



## The Secret Under My Skin

*Janet McNaughton*

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## **The Secret Under My Skin** Janet McNaughton

In the year 2368, humankind must struggle to survive under dire environmental conditions and strict government control. In this startling world, one brave young woman begins to unravel a web of lies about life on Earth that will empower her to discover, at last, who she really is. McNaughton vividly imagines an all-too-believable future and celebrates the impact that one person can make on the world.

## **The Secret Under My Skin Details**

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Author : Janet McNaughton

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## From Reader Review The Secret Under My Skin for online ebook

### Aren says

'The Secret Under My Skin' is one of the best young adult sci-fi novels that I've read recently. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of reading the sequel (The Raintree Rebellion) before I read this, so I was aware of some things that were supposed to be secret. However, I didn't think that detracted from my experience! Blake (or Blay) is a likeable, quietly brave character who unexpectedly stumbles into a rebellion that she doesn't understand. The rest of the characters are well-rounded, especially Lem, and the futuristic "technology" is entirely believable. The description of the "technocaust" didn't make me scoff - I found it realistic and intriguing.

Overall a great book! Would definitely recommend it.

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### Ian Wood says

This is a slightly abbreviated version of the review on my blog. Note that links in the blog review will not be reproduced here.

NOTE: SPOILERS!

I would gladly (well, maybe not gladly - try) willingly well, maybe not willingly try: just) suffer through four examples of Charlaine Harris's inane drivel if I could be guaranteed a gem like The Secret Under My Skin at the end of it. I was drawn into this from the beginning and grew ever more fond of it as I read. The main character, Lobelia September, more properly known as Blay Raytee (which itself is only a poor approximation of her real name: Blake Raintree) is a real charmer and sets the standard for how such a character in such a novel should be IMO.

I started reading this Sunday night in bed; I was almost ninety pages in before I knew it, and it was nearly midnight! I resented having to stop reading to get to sleep since I had to work the next day! If I had started it Sunday morning, I don't doubt for a minute that I would have read it straight through non-stop! Now I'm frustrated by everything which pulls me away from pursuing further reading! Yes, my name is Ian Wood and I am a good fiction addict! It's been way too long since my last read!

This 2368AD world in which Blake lives is a horrible one, where global warming and pollution have trashed Earth, but unlike so many novels of this type, this Earth is slowly recovering. The problem in this novel is that the authoritarian governments who seized power when the environment and lifestyles deteriorated, do not want to relinquish that power now. They therefore perpetuate the myth that Earth is highly dangerous, in order to retain control.

They have Bio-Indicators (BI). These are people who are especially sensitive to certain aspects of the environment, and whose job it is to issue warnings when conditions are bad. Such people are held in high regard and lead a pampered lifestyle, but they're slowly going out of business. Contrast this with the pervasive hatred of scientists and technology. Indeed, the hatred became so bad that not long before the novel starts, there was a brutal purge of such people and their children, referred to as the 'technocaust'.

This scenario is very familiar territory to me, having covered it in my own 'Godstruck' but my novel takes a completely different tack to McNaughton's. In mine, the ruling power is the church, and the main character is

an older guy rather than a girl in her mid teens.

I have to give major props to McNaughton for bringing an intelligent treatment of scientific subjects to her material. Yes, the novel is fiction, but it's evidently strongly grounded in reality, and I can find no fault in her scientific presentation at all. It's really refreshing to read something so solid and honest.

Blake is an inmate in a work camp, where she has to go out each day in the baking summer, with her anti-UV clothing and goggles, along with her fellow internees, to scavenge scrap from an ancient trash tip. The scrap is sold to fund the work camp. There's some cruelty and bullying, but nothing extreme. McNaughton's representation of the work camp seems realistic and not a caricature. Blake tries to keep herself to herself and is a decent person. One day she's selected for a group of about fifteen similar internees. She's told that a BI is visiting to find an assistant, and the BI picks Blake because she seems like someone who will not overshadow the BI. Blake can't believe she was chosen for this honor, and suddenly finds herself in a completely different world - one she could never have dreamed of.

