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# Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

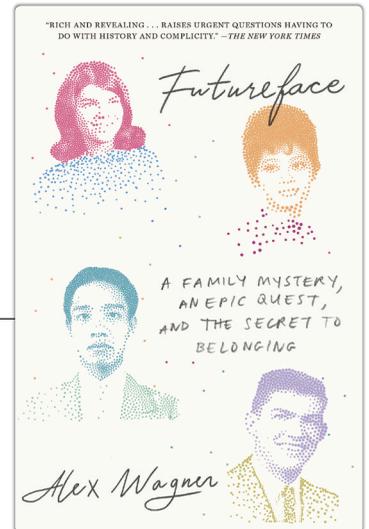
## Futureface

A Family Mystery, an Epic Quest,  
and the Secret to Belonging

by Alex Wagner

One World | Paperback | 978-0-8129-8750-8 | 352 pages | \$18.00

Also available in e-book format and as an audio download



“Smart, searching . . . Meditating on our ancestors, as Wagner’s own story shows, can suggest better ways of being ourselves.” —Maud Newton, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Sincere and instructive . . . This timely reflection on American identity, with a bonus exposé of DNA ancestry testing, deserves a wide audience.” —*Library Journal*

### • about the book

The daughter of a Burmese mother and a white American father, Alex Wagner grew up thinking of herself as a “futureface”—an avatar of a mixed-race future when all races would merge into a brown singularity. But when one family mystery leads to another, Wagner’s post-racial ideals fray as she becomes obsessed with the specifics of her own family’s racial and ethnic history.

Drawn into the wild world of ancestry, she embarks upon a quest around the world—and into her own DNA—to answer the ultimate questions of who she really is and where she belongs. The journey takes her from Burma to Luxembourg, from ruined colonial capitals with records written on banana leaves to Mormon databases, genetic labs, and the rest of the twenty-first-century genealogy complex. But soon she begins to grapple with a deeper question: Does it matter? Is our enduring obsession with blood and land, race and identity, worth all the trouble it’s caused us?

Wagner weaves together fascinating history, genetic science, and sociology but is really after deeper stuff than her own ancestry: in a time of conflict over who we are as a country, she tries to find the story where we all belong.

### • about the author

Alex Wagner is co-host and executive producer of Showtime’s *The Circus*, a national correspondent for CBS News, and a contributing editor to *The Atlantic*. She lives in New York City.

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## • discussion questions

1. In the Introduction, what does Wagner say is the “adventure story that has defined and threatened human existence from the beginning” (xii)? What are some of the questions that she says “many of us either devote ourselves to answering or spend our lives evading” (xii)?
2. What is the futureface and why does the author feel that within this category “is a place [she] could belong” (10)? What leads Wagner to the realization that “how [she] saw [herself] wasn’t necessarily how everyone else saw [her]” (8)? What does she mean when she says that her identification with the futureface led her to opt “for that most American of paths” (15)?
3. In Chapter Two, what does the author say that she has always known about identity? What does she believe her “own particularly elusive tribal membership” proves (23)?
4. What causes Wagner to open the “Pandora’s box of heritage and identity” (24)? What does she say “defined the culture of [her] father’s own background” (29)? What anecdotes challenge their “conception of the Wagner clan’s traditional Irish Catholic roots” (33)? How does Alex’s response to this information compare to her father’s response? What excites Wagner about what she has learned?
5. What “two approaches to the existential mystery of identity and belonging” did Wagner’s family represent (40)? What do her parents’ stories have in common and what are the differences? What revelation about Wagner’s own heritage and identity did “the Jewish Theory” force (41)? What does Wagner hope to recover—of what does she want definitive proof?
6. Why does the author’s cousin Geoff recall Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* when discussing their grandmother? What does Rushdie say that one must do in order to understand a single life and how does that apply to Wagner’s quest and understanding of her own grandmother?
7. Explore the treatment of nostalgia. Who in the book engages in nostalgic ways of remembering and thinking? What roles do privilege and deprivation play in relation to nostalgia according to the author? Why does Wagner say it “always rang alarm bells when anyone got misty-eyed about the good times” (58)?
8. What does the author believe was at “the core of the crisis that had splintered Burma” and led to her mother’s family’s immigration (63–4)? What role did events, formerly considered “massive” and “abstract” by the author, play in the formation of her own personal history (68)? As Wagner learns more about these events, what questions does she know she will have to ask about her Burmese ancestors and all of her ancestors? What answers does she ultimately find and what about these answers feels “humanizing” to Wagner (73)?
9. What is Wagner surprised to feel when she goes to the Thai-Burma border to visit refugee camps? Wagner says that the feeling was “evidence of the powerful narcotic of identity”—what does she mean by this (76)?
10. What does the author come to understand about her grandmother’s casual use of the word *kala* to describe Indian people (78)? What parallels does Wagner point out between the treatment of Indians in Burma and the contemporary United States? Who had Wagner always presumed to be the oppressed and how does this presumption change as she delves further into her family history?

