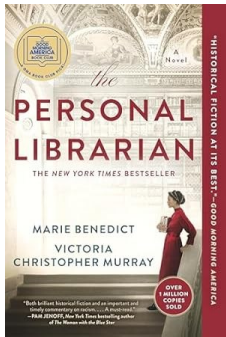




Discussion Guide



About the Book: *The Personal Librarian*

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Questions for Discussion

1. What were your general impressions of this book?
2. This novel was based on a true story of the early 1900s. What do you know about the role of women and the treatment of African Americans during this time period?
3. How does Belle carve a role of prestige for herself, in spite of the role of women and treatment of African Americans in this era?
4. What did you think of Belle's mother's decision to pass as white with her children? Would you do this if you were her? Why or why not?
5. Belle's father was the first African American to graduate from Harvard. How did he impact Belle? If he was your father, would you have joined him in his fight for civil rights, or followed your mother's path?
6. How did JP Morgan view Belle? Do you think he was attracted to her? What do you think he would have done if her true identity was revealed? Discuss their relationship.
7. What did you think of Belle's affair with Bernard Bergeson? Who had the upper hand? Did you think she should have gone back to him after what happened? Why or why not?
8. The book revolves around Belle and J.P. Morgan's love of old books and desire to preserve them for prosperity and the public. What is your own feeling about old books and do you think it's important to preserve them? me of them?
9. The book describes Belle as one of the most influential and prestigious women of her time. How did you view her?
10. In what ways have you pushed against race and gender roles in your own life? Do you identify with Belle in any way? Explain.
11. What do the MAMs have to say about the book? Whom do you agree with?

Listen on YouTube:

Authors of 'The Personal Librarian' talk about their new novel | GMA (5:34)

How Belle da Costa Greene became curator of The Morgan Library (4:59)

Victoria Christopher Murray and Marie Benedict — The Personal Librarian (52:49)



NANCY: I experienced this book as an audio book, listening as I traveled. I found the narrator did a compelling job of bringing Belle and those in her circles to life. A well-written book, taking historical facts and filling it in with plausible scenarios that she may have lived. The book depicts such an amazing, brilliant woman who found ways to transcend the limits of gender and race to excel in her vocation, while also exacting quite a large personal emotional and social cost to maintain her position.



ABIGAIL: I found the love of old books so intriguing in this story. The things people were concerned about back then are quite different than in our time. And yet, I don't think we value the wisdom of the past as much as we should. Although we have developed significantly with technology and industry, sometimes it seems like we aren't growing in wisdom as a people. We do need to value the old books, printed or digital, and the wisdom therein.



SALLIE: Wow, what a story. I felt really sad for Belle and her siblings when her mother decided to have the pass as white. They were cut off from their father and the rest of their family. I get that she wanted to give them a better future, but at such great expense. Life was and is so unfair in many ways.



PRISCILLA: She was quite a proper woman and I appreciated that about her, until she had an affair. I didn't approve of that, and I wish she had kept the baby. She makes me wonder what more I could accomplish with my life. Do you think I could be more than an administrative assistant?



JANE: Of course you can, Priscilla. Belle is my kind of lady. She didn't let those men throw her off course. I cheered her on all the way. Have you seen pictures of the office she occupied? Spectacular. Ladies, she does us proud.



MOLLY: Jane, you're right, but passing is so hard. Life is so unfair for African Americans, then and now. She was brilliant and accomplished, but look at what she sacrificed to do all that. She didn't belong with the white people or her own people. She was stranded in between. When will this insanity of racism ever end?



KATHARINE: These authors did an admirable job weaving fact with fiction, keeping it interesting. A good book for students studying social history of our country, and perhaps history in general. Also for literature students looking at fiction mixed with nonfiction. For women studies, African American studies, too. Could spark lively debates in class room settings.