The BI's name is Marella (after a fossil found in the famous Burgess Shale formation). Again props to McNaughton for bringing in ideas and topics which may seem obscure to someone who isn't quite as obsessed with science as I am(!), yet even as she does this, she makes it interesting and accessible, touching on the topics without lecturing at all. The two people Marella is staying with, and with whom Blake now resides, are Erica and William, an older couple who are very much in love and have some secrets which are only slowly revealed to Blake. Whereas the couple is quite easy-going, Marella is spoiled and petulant and very difficult to get along with.

Blake is resolved to help her despite her attitude, and as they spend time together, and even while Blake is appalled and distressed at how lazy Marella is, she begins to understand her. One night Marella asks Blake to wash her hair, and Blake discovers that her hair is almost non-existent. Her scalp is roseate, and cracked and scaling, as though she has suffered radiation poisoning. Given the tenuous state of the ozone layer, she may well have been poisoned by excess ultra violet light, or perhaps she's highly allergic to something.

Marella is required to undertake educational reading in order to prepare for her initiation as a full BI, but she doesn't apply herself to this material. She's lazy, but Blake is thrilled with the chance to learn more, and it's her dedication, intelligence, and loyalty to Marella which saves her partner on more than one occasion, from William's annoyance and even wrath.

As Blake settles in to her new home and the relative luxury it offers, she realizes increasingly that she has been lied to by the people at the government-run work camp. The ozone layer is healing, and she doesn't need quite so much protection when going outside as the work camp people had convinced her she did, for one thing. On a trip to the village, one which the workhouse children would never be allowed to make, Blake learns more secrets about her world, what the government is up to, and how much resistance is stirring against this draconian rule.

There are other things she has also been lied to about. "Lem Howl", a guy who lives up the hill from Blake's new home, has been deliberately represented to her as a horrible, fearful figure who made his wife drink poison and who will eat children who stray from the work camp, but when Blake properly meets him, she realizes how misled she's been. Lem Howell is a scientist and inventor who works closely with Erica and William, and he even agrees to see if he can make a device to read Blake's "object" - an obsolete cassette tape. He discovers that Blake has an ID chip embedded in her arm which, if he can create a device to read it, will reveal her true age and identity. She begins to entertain faint hopes that she will discover who her real parents were, but all she learns from her chip is her real name and age.

The final stage of Marella's initiation is for her to take a trip to 'the badlands' where she's supposed to undergo some sort of vision or revelation, which will fully bring her into her role as a BI. Blake accompanies

Marella on this trip, a journey over which Marella is morose and whiny. She's so worried about it that she even reads the material on this occasion, which she has never done before. Blake has begun to become resentful of Marella's frequent tantrums and the fact that Blake was picked because she was considered to be stupid and incompetent. And now the two of them are alone in the wilds with no company or help but each other.

The problem is that Blake is the one who experiences the vision. Marella does not, but Blake has no designs on being a BI. Instead, she shares her vision with Marella, helping her to remember it, so she can pass it off as her own, and she appears to do this successfully, but when the party returns to its home, things have changed somewhat. The Commission - the government - has put some harsh measures into place, taking all male children over the age of fifteen in a round-up. Clearly they fear something, and if Marella no longer needs Blake's tutoring to become a BI, then what future can remain for Blake?

I will not reveal any more, but instead recommend you read this one. You may find the ending is a bit of a let down. I didn't. I liked the way it was done. It fitted what came before. Just because it's a YA novel doesn't mean there has to be magic and mayhem. All there has to be is a good story and that's exactly what Janet McNaughton delivers.

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### **Cornmaven says**

I liked this story of a post-global warming/misuse of technology world, where there are opposing factions, autocratic rule, resistance movements, etc., with children caught in the crossfire. The protagonist is in a orphanage-labor camp and is chosen to assist a soon-to-be "bio-indicator", a person who is like a mine canary for environmental toxins and changes.

