

## ***Culpability* by Bruce Holsinger**

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bruce Holsinger is the author of *Culpability*, the 116th selection of Oprah's Book Club and hailed by Oprah Winfrey as "a must-read for all generations." His four previous novels include *The Gifted School*, a Book of the Month Club selection and winner of the Colorado Book Award; *The Displacements*, the inaugural title in the United Nations Read for Action Book Club; and *The Invention of Fire* and *A Burnable Book*, historical novels set in medieval London. He's also written many works of nonfiction, most recently *On Parchment: Animals, Archives, and the Making of Culture from Herodotus to the Digital Age*. His essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and many other publications, and he has been profiled on NPR's *Weekend Edition*, *Here & Now*, and *Marketplace*. He is the editor of the quarterly journal *New Literary History* as well as a frequent instructor at WriterHouse, a nonprofit in Charlottesville. He teaches English at the University of Virginia and is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. Visit him online at [bruceholsinger.com](http://bruceholsinger.com)

### **ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

*As you read and annotate the book, keep these three big questions in mind. Look for quotes or short passages that answer these questions – then mark those sections of the book!*

- ★ In what ways do guilt, grief, and blame affect the relationships between family members after a crisis?
- ★ To what extent do fear, public opinion, and media attention shape the way individuals and society respond to tragedy?
- ★ To what extent are there ethical limits on artificial intelligence and technological dependence?

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. The novel begins with the autonomous minivan crash that kills Phil and Judith Drummond. To what extent is Charlie responsible for the accident, even though the vehicle was operating autonomously?
2. Noah believes he was supervising Charlie responsibly, yet he was distracted by work emails at the time of the crash. How does the novel complicate traditional ideas of parental responsibility?
3. Lorelei Shaw is a leading AI ethicist writing *Silicon Souls: On the Culpability of Artificial Minds*. How ironic is her role in the accident, and what larger point does Holsinger make through that irony?
4. Each member of the Cassidy-Shaw family believes they contributed to the crash in some way. Why does Holsinger distribute guilt across the entire family instead of assigning blame to a single person?

5. How does the novel distinguish between legal culpability and moral culpability? Which characters seem most concerned with each form of responsibility?
6. Charlie's texting and distraction during the drive become central to the investigation. How does his behavior reflect broader concerns about teenage dependence on technology?
7. Daniel Monet presents himself as a visionary tech entrepreneur, but Noah increasingly distrusts him. What does Monet represent in the novel's critique of Silicon Valley culture?
8. Charlie's growing relationship with Eurydice Monet complicates the family's already fragile situation. Why is this relationship important both emotionally and symbolically?
9. How does the Chesapeake Bay setting contribute to the novel's mood of isolation, surveillance, and uncertainty?
10. Lorelei argues that AI systems reflect the values and flaws of the humans who create them. Which events in the novel best support this argument?
11. Noah often views his family as functioning like an "algorithm." What does this metaphor suggest about human relationships and patterns of behavior?
12. Daniel Monet's wealth allows him to shape narratives, influence investigations, and maintain privacy. What commentary does the novel make about the relationship between technology and power?
13. How does Holsinger use the deaths of Phil and Judith Drummond to humanize what could otherwise become an abstract debate about AI ethics?
14. Several characters attempt to avoid responsibility by blaming systems, distractions, or circumstances. Why is accepting responsibility so difficult in the world of the novel?
15. The marshals, lawyers, engineers, and journalists all interpret the crash differently. What does this suggest about the nature of truth in the digital age?