WE ARE WATCHING ELIZA BRIGHT by A.E. Osworth Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. *We Are Watching Eliza Bright* is narrated by the collective voice of men's rights activists and incel Redditors. Discuss the ways in which collective voices in society often influence our reality, the way we look at the world and the choices we make.
2. The narrators of the novel are constantly watching Eliza and the other characters. In reality, people are leaving a digital footprint and being surveilled at all times, whether or not they realize it. While increasing action is being taken by companies and individuals to combat invasions of privacy, do you think we have reached a point of no return?
3. Suzanne, Devonte and Eliza are known to the narrators as the the 'Diversity Squad.' When Eliza faces discrimination due to being a woman working in a male-dominated industry, each person reacts differently, with a different idea of what Eliza should do in the face of Lewis and JP's harassment. Discuss how their viewpoints are borne from their own experiences with oppression.
4. Preston who believes that he is the kind of person who is doing the right thing, blind to how his behavior and actions allows workplace discrimination. Discuss the ways in which Preston often tries and fails to understand his mistakes, and why that is the case.
5. *We are Watching Eliza Bright* is set in the post-2016 US election world, and shines a light on how radicalized communities operate, especially young white men. Discuss the historical, political and cultural forces that have worked to embolden these points of view.
6. The novel is narrated by two contrasting collective voices: of the Redditors and the Sixsterhood. Discuss the stylistic ways in which these voices differ and how they altered your reading of the main characters and the plot.
7. By novel's end, we realize that perhaps events didn't necessarily transpire in the way we we were told. What are some of your other favorite examples of unreliable narrators in the books and film?
8. If you were playing *Guilds of the Protectorate*, what kind of villain or hero would you create? Good, evil, lawful, chaotic—what would your character's alignment be and why?
9. Gaming is integral to the lives of the characters in *We Are Watching Eliza Bright*, and we learn about their history in video games and how that's shaped them into who they are as adults. Can you point to specific works in any medium—from video games, music, books or film—that have influenced your life to a similar extent?
10. *We Are Watching Eliza Bright* is not only a thriller but a look at the way systems and instituions shape the way we view the world and other people. What did this novel reveal to you in terms of understanding how other people think?

Discussion with A.E. Osworth

1. **What inspired you to write *We Are Watching Eliza Bright?*** A couple things, actually—first, it came directly out of a writing exercise assigned by Shelley Jackson at The New School, where I got my MFA. In her literature seminar, she has everyone write in the style of whatever book we just read for two pages, which I think is a really

valuable exercise. I just never stopped writing it, and the further along I got, the less it sounded like its source text (Motorman, by David Ohle, in case you were wondering). The second thing is that I spent a lot of years as Geekery Editor at Autostraddle, a website for queer women and nonbinary folks. One of the things in my vertical was gaming and nerd culture, so naturally I covered Gamergate on occasion and accepted pitches about it. Looking back at my own writing there, it's strange—I didn't actually cover Gamergate nearly as often or as deeply as I remember, and I think that's because I was constantly thinking about it even when I was writing other things. Gamergate felt like the logical conclusion of so many aspects of the patriarchy, the internet and Western culture, and it also felt like a huge tipping point into something even more sinister than we'd had before, which it obviously did wind up being. I couldn't get it out of my head. So I just kept writing. Then Donald Trump won in 2016 and it became apparent that at least part of why was a resurgence (or perhaps a better term is an unveiling) of white nationalism; the online spaces where young white men are radicalized became an obsession. I rewrote the whole book to set it in an immediate post-2016-Presidential-Election world.

2. **How deep are you personally in the online gaming world?** Nearly not at all! And in fact, for all the reasons outlined in the book! I find it a scary place to exist, which is a damn shame. When I do play online games, I play them on personal servers with no one else on them, or with a select group of friends. My gaming heart is very much in the tabletop RPG realm. I play a lot of Dungeons and Dragons—I love using games to build community in physical space, and MMOs don't scratch the same itch for me. To get the video game industry in the novel correct, I combined what I know to be true about the tech industry and startup culture, and then asked a dear friend and fellow fiction writer who also happens to work in gaming to take a look to get some of the finer details right (thank you, Nat Mesnard! Any errors that remain are my own).

