

“The Grace of Silence”: Reading group guide (revised from michele-norris.com)

1. How did family secrets affect life in the Norris home? Have you had the experience of finding out something about a family member that you never knew? How did it change your perspective about that person? Alternatively, have you ever been the keeper of such secrets? What might be the reasons for Norris’s family, or your own, to not discuss certain experiences? What did Norris mean when she says she was “shaped by the weight of silence.”

2. Norris’s mother and uncle have different perceptions of her grandmother Ione’s work as a traveling Aunt Jemima. While her mother has mixed emotions, her uncle says, “I know a lot of people are ashamed of that image but I am not....She put on that costume and she was a star.” Norris finds a similar range of reactions when she delves into the history of Aunt Jemima. The owner of Mammy’s Cupboard restaurant says, “Sometimes I don’t understand why black folks don’t claim her because she was theirs first. She’s still theirs, isn’t she?” What’s your answer to that question? What does the Aunt Jemima image mean to you? Does the upgrade to her image de-stigmatize the logo? What are other examples of complicated images in American commercial life?

3. Norris writes that she was deprived of the story of her father’s shooting after his discharge from World War II not only because of family silence, but “because the collective story of the black World War II veterans had been slighted.” Before reading *The Grace of Silence*, did you know the history of black veterans during and after World War II? What affect do you think this period had on civil rights in America and what does it mean that it is rarely discussed these days, if at all?

4. Additional question: After Belvin Norris is shot, he relocates to the northern U.S. He has family in both the north and the south and often travels back to Birmingham where he grew up. Are racial attitudes different in the northern and southern U.S.? Are they expressed differently?

5. Julia Beaton says to Norris: “I have no white American friends. I just don’t care for them. I just don’t trust them. I have always told my sons and my grandsons not to bring a woman in this house who does not look like me.” What was your reaction to Beaton’s statements? Do you respond differently to her, as an older black woman, than you do to the older white men and women that Norris also interviews? Should we judge her words less harshly than we might a white person saying “I just don’t trust black people”?

6. Norris asks a powerful question at the end of *The Grace of Silence*: “What’s been more corrosive to the dialogue on race in America over the last half century or so? Things said or unsaid?” Discuss your responses.

Suggestion for further action:

7. The question that lies at the heart of Norris’s memoir is this, “How well do you know the people who raised you?” Carry this question home with you and, as Norris states, “take the bold step and say: Tell me more about yourself.” Stay at the table even if the conversation is difficult, and prepare yourself to listen. “There is grace in silence, and power to be had from listening to that which, more often than not, was left unsaid.”