

| This guide assumes your class has read the earlier books. It mentions some of what happens in them.

A MAP OF OTHER LAWS · BOOK FOUR

Teaching guide

The Mercy of Systems: discussion questions and activities for each of its four countries

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This guide is for teachers of senior high-school English, philosophy, civics and politics, for first-year instructors in political theory and literature, and for anyone leading a book club. It covers *The Mercy of Systems*, Book Four of *A Map of Other Laws*.

The guide is free. You may print and copy it for teaching and for book clubs without asking. It is on the series website at mapofotherlaws.com/teaching-guide/book-four, with a printable PDF of the same text.

How to use this guide

The Mercy of Systems is in four parts, one for each country the traveler crosses. Each part works as a unit of its own, a country and the one law it was founded on, with the people who live by it. You can teach the book a part at a time, or take a single country as a short unit.

The questions avoid endings. None of them gives away how a part ends or what becomes of anyone in it, so a class can use them mid-book. Each country's questions can be used once students have read the first few chapters of that part. Students who have read ahead can be asked to keep what they know to themselves until the class catches up.

The book is written plainly, in short chapters, by a narrator who explains each country's words as he meets them. It deals with grief, drowning, bankruptcy and loneliness, and with the slow harm that well-meant institutions can do. A violent marriage is mentioned but not shown, and one country's founding story includes four deaths by suicide. There is no explicit sex and no graphic violence. The paperback runs to 224 pages.

If your class has not read the earlier books

Book Four can be taught on its own. Whenever the narrator looks back to an earlier country, he explains it in a clause or two. Students need only a few facts to begin.

- The traveler has already crossed twelve countries. The ground carries him on without warning, and no country has yet kept him past the day it set for deciding what he is. He never goes back.
- What he carries crosses with him. That includes a bell without a tongue, a map, a question sealed in wax by Sef, a mapmaker, to be asked aloud somewhere questions are free, and seven pounds of testimony in oilcloth that he calls the salt archive. He also owes a debt of two grains of injustice, taken on in Tares so that a hungry child would not have to carry it.

- In Book Two he was bonded to Sorel, a clockmender, in Gemel, the country of pairs, and the two crossed three borders together. One morning in Vale, the fourth country, the ground carried him on and Sorel did not cross. He has asked after Sorel in every country since.

Before reading

These prompts work well as a short journal entry or a pair discussion before students open the book. There are no right answers.

1. Think of a time someone held back bad news from you, or you held it back from someone, to spare them. Was it the right call? Who should decide when a person is ready to hear something?
2. When someone in your community suffers a great loss, what do the people around them do? Would it be better if everyone carried a small share of that grief, even strangers?
3. Imagine a place where nobody may ever turn down a request for company. Who would that place be good for? Who would it wear out?
4. Suppose you could undo one decision you made, the choice itself rather than its result. Would you want that power to exist? What would you want to keep, even from a choice you regret?

Book Four, country by country

The traveler at the center of the series has no name. He was a ledger clerk once, and he still counts what things cost and who ends up paying. The countries in Book Four are the kindest he has crossed. Each offers to take a pain away: bad news in Salve, grief in Plur, loneliness in the Sanctuary and regret in Palun. None of them can decide what he is. In every one he asks after Sorel.

Part One · Salve, the Republic Without Bad News

The traveler comes down the salt road into a harbor town of white terraces, where the arrivals board on the pier still lists, under EXPECTED, a ship the sea took two months before. In Salve no news may enter a person's life until the Office of Readiness has certified that person ready to receive it. The Office cannot certify him at all, because nothing bad has ever been brought to him in stages.

The law. No one should be broken by the manner of knowing.

DISCUSS

1. The Office brought Orra the news of her husband's death over four months, in stages, with the same assessor, whom Salve calls "your face," coming up the shore road at the same hour each time. The first stage came on a morning chosen because she had slept well and her washing was in. "They watch for that," she says. Is this care, or a kind of watching that would trouble you? Could it be both?
2. Over six weeks, two officials walk a ruined shopkeeper toward the fact of his ruin, smallest losses first, until he says the word *ruin* himself. The traveler looks "for a seam in it, a weak place I could put a knife to," and cannot find one. In Tares, he remembers, "a man had to stand where the figure put him." Which is the fairer accounting?
3. Every week Tivas answers Meral's letters to her drowned son, in the son's own hand. He knows she senses something wrong in them: "A doubt she can't name is a doubt she can't act on." Is he protecting her, or managing her? He tells the traveler, "I'd want you to know that I know." Does knowing make it better or worse?
4. Meral's file comes back from review with a finding of *never*, and Tivas leaves it open on the supper table and turns to the window. Stop at the end of chapter 16. Before reading on, list everything the traveler could do, and who would pay in each case. Remember that Salve forbids a citizen to consent to taking bad news raw.

