

CLASS OF 2025 BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Yusef Komunyakaa

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

1. Yusef Komunyakaa's work is deeply inspired by jazz, blues, and musical forms. For the last half-century, he has used jazz, visual art, and the natural world to meditate on power, civil rights, race relations, and nationhood.

In a conversation with Lauren McClung for Poetry Nation Review, Komunyakaa says, "a poet cannot create jazz. The music is whole. It's a different language. But the poet can create an impression of jazz because the poem assumes a certain freedom. It breaks out of the straitjacket of formalistic conformity...Poems are in a way a glance and blow – a way of beckoning to the reader. I think that's important – trying to bring the reader into a dialogue instead of pushing him or her away. That's what an image can do. In a way, imagery is subversive because the image returns again and again; a statement evaporates."

2. As you're reading Yusef Komunyakaa's work, can you find locations where jazz, rhythm, and meter are present? How does that rhythm enhance your understanding of the poem through embodiment? In what places in the poem are you being invited into the content and the topics? In these poems, how does the work feel different than a statement?

Over the course of seventeen books, Yusef Komunyakaa faces American history by investigating race and power. Yet, during an interview with the New York Public Library when Komunyakaa is asked if he considers his poems as political, he remarks, "I think language is political, and that's what I use as a tool...the politics of the poem are not on the surface of the poem. But I think because I use language, the politics are underneath, moving into the emotional architecture of the poem."

Reading poems like "Back Then" or "Monsoon Season" can you find ways that politics are running underneath the surface of the poem and are built into the language and architecture of the poem? How do you think building politics into the 'emotional architecture' of the poem impacts you as a reader?

3. "In an interview with Jesse Nathan for McSweeney's, Komunyakaa notes "I like poetry that invites contemplation, and not the false urgency of an ad for an emotion propelled by noise...I believe that there's an uproar in our contemporary psyche that is attitude or disposition—a noise outside of sound that we ingest—even in poetry. In fact, I admire poetry that invites the reader in as a co-creator of meaning, atypical to the vertical plunge of some contemporary constructed poems of acceleration that does little for hearts and minds."

A hallmark of Yusef Komunyakaa's craft is the collapsing of tenses and the suspension of time. As you read "Facing It" or "Venus's Flytraps" how are you experiencing time, memory, and history? How are you being invited to develop meaning alongside the speaker? How and why do you think Komunyakaa resists urgency and instead insists on contemplation?