

# Discussion Questions: Gods of the Upper Air

1) Impression: what (if anything) in this book “struck” you - impressed you or annoyed you? Why? Read us a quote that stayed with you.

2) Characters: This is a group biography of Boas, Benedict, Mead, Hurston, Deloria, and their influence on one another. Could you empathize with or relate to some, all, or any of the characters? Why do you think Boas found most of his best students were female?

3) Historical background: what was the ethnological “world view” or dominant paradigm about race that Boas grew up in, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> C and early 20<sup>th</sup> C? How did his participation in the World’s Fair reinforce that paradigm? Which research changed his views? Why did Boas object to museums grouping “exotic cultures” artifacts by type instead of by cultural origin?

4) Theme: Where does the quote “Gods of the Upper Air” come from, and what does mean as the title of this book? How would you describe their theory of “cultural relativism”? Why was this important, and how did it become widespread? How has “cultural relativism” changed (or failed to change) our culture’s views on race and gender?

5) Plot: Did Boas “walk the talk” by immersing himself in living with the cultures he was studying on the Kwakiutl and Baffin Island? Did Mead’s “unconventional” romantic life propel or influence her research on sex in other cultures?

6) Setting: All of these anthropologists were American, though Boas was a German immigrant. Hurston and Deloria studied their own American racial subcultures. But Benedict, who was white, studied American Indians. Boas & Mead studied “exotic” cultures of First Nations & Inuit, and Polynesian Indigenous peoples. All of their research was done in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. How would their work be different if done today? Or if done by people who grew up in these cultures? How have “anthropology” and our views on cultural appropriation changed since then?

7) Personal relatability- Did you learn anything in this book? Did it change your perception about anything? Does it resonate with anything in your life? Would you recommend it to a friend?