



The Personal Librarian by Marie Benedict

Martin County Library System Book Club Kit:

The Personal Librarian by Marie Benedict

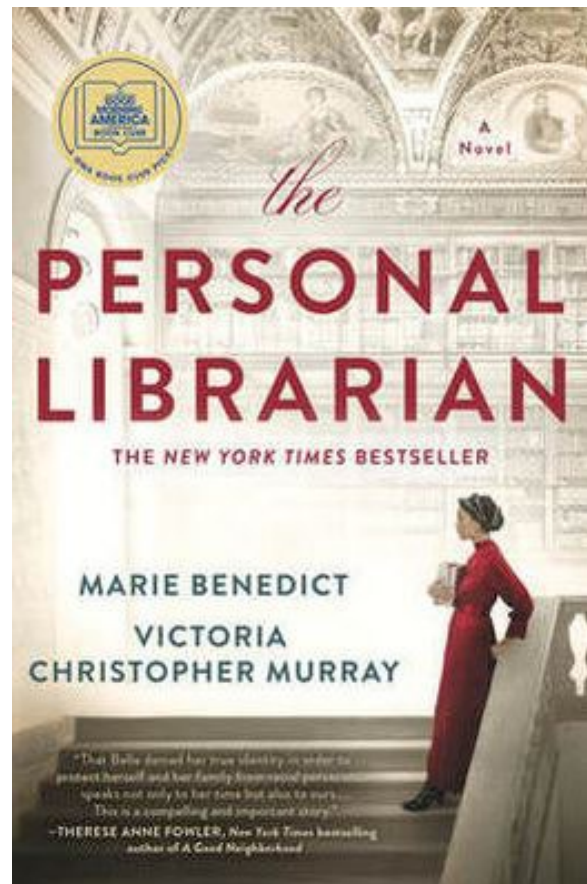
Included in the Kit:

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Book summary

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 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 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.



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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.

Source: Author's website. (authormariebenedict.com)





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Meet the Author

Marie Benedict is a lawyer with more than ten years' experience as a litigator at two of the country's premier law firms, who found her calling unearthing the hidden historical stories of women. Her mission is to excavate from the past the most important, complex and fascinating women of history and bring them into the light of present-day where we can finally perceive the breadth of their contributions as well as the insights they bring to modern day issues.



She embarked on a new, thematically connected series of historical novels with *THE OTHER EINSTEIN*, which tells the tale of Albert Einstein's first wife, a physicist herself, and the role she might have played in his theories. The next novel in this series is the *USA Today* bestselling *CARNEGIE'S MAID* -- which released in January of 2018 -- and the book that followed is the New York Times bestseller and Barnes & Noble Book Club Pick *THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM*, the story of the brilliant inventor Hedy Lamarr, which published in January of 2019.

In January of 2020, *LADY CLEMENTINE*, the story of the incredible Clementine Churchill, was released, and became an international bestseller. Her next novel, the instant *NYTimes* and *USAToday* bestselling *THE MYSTERY OF MRS. CHRISTIE*, was published on December 29, 2020, and her first co-written book with the talented Victoria Christopher Murray, the instant *NYTimes* bestseller and Good Morning America Book Club Pick *THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN*, was released on June 29, 2021.

Source: Author's website. (authormariebenedict.com)



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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?



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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?

Source: Reading Group Guides.
(readinggroupguides.com/reviews/the-personal-librarian/guide)

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Recipes

Earl Grey Scones with Lemon Glaze

- 1/2 cup unsalted butter (frozen and grated)
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 2 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 earl grey tea bags (3 to steep, 1 for the dough)
- 1/2 cup boiling water
- 1/2 cup sour cream (cold)
- 1 large egg (cold)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract



Boil water, then measure out 1/2 cup and add three tea bags and steep for 10 min., then wring out the tea bags to get all the flavor.

Grate the frozen butter, then store it in the fridge while preparing the rest of the ingredients.

In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, and contents of 1 earl grey tea bag.

In another bowl, whisk together the steeped tea, sour cream, egg and vanilla.

Add the cold butter to the dry ingredients and toss to combine, then add the wet ingredients and mix together with a wooden spoon. Switch to your hands to bring the dough together quickly into a ball. (Note: Keep the butter and wet ingredients as cold as possible and work quickly so the butter doesn't melt and soften into the dough too much.)

Transfer the dough to a lightly floured surface and press the dough to a circle about 7-8 inches in diameter and about an inch high. Use a bench scraper or knife

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to cut the round into 8 slices, then transfer to a large parchment lined baking pan. Keep the wedges relatively close to each other, as it helps the scones to rise. Place the pan and scones in the freezer and preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. Once preheated, bake the scones for 16-18 min., then cool in the pan.

Lemon Icing

- 1 1/4 cups powdered sugar
- 3-4 Tablespoons lemon juice freshly squeezed
- 1 teaspoon vanilla paste or extract

Whisk together the powder sugar, lemon juice, and vanilla until a thick icing is formed. If the icing is too thin, add more powdered sugar. If it's too thick, add more lemon juice (or water). Add a spoonful of glaze to each scone spreading it over the top.

Source: "Earl Grey Scones with Lemon Glaze," The Cozy Plum.
(thecozyplum.com/earl-grey-scones)

Spinach Artichoke Cups

- 1 (10 oz.) package frozen spinach, defrosted and chopped
- 1 cup canned artichoke hearts, drained and chopped
- 4 oz. cream cheese, softened
- 1/4 cup sour cream
- 1 1/2 cup shredded mozzarella
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tube crescent dough





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Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Grease a mini muffin tin with cooking spray. In a large bowl, combine spinach, artichokes, cream cheese, sour cream, 1 cup mozzarella, parmesan, and garlic. Season with salt and pepper.

On a lightly floured surface, roll out the crescent dough, pinching the seams together to make one sheet. Cut into 24 squares. Place squares into muffin tin slots, and spoon 1 tablespoon of dip onto the dough. Top with remaining mozzarella.

Bake until pastry is golden and cheese is melted, about 15 min.

Source: "Spinach Artichoke Cups," Delish.
(delish.com/cooking/g4208/book-club-food-ideas/?slide=22)

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