

Discussion Questions for “You” Series

After sneaking into Beck’s apartment, snooping around and even taking some of her underwear, Joe hides in the shower when Beck comes home unexpectedly. In his internal monologue, he says “I’ve seen enough romantic comedies to know guys like me are always getting in jams like this.”

1. “You” is a psychological thriller – not a romance. However, throughout the series, Joe refers to romantic films and even points out how his actions mirror those of romantic “heroes.”

A popular trope in romantic comedies suggests that if you pursue someone persistently enough – and push through their disinterest and rejection -- they will eventually fall in love with you. What “guys like Joe” have you seen represented in romantic films or stories? What are some examples of other movies where one character has pursued someone relentlessly as part of a “love” story (or similar)?

Main point: Romantic films often include protagonists who are “guys like Joe,” ones who stop at nothing to “get the girl.” Usually, there is no negative consequence for their actions – in fact, the stalking is successful and they persuade their initially reluctant romantic interests that they should be together. They are rewarded despite requests to stop and ignoring her rejections. This “romantic pursuit” usually ends with “guys like Joe” winning over their love interests -- the stalker “wears them down” until they “come around” and “see the truth.” These characters are often presented as awkward, funny, sweet and/or passionate rather than scary and problematic.

A few examples:

- *In the “Twilight” series, Edward repeatedly stalks Bella – including breaking into her room to watching her sleep and following her.*
- *In the “Fifty Shades” series, Christian Grey shows up where Anastasia Steele is and monitors her behavior without her consent multiple times.*
- *Jon Cusack in “Say Anything” standing outside his ex’s home with a boom box playing the song they listened to when they were first intimate, even after she asked him to leave her alone.*
- *Ben Stiller in “There’s Something About Mary,” hires a private investigator to find his high school crush and stalks her throughout the film.*

2. How are these characters usually presented? Are they funny? Sweet? Awkward? Scary? What are the outcomes of their stalking behaviors – are they punished? Rejected?

Sample answers:

- *They are often presented as awkward, funny, sweet and/or passionate rather than scary.*
- *If you think about their behaviors happening in real life, they'd be scary.*
- *Typically, the outcome is positive and they “get the girl.”*
- *Their targets/romantic interests range from annoyed to flattered, but rarely scared.*

3. What is the line between romantic pursuit (flirting, getting to know someone, doing thoughtful actions) and stalking?

Sample answers:

- *If the target/victim feels afraid, then it's crossed a line.*
- *If the target/victim is uncomfortable or told them person to stop and they didn't, it's crossed a line.*
- *It's a bit subjective.*
- *Romantic pursuit can look different at different stages of life – adolescents and college students may be more assertive than older adults, for example.*

4. Many fans of the show have expressed love for Joe, tweeting things like “Kidnap me pls” and “Penn Badgley is breaking my heart as Joe...what is it about him?”

A) What is it about Joe's behaviors that may be appealing to viewers? What romantic ideas does it evoke?

Sample answers:

- *Appealing fantasy: that you're just innately special, someone can instantly see the goodness in you, someone is fascinated by you and has chosen you.*
- *It's especially appealing when it's an attractive person.*
- *The concept of “love at first sight.”*
- *The concepts of “all's fair in love and war”/ “I'll do anything for love.”*
- *When viewers fantasize, they are taking an active role and expressing a desire for something to happen – they have control. As a character, Beck did not make this choice and had no control.*

B) Throughout the show, there are many examples of Joe doing kind and helpful things for others – like the kindness he shows to Paco, his young neighbor. How does this “good side” of Joe contribute to our thoughts about him? How realistic is it that Joe is kind and helpful while also engaging in stalking behaviors? How might this make it hard to see him as the “bad guy”?

Sample answers:

- *Seeing Joe’s kindness can soften our impression of him, making him seem more sympathetic and dulling our horror at his stalking behaviors.*
- *People are multidimensional – very realistic that a stalker also does positive things.*
- *Many stalkers and abusers are seen as upstanding, kind and/or successful people and thus are able to get away with their behaviors.*
- *It’s easy to think of stalkers as “monsters” with no redeeming qualities – in reality, they are usually people we know and may even have positive relationships with. They are our friends, family members and coworkers. This is part of what makes it hard for us to hold them accountable for their actions.*

5. In the show “You,” how many and what type of stalking behaviors does Joe engage in? Which of these seem realistic? Which seem unrealistic?

