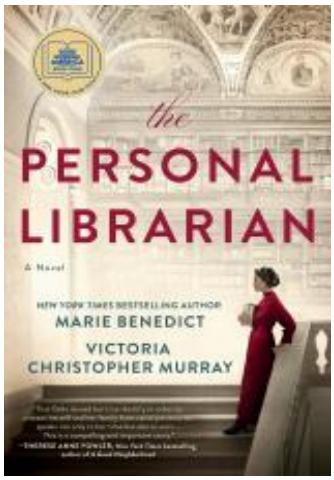
The Personal Librarian

by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray



About the Book

The remarkable story of J. P. Morgan?s personal librarian, Belle da Costa Greene, the Black American woman who was forced to hide her true identity and pass as white to leave a lasting legacy that enriched our nation, from *New York Times* bestselling author Marie Benedict and acclaimed author Victoria Christopher Murray.

In her 20s, 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 Guide

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?

Author Bio

Marie Benedict is a lawyer with more than 10 years? experience as a litigator. A graduate of Boston College and the Boston University School of Law, she is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN and THE FIRST LADIES (with Victoria Christopher Murray), THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM, THE MYSTERY OF MRS. CHRISTIE, CARNEGIE'S MAID, THE OTHER EINSTEIN and LADY CLEMENTINE. All have been translated into multiple languages. She lives in Pittsburgh with her family.

Victoria Christopher Murray is an acclaimed author with more than one million books in print. She has written more than 20 novels, including THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN and THE FIRST LADIES (with Marie Benedict), as well as STAND YOUR GROUND, a NAACP Image Award Winner for Outstanding Fiction and a *Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. She holds an MBA from the NYU Stern School of Business.

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