



 @benjaminOliver

# THE LOOP

Ben Oliver


## READING GUIDE




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# THE LOOP BY BENJAMIN OLIVER

## SYNOPSIS

Life inside hi-tech prison, the Loop, is one long repetitive hell. Luka Kane has just turned sixteen and has been inside for two years. The inmates live in solitary confinement and must participate in the energy harvest – a cruel process which uses their own energy to power the prison. The prisoners are serving death sentences. Execution dates come up every six months with the option to postpone if they participate in ‘Delays’, medical trials for the benefit of the wealthy elite in the outside world. This is a world and a system controlled by technology – from the way food is delivered to prisoners to the outcome of their trials.

Luke is in love with the warden, Wren, who brings him the books that are his only escape. Wren is an Alt – one of the rich, genetically modified members of the population who benefit from the medical trials Luka and his fellow ‘Regular’ inmates go through. The only other being he talks to in his cell is the computer, Happy, the face of all technology in this world.

Wren risks her own freedom by unlocking a dozen cells every Wednesday night at 2am during the Loop’s three-hour diagnostic period. It’s during these small moments of freedom that Luka meets his friends, the other inmates Wren deems trustworthy enough to join ‘the 2am club’.

Also in the Loop is Tyco – who wants to kill Luka and repetitively shouts death threats over the wall during exercise hour. Luka doesn’t know why. As rumours of a war begin to circulate inside the Loop, a new inmate arrives; Kina. Luka and Kina quickly become friends.



The Loop's routine suddenly changes. First the government-issued rain stops falling, then all inmates are offered an unscheduled mass Delay. The inmates accept the Delay and are separated into groups A and B. Group A return and display strange and disturbing behaviours during exercise hour before dying.

Luka knows that he must escape if he is to live. During the Delay, Luka makes a daring escape attempt but is thwarted. He is taken to the trial room where he is put in the paralyses chair and injected with an unknown chemical.

Luka wakes to find himself abandoned in the Loop. A day goes by without food, water, or human contact. Finally Wren shows up. She explains that war has come, the city is burning. Wren releases the 2am club and decides to let them out of the prison. Before she can free them, though, Wren loses her mind like the inmates in Group A, killing two inmates before the rest manage to lock themselves back inside their cells.

Luka escapes. He frees Kina and runs through rat-infested train tunnels to the city to find medical help for Wren – only to discover its citizens in the same state as the warden. He dubs them 'smilers' because of the fixed smile on all of their faces as they kill others mindlessly. He believes there must have been a biochemical attack that makes people lose their sanity. The Group B Delay he received must've been a vaccination.

He returns to the Loop, freeing the 2am club. After some deliberation, they decide to let the other inmates out of their cells ... including Tyco. Tyco immediately tries to attack Luka. We learn Tyco is convinced Luka killed his brother, when really it was Luka's sister Molly. It was an accident for which Luka took the rap. As Luka released Tyco, he agrees not to kill Luka yet, but to give him a head start into the war zone. After that, he's fair game.

The group travel to the city, intending to find their families and then regroup at the medical facility where they received the vaccination, hoping to find a cure. Luka ends up alone with Tyco, who pretends to have forgiven him, then drugs him with Ebb and attempts to murder him.

At the last moment, Luka is saved by two Ebb addicts (known as 'clones'), Shion and Day, who tell Luka about a place where other survivors are hiding. The drug offers immunity from the Smiler disease. Luka leaves Day and Shion to continue his mission to find his family. Luka makes it home and finds his sister is an Ebb addict and his father is a Smiler.

Luka decides to bring his sister to Day and Shion but the gigantic apartment building is stormed by soldiers. Luka



and his sister make it to the roof but are cornered by the soldiers. Luka's infected father saves their lives by dragging the soldiers to their deaths off the edge of the building, sacrificing himself in the process.

Luka is rescued by his fellow Loop inmates but the vehicle they are in crashes. Luka's shoulder is impaled by a piece of the car's doorframe, this is when he learns that he now has superhuman healing capabilities. So do the others. This seems to be a side effect of the Delay taken by Group B.

