Negroland Study Guide

Negroland by Margo Jefferson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

This study guide was created from the following version of this book: Jefferson, Margo. Negroland. New York: Pantheon Books, 2015. Kindle AZW file.

Margo Jefferson was born into a family that was middle-class by American standards but upper-class by Negro standards. Her father was a doctor of pediatric medicine and her mother was a social worker, but her main role was taking care of their home and family with a special emphasis on caring for Margo and her older sister, Denise.

Jefferson was a vivacious child who learned early on that it was acceptable to show off only in the correct circumstances. Jefferson, Denise, and their peers were held to a high set of standards. They were taught that white people were constantly evaluating the Negroes' actions in the hope of tearing down the race as a whole. They were also taught they had a huge responsibility on that front, and that their actions could literally harm the entire race.

Jefferson and Denise attended a private school with a majority white student base and only a few select Negro students. She never developed deep friendships but always had friends and did well when she applied herself. Jefferson excelled academically and was talented in drama and music, but always felt that she was not as pretty as she should be. She and her peers were taught all the ways they could enhance their beauty. They rigorously avoided “ashy” skin with the use of cosmetic lotions. They also sat still for their mother to straighten their hair into conformity, which meant it was to be straight and lustrous. Jefferson had eye problems, which meant she wore glasses throughout her childhood, and she felt they put her at a greater disadvantage.

Jefferson always struggled with racial slurs and did not understand the subtler ones. Her mother was furious when she discovered that Jefferson's class had learned a song that included the word “darkie.” Her grandmother interrupted when Jefferson, following a girl from the neighborhood, was pretending to be a monkey. When those situations occurred, Jefferson felt that she would never understand the racial slurs and felt like a failure because of her lack of understanding. By college, she had become more adept at maneuvering through the racial questions, but still faced challenges, such as when she was cast to play a maid. In that case, she had to weigh the stereotypical black woman as a maid against her desire to take the stage.

Jefferson was in college when the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing. She was angry at some parts of her life, including that much of her childhood was spent learning how to mimic white people. Her language began to change during that period. She continued to use the word Negro to refer to her childhood, but began to use black to describe herself as an adult. She also used African American in some specific circumstances. She had launched a successful career in journalism by the time women's rights were at the forefront of the political and social scene. She observed that the movement was dominated by whites.

As an adult, Jefferson saw black women gain rights that they had never had before. As a child, she was taught that a Negro woman was to be a strong person who never gave in to the tragedies of life. As an adult, she found that black women suddenly had the right to admit to being depressed. For Jefferson, that opened a fascination with death and she even practiced writing suicide notes.

As Jefferson brings her story to a close, she talks about her continuing desire to “dismantle” herself. She considers whether she has done anything to make the world a better place and whether she has become a happy adult. She concludes that she might not have been perfect, but that it does not really matter.

Chapters 1-3

Summary

In Chapter 1, Margo Jefferson begins by talking about the expectations for her deportment, mainly the requirement that she be decorous at all times. She told the story of rushing on stage during a children's talent show. She took the stage, though another child was in the middle of a performance, demanded that the pianist continue playing, and danced. Soon after that, Jefferon and her family were at a dinner party. During a lull in the conversation, she announced that she sometimes did not wipe herself when she went to the bathroom. She immediately recognized the difference between the reactions at the two events.

Jefferson defines Negroland as her personal name for “a small region of Negro America where residents were sheltered by a certain amount of privilege and plenty” (3). Adults warned that whites were always looking for a way to return them to “indigence, deference, and subservience” (3).

In Chapter 2, Jefferson explains that the people of Negroland have called themselves many names over the years of their existence, including “the blue vein society,” “the colored elite,” and “the colored 400” (7). She talks about her ancestry, including the “slaves and slaveholders” a few generations earlier. She has a series of professional people in her immediate family line, including police officers, engineers, real estate business women, lawyers, judges, doctors, and social workers. Jefferson launches into brief histories of Negroes who had created successful lives for themselves, sometimes through the help of white patrons who provided financial backing and resources, such as access to education.

In Chapter 3, Jefferson talks about the roles of Negroes in the Civil War. The men built railroads and forts for the Confederate Army, and worked on the southern plantations. Over the course of the war, some Negroes ran away to Union military camps, where they did many of the same jobs but were considered “contraband.” Some mulattoes offered to fight for the Confederacy, but the offers were usually refused. Some Negroes believed freedom would come at the end of the war, and prepared themselves to become leaders when that happened. The Negroes who went North before the war discover that they were not generally welcome. Through it all, a few Negroes gained recognition, raised money for the abolitionist movement, and became leaders in their communities.

Negroes endured harsh situations during the war and incredible changes with Reconstruction and the formal end of slavery. The Negro community was met with direct attacks for every advance they made. In 1965 and 1866, the civil rights act was enacted and the Ku Klux Kan was founded. Negroes continued to grasp limited opportunities, including positions as political leaders and business owners. Meanwhile, the Negroes who were already among the elite noted the dark skin and lack of refinement in the

lower class of Negroes. The established families worked hard to create a “competing elite” class and to cope with the situation (27). She cited the writing of Ida B. Wells, a young teacher and journalist, who wrote about punishment exacted on Negroes for even minor infringements. Wells used newspapers and official documents to write about men, women, and children who were lynched for “insurrection.” Negroes were also lynched if their successes were a threat to their white counterparts. She was an advocate of rights for blacks and for women.

Jefferson presents information on several significant books about Negroes, including The Souls of Black Folks and Black Bourgeoisie. The latter, written by Franklin Frazier in 1957, stirred up anger among the middle-class blacks. Jefferson says the people of Negroland were working in the civil rights movement during the 1960s, providing leadership and financial support. They were also involved in court cases and news headlines, and were participating in demonstrations “on the streets and freedom buses” (35). The language changes to include terms such as “Black Power” and “Black Studies,” changing the attitude about the word black, which had been avoided in previous years. During the 1970s, blacks moved into new positions, including political and business. Society changed even more leading up to the year 2000.

Margo said that all those changes were still in the future when she was a child of the 1950s and 1960s. She was raised to understand that the Negroes were better than the whites, but that whites looked down on them anyway. They were also taught that the privileges they enjoyed could be lost.

Analysis

The book was copyrighted in 2015. By that time, the word “Negro” was not commonly used and some people might even find it offensive. However, the word would have been a common term for blacks during the author's early life, and she chooses it because of its historical significance, which she says is both “glorious and terrible.” In an effort to maintain the author's choice of tone, the word “Negro” is used frequently throughout this study guide.

Jefferson's opening paragraphs set the stage for the entire book. She talks about blacks who had made something of themselves, and whites who were simply waiting for the opportunity to drag them back into their poverty. While she does not mention slavery by name in this section of the chapter, she does talk about it at length, and how the adults in her childhood seemed to hint that the children could be returned to slavery if they failed to conduct themselves properly. There is a similarity to parents everywhere who threaten their children with tales of “the boogeyman.” The difference is that the boogeyman did not exist but the whites who wanted desperately to see blacks fail were all too real during this time in America's history.

Jefferson mentions Franklin Frazier's book, Black Bourgeoisie, with emphasis on the title. The word bourgeoisie refers to a middle class that is solely devoted to keeping their own financial situations intact. Jefferson's comment about the title seems to

indicate that she is disdainful of the attitude that became prevalent during this time in history. Instead of working toward attaining higher educations and becoming political and a community, many of the people of that era wanted only to safely preserve their own way of life. She goes on to talk about their apparent feelings of inferiority. The middle class Negroes were notably angry over Frazier's criticism, and he took that as a sign that they recognized the truth of his statements.

The wording throughout the book is important because the reader has to assume that word choices are deliberate. One example is seen in Chapter 3. Jefferson writes that she and her peers were taught that their privileges could be “taken away.” She does not say that it could be lost or that they could squander it. Her word choice indicates that she knew from an early age that her lifestyle was dependent on white indulgence and on the Negros' determination to hold onto what they had accomplished.

Vocabulary

parse, maimed, deprivation, obscurities, distinctions, rivals, arbiters, melange, fluently, mulatto, abolitionist, entrepreneur, curtail, indentured, patrons, fluctuating, deeming

Chapters 4-6

Summary

In Chapter 4, Jefferson's father, a captain, was at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, the location of the largest Negro hospital in the U.S. Negroes staffed and commanded the hospital, a rarity in World War II when most commanders were white. Jefferson's mother, Irma Jefferson wrote a letter to a friend, Deborah Raines, about her life there.

In Chapter 5, one of Jefferson's friends said Jefferson's family seemed wealthy. Jefferson posed the question to her mother and got a lecture about the rudeness of that question. Jefferson was a young girl during these events. About that same time, some other friends asked if she knew the janitor. (Jefferson did not specify, but the girls were apparently asking about the janitor at their school.) When Jefferson mentioned this to her mother, Irma Jefferson said that white people tend to think all Negroes know each other. Wally was the white man who picked up the Jefferson family's laundry each week. He was always very friendly with the family when he was making deliveries, but went out of his way to avoid Irma once when they met accidentally in Sears.

Irma Jefferson told her daughter that black people who worked as servants sometimes preferred to work for white people because they did not resent that as much as working as a servant for a black family. The attitude was that black people who worked as servants would look at their white employers and think that they would always be a servant unless the future changed things for Negroes. But black people who worked as servants for other black people had to think that they could have had that kind of life, “if I hadn't had to start doing housework at fifteen” (45). The servant would see either employer as privileged, and it would be difficult to determine which would be the more difficult situation to bear.

Jefferson talked about their own household. Mrs. Blake was the servant who helped with cleaning, but Jefferson and her sister, Denise, were taught to always show respect to Mrs. Blake. They made their own beds and never left a dirty bathtub for Mrs. Blake to clean. When she did laundry in the humid basement, some tendrils of hair would stick up. Though Jefferson and Denise would laugh about that kind of hair in general, they knew they would be punished if they made fun of Mrs. Blake.

In Chapter 6, Jefferson asked her mother if they had Indian blood after spending time at summer camp. Her mother hated that having Indian ancestry had become popular.

Jefferson explained that she would often refer her acquaintances by an initial in order to protect their privacy. She said the stories would not always place them in a good light, and that those moments were not hers to share.

Jefferson and Denise spent time at summer camp, two of only a few Negroes at that camp. There was another Negro boy named Ronnie who was new at the camp. A

counselor asked Jefferson to try to help him figure out how to fit in. Jefferson resented that she was chosen for the task when there was another Negro boy, Phillip, at the camp. She did obey, and talked to Ronnie, but it was awkward and Jefferson soon forgot all about him. She felt "grief" when she thought about him in later years because of her attitude toward him. She said she “looked down on him,” but that her attitude was even worse than that because she actually “dreaded him” (49).