ACTIVITY · PLAN A DELIVERY

Your school has adopted the law of Salve: no news may reach a student until an office has certified that student ready for it. In small groups, take one piece of hard but ordinary news, such as the cancelling of a class trip everyone has saved for. Plan its delivery as the Office of Readiness would: the stages and the words used at each, who will be the student's face, how the day is chosen, and what the student may hear from friends meanwhile. Then swap plans with another group, one of whose members asks the office for the whole of it now, at their own risk. Salve's answer is that assessment cannot be waived, because "it is the mercy itself." Does your office grant the request? Finish as a class. Who should decide when a person is ready to know something, the person or the people who care for them?

Part Two · Plur, the State of Shared Sorrow

The traveler comes down into a market town as a fine warm rain falls from a sky with no cloud in it, and a baker in her doorway weeps into the flour on her hands. In Plur a great loss is levied like a tax and falls as rain on everyone, so that each citizen carries a small, bearable share of a stranger's sorrow. The rain falls on the traveler as hard as on anyone and does not go in, and a small boy under a stall awning is the first to say so.

The law. No one should be destroyed by a grief that others could have carried.

DISCUSS

1. The rains are forecast on bills that carry no names, because if people knew whose grief was falling, they would stand outside the house to look, "and the sharing would curdle into a show." Yet the baker can taste the rain: "Someone's mother, that is. By the taste." Is a sorrow easier to share when nobody knows whose it is? Compare the ways people grieve in public online.
2. The cooper lost both parents to a fever at fourteen. "Ten thousand people a little wet for a season, and I stood up." Then he says, "There's a hole in it," and that he knows where it is. "I'd still take it." Where do you think the hole is? Why might someone who knows a law's flaw still choose it?
3. Asked what becomes of a slight, a disappointment, a friendship gone quiet or a door not knocked on, a clerk tells the traveler, kindly, "Those aren't losses," and then, "Not within the meaning of the act." Seld, whose husband of fifty years died in the spring, petitions for her own rain back on a form made for property, and leaves the box for its value empty. Who should decide what counts as a loss?
4. The traveler meets Noa at the rain-gauge station "without a case and without an instrument between us." When the levy takes nothing from him, Noa says, "It doesn't take from you, does it," and then only, "That must be heavy." Why might four plain words mean more to him than any instrument's finding? When has a plain answer helped you more than advice?

ACTIVITY · THE FORECASTER'S MARGIN

In small groups, invent a town of four districts and write the levy office's bills for one week in its own style: "A great loss out of the western district; rain from midday." Put no names on them, and give no district two rains on one day. Then write the district forecaster's private column for the same week, the one she keeps at the edge of the official sheet, noting what each bill leaves out. Swap with another group. Read their bills and decide what you would plan by them, a harvest or a wedding. Then read their margin. Which sheet would you trust to plan your week by, and which to understand your neighbors by? What is a public record for?

Part Three · The Sanctuary of Unrefused Company

The traveler comes down into a valley of long houses and shared yards, and by evening four people have taken his hand. Its people call the country the House, because its founders, each of them once refused at some door in another country, built it as one house for anyone turned out of another. Its one law is that no request for company may be refused. He grants every request and makes none of his own, and a girl of six is the first to notice.

The law. No one should ever again ask for company and be told no.

DISCUSS

1. The book of arrivals at the gate has a column for the name and a column for the country that would not keep the person. "There is no column at all for the reason, because the founders would not have a reason written down about anybody." Why would they refuse to record a reason? Which records about you carry one, and who reads them?
2. Tolla, who has eaten no meal alone in forty years, calls the House heaven "without one grain of irony." "I've been the one nobody asked. At forty tables." Then she makes the traveler say the law back to her, twice. Make Tolla's case as strongly as you can. Why might she need a newcomer to say it aloud?
3. Corin is asked for something every hour of the day. He is also very good at company: he teaches a boy to skim stones by doing it badly, so that the boy gets it first. "The law requires presence and nothing more. Corin gave attention, which is a different thing." If a yes is required, can anyone tell whether the attention behind it is freely given? Where is a yes expected of you?
4. The traveler keeps the salt archive shut all his time in the House, because "the rule covered company and said nothing of baggage." For once, he says, he did not resent "a rule with a wall in it." Why might the limits of a rule be a comfort? What should no rule, however kind, be allowed to reach?

ACTIVITY · ASK AS IF A NO WERE POSSIBLE

Every etiquette class in the House opens with the warden's words: "Ask as if a no were possible. A no is not possible. Ask as if it were." Imagine a club at your school has adopted the House's law. In groups, write the club's one-page lesson for newcomers, using the House's methods: one bean to a quarter hour of company, and the end named inside the asking. Test it on the man who sits out his four beans and reaches for "another four." Can anything in your lesson stop him? Then read the warden's private list of signs that a companion would have chosen you, such as "The company that comes a moment before it is asked," and add a sign of your own. Discuss: where no is not allowed, can any sign tell a wanted yes from a required one?

