Discussion Questions: *Ship Breaker* by Paolo Bacigalupi

1. This book was nominated for a National Book Award for adolescent literature. Why? How is the book representative of what is good in young adult literature?

   It asks the question – What will our world look like when we run out of non-renewable resources? It also asks questions about the future in a post-Global Warming Age.

2. What is this book about? Find passages that support a claim that the book is about the following:

   - Loyalty as a major virtue
   - Class distinctions The world is divided between "rust rats" and "swanks"
   - Fate versus free will
   - Star-crossed lovers
   - Definition of family
   - Realization of potential

   The nature of **trust, family, fate and luck** form the thematic underpinnings of *Ship Breaker*'s heady adventures. Because for all its bleakness and brutal decisions—in even the most dystopian YA it’s rare to find a scene where a character we like a great deal is willing to kill an innocent person—this is an adventure story in the swashbuckling tradition. Nailer’s adventures are given weight not just by the hard decisions faced by him and the other characters, but by the threat of this future and its endless parallels with our own reality.

   The localized eco-apocalypse in the Gulf has spawned a trade-based economy that allows corporations to enlist the locals to do their dirty work. Driven by desperation and reliant upon the gods of luck, the crews of the Gulf live day by day, struggling to salvage enough metal to sell back to their corporate masters in exchange for meager earnings. They have a strong sense of family, but at the same time are willing to kill anyone that crosses them. Contrast that risky lifestyle with the "swanks" who live further north and are largely unaware of the existence led by the people in the forsaken Gulf Region, where the trinkets they wear as throwaway jewelry are worth more money than they would see in a month. Bacigalupi's depiction of this society is first rate and wonderfully gloomy.

3. This book is also "Green" literature. How does it address environmental issues?

   - Recycling
   - Drastic change in the environment
   - Corporate consumption of resources
Harvesting body parts
Genetic engineering
Role of science – Some members of the universe continue to use science to progress.

4. For you librarians in the group, explain to the rest of us why this book will or will not “fly off the shelf.”

Paolo takes everything we take for granted in the 21st century — access to an almost limitless supply and variety of goods and services, oil-run machines, and top-of-the-line technology, as well as relative safety from disease, poverty, and lawlessness — and strips it all away. The disparity between the haves and have-nots is larger than it’s ever been in the US, with all the rich people living in the Northern territories and the unfortunate in the South. What is left in the Gulf Coast are the decomposing remnants of our prosperous, fossil-fuel era (known as the Accelerated Age): our oil tankers and freighters, and the thrice-built infrastructure of New Orleans.

5. There are several allusions in the book to “mistakes” we are making today in the care of the environment. Look at the second paragraph on page 193. Cite other passages that illustrate how this future generation is only perpetuating the global crisis.

Nailer’s world is one of darkness, of stark, painful, cold reality. Nailer’s is a terrifying post-apocalyptic world – a world ravaged by climate change, extreme poverty, in a post-oil era. As with Mr. Bacigalupi’s other works to date, the worldbuilding for Ship Breaker is positively superb, and all the more horrifying for how very plausible it seems. In the Gulf Coast, the seas have risen and reclaimed coastal cities to their depths. Weather has become extreme, spawning level 7 hurricanes capable of knocking out entire landscapes. The divide between the haves and have-nots (the “Beach Rats” and the “Swanks”) has grown to an insurmountable chasm. All this is certainly familiar – if not in developed countries, it sure as hell is a reality in third world countries already (take it from someone that grew up in Jakarta, Indonesia – the divide between the wealthy and poor is a grim reality). Trade is done not only in scrap metal and salvaged wrecks, but also in flesh and blood – organs, body parts, eggs and sperm sold to gene modifiers.

6. Were you satisfied with the ending of the book? Is there a tone of hope or despair?

7. Tool is one of the most engaging and most interesting characters in the book. How did you read him (it)?
8. In his Acknowledgements, Bacigalupi thanks his father for introducing him to the wonders of science fiction. Is this book science fiction, fantasy, dystopian literature? How do you catalog this book?

9. **Dystopian Literature:** Sometimes, reading YA dystopian fiction seems a lot like reading high fantasy: It’s fun, it’s engaging, but the premise and world-building have constructed a story that seems light years apart from our own reality. The future that Paolo creates in *Ship Breaker* seems not only plausible, but not that far off, either, which makes this story relevant to the issues of climate change and reliance on fossil fuels that we are dealing with in the present. Not only that, but reading about the possibility of third-world conditions in the US, one of the most “advanced” countries in the world, is enough to make my skin crawl. When I imagine the future, I (perhaps naively), like to think that the human condition around the world will improve. But to envision a future like *Ship Breaker* does in which the world has actually regressed is, quite frankly, terrifying to think about. As much as *Ship Breaker* is an entertaining fictional story, it is also a sobering reminder that what we do now will affect the entire planet and all the people in it in the future.

Dystopias are extremely popular in YA fiction at the moment, but Bacigalupi takes a different approach than most. He focuses not on the high concept but on the small life of Nailer. The larger issues that fuel the world emerge only as Nailer learns about them. And Nailer does not have designs on saving the planet or any chance of doing so. He wants to save himself and his friends. This approach leaves plenty of uncovered ground for the coming sequel to explore, throwing out such rich seeds as genetically engineered “half-men” created using dog and human DNA who may or may not have to obey their masters and the complex political landscape that swirls around Nita’s powerful family business.

10. **Characters:** This well-imagined world is populated with interesting and culturally diverse characters. Besides Nailer there’s his friend Pim, a tough-as-nails ship breaker whose mother looks after Nailer because Nailer’s father is abusive and otherwise too drug-addled to care; Sloth, their greedy fellow crew member who, like all of them, is waiting for her one big break from poverty and labor; Tool is a genetically engineered “half-man”, bred with canine loyalty and an animal ferocity to match; and Nita, the rich survivor they call “Lucky Girl” who might not actually be the salvation Nailer hopes she is...a deception she perpetrates to keep her from the blood harvesters. The majority of characters in *Ship Breaker* are, in fact, driven (sometimes to kill) by the desperation of survival. Nailer, at least, is smart enough to know that he needs a way out of this society. And he trustingly sees Nita as his ticket out.

*Ship Breaker* is a YA science fiction novel—more sociological/adventure than hard SF, but one that takes an unflinching look at what life may be like for the majority of people in the Western world given a few more decades of ecological
degradation, economic collapse, global climate change, governmental failure, and corporate pillage. I say “the Western world” because in all honesty, the future this book portrays is a world that most human beings on Earth already live in—surviving as scavengers, repurposing scraps, living on the margins and the waste of wealthier cultures, existing to be exploited and discarded.

Bacigalupi doesn’t have to invent the horrors of a future dystopia: all he has to do is transplant them to the Gulf Coast of the United States. Given the nightmare oil spill currently poisoning those waters, his view looks a little prophetic right this second.

Where the inventiveness of his fine worldbuilding shines, however, is in showing the adaptations the still-civilized fragments of the world have made to a post-peak-oil, post-rising-seas world. I was more than a little in love with his clipper ships—especially as seen through the eyes of his scavenger protagonist, Nailer, to whom they represent the only possible escape from a nightmare life of deadly work and fingernail existence that will be all too familiar to anyone who has experienced poverty.