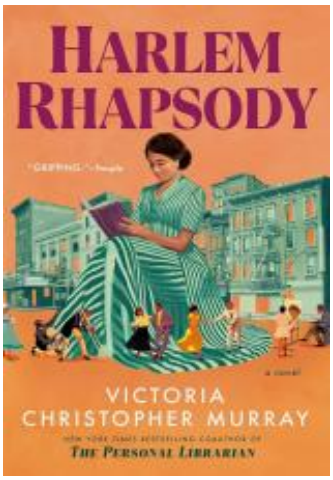
Harlem Rhapsody

by Victoria Christopher Murray



About the Book

She found the literary voices that would inspire the world. The extraordinary story of the woman who ignited the Harlem Renaissance, written by Victoria Christopher Murray, the *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN.

In 1919, a high school teacher from Washington, D.C arrives in Harlem excited to realize her lifelong dream. Jessie Redmon Fauset has been named the literary editor of *The Crisis*. The first Black woman to hold this position at a preeminent Negro magazine, Jessie is poised to achieve literary greatness. But she holds a secret that jeopardizes it all.

W. E. B. Du Bois, the founder of *The Crisis*, is not only Jessie?s boss, he?s her lover. And neither his wife nor their 14-year age difference can keep the two apart. Amidst rumors of their tumultuous affair, Jessie is determined to prove herself. She attacks the challenge of discovering young writers with fervor, finding 16-year-old Countee Cullen, 17-year-old Langston Hughes, and Nella Larsen, who becomes one of her best friends. Under Jessie?s leadership, *The Crisis* thrives. Every African American writer in the country wants their work published there.

When her first novel is released to great acclaim, it?s clear that Jessie is at the heart of a renaissance in Black music, theater and the arts. She has shaped a generation of literary legends, but as she strives to preserve her legacy, she?ll discover the high cost of her unparalleled success.

Discussion Guide

1. Jessie Redmon Fauset was instrumental in the success of so many legendary authors, like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. Yet she herself is not famous for this extraordinary accomplishment or her groundbreaking novel, THERE IS CONFUSION. Why do you think she was forgotten in history?

2. What factors in the United States contributed to the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s?

3. What role did Jessie play in the Harlem Renaissance?

4. Why do you think Jessie was so successful as the literary editor of *The Crisis*? What personality traits and skill set made her able to discover and nurture talented authors?

5. How did W. E. B. Du Bois help and hinder Jessie?s career?

6. Jessie had such a tempestuous relationship with W. E. B. Du Bois. Why do you think she was so attracted to him? Do you think she made the correct decision at the end of the book?

7. One of the founding members of the NAACP and the first Black American to earn a PhD from Harvard, W. E. B. Du Bois had a tremendous impact on US society and is renowned for being one of the most important civil rights activists in US history. Were you aware that he founded *The Crisis*? Did you know about his affair with Jessie? Does knowing about his relationship with Jessie change your opinion of him?

8. There are a number of conversations in the novel about whether books or plays portraying Black characters in a positive light are of value if they are not written by Black authors. What do you think?

9. Jessie and her stepmother, Isabella Huff Fauset, have a very close relationship. Why do you think that is? How do you think Isabella influenced Jessie?s life? How is Isabella an extraordinary woman for her time?

10. Jessie faced a lot of racism and sexism in her life. How did she combat both throughout the novel? Do you think her attitude to racism and sexism changed over the course of the book?

11. Were you surprised to learn about Charlotte Osgood Mason? What do you think of the role that white women like Charlotte played in the success of authors like Langston Hughes? Do you think they accomplished more good than harm or more harm than good?

12. During the Harlem Renaissance, Black music, literature, theater, fashion and art all flourished. How did the novel incorporate each of these creative disciplines to evoke this time period and cultural movement?

Author Bio

Victoria Christopher Murray is a *New York Times* bestselling author of more than 30 novels, including her most recent stand-alone release, HARLEM RHAPSODY. With Marie Benedict, she coauthored THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN, a ?Good Morning America? Book Club pick; THE FIRST LADIES, Target?s 2023 Book of the Year; and A PAIR OF ACES. She is an NAACP Image Award Winner for Outstanding Literary Work for her novel STAND YOUR GROUND, which also was a *Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. She holds an MBA from the NYU Stern School of Business.

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