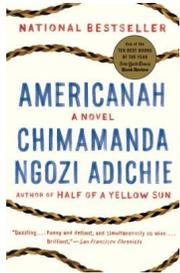


# Books by the Stack



## **Americanah** by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Ifemelu and Obinze are young and in love when they depart military-ruled Nigeria. Ifemelu heads for America, where she grapples with what it means to be black for the first time. With post-9/11 America closed to him, Obinze plunges into an undocumented life in London. Fifteen years later, they reunite in a newly democratic Nigeria, and reignite their passion—for each other and for their homeland.

**Why you'll like it:** *Racial identity. Culture shock. Witty. Heartfelt.*

**About the Author:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work has been translated into thirty languages and has appeared in various publications, including *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, the *Financial Times*, and *Zoetrope: All-Story*. Adichie is the author of the novels *Purple Hibiscus*, which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which won the Orange Prize and was a National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist, a *New York Times* Notable Book, and a *People and Black Issues Book Review* Best Book of the Year, the story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *We Should All Be Feminist*. She also made the list for *Time Magazine's* 100 most influential people 2015. Adichie, a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, divides her time between the United States and Nigeria. (Bowker Author Biography)

### Questions for Discussion

1. The first part of Ifemelu's story is told in flashback while she is having her hair braided at a salon before she returns to Nigeria. Why might Adichie have chosen this structure for storytelling? What happens when the narrator shifts to Obinze's story? How conscious are you as a reader about the switches in narrative perspective?
2. Auntie Uju's relationship with the General serves as an example of one mode of economic survival for a single woman: she attaches herself to a married man who supports her in return for sexual access. But Uju runs into serious problems when the General dies and political power shifts. Why, given what you learn of Uju's intelligence and capabilities later, do you think she chose to engage in this relationship with the General instead of remaining independent?
3. Ifemelu feels that Auntie Uju is too eager to capitulate to the demands of fitting in. Uju says, "You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (120). Is Uju right in compromising her own identity to a certain extent?
4. Ifemelu's experience with the tennis coach is a low point in her life. Why does she avoid being in touch with Obinze afterward (157-58)? Why doesn't she read his letters? How do you interpret her behavior?
5. Ifemelu realizes that naturally kinky hair is a subject worth blogging about. She notices that Michelle Obama and Beyonce never appear in public with natural hair. Why not? "Because, you see, it's not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it's just not damn normal" (229). Read the blog post "A Michelle

Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor” (299-300), and discuss why hair is a useful way of examining race and culture.

**6.** Obinze goes to London, and when his visa expires he is reduced to cleaning toilets (238); eventually he is deported. On his return home, “a new sadness blanketed him, the sadness of his coming days, when he would feel the world slightly off-kilter, his vision unfocused” (286). How does his experience in Londa affect the decision he makes when he gets back to Lagos? Why does he marry Kosi? How do these choices and feelings compare to Ifemelu's?

**7.** When reading Obinze's conversations with Ojiugo, his now-wealthy friend who has married an EU citizen, did you get the sense that those who emigrate lose something of themselves when they enter the competitive struggle in the new culture (Chapter 24), or is it more of a struggle to maintain that former self? Does Adichie suggest that this is a necessary sacrifice? Are all of the characters who leave Nigeria (such as Emenike, Auntie Uju, Bartholomew, and Ginika) similarly compromised?

**8.** Is the United States presented in generally positive or generally negative ways in *Americanah*?

**9.** The term “Americanah” is used for Nigerians who have changed by having lived in America. Like those in the novel's Nigeropolitan Club, they have become clinical of their native land and culture; “They were sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer” (408). Is the book's title meant as criticism of Ifemelu, or simply an accurate word for what she fears she will become (and what others may think of her)?

**10.** Why is it important to have the perspective of an African writer on race in America? How does reading the story make you more alert to race, and to the cultural identifications within races and mixed races? Did this novel enlarge your own perspective, and if so, how?

*(Questions issued by publisher)*



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