



The Personal Librarian

by Marie Benedict

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1:30p | Isabel Hall

Discussion Questions

1. How might you explain Belle's rise to such heights in society and her profession at a time when women—especially African American women—faced such blatant discrimination and exclusion? Did Belle possess certain personality traits that yielded this incredible outcome? If so, what are they? What sorts of outside influences contributed to her ascent?
2. In some ways, Belle's parents had somewhat unique experiences or backgrounds for African American people during this time period. What kind of reaction did you have to her parents' histories? How might those histories have impacted Belle, even when she had not been told the details of her parents' pasts?
3. How did you view Belle's relationship with her mother and her father? How did the relationships affect Belle? How did the relationships change during the novel?
4. How would you describe Belle's position among her siblings? How did you feel about her relationship with them and her responsibilities to them?
5. What sort of pressure do you think Belle might have experienced from the rumors about her true ethnicity? Do you think J.P. Morgan heard the rumors? Do you think he knew she was passing as white and decided to ignore it, or do you think he was unaware of her heritage?
6. How would you describe the attraction between Belle and Bernard Berenson? What were the attributes that drew them together and ultimately, forced them apart?
7. What surprised you the most about Belle's life? About her time period?
8. What sacrifices did Belle make by choosing to follow her mother's path? What advantages did she gain?
9. Before reading this book, were you familiar with the Civil Rights Act of 1875 or the efforts toward equality that occurred during Reconstruction? What might have happened in the U.S. in the decades that followed if the Civil Rights Act of 1875—along with the many efforts of equality that occurred during Reconstruction—had not been overturned?
10. How do the racial issues and events in the book relate to events happening today?
11. In the end, do you think Belle was happy with her choices and decisions? Do you think she would have done anything differently?