

Reading With Patrick by Michelle Kuo

1. What challenges do rural areas such as the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas face, and how are they different from urban areas? Why do you think we hear so little about rural education, employment, and crime in the news? Why do they get under researched and underreported?

2. Can the classroom protect students from the deprivation outside of it? Can it further that deprivation? How do Michelle's experiences confirm or challenge your ideas about the transformative power of the classroom?

3. How is reading alone different from reading together? Consider experiences you've had being read to or instances where you've read to others.

4. What does poetry do that other texts can't? Consider the "I Am" poem in school and poetry in the county jail.

5. What changes do you see in Michelle as a teacher? How would you compare her individual lessons with Patrick to her time as a formal teacher?

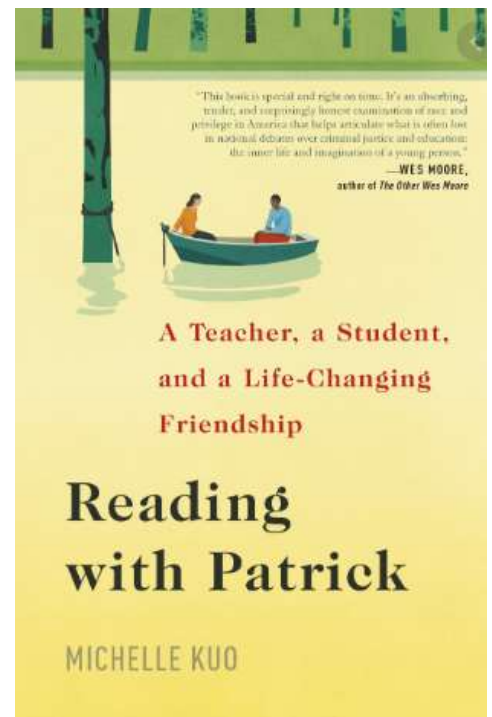
6. Patrick is a stranger when Michelle meets him, but overtime she begins to feel an ethical responsibility for his life. Why? Does she owe him anything? Why does she think she does, and how does he respond?

7. Michelle and Patrick ask each other their favorite lines from literature. Why does this act of sharing open up conversation between them? What are some of your favorite lines from the book? (This can include lines from the poetry and books that they read together.)

8. Patrick does not blame his circumstances for his hard life. Michelle clearly does. What do you make of their disagreement? Would you have tried to convince him otherwise?

9. Among other histories, we witness passages on migration, rural organizing of Back-to-Africa movements, and violence in the Arkansas Delta. How do these historical scenes help us to make sense of the memoir's present-day circumstances and events?

10. This book is as much an Asian American story as it is an African American story. How does being Asian American help explain Michelle's choices, including the decision to go to the Delta and the decision to leave?



11. Can two people who have a radical power difference ever connect through a genuine feeling of equality? Michelle questions this idea, except for in one instance: when they read together. Why would literature, or any kind of art, open up that possibility of experiencing equality with one another? And why would she call that experience “fleeting”?

12. Michelle could have ended on the optimistic note of Part 3, where, after intensive daily work together, Patrick has become a writer of exquisite sentences and a sophisticated reader. But she doesn't. We are told that life after prison for Patrick—finding a job, feeling at home in the Delta—“was a new battle, excruciating, and, unlike incarceration, with no end date.” Why do you think Michelle includes this information? Does it change the meaning of their seven months together if Patrick still struggles after?