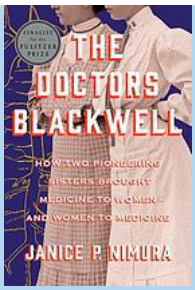
Discussion Guide



The Doctors Blackwell
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Women in Medicine
History of Medicine

Summary

In 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman in America to receive an M.D. She was soon joined in her iconic achievement by her younger sister, Emily. Together they founded the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children, the first hospital staffed entirely by women. Both sisters were tenacious and visionary, but their convictions did not always align with the emergence of women's rights – or with others.

Questions

1. Which sister, Elizabeth or Emily, resonated more strongly with you? Why?
2. None of the five Blackwell sisters married, while their brothers chose strikingly independent women as partners. Why do you think this was?
3. What were the origins of Elizabeth's interest in the newborn field of public health?
4. How did Emily's ideas about the role of a female physician diverge from Elizabeth's?
5. How did the Blackwell sisters feel about women's rights or other women in general?
6. Nineteenth-century medicine looked very different from modern practice, but like today the pace of innovation was rapid. What did you find most startling about the Blackwells' medical training—and which of our techniques will seem quaint or barbaric in the future?
7. The Blackwells interacted, sometimes intimately, with some of the most famous figures of their day: Florence Nightingale, Henry Ward Beecher, Lucy Stone, William Lloyd Garrison, Lady Byron, Henry Whitney Bellows, even Abraham Lincoln. Yet comparatively few people are familiar with the Blackwell story today. Why?
8. How have the challenges faced by women doctors changed over time? Which issues, in the present, would surprise the Blackwell sisters, and which would they recognize from their own lives?
9. The Blackwell story is easiest to find on the children's biography shelf, with Elizabeth often depicted as a slim, attractive young woman with a stethoscope, leaning solicitously over a grateful patient. If you read one of these inspirational stories as a child, how was it different from *The Doctors Blackwell*? What do the children's versions leave out, and why?
10. Have we made progress in our ability to accept and embrace powerful or pioneering women?

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