

FALSE START Book Club Questionnaire

Welcome, everyone, to our book club meeting! Today, we're diving into Steve Shipley's ***FALSE START (Blake Willis Thriller Series Book 2)***, a riveting read that plunges us deep into the complex world of geopolitical crime and cyber warfare.

Before we begin our discussion, let's set the stage with a brief synopsis of the book.

Book Synopsis: *FALSE START*

FALSE START is the second installment in Steve Shipley's Blake Willis Thriller Series, firmly rooted in the geopolitical crime thriller genre. The narrative plunges protagonist Blake Willis, a corporate security consultant, and his super-smart wife, Rebecca, into a high-stakes conspiracy that threatens Australia and global stability. The story begins with the sudden disappearance of Dr. Daniel Zhu, Blake and Rebecca's close friend and the former CEO of their security company, CloudPhantom. This abduction quickly reveals a terrifying truth: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is orchestrating a sophisticated, decades-old "long game" to infiltrate and control Australia's critical infrastructure, including its financial markets, power grids, and military systems.

As Blake and Rebecca race against a ticking clock, they uncover layers of corporate espionage, corrupt officials, and state-sponsored cyber-attacks designed to destabilize Australia and achieve global dominance. The search for Daniel reveals a network of Chinese front businesses used for illicit activities, including money laundering, human trafficking, and even a crematorium that disposes of "undesirables".

The tension escalates as Blake and Rebecca navigate corrupt corporate boardrooms and government agencies, working alongside their elite team of tech geniuses like Robert "Blizzard" Baumgartner, and strong female characters such as Carla Rossini and Judith Sinclair. The narrative intensifies with the false imprisonment of Rebecca's mother in China, a move designed to coerce Daniel into giving the CCP backdoor access to CloudPhantom's global systems.

The discovery of Daniel's hidden messages and critical information about planted toxins across Australia transforms the mission from a rescue operation into a global crisis intervention. The infiltration extends to the Royal Australian Navy, leading to a race to prevent widespread biological attacks and full Chinese control. *FALSE START* explores themes of loyalty, betrayal, the ethical ambiguities of power, and the profound personal costs of fighting a shadow war that could redefine global power. With Blake navigating corporate politics and confronting the deep-seated corruption, *FALSE START* delivers a relentless, action-packed narrative that questions the nature of power, trust, and the global implications of a silent war waged in the digital realm and hidden in plain sight.

Book Club Discussion Questions

Here are ten questions to kick off our discussion, designed to encourage a deep dive into the novel's themes and characters. We'll aim to spend about five to ten minutes on each question. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers!

1. **The Central Conflict and its Realism:** The core conflict of *FALSE START* revolves around the Chinese Communist Party's long-term strategy to infiltrate and control Australia's infrastructure, using cyber warfare as a primary weapon. How effectively do you think the author portrays this geopolitical threat, and what aspects of the conspiracy felt most unsettlingly realistic in today's world?
2. **Daniel Zhu's Abduction and his Hidden Message:** Daniel Zhu's disappearance is the catalyst for the entire plot. Despite being held captive and under immense pressure, he manages to leave a cryptic message for Rebecca, detailing his duress and the limited damage he inflicted. **What does Daniel's decision to leave a clue, even at great personal risk, reveal about his character and his moral compass?** Do you believe his actions were justified given the circumstances?
3. **The Nature of Infiltration—The Long Game:** Deputy Secretary Xinshe and the CCP describe their strategy as "the long game" and "pebble-by-pebble approach," involving multi-generational infiltration and subtle manipulation within Australian society and government. **How does the book's depiction of this insidious, long-term infiltration resonate with contemporary geopolitical discussions?** Were there moments that made you question where the line between fiction and reality blurred?
4. **Moral Ambiguity and Shifting Loyalties:** Characters like Dr. Biao Li and Rodney Fang find themselves in morally compromised positions, with their loyalties tested and shifting throughout the narrative. **How do these characters contribute to the theme of "loyalty vs. betrayal?"** Did you sympathize with any of their choices, even those that seemed morally questionable?
5. **The Role of Technology and Cybersecurity:** CloudPhantom, with its advanced cybersecurity capabilities, is central to the conflict, both as a target and a tool for defense. **How does the book portray the duality of technology—its capacity to both enable catastrophic threats and to provide the means to counter them?**
6. **Blake Willis's Evolution:** Blake begins the series as a "competent and loyal" corporate security consultant. In *FALSE START*, he faces intense corporate politics, personal threats, and the weight of global responsibility. **How does Blake's personal growth and shift towards prioritizing charity work influence his approach to this larger, global conflict?**
7. **The Interplay of Personal and Geopolitical Stakes:** The safety of Blake and Rebecca's family, particularly Rebecca's pregnant state and her mother's

wrongful arrest, directly impacts the larger geopolitical struggle. **How does the author balance these deeply personal stakes with the broader international conflict?** Does this enhance or detract from the thriller aspect for you?

8. **Media Manipulation and “the Truth:”** The book highlights the power of controlling the narrative, with both the CCP and the Australian government engaging in media manipulation and disinformation. Judith Sinclair, the investigative journalist, struggles to reveal the whole truth. **How does this theme of “information warfare” affect your perception of truth in the modern world?** Did the ending’s media “redaction” leave you satisfied or frustrated?
9. **Private Citizens vs. Government Agencies:** The CloudPhantom team often works in parallel with, or even ahead of, official police and government agencies. **What does this dynamic suggest about the effectiveness of traditional institutions versus agile private entities in confronting modern, complex threats?**
10. **The Ending: Resolution or Ongoing Threat?** The book concludes with a negotiated “peace” with China and the dismantling of some immediate threats. However, the General Secretary’s final smile and the mention of future plans suggest an ongoing threat. **Do you feel this ending provides a satisfying conclusion to the book’s central conflict, or does it primarily serve to set up future installments in the series?**

Optional Questions (if time permits)

- **The Author’s Dedication:** *FALSE START* is dedicated to David Hovenden, who “significantly influenced the portrayal of China and its motivations.” **How does knowing this dedication impact your reading of the book’s geopolitical themes?**
- **The Role of Other Nations:** While China is the primary antagonist, Russia and its stolen serum technology also play a part in Daniel’s abduction. **How does the inclusion of this secondary threat add to the overall complexity and tension of the narrative?**
- **The “Everyman” Hero:** Blake Willis is described as an “Everyman Turned Hero.” **In what ways does Blake defy or embody the typical hero tropes you might expect in a thriller?**
- **The Setting as a Character:** The novel moves between the Hunter Valley’s vineyards and hideaways and Sydney’s bustling corporate world. **How do these contrasting settings—the tranquil Hunter Valley versus the intense urban centers—contribute to the atmosphere and themes of the novel?**
- **The *False Start* Title:** The title of the book is *FALSE START*. **What specific “false starts” or misleading beginnings do you identify in the plot?** How do these contribute to the overall suspense?