There's discussion about fear of science being a bad thing, and also a lot of weaving (in fact there is a guild called the Weavers) of ancient, mystical worldviews and modern worldviews. The protagonist needs to be in the future generation's salvation group, but is of course the unlikely candidate, and that is part of the discovery throughout the story.

However, I had trouble keeping track of the various factions, people, and philosophies that were being presented, all throughout the book. Part of it had to do with the author's decision to just insert clues and little tidbits along the way. But I think the main problem was the sentence structure, in her attempt to do the slow reveal. I loved her post-apocalyptic descriptions of devices that we know instantly, and how the reader had to figure out what it actually was. But there were sentences involving two women, for example, and she would use "her" at some point, and I really couldn't figure out who "her" was, because of the structure and my difficulty in keeping up with who was on what 'team' and who held what ideology. A little too much subtlety and obfuscation for me.

But I liked the story. And the characters were complex enough to be of continuing interest. I cared about all of them, the mark of a good tale.

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### **Dayna says**

This book kept me reading for sure! I enjoyed the pace. I did find some sections of text confusing as they lacked detail or did not indicate the subject of the sentence properly. (Sometimes I was like, 'Who is this sentence talking about?') I was a bit let down with the ending. Although it had a decent resolution, I was

hoping for more action resulting from Blay being the intuitive one. The love story kind of seemed forced, perhaps to appeal to the younger readers. By the last few pages, I was fed up with Blay saying things and then stating her worry about whether she had said the wrong thing to or not. All those negatives aside, I found it kept me reading more likely because of the dystopian/post-apocalyptic themes and mystery/suspense surrounding the characters. A similar themed (but stronger) book recommendation I would give would be *Chrysalids* by John Wyndham.

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### **Jessica says**

This was a great dystopia. It had some complex themes and a believable world. Environmental damage and the planet's ability to recover are central to the plot, while also being written about as almost matter of fact parts of daily life. The characters are not very complex, but many of them do develop, change, and become more rounded over time.

I loved reading about a young woman discovering science and enjoying reading and learning despite a lack of formal training. It was also nice to see a young adult book explore authoritarianism, religion versus the state, wanting to learn, and environmentalism without beating the reader over the head with point.

It was a quick read for me, both from enjoyment and an easier reading level.

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### **Karin says**

Blay Raytee lives in a government work-camp in the year 2368. Humanity struggles to heal after the technocaust left the world in ruins. The government maintains its control by instilling fear in the people – the fear of technology. Those few that aren't afraid, eventually become part of the resistance and fight for the return of a democratic society.

Blay is "saved" from a menial life at the work-camp when she is chosen to assist the new Bioindicator (guardian of the environment). Through her missions with Marrella, Blay learns the world isn't as she's always been told. Soon, she is involved in the resistance and through the use of technology, she discovers who she really is.

THE SECRET UNDER MY SKIN was a let down. The world Janet McNaughton created was complicated and the story didn't contain enough conflict. The small amount of romance included in the story lacked authenticity and the ending was unsatisfying. The technocaust and the role/purpose of the Bioindicator needed more explanation. That being said, I still finished the book – even though it took my all of Spring Break. I kept hoping it would get better.

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### **Crystal says**

It was plainly written and it'll be over before you knew it. I liked the story itself about Blay and her journey. It's the kind of book you would go back to and re-read.

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## Lucy says

Blay is an unwanted child, an orphan of the technocaust. She lives in a work camp, run by the Comission, where she sorts through a landfill in exchange for a bed and regular meals.

Everything changes when William, the Master of the Way up the hill comes to the work camp and chooses her to be the tutor and companion to Marella, the bio-indicator that he is preparing. Because William and his wife Erica are involved in the resistance against the Comission. And for the first time in her life, Blay finds that she has an identity, and a purpose.

This is an interesting post-apoc book, where the apocalypse is basically global warming and the destruction of the ozone layer, followed by a worldwide fear and hate of all science and technology, resulting in the the technocaust, in which all scientists and techies were taken to concentration camps and killed.

