Euphoria – Discussion Questions

1. Set against the lush tropical landscape of 1930s New Guinea, this novel charts British anthropologist Andrew Bankson’s fascination for colleagues Nell Stone and her husband, Fen, a fascination that turns deadly. How far does the setting play a role in shaping events? Is there a sense that the three have created their own small universe on the banks of the Sepik River, far removed from the Western world? If so, by whose rules are they playing?

2. “She tried not to think about the villages they were passing ... the tribes she would never know and words she would never hear, the worry that they might right now be passing the one people she was meant to study, a people whose genius she would unlock, and who would unlock hers, a people who had a way of life that made sense to her” (p. 8). In the light of this quote, discuss Nell Stone’s passion and need for anthropology and find ways in which they differ from Bankson’s and Fen’s. Talk about the significance of her childhood dream of being carried away by gypsies.

3. Continue your discussion by considering Nell’s statement: “If I didn’t believe they shared my humanity entirely, I wouldn’t be here ... I’m not interested in zoology” (p. 55). Find instances in the novel in which she demonstrates this. How far do you agree, as Nell states, that it is an anthropologist’s role to encourage self-analysis and self-awareness in the tribes he/she studies?

4. Over the course of the novel we learn a great deal about Bankson’s childhood and young adulthood. Talk about the reasons and life events that brought him to anthropology. What has led him to the brink of suicide? How seriously do you think he views his statement: “The meaning of life is the quest to understand the structure and order of the natural world—that was the mantra I was raised on. To deviate from it was suicide” (p. 32).

5. Given his upbringing and his father’s passion for “hard” science, Nell’s focus on humanity instead of zoology must hold great appeal for Bankson. What else draws him to Nell, leaving him with “Fierce desires, a great tide of feeling of which I could make little sense, an ache that seems
to have no name but want. I want” (p. 86). What exactly does Bankson want?

6. Discuss the ways in which Bankson’s attitude toward his work changes as he gets to know Nell and her research methods. Consider his acknowledgment of the limitations of an anthropologist’s work and discuss how far it is possible to ever get to know another’s culture. Take into account Bankson’s interest in the objectivity of the observer.

7. Take your discussion of the previous question a step further by considering whether it is ever possible to truly know another person. Apply your observations to Bankson’s views of Nell and Fen.

8. The theme of possession, of ownership, runs throughout the novel, twisting like the river Sepik itself through the relationships and conversations of the protagonists. Talk about Nell’s search for “a group of people who give each other the room to be in whatever way they need to be” (p. 88). Has she found this kind of freedom in any of the tribes she has studied? In any of her relationships? Talk specifically about Fen and Bankson.

9. Further your discussion by focusing on the idea of words and thoughts as things to be owned—as Nell states, “once I published that book and my words became a commodity …” (p. 91). How has this impacted her relationship with Fen? Consider her statement “I only know that when F leaves and B and I talk I feel like I am saying—and hearing—the first wholly honest words of my life” (p. 198).

10. On several occasions during the novel, Nell refers to an Amy Lowell poem, “Decade.” Why do you think the poem holds such meaning for her? How does the poem’s central idea—of feelings for a lover changing from the sweet, almost painful intensity of red wine into the blissful satisfaction of bread—relate to her and her own relationships?

11. While Nell declares later that “He is wine and bread and deep in my stomach” (p. 247), do you believe that Bankson was able to give Nell the freedom she was looking for? How or how not? Could it have led inevitably to her death?
12. How far would you consider Nell to be the epitome of a young, independent accomplished woman? Talk about her character, her personality, work habits and motivations. Then discuss her disturbing relationship with Fen, and her inability to escape his harm. How did she end up in such an untenable situation?

13. In one journal entry, Nell writes: “I am angry that I was made to choose, that both Fen & Helen needed me to choose, to be their one & only when I didn’t want a one & only” (p. 92). Consider Nell’s relationship with Helen as compared to her relationship with Fen and talk about the reasons she may have chosen Fen over Helen. Do you think that she made this decision or it was made for her?

14. Set against a distant backdrop of a Western world mired in doubt and economic depression, the novel can be seen to depict a search for understanding, for a sense of order. Look at the ways in which the study of the tribes of New Guinea reflects the protagonists’ desperate search for meaning—a search that can lead to a sense of failure or instead to Nell’s euphoria when “at that moment the place feels entirely yours” (p. 50). Find instances of despair and disillusionment for Nell, Fen, and Bankson in their various work experiences. How do they react?

15. What do the three of them really see in the tribes of New Guinea? To what extent, when unlocking the puzzles of the Kiona and the Tam, are they searching for meaning within themselves? How important is it to impending events that the Tam tribe appears to be female-dominated?

16. In the context of the previous two questions, talk about the significance of the Grid to the three anthropologists. What does it represent to them? Why does Bankson refer to a “shift in the stars” caused by the Grid?

