



BOOK CLUB KIT



# DEAR READER,

I can't tell you how excited I am that you're reading "Wings of Ebony" for your book club! When I set out to write this book, I wanted it to be a story that sparked conversations. I wanted it to both dazzle the reader with its thrilling, page-turning pace, but also plant seeds of what could grow into thought-provoking dialogue. So while you're on this riveting, emotional journey with Rue, know that there are all sorts of tidbits I've buried in here for you all to unpack. I'm excited to see if you can unearth them all.

"Wings of Ebony" was born out of a longing to make space on bookshelves for my community. I was inspired by home, my hood, in the inner-city area of Houston. I wrote this book for young me, my teen sisters, and kids from where I'm from who haven't experienced the validation of seeing our lived experiences on the pages of the story, where we are heroines, powerful, able to save the day.

It's my hope that readers in my community, in particular, will be inspired to connect with our roots, look to our ancestors, predecessors, the John Lewis's, the Barack Obamas, the Kamala HARRISES to realize the greatness we come from, the greatness we **are**. And know that despite what the world's narrative about our community is — we are taking the pen and writing a new one.

And for those who might find Rue's life unfamiliar, I worked very hard to provide a window into the world where I grew up, a tapestry of the "hood" in its true light. Not what the media portrays, but the heart, the hope, the ingenuity, the tenacity, the rich heritage, the close bonds, places that birth hearts like Nipsey's, wisdom like Pac's, hustle like Jay Z's, talent like Queen Beyoncé's. With Rue, you have an opportunity to walk a day in the shoes of someone who might have lived a very different life from you.

I dare you to come away from it unchanged.

So, Rue will be your guide through this world and I hope that you love her, root for her, even get a little frustrated with her, but ride or die with her until the end.



Through "Wings of Ebony," I hope you're able to embark on a bit of self-discovery and empowerment through the characters in this story. My goal is for you to see a bit of yourself somewhere on these pages, and perhaps find other parts of yourself you might not have known were there.

Finally, I hope you'll be riveted, sucked into all-night reading, and utterly enamored. That you'll feel the love of this community, relish in its joy, share in the weight of its pain, but behold its power, too.

Thank you for reading! And remember, I'd love to hear from you. I'm always just a hashtag away. Reach out on socials using #WingsOfEbonyBookClub anytime!

- J. Elle

**1. You have a wonderful vision of inner-city communities as places full of magic, potential, and power. How do you approach blending some of the harsher realities of these communities with the more fantastical elements in your novel?**

Outside of the pages of a book, those of us living with these harsher realities can find it tough to reimagine a world without them. But in fiction, we have limitless imagination, tools, and power. I try to examine societal complexities that might inhibit us from challenging the status quo, and I put magical resources at my character's disposal so my readers metaphorically understand that they are indeed capable of more than they can even imagine. The mindset that we can't impact change is the first injustice we must eradicate.

One of my favorite characters in "Wings of Ebony" is tattoo-covered, gold grill-wearing Julius. How the media typically portrays kids who look like Julius is decidedly different from Julius' real story — the story I set out to tell in "Wings of Ebony." I'm going to make sure Julius and kids like him get their space on shelves.

**2. Why is the blend of YA Fantasy and Contemporary genres particularly important for you when crafting "Wings of Ebony?"**

I tend to like books that have real-world issues front and center, but I realize exploring difficult themes through fantasy is more palatable for many readers, because it's a step removed from reality. Ultimately, I want my books to spark tough conversations. There will always be commentary in my books, weightier topics I want to challenge teens to consider, and the contemporary elements of my story allow me to explore these topics more directly. But I wrap those contemporary elements in a fantastical story, so that while teens grapple with these weightier topics, they are also inspired and encouraged by the metaphorical, magical "what-ifs." Readers will finish "Wings of Ebony" and have had an unflinching look at the reality of racism (toward inner-city kids in particular). But they will also have reconciled that disgusting truth with how powerful we are in the face of that injustice, how we are changemakers that will be reckoned with.