Main point: While “You” is fictional and a bit sensationalized with lots of twists and drama, many of the stalking behaviors that Joe engages in are fairly common. You may wish to highlight those on the chart at the end of this guide to educate on the realities of stalking.

Sample answers:

- Following, watching through her window, showing up where Beck is.
- Stalking through technology: monitoring texts, messages, GPS.
- Stalking through social media: keeping track of Beck’s posts, messages, social media presence.
- Breaking into Beck’s home and stealing her property.

6. How might shows like “You” influence our cultural/social understanding of stalking? How could it be helpful? How could it be harmful?

Sample answers:

- *Helpful: brings awareness to the issue, portrays stalking as frightening, encourages dialogue on stalking amongst viewers/fans, demonstrates many actual stalking behaviors.*

- *Harmful: many fans romanticize the Joe character and may not realize that stalking is scary, entertaining show can make stalking seem like the stuff of soap operas instead of a real issue that actually impacts many people.*

Stalking Behaviors in Season 1 of “You”

Stalking is a serious issue that affects over 1 in 6 women and 1 in 17 men in the United States.

Following, waiting, watching – Joe engages in many stalking behaviors to track and monitor Beck. This chart below explores some additional stalking tactics that may be lesser known.

| Behavior | “You” Example(s) | Real Life |
|--|--|---|
| Stalking through social media | Joe looks closely at Beck’s social media posts to learn information about her when they meet. He also checks it while they’re broken up to check in on her. | While using social media is not criminal, many stalkers use social media to collect information about their victims in order to stalk. They may also send threatening messages through social media platforms or track victims through “check-ins” or GPS (like the Snap Map on Snapchat). Stalkers may also use Spyware, cameras or GPS trackers to monitor victims. |
| Impersonating a victim online | Joe impersonates multiple victims online, texting friends and/or making social media posts so that his victims seem like they are doing okay. | Many stalkers impersonate their victims online for a variety of purposes. For example, some impersonate victims through dating websites, sharing intimate images and/or setting up “dates” that are set up to perpetrate sexual assault or other violence. |
| Mining friends for information | Joe uses Beck’s friends to get information about her and/or for the purpose of stalking her. For example, he meets with Annika to try and figure out Peach’s password. | Called “stalking via proxy,” many stalkers get information about their victims from family, friends, colleagues and others, and/or get those people to engage in the stalking behavior unwittingly. Often, the victim’s community offers this information without realizing the situation. |
| Stalking Before and During the Relationship | Joe stalks Beck from their first encounter at the bookstore, quickly finding out where she lives and following her wherever she goes. He continues to follow her and track her phone for most of their relationship. | Over half the time, intimate partner stalkers stalk during <i>and</i> after the relationship. Some stalkers also engage in stalking behaviors before the relationship begins to select their victims, assessing their victims’ vulnerabilities. |

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| Being an intimate partner | Joe becomes an intimate partner – i.e., a boyfriend. | Victims know their perpetrators the vast majority of the time. Over half the time, stalkers are current or former intimate partners (like boyfriends, girlfriends or spouses). |
| Co-occurring other crimes | Joe commits many crimes throughout the show (in addition to stalking and murder), including breaking into Beck’s apartment, stealing Peach’s book and laptop and kidnapping Benjy. | Some stalkers stalk primarily to scope out a victim for another crime, like robbery or sexual assault. Many stalkers commit crimes as part of their stalking pattern of behavior. |
| Harming friends, family or others close to the victim | Joe assaults and ultimately kills Beck’s friend, Peach. | Stalkers often harm the victim’s friends, family members or pets. |
| Murder/Homicide | Joe kills several people, including Beck. | Stalking can be dangerous and even lethal. In over 3 in 4 cases of intimate partner femicide (murder of a female intimate partner), the perpetrator stalked the victim prior to the attack. Stalking is an indicator of potential lethality. |

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