Analysis

Jefferson was “excited” with the possibility that she might have something in her background other than Negro blood. That is one example of trends seen in history. In recent years, many people have gone out of their way to prove Indian ancestry for a number of reasons. Jefferson's attitude is interesting considering that she mentioned the slaveholders in her own ancestry, which indicates white blood in her past. She may not have known about that when she was a child talking about the possibility of Indian ancestry.

Jefferson talks about the boy named Ronnie who was new at their summer camp. She does not go into details about Ronnie, but it is evident that he did not fit in with the other children there. Jefferson says the counselor sought Jefferson out as the one person who might talk to Ronnie in an effort to help him fit in. There are several important points in this story. First, Jefferson notes that she was always angry when her “Race singles me out for a special chore or duties” (48). Jefferson uses a capital “R” to denote the importance of the word “Race” in this case. Her words imply the situation was not new to her. She was having fun and was singled out as the person who should talk to Ronnie. Jefferson knew that there was a Negro boy named Phillip at the camp, and years later she and a white friend discussed the reason the counselor called on Jefferson rather than Phillip. The friend decided the counselors did not even consciously consider him because they did not really see him as black.

The situation involving summer camp is one of many examples of the challenges Margo and her peers faced. Not only were they dealing with the social standings between white and black, they were also faced with the social issues among people of her own race. Negroes with lighter skin, the right kind of hair, and better educations looked down on Negroes who did not have those traits and advantages. While some people could control some aspects of those – such as working hard for a better education – they could do little about the texture of their hair or their skin color. These prejudices within the race were as difficult for young people to navigate as the prejudices between races. These are probably easy for the modern reader to understand but some may be surprised that the social classes within the Negro race were so clearly defined.

Vocabulary

ensembles, presumption, inappropriate, normality, pathetic, recognizable, interracial, sufficient, defy, leisurely, sullen, disquieting

Chapters 7-9

Summary

In Chapter 7, Jefferson says the people of Negroland felt they were a Third Race that had the advantage of the Third Eye. She goes on to describe how they felt about themselves, including that they had more ambition than either whites or the less-affluent blacks. Despite that, the Negroes of her generation sought to become more like whites in all ways possible, and bragged about any white blood in their ancestry. She said the whites wanted the same things. Jefferson claims the whites failed more often, but the color of their skin meant they were not judged the same as Negroes with the same failures.

In Chapter 8, Jefferson launches into a list of attributes coveted by the young women of Negroland. They were under “stringent” standards as to what constituted beauty. They were taught to take ruthless stock of problem areas and to compensate for those. Hair, skin color, and the shape of noses and mouths were among the most important. Jefferson and Denise had some positive attributes but their mother worked constantly to keep their hair under control.

The Jefferson family watched every ballet that made an appearance in Chicago. At age seven, Denise decided she wanted to take “serious” ballet lessons. Miss Edna McRae became her teacher. She said Denise had talent but would likely never perform onstage unless it was with an all-Negro company.

Jefferson talks at length about skin tone, saying Denise was darker than Jefferson and her mother. Denise and Jefferson faithfully watched the Miss America pageants and suggested that their mother could be a contender. She told them the story of a sorority sister who had been nominated for the Cap and Gown beauty contest by a friend without her permission. She won the most votes but the college officials, upon learning she was a Negro, took away the award. She had never wanted to participate but hated that it was taken away.

Jefferson gives a brief history of Mary Jane McLeod who was shamed into action when she watched white children studying while being denied an education herself. She became an important educator in Florida. She appeared on the cover of Ebony magazine with Eleanor Roosevelt and served on a political cabinet. Mary McLeod was not a beautiful woman by the standards of Jefferson's childhood, but her work was one step that made Jefferson's life possible.

In Chapter 9, the family gathered to watch their favorite weekend television shows, including the Milton Burl Show with guest Sammy Davis Jr. Jefferson's parents evaluated Sammy's performance and the presence of his elderly father and another man. Jefferson talked about other performers, including Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge. Jefferson listed the small details of their performances, including their

clothes, and her parents' evaluations. It was common knowledge that Dorothy wanted to marry a white man. She'd had white lovers, but never made the step to marriage. She eventually did marry a man no one had even heard of, and Jefferson said he would never have been able to marry a white woman who had Dorothy's money and Hollywood connections.

Analysis

Chapter 7 is very brief, just a little more than a page in length. Jefferson talks about several important aspects of her life, including the comparison to the Third Race and the image of the Third Eye.

The Third Race is a reference to the them-versus-us mentality. Historically, people have held to that feeling mainly with regard to ethnicity or religion. The early Christians called themselves the Third Race as a way to differentiate between the Jews-or-Gentiles mentality. The Jews of that time considered themselves chosen and anyone who was not a Jew was automatically classed as Gentile. The Christians sought to set themselves apart from both. Margo described the affluent blacks of Negroland as the Third Race, indicating that they did not feel they were like the whites but they also did not identify with the majority of blacks who were less-affluent and usually poorly educated.

Jefferson also talks about the idea of the Third Eye, which is a pagan theory that everyone has an inner eye, used for a higher level of enlightenment than the ordinary people. Expanding on that, she says that the people of Negroland felt they were better than their white counterparts in several areas, including education, sophistication, and ambition.

The final point of the chapter is that the people of Negroland sought to be like whites in many ways, including the appearances and manners that were the "birthright" of whites. She goes on to say that the Negroes sometimes failed at their efforts but that whites failed much more often. However, the whites looked white, which meant that they were not judged for their failures as blacks were.

Jefferson lists all the attributes that were considered favorable for the young Negro woman and those that were hated. The notable thing about these lists are that many of them are not within the young lady's control. Others took a lot of work to change. Splotchy skin was not acceptable and young ladies spent extra effort on their knees and elbows. Jefferson said that “elbow grease” was not just a saying. The attitudes have changed in the years since Jefferson's childhood, but there are still some aspects of those rules and rituals that remain a part of every young person's life in modern society, such as the need to make up for flaws, whether those are real or perceived. There are also some things considered favorable while other attributes are undesirable. For Jefferson, straight or wavy hair was preferred over “nappy hair” that cannot be controlled. Though trends change, the person trying to fit in to a specific sect of society is usually forced to fill as many of the positive attributes as possible.

Jefferson's parents seemed to watch television mainly for the opportunity to evaluate the actions of the Negro performers. They were free with their criticism but seemed to also be willing to give praise when it was deserved. For example, they talked about Lena Horne's tendency to “mug.” They were referring to a facial expression that would normally be a negative, but said she could make that expression because she was so pretty. Their attitudes about others seemed to mimic what Jefferson had already written in an early chapter about the people of Negroland who felt they were in a class unto themselves, but were always looking for ways to be more like white people. That seems to include a right to constantly evaluate others of Negroland and to consider what they were doing right as well as what they were doing wrong.

Vocabulary

blatant, surreptitious, dexterity, tepidly, irreproachable, stringent, vigilant, perceived, deficiencies, obtrusive, sheath, sediment, flaunting, evokes

Chapters 10-12

Summary

In Chapter 10, Jefferson reveals that she read the Ebony magazine each month. She talks about the differences between the mainstream white publications and Ebony. The white publications were more inclined to “defend the norms they were sure of” while Ebony sought to “establish norms and be lauded for those we maintain” (72). She cites other magazine articles. Some sought to discover more about the Negros as individuals and as a race but some were laudatory while some were negative. An article about the number of Negroes in baseball prompted the idea that every success for the Negro race could meet with demands for retreat.

Jefferson talked about other articles. Louis Armstrong's reasons for liking "dark women” was in one. Eartha Kitt was subject of another. Kitt was an actress and the article listed reasons Negroes did not like her. Jefferson's parents threw a party for the cast of a play called New Faces. Eartha Kitt was the only major cast member who failed to show up. It was an obvious slight but prompted the adults to say that she was not secure enough with her own success to be in the company of other successful Negroes.

In Chapter 11, Jefferson and Denise sometimes watched their parents' parties from the stairs. She describes two handsome men who insisted the girls come down for a moment. They returned to their spot on the stairs and the young Jefferson watched, with her glasses pressed against the banisters.

Jefferson's father told her about the day they discovered Jefferson had myopia, astigmatism, and strabismus. Her mother was crying loudly when they returned from the eye doctor and Jefferson was crying because her mother was crying. An operation at an early age helped correct the crossed eyes. She wore a patch in first grade when several other children were also wearing patches, but she had to endure it again in sixth grade, this time when none of her classmates were going through it. Her glasses had such a high level of correction that the lenses jutted out from the frames. She hated how she looked. When she was in high school, she got contacts and finally felt the satisfaction of being able to wear eye makeup that made an impact.

Jefferson says she felt she'd lost some of her dependence on sight when she was a child, and that she regretted that as an adult. That happened as a way of coping with her self-consciousness when she compared herself with her friends.

In Chapter 12, Jefferson's parents wanted both Jefferson and Denise to attend a quality private school. The University of Chicago Laboratory School opened its doors to a few Negroes in 1942. In 1951, Denise began second grade there. In 1952, Jefferson began kindergarten there. Jefferson said her childhood home felt safe and “orderly,” but she also felt a kinship with Negroes in other places in the city, and learned that her mother felt the same.

When two Negro families tried to move into a white neighborhood, a riot ensued. Jefferson says the rioters were chanting, “We want fire, we want blood” (81). In a footnote attached to that paragraph, Jefferson says the historical account of the event included that “two crosses were burned and the two houses stoned” (97). Jefferson was obviously moved by those words, which prompted her decision to include an explanation as a footnote. She says the details about the crosses hit close to home because her own grandfather took his family from their Mississippi home to California in 1918, and someone burned a cross on their lawn immediately. Her grandfather sat up all night with his shotgun to protect his family and his property. They took the case to court and won the right to remain in their home.

The Jeffersons moved from Bronzeville to Park Manor when Margo Jefferson was three. Soon after, the police stopped Dr. Jefferson on his way home from work. They searched his doctor's bag and found proof that he was a doctor, as he had told them.

Jefferson quotes a lengthy passage but did not identify the source. In that passage, she talks about the fact that parents knew their children would face this kind of discrimination. They had to decide whether to protect the children from the harsh realities and let them learn it for themselves, or to tell them about it when they were young so they would be more prepared. The passage concludes by saying there were negatives to both and either could “lead to spiritual disaster for the child” (82). Jefferson adds that both choices could also lead to “spiritual disaster” for the adults.

