

Yellowfish: A Novel

John Keeble

*New Foreword by William Kittredge, New Afterword by the Author
(University of Washington Press, 2008)*

Discussion Questions for Book Clubs and Classes

1. Much of this novel is about foreigners and being foreign. Do you think Sandman is a foreigner?
2. Sandman is first described as “the man in bed” and a “sensualist.” He describes Lily as “something from his dreams.” What is the significance of the name “Sandman” and does he succeed in finding the West?
3. Taam tells Erks that “his way is truly American.” What do you think he means by that?
4. What is the source of Lily’s power over the men in the novel (and the dogs on the farm)?
5. Erks feels strongly about the importance of places in human history. What is his connection to the landscape and what can it tell us about land ownership?
6. For most of the novel, Taam relies on Erks and Lily to guide and protect him in the (to him) foreign landscape of Washington and Idaho. His power, however, is revealed in the final chapters, as his personal history is told against the backdrop of the familiar landscapes of Nevada and California. In turn, Lily and Erks experience moments of powerlessness. At which point in the novel do Chinese history and American history collide? And what does this collision tell us about western history?
7. Is it safe to say that Erks and Taam become friends by the end of their journey? Does Taam’s death represent a failure of Chinese and American relations?

(continued)



8. Ruby dislikes Lucas even though she has never met him. Why? How does Lucas fit into the history of the West?

9. How do concepts of morality and ethics cross ethnic and cultural boundaries in the novel?

10. Erks believes that “lives lived on a ground were shaped forever by the nature of that ground.” What does he mean? How does this sentiment complicate our understanding of race and culture, and how does it inform our understanding of the history of a place?

11. Why does Taam call Erks’s way of life “an illusion”?

12. Lily’s mother’s body in her coffin is described this way: “its meaning now poised somewhere between dead, lamented mother and trucked meat.” Is Ho ever described in similar terms? How is the transport of his body different from the transport of hers?

13. In the 1960s, Canada’s immigration policy opened up, while the United States continued with a strict quota system. With this in mind, how do the descriptions of the Chinatowns in Vancouver and San Francisco differ? Is it important that the Canadian Chinatown is more ethnically diverse than the one in San Francisco, and what does this tell us about the function of Chinatowns in large urban areas?

14. Erks identifies with the historical figure Simon Fraser. How does Erks’s sense of history help him in his journey to Nevada, and how does it explain his journey?

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