

# YELLOWFACE



BOOK CLUB KIT

R. F. KUANG

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I wrote *Yellowface* to explore two anxieties I have about the literary environment we're living in.

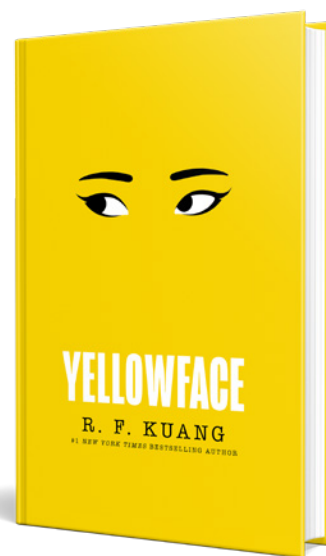
First, I started drafting this story in early 2021, when many of us were still isolated from the friends and family we used to see on a regular basis. A lot of the writing community had moved online, and I'd noticed a lot of those conversations had taken a strange, nasty turn. People seemed to take active glee in ripping others apart. I don't know if the Internet had become more toxic as a result of our isolation, but I do think interacting with others purely through a screen often leads to downward spirals of paranoia, jealousies, resentments, and willful misinterpretations. And even when things are ostensibly just fun and games, being a writer online seemed to generate anxiety more than anything else. I've spoken to so many early-career writers about the immense pressure they feel to constantly perform in comparison to their peers. I wonder what all this is doing to our heads. Maybe it was a better time when we knew less about each other. I don't know.

Second, as a scholar of Sinophone and Asian American literature, I am unavoidably concerned with problems regarding how authorial identity and textual interpretation intersect. Should the author's background ever affect how we judge a novel? What does it mean to "own" or "steal" a story? What is authenticity? What do we owe the people we're writing about? What happens when we foreground authorial identity above all else—when we, for instance, pigeonhole Asian American writers as Asian before they are writers? For what it's worth, I don't think there are easy or obvious answers to these questions, and I remain suspicious of anyone who claims there are.

*Yellowface*—though very different from my fantasy novels—similarly invites you to dig deep into some questions I think we've been skirting for a while. But if all it does is inspire you to go outside and touch some grass, I'll consider my job well done.

Best,

Rebecca



*Wm*  
MORROW

## 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 “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?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**REBECCA F. KUANG** is a Marshall Scholar, Chinese-English translator, and the Astounding Award-winning and the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and World Fantasy Award nominated author of the Poppy War trilogy and the forthcoming Babel. Her work has won the Crawford Award and the Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel. 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.



### ALSO BY **R.F. KUANG**