We only learn about the apocalypse in bits and pieces--we're really only seeing the late aftermath, and only through Blay's eyes. I really wanted more pieces of the apocalypse, to see how it had happened, and how the Comission had come to have such a stranglehold on the world. I also felt like the ending came too quickly, and too easily.

Mostly I just wanted more. I wanted more about how it happened, how it's been since them,how it started to change. I wanted more about the Way and the Weavers and the bio-indicators. I just really, really wanted more.

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## TheSaint says

It is not difficult to imagine a future where the environment is toxic to humans. It is not difficult to imagine a future where quasi governmental agencies rule the remaining populace through fear and intimidation. It is perhaps more difficult to imagine how citizens might begin to assert their democratic rights in such an environment, but that is exactly what Janet McNaughton attempts to do in *The Secret Under My Skin*. Blay Raytee seems an unlikely choice to be the next savior of her village -- having been housed for years in a bleak work camp, but once she's been chosen to assist the new "bio-indicator" she begins to unravel the secrets of her past, as she tries to weave a transparent future.

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## Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

Blay Raytee was a street child scraping a living together on the streets of St Pearl with Hilary, her protector, until Hilary is taken by the Death Squad and Blay is rounded up by the Commission and sent to a workcamp in Kildevil. Like all the children in workcamps, she's given the name of the month she was taken: September, but in her heart she holds onto the only name she can remember, Blay Raytee. She doesn't know how old she is or where she came from, but when she's not scavenging the local landfill for recyclable objects with the other children, wearing heavy UV suits and visors, she's reading all the lastbooks and discovering ancient poets like Yeats.

There's a new bio-indicator in training, a girl called Marrella, living with the Master of the Way up the hill, who needs help with her lessons. The children who read the books at the workcamp are gathered and Marrella picks small, scrawny Blay. Life with the Master, William, and his wife Erica is the happiest time

Blay's ever known, despite the mean, snobby Marrella who rejects Blay's offers of friendship. She also refuses to learn what she must be bio-indicator, a sacrificial lamb of sorts dating from the time when the air was toxic and the water poisonous - now bio-indicators are more like religious symbols who, away from the control of the Commission, are helping to resurrect science. The planet, devastated by global warming and all that it entailed, has slowly recovered but the Commission has convinced people it's still dangerous to be out during daylight hours.

Blay learns what Marrella refuses to learn and finds she has intuition for the tests Marrella must take. Not wanting to be sent back to the workcamp, Blay helps Marrella pass the tests. She becomes part of the resistance efforts after gaining Erica's trust, and the crazy man up the hill, Lem Howell, is able to help her find out who she is and where she came from - all because of a secret under her skin.

This book is set in the 24th century in Newfoundland - a much more hospitable place in this time than it is now. The book appealed to me because I love post-apocalyptic fiction and I love books with an environmental bend, especially when the two are combined, as they often are. As McNaughton says in her note:

I wrote this book to help young readers begin to think about the kind of world they want to create. The future I've envisioned in [this book:] is not the way things have to be. But it is the future I'm afraid will develop if we don't work to change things. I firmly believe the next generation can do a better job of taking care of the earth and its people than we have until now.

That's an admirable objective and a sentiment I can appreciate. Yet she doesn't sermonise, never going so far as to alienate her readers. Like all good stories, it is about the people most of all, and their relationships to each other - between the lines is the unspoken point that it's all symbiosis, that our relationships with each other should be no different from the one that we have with the planet that sustains us.