Luka deduces who is to blame for the attack: there is no enemy but the government itself. He heads to the centre of town where the government is holding Wren hostage, only for his expectations to be defied. The true villain is not Galen Rye, but the computer Happy – a computer who has decided that humans have outlived their evolutionary time on the earth, destroying it and draining it of resources. Happy has control of the government and the band of prisoners and Ebb addicts are overwhelmed.

Luka finally wakes up in the Block – the legendary prison for adult prisoners where the computer, Happy, tries to trick him into giving away the location of the city's survivors and his friends ...

## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*'The first time I read The Loop, I had to stay up late to finish it – it's totally gripping. The trouble is, the world of this book is so vivid and convincing that it feels real. I'm now completely terrified of computers, politicians, surgery and rats ... thanks Ben! Of course, if we don't control our tomorrows then The Loop might be more than just the words between these pages. If we're not careful, we, too, may have to break out of a future we can no longer control ... This is a brilliant futuristic thriller in which real human emotions are the only forces that can really make a difference – and that's the truth, both in this book and out of it. Let's hope we never forget that.'* **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Ben Oliver began writing creatively at age seven, and was promptly placed into the lowest reading and writing group at school. Frustrated by his lack of immediate success, Ben chose to step down from the world of writing.



Three years later, he came out of retirement to write a 'What I Did During My Summer Holiday' assignment, in which he claimed he saved the world from the apocalypse. Encouraged by an enthusiastic teacher, Ben returned, triumphantly, to writing.

A mere twenty-two years later, he is now a high school English teacher and his debut novel is the first book in a futuristic prison-break trilogy, *The Loop*, which has been optioned for TV/film development by Lime Pictures.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'*The Loop* began with the idea of the Delays. At first I didn't have any characters, I didn't know when or where the story would be set, I didn't even have a plot. All I had was the idea of a prisoner on death-row pushing back the date of their execution by taking part in scientific experiments. That alone wasn't enough to begin writing. It was only later, when other elements of the story started to come together – artificial intelligence; corrupt governments; the gulf between the rich and the poor in society – that the main characters started to come forward in my mind, and the plot began to form.

I don't like to make a big plan about what I'm going to write. I much prefer to just sit down with a few ideas and then start writing. I find that by writing in this way – the characters begin to do their own thing. It's not me telling them what to do, it's them telling me what to do.

When I finished the first draft of *The Loop*, I realised that I had a story about friendship, class divides, corruption, humanity's propensity for destruction, and the possibilities and dangers of technology. With these themes clear in my mind, I began the second draft, in which I tried to emphasise these ideas and make them more prominent.

What I was really doing, when writing *The Loop*, was trying to recapture that feeling I used to get when I would read an amazing book and forget everything else in the world, or when I'd watch a movie that was so brilliant that I felt genuine fear when the main characters were in trouble. In a way I was trying to write a book for my teenage self; a boy who would terrify himself with Stephen King books, or stay up too late watching *Dawn of the Dead* or *Blade Runner*, when everyone else had gone to sleep.' **BEN OLIVER**





# THEMES

- Technology and humanity
- Crime and punishment
- Family and friendship
- Truth and deception
- Freedom and incarceration

# WRITING STYLE

*The Loop* is written in first person, present tense – you are right with the main character, Luka, inside his head. The experience of reading the book is incredibly visceral and immediate and sometimes deliberately confusing. The story starts with a day-by-day description of the prison's mind-numbing routine, presented at times as a chapter merely a few lines in length – this structure returns at the end when Luka is imprisoned in a second prison called the Block. In the middle of the book, as the routine unravels, the writing style broadens too. The descriptive language is vivid, often slipping into horror during moments of violence and tension, but is balanced out by realistic dialogue and moments of dark humour. **363 pages, ages 14+**

# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## 1. Imprisonment

*'There is no gift in the world, no experience or feeling, that can compare to these hours where we can look into each other's eyes and talk without walls between us, or microphones listening to us.'* **Luka, p35**

There is constant coverage in the media and in other public forums about the effectiveness of imprisonment as punishment. A lot of people believe prisons today are too lenient. Others believe prisons are simply ineffective as a deterrent and reforming tool.



