



Princeton Reads 2006

The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother by James McBride

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As a boy in Brooklyn's Red Hook projects, James McBride knew his mother was different. But when he asked about it, she'd simply say, "I'm light-skinned." Later, he wondered if he was different, too, and asked his mother whether he was black or white. "You're a human being," she snapped. "Educate yourself or you'll be a nobody!" And, when James asked what color God was, she said, "God is the color of water."... As an adult, McBride finally persuaded his mother to tell her story - the story of a rabbi's daughter, born in Poland and raised in the South, who fled to Harlem, married a black man, founded a Baptist church, and put twelve children through college. **The Color of Water** is James McBride's tribute to his remarkable, eccentric, determined mother - and an eloquent exploration of what family really means.

The Color of Water contains themes and content with which our diverse population can identify. The multiplicity of people and events that confront Ruth and James in this book allow for rich discussions about religion, education, parenting, families, identity and survival. None of the characters are perfect, and none are without redemption. The use of two first person narrators also makes for a great entrée into discussing multiple perspectives on common events and experiences. The writing is straightforward and filled with anecdotes that at times make you laugh and at times make you cringe. And like James, you are left desirous of knowing more about the people who shaped your life and influenced you to become the person you are today.

" Complex and moving...suffused with issues of race, religion and identity. Yet those issues, so much a part of their lives and stories, are not central. The triumph of the book - and of their lives - is that race and religion are transcended in these interwoven histories by family, love, the sheer force of a mother's will and her unshakable insistence that only two things really matter: school and church...It is her voice - unique, incisive, at once unsparing and ironic - that is dominant in this paired history, and its richest contribution... The two stories, son's and mother's, beautifully juxtaposed, strike a graceful note at a time of racial polarization." -**The New York Times Book Review**

Like Gregory Williams's *Life on the Color Line* (LJ 2/1/95), these two memoirs describe growing up interracial from the perspective of the sons of African American fathers and white mothers. McBride, an accomplished journalist and musician, has viewed the yawning chasm of racial division from both sides and, despite carving out a successful life, has been scarred. Unlike Williams and Minerbrook, though, he focuses on a single, singular parent, a rabbi's daughter who later helped her husband establish an all-black Baptist church in her home and saw 12 children through college. His mother's own story,

juxtaposed with McBride's, helps make this book a standout. Recommended for all collections. Minerbrook's father came from Chicago's African American high society, his mother from rural Missouri. He paints a detailed portrait of their family life, of relationships complicated by the fact that "human emotions, when mixed with racial issues, are prone to shatter like glass." Nearing middle age, he seeks out the white side of his family, who have rejected his mother and her offspring, and achieves a well-deserved catharsis. Still, his accounts of the almost unrelenting prejudice of white against black, black against white, light-skinned black against dark-skinned black, and so on are deeply disturbing. One is left to borrow the words of another recent commentator and say that this cancer does indeed make me want to holler. Highly recommended. **Library Journal**, Jim Burns, Ottumwa P.L.

Writer and musician McBride recounts a telling conversation with his mother: "Am I Black or White?" "You're a human being. Educate yourself or you'll be a nobody!" With the help of two remarkable African American husbands (James is the youngest of eight McBride kids; his father, Rev. Andrew McBride, died before he was born in 1957, and four more children were born during a second marriage), Ruthie Shilsky McBride Jordan infused her children with two values--a respect for education and religious belief. What makes this story inspiring is that she succeeded against strong odds--raising her family in all-black lower-income neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens in New York City, where opportunities for her children to get into major trouble abounded; how she did this is what makes this memoir read like a very well-plotted novel. An orthodox Jew born in Poland and raised in the South, Ruthie's early life included her abusive father, an itinerant rabbi who ran a grocery store where he exploited his black customers; a caring but helpless mother crippled by polio, who spoke no English; and a hardscrabble childhood in rural Virginia, where she was shunned by whites and blacks alike, because she was a Jew and also for her father's business practices. McBride skillfully alternates chapters relating his life story and his coming to terms with his mixed ethnic and religious heritage with chapters conveying his mother's travails and her development into a fervent Baptist; the latter in her own voice. This moving and unforgettable memoir needs to be read by people of all colors and faiths. **Publishers Weekly**, Jan 15, 1996

People of the Book



James McBride - James McBride is an award-winning writer and composer. His critically acclaimed memoir, *The Color of Water*, won the 1997 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for Literary Excellence, was an ALA Notable Book of the Year, and spent more than two years on *The New York Times* bestseller list. In 2002 it was chosen by The New York Women's Agenda as the book for New York City Reads Together, the first book selected for that honor. *The Color of Water* has sold more than 1.5 million copies in the United States alone and is now required reading at numerous colleges and high schools across the country. It is a perennial favorite among book clubs and community-wide reading groups, and has been published in 16 languages and in more than 20 countries.