I really liked Blay. She starts off shy, nervous and awkward, and gradually grows into a bright young woman with courage and conviction. It happens smoothly and naturally, so that you feel she is real. While some of the details of the history and the political situation aren't terribly clear, making it sometimes confusing or unjustified, Blay remains an endearing protagonist whose story is continued in *The Raintree Rebellion*. The other character who really comes alive is the landscape. This doesn't quite fit but I marked one quote that I liked, mostly because it captures a feeling I've known:

The joy in William's voice tugs at something left over in me from last night's dreams. The next time we pass one, I bend and touch the tarry surface of the asphalt outcrop. William says, "Imagine, the dance of continents happens all around us but at a pace too slow to comprehend, our lives passing in less than an eye-blink of geological time. Even our time on this earth as a species is mere moments." And I try but his ideas are too vast to hold. They slip from my grasp and are gone. (p164)

There are big ideas in this book too, and some gently-handled information about plants, animals and geology, slipped in carefully so as not to frighten the average teenager. It also deals with repression, oppressive government structures, freedom and other political ideologies. I would have loved this book had I read it at, say, 14. I enjoyed it at 29, but I'm much harder to please now. That said, it was a satisfying read and if you liked *Obernewtyn* or *Scatterlings* or other environmental post-apocalyptic YA novels, you'll enjoy this one as well.

## Elizabeth says

I liked this book, easy read, similar to hunger games but more mild. reading level reminds me of hatch, sign of the beaver, tuck everlasting.

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## Bibliotropic says

This novel shows an interesting and not entirely unbelievable vision of the future, after the world has been ruined due to pollution. People blaming everyone else, a government struggling to stay in power by fear and tight controls, and everyone, including young children, is put to work in some fashion.

McNaughton weaves an interesting future in her novel, and throws in a lot of little details that sometimes go missing in other YA novels, such as the issue of, well, clothing. In a world where technology is feared and tightly controlled, it's not as though people can just run down to a department store and grab a new sweater. As such, the presence of the Weavers' Guild, and the cultural meanings of things like knitting and other aspects of textile creation, are thrown into the forefront as seen as essential skills. Weavers are given high respect, and as such hold more than a small degree of power.

There's more than one story going on here, as it is with most good books. There's the story of Marella and her struggles to become a bio-indicator with Blay's help, and then there's the story of Blay trying to find out more about her past and just who she is. Side-by-side, the tale is a rich one that comes alive with ease, and draws you in.

The biggest shame about this book is that it's so short. I hear there's a sequel, and I suspect I'm going to have to track it down sooner rather than later, as I enjoyed this book so much. Definitely a recommend to fans of YA futuristic stories, and to those who enjoy hints of an interesting dystopia.

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## Terra Leach says

It was just ok. I was disappointed as it has been on my to read list for awhile. It was hard to understand at first as there was no real explanation of what type of world the main characters were living in, how it came to be, what the year was or location. And the plot was just ok.

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## Jennie says

I was assigned to lead a workshop on this book for Peace Week at my school. (I got lucky--all the other teachers leading book groups had to read memoirs), and it wasn't a bad book. There wasn't really anything that made it stand out from other YA fiction, but it was pretty well-written, and it dealt with some very interesting ideas--the relationship between government, society, technology and the environment, effective ways to produce social change, etc. All in all, a good fit for Peace Week.

The only problem? This is a relatively non-violent book whose main character is a girl, and I had four middle

school boys in my group. Their summary of the book? "We should take care of the environment or we'll die." Their main criticism? "It needs more bloodshed. Then it would be cool." The more we talked about this book, and the layers of meaning, and the implications of our actions and choices, the more they got into it, but it's amazing how sometimes getting them to recognize the way things connect to each other can be like pulling teeth. Lord bless the English teachers. This was fun, but I couldn't do it all year.

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### **Katie says**

Set in 2368, this dystopia describes a future where Democracy is non-existent and technology has been outlawed. During the Technocaust, thousands of people who worked with technology were killed.

Blay lives in a work camp where she sorts through garbage looking for valuable material. This is a step up from her former life on the street, where she'd lived since she was two. She doesn't know how she ended up there, or who she is.

Then, suddenly, Blay is swept away from the work camp to assist the new bio-indicator, whose job it is to test the environment for harmful toxins. In her new life, Blay will not only learn the shocking details of her past - ' she will also join a rebellion.

