

LOOK

THE

MICHELLE OBAMA

A Reader's Discussion Guide

1. Mrs. Obama writes that while *The Look* is a celebration of fashion, even more so she hopes it is “a celebration of confidence, identity, and authenticity, and an inspiration to think deeply about how we choose to define style and beauty” (page 32). How do you define style and beauty? Has that changed since reading *The Look*?
2. What role does fashion play in how Mrs. Obama defines herself? How does she use it to communicate—politically, culturally, or personally?
3. How did Mrs. Obama’s wardrobe choices conform to—or challenge—traditional expectations of what First Ladies should wear or represent?
4. What messages do you think Mrs. Obama conveyed through specific iconic outfits? Who do you think the intended audience was for those looks? What different meanings might different audiences project onto them?
5. Mrs. Obama describes her earliest fashion memory of looking in the mirror and being proud of the brown Sears dress she’d picked out for herself (pages 27–28). What was the first time you remember feeling confident in something you wore? What made that moment stick with you?
6. In the introduction, Mrs. Obama says, “As a Black woman, I was under a particularly white-hot glare, constantly appraised for whether my outfits were ‘acceptable’ and ‘appropriate,’ the color of my skin somehow inviting even more judgment than the color of my dresses” (page 28). How do public expectations around professionalism shape the way we present ourselves? In what ways did Mrs. Obama challenge those expectations?
7. While Mrs. Obama’s own mother was exceedingly practical about clothing, many women inherit a generational understanding of style from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends. Who influenced your fashion sense and ideas of what style looks like?
8. Mrs. Obama opens chapter one, “Into the Spotlight,” by sharing how her “regular-person closet” was not equipped to keep up with the sudden demand of public appearances as her husband’s political career took off. Have you ever stepped into a season of life in which you felt like nothing in your closet fit what you needed? How did you navigate that change?
9. Mrs. Obama describes how it was important to her from the beginning of her husband’s presidency to wear emerging designers, particularly designers of color. What impact did this have on the fashion industry and the public’s perception of Mrs. Obama?
10. In chapter two, “First Lady as a Verb,” Mrs. Obama writes, “My first questions when considering any outfit or look were ‘Do I love it? Does it reflect who I am?’” (page 70). What are your own criteria for choosing your clothes?
11. Meredith Koop, Mrs. Obama’s stylist, shares her journey to the White House and her process for styling the First Lady. What surprised you most about what happens behind the scenes to get her ready for a day of work and official appearances?
12. Throughout *The Look*, Mrs. Obama touches on how she used the public’s fascination with her style as a tool to draw attention to her values and initiatives: “If you want me to be on your magazine cover, let the focus be on what I stand for as much as on the heels I’m standing in” (page 32). What values do you hope shine through your own presence and style?

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13. In her foreword, Farah Jasmine Griffin writes of Mrs. Obama: “Throughout her time in the East Wing, Mrs. Obama fully embodied her role—she was a multidimensional, real person even as she became more and more of an icon” (page 21). Have you ever felt that people put you on a pedestal or expected you to have it all together just because you’re strong or successful? What helps you stay grounded?
14. Mrs. Obama writes about how her body was often politicized and scrutinized, like when she was lambasted for wearing sleeveless dresses to a joint session of Congress and in her first official White House portrait. How has the way others have projected meaning onto your body informed your relationship to style and to expressing yourself through it?
15. During President Obama’s campaigns and presidency, Mrs. Obama faced intense criticism for her public appearance—including from surprising sources. As she writes in chapter five, “In the Eye,” she writes, “I’d grown to expect this kind of commentary from men and political opponents, but it was upsetting to me that a fellow Black woman would contribute to the pile-on.” (page 152) Have you ever been criticized by someone you expected to support you? How did that feel?
16. Mrs. Obama describes her appearances on the cover of *Vogue* and other magazines and what those opportunities meant to her. If you were to appear on the cover of *Vogue*, what would you wear? How would you approach that process? What would you want your look to communicate about you?
17. *The Look* showcases two official portraits of Mrs. Obama: one by Sharon Sprung for the White House collection (page 150) and another by Amy Sherald for the National Portrait Gallery (page 167). What do those looks communicate to you about Mrs. Obama and her legacy through those paintings?
18. Mrs. Obama describes the extensive time, cost, and effort involved in preparing for public appearances—from styling and fittings to hair, makeup, and travel contingencies. What are your thoughts on the added time and labor women are expected to invest in their appearance compared to men?
19. Mrs. Obama’s makeup artist Carl Ray and her hairstylists Yene Damtew and Njeri Radway each offer a behind-the-scenes look at how they came to work with Mrs. Obama and how they approached their roles. What stood out to you about their reflections on collaboration, trust, and creative responsibility? How do their stories shape your understanding of the invisible labor—and powerful influence—behind a polished public image?
20. In chapter eight, “Hair Journey,” Mrs. Obama says, “I knew there was absolutely no way that the first Black First Lady could show up in braids—or any other protective hairstyle, for that matter.” (page 249) How does her experience highlight the broader tensions between cultural identity, personal expression, and public expectation? In what ways do you think her visibility helped challenge narrow definitions of professionalism and beauty?
21. Fostering self-confidence is “a reciprocal, inside-out experience,” (page 277) Mrs. Obama writes in chapter nine, “Confidently Me.” To nurture that confidence from the inside, she explicitly puts exercise, time for socializing, and other forms of physical and mental self-care on her calendar. What does your self-care practice look like today? How does it influence your outward presentation and self-confidence?
22. As Farah Jasmine Griffin writes in her foreword, “In her post-White House life, Michelle Obama has continued to evolve, and in our appreciation of the process of her becoming, we are encouraged to pursue ours” (page 22). Mrs. Obama describes her post-White House evolution this way: “I was beginning to explore what looks broadcast me as Michelle Obama the person, not Michelle Obama the First Lady” (page 274). When have you redefined your look to reflect the person you had become?
23. In what ways has Mrs. Obama’s approach to style inspired you to take more ownership of how you present yourself in the world—whether in celebration, protest, professionalism, or joy?
24. As you reflect on Mrs. Obama’s stories and message in *The Look*, how do you think fashion fits into her legacy? What about as a part of your own?