17. Discuss the glimpses the novel gives into the world of 1930s colonialism—in the conversations with Westerners in New Guinea and in Australia; and in Bankson’s, Nell’s, and Fen’s attitudes to the tribes they study and the Western society to which they must eventually return. How, if at all, do Nell, Fen, and Bankson take colonial approaches toward their
research practices and anthropological subjects? What is the role of Xambun as he rejoins his tribal village after being recruited by a Western company? Is it possible to live between the two worlds?

18. Fen briefly mentions a dark family secret, then continues the conversation to discuss the primitive world versus the “civilized world”: “Nothing in the primitive world shocks me, Bankson. Or I should say, what shocks me in the primitive world is any sense of order and ethics. All the rest—the cannibalism, infanticide, raids, mutilation—it’s all comprehensible, nearly reasonable, to me. I’ve always been able to see the savageness beneath the veneer of society” (p. 137–38). What does this say about Fen? How far do you agree with his comment, especially in the light of events that follow in the novel?

19. For all of Nell and Bankson’s heartfelt conversations, and Bankson’s keen observations of her at work, there are many important things left unsaid. Nell states: “You don’t realize how language actually interferes with communication … how it gets in the way like an overdominant sense” (p. 79). Should Bankson have understood further Nell’s sadness within her marriage, Fen’s physical abuse? As a reader, do we miss the clues too?

20. Discuss Fen’s obsession with the flute, and the reasons why it ultimately leads to the destruction of so much: the anthropologists’ relationship with the Tam tribe, Fen’s relationship with Nell and Bankson. If Xambun had not been killed, would it have been acceptable for Fen to take the flute?

21. Continue your discussion to consider whether an anthropologist must always betray in some way the tribes he/she works with. How does Nell writing books about the people she studies differ from Fen selling the flute to a museum? Was Nell’s work in the field beneficial to the Tam or to the children of Kirakira? Are her reasons for working with them ultimately as selfish as Fen’s need to profit from the flute? How morally responsible are Bankson and Nell for Xambun’s death?

22. Fen justifies taking the flute so that he can restore balance to his relationship with Nell: “There has to be a balance. A man can’t be without power—it doesn’t work like that” (p. 238). Contrast this with Nell’s thoughts
on balance: “[P]erhaps a culture that flourishes is a culture that has found a similar balance among its people” (p. 144). Do you think they are talking about the same thing? Does balance always need to rest on power?

23. Trace Bankson’s emotional and intellectual development throughout the course of the novel, ending with his visits from his biographer. How do you think his experience with Nell and Fen affected and changed him? Talk about what may have kept him going after Nell’s death. Why did he not revert back to his suicidal path? Consider the quote that holds so much meaning for him from war poet Edward Shillito’s “Hardness of Heart”: “Tears are not endless and we have no more.”

Source: http://www.groveatlantic.com/?title=Euphoria#page=isbn9780802123701-readers
Maximum Shelf author interview: Lily King

Lily King grew up in Manchester, Mass. She received her B.A. in English Literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and her M.A. in Creative Writing from Syracuse University. She has taught English and creative writing at several universities and high schools in the U.S. and abroad. Her three previous novels are The Pleasing Hour, The English Teacher and Father of The Rain. Her short fiction has appeared in literary magazines including Ploughshares and Glimmer Train, as well as in several anthologies. King is the recipient of a MacDowell Fellowship and the Whiting and PEN/Hemingway Awards, among others. She lives with her husband and children in Maine.

Presumably even this “loosely based” work required research into the field of anthropology and Mead’s life. Did you have any background to begin with? Did you enjoy this research?

It required a ton of research and no, I had zero background in anthropology or ethnology, not even one anthropology course in college! Like many writers, though, I have always felt like an extremely amateur and untrained anthropologist in the world, observing the huge, crazy mysteries of human behavior and writing it all down in novels.

On the one hand, you enjoy the research because it’s not writing, which is much harder, but on the other hand you miss writing miserably and feel like a part of you is dead. I had so much to learn before I could start, but because I always knew the book would be fiction, I didn’t want to get too attached to any one detail or fact. I read a lot of books at a squint, taking notes but always letting my imagination in on it, writing more notes on what could happen than what did happen, but at the same time trying to absorb all the information in some visceral way so that it felt like personal experience I could draw from when I started writing. And it was hard to know when to start writing. There was always, always more to read, more to learn. When I finally decided it was time, the research loomed over me. But once I wrote the first scene, I felt it become my story, and all that information became useful, not threatening.

What makes Margaret Mead such a good subject for this work? And when did you know you wanted to write about her?