Jefferson's family bought an apartment house and they occupied three of the building's four floors. Mrs. Collins, a Negro divorcee who made hats, rented the fourth. There were some whites in the neighborhood but Negroes were quickly buying up the property. Many years later, Irma Jeffeson told Margo Jefferson there was a white family with two little girls who lived nearby when they first moved to Park Manor. Three times, the little girls went to the swing in Jeffersons' back yard when Jefferson and Denise were taking their naps. Irma Jefferson urged the girls to go home but never had the nerve to confront their mother.

Irma was always perfectly dressed when she dropped Jefferson and and Denise off at school. On the first day, Jefferson cried at being left. For the first few days, she insisted on a specific red dress that made her feel braver. After a short time, she stopped being afraid and mimicked a little girl who still cried. Her parents were “delighted.” Jefferson goes on to give synopsis of her time in each grade up to third.

In 1956, the family traveled on vacation that included a stop in Atlantic City where they were treated badly, given small rooms overlooking the parking lot, and made to feel unwelcome. They remained only one night with Irma explaining the reason to the girls. On the way home, she said they should have done more research before “taking the risk” (93). Jefferson talks about the Negroes who had no ambition and gave the entire race a bad reputation. She also talks about the whites who counted themselves superior to all Negroes, but who showed their own inferiority by the fact that they grouped all Negros as inferior.

That same summer, there was a girl in the neighborhood named Betty Ann. Jefferson and Denise were envious when Betty Ann and her friends jumped rope and ate candy, obviously having a good time together. When they refused to let Jefferson have another turn because she was so clumsy, the girls went home. That night, the parents discussed the “coarse” manners Betty Ann and her friends exhibited, and wondered if it was time to move again after only five years in the neighborhood.

When Jefferson was in fourth grade, she sang the song “Swanee River.” Her mother was furious when she included the word “darkie,” citing teachers from a previous year who had changed the offensive word. Jefferson remembers a time when she was playing with a little girl from her grandmother's neighborhood. As the two hunched over, shouting that they were from the jungle, Jefferson's grandmother called her inside and explained that the girl was comparing Jefferson to a monkey. Jefferson said situations like these made her feel that she should have known what was going on, and that it was both dangerous and shameful to be ignorant about such things.

Analysis

Jefferson talks about the family's move to Park Manor only with regard to the changes that were being wrought in the neighborhood. There had apparently been whites in the neighborhood in the past, but that was rapidly changing. Though there were no members of the Ku Klux Klan burning crosses in yards, there was another kind of overt discrimination at work. Realtors were actively seeking out property owners, promising to sell the property at an over-priced rate to Negro families looking for homes in the neighborhood. Jefferson cites an imaginary sales pitch given by a “savvy white realtor” to “an angry white homeowner.” In that conversation, the realtor said they would sell all the property to the Negroes and “let them pay to ruin the neighborhood if they want it so much” (84).

There are some moments that appear to be painfully honest and are probably the author's effort to make the reader understand their lives. Jefferson's mother talked about being intimidated by a white family that lived in their neighborhood. There were two girls who appeared at the Jefferson's back yard several times, playing on their swings at a time of day when Jefferson and Diane were having their afternoon nap. Jefferson's mother said she always told the girls that Jefferson and Diane could not come out to play now, and that they could come back some other time, which seemed like a tactful way of sending the girls home. She admitted to Jefferson that she never had the nerve to talk to the girls' mother about the situation. Jefferson compared that to any other situation in which wrongs are never corrected because the person never actually addresses them.

When Irma Jefferson was telling Jefferson that story, Jefferson realized that her mother was sad because of the memory. They talked about it briefly and Jefferson tapped into “slave humor” as a means of trying to make her mother smile. She said the “pattyrollers” might have come for Mrs. Jefferson, if she had confronted the girls' mother. The “pattyrollers” reference dates back to the slave days when men patrolled specific areas

in search of slaves who had broken law, including runaway slaves. The slaves referred to them as “pattyrollers.”

Jefferson also told her mother that the girls must have moved away before Jefferson and Denise got their badminton set. She said the little girls would not have been able to stay away from the Jeffersons' back yard once they saw Denise and Jefferson having so much fun with that game. Jefferson was obviously trying to cheer her mother's mood, but she may also have been making a veiled statement about race relations. While there were many things that kept races apart, there were also some fundamental moments that brought them together. Children having fun together could have been one of those moments.

There is an interesting aspect of what is expected and accepted with regard to manners. Jefferson cried the first day she was left at school and was obviously upset for the first week or more. She got past her fears and began to go without incident after a relatively short time. But there was another little girl who continued to cry and Jefferson mimicked her wail. Her parents were “delighted” with her ability to perfectly match the little girl's cries. It seems cruel that a parent would allow a child to make fun of another child's fears, even if that child never knew about Jefferson's conversation with her parents. But that is seen several times in the book. Jefferson writes about Mrs. Blake, the woman who took care of some of their household chores, including their laundry. The girls typically made fun of any Negro who had the “nappy” hair that refused to be tamed. Mrs. Blake's hair was exactly like that. When she was in the humid basement, her hair would often escape and curl around her face. Jefferson and Denise might have made fun of that situation in general, but they would never have made fun of Mrs. Blake. That attitude is left to the reader to evaluate.

It is obvious that Jefferson's parents were anxious to live a good lifestyle in a good neighborhood, and to give their daughters the tools to live similar lives. There is a section about the impact of failures on the entire race. There were Negroes who did not have the ambition to try harder, and who were willing to live in slum conditions because they were poor. Jefferson concludes that section of the book with the statement that all Negroes were held accountable for the actions of that segment of the population.

Jefferson felt that she often did not know about things that were prejudicial, such as the song that included the word “darkie” and the game about the jungle. Her feelings were strong on these subjects, indicating that they made a big impact on her at the time and that they made a lasting impact on her life.

Vocabulary

pragmatist, nurture, experimentation, coeducational, monoracial, pristine, vigilant, minority, excruciating, deemed, fiercely, social, persuasion, partaking

Chapters 13-15

Summary

In Chapter 13, Jefferson says there were generations worth of youngsters who learned “the standard race curriculum” (98). She said each of those young people have a debt to their race but she wonders if future generations will be “exempt.” She questions whether future generations will be examples of the damages inherited by Jefferson's generation.

In Chapter 14, Jefferson and Denise recited a poem by Langston Hughes. They used an exaggerated “ignorant dialect” that they found funny, but their mother was not amused and immediately set out to increase the girls' awareness and appreciation of the accomplishments of Negroes. Jefferson lists several of those Negroes and ends this section by asking a question that was apparently posed by their mother: “Do you really want to know as little as your white schoolmates know about where we came from and what we've accomplished?” (105).

By age 10, Jefferson was popular but worried that her outgoing attitude would make her seem shallow. She had a quarrel with a friend and Jefferson snubbed the girl's first attempt to reconcile. They did make up but the relationship was never the same and Jefferson learned a lesson.

About this time, Jefferson's Uncle Lucious returned to Negroland. His skin was so light that he lived his life as a white man. He tried to fit in but found that he often got into fights when whites voiced their hatred of Negroes. He was a salesman all his life and Jefferson's parents were judgmental, saying he had the advantage of living as a white man and still never managed to do anything more than be a salesman. Jefferson knew the basic story before Uncle Lucious arrived for dinner one night, but she was surprised that he did not appear to be Negro at all. That made her question all the people she knew who were white, considering that some of them could be hiding the fact that they were Negro.

There were other Negros who lived as whites, including a man Jefferson identifies as her cousin, J.E. He hid his background from his white family all his life. When he died, his sons apparently found something that made them know that their father was a Negro. They went to J.E.'s mother, their grandmother, but she denied knowing the man and turned them away. There were complex reasons behind her action, including the knowledge that they would have seen the resemblance and would have to live with that knowledge.

Jefferson was a member of Jack and Jill, a social club for children with their mothers devoted to “the insights and enlightened ideals of child psychology” (118). The club played an important role in the lives of Negro children, especially those who attended white schools as a “racial enrichment program” that helped them understand they did

not need to depend on the approval of their white classmates. Jefferson says she hates the Negro who claims they would have had a deeper racial identity if they had attended an all-Negro school, at least during their early years. She cites cases of prejudice in education, including a problem her father faced during his fellowship to become a doctor.

In Chapter 15, Denise and Jefferson reached puberty and learned to navigate through the related problems, including Clearasil for their pimples. Jefferson and Denise watched and evaluated American Bandstand. Jefferson still read when she was alone and she discovered the poem, The Congo, by Vachel Lindsay. Jefferson experienced a whirlwind of emotions that jumped from compulsion to revulsion and back again. She felt the writer's vicious attack on the “stuporous and savage” race. Jefferson said the poem was literally her first “pornography.”

Analysis

Chapter 13 is very brief, consisting of only seven sentences. The message, however, is complex. This kind of writing is seen in several sections of the book with Jefferson putting complicated ideas out there and leaving them to the reader to evaluate. In most cases, the ideas are further examined in coming chapters, or have already been discussed through situations and memories.

Jefferson and Denise socialized with white children at school and they were becoming more often exposed to white ideas and prejudices. They were very young and could not always tell when something was a racial slur that should be avoided. Langston Hughes' poem is one example. Jefferson said she and other Negro children were in a new world in which they could not depend on separation of their cultures as a means of understanding racial slurs.

The woman who denied knowing her son and turned her grandsons away seems overly hostile, but there were deeper implications and emotions at work. First, the man had lived his life as a white man, never acknowledging his Negro relatives. That included his mother. He made his preferences clear and his mother obeyed his wishes by denying that she knew him. That was one side of the situation, but another was that the man's mother had denied her very existence for most of his life. Her feelings were bound to be hurt and their relationship damaged beyond repair. The woman sent her grandsons away so that she could not face the possibility of rejection, but knew the boys would never again see themselves as completely white. The modern reader has to remember the time setting in order to fully understand the emotions at work. Negroes of this era were treated overall as substandard people with few rights. The outright hatred and bigotry was not usually concealed. It could have been that those boys were trying to connect with a grandmother because they were desperate for family connections of any kind, but it was more likely that they were trying to disprove the theory that their father was Negro. With that in mind, the grandmother's actions seem more understandable.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

exempt, demise, curriculum, dialect, premises, instilled, vivacity, shallow, somber, sputter, pedagogy, integrity, galvanized, maligned, embody

Chapters 16-18

Summary

In Chapter 16, Jefferson's class got bigger in sixth grade with an influx of students who had been in public school. They brought “worldly” ways that created a whole new set of competitions, including a “list" of the prettiest girls with the best personalities and best dance moves. Jefferson was top of the personality and dance list, but bottom of the looks list. One boy liked her but Jefferson stopped returning his smiles when she discovered he lived in a building where Negroes were not allowed. About that time, her mother told her that she could not trust whites because they always carried a level of prejudice.