**3. Why is "Wings of Ebony" so important to you personally?**

This book is a love letter to younger me, to my teen sisters, to my community and the home that raised me. I grew up seeing communities like mine depicted only as troublesome, wrought with crime, full of kids "not going anywhere." But that wasn't how I viewed my home growing up. So, I decided to shift the narrative and show a home like mine as magical, so that kids from places like where I am from see their neighborhood on the page/screen in a different way than how it is typically portrayed. This is vitally important so kids in our community realize their day-to-day lives are rich with magic, too. I believe shifting the connotation of the term "inner-city kids" will help fill shelves, and conversations, with representation that shatters stereotypes. "Wings of Ebony" is a no nonsense, unapologetic step in that direction.

**4. Who is "Wings of Ebony" for? Who will be drawn to this book?**

Though there's a beautiful badass Black girl in a hoodie on the cover, this story isn't just for Black kids. This book is for underdog changemakers and their allies — those who know how to become allies and those hungry to learn. Fans of Katniss Everdeen, Starr Carter, and anyone in love with all things Wakanda are going to rave about "Wings of Ebony." I can't wait to see the cosplay!

This book can also be instructive and a great fit for classrooms full of kids learning how to have safe, productive discussions about race with others who may not share their identity. A 6-week curriculum complete with a Hyperdoc, day-by-day lesson plans, vocabulary list, hands-on activities, discussion questions, and a culmination project that ties well with Black History Month can be found [here](#).

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## 5. Why are conversations about privilege important for kids to have with one another, particularly today?

We have one world with thousands of cultures within it that, for the good and health of this world, must learn to work together. We can't exist singularly in our own communities and choose to not coexist. First, that allows the powerful to remain powerful without challenge; second, it's not realistic. But in order to come together in collaborative environments and engineer true change, creating a world we are proud to live in, we must learn how to work together. This starts with checking our bias at the door, and realizing that our preconceived notions — often subconscious — are shaping how we interact with and treat people who are different from us. And an often ignored facet of that conversation around bias, racism, and xenophobia is **privilege**.

Privilege is the dagger that stabs you in the back that you never saw coming — because you “didn’t know” it existed. People who are unaware of the privilege they possess do damage to others around them without even realizing it; and yet they wonder why they’re unable to have productive, meaningful discourse with people who are different from them. On a global level, that lack of self-awareness stalls productivity, throws a wrench in business connections and the economy, and fractures our growth. On a personal level, at minimum, it shatters relationships and breeds toxic thinking.

We *all* suffer when the privileged are afforded the ability to live within a bubble without awareness. “Wings of Ebony” aims to pop that bubble. I want to equip the next generation with tools to have these tough conversations that yield self-awareness, in order to usher in a more tolerant and mutually respectful world. Colleges are catching on to the importance of conversations around privilege. There are resources being implemented at the university level to study the social construct of privilege, and I’m excited that “Wings of Ebony” is appropriate to be a central part of these and conversations to come.

## 6. Few authors experience the kind of whirlwind success you’ve experienced in the past couple years. What has this publishing journey been like for you? What has surprised you, challenged you, and helped you grow?

The fact that I am going to have a book headed to shelves *still* surprises me. When I set out to write “Wings of Ebony” I was very new to writing fiction and wasn’t sure what to expect. My DVPit pitch blowing up on Twitter shocked me, but from then on I knew I was on to something highly marketable. One of the reasons I’m committed to mentoring aspiring authors is because I want them to understand I was *just* where they were. I’m so new at all of this, so they too should keep fighting, hoping, revising, growing, and I believe they’ll get there, too.

There’s nothing like going on submission to editors that makes you realize just how much of a privilege it is to have a book in the world. This industry really forces you to remember that patience is important and there’s no use in stressing about things out of our control. I was on sub for 5 months, and during that time I completed a revision for a brilliant editor at a Big 5 publisher who gave me some very candid, pointed feedback. I have an ambitious, can-do attitude — just tell me what needs to be done and I’ll blow you away with how fast and well I do it.

