Kudos

by Rachel Cusk



About the Book

Rachel Cusk, the award-winning and critically acclaimed author of OUTLINE and TRANSIT, completes the transcendent literary trilogy with KUDOS, a novel of unsettling power.

A woman writer visits a Europe in flux, where questions of personal and political identity are rising to the surface and the trauma of change is opening up new possibilities of loss and renewal. Within the rituals of literary culture, Faye finds the human story in disarray amid differing attitudes toward the public performance of the creative persona. She begins to identify among the people she meets a tension between truth and representation, a fissure that accrues great dramatic force as KUDOS reaches a profound and beautiful climax.

In this conclusion to her groundbreaking trilogy, Cusk unflinchingly explores the nature of family and art, justice and love, and the ultimate value of suffering. She is without question one of our most important living writers.

Discussion Guide

1. As the book opens, the narrator tells us, ?The man next to me on the plane was so tall he couldn?t fit in his seat.? Who is this man and why is he traveling? What does he reveal about himself and his family that lays the groundwork for themes that will be developed?

2. What is the plot or storyline of KUDOS? Who is the narrator? What is her name? Where is she traveling? What else do we know about her? Is there significance in what we are not told?

3. What does KUDOS have to say about the value of listening? Who are the listeners and who are the talkers? Why do the characters feel compelled to tell their stories? What does the narrator do, not just to keep them talking, but to draw out deep feelings and secret concerns?

4. Early in the literary festival, the narrator meets with her publisher. He will be moderating a reading that features her and another writer, Linda, who is promoting her first novel. Of Linda?s book, the publisher says, ?It reassures them [readers] of the absurdity of life, without causing them to feel that they themselves are absurd.? Is this a useful description of the function of literature? Is it a description that fits KUDOS?

5. The subject of freedom comes up in many conversations. In the opening pages, the man on the plane talks about a spreadsheet titled ?Freedom? that he kept so he would know when he could afford to retire. Linda relates a story about a skier who in the moments before a serious accident feels ?an extraordinary sense of her own power, and also of her freedom.? The narrator, in describing her son?s relationship with a friend?s family, says, ?He understood that he had given some of his freedom away, through a desire to avoid or alleviate his own suffering.? What are some other stories that examine the concept of freedom and what it is that makes people feel free? What do these stories imply about the costs or consequences of freedom? Specifically, what do the female characters reveal about the nature of freedom?

6. The narrator repeatedly finds herself in situations that aren?t quite right. She gets lost in her hotel, stands in line for food that never comes, goes to interviews that are cut short. How might these experiences relate to life as a writer? Are disorder and freedom presented as crucial to the creation of art or as impediments?

7. Several unusual structures are described in the book --- the round hotel, the concert hall beneath the park, the burned-out church. What are other examples? What might these symbolize?

8. Hermann is a student who works as a guide at the literary festival. His mother is the festival director. What is unusual about Hermann? How is his view of the world different from the narrator?s? What does he say about himself that is pertinent to the themes explored in KUDOS?

9. The narrator describes in detail several of the writers in attendance at the conference. There is the Welsh writer who keeps wandering off by himself, the Irish writer who has given his body over to a diet and fitness regime. Who are the others she meets? How does she describe their personalities and physical appearances? What do we learn from each of these encounters about the characters? priorities and concerns? About the work of writing?

10. How do the male and female writers behave toward one another? Who is confident? Who is self-deprecating? Does a definition of feminism emerge from the narrator?s descriptions of the people she meets and her conversations with them?

11. Who are the children and parents in the book? How does each of the mothers or fathers describe their children? What are their worries? How do they feel about being parents?

12. While the narrator is present in every line, she also seems to be hiding behind the people she meets and the stories they tell her. Why might Rachel Cusk have chosen this narrative strategy, given her central themes?

13. Paola, the narrator?s editor, says that she has stopped believing in romantic love. She says, ?Even at fifty I had somehow kept the idea of finding my true mate, as though he were the hero of a novel who had failed to turn up and had

to be tracked down before the novel ended. But my body knows better...and it demands to be left alone.? What are other ways romantic love is described? What other kinds of love are depicted? Is love presented as more about suffering or happiness? Have the male and female characters had different experiences with love, romantic and otherwise?

14. The book is populated with divorced women and married men. The narrator has remarried, but her husband does not appear in her thoughts or conversations with others. Is this choice meant to emphasize her independence or to intimate that something is awry in her life? What is the picture of marriage that emerges?

15. Toward the end of the book, the narrator faces a young interviewer who says to her, ?I wonder...if you have ever thought of what it would be like to live in the sun.? Why does he ask her this, and how does she respond? Later, she visits a beach, where the light is ?bruised? and ?dusky.? What might her experiences at the beach signify about life in the sun? How does she feel as she talks to her son, walks, swims? Is the beach another version of freedom? Does the book have a satisfying ending?

16. What is the significance of the title? What does the novel reveal about the role of recognition and fame and its relationship to art?

Author Bio

Rachel Cusk is the author of the *Outline* trilogy, the memoirs ALIFE'S WORK and AFTERMATH, and several other works of fiction and nonfiction. She is a Guggenheim fellow. She lives in Paris.

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