I stumbled into the novel by reading a biography of Margaret Mead nine years ago and coming across this one short chapter about when she was way up this river in Papua New Guinea with her second husband and she met her third. She fell in love hard and fast in this completely isolated environment.
She believed in an open marriage, what she called “polygamy,” and her husband did not, but she was very honest about her feelings and the whole thing, combined with the heat and mosquitoes and malarial fevers, was just a wild mess. So of course I thought, what a fantastic novel that would make. For a long time I didn’t believe that I would actually write it. But I kept going out and getting books about them and by them and taking notes and getting ideas while at the same time thinking: I cannot write this novel. I cannot write a novel about a love triangle between anthropologists in Papua New Guinea in 1933. It was preposterous. But I couldn’t seem to stop myself, either.

**How did the writing of *Euphoria* differ from your three previous novels?**

With the first three, I was able to just start writing. Each of them required a little detour to the library for something, but usually not until I was deep in, after the first draft had been written. But for this one I didn’t even write a sentence for a year after I got the idea. I was working on my novel *Father of the Rain* while reading everything I could get my hands on about Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and Reo Fortune. And when I got that first sentence—four sentences, actually—in a coffee shop, I didn’t write anything else for several more years. That little cluster of sentences, though, helped me feel I could write the rest someday. They are the words that open the book still and are not much changed from when I scribbled them down at the back of a notebook in that coffee shop. That was very different. With the other books, once I got the first sentences I kept going for fear the initial vision would cloud over and vanish.

*Euphoria* is told in first person by Bankson, who is the outsider in his own tale. This gives the reader a somewhat restrained perspective. How did you decide to tell it this way? Did you toy with giving Nell her own voice?

That’s an excellent question. The plan all along was for it to be told from Nell’s point of view. It was supposed to be her story entirely. And it did start that way. But after I wrote the first chapter, I realized I needed the reader to feel what was going on with Bankson, the man she is about to meet and fall in love with, so I wrote that next chapter from his perspective. It surprised me how much closer I was able to get to him, and so quickly, how I was able to get inside him in a way that I was not inside her. This is something that all the planning and plotting of a book can’t anticipate. I knew I was a bit in love with him even before I started writing, so I thought it would be so easy to write from Nell’s perspective about falling for him. I just never expected to identify with him so closely, sort of fuse with him. But once I did, I realized it was his story. I denied this for a while, actually, and tried to write the book from all three points of view, but apart from Nell’s journal entries, Bankson claimed the whole thing in the end.
How important is historical accuracy in fiction? How faithfully does your novel follow the historical record?

Fiction is called fiction for a reason. While I used what I read about a particular moment in the life of Margaret Mead as a springboard, I felt absolutely no allegiance to historical accuracy when it didn’t work within the story I was trying to tell. Some of *Euphoria* is historically accurate, but not because I forced it to be, just because those elements were useful to me. They inspired me. I love history and I love reading about history and I treasure what little I know about our past on this earth, but a novel is not where I go for facts. A novel is where I want to feel the truth. Sometimes you need facts to get at the truth; more often you need your own voice and vision.

Source: http://pagesofjulia.com/2014/05/14/maximum-shelf-author-interview-lily-king/
As a public icon, Margaret Mead has grown fusty — more respected than read, scarred by potshots (remember the critic who tried to prove that she’d been duped by her Samoan informants?) and sidelined in anthropology by a new dispensation, fluent in evolutionary biology, that makes Mead’s “culture and personality” approach look quaint. It’s hard to conceive of the shock caused in 1928 by her depiction, in “Coming of Age in Samoa,” of sexual freedom as key to a happy adolescence, or of the scope of her influence, decades later, as an unflagging champion of progressive causes, from women’s rights to the legalization of marijuana. For most of us, Mead’s name no longer automatically conjures what one biographer termed “steamy things that happened in torrid, languid jungles.” But her life was rich with incident and, on one occasion at least, may have conformed to this description.

In “Euphoria,” the novelist Lily King has taken the known details of that occasion — a 1933 field trip to the Sepik River, in New Guinea, during which Mead and her second husband, Reo Fortune, briefly collaborated with the man who would become her third husband, the English anthropologist Gregory Bateson — and blended them into a story of her own devising. The result is as uncanny as it is transporting. “Euphoria” is a meticulously researched homage to Mead’s restless mind and a considered portrait of Western anthropology in its primitivist heyday. It’s also a taut, witty, fiercely intelligent tale of competing egos and desires in a landscape of exotic menace — a love triangle in extremis.

For King, whose three previous novels, all expertly crafted, rarely strayed far from late-20th-century, New England WASP culture, “Euphoria” represents a departure and arguably a breakthrough. The steam the book emits is as much intellectual as erotic (for Mead there seems hardly to have been a distinction), and King’s signal achievement may be to have created satisfying drama out of a quest for interpretive insight.