Writers should understand that revising can be magic for your story, so don’t be overly precious about your words. If you want to publish traditionally, understand you’re looking for a partner (to put *their* money behind *your* book) so you’re going to have to flex some. And a good editor is going to actually make your book *much* stronger. That’s the best part!

I completed my revision quickly, and we sent it to everyone still considering my pages, which was about ten editors or so. From there we had multiple editors interested, but Denene Millner at Simon & Schuster came in strong and fast with *so much* enthusiasm and ultimately won me over. Working with her has transformed my writing. This book is miles from where it was. As such a novice writer, I just feel so fortunate and lucky to have this opportunity. I still pinch myself everyday wondering how any of this can be real.

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**7. In what ways did your own childhood experience inspire Rue's neighborhood and community?**

"Wings of Ebony" is set where I grew up, on the southeast side of Houston. The "community as family" aspect of my story is probably one of the strongest parallels to my own childhood. Growing up, neighbors are aunts. "It takes a village" isn't just a saying. Communities like mine look out for one another because we have to. We are forged with a closeness rooted in our identity and the "hood" we call home; it's one of the most magical parts of my upbringing.

Also, Rue is an enigmatic mix of kids teachers see in inner-city classrooms, kids I've taught, best friends I've had — the kid with a hard exterior that reads like a chip is on their shoulder. That chip is necessary armor, and what's beneath is ridiculously powerful love. I hope this book helps those kids feel more seen, more capable, and opens their eyes to their own magic; but also, I hope it helps others think twice the next time they roll through my hood, see one of these "hoodie-wearing-kids" walking down the street, or have a particularly stubborn kid in their classroom — I hope "Wings of Ebony" challenges them to see what's beneath.

**8. What top advice do you give to other writers who are working to make their voices and stories heard?**

First, understand that there are so many factors involved in pursuing traditional publishing, and most of them are out of your control. All you control is the writing. Focus on being well-read in your genre and writing the best book you can write.

Second, know that rejections are an inevitable part of the process and are not a reflection of you as a person. They are not brick walls, they are stop signs. Pause, learn, grow — KEEP GOING.

Third, and most importantly, neither of those two facts negate the need for your voice. The voices drowning out ours have a lot more privilege and access. So remember, tenacity is your greatest weapon.

**9. It's incredible that you wrote the manuscript for "Wings of Ebony" in just 35 days. How long has this story been developing in your mind? What can you tell us about the writing process?**

Honestly, Rue's voice just came to me one morning. I'd had an image in my head of a girl standing over an injured little girl and using her magic to save her life. The setting of that image was my neighborhood, where I grew up. And it just hit me that *this* is what I hadn't seen before: my neighborhood, the people there, the places, depicted as magical. I can't explain it, but the story just poured out of me, and while it's undergone significant revisions since that 35-day-version, Rue's fierceness, her fire, her heart, and her magic are still the same. The writing process varies from person to person, but what I can say is that if there is a story or character or voice burning to just pour out of you, let it.

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**10. What message(s) do you want Rue's story to send to readers (of any age)?**

You are capable. You are power. You are strength.

