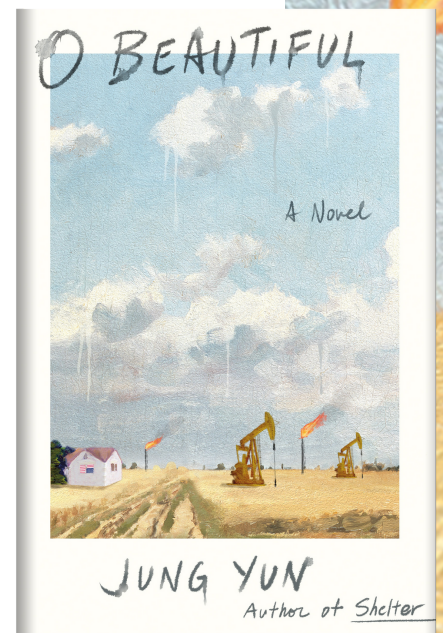


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were your initial impressions of Elinor Hanson in the opening chapters? How did those impressions change over time?
2. How do Elinor's overlapping identities affect the way she experiences the Bakken? How does identity affect the way someone might see or tell a story?
3. Maren and Elinor grew up in the same household and were raised by the same parents. Why do you think these sisters turned out so differently? How does their relationship reflect Elinor's relationships with other women?
4. Elinor didn't mind being catcalled as a teenager because "it was the first time she'd ever felt noticed for being pretty instead of being different." Are there events from your own youth that you look back on differently with adult eyes? What accounts for the change(s) in your perspective?
5. What coping mechanisms did you observe Elinor using in response to incidents of misogyny or racism? How would you respond/how have you responded under similar circumstances?
6. Elinor often feels minimized or erased by virtue of being a woman and/or a person of color. How does she occasionally minimize or erase others?
7. There are several "bad actors" in and around Avery who overshadow the presence of good. Were there characters in whom you recognized goodness and kindness? If so, how did these qualities manifest?
8. In a moment of anger, Kathryn Tasso tells Elinor, "Women like you make it so much harder for the rest of us." Do you agree with this statement? Do you think Elinor agrees with it? Why or why not?
9. "Great beauty" and "terrible ugliness" are themes that run throughout this novel. What other themes did you identify that resonated with you?
10. How does the landscape of Avery and the surrounding areas serve as a metaphor for contemporary America?
11. In the final scene, Elinor imagines returning to the reservation to see Shawnalee and begin writing her story for the Standard anew. Why do you think she wants to do this?
12. What emotions does the ending of the novel leave you with? What do you hope Elinor will do next?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Author Responses to Select Discussion Questions

Jung Yun

QUESTION #4: Elinor didn't mind being catcalled as a teenager because "it was the first time she'd ever felt noticed for being pretty instead of being different." Are there events from your own youth that you look back on differently with adult eyes? What accounts for the change(s) in your perspective?

I went through a long, awkward, and not entirely unusual period in my teens when I permed my hair and wore lots of shimmery blue eye shadow and seashell pink lip gloss. (In case the blue eye shadow didn't give it away, this was back in the eighties, and if you've seen my author photo, you probably know that this wasn't a good look for me in any decade.) As an adult, I understand that I was trying to conform to the standards of beauty I observed in popular culture, particularly movies, TV, and magazines, but I wasn't intellectually or emotionally equipped to ask myself the harder questions back then. Whose standards are these? Who gets to define what "beautiful" is? Why is the definition so narrow? Who does it exclude? Representation—seeing other Asian Americans and women of color in the media—helped me develop more expansive ideas about beauty over time. I'm also aware that inclusion—living in a world in which more women of color hold positions of leadership on mastheads and occupy the C-suites of entertainment companies—helps make some of that representation possible.

QUESTION #5: What coping mechanisms did you observe Elinor using in response to incidents of misogyny or racism? How would you respond/how have you responded under similar circumstances?

I've spent a lot of time talking with close friends about how we occasionally self-censor or "lock up" in response to racist or sexist behavior. None of us are particularly timid people either, so we've also talked about the feelings of embarrassment, disappointment, and shame that linger long after the actual incident, even though it's a very natural human impulse to be conflict averse, temporarily stunned silent, or just want someone else to take a turn and do the speaking up for a change. Elinor resorts to similar types of behavior throughout the novel—constantly second-guessing herself into silence, smiling away lewd or offensive comments like they don't bother her, letting people off the hook because it's easier than engaging in hard, potentially adversarial conversations. Although she's somewhat limited by her role as a writer to observe and report rather than influence or interfere, she's also engaging in some common forms of self-protection to cope with the barrage of racism and sexism coming at her from all directions. I think the challenge for Elinor is learning to speak up when enough finally feels like enough.

QUESTION #11: In the final scene, Elinor imagines returning to the reservation to see Shawnalee and begin writing her story for the Standard anew. Why do you think she wants to do this?

Although Elinor has experienced a number of struggles throughout her lifetime, she's not without agency or responsibility. As a child, she was so desperate to not be teased or ridiculed by her classmates that when their attentions shifted to the Native American girls, she was quick to turn on them too. As an adult, she naively believed that the disappearance of Leanne Lowell was newsworthy and unusual in the area, not understanding that she'd long been conditioned to care about a certain type of missing person while ignoring so many others. Storytelling draws upon the past, present, and future of the storyteller; it's a product of one's whole being. If Richard had gone to the Bakken instead of Elinor, his experience probably would have been very different from hers by virtue of his age, race, gender, professional status, and a host of other factors. His story also would have been different as a result. When she returns to the reservation to talk to Shawnalee, Elinor is attempting to tell the story that she's able to see by virtue of her many identities and life experiences. It's a small, but hopeful gesture that acknowledges not only her complicity in the past, but also her capacity to change and think beyond her own pain in the future.



RECOMMENDED READING

The New Wild West: Black Gold, Fracking, and Life in a North Dakota Boomtown
by Blaire Briody

My Time Among the Whites: Notes from an Unfinished Education
by Jennine Capó Crucet

The Bakken Goes Boom: Oil and the Changing Geographies of Western North Dakota
edited by William Caraher and Kyle Conway

Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger
by Soraya Chemaly

Yellow Bird: Oil, Murder, and a Woman's Search for Justice in Indian Country
by Sierra Crane Murdoch

An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States
by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People
by Elizabeth A. Fenn

The Boom: How Fracking Ignited the American Energy Revolution and Changed the World
by Russell Gold

Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning
by Cathy Park Hong

This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America
by Morgan Jerkins

Dakota: A Spiritual Geography
by Kathleen Norris

Great American Outpost: Dreamers, Mavericks, and the Making of an Oil Frontier
by Maya Rao

The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America
by Andrés Reséndez

Dakota: The Story of the Northern Plains
by Norman K. Risjord

Asian America: A Primary Source Reader
edited by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, K. Scott Wong, and Jason Oliver Chang

Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger
by Rebecca Traister

Rez Life: An Indian's Journey through Reservation Life
by David Treuer

Coyote Warrior: One Man, Three Tribes, and the Trial That Forged a Nation
by Paul VanDevelder

The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America
by Robert Wuthnow

The Frackers: The Outrageous Inside Story of the New Billionaire Wildcatters
by Gregory Zuckerman

