

THE FAMILY SECRET
Alice Irene Pifer and Lynn Sherr
ABC News 20/20

Analysis

“The Family Secret” does a good job of blending historical context into an unfolding story so that the viewer learns something about history while following a modern tale. The news peg—the gathering at Monticello—grounds the piece in the present and makes for a strong narrative arc: the story follows Jill through her stages of discovery about her black family and eventually travels with her to the reunion at Monticello, a logical, climactic place for the piece to end.

We see in Jill some of the complexity that’s so often to be found in these stories when she talks about the contradictory feelings—sometimes admiration, sometimes anger—she has for her great-grandmother (**DVD: The Family Secret, 1:02**). The story hinges on matters of identity—the fact that her forebears passed, Jill’s musings on her own racial identity, and the fact that she tells her son he is white and black. Note how well Lynn Sherr’s follow-up questions draw out the layers of Jill’s thinking on the issue and get to deeper truths.



Jill Atkin Sim and her son Harrison at the Jefferson Family reunion in Monticello.
(Photo: ABC News, 20/20)

Technically speaking, two point-of-view camera shots—demonstrating how Jill’s great-great-grandmother Dora had to see her grandchildren at a distance and had to go through a servant’s entrance to visit her daughter—provide a poignant way of not just telling but showing the pain at the heart of passing.



Lynn Sherr,
ABC News, 20/20

The 20/20 segment left some questions unanswered that might have helped viewers better understand the sharp edges of Jill’s history. It makes no mention, for example, of the tensions roiling in Jill’s family over her decision to go public with her great-grandparents’ story (**Text: pp. 93–94; DVD: Pifer/Sherr interview, 1:02**). Producer Alice Irene Pifer was true to her promise to Jill that she wouldn’t involve other family members in the report or identify them (**Text: pp. 94–95; DVD: Pifer/Sherr interview, 1:42**), but Pifer didn’t let viewers know why such a significant angle of the story went unexplored. Could there have been a brief explanation of this in the script that would not have violated the promise to Jill?

The additional challenge in this story is how to identify Jill. Descended on one side of her family from black ancestors, she is indirectly identified at least once by Sherr as white.

Because racial identity is so central to this story, the journalists could have been more precise in identifying Jill (**DVD: Pifer/Sherr interview, 4:34**).

In the Classroom

The story may prompt students to think about their own racial/ethnic identity (or their own family secrets). Some may want to tell stories they know about passing or talk about definitions of “white” and “black.” Students may wonder why it’s news that a white person discovers black ancestry when it’s rarely, if ever, news when a black person discovers a white ancestor.

When facilitating a conversation about this story, teachers should seek to identify the many prisms through which students are likely to view the issues of identity and passing (be aware that many students will not know what passing is). The journalistic point of such a conversation is this: students will come to appreciate the range of ways an issue of race/ethnicity can be viewed. This is essential for journalists to understand, since they’ll often be doing stories about people who have very different perspectives from their own. Be wary of allowing the conversation to degenerate into a my-pain-is-worse-than-yours comparison. Ask lots of clarifying questions—for instance, “What do you mean?”—to move students beyond coded language.

Context

Context adds to understanding and bolsters fact. It puts action into perspective, zeroing in on the reasons things happen as they do so that the viewer, reader, or listener won’t have to guess about the motives of a character in a story. When a story provides too little context, a character’s actions can seem odd, inexplicable.

In *The Family Secret*, the viewer needs to know enough about racism and the era in which Jill’s ancestors were living to understand fully several critical layers of the story (**Text: p. 96–97; DVD: Pifer/Sherr interview, 5:20**). Otherwise, the complex and often wrenching decision to sever part of a family tree—essentially the decision Jill’s great-grandparents made—might seem merely selfish or cruel. Without some contextual insight into bigotry—historical and modern—it’s hard to appreciate fully why some in Jill’s extended family would regard black ancestry as a matter of shame. Moreover, a story about that “shame,” void of the context that gives it its power, could tacitly validate the belief that there’s something inherently wrong with having black forebears.

Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Context, the interview with Alice Irene Pifer and Lynn Sherr has entries listed in the Topic Index in the following categories:

Building Trust / Establishing Credibility
Covering People Different From You
Describing People by Race and Ethnicity
Doing Your Homework
Ethics: Using Disturbing Images and Words

Ethics: Various Issues
Getting People to be Candid
Lessons from the Field
Who Should Review Your Stories?

Assignments

1. Interview ten people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Ask them how they identify themselves racially or ethnically and why. Before the interviews, write down what race/ethnicity you believe each person will choose. Then write a report comparing your interviewees' racial or ethnic identity with what you predicted they'd say. Include in the paper your reactions to the assignment.

2. Write a story about the different ways people pass in your community. Identify at least four forms of passing and talk to sources who represent each type.

3. There was some tension in the reporting and producing of "The Family Secret" over how to tell Jill's story without outing other relatives. Research the standards and practices of several local news organizations regarding outing. Then, assume the role of chief executive of a news organization and write a detailed policy paper on outing. Be sure you state penalties for violation of the policy and cite cases/studies.



Anita Hemmings
(ABC News, 20/20)