***A'laya nah ick e'bah.***

Yes, you'll have to read the book to find out what that means.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What surprised you most about "Wings of Ebony"? Who or what did you enjoy the most, or find the most powerful and compelling? How did the book confront you, challenge your assumptions, or make you think?
2. Rue is unapologetically bold, strong, and resilient. When you peel back her layers however, she's also vulnerable and tender towards the people she cares about. How and why does Rue navigate between strength and vulnerability? How does she deal with her pain? Did you see yourself in Rue? Why or why not?
3. Rue's neighborhood of East Row is characterized by poverty, violence, and crime to outsiders, but for the characters who call East Row home it's a place of community, generosity, family – and even magic. How does the depiction of East Row in the novel compare or contrast to your understanding of "the hood?"
4. Throughout the novel, Rue repeats several personal mantras: *"Make a way out of no way."* *"Moms raised a diamond. And don't crack."* And *"Grow stronger in the pain."* How do these mantras influence Rue's character and decisions? Which of these mantras resonated with you the most?
5. How did Rue's relationship with her father Aasim impact her character? What surprised you about him?
6. Discuss the relationship between Rue and Bri. How is Bri different at the end of the novel than she was at the beginning? How did Rue's revelation that the Chancellor had stolen Ghizoni magic impact their understanding of themselves, and each other? What does their exchange tell us about allyship? What specifically does it tell us about privilege? Was Bri able to arrive at a place of empathy for Rue right away? Rue asserts in so many words that Bri needs to work on grieving her privilege on her own and not put that emotional labor on Rue. What do you think Rue means? Have you ever experienced that sort of "emotional labor" or put it on someone else?
7. The residents of East Row and also the Macazi (the "magicless," New Ghazan's lowest caste) are treated as expendable and even worthless by the rest of society, particularly by those in power. What real-life parallels do you see reflected here?
8. "Power" takes many forms in both Ghizon and East Row, from Ghizoni ancestral magic and the Chancellor's rule to police patrols in the hood and the influence of Litto's gang. In what ways do you see "power" expressed in the novel? How does Rue embrace her literal magical power, as well as her own personal power and influence?
9. Who or what is the true antagonist of "Wings of Ebony"?
10. The novel ended with a cliffhanger with the Chancellor marching on Yiyo Peak. Where do you hope Rue's story goes from here? What do you want to see in Book 2?
11. Declare your ship allegiance! Do you want to see Rue end up with Ghizonian cinnamon roll JHAMAL or her childhood best friend & first love JULIUS? Join the ship teams by sharing your allegiance on Twitter or Instagram using the hashtag #TeamJhamal or #TeamJulius.



***In the magical land of Ghizon and Rue's East Row hood, food is an expression of welcome, comfort, and family. Here's a delicious dish from "Wings of Ebony" to welcome your book club to the table.***

Deep within Yiyo Peak, Rue enjoys a feast with a ***"tray piled with sautéed qui, crusted ksi ksi, which are like sweet collard greens, chunky kwello root, which are kind of like sweet potatoes but red instead of orange and savory instead of sweet."*** Enjoy your own feast with this delicious spin on kwello root from the book!

**1 pound of red baby potatoes  
2 tablespoons of olive oil  
1 tablespoon of Cajun seasoning  
½ tablespoon of Italian seasoning  
½ teaspoon of paprika  
½ teaspoon of minced garlic  
Salt, pepper, and cayenne pepper**

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. Wash and dice your potatoes.
3. Whisk your oil, seasonings, and garlic together in a medium/large bowl. Add your potatoes to the bowl and toss everything together.
4. Spread the potatoes evenly on the baking sheet, adjusting the seasonings as needed.
5. Roast in the oven until they are crisp and golden brown (or golden red in this case!), about 30 minutes, stirring once halfway through.



**GHIZONI ROASTED  
KWELLO ROOT**



**1. Know someone who will love "Wings of Ebony"? Share Chapter 1 with them!**



**2. Listen to a Spotify playlist for "Wings of Ebony" curated by J. Elle, and enjoy the music that helped inspire the novel!**



**3. Bring "Wings of Ebony" into your school**  
Download the six-week interactive curriculum. As a former teacher to inner-city students, J. Elle is deeply passionate about helping young people discover their power, just like Rue does in the novel. She's also committed to helping educators easily integrate "Wings of Ebony" into their classrooms. The downloadable six-week curriculum for "Wings of Ebony" is aligned to standards, ties into Black History Month, and includes:

- An interactive hyperdoc
- Day-to-day lesson plan
- Handouts and activities
- Discussion questions
- "I Am Rue" Culmination project



**4. Apply to be a launch school!**  
Be one of a limited number of schools across the country to get a FREE SWAG Box from the author when you bring Wings of Ebony into your classroom. Enjoy exclusive author interview clips discussing the mechanics of writing, an annotated copy of Wings of Ebony, T-shirts, temporary tattoos inspired by the story, and so much more. Learn more and apply here.



