

DISCUSSION GUIDE

READ

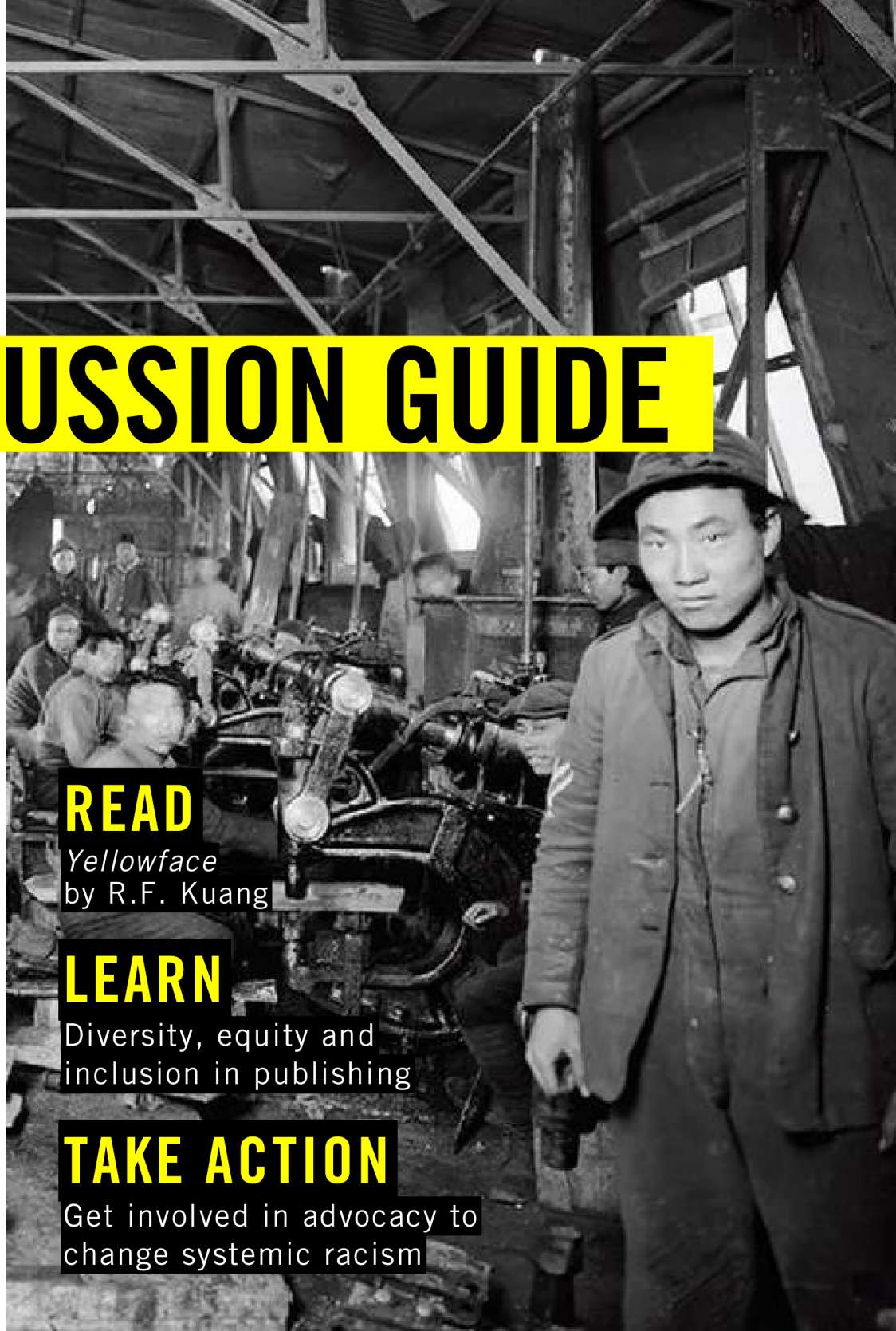
Yellowface
by R.F. Kuang

LEARN

Diversity, equity and
inclusion in publishing

TAKE ACTION

Get involved in advocacy to
change systemic racism



MAR/APR
2024

Yellowface by R. F. Kuang features a plagiarized manuscript about the lives of Chinese labourers (shown above) who comprised the largest non-European workforce during World War I.