This book is full of mystery, suspense, and lots of surprises. McNaughton's vision of the future is chilling, particularly because it seems very possible.

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### **Maria says**

More of a 3.5 than a 3 but I do not have the option too. Anyways this book was a class assignment and it is a great read or teens or if you just want something lighter to read. I enjoyed it thoroughly even though it wasn't the best I have read personal;y

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### **Sarah Crawford says**

This is an extremely good book about possible consequences of all the environmental problems that are going on right now. The book takes place in the year 2368.

The problems with the environment were every bit as bad as expected and worse. Rising sea level has caused the destruction of some cities, and other problems have led to the end of democratic rule (at least in Canada where the story takes place), and draconian measures by a group called The Commission that has seized power.

There was a thing called the technocaust when scientists were blamed for the problems (and not the greedy multi-national corporations), and many were killed. The main character, whose name at the start is Blay, is living in a orphanage of a type, but it's really a work camp for young children.

There is also a person called a bio-indicator who takes a position that has her or him monitoring the environment for toxins; the person is basically the 'canary in the coal mine.' There's a nearby village that has an intense dislike of any advanced technology, and spends most of its time weaving.

Blay ends up getting picked by a woman that is due to become the next bio-indicator, and the story takes off from there. Blay is basically the woman's helper, but she really ends up doing most of the work that Marella, the bio-indicator-in-waiting, should be doing.

There's some really good stuff about how propaganda has been fed to the children in the work camps to make them believe certain people are evil when they aren't. Blay learns that what she has been told has little if any relevance to reality.

She helps Marella train, learns about what is basically a resistance movement, gets a crush on a guy, helps on a vision quest, tries to find out about her own background, and discovers that she has abilities she never knew she had.

There's also a peasant's uprising, of a sort, and a lot of interaction between the Weaver's Guild and the military.

The book is an excellent preview of what could very well happen if the man-made climate problems are not dealt with effectively, and if the anti-scientific right-wing groups get their way.

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### **Sophie says**

Confusing and long, but otherwise good

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### **Nicole says**

My history with this book is that I saw it on the shelf all the time in the library in middle school but never bothered to pick it up because the title didn't really catch my interest and it didn't seem to fit with the genre I devoured at the time (medieval/fantasy). Then the other day I was at the library and saw this book and thought, "Oh, this book. Well, I like *An Earthly Knight* by Janet McNaughton. I wonder what this is about." I picked it up and flipped it over and read the back and went, "No way! Life after an ecological devastation! Someone writing about the environment?!"

So I signed it out and thought it would be pretty cool, because while this type of thing didn't particularly interest me in middle school, it certainly does now, and I thought it could be a really good read. And it was! I really enjoyed it. Sometimes the plot was a bit confusing, trying to understand the history, and who the bad/good guys were and which organisations interacted with whom or did what. But I liked the characters and found that my first impressions of Blake and Marrella were completely wrong, which doesn't usually happen. That's cool. I also really liked that it was set in Canada, in Newfoundland, and that Fraser knit Blake a sweater. That was cool.

Will read again at some point.

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### **AJ Ryan says**

McNaughton continues her brilliant story construction in this dystopic vision of a future Newfoundland. The idea of a Technocaust is entirely chilling, and yet in what readers have come to expect of her stories, it is not

without rays of hope. Her characters are intriguing and strong, from Blay to Erica and Clara, and even Marella. They are tinged in some of the traditional Newfoundland traits as well, making the world she sees that much more believable.

The ending does not disappoint, but again, in McNaughton's usual fashion, she holds to life-like honesty in that not everything is happy and the reader is imbued with the sense that life goes on beyond the pages. Everything is not settled, but the characters, like us, continue onward in the struggle of everyday life, knowing hope as well as their own strength and desire for freedom.

This novel goes to the top of my list with David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. It is also the second book I would entertain reading multiple times as well as exploring through literary criticism and theory! I look forward to working with this masterpiece in the future.

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