**5. Discover more incredible YA resources from Black creators with Melanin in YA.**  
Melanin in YA is an amazing website and resource featuring everywhere Black creators and Young Adult lit converge. Their database will cover everything including Black authors (including a yearly book release schedule where you can see Wings of Ebony listed among other fantastic 2021 titles), influencers, celebrities, adaptations, podcasts, events, Black-owned bookstores, and more. The site was soft-launched by Melody L. Simpson in August 2020 and the database is still underway but growing. Check it out!





PRAISE FOR "WINGS OF EBONY"

## ***A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection***

"The best fantasy novels invent alternate worlds in order to illuminate our own. 'Wings of Ebony' is one of them— a bold, inventive, big-hearted and deeply perceptive vision of a Black girl's journey to reclaim her magic from forces determined to destroy her. The parallels to our current reality are unmistakable and the book brings us all a much-needed ray of hope."

**NICOLA YOON,**

**#1 New York Times bestselling author of "Everything, Everything" and "The Sun Is Also A Star"**

" 'Wings of Ebony' is an intense, page-turner of a book about magic, sisterhood, community and family. Debut author J. Elle offers us a richly-wrought world, weaving together past and present with a rare blend of deft insight and keen humor that leaves the reader wanting more."

**SABAA TAHIR,**

**#1 New York Times bestselling author of "An Ember in the Ashes"**

"There is little on earth more powerful than seeing a reflection of the self, not only as it is, but also as it COULD be. 'Wings of Ebony' is a rooftop-shout of affirmation that black girls from ALL walks of life are magic."

**NIC STONE,**

**#1 New York Times bestselling author of "Dear Martin"**

"A remarkable, breathtaking, earthshaking, poetic thrill-ride bristling with magic, life, and so much love. Rue and her incredible adventures will change the world."

**DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER,**

**New York Times bestselling author of "Shadowshaper"**

"A heart-racing thrilling fantasy that sucks you in from the very first page. J. Elle has such a voracious voice and she's about to change the game!"

**TIFFANY D. JACKSON,**

**author of "Grown" and "Monday's Not Coming"**

"J. Elle has crafted an unapologetic heroine determined to save her block from agents of stolen magic in this immersive hidden world. A thrilling and irresistible new saga about loyalty and lineage."

**KIM JOHNSON,**

**indie bestselling author of "This is My America"**

"A powerful, thoughtful, and masterful exploration of #BlackGirlMagic that enthralls you from the first page and refuses to let you go."

**ALECHIA DOW,**

**author of "The Sound of Stars"**



## WEBSITE

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## GOODREADS



## PINTEREST



**J. ELLE** is a prolific Black author and advocate for marginalized voices in both publishing and her community. Her debut novel, "Wings of Ebony," sold in a six-figure pre-empt and is part of a YA fantasy duology about a Black girl from a poor neighborhood who learns she's magical. "Wings of Ebony" is a lead title in Simon & Schuster's Spring 2021 lineup.

Six months later Elle also sold, at auction, "A Taste of Magic," a middle grade contemporary fantasy duology about a Black girl who learns she's a witch and fights to save her inner-city magic school with baking. "Park Row Magic Academy: A Taste of Magic" is also a lead title on Bloomsbury's Spring 2022 list.

From growing up poor to being a first generation college student, Elle's tenacity and passion for empowering others dates back to her first career in education, teaching tweens and teens from traditionally underserved areas to fight for their dreams. More recently, as the founder of the Your Story Is Your Power, a creative writing workshop, she mentors high schoolers on the craft of writing and the importance of sharing stories from their perspective.

Elle has worked as an Editorial Intern at P.S. Literary Agency and Gelfman/ICM Partners. She's also served as a mentor for both PitchWars and Author Mentor Match. Elle is the founder and co-host of #MondayMixer, a Twitter chat to engage writers on the platform with networking opportunities, writing questions, and encouragement. In her spare time you'll find her cooking up some dish true to her Texas and Louisiana roots, loving on her three littles, and traveling the country with her nomadic spouse. Learn more at <https://www.wingsofebony.com>.