Jefferson found that she did not have a "best friend." One girl was a year ahead in school, so was constantly in demand. A group of other friends were more involved with each other. Jefferson welcomed the chance to go to art camp. For three years, Jefferson attended eight weeks at Interlochen in Michigan, and those weeks filled with music, drama, and art felt like a reprieve from the demands of life.

In Chapter 17, Jefferson began as a freshman at University High in 1960, with three of the four years in an “unhappy” state.” She was selected as the only freshman on the squad that year and the only Negro. She was beat out in coming years by girls who had not even realized they might be cheerleaders until she paved the way. She struggled through reading James Baldwin's essays, specifically Notes of a Native Son. Jefferson includes many of Baldwin's passages and her thoughts, including her hatred of the coarse Negro of Baldwin's writing that made it more difficult for the Negro who made advances by dignified means. She also hated the characters like Mark Twain's Jim from Huckleberry Finn, and wished Negroes who achieved great things could be featured instead.

Jefferson spent her final summer at Interlochen and discovered another Negro girl was there. Jefferson was only as polite as her upbringing demanded, but she felt ashamed that she did not want that other Negro girl to be there.

When Jefferson got home, the family had moved to Hyde Park-Kenwood with Jefferson's parents pleased with the “socially stable" aspects of the neighborhood. They were one of few Negro families. A realtor group had arranged for the move, apparently choosing the Jeffersons as a family that would fit in with the neighborhood's goals, which included a “small number of upper-middle-class Negroes” in the neighborhood. They lived in a condominium with other Negro families.

Jefferson was a junior in high school and was now close enough to Lab High that she could walk home or take a brief bus ride. During senior year, she was chosen as a cheerleader and as team captain.

At this point in the book, Jefferson dropped to third person, saying it gave the impression that she had more emotional control. She had “flurries” of friendships but still had no one she could call a best friend. She wanted to belong in lots of places but sometimes struggled, as when she was chosen to play a piano solo at graduation but did not practice enough to be perfect. She struggled to be popular, balancing that against her reputation of being talented and intelligent. She said she struggled to balance the attitudes whites had about her because she was black and the attitudes of Negroes who felt she was “socially inept due to an excess of white-derived manners and interests” (156).

In Chapter 18, Jefferson studied at Brandels University from 1964 through 1968. She made the cheer squad but realized that was not a respected organization. She finished one season and never tried out again. She became involved in drama and rebelled against a stereotypical role as a maid. She failed to land the next role and dropped out for awhile. When she was encouraged to join the fencing team, she “practiced” falling down some stairs and arrived on the day of tryouts with a bandage on her knee, the perfect excuse not to try out.

Jefferson launches into a lengthy passage about her thoughts on the Civil Rights Movement. She felt there was no reason for blacks to expect to get equal rights while obeying social dictates because white people did not respect those rules. Jefferson began to look more closely at her childhood teachings that required Negroes to be better than their white counterparts in order to get ahead in the world. Jefferson's mother and her peers made jokes about the afros that were becoming popular with Jefferson and her friends. Jefferson concludes the chapter by saying that her mother's generation has “a lot to answer for” (162).

Analysis

Jefferson was one of very few Negroes at Interlochen. She was very talented and, from her words, everyone seemed to like her. When a new Negro girl arrived, Jefferson followed the manners she had been taught which demanded that she greet the girl. To have done otherwise would be impolite. The modern reader may find it odd that Jefferson was obliged to make a connection with the girl just because they were both Negroes, but there was a reason behind it. Negroes who found themselves at places where they were the minority would naturally feel out of place, at least to a degree. Irma Jefferson taught her daughters that it was polite to say hello, just to assure that other Negro that there was someone rooting for their success. But Jefferson admitted that she did not like having that other Negro girl there and really resented her presence. She probably was not as welcoming as she should have been according to her mother's dictates, but it is important to remember that she was still just a teenager and was subject to emotions that sometimes drove her actions differently than her parents wanted.

Jefferson talks about her social life during her final years of high school. She says there were unwritten guidelines that were generally accepted, and these provided a means of

co-existing with her peers, including Negroes, Jews and whites. The boys typically gathered for sports activities. The girls shopped or visited museums. The girls never had sleepovers. All these seem reasonable on their face, especially considering that it was the early 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement was just about to launch. But then Jefferson makes another interesting comment. She says her parents owned a boat and they sometimes used it on weekends. If they saw white classmates, they all waved as if they were happy to see each other, but they never stopped to talk. Jefferson and the others her age would undoubtedly have enjoyed that kind of connection, but their parents were not interested in those encounters because they were on the water to relax. The indication is that the parents would have struggled far more with those encounters than their children. That makes sense because those young people had, by that time, spent years getting to know each other and race was not nearly as important to them as their friendships, even though those friendships were mainly casual.

Jefferson has written gently about her mother up to this point and seems to approve of the dictates handed down by the reputable women of her mother's generation. They sought to make their sons and daughters into the very best they could be, pushing them academically and socially while nurturing any talent, including ballet and piano. Jefferson's attitude abruptly changes when she begins to talk about her time in college. She admits that she was born at the perfect time in history, just at the front edge of the Civil Rights Movement. By the time she was in college, the Movement was in full swing. Jefferson began to see her mother's attitude as a means for affluent Negroes to avoid confrontations while making the most of their lives. It would not be fair to say they never stood up for themselves, because they did, but they did it in the newspapers and courts, seeking to win while “behaving” by a specific set of rules. By contrast, Jefferson says that they needed to stop being the affluent, well-mannered Negroes and just accept that they were all Negroes who needed to stand together. This abrupt change in attitude could be partly attributed to the time. Remember that college campuses around the nation were prime battle grounds over civil rights issues during a tumultuous time in American history. But Jefferson was also in college, working on her own ideas and developing her own personality with some distance from her mother's influence. It would be a natural time for Jefferson to experience a coming of age epiphany.

Jefferson's final sentence of Chapter 18 seems rather brutal. She says her mother's generation had “a lot to answer for.” She was largely talking about the attitudes that had been instilled in Jefferson's generation, which Jefferson seems to believe was wrong on many fronts.

Vocabulary

ecstatically, icon, prestigious, legitimacy, pretentious, prosper, intensities, stoic, adroitly, insidious, voluptuously, miscegenation, unfurls, rigor, stringent

Chapters 19-21

Summary

In Chapter 19, Jefferson talks about the young Negro men who were dying with guns in their hands, either at home or in Vietnam, or who were turning to drugs and alcohol that eventually took their lives. Some young Negro women were falling into disgrace with premarital sex and unplanned pregnancies outside marriage. With the Civil Rights Movement, everything changed and the Negro was faced with the knowledge that there were more options than one extreme or the other - the full decorum demanded by their parents and the disgrace of sex and drugs.

Suddenly, Jefferson, her family, and her peers were not entitled, but were corruptions of the black race. They had left behind their black culture to live on the edge of white culture. The young generation of blacks examined themselves ruthlessly, looking at how much African history they had studied and weighing the number of white musicians, writers, and artists they admired to decide if that number was too high. Jefferson's peers, who had been raised by mothers similar to Jefferson's, sought out a different life. They married boys their parents did not know and would not approve of. There were some “mistakes” with the Negro girl who ended up dead at the hands of a bad drug deal. While white girls faced that fate on a regular basis, Jefferson noted that they had been raised to be better than that. The Negro mothers argued that the whites could afford to lose some of their own, but that there were relatively few good Negroes, yet the young people were dying at an alarming rate.

Jefferson says many of the Negro boys turned to the streets and the girls turned with them, often ending up dead or with a child they had to raise alone. She wondered if there was some “vestigial longing to plunge back into the abyss” where Negroes had been for centuries (169).

By the 1970s, Jefferson had become a reputable journalist and active feminist. She said she “began to actively cultivate a desire to kill myself” during those years (169). Jefferson said the girls of Negroland had been denied the option of giving in to depression. As a race, they had overcome extraordinary obstacles and were to be the epitome of strength and resilience. Jefferson cites a play in which a young Negro woman struggled through her fears. She hanged herself at the end. Jefferson said the woman was the symbol for Negro women who struggled with their love and fear of white culture and their love and shame of their own people. Jefferson concludes by saying that most of the blame lay at the feet of her “enemies” who forced her parents to make unreasonable demands.

Jefferson wrote down thoughts on death and practiced writing suicide notes. Some included who should get her jewelry. She wrote down the Hemlock Society instructions, including at least 30 aspirin taken with something to make one sleepy, then tying a plastic bag over the head. At the end of the chapter, Jefferson wrote that she knew she

had to “set an example” for other young women in her position by giving them “a death they can live up to” (177).

In Chapter 20, Jefferson gives samples from her diary during that period of her life. Some of the entries quoted other writers. One included the observation of “Unhappiness as an avocation” (179). She went on to talk about changing attitudes and the desire to end the struggles. She hated to talk about race and noted that everyone – even WASPs – were touting all the ways they were wronged.

In Chapter 21, Jefferson talks about her mother's words, “Sometimes I almost forget I'm Negro” (184). She says the sentence had taken on a whole new meaning with the social changes of the 1960s.

Jefferson gives a lengthy history of Charlotte Hawkins Brown. Brown had mixed ancestry and was very intelligent, working her way into a position of founder of a college. She grew up interested in the white culture of the New Englanders. When she was starting her own school, she was controlled by white donors who insisted she teach practical classes rather than liberal arts, but there came a time when she moved past those white donors' demands to meet the needs of young Negro students, including how to act in social situations. She talked about others who blazed the way, including Sojourner and Marian Anderson.

Analysis

Jefferson seems to go on something of a tirade about the wrongs of her parents' generation regarding their demands on Jefferson and her peers. The parents pushed them to live their lives almost as if they were trying to imitate white culture. They pushed them to be better than their white counterparts and the lower class of Negroes, and gave reasons for those demands. When she recounted the stories of her youth, Jefferson seems to accept that these were the best courses for her, but when she became active in civil rights programs during college, she seemed to become critical of her parents' choices. Now, however, she says that it was the demands of whites that pushed her parents into their lifestyles and that prompted the rules imposed on Jefferson and her peers.

