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## Heroine and book suffer an identity crisis; [FINAL Edition]

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

In the first chapter, [Emily Raboteau] places [Emma Boudreaux]'s awkward encounters on a continuum with her grandfather, lynched before her father was born. This is at best absurd, and at worst, an ugly kind of pandering. Is it ironic that, when [Bernie] tells Emma how their grandfather died, violins play in the distance? Far more powerful are the chapters about Emma's father, Bernard -- like Raboteau's, a distinguished professor at Princeton. (Somewhat humorously, thinly disguised colleague Cornel West -- replete with iconic three-piece suit and Afro -- passes through the fictional landscape as "Lester Wright.") When Bernard leaves his small Southern town to integrate a Catholic boarding school, he is relegated to a windowless supply closet for his own protection. In a pivotal scene, Bernard's schoolmates slowly push burning matches under the door, which he puts out one by one, "like wishes going dark." He decides to dispense with "the old Bernard, the one who could be pitied," and embarks on the path that will garner endowed chairs and Guggenheims. Bernard's story -- this moment in particular -- could have neatly eclipsed Emma's in terms of high sentiment, but Raboteau rises to the occasion, and it is deeply moving.

### Full Text (619 words)

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### The Professor's Daughter

By Emily Raboteau. Henry Holt & Co. 278 pages. \$24.

The author whose biography nearly mirrors that of her protagonist plays a dangerous game. Memories have as good a chance as imaginings to bloom into a successful piece of fiction, but a novel in which circumstances and characters are readily identified can seem like a half-hearted memoir. In Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter*, the sections that diverge from the author's life are by far the most absorbing, and the specter of the author -- who, like Emma Boudreaux, was raised in Princeton, attended Yale and, as the product of a black father and a white mother, looks neither white nor black -- rises so frequently, one wonders why one genre won out over the other.

What would author Nella Larsen, who chronicled the murky byways of biracialism in the 1920s and 1930s, make of Emma, for whom the question "What are you, anyway?" is a veritable assault against a fragile psyche? "I remain a question mark," Emma tells us, then duly recounts the humiliations of the archetypal mulatto -- hair issues, alienation, constant inquiries from peers. But, as these horrors take place first in Princeton's cosseted homes, then in the overheated dorm rooms of Yale University, the reader is stuck between sympathy and the sensation that Emma is less a character than a collection of resentments. (It doesn't help that Emma's older brother Bernie, who electrocutes himself early in the novel, is also the favorite child.)

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Bernie tells Emma how their grandfather died, violins play in the distance? Far more powerful are the chapters about Emma's father, Bernard -- like Raboteau's, a distinguished professor at Princeton. (Somewhat humorously, thinly disguised colleague Cornel West -- replete with iconic three-piece suit and Afro -- passes through the fictional landscape as "Lester Wright.") When Bernard leaves his small Southern town to integrate a Catholic boarding school, he is relegated to a windowless supply closet for his own protection. In a pivotal scene, Bernard's schoolmates slowly push burning matches under the door, which he puts out one by one, "like wishes going dark." He decides to dispense with "the old Bernard, the one who could be pitied," and embarks on the path that will garner endowed chairs and Guggenheims. Bernard's story -- this moment in particular -- could have neatly eclipsed Emma's in terms of high sentiment, but Raboteau rises to the occasion, and it is deeply moving.

Most of the novel's chapters have appeared as prize-winning features in literary journals, and it is perhaps a testament to their strength as short fiction that they come together so poorly as a novel. After adult Bernie is reduced to "a vegetable" in the first chapter, he scarcely reappears until the novel's close. A fictional account of the childhood of South African novelist Willa Head -- a school assignment of Emma's, but it barely registers -- stands alongside a chapter in which Lester Wright's Ethiopian wife is nearly driven mad by Princeton's thinning of the deer. Raboteau circles the same characters, but there's no continuity -- even the title misrepresents the whole. Was it a marketing decision to make this a novel and not a set of linked stories? If so, it's a shame, because Emma's identity crisis is not as great as the one on the page.

Lizzie Skurnick is a writer living in Baltimore. She is the editor of the literary blog Old Hag ([www.theoldhag.com](http://www.theoldhag.com)).

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