



Discussion Questions: *Booth*

“Words, Words, Words” Book Club—February 2023

1. What are your first impressions of the novel? If asked, what would you say this novel is about?
2. Were you expecting to have John Wilkes be one of the perspectives offered? What did you think of the decision to leave him out?
3. In her author’s note, Karen Joy Fowler wrote: “I did not want to write a book about John Wilkes Booth. This is a man who craved attention and has gotten too much of it; I didn’t think he deserved mine . . .The tension over this issue—how to write the book without centering John Wilkes—is something I grappled with on nearly every page.” How did she handle this tension?
4. What do you think about Fowler's allusions to our own recent history? How do you think this book would have been different if it were written in, say, 2014?
5. What were you surprised to find in this account of the Booth family? What did you think of having the women’s perspectives and Fowler’s presentation of Rosalie, about whom little is known? Would this be an interesting novel without John Wilkes?
6. The Folger contains a number of items relating to John Wilkes Booth and is located in the same city as Ford’s Theatre, the site of Lincoln’s assassination. How should cultural institutions approach material related to crimes? How can we educate without celebrating?
7. What do you make of the use of prophecy and destiny throughout the book? Would it feel different if you were unaware of the historical event on the horizon?
8. In an interview Fowler said of John Wilkes: “He certainly had an outsized sense of his own destiny. Maybe there was too much Shakespeare in his life.” To what extent is Shakespeare seen to impact the lives of the Booths? How did their connection to performance shape their understanding of their own place in the world?
9. As John Wilkes becomes increasingly embroiled in the political scene, his family reminds him “that the time will come when he must choose—politics or the theater” (p. 236). How do you view the relationship between the two? To what extent do they overlap, in this novel and in our own time?
10. To what extent, if any, do you find the Booth family responsible for John Wilkes’s actions?