

ELYSIUM

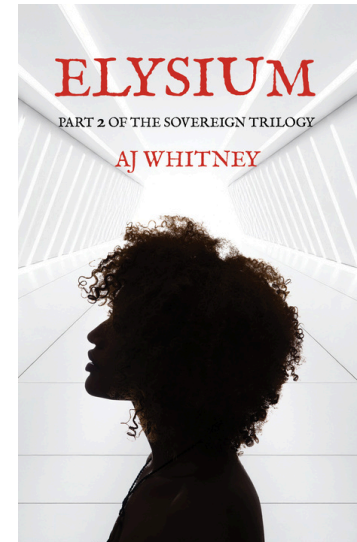
AJ WHITNEY

Grade Level: 6-12

Ages: 12+

Themes: Religion, violence, death, superstition, found family, adoption, selflessness, self-sacrifice, starvation, discrimination, dehumanization, government interference, racism, groupthink

ISBN:



ELYSIUM

SUMMARY

When 13-year-old Harper wakes strapped to a modern hospital bed after being abducted from her pre-industrial cult village, she learns that she's in Elysium, an underground city whose citizens survived a nuclear holocaust over three hundred years ago. But the village the Elysians took her from has just received another message from the gods, and the two stories don't quite add up.

Elysium is the second book in the Sovereign Trilogy. **This guide contains spoilers.**

PRE-READING DISCUSSION

Have a discussion about learning to think for oneself, asking students the following questions:

- Think about the phrase *Because I said so*. What do you think and feel when you hear that?
- What does that phrase actually *mean*?
- Sometimes people just want you to do what they tell you without bothering to think about it. What does that say about your relationship?
- How would you prefer to be treated instead?
- What's important to you about being able to ask questions?
- What do you think happens in places where people aren't allowed to think for themselves?
- What do you think would be different in places where people think for themselves all the time and ask a lot of questions?



CONNECTING TO THE WORLD

In *Elysium*, we find out for the first time that Harper is Black-presenting biracial and that Maggie was the only other person in their village who looked like her. Everyone else was white. Harper is surprised when she visits the Elysian school and discovers that there are all kinds of different people there, including a lot who are Black. Imagine what it would be like to live your entire life without seeing a single other person who had the same skin color or hair texture or eye shape as you do. What would it be like to discover a place where half of the people had those things in common with you? What do you think you would experience? Write a short story, song, or poem describing your emotional and physical reactions to this experience.

Follow-up discussion:

- As a group, list all the different emotions you experienced during this activity.
- What thoughts went along with those emotions?
- Which thoughts or emotions did other people mention that surprised you? What was surprising about them?
- Many people have had similar experiences when they were the only Black, Asian, LatinX, Indian, or Indigenous person in the room. What do you think about that?
- How does this affect the way you think about people who look different than you do?

CONNECTING TO THE TEXT***Points of View***

Like *Sovereign*, *Elysium* is told from two points of view. Harper's is first-person (I/me), and the village's is third-person (he/she/they). What do you think was the author's reason for writing it this way? What did the village's story actually turn out to be? (*the hidden surveillance footage that Matthew discovers at the end*) What do you think was important about Harper's story being told in present tense (happening right now) while the village's story was told in past tense (happening in the past)?

ELYSIUM



Plot Twists & Cliffhangers

The author loves to include plot twists (surprises you don't see coming) and cliffhangers (endings that leave things unfinished or unexplained). What were some of the plot twists you noticed in *Elysium*? What were you expecting instead? How did you react to them?

Elysium ends on the cliffhanger of John and Maggie being “extracted” by Elysian soldiers and carried away from the village. When one of the soldiers removes his gas mask, it turns out to be Rome, who we previously thought was serving a life prison sentence as a traitor. What do you think is really happening? What do you hope happens next?

CONNECTING TO THE STUDENTS: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When Harper wakes up in Elysium's hospital, she describes a lot of tubes, wires, machines, and noises. What did you think was happening at first? Which modern items were able to identify?
- What did you first think of Dr. Tori's explanation about the Global Devastation and the illness that ravaged the villagers above? When did you start to get suspicious of her story?
- What do you think was the author's reason for including specialists, like a physical therapist, in Harper's care at the hospital?
- What did you think about Harper and the other former Orphans having to talk to therapists?
- If you were in Harper, Ava, and Matthew's situation, would you have chosen to stay in Elysium or go home to the village?
- What did you think about the Elysian system of school? Which way would you rather learn?
- Harper, Ava, and Matthew make friends with a group of former Orphans who were sent to Elysium in the Sending before theirs. Which of these characters is your favorite? Your least favorite? What do you like/dislike about them?
- Early on in his friendship with Harper, Amari gets the wrong idea, gets a crush, assume she likes him back, and puts his arm around her. What do you think about his actions? What about the way Matthew reacts?

ELYSIUM



ELYSIUM

CONNECTING TO THE STUDENTS: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think caused the tension between Harper and Matthew? Should they really have broken up?
- Now that you know the Sovereign aren't real, who do you think left the message for the villagers that said, "We took what was owed. Repent or pay the price?"
- When they find the message, the village ousts their current Elders and punishes anyone who was involved with the Orphans. They enact some cruel new rules and punishments to show that they've repented. What emotions did you experience reading those things? Which ones were the hardest for you?
- What do you think about Maggie's reaction to finding out the Sovereign were real after all?
- What evidence was there that General Yarrow and Dr. Tori might have been less than truthful?
- Throughout this book, Harper undergoes an undeniable transformation. What do you like and dislike about her as a soldier and why?
- Who do you like better for Harper – Matthew or Rome – and why?
- Something unusual happens in Harper's interrogation of Rome. What do you think he meant when he said there was another mission?
- In Harper's nightmare, there are several callbacks to events from the previous book. Which ones did you notice and what is their importance?
- Matthew's adoptive mother, Anna Aaron, becomes the leader of the village's resistance movement. What do you think of her now, and what was your reaction to her death?
- You probably suspected Elysium was hiding something from early on in the book. What was your reaction when you learned the truth?

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

AJ Whitney is a Kansas City author and high school counselor writing dark speculative YA fiction. Her debut, *Sovereign*, launched a twisty, high-stakes trilogy. She champions teens, anti-bullying, and LGBTQ+ education, writing stories that challenge norms, celebrate individuality, and prove the dark can be just as powerful as the light.

