



Discussion Questions

Caucasia by Danzy Senna

Source: Madison Public Library

1. *Caucasia* begins with Birdie's recollection: "A long time ago I disappeared. One day I was here, the next I was gone." Why does Birdie come to think of herself as having "disappeared" when living as Jesse Goldman? Is her ability to disappear a blessing or a curse? Is Birdie "passing" when she calls herself black, or when she calls herself white? When is she not passing?
2. Cole and Birdie speak Elemenó, a language named after their favorite letters in the alphabet, "with no verb tenses, no pronouns, just words floating outside time and space, without owner or direction" (p. 6). How does Elemenó reflect the sisters' positions in their family and in the world? Why does Elemenó continue to be so important to Birdie throughout the novel?
3. In what ways is the tension between Sandy and Cole typical of that between any mother and daughter, and in what ways is it specific to an interracial family? Do you agree with Cole's statement: "Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child" (p. 44)? Does Sandy treat her two daughters differently based on their appearances?
4. Why do you think Deck treats Birdie with a "cheerful disinterest – never hostility or ill will, but with a kind of impatient amusement" (p. 47)? Do you think he loves Birdie? How do Birdie and Cole respond differently to Deck's teachings on race? Who internalizes his vision of America more? By the end of the novel, have Cole and Birdie embraced or rejected their parents' philosophies about the world? Which sister seems to have become more like Deck, and which more like Sandy?
5. Officially, Birdie has no name. Her birth certificate "still reads 'Baby Lee,' like the gravestone of some stillborn child" (p. 17). Her sister's name, meanwhile, was originally Colette after the French novelist, but was later shortened to Cole. Discuss the significance of the sisters' names.

6. Sandy and Deck are initially drawn together by a quote by the French existentialist writer, Camus, who wrote: "Do you drink coffee at night?" What does this initial encounter tell you about their compatibility, or incompatibility? Why does their relationship eventually sour? Do you believe they were torn apart because of external pressures, or internal ones? Do you think they would have stayed together had they lived in a less racially divided city or in another country altogether? By the end of the novel, does Birdie believe that her parents really loved each other? Do you believe that they did?
7. Birdie refers to the time she spends on the run with Sandy, while "the lie of our false identities seemed irrelevant" (p. 116), as "dreamlike." Despite a sense of loneliness, Birdie says she felt "comfort in that state of incompleteness" (p. 116). Do you feel that this experience weighed more positively or negatively in Birdie's development? By the end of the novel, has she found "completion" – or will she continue to live in this state of incompleteness?
8. How did Sandy and Birdie's stay at Aurora affect Birdie's emerging sexual identity? How do her sexual experiences with Alexis compare to her later sexual experiences with Nicholas in New Hampshire? Does Birdie's emerging sexuality in any way parallel her search for racial identity?
9. Redbone lurks in the background of the novel as a sinister figure. Why does he initially take such an interest in Birdie? Why does he take her photograph in the playground? Do you believe he is in part responsible for the troubles that befall the family? Ultimately, who or what do you feel is to blame for Cole and Birdie's separation?
10. Birdie often seeks her reflection in other women's faces. What parts of herself does she see mirrored in Cole? Sandy? Maria? Samantha? Dot? Penelope? Mona? Others? What are the potential advantages and disadvantages to being a chameleon?
11. Birdie holds on to a fantasy of helping Deck's research by spying on white people while "passing." How does she fail or succeed in her study? What does she find out? Does she become Jesse Goldman, or is she able to remain Birdie in disguise? Are her fantasies about Deck shattered or fulfilled when she encounters him at the novel's conclusion?

12. At some point in New Hampshire, Birdie starts to add items to her box of "negrobilia." Discuss the significance of the various "artifacts" Birdie keeps in her box. Do they succeed in helping her remember Cole and Deck?
13. In the woods one night in New Hampshire, Samantha says to Birdie: "I'm black. Like you" (p. 242). Do you think Samantha has been aware of Birdie's racial heritage all along, or is Birdie mishearing her? What or who gives Birdie the courage to finally leave New Hampshire?
14. Birdie sees her mother as "a long-lost daughter of Mayflower histories, forever in motion, running from or toward an utterable hideaway" (p. 286). In your opinion, is Sandy more "a hero, a madwoman, or a fool" (p. 332)? What motivated her to take up a life of political activism? What has she sacrificed in the process?
15. Do you agree with Deck that race is "a complete illusion . . . a costume" (p.334)? Does Birdie and Cole's experience prove that racial identity is simply a costume, or something deeper?
16. In the novel's conclusion, Birdie says to her sister: "They say you don't have to choose. But ... there are consequences if you don't." Cole replies: "Yeah, and there are consequences if you do." What are the consequences of choosing and not choosing? Have Birdie and Cole chosen one part of their racial heritage over the other by the novel's conclusion?
17. Birdie writes, "While there seemed to be remnants of my mother's family everywhere – history books, PBS specials, plaques in Harvard Square – my father's family was a mystery. It was as if my father and Dot had arisen out of thin air." Does her mother's white family's written history shape her identify more than her black imagined one? How does knowing or not knowing one's history contribute to one's sense of identity? Does what we learn about ourselves through oral or written histories give us a different understanding of ourselves?
18. Do you agree with Deck's theory about mulattos in America functioning as canaries in the coalmine? Is Birdie a canary in the coalmine? What do you imagine her fate will be?