

“Razor sharp.” —Time

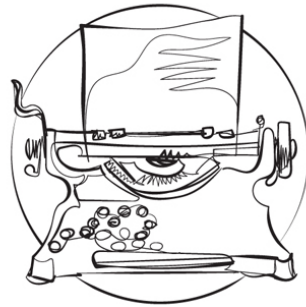


YELLOWFACE

R. F. KUANG

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Yellowface



A Novel

R. F. Kuang

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WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To Eric and Janette

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One

THE NIGHT I WATCH ATHENA LIU DIE, WE'RE CELEBRATING HER TV deal with Netflix.

Off the bat, for this story to make sense, you should know two things about Athena:

First, she has everything: a multibook deal straight out of college at a major publishing house, an MFA from the one writing workshop everyone's heard of, a résumé of prestigious artist residencies, and a history of awards nominations longer than my grocery list. At twenty-seven, she's published three novels, each one a successively bigger hit. For Athena, the Netflix deal was not a life-changing event, just another feather in her cap, one of the side perks of the road to literary stardom she's been hurtling down since graduation.

Second, perhaps as a consequence of the first, she has almost no friends. Writers our age—young, ambitious up-and-comers just this side of thirty—tend to run in packs. You'll find evidence of cliques all over social media—writers gushing over excerpts of one another's unpublished manuscripts (LOSING MY HEAD OVER THIS WIP!), squealing over cover reveals (THIS IS SO GORGEOUS I WILL DIE!!!), and posting selfies of group hangs at literary meet-ups across the globe. But Athena's Instagram photos feature no one else. She regularly tweets career updates and quirky jokes to her seventy thousand followers, but she rarely @s other people. She doesn't name-drop, doesn't blurb or recommend her colleagues' books, and doesn't publicly rub shoulders in that ostentatious, desperate way early career writers do. In the entire time I've known her, I've never heard her reference any close friends but me.

I used to think that she was simply aloof. Athena is so stupidly, ridiculously successful that it makes sense she wouldn't want to mingle with mere mortals. Athena, presumably, chats exclusively with blue check holders and fellow bestselling authors who can entertain her with their rarefied observations on modern society. Athena doesn't have time to make friends with proletarians.

But in recent years, I've developed another theory, which is that everyone else finds her as unbearable as I do. It's hard, after all, to be friends with someone who outshines you at every turn. Probably no one else can stand Athena because they can't stand constantly failing to measure up to her. Probably I'm here because I'm just that pathetic.

So that night it's only Athena and me at a loud, overpriced rooftop bar in Georgetown. She's flinging back cocktails like she has a duty to prove she's having a good time, and I'm drinking to dull the bitch in me that wishes she were dead.

ATHENA AND I ONLY BECAME FRIENDS BY CIRCUMSTANCE. WE LIVED on the same floor at Yale our freshman year, and because we've both known we wanted to be writers since we were sentient, we ended up in all the same undergraduate writing seminars. We both published short stories in the same literary magazines early on in our careers and, a few years after graduation, moved to the same city—Athena for a prestigious fellowship at Georgetown, whose faculty, according to rumor, were so impressed by a guest lecture she gave at American University that its English department inaugurated a creative writing post just for her, and I because my mother's cousin owned a condo in Rosslyn that she would rent to me for the cost of utilities if I remembered to water her plants. We'd never experienced anything like kindred spirit recognition, or some deep, bonding trauma—we were just always in the same place, doing the same things, so it was convenient to be friendly.

But although we started out in the same place—Professor Natalia Gaines's Introduction to Short Fiction—our careers spiraled in wildly different directions after graduation.

I wrote my first novel in a fit of inspiration during a year spent bored out of my skull working for Teach for America. I'd come home after work every day to meticulously draft the story I'd wanted to tell since my childhood: a richly detailed and subtly magical coming-of-age story about

grief, loss, and sisterhood titled *Over the Sycamore*. After I'd queried nearly fifty literary agents without luck, the book was picked up by a small press named Evermore during an open call for submissions. The advance seemed like an absurd amount of money to me at the time—ten thousand dollars up front, with royalties to come once I'd earned out—but that was before I learned Athena had gotten six figures for her debut novel at Penguin Random House.

