

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Personal Librarian

by Marie Benedict and
Victoria Christopher Murray

BOOK GROUP

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Marie Benedict is a lawyer with more than ten years' experience as a litigator at two of the country's premier law firms. She found her calling unearthing the hidden historical stories of women. Her mission is to excavate from the past the most important, complex and fascinating women of history and bring them into the light of present-day where we can finally perceive the breadth of their contributions as well as the insights they bring to modern day issues.

She embarked on a new, thematically connected series of historical novels with *The Other Einstein*, which tells the tale of Albert Einstein's first wife, a physicist herself, and the role she might have played in his theories.

And, in January of 2023, she released the bestselling *The Mitford Affair*, which explores the role that history's most notorious sisters—the beautiful, brilliant, eccentric Mitfords—played in the rise of World War II, both for and against the Nazis.

Victoria Christopher Murray is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* best selling author of more than 30 novels, including the *New York Times* Instant Best Sellers, *The Personal Librarian* and *The First Ladies*. Both novels, Victoria co-wrote with Marie Benedict.

A native New Yorker, Victoria Christopher Murray attended Hampton University where she majored in Communication Disorders. After graduating, Victoria attended New York University's Stern Business School where she received her MBA in Marketing.

Victoria spent ten years in corporate America before she tested her entrepreneurial spirit. She opened a financial services agency for Aegon, USA where she managed the number one division for nine consecutive years. However, Victoria always dreamed of writing and in 1997, she pursued her dream.

Victoria originally self published her first novel, *Temptation* and in 2000, Time Warner published that novel. *Temptation* remained on the *Essence* bestsellers list for nine consecutive months. In 2001, Victoria received her first NAACP Image Award nomination for Outstanding Literature with *Temptation*.

BOOK SUMMARY

In her twenties, Belle da Costa Greene is hired by J. P. Morgan to curate a collection of rare manuscripts, books, and artwork for his newly built Pierpont Morgan Library. Belle becomes a fixture in New York City society and one of the most powerful people in the art and book world, known for her impeccable taste and shrewd negotiating for critical works as she helps create a world-class collection.

But Belle has a secret, one she must protect at all costs. She was born not Belle da Costa Greene but Belle Marion Greener. She is the daughter of Richard Greener, the first Black graduate of Harvard and a well-known advocate for equality. Belle's complexion isn't dark because of her alleged Portuguese heritage that lets her pass as white—her complexion is dark because she is African American.

The Personal Librarian tells the story of an extraordinary woman, famous for her intellect, style, and wit, and shares the lengths she must go to—for the protection of her family and her legacy—to preserve her carefully crafted white identity in the racist world in which she lives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Gertrude is Belle's friend from college who "...doesn't need to assess every single moment of every single day against societal standards to ensure her behavior passes muster. She has no need to analyze her words, her walk, her manner, but I do."

Consider and discuss the toll extracted when your public face has to be constantly vigilant, constantly striving to stay within the bounds of "normal" or "average".

2. But then, later in the book Belle throws a lot of that conformity to the wind, by developing a bold style of dress, going on the party circuit and beating her male colleagues at their own game. Why was she more comfortable doing it then? Did the muscle behind the library give her cover?
3. After a shared and knowing glance with a serving woman at a society party, she says "Why does she serve, while I am served? Why is it that the relative whiteness of my skin has given me this chance at privilege? It seems incomprehensible, but it is thus."

Belle has several such moments with the serving staff at different parties. What are they seeing in Belle that her white friends and colleagues didn't see?

4. Belle isn't the only one keeping secrets. Who else was holding back? And what would have been the consequences if their own secrets had become public?
5. "Marriage is not something that I've really considered. I've always known that, because of my heritage, a traditional relationship would not be possible for me. Not only because of my family's financial dependence but because a marriage means children, and that is something I cannot hazard. Without the fairer skin of my siblings, I could never risk bearing a child whose skin color might reveal my deception."

Choosing to neither marry, nor have kids was a very unconventional choice in Belle's day. How much of this choice do you believe was concern about whether a potential child could pass and how much would you put down to her unconventional ways?

6. What about that relationship between Belle and Bernard Berenson? What drew them together? What forced them apart? Was he a cad? Was she naive?
7. Some of the more negative reviews of the book found it either slow going after the mid-point, or they found the dialogue stilted (or both). Did anyone in your group have this negative reaction? How did you find the pacing?
8. Before reading the book, how familiar were you with passing? Have you read other books with passing characters? Have you had any friends, family members or ancestors who have passed?
9. From the book..."I still believe. I still believe that someday there will be equality in this country. That someday there will be a new civil rights act, and a new president and Congress to enforce it. That everyone will be able to follow their dream, regardless of race. That those words about the equality of men in the Declaration of Independence will be true."

Has this sentiment come true since the '20's? If so, how? If not, why?

10. Working for the Pierpont Morgan library was Belle's absolute dream job. Imagine how she felt walking into the library that first day. Do you love libraries? What's your literary dream job?

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