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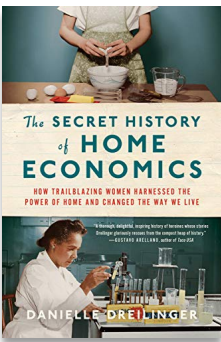
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***The Secret History of Home Economics:
How Trailblazing Women Harnessed the Power of Home
and Changed the Way We Live***

Reading Group Guide

1. During the second half of the nineteenth century, more and different colleges were established, and most college leaders supported a course in “domestic science” for women. Do you believe it was empowering or repressive to include housework in the curriculum for women? Do you think you would have chosen to study domestic science even after hearing it wasn’t “a course of training for really intelligent women”? Why or why not?
2. Booker T. Washington said in his most famous speech, “No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.” Do you agree with Washington? How did black women approach home economics differently than white women? How might white and black women have benefited from working together? What challenges did they share?
3. Ellen Richards and her colleagues at the Lake Placid Conference wanted to convince universities to embrace home science as a serious study in order to create “a new profession commanding adequate compensation.” What made home economics “serious” to these pioneering women?
4. Eugenicists embraced home economics because they believed some heritable traits could be cured by right living. Why do you think home economists were reluctant to reject eugenics? Do you think that a focus on “race betterment” helped or hurt home economists as they tried to secure support from white men in charge?
5. Betty Crocker, the fictional character who taught home economics in a radio program for General Mills, was not allowed to discuss her private life. Why do you think General Mills prevented its female influencer from sharing personal matters? How do you think women would respond to Betty Crocker or Aunt Sammy today?
6. In the 1920s, home economics departments began trying to teach students about parenthood with practice babies. Why do you think home economists embraced the “professionalization of parenthood”? What ethical questions did practice babies raise? What do you think of the practice yourself?

7. During the 1950s, a group of Maryland homemakers complained in *The Journal of Home Economics* that news coverage lionized working women and minimized the importance of homemaking. Which do you think is more important: paid work or homemaking?
8. Home economists made considerable contributions to progressive causes in the late 1960s, and yet they were uncertain about their purpose and future direction. What would you have advised home economists to do as they struggled for respect?
9. Robin Morgan went to the 1971 American Home Economics Association conference and declared, “As a radical feminist, I am here addressing the enemy.” Why was Morgan so concerned about young women passing through home economics departments? What did she want home economists to do going forward? Did home economists need radical feminists? Did radical feminists need home economists?
10. In 1980, the family values movement put home economics on trial. Why did Christian fundamentalists target home economists? Why didn’t earlier home economists face the same scrutiny? Do you think home economics departments knew how to talk about family life at the end of the twentieth century? Why or why not?
11. Roberta Duyff believes that “the terminology [of home economics] is lost but the profession is still there.” Do you agree with this assessment? Where are home economists working today? Have families paid a price as home economics programs have crumbled?
12. Dreilinger tells us how we might be able to revive home economics. Do you agree with her recommendations? Would you modify or add anything? Should home economics focus on life skills or career preparation? Personal improvement or societal change?



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