Evermore folded three months before my book went to print. My rights reverted back to me. Miraculously, my literary agent—who had signed me after Evermore's initial offer—resold the rights to one of the Big Five publishing houses for a twenty-thousand-dollar advance—a “nice deal,” read the Publishers Marketplace announcement. It seemed like I had finally Made It, that all my dreams of fame and success were about to come true, until my launch day drew closer, and my first print run was reduced from ten thousand to five thousand copies, my six-city book tour was reduced to three stops in the DMV area, and the promised quotes from famous writers failed to materialize. I never got a second printing. I sold two, maybe three thousand copies total. My editor was fired during one of those publishing squeezes that happen every time the economy dips, and I got passed along to some guy named Garrett who has so far shown so little interest in supporting the novel that I often wonder whether he's forgotten about me entirely.

But that's par for the course, everyone told me. Everyone has a shitty debut experience. Publishers are Just Like That. It's always chaos in New York, all the editors and publicists are overworked and underpaid, and balls get dropped all the time. The grass is never greener on the other side. Every author hates their imprint. There are no Cinderella stories—just hard work, tenacity, and repeat attempts at the golden ticket.

So why, then, do some people rocket to stardom on their first try? Six months before Athena's debut novel came out, she got a big, sexy photo spread in a widely read publishing magazine under the title “Publishing's Newest Prodigy Is Here to Tell the AAPI Stories We Need.” She sold foreign rights in thirty different territories. Her debut launched amidst a fanfare of critical acclaim in venues like the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, and it occupied top spots on every bestseller list for weeks. The awards circuit the following year was a foregone conclusion. Athena's debut—*Voice and Echo*, about a Chinese American girl who can summon

the ghosts of all the deceased women in her family—was one of those rare novels that perfectly straddled the line between speculative and commercial fiction, so she accrued nominations for the Booker, Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy awards, two of which she won. And that was only three years ago. She’s published two more books since, and the critical consensus is that she’s only gotten better and better.

It’s not that Athena isn’t talented. She’s a fucking *good* writer—I’ve read all her work, and I’m not too jealous to acknowledge good writing when I see it. But Athena’s star power is so obviously not about the writing. It’s about *her*. Athena Liu is, simply put, so fucking cool. Even her name—Athena Ling En Liu—is cool; well done, Mr. and Mrs. Liu, to choose a perfect combination of the classical and exotic. Born in Hong Kong, raised between Sydney and New York, educated in British boarding schools that gave her a posh, unplaceable foreign accent; tall and razor-thin, graceful in the way all former ballet dancers are, porcelain pale and possessed of these massive, long-lashed brown eyes that make her look like a Chinese Anne Hathaway (that’s not racist for me to say—Athena once posted a selfie of her and “Annie” from some red carpet event, their four enormous doe eyes squeezed side by side, captioned simply, *Twins!*).

She’s unbelievable. She’s literally unbelievable.

So of course Athena gets every good thing, because that’s how this industry works. Publishing picks a winner—someone attractive enough, someone cool and young and, oh, we’re all thinking it, let’s just say it, “diverse” enough—and lavishes all its money and resources on them. It’s so fucking arbitrary. Or perhaps not arbitrary, but it hinges on factors that have nothing to do with the strength of one’s prose. Athena—a beautiful, Yale-educated, international, ambiguously queer woman of color—has been chosen by the Powers That Be. Meanwhile, I’m just brown-eyed, brown-haired June Hayward, from Philly—and no matter how hard I work, or how well I write, I’ll never be Athena Liu.

I’d expected her to skyrocket out of my orbit by now. But the friendly texts keep coming—how’s writing going today? hitting that word count target? good luck with your deadline!—as do the invitations: happy hour margaritas at El Centro, brunch at Zaytinya, a poetry slam on U Street. We have one of those skin-deep friendships where you manage to spend a lot of time together without really getting to know the other person. I still don’t know if she has any siblings. She’s never asked me about my boyfriends. But we