

The Personal Librarian by Marie Benedict Discussion Questions

1. How might you explain Belle's rise to such breathtaking 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? Do you think Belle resented her mother, or did their relationship change over the course of the book such that they came to a place of understanding? If so, what was Belle's turning point with her mother?
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 reaction did you have to Belle's relationship with her father? Do you think Belle ever felt deserted by her father in the same way her siblings did? Why or why not?
6. 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?
7. What do you think really happened romantically between Belle and J. P. Morgan? Do you agree with the portrayal in the book?
8. How would you describe the attraction between Belle and Bernard Berenson? What were the attributes that drew them together and, ultimately, forced them apart? How did you feel about their relationship—and Belle's ability to have a partner and family of her own?
9. What surprised you the most about Belle's life? About her time period?
10. How familiar were you with passing before reading this novel? Has your understanding of the reasons and sacrifices behind it altered after reading about Belle's life?
11. What sacrifices did Belle make by choosing to follow her mother's path? What advantages did she gain?
12. Before reading this book, were you familiar with the Civil Rights Act of 1875 or the efforts toward equality that occurred during Reconstruction? Did you have any understanding of what transpired in the years after Reconstruction? What might have happened in the United States in the decades that followed if the Civil Rights Act of 1875—along with the many efforts at equality that occurred during Reconstruction—had not been overturned?
13. How do the racial issues and events in the book relate to events happening today?
14. In the end, do you think Belle was happy with her choices and decisions? Do you think she would have done anything differently?