Jefferson's fascination with death was somewhat metaphorical, but it could be interpreted as a literal longing to commit suicide, or at least for her life to end. She cited the fact that Negro women had been placed under stringent demands to be strong but that changed as the country made moves toward equal rights for all races and for women. In that way, one could argue that equal rights were not really a good thing for everyone. That, of course, would be a ridiculous argument, but it seems in keeping with Jefferson's idea that Negro women were not free to feel or express depression until the Civil Rights Movement began to change things.

It should be noted that Jefferson begins to use the word “black” sometimes around the time she is writing about her college years. She still uses the word “Negro” as well, but

there seems to be a slight shift in her thinking about the words. As was previously stated, this guide will continue to reflect Jefferson's use of the words in an effort to maintain her choice of tone.

The sample diary entries were somewhat chaotic, but that reflects Jefferson's state of mind during those years. It is also important to remember that the reader gets only excerpts. In one of those, Jefferson wrote a question to herself, asking why she did not respond when people said things to hurt her. She answered that she had hoped to show her goodness by her silence, and that the other person would feel ashamed because of it. There are issues with her argument, including that a person who deliberately sets out to hurt someone is usually incapable of feeling remorse. That makes a strong comparison to Jefferson's own thoughts about people she had slighted and her shame over her actions.

The term WASP appears several times in the book. It stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and represents the typical person of the white community. As is the case with all generic words used to describe a particular ethnic group, WASP can be seen as a derogatory term in some instances.

Vocabulary

extinction, effusive, seductively, evade, dominated, flagrantly, prosperity, extramarital, liaisons, quell, loitering, decorum, denouncing, deviations, rubric

Chapters 22-24

Summary

In Chapter 22, Jefferson refers to her depression as “melancholy,” saying she prefers how that sounds. She said she, like others who emerged on the other side of depression, did get past the obstacles and had to figure out how to make the various aspects of their lives mesh.

Jefferson writess about her life in the 1970s. Her friend Shawn wore an Afro wig, like many black women who had straight hair. Their purpose was to be certain people recognized them as black. One night, she went into the bathroom at a club and removed the wig, wiping off the sweat and rearranging the hair. Another black woman had removed her own wig that sported straight hair with a flip at the ends. Their eyes met briefly in the mirror but they left the room without talking.

In the 1980s, Jefferson and her friends, Peachie and Joan, often talked about black culture for a few minutes when they were at a mainly-white gathering. Jefferson said it was partly to assure themselves that they know about both black and white cultures, but that most people present could not say the same. Peachie looked white and began most conversations with the words, “as a black woman,” so there would be no confusion about her race. As the three were talking during one party, a young man joined them. They tried to welcome him but were not thrilled with his presence. Peachie made a remark about dating a white man from the South, and that she tended to mimic his accent when they were together. The new man in their group said he had also dated a man from the South, and he did the same. Jefferson told him he had jumped to the position of the most “exotic” person in their group. Jefferson had a gay friend named George and said it was interesting to watch as other people reacted to seeing them together.

Jefferson writess about her life in the 1990s. She and Shawn were still good friends. They talked about the recent deaths of Audrey Hepburn and Thurgood Marshall, and both agreed they were more moved by Hepburn's death than by Marshall's, though they said it in whispers to be sure no one else could hear.

One day, two friends who were white told Jefferson that a black friend had said Jefferson was trying to be white. By then, she was an established adult but she still had insecurities. She was furious that the black friend spread that rumor because the white friends might believe it without even fully understanding what a slur it was. Later, another friend asked Jefferson if she had ever found out that people were spreading rumors about her. This friend said it was even more difficult when there might be an element of truth to it, even if it was a small element. Jefferson relayed the race rumor. This new friend said she did not intend to trivialize that story, but said the rumor about her was that she was a “predatory narcissist.” She asked if Jefferson's rumor was worse but Jefferson agreed that it was not. She said she “rejoiced” at the comparison.

In Chapter 23, Jefferson returns to her mother's comment that she could sometimes “almost forget I am a Negro.” Jefferson says her mother had only been trying to convey her happiness at that moment, reveling in the fact that everything in her world was as it should be. Jefferson talks more about her childhood, when she had been exposed to traditionally white literature and a mixed bag of speech. As a journalist, she often wrote in a way that her race was never apparent, but sometimes wrote pieces that were guided by her race.

A new release of a favored childhood book, The Little Women, prompted Jefferson to pick up an original copy and read it again. She talked at length about the four main characters, Meg, Beth, Jo, and Amy, and the attributes of each. She said Denise had read the book first and identified with Amy. But Jefferson, upon closer reflection, identified with Beth, who died a tragic death. As an adult, Jefferson realized that she found death “seductive,” even as a child reading the book for the first time. Amy, on the other hand, was overt in her demand for attention. Jefferson said none of her peers would have admitted they wanted to be like Amy. Amy did, however, grow out of her selfish ways.

Jefferson drops back in time to talk about her ancestry. Her grandmother was Lily McClendon Armstrong. Her husband died in Booker T. Washington's employ when Irma was only two. Lily moved from Mississippi to Missouri and remarried, but left him when it became evident he had no ambition. She became one of the first police women in Chicago. She married a Pullman porter and they bought property. Lily and her peers sent their daughters to school, sometimes for advanced degrees, and “into good marriages” with men of good standing in reputable occupations.

Jefferson's paternal grandmother lived in California and Jefferson did not know her well. She raised four children. One became a doctor and two became lawyers and then judges. The only daughter of the family earned three masters degrees.

Jefferson's mother, Irma, was raised to understand that she was to complete a degree and marry well. She did household chores but never scrubbed the floors and never learned to sew, a trade that had served her mother well. She learned to shop for quality clothing. When Irma was 92, Jefferson asked her about her favorite clothes. She cited her love of evening dresses. Jefferson recalls shopping with her mother with Irma showing her daughters what should draw their attention. They shopped often at Marshall Field's, visiting Santa, having lunch, and remembering that Jefferson's aunt had “passed for white” and worked as a saleswoman in the 1920s.

As a young child, Jefferson was drawn by fashion but accepted her mother's dictates on what was acceptable, mainly because she respected how her mother looked and wanted to make up for her lack of prettiness. In the 1960s, the first black models appeared. While Jefferson knew that she could never look like the white singers and actresses she admired, she paid attention as Ebony began to show “Negro beauty and glamor” (229). Though Jefferson admired those early black models, she did not adore them as she did the famous whites. One reason was that her white friends had never

heard of those black models. Over the coming years, the landscape changed even more but Jefferson continued to see the segregation, even in the world of fashion.

In Chapter 24, Jefferson explains that it is a simple matter to get drawn into the unhappy memories when looking back at one's life, and took the final chapter as an opportunity to recount.

Jefferson explains various kinds of racial shock. One kind happens when some event makes a person suddenly different, even when members of that race have been there all along. She describes that as unhappiness, outrage, and grief. The second happens when an entire race has a “charged destiny” (233).

Jefferson says things had changed dramatically from her childhood when race mattered but gender was not an issue. Over the last half of the 1900s, equal rights efforts for blacks were dominated by men and equal rights efforts for women were dominated by whites. She cited the thoughts of activist Florynce Kennedy who said Negro women had mimicked white women their entire lives, but when white women finally had a good idea in the form of equal rights, the blacks chose not to join them. Through it all, Jefferson and the other girls of her generation had privileges that were not to be mistaken for rights. They had good educations and “cultural enrichment,” but were to avoid being disruptive. Their natural goal was to marry well for security and status, but to have something to fall back on with the option to turn that into a career. Jefferson said that she, like many others, dreaded the idea of marriage, mainly because she felt she was never fully up to par on the necessary skills.

Jefferson closes the book by saying that it would not be proper to end on an “abstract” point. The final and most important question, she writes, is whether she had become a person who had not “held the world back” and “made a viable life” for herself. She sums up her life as being a Negro child who grew into a black woman but calls herself African American when involved in “official discourse.” She remained single and followed her plan to never have children. She depended on friendships.

Jefferson admits that she sometimes wanted to “dismantle” herself, thinking that she had not lived her life well. She countered that thinking with a final question: “So what?” (240).

Analysis

The scene involving Shawn's wig seems very similar to modern-day trends. Shawn wanted her hair to be an Afro but her hair was too straight to meet the demands of that hairstyle. The other young woman in the mirror had curly hair that was cropped close to her head, and her wig had straight hair. Each woman wanted what the other had. Shawn was following a new trend to wear an Afro so no one could mistake her for anything other than black. The other woman wanted straight hair, as Jefferson's family and peers had sought during Jefferson's childhood. That seemed like an outdated fashion and Jefferson did not talk about what her motivations might have been.

Jefferson relates the story of being in a shop buying cosmetics when a young black gay man asked her ethnicity. She said she was African American, knowing he was looking for an exact answer. They talked briefly about ethnicity, including that most blacks have a mixed ancestry and that her cream-colored skin demonstrated that. When Jefferson learned that the black friend had told the white friends she was trying to be white, she was angry. She explains that the slur was deeper than it might first appear. For example, the two white friends might just assume it was true because they did not really understand the psyche of blacks. The situation was made more complex by the fact that Jefferson dyed her hair a light color and took other steps that might really have made people think that was true. Her ethnicity was more stable by this point in her life and she was probably much more comfortable than she ever had been, which would make the slur sting even more.

Jefferson finishes that story by talking about the friend who said someone had called her a “predatory narcissist.” She asked which was worse and Jefferson had to admit that the “predatory narcissist” comment was worse, which prompted her to “rejoice,” apparently realizing that this black friend really could have done more damage to her reputation than he did.

It seems unusual that Jefferson would have spent so much time talking about the novel, The Little Women. She explained several of the characters at length and Jefferson's book at that point began to feel like an essay about The Little Women. But on closer examination, the women of that novel closely represent the various aspects of Jefferson's life. For example, Amy was an extrovert and she was lauded for her personality more than for her talent. When she was an adult, she realized that and gave up her painting. She represents all the Negro girls who were overly outspoken and showy, and who lost things in the end because of that trait.

Jefferson writes briefly about relationships, saying she had always preferred friendships because they were more apt to have "varied groups" and "sustained" partnering. She talked in previous passages about her inability to have one person she called her best friend for any length of time, and that she was more likely to be on the edge of a group that included several people who were her friends. That tendency seemed to remain with her through adulthood, though she did mention a few people who were long-term friends and seemed to be important to her.

