

The Other Madisons by Bettye Kears

Discussion Questions

1. Bettye Kears introduces us to her family's credo: "Always remember—you're a Madison. You come from African slaves and a president" (12). These words, as Kears writes, guided her family for nine generations, especially in the antebellum years when her enslaved ancestors used James Madison's name as a tool to help them find family members who had been sold and sent away. Discuss the importance of a name. Can names be used as tool of imprisonment or linking or both?
2. Discuss what it means to be a *griot* or *griotte*. How does Kears react when she learns that she'll be the next *griotte* in her family? What does she foresee as the greatest challenges?
3. What is the significance of the cotillion scene (13–15)? What does it foreshadow?
4. Discuss the role of community in this memoir—both in Kears's own life and in the lives of her ancestors. What has community offered them?
5. Kears writes, "Though many in our family have heard we descend from President Madison and his slaves, only the *griots* know the full account of our ancestors, white and black, in

America” (38). Discuss the importance of oral history. What does it provide that written history cannot?

6. Gramps says, “Our white ancestors laid the foundation for this country, but our dark-skinned ancestors built it” (94). Kearsse embarks on her own journey in an effort to better understand her ancestry and her family’s regard toward it. How might you imagine confronting this reality when some ancestors oppressed and tried to erase others? What are some of the struggles Kearsse experiences on her journey?
7. Discuss the significance of the Mandy sections. What insight do Kearsse’s imaginings of Mandy offer us? What do these sections bring to the book? Why was it important to Kearsse to trace Mandy’s footsteps?
8. Kearsse writes, “‘If you shake any family tree, a chain will rattle’” (143). Discuss what she means by this, especially within the context of Chapter 11, “Visiting.”
9. In Chapter 13, “In Search of the President’s Son,” Kearsse describes her archival and scientific research. How has technology played a role in linking family histories? What are its blind spots?

10. Discuss the realizations that Kearsse has after attending a workshop at the American Civil War Center (232–36). What does the inclusion of the words “other persons” in the Constitution signify?

11. Was there a particular person from Kearsse’s family history who captured your attention and whom you wished you knew more about? What about their story has been lost to time? What would a fuller sense of their story offer to your understanding of history?

12. Why do you think it was important to Kearsse to write this book? What message(s) did you take away?