3. **What kind of research did writing your novel entail?** Oh gosh, aside from the above, I read a *ton* of Reddit to try to get the Reddit voice correct. I tried a lot of different ways that they "know what they know" as well—at one point they had some creepy surveillance mechanics? I did a lot of research into how it's possible to see people through their webcams without their knowledge, which was terrifying and I wound up using none of it. Because the thing that solidified that the narrators were going to be inventing massive portions of the protagonists' actions and internal life actually came from watching a group of voice actors play Dungeons and Dragons (that's how much I love Dungeons and Dragons). One of the original cast members of *Critical Role*, a livestream D&D game on Twitch, left the show in a way that hinted at contention and the cast asked their fans, who are Multitude and Very Online, to refrain from speculating about why. We all know that's the best way to *ensure* something happens, is to ask a large number of internet strangers to please not do something. I popped my figurative popcorn and watched people who formed parasocial relationships with the cast members wax poetic about the situation as though they were close to the story. I took note of what I thought they were missing, where I imagined blind spots were, and the clamor of voices trying to divine what occurred became my guiding light for how Reddit imagined the protagonists into existence. What I'm actually saying is that my research processes were

largely deep dives into things that already held my interest (for instance, I'm still a die-hard fan of *Critical Role* and no, I don't think their fandom has all that much in common with my narrators, the #Critters are *far* nicer) and it made my research much more enjoyable.

4. **The voice of the novel's deeply unreliable narrators—a collection of men's rights activists and incel Redditors—felt so authentic, and had to go to such dark, brutal places in order to do so. What was the challenge of being in that headspace and writing in that voice for extended periods of time?** I'm having trouble thinking of just one challenge; there's a lot that's hard about it. I actually get asked this a lot by all sorts of folks because the narrators are *so* brutal, and it's why I needed to find ways to root my research in joy. Because how do you explain to people why you spend so much time reading things you find abhorrent? I can only say that I was obsessed with these digital spaces and how they were formed, what was prized and prioritized in them. That curiosity and the feeling that it was important to understand, that sustained me through things like analyzing language in the Elliot Rodger manifesto and deploying what I found there. The last time I was asked this question was by one of the Deans at The New School while we were in line at O Café and it included an amendment—did I find I now had this really damaging voice in my head and body, and if so, how do I deal with that? I thought about it while I was waiting for my coffee and answered that I actually think we all have this voice inside us. It's a part of existing in a patriarchal culture with the omnipresent amplification of the internet. Spending so much time writing in the voice has given me a particular superpower of identifying *when* that voice is whispering vitriol in my ear, the ability to recognize it as something external and harmful, and to turn the dial down on it in my internal monologue. That said, do recommend having a good therapist in your life if you plan to attempt the same or similar.

5. **On the other—warmer, comforting—end are the glorious Sixsterhood narrators. How did you channel their unique voice and create the grammatical structure of their chapters?** The Sixsterhood are me and mine, the queer and trans folks, my chosen family! This is my community arriving full force on the page. No, our houses usually aren't as cool (though I did stay in a friend's art collective's elevator shaft one time, thank you DJ!), but we come from a Place of Abundance all the same. That's really what drove me to make the specific decisions I did about their syntax. The Reddit narrators approach the world from a place of scarcity, therefore they use "or" when they're speculating on the protagonists' actions. The Sixsterhood fundamentally believes that everything is possible, and in fact that little in this life is mutually exclusive, so they use "and" when they're speculating (and they're still largely speculating, even though they can see what's going on!). Practically, the Sixsterhood voice didn't exist before my editor, Seema Mahanian, came on the scene and declared that as I'd written them, the voices sounded identical (which was true). In the era of pandemic, we hopped on a Zoom call and talked through the hallmarks of the Reddit narrators and what opposite choices I could make when it came to the Sixsterhood's vocal texture. And all those choices are really rooted in scarcity versus Abundance—Reddit's short sentences, for instance, versus the Sixsterhood's aversion to periods.

6. **Were there any specific characters that you innately understood and who came to you easily, and were there any characters that you had a more difficult time conjuring?** Suzanne's voice leapt clear into my head, fully formed, as did Preston's creative constipation. Suzanne's voice is closest to my own, and I've met so many people like Preston who are so afraid to give their all (once again, scarcity). Those two aspects have changed the least because I was so sure about them. Believe it or not, Eliza was probably my most difficult, and I think it was because the narrators hate her so much even as they're fixated on her. It took me a long while to get a clear sense of her because she was so obfuscated through their conjuration, and to be honest I'm still not sure I do have the clearest idea of her. But I do know how she surprises the narrators, how she subverts their idea of her; I think that's probably the most important thing I need to have clarity on.

