

Book Club Discussion Guide



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Yellowface

By R.F. Kuang

About the author:

Rebecca F. Kuang is the #1 New York Times and #1 Sunday Times bestselling author of the Poppy War trilogy, *Babel: An Arcane History*, *Yellowface*, and *Katabasis* (forthcoming). Her work has won the Nebula, Locus, Crawford, and British Book Awards. She has been named to the 2023 Time100 Next list and the Forbes 30 Under 30 Class of 2024. A Marshall Scholar, she has an MPhil in Chinese Studies from Cambridge and an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Oxford. She is now pursuing a PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale, where she studies Sinophone literature and Asian American literature.

Source: <https://rfkuang.com/about/>

About this book:

Authors June Hayward and Athena Liu were supposed to be twin rising stars. But Athena's a literary darling. June Hayward is literally nobody. Who wants stories about basic white girls, June thinks.

So when June witnesses Athena's death in a freak accident, she acts on impulse: she steals Athena's just-finished masterpiece, an experimental novel about the unsung contributions of Chinese laborers during World War I.

So what if June edits Athena's novel and sends it to her agent as her own work? So what if she lets her new publisher rebrand her as Juniper Song—complete with an ambiguously

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ethnic author photo? Doesn't this piece of history deserve to be told, whoever the teller? That's what June claims, and the New York Times bestseller list seems to agree.

But June can't get away from Athena's shadow, and emerging evidence threatens to bring June's (stolen) success down around her. As June races to protect her secret, she discovers exactly how far she will go to keep what she thinks she deserves.

With its totally immersive first-person voice, *Yellowface* grapples with questions of diversity, racism, and cultural appropriation, as well as the terrifying alienation of social media. R.F. Kuang's novel is timely, razor-sharp, and eminently readable.

Source: <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/yellowface-r-f-kuang?variant=40985522831394>

Discussion Questions:

1. Roland Barthes published the essay "The Death of the Author" in 1967 on whether the author's identity and biography are relevant to the meaning of a text. What do you take the "death of the author" to mean? Do you agree? How much does the identity and biography of the author affect how you interpret a text, if at all? Does it change things if the author is still living? If they died over a century ago?
2. June feels betrayed by Athena for writing a story about a traumatic experience she suffered during college. Do you think what Athena did was wrong? Robert Kolker's 2021 piece "Who is the Bad Art Friend?" also raised questions about whether it is ethical to publish fiction drawn explicitly from someone else's life. What obligations, if any, do authors have towards living subjects who inspire their stories?
3. Can we ever argue that someone does or doesn't have the write to tell a certain story? Where do we draw the line between this and censorship? What makes for

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“bad” literary representation? What constitutes the “harm” done by bad literary representation?

4. Much of June’s anxiety about her writing career comes from paranoia about how other authors perceive her and compare against her. John Banville once offered the following advice for young writers: “I remind them, as gently as I can, that they are on their own, with no help available anywhere.” Is writing a necessarily solitary activity?
5. The text employs recurring imagery of masks and skin; June imagines unzipping Athena’s skin and pulling it on over herself. Consider also films like Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* and James Cameron’s *Avatar*, which explore (to differing critical degrees) the white desire to slip into another skin. In what ways is this trope salient to understanding racialization today?
6. June justifies finishing Athena’s manuscript by arguing it is better for her story to reach the world than to linger unpublished, or to be posthumously published in unfinished form. Do you agree?
7. June and Athena’s friendship seem defined by way they constantly hurt each other. Why do you think they were drawn to each other? Why did they keep seeing one another?
8. Athena in many respects rankles against her canonical status as an Asian American author. She rants about being pigeonholed; she rejects overtures by younger Asian American writers. Why might she feel resentful towards her own community?

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