



*Reading
Group Guide*

This reading group guide for *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

Feyi Adekola wants to learn how to be alive again.

It's been five years since the accident that killed the love of her life and she's almost a new person now—an artist with her own studio, sharing a brownstone apartment with her ride-or-die best friend, Joy, who insists it's time for Feyi to ease back into the dating scene. Feyi isn't ready for anything serious, but a steamy encounter at a rooftop party cascades into a whirlwind summer she could never have imagined: a luxury trip to a tropical island, decadent meals in the glamorous home of a celebrity chef, and a major curator who wants to launch her art career.

She's even started dating the perfect guy, but their new relationship might be sabotaged before it has a chance by the overwhelming desire Feyi feels every time she locks eyes with the one person who is most definitely off-limits—his father. This new life she asked for just got a lot more complicated, and Feyi must begin her search for real answers. Who is she ready to become? Can she release her past and honor her grief while still embracing her future? And, of course, there's the biggest question of them all—how far is she willing to go for a second chance at love?



Topics and Questions for Discussion

1 Feyi's interior monologue (and actions) in response to Nasir's pursuit rapidly oscillates between interest and disgust, as we see in chapter 2: "He was *hunting* her"; "she wanted him closer. She wanted him far, *far* away." What does Feyi want on the roof? Do we know? Does she?

2 In chapter 3, Joy says, "Maybe Nasir is it—not the serious thing itself, but just the *chance*. Don't run away from it," in response to Feyi's insecurities about accepting a date with Nasir. Later, Joy's voice in Feyi's head tells her to *Take a chance*. What does this chance refer to and what could it mean for Feyi?

3 When thinking about her developing emotional intimacy with Nasir, Feyi considers the fact that their physical intimacy is moving glacially. In chapter 4, Feyi asks Nasir whether he was sleeping with anyone, and his response allows for a shared moment of trust and humor between them. Nasir uses that space as an opportunity to inquire about Feyi's studio. How does this reflect their respective outlets of intimacy and their inevitable relationships to it?

4 "Everyone had always told Feyi growing up that she should stay away from bright colors, that they would be too garish against her dark skin, so it was a delight to stop listening to all of them, to lean into pastels and neons and metallics, rainbows cascading down her back," we read in chapter 5. Think about Feyi's color choices in this book: How do they work not only as an act of resistance against beauty norms dictated by colorism but also as a canvas for Feyi's other identities and forms of self-expression?

5 "So much of her time was spent in uncertainty" Feyi reflects on her imposter syndrome; meanwhile "it was hard to imagine Alim ever doubting if he fit into wherever he was." What were Feyi's doubts around her work? How does this doubt pervade other aspects of her life and how does she view Alim's sureness in comparison?

6 "It was something she wanted to hear—what it was like to fall in love again after your heart had been shattered. She could feel Jonah's presence on the mountain peak, gentle and curious," Emezi writes in chapter 10. How does this differ from past moments of intimacy up until this point when Feyi felt Jonah's presence?

7 “There are so many different types of love, so many ways someone can stay committed to you, stay in your life, even if y’all aren’t together, you know? And none of those ways are more important than the other,” Alim says in chapter 11. Why is this perspective liberating for Feyi?

8 In chapter 11, Nasir tells Feyi, “Lorraine and I don’t have a lot of memories of our mom. The house helps us remember.” What does this house represent to the Blake family? And to Feyi? How do these meanings influence the space she occupies in it?

9 Feyi fondly recalls Jonah’s words in chapter 15: “He said [being messy is] one of the best things about being human, how we could make such disasters and recover from them enough to make them into stories later.” How has this informed Feyi’s decisions in life since Jonah’s passing?

10 What is the difference between Alim calling Feyi his friend and Feyi calling Nasir her friend?

11 “You know you can always just come home right?” Joy reassures Feyi in chapter 16. What—or who—is Feyi’s home here?

12 In chapter 17 we witness the confrontation between Nasir, Feyi, and Alim. Discuss whether you expected it to go down this way or not. Were Nasir’s anger and subsequently his actions justified? Were Alim’s? How was this possibly triggering for Feyi?

