

## *Yellow*

By Don Lee

W. W. Norton & Company

### A Reading and Discussion Guide

Massachusetts  
Honor Book  
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#### **SUMMARY:**

Reprinted courtesy of the author's website: [www.don-lee.com](http://www.don-lee.com)

Set in the fictional California town of Rosarita Bay, Don Lee's *Yellow* is a fresh, contemporary vision of what it means to be Asian in America, a post-immigrant examination of identity, race, and love. In this sophisticated and provocative collection, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese Americans flirt across and within racial lines, and end up facing not only fears of being ethnically "yellow" but also the universal terrors of failure and abandonment.

In a wide range of moods from the hilarious to the poignant to the sublime, these stories are smart and sexy, wry and evocative. Novelistic in scope, they feature such memorable characters as Annie Yung, whose aching heart and passion for country music have her longing for a cowboy; Duncan Roh, a big-wave surfer trying to transcend his reputation as a womanizer; Patrick and Brian Fenny, two mixed-blooded boys deserted by their golfer dad; ex-fisherman Alan Fujitani, marooned in romantic widowerhood; and the wildly competitive "Oriental Hair Poets," Marcella Ahn and Caroline Yip, engaged in a battle of wits for the attention of Dean Kaneshiro, whose handcrafted chairs are museum pieces. The title novella, which was a finalist for a National Magazine Award, spans twenty years, following Danny Kim from his disastrous foray into boxing as a teenager to his ascent into Boston society as a management consultant—poisoned not so much by racism as by his paranoid fear of it.

A literary descendant of *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio*, *Yellow* captures modern Asian American lives with moral urgency, surprising compassion, and sly humor.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

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1. In "The Price of Eggs in China," what qualities distinguish and link Marcella Ahn, Caroline Yip, and Dean Kaneshiro? How do they differ in their opinions about the function of art and the role of artists? Why is Caroline so angry when she discovers the extent of Dean's artistic success?

2. In many of the stories, author Don Lee describes a character's profession or special talent. How does learning about this aspect of the character's life shape our perception? Discuss other characters in this collection who are defined by their jobs and avocations.
3. In your judgment, who was Caroline's mysterious prank caller: Marcella, as Dean chooses to believe, or Caroline herself, as Marcella claims? How does this mystery affect the outcome of the story?
4. Much of the story "Voir Dire" covers the trial of drug addict Chee Seng Lam, who is accused of murdering the child of his girlfriend, Ruby Liu. How does their situation compare to Hank Low Kwon and Molly Beddle's? What questions of moral accountability are raised?
5. How is the symbol or motif of water used in this and other stories in the book?
6. Alan Fujitani, the main character of "Widowers," is captivated by the young widow Emily Vieira, but he holds on to his dead wife's memory with great respect and devotion – perhaps too much. What is it about Emily that he finds admirable? Does meeting Emily change Alan?
7. Annie Yung becomes a regular at the Lone Night Cantina, "where she thought she belonged, in the cheatin' heart world of Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline songs." Why does Korean American Annie seem to find solace in dressing the part of a blond cowgirl with a Southern twang? How does Don Lee play with symbols of American culture in the story?
8. This story closes with Annie not riding into the sunset but driving in the rain. The choice between pragmatism and romantic escape or even delusion appears to echo throughout the collection. Discuss how this choice relates to the questions of ethnicity, relationships, and personal identity.
9. In "Casual Water," Patrick Fenny asks himself: "What was it that made people so weak?" What are the individual characters' weaknesses? All the stories in the collection seem to hinge on characters' fears, particularly of being alone, isolated, or abandoned. How is this theme developed?
10. Miss Yung, Brian's teacher, also appears in "The Lone Night Cantina" as Annie Yung's sister. What other characters and places recur in the book? What impression do you get of the town of Rosarita Bay, and how does it fit in with the themes of the collection? Why do the characters feel drawn or trapped by the town?
11. In "The Possible Husband," Duncan Rob seems to flit from one pastime to another, much as he does with women. What is he ultimately seeking? Escapism or transcendence?

12. In “Domo Arigato,” Eugene Kim is an outsider not only in Japanese society but also in the close circle of his American girlfriend’s white family. As a Korean American, how does Eugene perceive himself in relation to the native Japanese? What does his story tell us about the differences among Asian cultures themselves?
13. Eugene eventually marries Janet, whom we learn is half-black, half-Korean. How does Eugene’s ultimate choice in his spouse reflect his experience with race, intimate relationships, and family? Does his choice signify a rejection of white American culture or a reinforcement of ethnic identity? Is his conclusion about racial equality a form of resignation or acquired wisdom?
14. In the title story, “Yellow,” when Danny Kim says to his wife, Rachel, “No stereotype is innocent,” she replies, “Racism’s not the problem. It’s you.” Do you agree with Danny or Rachel? Or both? Why does he perceive others as the problem, not himself?
15. How does Danny attempt to overcome his feelings of insecurity? Does his response change as he grows older and more successful? How does his paranoia about race influence his desire to achieve?
16. Each story in this collection includes details about the characters’ race and background, but the plots and people themselves are often defined not by their color but by their personal passions and by human dilemmas that are universally shared. How do these stories deal with racial stereotypes? What do they communicate about the diversity of Asian backgrounds and relationships with non-Asians? Explore how your perception of the stories might have changed if the characters’ race had not been described.
17. While race does not seem to be the central focus of each story, the collection’s title is, nonetheless, *Yellow*. What is the impact of this provocative title? What about the titles of the other stories? What messages or dual meanings do they carry?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Reprinted courtesy of the author’s website: [www.don-lee.com](http://www.don-lee.com)

Don Lee is a third-generation Korean American. He is the author of the novel *Country of Origin* and the story collection *Yellow*, which won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has received an O. Henry Award and a Pushcart Prize, and his stories have been published *GQ*, *New England Review*, *The North American Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Bamboo Ridge*, *Manoa*, *American Short Fiction*, and *Glimmer Train*. He has received fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the St. Botolph Club Foundation.

He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and has been the editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares* at Emerson College in Boston for 16 years. The son of a career State Department officer, he spent the majority of his childhood in Tokyo and Seoul. In Tokyo, he attended ASIJ—the American School in Japan. He received his B.A. in English literature from UCLA and his M.F.A. in creative writing and literature from Emerson College. After graduating, he taught fiction writing workshops at Emerson for three years as an adjunct instructor, then began working full-time at *Ploughshares*.

Off-time activities: Windsurfing is his big passion. He drives to Cape Cod whenever the forecast is good during the summer and fall, and in the spring, he always goes to Bonaire, an island off the coast of Venezuela. He is 44 years old but doesn't quite believe it.

#### **HELPFUL LINKS:**

Don Lee's website: [www.don-lee.com](http://www.don-lee.com)

Reviews and Interviews of *Yellow*: [www.don-lee.com/reviews.html](http://www.don-lee.com/reviews.html)



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