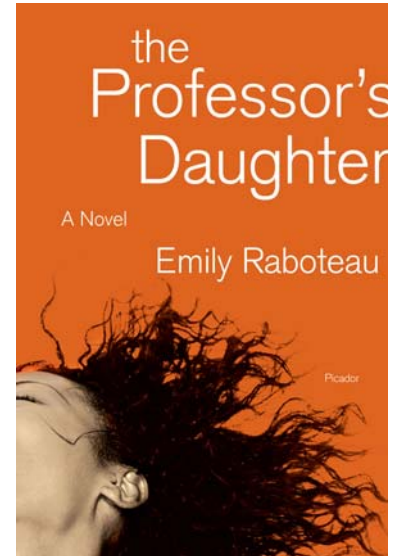


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Professor's Daughter *A Novel*

by Emily Raboteau



ISBN: 0-312-42568-6

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Professor's Daughter* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Professor's Daughter*.

About the Book

When Emma Boudreaux's older brother winds up in a coma after a freak accident, she loses her compass: only Bernie was able to navigate—if not always diplomatically—the terrain of their biracial identity. And although her father and brother are bound by a haunting past that Emma slowly uncovers, she sees that she might just escape.

In exhilarating prose, *The Professor's Daughter* traces the borderlands of race and family, contested territory that gives rise to rage, confusion, madness, and invisibility. Emily Raboteau's astonishingly original voice surges with energy and purpose.

“Raboteau paints Emma’s world with grand, sweeping strokes . . . Her timing is excellent, her humor is wry, her voice is on point and her eye works with laser-like precision. Raboteau’s sensitivity to life and to people is nothing short of astounding.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“A bolt of energy . . . Fearless, and lyrically inventive, Raboteau is a writer to watch.”

—*O magazine*

“Dazzling and smart . . . With a daring narrative structure—Raboteau weaves in bits of folklore, poems, a story about African writer Bessie Head, slave narratives, and a stunning interpolation of an American Indian legend—*The Professor’s Daughter* is a book that will haunt readers with its heartfelt grief, memorable characters and lovely conclusion. . . . And her future, like this novel, offers a doorway into a different, larger world.”

—*The Times Picayune* (New Orleans)

“The best first novel I’ve come across in some time. . . . One of Emily Raboteau’s greatest strengths . . . is her ability to understand and express the way the past—a uniquely American past, haunted by the specters of racial violence—continues to live in the bones and blood of her complex, finely observed characters. . . . As Emma tells us toward the end of the book: ‘Language isn’t equipped for the range and complexity of human trouble. It doesn’t have enough music in it.’ . . . And yet this wise, beautiful book almost proves itself wrong.”

—*New Haven Advocate*

“*The Professor’s Daughter* intensely treats with a young life, the strains of an interracial family, and the seemingly hopeless vicissitudes of adolescence. Sometimes funny, and at other times horrifying, it’s always riveting and alive. This is a first rate job, a book that shows great subtlety and skill.”

—Robert Stone

“Bernard’s story—this moment in particular—could have neatly eclipsed Emma’s in terms of high sentiment, but Raboteau rises to the occasion, and it is deeply moving.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

“Mines the controversies of race and family.”

—*New York Post*

“Emily Raboteau’s prose is generous and precise, yet it is also lush and sensual and smart, without any tricks of forced irony. . . . This is a moving and significant work by a truly gifted and important new writer among us.”

—André Dubus III

“What sets this profound debut apart and should insure its success is not only its thematic cultural relevance but the immediacy and authenticity of its narrative.”

—*Elle.com*

“Alternates between the poignant first-person perspective of the daughter and the second-person recollections of the father to present a complex look at race and identity.”

—*Booklist*

“*The Professor’s Daughter* is an exciting debut by an enchanting writer whose singular voice makes every page of this novel exceptional. Emily Raboteau is funny and moving in the tradition of our best novelists. This elegant novel heralds the arrival of an important new writer with something to say. I can’t wait to read her next book, and the ones after that.”

—Katharine Weber

“The world that Emily Raboteau has so wonderfully created here is at turns harsh, beautiful, strange, and always real. This work is unflinchingly intelligent.”

—Percival Everett

“Deftly allows readers to experience Emma’s myriad parts as she splinters in an attempt to grapple with being the brown daughter of a white mother and a black father. The intersections of race and class, played out in upscale Princeton, NJ, where Emma’s father teaches, give resonance. Likewise, the treatment of sexual politics—among adults as well as youth—adds complexity to an unusual coming-of-age tale. Highly recommended.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Engaging . . . The story, however, with its clear, lyrical language, its symbols and metaphors, is so well written, so emotionally vibrant and honest that it soars . . . definitely a writer to watch.”

—*Black Issues Book Review*

“Emily Raboteau, Pushcart Prize winner and recipient of several prestigious fellowships, lives up to her promise with *The Professor’s Daughter*. . . . Raboteau’s lyrical yet clear writing style lends itself well to this story, which is often both terrifying and beautiful. Her attention to detail and language creates an extremely compelling atmosphere that will keep readers turning page after page. A book with resonating themes and a powerful storyline, *The Professor’s Daughter* is a strong debut from a talented writer.”