Part Four · Palun, the Country of No Regret

The traveler reaches Palun at dusk, when the city faintly wears everything it ever decided not to be: a taller tower behind the tower, and behind the crowd a second crowd, as thin as breath on glass. Any citizen may petition to revise a decision, and once the petition is granted the world comes round to the paper. A girl of eight sees that no faint alternatives trail at the traveler's feet, and the Bureau of Revision, which can amend only a life already written down, has no record of him.

The law. No one should be sentenced for life by their own worst decision.

DISCUSS

1. Dever, at the Bureau's intake counter, explains that the Bureau revises "the decision, you understand, and not the consequence." Of the faint residue that lingers at the city's edges, he says, "That's the world, not the instrument." Is it fair to separate what an instrument does from what follows it? Where have you heard an institution make the same move?
2. A woman revised a violent marriage out of her life twenty years ago. She looks levelly at a faint man on a corner and says, "I chose the version where I'm alive." A man on his eleventh revision half remembers several boyhoods and now petitions only for "the one before." What separates the two? If Palun asked you to write one limit into its law, what would it be?
3. Palun was founded on a magistrate's regret: he condemned his own brother on good evidence that was also false. It is the one decision the Bureau can never revise, because revising it would leave no Bureau. "It is not a hole in the instrument," Dever says. "It is where the instrument is nailed to the wall." Put the knot in your own words. Can you think of a real institution built on a wrong it cannot undo?
4. The Bureau offers the traveler a complete record, with a birth in the city, a mother's name, a street and a school, and the borders behind him would fade "to the texture of a book read very young." Stop at the end of chapter 12. Before reading on, list what the record would give him and what it would cost, and who besides him might pay.

ACTIVITY · FILE A PETITION

Choose a character the class knows well, from this or another book, or a figure from history. Never use yourself or anyone else you know. In pairs, write the character's petition to the Bureau of Revision, naming the decision and the year it was taken, and saying what the record should read instead. Then swap with another pair, who write the residue: what will stand faint at the edges of the revised life, and who will be left remembering the old one. Finish by sitting as the Bureau. Ask each petitioner the registrar's two questions, whether the petition is made freely and whether the petitioner understands what a revision does not remove. Grant or refuse each one, with a reason. Does any petition undo the thing that made the petitioner who they are?

Across the book

Big questions

1. The series asks one question throughout. When a rule is built to protect people, what does it cost the person it was never built to see? Each country in this book offers to take a pain away. Choose one. Who is that person there, and what does the law cost them? Which of the four would you choose to live in?
2. In every country a child sees what is strange about the traveler before any official does. "That one already knows everything." "The rain's not going in." "He hasn't asked anybody anything." "He hasn't got any of the others." Each time, an adult hushes the child or draws the child away. Why might the book give this moment to a child every time?
3. In each country one person keeps, unpaid, something the law cannot hold: Tivas's list of true things he has never let into the boy's letters, the forecaster's column at the edge of the official sheet, the warden's folded list of signs, and the registrar's memory of every prior version of every person she has amended. What does each keep, and for whom? Who does this kind of keeping in your own family or town?
4. Each office the traveler asks about Sorel has its own reason it cannot answer. Salve's Office may not say what it holds. Plur's register holds only the dead that Plur has mourned. The House's gate book lists only those who asked to stay. The Bureau indexes by the decision, not the name. What does each record leave out, and whom was it built to serve? What could a record about you never tell a stranger who came asking?

Written response

Choose one of the four countries. In 600 to 900 words, make the strongest case for its law in the voice of a citizen who believes in it, using details and at least two short quotations from the book. Then step out of that voice and name one person the law was never built to see, and what it costs them. Do not argue that the citizens are villains; the book never does. End with the change, if any, you would make to the law, and what that change would cost in its turn.

For college and workplace courses, an alternative: rewrite the law of one country as a one-page policy for a real hospital, school, workplace or app. Include its purpose, the rule itself, how it will be enforced, and a final section headed "Who this policy may not see."

Assessment idea

A new country. In pairs or small groups, students invent a country that could sit on the same map. Every country in the series follows four beats: a wound, the disaster it was founded after; a promise, its one law; an instrument, the way the law is kept; and a stranger, the person the instrument cannot read. Like the countries in this book, the new one should offer to take a pain away, such as fear, shame, envy or boredom. Each group presents its country in five minutes and then answers questions from the class, who play its citizens. Assess four things: a promise a reasonable person would sign; an instrument that follows clearly from the promise; a stranger whose difficulty grows out of the law itself, with no villain needed; and a short written reflection that links the new country to one country in the book, with evidence.

