

## Book Club Discussion Questions

### Yellowface

By R.F. Kuang

- 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 “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6) June justifies finishing Athena’s manuscript by arguing it is better for her story to reach the world than to linger unpublished, or to be posthumously published in unfinished form.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?

Discussion questions by the publisher.

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