Jefferson's final chapter is meant to wrap up her life, but her final thought seems to leave the book with a completely open ending. She says that she has questions about what she did with her life, including whether she wasted too much of her time. The final sentence is, "So what?" That seems to indicate that Jefferson has come to a point in her life when she no longer cares to worry about what she might have done. That seems like an easy attitude when the reader considers that Jefferson's career included awards and prizes, evidence that she was well-respected in her field.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

circumnavigating, chagrin, postmodern, sibilant, insidious, smirk, furrowed, voluminous, coaxing, condescend, exotic

Important People

Margo Jefferson

Margo Jefferson was born into a group of blacks she referred to as “Negroland.” These were the elite among the Negro society at the time, and her parents fit right in. Her father was a doctor and her mother was a social worker, though she spent her time making a home and raising her two daughters. With this background, Jefferson learned what was expected and acceptable as a child, but found she had almost a complete change of attitude as an adult.

Jefferson, her sister Denise, and their peers were taught that it was appropriate to show off only if that action brought pride to your family and your race. She attended a private schools with only a few other Negro students. While she was still a child, she discovered that she did not always catch on to racial slurs and she felt horrible that she did not understand. She had white friends at school but there was a strict line limiting how much time they spent together outside school.

Jefferson attended college and became a journalist. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing when she was in college and her attitudes began to change. She realized that she had been raised to mimic the ways of whites, and that made her angry. As equal rights took hold, Jefferson found she was free to fall into a deep depression, something that had been denied Negro women for years. The women of her race were taught to be strong and stoic, but with the end of that kind of thinking, Jefferson became enthralled with the idea of death to the point that she practiced writing suicide notes.

As she aged, Jefferson admitted that she continued to struggle with the desire to “dismantle” the life she had created for herself. She ended the book with the idea that she had wasted time and failed on some fronts, but that it really did not matter.

Irma Jefferson

Irma was Margo Jefferson's mother and she was the epitome of a the mothers of Negroland. She focused all her energies on her home and family, devoting every bit of herself to ensuring that she and her daughters lived up to their fullest potential and never did anything to shame themselves or their race. That included taking the girls to all kinds of lessons, including ballet and music.

Appearances were very important to Irma. She learned how to shop for the best quality at an early age and passed that on to her daughters. She straightened their hair and made certain they used the right products for their hair and skin. She refused to let them wear nail polish outside the house when they were children, one of many rules she used to ensure that others never had a reason to judge the girls or talk about their lack of style. Many of her lessons were prompted by a desire to look and act like their white counterparts. Margo Jefferson felt the whites had pushed her mother and others like her

into those lifestyles, but still felt that the children of the 1960s had paid the ultimate price for those lifestyles.

Irma was taught to live as she did. She attended college but girls of her generation were taught to plan for a stable future with a good husband. She passed those lessons on to her daughters, though Margo Jefferson chose a different path for herself, making a career for herself without marrying or having children. Irma also taught her daughters about the dangers of white people, including that they were always looking for Negros who failed to conduct themselves property or failed to make something of themselves.

Denise Jefferson

Denise is Jefferson's older sister. She played an important role in Jefferson's childhood but did not play an important role in the book. Denise was, in many ways, atypical of the siblings seen in modern society. When a little girl in the neighborhood refused to let Jefferson jump rope with them, Denise stood up for her sister and the two left together. Jefferson writes that Denise's friends sometimes teased Jefferson or pushed her away from their play, but that Denise or the mothers would always intervene.

Dr. Jefferson

Dr. Jefferson was Margo Jefferson's father. He was ahead of his time in pediatric medicine, earning a medical degree at a time when it was difficult for blacks to do so. He was not mentioned often in the book but Jefferson seemed to love and respect him.

Uncle Lucious

Uncle Lucious was not present during Margo Jefferson's early childhood because he lived his life as a white man and never spent time with members of the family unless they could also pass for white. When he retired, he returned to Negroland and took up his life as a Negro. He was a salesman all his life. Jefferson noted that her parents always looked down on him because he lived as a white man and still never managed to do anything significant with his life.

Peachie

Peachie was a black woman and was Margo Jefferson's friend as an adult. They apparently attended events together regularly and were sometimes among the very few blacks present. Peachie, Jefferson, and a third black friend often gathered for a few minutes to talk and Jefferson said that was mainly about reassuring themselves that they could fit in to both racial worlds – black and white – while few of the whites could say the same.

Mrs. Blake

Mrs. Blake was a servant in the Jefferson home but Margo and Denise Jefferson were taught to treat her with respect. Mrs. Blake's hair defied her efforts at control when she was doing laundry in the humid basement. Jefferson and her peers might have made fun of Negro hair that curled tightly around the head as a general problem, but would never have made fun of Mrs. Blake. Jefferson and Denise were taught to make their own beds rather than leaving those kinds of chores for Mrs. Blake.

Betty Ann

Betty Ann was a young girl who lived in the neighborhood. She seemed to be friends with Denise and Margo Jefferson for a short time but then began spending more time with other friends. Jefferson and Denise joined Betty Ann and their group once to play jump rope but Betty Ann refused to let Jefferson play after she proved that she was too clumsy to meet Betty Ann's expectations. The adults in Jefferson's life were certain that Betty Ann was coarse and lacked manners, and they debated whether it was time to move. While that may seem extreme, they were actually desperate to keep their children from falling into those coarse habits at any cost. In the eyes of Jefferson's parents, Betty Ann represented the group of Negroes who lacked ambition and were not proud enough to make the most of themselves.

Eartha Kitt

Eartha Kitt was a young actress who appeared in a play in Chicago. Jefferson read an article explaining why Negroes did not like her, but Jefferson admired her. When one of Kitt's plays went onstage in Chicago, the Jeffersons held a party for the cast. Kitt was the only major cast member who did not appear. The adults said she was not secure enough to be around other successful Negroes, but there was no doubt that she had hurt them by refusing the invitation.

Lily McClendon Armstrong

Lily was Margo Jefferson's maternal grandmother. Her husband, Irma's father, died when Irma was a toddler. Lily moved from Mississippi to places where she hoped to find better opportunities, and she was successful. She owned property and put her children through college, launching each in to successful lives of their own.

Objects/Places

Negroland

Negroland is Jefferson's word for the elite group of Negros who lived a “sheltered” life because of their privilege. It was a group of people rather than a place, and represented the people of her childhood. The adults of those families were professionals and relatively affluent. They exhibited good manners and good taste. They stood up for themselves, but through the courts and newspapers. The children attended the best schools and studied arts in order to become well-rounded adults.

Interlochen

Interlochen was a summer camp Jefferson attended to study the arts, including music and drama. The camp was a respite from the rigors of her teenage years because there were fewer chances that she could make mistakes during those months at camp.

The Negro Girl at Interlochen

During Jefferson's final year at Interlochen, another Negro girl was in attendance. Manners prompted Jefferson to stop and talk to the girl, but she resented the girl's presence. In the years after that encounter, Jefferson was ashamed of her feelings toward the girl. The girl represents the exclusivity that Jefferson often enjoyed as the only Negro in a group or one of only a few.

Margo Jefferson's Glasses

Jefferson was always certain that she was not pretty and she felt that her glasses were another strike against her appearance. Though the glasses were necessary, they represented just one more thing that Jefferson hated about her appearance.

The Little Women

Jefferson loved the novel and felt that the characters from that story represented various aspects of the lives of Negroes. She identified with Beth, a loving, generous person who died young. She said none of her peers would have admitted that they identified with Amy, who was an extravert who eventually realized that people had approved of her art mainly because of her outgoing personality, prompting her to give it up.

The University of Chicago Laboratory School

Denise and Margo Jefferson attended this school, which opened its doors to a very limited number of Negro students. Through their experiences there, they learned about white culture and sometimes faced prejudices. As an adult, Jefferson said she hated to hear someone insist that they would have had a stronger cultural background if they had attended a Negro school.

Depression

Jefferson suffered from depression as a young adult and felt that death would be welcome. The important aspect of depression was that Jefferson's generation and the generations before had been taught that Negro women were strong, meaning they could never admit to being depressed. With equal rights, Jefferson, like other black women, felt she was free to admit to the depression.

Atlantic City

Atlantic City was the last stop the Jeffersons made on a vacation when Denise and Margo Jefferson were young girls When they arrived, they were given a small room with a view of the parking lot, which was obviously substandard for the hotel and was not what Dr. and Mrs. Jefferson requested when they made reservations. They left after only one night, cutting their vacation short and realizing that they should have looked into how blacks were treated there.

Ebony Magazine

Ebony was the name of the magazine that Jefferson mentions several times. The publication provided information about Negroes who had become successful in their fields, and sometimes about their faults and failures. It also provided information about products for Negro consumers.

Jack and Jill

Jack and Jill was a social club for young Negro children when Jefferson was a child. Both she and Denise were members and their mother was an avid volunteer. The organization provided a social structure for Negro children, especially those who attended white schools.

Themes

Facing Prejudices

Jefferson writes repeatedly about how the prejudices Negroes faced in a variety of forms, from subtle to violent, changed the lives of people and eventually led to the quest for equal rights, but even that did not completely end prejudice against blacks.

Jefferson writes about the lives of Negroes around the time of the Civil War. They were forced to work for the Confederacy but when mulattoes offered to fight for the Confederacy, they were denied that opportunity. When Negroes escaped and showed up at Union camps, they were treated as “contraband.”

One of the earliest personal examples of this theme is seen in Jefferson's story about her paternal grandfather. He moved his family from Mississippi to California and bought a house in a modest neighborhood. The day the family moved in, someone burned a cross on their lawn. Jefferson's grandfather stood guard all that night to protect his home and family. They faced that prejudice by taking the matter to court, where they won the case and the right to stay in their home. She cited a similar story of two black families who had crosses burned in their yards.

A different kind of prejudicial action went on when Negroes began moving into some specific Chicago neighborhoods. Jefferson described the predatory realtors who actively sought out homeowners, promising they could exact an extreme price for their property from Negro families desperate to live there. Jefferson imagined the realtors discussing the idea that they could let the Negroes move in an ruin the neighborhood, indicating they did not believe Negroes were savvy enough to understand real estate values and that they would undoubtedly bring ruin to the neighborhood.

Jefferson felt inadequate during her childhood because she could not always recognize the racial slurs that were aimed at Negroes. There were two events that happened about the same time that prompted her fears. The first was when her teacher had the group singing a song that included the word “darkie.” In that case, Jefferson's mother told her that the word was wrong. Ironically, Jefferson did not say what action her mother took to correct the situation. The second is seen when Jefferson was playing with a little girl in her grandmother's neighborhood. Following the girl's example, Jefferson was pretending to be in the jungle. Her grandmother explained that the girl was making fun of Jefferson for being black, and explained the “jungle” reference. In both cases, Jefferson did not understand the prejudicial attitude until her elders explained it, and that made her feel an array of emotions, including fear.