The threat of violence and death looms from Page 1, as a disgruntled Mumbanyo tribe member lobs what may or may not be a dead baby at Nell Stone, the controversial American author of the best-selling ethnography “The Children of Kirakira,” and her envious Australian husband, Fen, who are fleeing the tribe in a canoe. Nell’s glasses are broken (by Fen, in what, it’s implied, was a deliberate act), as is one of her ankles. Both husband and wife are filthy, dispirited and sick with malaria. Nell, who longs to be pregnant, has recently miscarried. “Maybe you noticed — there’s sort of a stench of failure about us,” she tells Andrew Bankson, the English
anthropologist they run into upon arriving at the local government station, where a drunken Christmas party is underway.

Bankson, the novel’s narrator, isn’t doing too well himself. Like Bateson, his real-life inspiration, he’s tormented by the deaths of his older brothers, one blown up over Belgium in World War I, the other a suicide in Piccadilly Circus, and for two years has been living with a tribe on the Sepik River, less out of a passion for analyzing human social systems than to escape his overbearing mother. Stymied in his work and deeply depressed, he’s fresh from his own suicide attempt — in the river, his pockets full of stones, like Virginia Woolf. On seeing Nell and Fen, it’s all he can do not to fling himself at them: “My heart whapped in my throat and all I could think was how to keep them, how to keep them. I felt my loneliness bulge out of me like a goiter.”

The book is rife with such visceral imagery and pungent with the stink of disease, foul breath and unwashed bodies. Bankson, who falls hard for Nell, describes her — much as Bateson did Mead — in a letter to his mother, as “a sickly, pocket-sized creature with a face like a female Darwin”; in the bush, sentimentality is a luxury, like iodine and Band-Aids. Anyway, it’s Nell’s brain that excites him, her drive and discipline, her easy way with the natives, her scandalously impressionistic field notes, her poetry-laden talk, her naked curiosity, her freedom. “For so long I’d felt that what I’d been trained to do in academic writing was to press my nose to the ground, and here was Nell Stone with her head raised and swiveling in all directions. It was exhilarating and infuriating and I needed to see her again.”

“Euphoria” takes the form of unflinching retrospection, interspersed with entries from Nell’s journal, as Bankson recounts, decades later, his helpless love for her. King deploys this frame with admirable delicacy, casting a shadow of impending tragedy over the narrative and administering the occasional strategic dose of irony or nostalgia. Apart from an early chapter in which Bankson chronicles his painful family history — her only misstep, it comes off a bit pat — she wisely allows the proceedings to unfold mostly as they happen.

Bankson persuades Nell and Fen to take up residence with the Tam, a tribe seven hours upriver by motorized canoe from the one he’s studying. In the bush, this makes them neighbors, and Bankson can’t stay away, at one point falling so desperately ill that he ends up spending a week in their bed. King is brilliant on the moral contradictions that propelled anthropological encounters with remote tribes — a volatile mix of liberal high-mindedness, stoicism, hubris and greed. “If I didn’t believe they shared my humanity entirely, I wouldn’t be here,” Nell tells Bankson loftily. “I’m not interested in zoology.” Yet she and Fen make clear to him that after the loathsome Mumbanyo, who practiced infanticide with clinical indifference, they require a tribe with more savory amenities — a pretty beach and good art. When Bankson visits the couple after they’ve installed themselves among the Tam, he laughs out loud at the sight of their house, with its portico and blue-and-white cloth curtains — “this English tea shop encircled by pampas grass in the middle of the Territories.”
Inside the house, Nell and Fen’s collaboration is dissolving in rancor, along with their marriage. Bankson’s presence temporarily defuses the tension, enabling first an uneasy détente, and then, in an episode King has adapted from Mead’s life, a collective frenzy: Over the course of one sleepless night, the three converge on a framework for mapping the whole of human culture, in all its variations. “We believed we were in the throes of a big theory. We could see our grid in chalk on university blackboards. It felt like we were putting a messy disorganized unlabeled world in order.”

So intense is this communal labor, and the thrill of new apprehension, that the physical romance that follows is almost beside the point. In any case, neither the love affair nor the theory is meant to be. (Mead never formally published her theory, which she called “the squares,” later writing of this period that “it was the closest I’ve ever come to madness.” In the novel, “the Grid” is published to acclaim, but after it is embraced in perverted form by the Third Reich, Bankson has it suppressed.) In King’s exquisite book, desire — for knowledge, fame, another person — is only fleetingly rewarded, and gratification is inseparable from self-deceit. As Nell observes about the moment, typically two months into fieldwork, when a culture suddenly begins to make sense, “It’s a delusion — you’ve only been there eight weeks — and it’s followed by the complete despair of ever understanding anything. But at that moment the place feels entirely yours. It’s the briefest, purest euphoria.”

Source: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/08/books/review/euphoria-by-lily-king.html