11. What does Wagner notice is often the relationship between colonization and nationalism? How does this inform her understanding of her own family—what does it cause her to rethink? Why does she say that the truth “was complex” and “fractured” (102–3)?
12. What kind of “mythmaking” and fantasy does the author say is at the heart of nationalism and the notions that “America had been great” and “we need to get back to that time” (172)? What does she believe makes this notion “intoxicating” (172)? What lie does she say it is “imperative to shatter” for the sake of all (173)?
13. In researching her great-grandfather, what does Wagner learn about immigration in his time versus our time? What does she say that “even those urging the construction of a wall” have in their past (181)? What does she learn about Henry Wagner’s identity “that was completely ahead of his time” (190)?
14. What does Wagner say is “in many ways the crux of the American immigrant story” (207)? Why does she feel that a connection to affluence is so important to Americans? What questions does she feel these stories of affluence should bring up? What does Wagner mean when she says that the “trappings of wealth were all set design for our American play” (208)?
15. As the author explores her genetic makeup, what does she learn about the relationship between Mormonism and genetic testing? After learning about and participating in the process herself, how does she feel about genetic testing? What does the book suggest most people are hoping to gain from these tests and what are some of the unforeseen consequences of participating? Why does Wagner say that “the landscape of consumer-focused DNA ancestry testing was a lot like the Wild West” (302)?
16. According to Wagner, how do genetic and ancestry testing websites’ statements about race compare to the understanding of race promoted by the tests themselves? What does the author say is the problem with concluding that race was based in science? Wagner says that this could be boiled down to one question for her: “Was this stuff moving us closer together or farther apart” (315)? What does she conclude?
17. Why does the author say that she put aside her Burmese heritage at first? What is “the power of exclusivity” and what was Wagner’s relationship to it before undertaking her project? Why do Professor Duster and Professor Lee say that “[b]elonging was still a binary proposition” (319)?
18. What does Wagner conclude may be “the most affirming way to bring us closer to one another in this time of American fracture” (319)? What “useful truth” revealed in her investigation does she feel that we should “hold fast to” (319)? What does Wagner ultimately feel “knits Americans together” (319)?
19. At the conclusion of the book, what is “the story that [Wagner] could tell about [herself] to [herself] to explain who [she] was (320)”? What is “the only community [she] would and could ever know” and “the constraint that created a community” (321)?
20. At the beginning of the book, the author introduces two questions at the heart of her search: “[W]hat did it mean to belong?” and “Who got to decide?” How does the book ultimately answer these questions? Did your own answer to these questions change after finishing the book?
21. In the Epilogue, what does Wagner say she believes is the lesson in the days after her father’s death? After her project is complete, how does the author come to a different understanding or interpretation of her grandmother’s final moments?

## • about this guide's writer

JE BANACH is a senior member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Workshop. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than seventy literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.

## • notes



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