Separate the class into groups, assigning group a specific area of research into prisons. Here are some potential avenues of research:

- The history of prisons. When did the idea of imprisonment start? What was its purpose? How did it change over the year, specifically in Victorian times (see Foucault)?
- The reality of prisons. What is it really like to be imprisoned? What are prisons like today?
- Arguments for the effectiveness of imprisonment. Why can prisons sometimes be a good thing? Are there any prominent success stories?
- Arguments against the effectiveness of prisons. What challenges do prisons and prisoners face? How are policy-makers seeking to address these challenges?
- The future of prisons. What will the prisons of the future look like? Do these bear any resemblance to *The Loop*?
- Art surrounding prisons and imprisonment. What prominent works of literature, or visual art handle the subject? What do they tell us about prisons?

Each group should create a short multimedia presentation tackling their area of expertise, including visual material, statistics and key facts. After the presentations, discuss your findings as a class. Does the representation of imprisonment in *The Loop* reflect the reality?

## ***2. Horror Writing***

What are the most frightening scenes in *The Loop*? Go through the book and mark the passages you feel are the most representative of the horror genre – for instance, the scene in the tunnels with the rats, or various scenes involving the Smilers. What do you think makes them scary? When everyone has marked up their texts, discuss your findings as a class. Who in the class enjoys the horror genre – what are their favourite horror movies or books? What makes horror so counterintuitively enjoyable?



Now, it's time to write a scary scene of your own, utilising all of the techniques you've discussed. You can base it in the world of *The Loop*, in our own world or another of your choosing. At the end of the writing session, a few members of the class may like to read out their work... whose scene was the scariest and why?

### **3. Character Profiles**

*The Loop* has a brilliant cast of characters, each one with their own individual backstory and 'arc' (the development of their personal story from the beginning to the end of the novel).

As a class, create a list of all the named characters in *The Loop* – then, separate into groups, assigning each group a character or two. The group should create a profile for each of their assigned characters. The profile should include all the information it's possible to glean about the character from the novel – including a portrait sketch, name, age, approximate height, history, motivations, important relationships and character traits, as well as any other information you feel is important. Where relevant, you could include the manner of the character's death.

Now, the teacher should collect all the profiles, shuffle, and reassign different characters to the groups. Imagine the character in front of you is now the main character of your story and write a scene from their perspective. The scene might be something inspired by the world of *The Loop* – set before, during, or after the events of the novel. Or, you might choose to write a story based in the real world, or another world altogether. In any case, be sure to include the important details about the character in your scene.

### **4. Prison Break**

The first third of *The Loop* is largely set in the prison itself. Imagine you are prisoners in the Loop, determined to escape ...

Separate into groups and comb through the book to find details of the physical layout of the prison as well as its security features and schedules. List as many details as possible as well as drawing a layout of the prison.

Now it's time to create your prison break plan. Discuss what you've discovered about the prison as a group





and come up with a strategy to escape. When you're finished, present your plan to the rest of the class. The teacher can decide which team of prisoners escapes!

## WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *'We gave them everything they needed, told them willingly; everything we love, everything we hate, political views, names of friends and family and enemies. We handed it over without arguing. We created them, Luka, that's the irony. We created them.'* (Galen Rye, p343)

What does *The Loop* tell us about the power and the perils of technology? Do you think we place too much trust in technology today? Do you think the world represented in the novel could one day be our world?

2. *'We chose to destroy the human population because it took us less than three seconds to conclude that humanity is a virus ...'* (Happy, p345)

Do you think Happy is right to say that humanity is a virus? If so, was the computer justified in attempting to destroy humanity completely?

3. *Everything is as it should be.* (Page 363)

What did you think of how the novel ended – particularly the last line? What do you think it means? What feeling are you left with and what do you think will happen next?

## IF YOU LIKED *THE LOOP* WHY NOT TRY ...

- *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner
- *The Fandom* by Anna Day
- *Jelly* by Clare Rees

