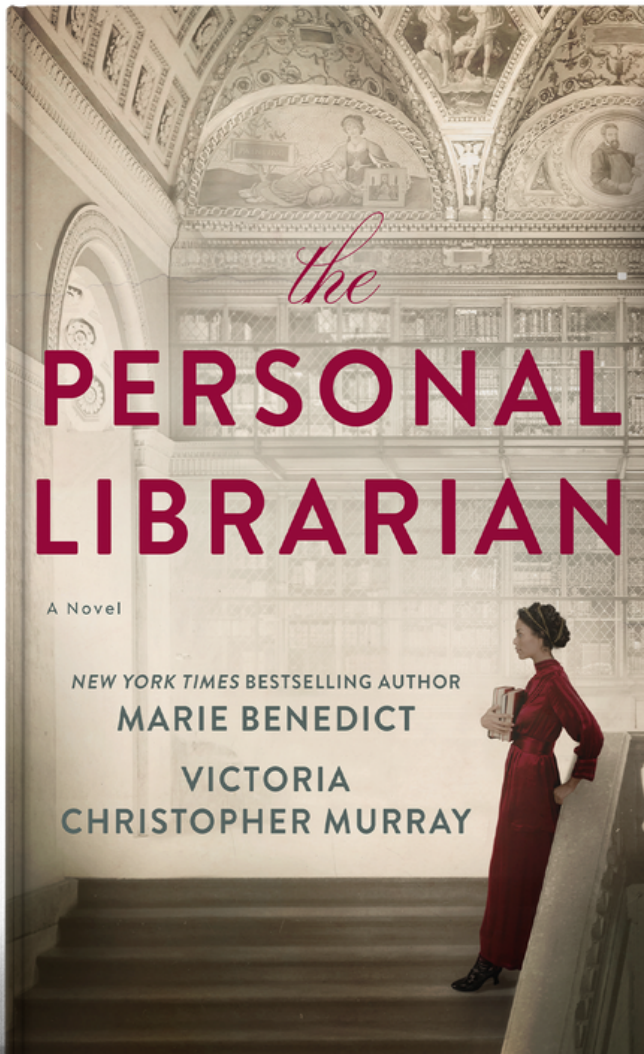


# ONE BOOK

ONE READ

*The Personal Librarian*



## Reader's Guide

THANK YOU FOR  
PARTICIPATING IN  
ONE BOOK, ONE READ!

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# WHAT IS ONE BOOK ONE READ?

One Book, One Read is a program many major cities across the country engage in. The aim is to get all of the people in an area reading, talking about, and engaging with the same book.

The goal is to promote critical conversations, community building, and literacy all while having fun with your neighbors.

## CENTRAL LIBRARY

**SEPTEMBER 30, 2023**

**6:00 PM EST**

- ➔ Book/eBook available for checkout
- ➔ Free to the Public
- ➔ Autograph copies available for purchase at event
- ➔ To register, visit [fulcolibrary.org/obor](http://fulcolibrary.org/obor)

## Meet the Authors Event

Victoria  
Christopher  
Murray

Marie  
Benedict



# ONE BOOK

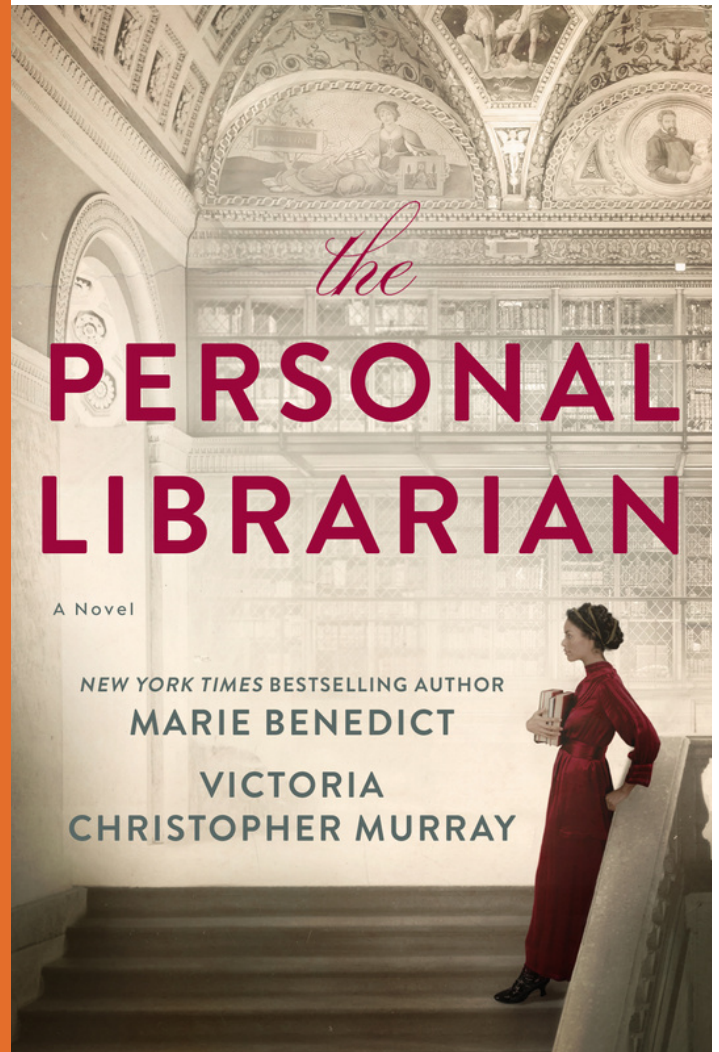
ONE READ

## Book Choice 2023

In her twenties, 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 on the New York society scene 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 build 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 to which she must go—for the protection of her family and her legacy—to preserve her carefully crafted white identity in the racist world in which she lives.



