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One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life: a story of race and family secrets by Bliss Broyard

Discussion questions used at SPL -- September 2009

1. Whose story is this?
2. What sort of man was Anatole? Would you have liked to know him?
3. How would you describe Bliss? How well did she know her father? She was 23 when her dad died. She started researching her father's background in 1993. Why do you think it took so long to write the book?
4. Do you think Anatole "passed"? Or did he just not say "what" he was? Is there a difference?
5. It seemed like everyone but Bliss and Todd knew of her father's background. Why didn't they? What did you think of Bliss's friend saying "oh, I knew that"? (P 39)
6. What did you think of Bliss's immediate attachment to her father's family at the funeral? She was worried about having "that" conversation with them about family - should she have been?
7. What did you think of her relationships with her father's family – esp. Shirley. What was she looking for from them?
8. What did you think of Bliss's concerns over "what" she was once she learned of her father's background? Should she have been concerned?
9. What did you think of Henry Gate's conversation with Bliss? Do you think he should have let her be the one to publish the news about her father? (P 105) Can someone suddenly be black? What did you think of Gates' "outing" of Anatole's secret?
10. Bliss describes her family as WASP - (P 53) – by association. How does that statement sound to you? Does that mean nurture beats nature?
11. Why did Bliss share her personality tests with us? The test was taken before she knew her father's background. Why would she be an imposter? Do you think she knew things she would not admit to?
12. "If you choose white over black" (P 69) - do you agree with the fact that you would have to be ashamed to do that?
13. On page 71 – there is a description of her father's dancing, clothes, etc. Was she stereotyping?
14. Shirley telling Bliss "the minute you let other people label you" is wrong. Do you agree with that?

15. Bliss describes her “racist” thoughts - do we all have them?
16. We meet the California cousins on p 115 - why were they all so different?
17. “Black people would recognize their roots in an instant” (P 117) – would you agree with that? Why do you think Caucasians would not see it?
18. Do you think there is the issue of being a “better” color still in the African American community? Have we moved past that? (P 133)
19. What did you think of the advice given by the LA cousins? (P 134) Which do you think is the best advice?
20. What did you think of her exploring her family’s past? Was it too much history for you? What was the most interesting part? What surprised you the most? What bothered you the most?
21. What did you think of the way of life in New Orleans before Louisiana became a state? The Creole culture?
22. The anger many people felt at Bliss and her father was expressed on P 181 - was it acceptable to you?
23. Were you surprised that one of the ancestors passed for black so he could marry? (P189)
24. What was the attitude of her New Orleans cousins? Did they understand her search? Did they think her life was “blessed”? How similar to the LA cousins were they?
25. What about Todd? What do you think he felt about the news of his father’s racial identity? Did he care as much as Bliss? What was the difference between them?
26. Is identity a performance? (P296)
27. What do you think the hardest part about passing would be? Losing family? Having to listen to negative comments?
28. What did you think of Bliss’s imagining what her father might have been thinking when applying for a social security card? (P 347). From what we’ve learned about Anatole, do you think this is what he might have thought or is this all Bliss?
29. War experiences (p 373) make a difference in people’s lives. How would you compare Anatole’s vs Frank’s – how did they shape each man?
30. What did you think of Bliss’s descriptions of the women her father was attracted to? Did this mean something? (P407)
31. What about her mother’s background – orphaned – no family? What was it about her that made a difference in Anatole in asking her to marry him? Would this have worked if she did have family that would have needed to approve (P413)? Would you have liked to have learned more about that side of the family?

32. Do you agree that he could not write his novel because he was living a lie? (P 431)
 33. What did you think of Shirley not letting Bliss help in disposing with Grandmother's ashes? Was that right or wrong of Shirley?
 34. Did she finally come to terms with "what" she is?
 35. DNA testing - what surprised you about the results? Would you be interested in doing this? What do you think is in your background?
 36. Has this book changed how you look at people?
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General Discussion Questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Questions taken from [Hachettebookgroup.com](http://www.hachettebookgroup.com)

<http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/bliss-broyard/one-drop/9780316008068/>

1. While the author and her brother Todd were unaware of their father's secret for almost his entire life, their mother and many others did know. In light of the author's statement, "I felt that because I'd come from my mother and father—been made up by their parts—I had a right to know everything about them (p. 4)," do you agree with Anatole and Sandy's decision to conceal his identity from their children?
2. Early on, the author's brother says "I'm supposed to understand my father by knowing his opinion on the latest Philip Roth novel (p. 11)." To what degree does Anatole's literary success influence his relationship with his family? How important do you think Anatole's identity as a preeminent literary critic is to him? Why?
3. On page 63, the author learns the personality tests she takes match her with the model for "'impostor'"—"not living in a way that's true to who you are (p. 63)." How important do you believe being 'true to who you are' is? Has reading ONE DROP influenced that opinion in any way?
4. To trace her father's family lineage, the author travels to New Orleans in 2000, where her first ancestor arrived in the early 1750's. Do you know or have you obtained your family's genealogy? If not, has reading ONE DROP inspired you to do so?
5. The author recalls her father saying "I need to think about how to present things. I want to order my vulnerabilities so they don't get magnified during the discussion (p. 12)." In your opinion, what are the benefits, if any, of Anatole's decision to wait to discuss his identity with his family? What are the benefits in his mind?
6. When the author does learn of her father's secret, she writes "The idea thrilled me, as though I'd been reading a fascinating history book and discovered my own name in the index (p. 17)." Have you or anyone you know learned of a secret of any kind that prompted a reaction similar to the author's?
7. During his final days, Anatole tells his wife "I'm not the golden boy anymore. I'm not that beautiful boy. I have to find a new way to think of myself (p. 20)." To what extent, in your opinion, are Anatole's decisions regarding his identity related to his self-image, and to what extent are they concerned with his family? Or are the two distinctions not mutually exclusive?
8. In the Afterword, the author discusses her use of DNA testing, noting "DNAPrint has found that about 5 percent of customers who self-identify as white show up with some African ancestry. More frequently people who think of themselves as black turn up with European and Native American roots." Do you know anyone who has elected for DNA testing? What did they discover?