, Epilogue (I) and (II) — Read this section after you finish the book. It discusses the ending.

What happens: In another reality, Mickey wakes from a night terror in a family home with Patience, Cassie, Ari, and two schnauzers. Ari asks, "You were in the 'in-between' again, weren't you, Dad?" and Patience suggests he write a book about his dreams. In the first epilogue, Mickey wakes in the vines of the Pit of Souls with a Jengan body, kept alive forever. In the second, an elderly Patience and her grown children say goodbye to Mickey in a hospital. His last words are "Stepping off the path. I'm going to the Glen of Spirits." Patience follows him there, and he asks her to "Remember…."

For discussion

1. The book closes with three realities: a family man with night terrors, a soul trapped on Kreedok, and a dying husband in a hospital. Which one feels most "real" to you? Do they all have to be true at once?
2. The purple rabbit's foot shows up on Mickey's belt loop in 1971, on the nightstand, in the vines, and in his palm at the end. What does it connect?
3. Patience teases, "You ever think about writing a book about this?" How did you react to the hint that the whole novel might be Mickey's dream turned into a story?
4. In the hospital, the nurses tie Mickey's arms down with straps, an echo of the laboratory where he was Subject 29. What did that detail make you feel?
5. Mickey goes to the Glen of Spirits, the Jengan heaven, while another version of him "goes away" to the Pit of Souls. What do the two epilogues suggest about judgment, mercy, and second chances?
6. The final words are "Remember…" and "And she does…." What do you think Patience remembers?

Big-Picture Questions

For your last meeting, or to close a single discussion of the whole book.

1. Identity is at the heart of the book. Mickey, Michael Carson, Subject 29, Jengu-23, and "the other": who is the real Mickey? Where does a person end and the thing living inside him begin?
2. Power runs through every faction: Kerr, Koku Kwee, the Jengu, and finally Mickey. Who in the book uses power well? What does the story suggest happens to anyone who becomes "a god"?
3. Many characters lay down their lives: Jengu-7, Jengu-15, Cassie, Ari, Jason ready to die for John, and Patience walking into Mickey's hands. Which sacrifice moved you most, and why?
4. Humans often look small through alien eyes. Koku calls them "the stupidest creatures in all universes," and the Farsan mocks their arrogance. Yet the Jengu treat them as equals. Which aliens see humanity most truly?
5. The 7-Eleven crowd, the drivers and neighbors who watch and do nothing, and Ralph in his driveway: how does the book judge people who see and do nothing, or who act on what they think they see?
6. Time travel in the book leaves "receipts." Do you think the future is fixed, or can it be changed? What did Cassie and Ari's missions accomplish?
7. Mickey's memories of Biloxi, the 1971 earthquake, and the Grand Canyon come from the author's own life. How do these personal memories change a book about wormholes and alien wars?
8. If you have read Michael Barnett's Eden Fading, you may notice familiar names in the Sylmar chapter: a father called Buck and a house full of brothers. What echoes do you see between the two books?
9. Which character would you most like to follow into another book, and why?

Thank You for Reading

If your group enjoyed When Earthlings Weep, a short review on Amazon or Goodreads helps other readers find it. You can watch the book trailer, listen to an audio conversation about the book, and learn about Michael's other books at michaelbarnettbooks.com.