Photo above by Wikimedia Commons/Chatham House, London

AMNESTYBOOKCLUB.CA

A COMMUNITY THAT READS, LEARNS & ACTS TOGETHER



Ketty Nivyabandi
Photo by Dave Chan

Amnesty International is a human rights organization and global movement of more than 10 million people in over 170 countries and territories who campaign for human rights.

SAVE THE DATE



May is Asian Heritage Month in Canada.

Ketty Nivyabandi

Secretary General
Amnesty International Canada

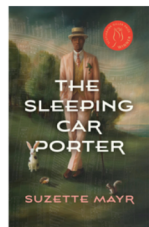
Welcome to Amnesty International Canada's Book Club. You are a critical part of this community that reads, learns and acts together for a better world.

This discussion guide is intended to help you spark and join conversations about recent notable works of fiction that weave compelling stories around the major human rights issues of our times.

In March and April, Amnesty International Canada's almost 13-thousand Book Club members will discuss the New York Times bestselling book, *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang. This book raises important questions about cultural appropriation and racism in the publishing industry.

I hope you'll enjoy reading, discussing and sharing this engrossing and thought-provoking story.

Previous
in 2024



JAN/FEB

Upcoming
in 2024



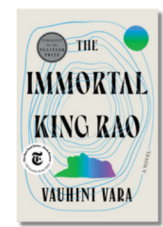
MAY/JUNE



JUL/AUG



SEPT/OCT



NOV/DEC



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THE BOOK



Photo by Mike Coppola/Getty Images for TIME



Rebecca (R. F.) Kuang
American Novelist

LEARN MORE



On NPR's *All Things Considered*, host Mary Louise Kelly interviews R. F. Kuang about cultural appropriation (2023).

Yellowface

By R. F. Kuang
HarperCollins Publishers, 2023

Yellowface unfolds in the ultra-competitive world of contemporary publishing at a time of reckoning with its overwhelming whiteness. A scathing, incisive and often laugh-out-loud-funny satire, *Yellowface* tells a resonant story of deep and systemic racism, white privilege, cultural appropriation and identity theft.

The book is narrated from the perspective of June Hayward, a struggling white writer who steals and publishes the manuscript of her recently deceased friend. Athena Liu, was a literary superstar whose talent and beauty made her the wealthy darling of the publishing world. Athena suffers a fatal accident while the two are alone together, and June subsequently takes Athena's last manuscript from her desk.

Athena's manuscript, *The Last Front*, is a painstakingly researched fictional account of the Chinese Labour Corps — the 140,000 Chinese workers sent to the Allied front during World War 1 by the British Army. It's a masterpiece.

June draws upon her privilege and white supremacy in the institution of publishing to silence all critics — especially criticism from Asian people — and enjoy her own meteoric rise to literary stardom. As the story progresses, she becomes increasingly haunted and trapped by the web of lies she has woven.

Yellowface raises important questions about what happens when authors from marginalized groups achieve success, underscoring the tokenism and snobbery of the publishing industry.



READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Diversity, equity and inclusion in book publishing



Above: Toni Morrison, Author & Editor

Above: The faces of authors juxtaposed with a large graphic of Yellowface at the London Book Fair in 2023. (Photo by Richard Baker/In Pictures via Getty Images)

In 2020, a McGill University professor and a New York Times editor teamed up to review 8,004 fiction books by 4,100 authors published by major publishing houses between 1950 and 2018. They hypothesized correctly that most of the authors would be white, but they were shocked by the extent of the inequality once they looked at the data.

