

Book Review

Yellowface by R.F. Kuang

by Trinity Nirenberg

Jealousy is one of those things that we all encounter during our lives. Jealousy happens at different levels to each person, of course, but everyone has a basic understanding of it as a concept: how this penetrative emotion makes us feel, guides our decision-making, and alters our view of the world. Envy is something we must filter, and the level to which we do sets us apart from those around us.

Told from the first-person point of view of a white female author with a lackluster career, *Yellowface* follows June Hayward as she capitalizes on the accidental death of her college peer. Athena, a successful Asian-American author, is everything June wishes she was. When Athena's newly finished manuscript sits conveniently on her desk, June can't help but snatch it for herself. June lightly rewrites sections of the manuscript, which concerns the Chinese Labour Corps in World War I, and submits it as a work of her own to her agent. Suddenly, June is catapulted into the career she fantasized about, but what she didn't plan for was the scrutinizing spotlight that came with it, haunted by the ghost of Athena.

In this spotlight, June is confronted via social media by reviewers claiming that the book was written by Athena. This snapshot into the horrors of the internet is brutally written, much like Kuang's previous work, using strong diction choices to show the disintegration of a person's sanity. Clearly showing the privilege on both sides of the publishing industry, the narrator blatantly manipulates herself into believing that she is doing the Asian community a favor.

Kuang weaponizes the use of an unreliable narrator by making the book itself unreliable, a book from a white person's point-of-view written by an Asian

woman. In an interview with NPR, Kuang states, “[A]ll of our assumptions about who gets to do cultural appropriation or when something counts as cultural appropriation kind of go away when you invert who is of what identity . . . a lot of our standards about cultural appropriation are language about ‘don’t write outside of your own lane. You can only write about this experience if you’ve had that experience’ . . . they’re actually quite limiting and harmful, and backfire more often on marginalized writers than they push forward conversations about widening opportunities . . . fiction should be about imagining outside our own perspectives, stepping into other people’s shoes and empathizing with the other” (Kelly 2023).

Yellowface is a masterful work of genre-bending fiction that widens perspectives on privilege in the publishing world, both at the author and corporate levels. The book itself is a satirical horror story paying its respects to the ethics around cultural appropriation.

References

Kuang, R.F. 2023a. *Yellowface*. New York: William Morrow.

Kuang, R.F. 2023b. “Author R.F. Kuang on Unlikable Narrators and Cultural Appropriation in ‘*Yellowface*.’” By Mary Louise Kelly, Elena Burnett, Mallory Yu, and Erika Ryan. NPR, May 16, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/16/1176508635/author-r-f-kuang-on-unlikable-narrators-and-cultural-appropriation-in-yellowface>.