

FAMILY TREE

Reading Group Discussion Guide

1. One of the major themes of *FAMILY TREE* is the discrepancy between the face we show to the public and the one we see in the mirror each day - the difference between who we say we are and who we really are. This arises in different contexts in *FAMILY TREE*. What contexts can you identify? Is this dichotomy one that you have seen in your own life or in those around you?
2. Eaton's personality was shaped in part by who he feared he was. Identify and discuss these different aspects of the man.
3. Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, "The lady doth protest too much." The same can be said for various of the characters in *FAMILY TREE*. Who are they, and in what ways do they overcompensate?
4. Dana lost her mother at the age of five. How did this event shape her personality? In what regards is she more needy? In what regards is she stronger? How did this early unexpected event prepare her for the surprise of Lizzie's birth?
5. In *FAMILY TREE*, the term "passing" can be applied to different characters in different ways. Who are these different characters, and in what ways have they "passed?"
6. Have you known someone who has "passed," either racially, religiously, or economically? Is this a common phenomenon? Prior to reading *FAMILY TREE*, were you aware of the "one-drop rule?" Have you ever seen evidence of that sort of discrimination?
7. Halfway through the book, Dana says of her marriage, "I thought it was perfect. Well, it's not, and maybe it never was, maybe that was an illusion..." Do you think that the perfect marriage exists? The perfect relationship? What role does illusion play in the relationships we foster? Is illusion determined by our own needs?
8. Dana hypothesizes that Hugh would never have married her if she'd had brown skin, because as open as he claims to be, an inbred elitism would have surfaced back then. Do you agree with her assessment? Do you think it is possible to change beliefs that have been ingrained since childhood? Can you site examples from your own life in which you or the others around you have "reverted" in some ways as you have grown older?
9. When Ellie Jo breaks her ankle, Dana finds herself challenged to do more than a new mother should be doing. Undaunted, perhaps bull-headed, she thinks, "She could do anything herself, if she wanted to badly enough - could do anything herself, if she had to." Is this a mother thing? A woman thing? Can you site examples from your own life where you or someone else has felt this way?
10. Though Hugh remains close to his former client, Yunus El-Sabwi, he understands that, like other Arab males, Yunus has trouble talking about personal family matters, and that keeping silence and a stiff upper lip is a matter of honor among such men. But is

it only Arab men who feel this? What about Western men? Are they more forthcoming about personal matters? And if not, why not? Honor? Pride? Stubbornness? Competitive instincts?

11. When Dana and Hugh arrive in Albany, Dana insists on carrying the baby herself. She considers Lizzie her security, proof that she is loved. Given the circumstances, is she justified in feeling this way? What dangers are involved in this? Do you know people who have unhealthy ties to their children?
12. When Dana meets Jack Jones Kettyle, he says that he simply stopped thinking about Liz Joseph when she left school. He explains it as follows: "The choice was between pining forever over a relationship that wasn't to be, or moving on. Putting Liz behind me was the only way I could survive." Is this attitude cold and calculated? Is it compatible with the idea of a priest who cares for all people? Are there other characters in *FAMILY TREE* who have experienced variations on this theme? Is there a lesson in his words for Dana?
13. On the day Ellie Jo has her stroke, Hugh makes the analogy of life as a chronological chain of change, whereby each distinct link alters the direction, however slightly, of a person's future. Do you agree with this analogy? What other links might Hugh have had in mind, beside the one of Ellie Jo's impairment? What are some of the links in your own life?
14. Eaton accuses his brother Brad of suggesting Hugh's marriage is shaky to compensate for Brad's own daughter's divorce. Likewise, Ellie Jo accuses her cousin Emma of starting rumors about Ellie Jo's Earl to compensate for Emma's lack of any husband at all. Do you think these accusations are valid? Do you see jealousy as a major problem in families? Among friends? Have you had personal experience with this?
15. With the results of the sickle-cell test, Dana suddenly sees Hugh as "more human." Do you? How do you define "human?" If you were to pick one word to describe Hugh prior to getting the results of this test, what would it be?