Just 5% of fiction published since 1950 was written by racialized people.

Of the 7,124 books for which the researchers were able to identify the author's race, 95% were white. They also found a strong correlation between the number of Black people working in publishing and the number of books published by Black authors.

Source: *The New York Times* (2020)

As Random House's first female Black editor, Toni Morrison championed writers such as **Toni Cade Bambara, Henry Dumas, and Gayl Jones**. In six years, she helped publish 806 books by Black authors. In the six years after she left in 1982, the publisher produced just two books by Black authors (one of them was Morrison's own Pulitzer Prize—winning novel *Beloved*).

LEARN MORE



"Just How White Is the Book Industry?" NYT, Richard Jean So & Gus Wezerek (2020). <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html>



"Reading Between the Lines: Race, Equity & Book Publishing," PEN America (2022). <https://pen.org/report/race-equity-and-book-publishing>



Photo of Toni Morrison by Bettmann via Getty Images

WHO GETS PUBLISHED IN CANADA?



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**“We are not the voiceless
looking for a voice.
We are the voices looking
for a microphone.”**

Sayre Quevedo, Artist & Journalist

Left: Sayre Quevedo at 38th Annual IDA Documentary Awards in 2022. (Photo by Araya Doheny/Getty Images)

Systemic exclusion in the Canadian publishing industry

In 2022, the Writers' Union of Canada found that authors who are racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+ or disabled face greater career challenges than others. Here are the recommendations from their report:

1. Ensure those in positions of power are more diverse.
2. Mandate diversity, equity and inclusion training.
3. Promote books in more nuanced and meaningful ways.
4. Increase support for small presses.
5. Create funding for writers who have disabilities.
6. Ensure better inclusivity for book industry prizes.
7. Re-evaluate prize, residency and grant opportunities with arbitrary age limits to recognize the barriers authors face that delay recognition and publication.

LEARN MORE



The Writers' Union of Canada, “Diversity in Canadian Writing: A 2020-2021 Snapshot.”
<https://www.writersunion.ca/news/who-gets-published-canada>



New York Times bestseller, *The Other Black Girl*, by Zakiya Dalila Harris (2021). A young Black woman contends with racism in the publishing industry.



If you haven't already, gather your friends and start a book club featuring racialized authors. Amnesty's Book Club books are a great place to start.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions are intended to spark thoughtful discussions and reflections on the book:

- How does it feel to approach the story from June's perspective?
- Would there be any appropriate way for June to act as an ally to publicize her friend's last manuscript?
- Racism, tokenism, and micro-aggressions show up in the publishing industry in multiple different ways in the book. Identify and discuss a few examples.
- How do social media shape the plot and issues of racism in the novel? How do they expose and/or perpetuate harm?
- June profited from a painful Chinese history. When challenged, she said, "I think it's dangerous to start censoring what authors should and shouldn't write... Can a Black writer not write a novel with a white protagonist?" How are these two situations different?
- How does an author's background impact their ability to tell certain stories?

“

I love writing unlikable narrators. But the trick here is it's much more fun to follow a character that does have a sympathetic background, that does think reasonable thoughts about half the time, because then you're compelled to follow their logic to the horrible decisions they are making.

R.F. Kuang, Author of Yellowface

Source: All Things Considered, NPR, 2023

- Kuang said she intended to provoke anxiety and discomfort in the reader. Consider the purpose of these feelings and the role they can play in conversations about issues of race and identity.
- What kind of impact do you think June's actions had on others, particularly Asian women?
- Why do you think the author ended the novel with June plotting ways to "reclaim" her story?

TAKE ACTION



Share Amnesty's Book Club with your friends, family, and broader community on social media or [GoodReads.com](https://www.goodreads.com).



Read and support authors from underrepresented communities. For ideas, visit the Writers' Trust Amplified Voices list: <https://www.writerstrust.com/programs/amplified-voices/>