7. **The online gaming community can be a highly exclusionary space. How did this inform your characterizations of Eliza, Suzanne and Devonte, who are gamers and insiders in that world, yet will never be welcomed or accepted?** This is my experience of every niche community that *has* an inside, which is, well, every community. Every space I've ever been a part of is highly exclusionary (which isn't always a bad thing! See: queer-only and trans-only spaces. But that's not exactly what I'm talking about here), and I've had to figure out ways to navigate them in a queer and trans body. Eliza, Suzanne and Devonte experience some similar things that I've experienced as a writer and as someone who works in a University—for instance, being encouraged not to speak up when you're being oppressed because it makes bosses and peers, who believe they can't do wrong or harm, upset. Or being out-argued by someone who is more familiar with the conversational conventions of the community, who the culture of the community is built by and for, but who happens to be wrong. Being wickedly underestimated based on the way my body moves through space. Being talked over or through. Being a target in ways I only understand later, after I've had time to think about it. The only thing that's different is the flavor, the specific content, and for the sake of dramatic tension in a novel, the severity (thank goodness I've never been hit in the face with a full wine bottle, and I hope to never experience it). It's certainly not a gaming-exclusive problem. But that sensation of being ostensibly an insider in a world that fundamentally rejects them means that part of the way those three characters function is in the constant calibration of trying to figure out how to get through it regardless.

8. **Who are some of your favorite writers and how have they influenced your work*?*** You're gonna laugh—the three largest influences on the prose style of this book are Marcel Proust, Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf. Yes, my book features virtual reality and takes place largely on the internet and I owe my greatest debts to authors of classics. It feels like a joke! But it isn't! Proust (who isn't even an author I particularly enjoy reading!) taught me the value of a good, long sentence and helped shake me into making some of the choices I made for the Sixsterhood. Austen taught me how to use letters to further both character and plot—in a modern context, this means emails and chats and texts. The only thing that's changed is the timing; we can do what Austen did, but faster. And Woolf taught me how to change point-of-view characters in the middle of a paragraph, in the middle of a sentence. The narrators flow between whose interiority

they're imagining much like the point of view in *To The Lighthouse*. I've also had the privilege of working with one of my favorite writers as my thesis advisor; Tiphanie Yanique has had a major influence on this book, which was born out of that thesis. She taught me to, and I shit you not, be a bad bitch. Exact phrasing. What it meant in the context of our conversation: to know when to stand up for my vision of the book, when a read or a piece of feedback I was being given didn't take into account the way I or my characters walk through the world, and when it did.

9. **What advice would you give to other writers?** Oh gosh. So this question makes me sweat and let me tell you why: writing advice is hyper-specific to both person and situation. If I don't know who I'm giving advice to and why, I struggle. And it's not like I don't give plenty of advice! I teach! I'm going to stick to things I feel apply really generally, but please please please disregard anything that just doesn't fit (though I'd argue for giving it a go before yeeting it into the sun, you just never know). Okay—first, ignore any writing advice that begins with "don't write." As in, "don't write on your phone," a thing that has been said to me a million times. If the goal is to write, not writing is not the way forward. You should write however you can, on whatever you can, with whatever time you have. It's unrealistic to think that all writers have unlimited hours to roll around in our own creative juices, marinating, whilst declaiming with our finest pens onto our smoothest paper—I write in ten-minute increments on the subway if I have to! And yes, on my phone! High five if you can spend six hours a day drafting, but some of us are busy and depressed. Second, no one ever did this alone. That's fake. People talk about writing being a solitary act; it's just not true. So many people have had a hand in this book, and I write with my friend Nat in the same room as me (or, in the case of pandemic times, on Zoom with me). Never disregard people—it's not good practice for being a human on this planet, and I really don't believe one can do that and also be any kind of artist. Writing is about community, at least it always has been for me. And last, no one can do this in one draft. Even Kerouac couldn't, that's some hyped-up mythos. Expect to iterate; revel in the process of it. It's really quite magic when you do, because it means you can begin wherever you are and be absolutely assured that it only gets better from here.