The prejudices were also evident when the blacks sought equal rights in the 1960s, but the prejudices against women came to the forefront of the social and political scenes soon after that. Jefferson does not dwell on specific instances of either kind of prejudice, but focuses on the impact of those prejudices.

While Jefferson naturally focuses on the prejudice waged against people like her family, she also writes about the prejudice the people of Negroland had against other people. They believed they were better than their white counterparts and better than the poorer Negroes who were less educated with unrefined manners and a lack of ambition.

Life in Negroland

Margo Jeffson writes extensively about how she, and the other kids in Negroland, were raised being told that they were never to act in a way that did not reflect well on themselves, their families, and the Negro race, because white people were always looking for a reason to put Negroes back into lives of “indigence, deference, and subservience” (3). Negros were to be well-mannered at all times, and they were to pay attention to their appearance and to always be presentable.

Jefferson's parents wanted to ensure that she had an appropriate education. She and her sister, Denise, were enrolled in the best private school available to them. Jefferson's mother was carefully dressed when she dropped her daughters off at school each day. Jefferson and her sister were two of only a few Negroes who attended that school. That likely gave them a good education, but there were some disadvantages to the girls.

Jefferson talks about her lack of close friends during her childhood. She had a few Negro friends but there were not many who went to the same exclusive school that Jefferson attended. She had white friends at school but the social dictates of the time meant they could not have sleepovers or do the bonding that would make them “best” friends. Jefferson talks several times about best friends and it seems that lack in her life had long-term effects. As an adult, she says she enjoys friendships but never married. It may be that, denied that true bonding experiences with people outside her family as a child, she was never able to create that kind of bond as an adult.

Another aspect of this idea is seen in the attitudes of Dr. and Mrs. Jefferson regarding whites. They did not socialize with white people and Irma Jefferson warned her daughter that she should not trust whites, despite the fact that she attended school with them. She was sending her children mixed messages, teaching them to act and look as much like white people as possible on one hand, but teaching them to hate and distrust white people on the other.

Jefferson was taught how to dress and act, and many aspects of those lessons mimicked white people of the time. When Jefferson was in college and the Civil Rights Movement was taking off, she began to evaluate her childhood. She says that she realized her mother's generation had made some mistakes in teaching their children to be better than some Negroes while trying to make them act and look like whites. Those childhood lessons made Jefferson and others like her a “deviation” from the traditional Negro person.

Appearances

Jefferson writes multiple times in her book about how appearances were important for a myriad of reasons, and how many of the dictates were made because they mimicked white people. Jefferson lists the positive attributes and the negative, and says she and her peers were to brutally name their flaws and seek ways to compensate for them. The person who could “pass” for white was truly fortunate, and some of them took advantage of their appearances.

Jefferson says she and the other Negro girls who grew up in the 1950s were held to a rigorous set of rules regarding appearances. Anyone who had curly or “nappy” hair did everything they could to straighten it. She talks about letting her mother use the hot combs and oil to force her hair into a straight style.

Jefferson says she and her peers would make fun of the typical “nappy” hair that refused to be tamed. There was a boy at summer camp named Ronnie. Jefferson said she knew he had “bad hair” because it was cut extremely short. By contrast, there was another Negro boy at the camp named Phillip. He had lighter skin and soft curls that “no one would mind patting” (49). That Jefferson remembered these details indicates that she was very conscious of appearances, and that she knew the boys' looks made a difference in how people treated them.

While there were some remedies for hair, skin color was another important aspect of appearance with lighter skin being preferable. Negro girls and women could never allow their knees or elbows to take on an “ashy” cast, and used products to ensure that did not happen. There were limited options for changing these things, but the Negroes of Jefferson's ilk took whatever steps were available to have the best skin and hair. Other attributes were the size of the nose and mouth, and the arch of the foot. It is noteworthy that many of these are things that a person cannot simply choose to change.

The skin tone and hair were so important to a person's appearance that there was literally a scale for ranking the color of the skin and the texture of the hair. Jefferson gives evaluations for her skin tone and compares those to her sister and mother.

Jefferson was always very critical of her appearance, and that is not surprising considering that attitudes of her childhood. She hated her glasses because she felt they were another strike against her effort to be pretty. She carefully critiqued every aspect of her appearance. It seems that she was a pretty child who grew into an attractive woman, by modern-day standards. The reader has to remember that the standards were different during the years of Jefferson's childhood.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in the fact that some Negroes could “pass” for white, and some chose to do so. Jefferson's Uncle Lucious spent years living as a white man. There were others who chose similar paths, because their appearances made it possible for them to do so.

Ambitions

Ambitions were lauded among the people of Negroland and those who failed in that category were judged harshly. An over-the-top example of this theme is seen in the life of Jefferson's Uncle Lucious.

Uncle Lucious lived as a white man most of his life. He had the appearance to make that happen, and he took advantage of it. While some people might have been critical of his choice, Jefferson's parents were not. They did, however, judge him for not having made more of himself. Uncle Lucious worked all his life as a salesman. Dr. and Mrs. Jefferson had the attitude that he was living with all the opportunities available to white people, but he failed to move himself into a better job. That was a choice that deserved criticism, in their mind, whereas they did not openly criticize his decision to leave his ethnicity and family behind.

The lives of Jefferson's family is another example of this theme. Jefferson's grandmother was named Lily Armstrong. Lily's daughter, Irma, was just two years old when her father died, leaving her mother a widow. Lily worked hard to send her children to school, and wound up with a son who was a doctor, two others who were lawyers and then judges, and Jefferson's mother, who graduated college and became a social worker until she turned her attention to her family. Lily married again but her second husband lacked ambition, and they split up because of that. Her next husband followed her lead and they bought property that gave them a sound lifestyle.

Jefferson's paternal grandparents also put their children through school and Jefferson's father was a pediatrician. Jefferson's father appears only briefly in the book, but he is a role model for Jefferson. He studied to become a doctor but met with opposition during his fellowship. He worked through that and earned the right to practice medicine.

Jefferson cited many cases of Negroes who were ambitious enough to make their dreams come true. Some became educators so that they could pass on their knowledge to other young Negroes, hoping to help the race advance through individuals. Some became actors and musicians while others became writers and politicians. In every case, they had some advantages – skin tone, a high intelligence, or even benefactors who helped at critical moments – but they all had the ambition to make their dreams come true.

The Negro race as a whole is another example of this theme. They fought for equal rights, though some of the changes were not really advantages. Their ambition on this front was to secure the freedom to attend the best colleges and to compete for the best jobs. The quest for equal rights for women was close on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement. Women were seeking the same rights that Negroes had fought for years earlier. Both movements took ambitious people who sought to correct long-standing wrongs.

Coming of Age

Throughout the book, Margo Jefferson matures from childhood to adulthood, but to complicate her life as a young adult, she had to change her attitudes and priorities, which all happened against a background that had taught her to brutally evaluate her flaws.

Jefferson's childhood was not typical of Negroes of the era. She was among the elite families she referred to as Negroland. Those families were spared many of the harsh realities of the general population of Negroes at the time because of their backgrounds, money, and ambition. The families of Negroland had better education and came from families that placed high expectations on its youth. Those expectations included how the children would act as children and what they would become as adults.

Jefferson and her peers were taught to brutally assess their appearances, and to compensate for their flaws. They were highly competitive as children with regard to grades and talents. They knew that, as women, they would be expected to find suitable husbands and to have families. They would devote themselves to their families and homes, but would have a profession they could fall back on, if the need arose. Margo struggled through her teenage years, trying to navigate the expectations and the normal challenges of puberty.

Up until the time she went to college, Jefferson remained on track with the expectations. She always felt that she had not met the full set of requirements (that she was not pretty enough or had not fully applied herself), but she remained dedicated to Negroland and the goals that group set for its young ladies. Then the Civil Rights Movement gained ground and Jefferson helped change the world as she knew it. More changes came on the back of the equal rights movement for women. The demand that blacks straighten their hair was gone, as was the idea that Negro women were not allowed to show weakness.

One of the most important changes in Jefferson's attitude during this early coming-of-age period of her life is seen in her new-found ability to criticize the teachings of her childhood. She realized that her mother's generation had taught their daughters to do everything they could to mimic whites. From their clothes to preferred light skin tones to straightened hair, Jefferson's mother, Irma, had sought to make herself and her daughters look like their white counterparts. The same was true of manners and actions. Similar rules and expectations had been handed down for generations and Jefferson was finally able to see them for what they were. She also saw what those attitudes had done to her generation. She called them an aberration from their Negro heritage, and many of her generation made complete turns from what they'd been taught. Jefferson did not go to the extreme of getting involved with drugs and violence, but she chose not to marry, not to have children, and to follow a career.

As she aged, she continued to evaluate herself and her life. She finishes her book with the question of whether she had wasted too much time and whether she had done right with her life. She answers that question by saying, “So what?”

Styles

Structure

The chapters are not named, nor are they numbered. There is, however, a table of contents. That section indicates that there are 24 chapters. The Kindle version of the book includes the option to go to the first page of each chapter. Some readers may find that confusing, especially when there is no real indication for the reader when one chapter ends and another begins.

The chapter vary greatly in length. At least two are no more than a page in length, while many others are more than 10-15 pages. Some chapters include subtitled sections, such as the chapters that focus on Jefferson's school years and the chapter about her life in the 1970s and 80s. One chapter includes excerpts from Jefferson's diary during her years of depression. The structure of that chapter makes it confusing. Some of the entries include quotes and it is sometimes difficult to tell which pieces are quotes and which are Jefferson's own words.

The author uses several literary terms, including analogies and metaphors. She makes many historical references. In some cases, she used sentence structures that are typically considered incorrect. For example, there were several cases of incomplete sentences. When Margo talked about Dorothy Dandridge's decision to turn down the role of a “Burmese maiden” in The King and I because the role depicted a woman who was “little more than a slave.” The final two sentences of that paragraph read as follows, “Exquisite, chastely arousing, worthy of worship, anguish, sacrifice. Played instead by the Puerto Rican Rita Moreno.” The lines are not full sentences, and similar passages appear throughout the book.

Perspective

The book is written in first person, exclusively from the perspective of Margo Jefferson. She seems to present an unbiased perspective, especially considering that she sometimes told stories of her own actions that put her in a less-than-perfect light. One example is seen in the opening pages of the book. She tells about a moment when she rushed onstage during a talent show, pushed ahead of the little girl who was performing, and took over the show with her own dance. The adults considered her age and tendency to be “spirited,” and were charmed by her audacity. Jefferson pointed out that she never gave a second thought to the little girl who was interrupted. That little girl might have been devastated by the situation and the fact that she did not get to finish her performance.