Key terms

- **The traveler.** The narrator. He has no name, and he was a ledger clerk before the crossings began.
- **Crossing.** Being carried from one country to the next. The traveler also calls it the passage, or the tide. The book never explains how it works.
- **Sorel.** A clockmender who crossed three borders at the traveler's side, and whom he asks after in every country.
- **Salve, the Republic Without Bad News.** A harbor town where no news reaches a person until that person is certified ready for it.
- **The Office of Readiness.** The office that holds all news and releases it on a schedule fitted to the one who must bear it.
- **Escrow.** Holding something that belongs to someone but may not yet be handed over, the way a lawyer holds money.
- **Your face.** The assessor who brings each stage of a person's news. The Office always sends the same one.
- **Continuance.** The office whose clerks answer letters written to the dead, in the dead person's hand.
- **The Black Post.** Salve's founding wound, a post in the harbor square where the raw casualty lists of a lost squadron were nailed up in the rain.
- **Unassessable.** Salve's word for the traveler, who has no history of bad news brought in stages for the Office to measure him against.
- **Plur, the State of Shared Sorrow.** An upland country where grief falls as rain.
- **The levy.** The sharing out of a citizen's great loss across the whole population, as a tax is shared.
- **The Widow of Askel.** Plur's founding wound, a woman who died of mourning in full sight of a village that could not reach her.
- **Bills.** The posted forecasts of the coming rains. They never carry names.
- **Umbrella.** A shirker. To put up an umbrella in a grief-rain is to decline your share.
- **Residue, in Plur.** The forecaster's word for the part of every great grief that will not divide and never comes down.
- **The Sanctuary of Unrefused Company.** A valley country made by people other places would not keep. Its people call it the House.
- **The book of arrivals.** The register at the gate, with a column for the name and a column for the country that would not keep the person.
- **Light asking.** The etiquette taught to newcomers: asking for a little rather than for all, and naming the end inside the asking.
- **Release.** The form for letting a companion go before the companion strains.
- **Beans.** The warden's teaching tool. One bean stands for a quarter hour of company.
- **Quarter-day.** The day, four times a year, when the season's newcomers are written into the book.
- **Palun, the Country of No Regret.** A country on a plain where any citizen may petition to revise a decision.

- **The Bureau of Revision.** The office that writes each granted petition over the citizen's existing record.
- **Residue, in Palun.** The discarded life that persists faintly at the edges of things, chiefly at dusk. By custom nobody looks at it.
- **The Founder's Regret.** Palun's founding wound, a magistrate's condemnation of his own brother on evidence that was good and also false.
- **The registrar of Palun.** The official who grants petitions and greets every citizen in the current version only.
- **Words I have not found.** The traveler's list, kept at the back of his notebook, of words no country has for the things he keeps meeting.
- **A woman in a green coat.** She is glimpsed once in this book, from behind, at a coach in Plur. The book does not explain her, and neither does this guide.

Curriculum connections

The guide supports broad strands found across senior English, philosophy, and civics and politics courses, and across first-year university courses in political theory and literature. Check the wording against your own course outline.

- **Reading for meaning.** Inference and point of view in a first-person narrator who counts what he sees and admits what he cannot resolve, and the way invented countries let readers test real ideas.
- **Critical literacy.** Whose losses an institution counts and whose it leaves out, and how fairly the book presents the believers in each law.
- **Writing and oral communication.** Argument from evidence, reflective writing, functional writing such as notices, petitions and policies, and structured discussion.
- **Ethics.** Truth and consolation, consent and protection, shared burdens and private grief, regret and responsibility.
- **Civic reasoning.** Who decides when a person is ready to know, duties that cannot be refused, laws written with no exceptions, and the records that decide whether a person can be found.
- **First-year political theory and literature.** Paternalism and autonomy, the ethics of care, consent and compulsory duty, and speculative fiction as a way of testing institutions on paper.

The rest of the series

The Mercy of Systems is out 6 December 2026. The three books before it and the one after it complete the series. Each line below comes from that book's own description.

- **Book One.** *The Logic of Strangers*, out 1 October 2026. Every kindness has a price. He cannot be charged.
- **Book Two.** *The Company of Others*, out 21 October 2026. In the Republic of Pairs, no one faces consequence alone. That is the law.
- **Book Three.** *The Weight of Witness*, out 15 November 2026. Here, silence is entered as evidence.

- **Book Five.** *The Unfinished Country*, out 1 January 2027. At the edge of the map there is a country that refuses to finish itself.

Teachers and book-club leaders are welcome to write with questions or suggestions at hello@mapofotherlaws.com.