13 Alim tells Feyi on chapter 19, “I can’t bring myself to not try to give you the best of every year I have left,” to which she requests he make “no plans.” Why is Feyi resistant to making plans?

14 “You can see [my painting] in any stage it’s in. I don’t care, I like showing myself to you,” Feyi tells Alim in chapter 21. How does this stark difference from her objection to showing Nasir her artwork parallel the differences in their respective relationships?

15 “You’re worth it Feyi...You can be yourself, as messy and contradictory as you like,” Joy affirms in chapter 5. “He’s lucky to even be near you.” Feyi’s feelings seem to be at odds with each other throughout the novel. Speak to the inherent beauty in contradiction and comfort in transience that comes as a result of Feyi’s growth, both within our protagonist as well as from the perspective of the reader.



A Conversation with Akwaeke Emezi

What inspired your foray into the romance genre and how you are able to seamlessly move from one genre to another.

I've been reading romance since I was a pre-teen, and I wanted to write a story that had a happy ending. Genre is a loose concept for me, and because I read across genres, it feels natural to write across them as well.

Who were these characters inspired by? Were they purely birthed from your imagination, or do they represent anyone in your life who already exists or who you hope to attract?

Purely imagination! The friendships are reminiscent of friendships I had myself while living in Bed-Stuy.

How did you decide on a love story between two artists dedicated to their respective crafts? How do their crafts act as a vehicle for their intimacy?

I find artists quite interesting to write because so much of who they are is communicated in their work, and it adds another layer to their relationships.

Food plays such a huge role in this novel, heightened by the fact that one of our main love interests is a chef. How did you come up with these lyrical descriptions and multidimensional concepts around food?

My rough draft of the book had a hodgepodge menu I'd created from watching cooking shows, but it would have been incoherent to an actual chef, so I commissioned one to make a menu specific to Alim's character. For me, if I'm going to put art in a book, then the art has to be as good as my writing.

It's safe to say that Joy is the voice of reason for all of us; she's all of our best friends now. Will we ever get the full story of Joy in the Fool of Death universe?

Perhaps! If I can find the time to write all the books clamoring in my head, haha.

What was the reason, if any, why you left the location of the island where Alim lives undisclosed?

It's a fictional Caribbean island, and honestly, I just never got around to creating a name for it.

This novel, while ultimately cathartic and inspiring, gets there by being a little messy. What inspired this unconventional path to love, especially one that defies the expectations of its genre?

Who doesn't want to read a DILF novel?? (Actually, quite a few people.) In the words of the Marie Kondo meme, I love mess. I think it's fascinating what people will do when they prioritize their pleasure.

What do you hope readers take away from this novel? Was there a specific reader you wanted to be able to touch?

I think it's a little fun to have a reader hear the premise of the book and decide what Feyi and Alim did was unconscionable, but then to actually read their story and end up sympathetic toward them. But that's a very specific reading experience; it's just one I find satisfying.

What are you reading now? What would you like to read in the near future?

I'm reading an advanced copy of Chinelo Okparanta's *Harry Sylvester Bird*, which is this delightfully subversive novel coming out in July 2022, and I'm looking forward to reading Warsan Shire's new poetry collection, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*.

Enhance Your Book Club

1 “Joy was usually slick and light when she talked about affairs, but this time, there was something real there, and it was uncomfortable in her mouth.” Feyi hears Joy’s dismissal of her own prospects at romantic depth, which she suspects is due to familial trauma around being “deviant,” and undeserving of “normalcy.” Reflect on the ways in which childhood and other trauma around family manifests and pervades interpersonal relationships in Joy, but also within the other characters in this novel (see page 70) and yourself.

2 Read the following exchange from chapter 9:

“I wish I could tell you it gets easier—”

“It doesn’t,” [Feyi] interrupted.

“No, no. But it gets...older. It grows with you,” [Alim said].

What is *it* here? Is it grief? Grief has been described as “love with nowhere to go.” Is this a story about grief? Or love? Or both? Or neither? Discuss in all its complicatedness.

3 In a series of tweets announcing the book, Emezi revealed the title for *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* was inspired by the song “Hunger” by Florence + The Machine, stating that listening to the band “stitched me together when my spirit was pulling itself apart.” Discuss the cathartic power of music and share your favorite songs or playlists with the group.