Jefferson also tells about a time she was at a dinner party. She could have been spurred on by the reaction to her dance routine and seeking more attention. She found a lull in the adult conversation and announced that she sometimes chose not to wipe

when she went to the bathroom. She said she immediately saw the difference in the adults' reactions. The fact that she included both events in her book could indicate that she tried to be as honest as possible.

Jefferson writes that she “dreaded revealing anything in these pages except our drive to excellence” (8). She goes on to say that attitude could “constrict” the story she wanted to tell. She then says that “we,” which apparently refers to blacks in general, were “prone to being touchy” or even “snobbish” (8). She does not really say what audience she hopes to reach with the book, but it seems these sentences could prompt some readers to put the book aside. This may be one of several indications that she truly meant to create an honest account of her life.

Tone

The book focuses on the trials and triumphs faced by the writer along with those of her family and friends. While it seems it would have been easy for her to focus more on the negative, she tries not fall into that trap, and even addresses that near the end of the book. This gives an overall tone of inspiration, hope, and fulfillment, even though the author faced trials and dealt with fears.

There were some instances in which Jefferson seems to directly address the reader. One of these occurs with an invitation to join Denise and Margo Jefferson on the stairs during one of their parents' parties. While she could have simply described the scene, inviting the reader to join the two girls as they watched the party is an intentional effort to take the reader more fully into Jefferson's story.

Jefferson outlines her depression, which she calls “melancholy,” and talks about why black women were finally able to admit to those feelings after the fight for equal rights meant they no longer had to be strong, stoic women. Most of that chapter should have a hopeless feeling, but Jefferson seems to focus more on the positive aspect of emerging from the depression. One part of that hope may be in the reader's mind because Jefferson obviously did not go through with her desire to commit suicide.

There are a few passages that include curse words and she mentions having a lover, but she does not go into details that readers might find offensive. Some readers may be offended by the use of racial words including “Negro” or even WASP, but it seems obvious that Jefferson's desire is to relate a story rather than incite anger.

Quotes

I as taught to avoid showing off. I was taught to distinguish myself through presentation, not declaration, to excel through deeds and manners, not showing off."
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: Jefferson is talking about the requirements on the young ladies of her social standing. She goes on to say that there were exceptions, and that she learned very young which of those were acceptable.

I call it Negroland because I still find 'Negro' a word of wonders, glorious and terrible. A word for runaway slave posters and civil rights proclamations; for social constructs and street corner flaunts.
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: This is a look at why Jefferson chooses to use the word Negro instead of black or African American. She goes on to say that the meaning has shifted and to point out the capital "N" made the word more dignified.

We're considered upper-class Negroes and upper-middle-class Americans,' Mother says. 'But most people would like to consider us Just More Negroes.'"
-- Irma Jefferson (chapter 5 paragraph 7)

Importance: Margo Jefferson relays this passage as just one more example of the precarious existence of the affluent Negroes of her childhood. Her mother warned repeatedly, in many different ways, about the need to act in a way that never brought shame upon her family or her race. In this passage, Irma again pointed out that there were people who would like nothing better than to see the affluent Negroes fail.

In Negroland we thought of ourselves as the Third Race, poised between the masses of Negroes and all classes of Caucasians. Like the Third Eye, the Third Race possessed wisdom, intuition, and enlightened knowledge the other two races lacked."
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 7 paragraph 1)

Importance: Jefferson uses a mixed analogy here to describe the situation of her family and their peers. In the first sentence of this quote, she mentioned the Third Race, which is a biblical reference to the early Christians. In the second, she mentioned the Third Eye, which is a reference to the idea that an inner eye has mystical abilities to see all things.

Beauty standards for girls are stringent in 1950s Negroland. Negro girls must be vigilant about their perceived deficiencies."
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 8 paragraph 3)

Importance: Jefferson talks at length about what girls do to ensure that they are as

attractive as possible. In this passage, she goes on to say that girls are taught to be brutally honest about their flaws and then do everything they can to make up for them.

When I feel sure of myself I sometimes joke that in ancient times, when tribes faced hard survival choices, my eyes would have meant I'd be left on a hilltop to die, along with the wounded, the aged, and the mentally deficient."
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 11 paragraph 11)

Importance: Jefferson had just related the story of her poor eyesight that included operations and thick glasses. The important part of this quote is that she begins by saying "when," which indicates that she does not always feel sure of herself.

Will they show the damage too many of us inherited? Or acquired? Or drove ourselves toward?"
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 13 paragraph 1)

Importance: Jefferson said her generation and the previous generations of Negroes were responsible for the future of the Negro race. She said that was a frightening burden to carry and wondered what future generations would face. Her point is that her generation may have "inherited" some of their fears and ideas, but they may have "acquired" some by other means. Finally, she knew that they might literally have driven themselves to some extremes, but did not explore the reasons.

What are parents to do, when they've taken all steps to ensure that their children flourish in the world at large, to claim their right to culture and education, when suddenly this chasm of ignorance and inferiority opens up to swallow their cultivated little selves?"
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 14 paragraph 22)

Importance: Jefferson and Denise had just read a poem by Langston Hughes in an exaggerated dialect. Jefferson said she and Denise were acting like "picaninnies" as they read, and expected their mother to laugh as they had. Instead, she was horrified by their antics and immediately set out to teach them more about the Negroes who made something of themselves.

We did not love white people, we did not care for most of them, but we envied them and sometimes we feared and hated them. Our daily practice as suspicion, caution at the very least."
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 16 paragraph 28)

Importance: Jefferson gives this as one of many examples about her attitude toward white people. She expresses the combination of conflicting emotions, including fear, envy, and hatred.

Suddenly, people like us were denouncing war and imperialism, discarding the strategic protocol of civil rights for the combat aggression of Black Power. We unmade our straightened hair, remade our pristine diction, renounced our social niceties and snobberies."

-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 19 paragraph 23)

Importance: Jefferson is talking about the changes that happened during the 1960s while she was in college. She had written about the social expectations heaped on her peers in the paragraphs leading up to this passage, then pointed out that it took a major shift for them to realize that there were “shades of possibility between decorum and disgrace.”

Sometimes I almost forget I'm a Negro,' my mother wrote 70 years ago. It wasn't a disavowal; it was her claim to free space. She was talking about her happiness at that moment – how you feel when everything inside and around you is where it belongs.”
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 23 paragraph 1)

Importance: Jefferson includes the letter in which her mother made this statement in an earlier chapter, and now goes on to discuss what her mother meant. She believes that her mother, at that time, was not forced to argue constantly for her American rights. Jefferson compares that attitude with her own, now that she is an adult who weathered the civil rights era, by saying that things had changed over those 70 years so that she could now “claim any part of any culture without race-linked restriction.”

When black women tell me feminism is a white woman's thing, I tell them: you've spent all these year, all these centuries, imitating every bad idea white women came up with – about their hair, their makeup, their clothes, their duties to their men. And now, they finally come up with one good idea – feminism – and you decide you don't want anything to do with it.”
-- Margo Jefferson (chapter 24 paragraph 25)

Importance: Jefferson talks about her impression of the activist Florynce Kennedy, and paraphrased this one of Kennedy's statements. The quote points out many of the issues Jefferson had discussed over the course of her book, including the tendency of Negroes to mimic white's attributes. They worked to make their hair straight and to dress very much like the stylish white women.

Topics for Discussion

What is Negroland?

Margo Jefferson used the term to describe the social class of Negroes who lived sheltered, privileged lives. The reader should talk about the fact that this is a group, rather than a place, and list attributes of the people included in the group.

Describe Jefferson's childhood.

This answer should include information about the demands Irma Jefferson placed on her daughters, such as manners and conduct. Readers should mention the private schools the girls attended and the neighborhoods where the Jeffersons lived.

What is the difference between Negro, black, and African American, according to Jefferson's book?

Jefferson used the term Negro to describe her childhood, black to describe herself as an adult, and African American during official or specific situations. The answer to this question should include discussions about each use and Jefferson's attitudes at that time of her life.

What was significant about Uncle Lucious?

Uncle Lucious was the man who lived his life as a white man and was a salesman. This answer should include discussion about his inability to fully fit into the white world, especially when people began making racial remarks about blacks, and that Jefferson's parents judged Uncle Lucious harshly for his failure to rise above the job as a salesman.

What was the significance of Jefferson's meeting with the Negro girl at the summer camp, Interlochen?

Jefferson was one of only a few Negros who attended that camp at that time and she resented the presence of the other Negro. This question should prompt discussion of the manners that were ingrained in Jefferson so that she forced herself to stop and greet the girl, but that she resented the girl's presence.

Why did Jefferson say the Civil Rights Movement allowed black women to suffer from depression?

The black women of Jefferson's generation and of the generations before had been taught they were to be strong and stoic, regardless of the hardships or tragedies they faced. When they were no longer burdened with that stereotype, they were free to admit to their feelings, including depression. The reader may also talk about the fact that Jefferson used the word "melancholy" instead of depression, and that she was fascinated by the idea of death during that time of her life.

What information does Jefferson reveal about her ancestry?

An important part of this answer is that her paternal grandfather moved his family to California and someone burned a cross on their yard the first night they were there. The other major piece of information is that Jefferson's maternal grandmother raised four children and sent them all to college, bought property, and lived a comfortable life. There are other details that can be included in this answer.

What were the important aspects of a girl's appearance, according to Jefferson's early teachings?

Skin tone, hair texture, and some facial features were among those listed in the book. The reader could also discuss the ways Negroes tried to address anything they saw as a shortcoming.

Why did people of Negroland consider themselves the Third Race?

The Third Race refers to the idea that Christians were neither Jew nor Gentile, but were of another race altogether. The people of Negroland felt they were better than their white counterparts and the lower class of Negroes who did not have the higher educations and good manners of the elite. The reader can also discuss the impact this idea had on people of Negroland, including Jefferson, and why her attitude changed during the Civil Rights Movement.

Why did Jefferson say that none of her peers would have admitted that they wanted to be like Amy from the novel, The Little Women?

Amy was an extrovert who gained notice through her actions rather than her talent. Jefferson and her peers were taught that they could show off, but only if it put their families and the entire race in a positive light. This question could also be used to recount Jefferson's first lessons in that area, when she was applauded for rushing on stage and stealing the show, but got a different reaction when she said she sometimes did not wipe herself after using the bathroom.