## Who can be involved?

Everyone! We are looking for community members, thought leaders, and curious readers to engage in reading the book with your friends and community. Gather a group from your family, religious organization, civic group, sorority or fraternity, job, or friends to read and discuss the book together.



# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

As a facilitator/moderator for these discussions, it is suggested the facilitator do these 5 tasks:



## PLEASE KEEP TRACK OF TIME

Whether you meet for an hour or two, discussions can get long and go over. Give each question a specific amount of time to provide open discussion and mingling at the end.

## KEEP THE DISCUSSION GOING

Participants may begin sharing experiences that deviate from the topic; remember to respectfully rein people in.

## ALLOW MANY VOICES

The key to a great discussion is participation and engagement. Don't be afraid to call on an individual who has not spoken during your discussion. They may just be shy.

## MAINTAIN THE PEACE IF DISCUSSIONS BECOME INTENSE

Everyone's voice and opinions matter during a discussion. The most important thing is that they are shared and received respectfully. The moderator facilitates this level of respect.



## SHARE WITH US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

We need you to spread the good word so others can be a part of this amazing initiative, bringing Fulton County residents together.



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



## MARIE BENEDICT

Marie Benedict is a lawyer with more than ten 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 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

Victoria Christopher Murray is an acclaimed author with more than one million books in print. She has written more than twenty novels, including *Stand Your Ground*, an 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.





# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?

Sign up at your local library to be a part of their book club. Each branch will be leading its own book club.

## DOES THIS COST MONEY?

The Author event on September 30 is free and open to the public! Register for the event at [fulcolibrary.org/obor](https://fulcolibrary.org/obor)

## WHERE CAN I GET THE BOOK?

There are approximately 500 copies in circulation in the Fulton County Library System. Local retailers, such as ACapella Books, are committed to having copies of the book in stock.

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## WHAT IS THE TIMELINE FOR THIS EVENT?

### WHEN DO I NEED TO SIGN UP?

There is no deadline to sign up. To join a book club, see above.

- June - September 2023 - Read! Book clubs will meet every month.
- September 30, 2023 lecture at 6pm, Central Library



# GUIDING QUESTIONS

**1** Gertrude is Belle's friend from college who stated that she "...doesn't need to assess every single moment of every single day against societal standards to ensure her behavior passes muster. She has no need to analyze her words, her walk, her manner, but I do."

Consider and discuss the toll extracted when your public face has to be constantly vigilant, constantly striving to stay within the bounds of "normal" or "average".

**2** Later in the book Belle throws a lot of that conformity to the wind, by developing a bold style of dress, going on the party circuit and beating her male colleagues at their own game. Why was she more comfortable doing it then? Did the muscle behind the library give her cover?

**3** After a shared and knowing glance with a serving woman at a society party, Belle begins to think..." why does she serve, while I am served? Why is it that the relative whiteness of my skin has given me this chance at privilege? It seems incomprehensible, but it is thus."

Belle has several such moments with the serving staff at different parties. What are they seeing in Belle that her white friends and colleagues didn't see?

**4** Belle isn't the only one keeping secrets. Who else was holding back? And what would have been the consequences if their own secrets had become public?

**5** "Marriage is not something that I've really considered. I've always known that, because of my heritage, a traditional relationship would not be possible for me. Not only because of my family's financial dependence but because a marriage means children, and that is something I cannot hazard. Without the fairer skin of my siblings, I could never risk bearing a child whose skin color might reveal my deception."

Choosing to neither marry, nor have kids was a very unconventional choice in Belle's era. How much of this choice do you believe was concern about whether a potential child could pass...and how much would you put down to her unconventional ways?

**6** Before reading the book, how familiar were you with passing? Have you read other books with passing characters? Have you had any friends, family members or ancestors who have passed?

**7** Working for the Pierpont Morgan library was Belle's absolute dream job. Imagine how she felt walking into the library that first day. Do you love libraries? What's your literary dream job?

**8** 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?

# GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 9** 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?
- 10** 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?
- 11** How would you describe Belle's position among her siblings? How did you feel about her relationship with them and her responsibilities to them?
- 12** 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?
- 13** 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?
- 14** What do you think really happened romantically between Belle and J. P. Morgan? Do you agree with the portrayal in the book?
- 15** What surprised you the most about Belle's life? About her time period?
- 16** 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?
- 17** Before reading the book, how familiar were you with passing? Have you read other books with passing characters? Have you had any friends, family members or ancestors who have passed?
- 18** What sacrifices did Belle make by choosing to follow her mother's path? What advantages did she gain?
- 19** How do the racial issues and events in the book relate to events happening today?
- 20** In the end, do you think Belle was happy with her choices and decisions? Do you think she would have done anything differently?

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## CONNECT WITH US



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