



# Radical Empathy Book Club

## Discussion Questions for *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang – January 2024

**‘Radical empathy...means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it’ – Isabel Wilkerson in *Caste***

1. At the beginning of chapter 3, June says: “I know what you’re thinking. *Thief. Plagiarizer.* And perhaps, because all bad things must be racially motivated, *Racist.* (p 36)
  - a. Do you think June is a thief, plagiarizer, and/or racist? Why/why not?
  - b. Would you think differently if June’s character and Athena’s character did not cross racial lines or if June and Athena switched roles? Why/why not?
  - c. Candice (the one person of color on the publishing team) suggests they do a sensitivity read to avoid ‘cultural appropriation and, worse, cultural leeching’ (p 64). Do you think this is an example of cultural appropriation or cultural leeching? Why? Where do you see examples of this in your own life?
2. Also in chapter 3, June recalls a conversation where Athena says: “People come to a text with so many prejudices formed by what they think they know about the author...I sometimes wonder how my work would be perceived if I pretended to be a man, or a white woman. The text could be exactly the same, but one might be a critical bomb and the other a resounding success, why is that.” (p 37).
  - a. Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not?
  - b. How would your feelings about this book have changed if the author was a different race and/or gender?
  - c. In chapter 8, a character who identifies as Chinese American asks June if she thinks it’s ok to “write, and profit from this kind of story? Why do you think you’re the right person to tell it?” (p 105). How would you have answered this question? Do you think anyone is able to tell any story regardless of their identity? Why?
3. June meets with Harvey and Justin from Greenhouse Productions in chapter 10. During that meeting, Harvey and Justin make a number of comments that are, at minimum misguided (proposing to amplify a secondary character who is white) or at worst, overtly racist (making fun of actors who have “bad English”). What was your reaction to this scene? Have you ever been involved in a conversation where someone speaks disparagingly about another race/identity? How did you react and why?
4. Radical Empathy encourages us to “listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. It is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will.” In what ways does this book help you understand:
  - a. What it’s like to be a person of color in an industry (like book publishing) that is dominated by people who are white?
  - b. What it’s like to be an Asian woman living in the U.S.?