—*BookPage*

About the Author

Emily Raboteau holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from New York University, where she was a *New York Times* Fellow. She is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, the *Chicago Tribune*’s Nelson Algren Award for Short Fiction, and a New York Foundation of the Arts Fellowship. Her stories have been published in *Tin House*, *The Missouri Review*, and *Best American Short Stories 2003*. She lives in Brooklyn and teaches creative writing at the City College of New York.

Discussion Questions

1. People perplexed by Emma's ethnicity repeatedly ask her, "what are you?" How does she respond to that question? In what way is the novel itself an answer?
2. Emma feels invisible next to her brother, Bernie. In particular, she feels invisible to her father, Bernard. Why? How does that invisibility affect her childhood and her development into a habitual runaway? Conversely, Bernard was extremely visible as the only black child in an all-white, private boy's school. Compare and contrast Emma and Bernard's childhood experiences.
3. The circumstances surrounding the death of Bernard's father are kept secret from him until he goes off to New Orleans to integrate St. Ignatius Prep. Nan Zan explains: "Hate works like a circle if you don't stop it somewhere." Why did she keep the truth from him for so long and what are the repercussions?
4. Bernard's best friend, Professor Lester, marries an Ethiopian woman. How does Lester's approach to blackness and black history differ from Bernard's? What role does he play in Bernie's life? Why does Bernard resent Lester for his attempts to teach his son to "be black?"
5. How does Bernie deal with his mixed-race heritage? Does he exploit it? Discuss his manner, speech, physical appearance, and behavior. How does his identity differ from his sister's? Bernie-ism 18:1 says, "It is a privilege to be able to invent oneself. It is also a burden." What might he mean by this?
6. How does Bernie's accident affect the members of the family? Discuss the link between the first Bernard's death and Bernie's accident. Does Bernard Jr.'s refusal to discuss his father in some way contribute to his son's death?
7. Raboteau describes herself as a Catholic writer. Many of the episodes in the book (such as Meteke's transformation into the White Buffalo Woman in order to stop the deer hunt) are formulated as complex parables. All three of the Bernards are perceived variously as Christ figures by other characters in the book. Give examples of where this occurs in the text. Who are the Bernards meant to save and what are the psychological consequences of that kind of pressure? How does Emma figure into this equation?
8. Emma almost seems to be able to control her recurrent rash. She gets it for the first time when she and Bernie paint their faces with black shoe polish. Is the rash a punishment? Is it self-induced? Could it be psychosomatic? What does it symbolize?
9. Emma studies Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* in her ongoing inquiry into her own heritage and writes a story about an African girl, "The Origins of Little Willa," in lieu of a college paper. How does Willa's story parallel Emma's/Bernard's? What else does Emma write? Discuss her role as writer throughout the novel. How does her writing change?

10. Aunt Patty tells the children a story about her alcoholic father's dashed dream to be a pilot. Bernie dreams of actually flying. After his death, flight becomes Emma's defense mechanism when she runs away, first to New Orleans, later to Brazil. What is she looking for? What are her other defense mechanisms for dealing with the terror of abandonment—by her brother, her father, Poresh, etc.? Why does Emma choose Lou, a man whom her mother describes as “beneath her” and who abuses alcohol? Discuss the role of alcoholism in the book.
11. How does Aunt Patty's confession of despair at the AA meeting affect Bernard? Describe Bernard's testimony. Does he, like Patty, still live in the shadow of his father? Do Bernie and Emma live in his? What does Bernard want for his own children? What does Emma mean when she says she wants to “begin?”
12. When Patty and Lynn go to Atlantic City, Bernard realizes that Lynn is the “glue” that holds the family together. What is his role? Why does Bernard disconnect from his family? How does his emotional absence affect Lynn, Bernie, and Emma? Would you describe his character as “self-loathing?” Why or why not?
13. Emma relates the story of Deb Levine, and her mother's attempt at stability after Bernard leaves them for a graduate student. To Emma's surprise, Lynn has been taking flying lessons. What does Deb's death, and the manner of her death, reveal to Emma about her mother's strength?
14. The narrative of *The Professor's Daughter* flip-flops from Emma's perspective to Bernard's. Whose story did you find more compelling? Brief interludes from Bernie's comatose perspective are also included. How do these contribute to the book's tone? Who would you describe as the hero of this book and why?
15. In a prayer to his father through his son's walkie-talkie, Bernard confesses that he married a white woman so that his children wouldn't “inherit our misery.” He has inherited his father's name, as has Bernie. Emma steals what might have been Lou's inheritance to finance her own to flight to Brazil, where she feels free for the first time in her life. In the final chapter, Bernard returns home to reclaim his inheritance, which he gives to his daughter. Discuss the metaphor of inheritance in the book. In what ways are the characters stymied by their fathers' histories? Do you think Emma is equipped to break that pattern?

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