McBride's new book, *Miracle at St. Anna*, an historical novel released in January 2002, is the story of an Italian orphan who befriends a black American soldier in Italy during World War II. It has been hailed as "an outstanding novel" by The Dallas Morning

News, called "greathearted, hopeful, and deeply imaginative" by *Elle Magazine*, and is described as "searingly, soaringly beautiful" by *The Baltimore Sun*.

McBride is a former staff writer for *The Washington Post*, *People Magazine*, and *Boston Globe*. His work has also appeared in *Essence*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Times*. Aside from his literary honors, McBride is also a musician. McBride is currently writing his newest book, a novel about jazz, and plans a fall 2003 college tour with his 12 piece R&B/jazz band in support of his newest CD/documentary project called "The Process."

McBride has appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines including *People*, *Newsweek*, *Savoy* and *USA Today*. He has appeared on several national radio and television shows including *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, NPR's *All Things Considered*, *Fresh Air*, *Morning Edition*, and in major news outlets in Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Canada, Germany, Belgium, and Italy. James is a native New Yorker and graduate of New York City public schools. He studied composition at The Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio and received a Masters in Journalism from Columbia University in New York at age 22. He also holds an Honorary Doctorate of Human Letters from Whitman College and The College of New Jersey.

James McBride has composed songs for Anita Baker, Grover Washington Jr., Gary Burton, Everett Harp, Rachelle Farel, and Purafe. McBride has also composed pieces for musicals and television. He created the award winning musical "Bobos" which was performed at the American Theater Festival in Philadelphia, in 1993. His musical work, *The Process*, is now available as a CD. In addition to writing and composing, James McBride has toured with musicians, including Michael Jackson.

McBride has won the Anisfield-Wolf Award for Literary Excellence, 1997, and Notable Book of the Year, American Library Association, both for *The Color of Water*; honorary doctorate, Whitman College. Awards for music include Stephen Sondheim Award, American Music Festival, 1993, Richard Rodgers Award, American Arts and Letters, 1996, and Richard Rodgers Horizons Award, ASCAP, 1996; *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* was chosen as the city of Philadelphia's second selection for the city's One Book program, 2004.



Ruth McBride Jordan - Born in Poland in 1921 to Hudis and Fishel Shilsky, Ruth changed her birth name as she embraced a new and happier life in New York City with Andrew Dennis McBride, who became her first husband. Her early life was filled with love from her mother and adversity almost everywhere else – at home, where she was abused and forced to work long hours in the family store; in the neighborhood; and at school, where she was ridiculed for being a member of the Jewish faith. After her graduation from high school, Ruth moved to New York, then later left the comfort of her grandmother's home to start a new life with Andrew. Their marriage was a happy one. Together they produced eight children, instilling in them the importance of

religion, education and family loyalty. Upon her husband's death, Ruth was assisted in raising her children by Hunter Jordan, who became her second husband and the father of her four additional children. She became a widow for a second time, and eventually overcame her grief to focus again on ensuring that all of her children would become well-educated, productive members of society. Once she had achieved that goal, she returned to school herself and became a social worker. Ruth moved to New Jersey to live with her daughter, Kathy, and continues to serve and educate others.

Rachel Deborah Shilsky's Family and Acquaintances

Hudis Shilsky - Rachel's beloved mother, Mameh, who suffered from polio. She was faithful to her three children and husband.

Fishel Shilsky - Rachel's father, Tateh, a rabbi, who was racist, demanding, greedy and abusive to his wife and children.

Sam Shilsky - Rachel's older brother, who ran away from home, enlisted in the military, and later died in WWII.

Gladys (Dee-Dee) Shilsky - Rachel's younger sister, who was born in America. She cut Rachel out of her life when Rachel decided to leave the family and flee to New York City.

Zaydeh and Bubeh - Rachel's grandparents, who settled in New York and supported Rachel's family when they first came to America.

Aunt Mary - Hudis's wealthy sister, who lived in New York and employed both Rachel and James McBride.

Laurie and Paul Schiffman - Hudis's eldest sister and her husband, whose sponsorship allowed the Shilskys to emigrate to the United States.

Aunt Betsy (Betts) - Hudis's youngest sister, who lived with Bubeh and helped Rachel obtain an abortion.

Uncle Dave, Uncle Issac, Aunt Rhonda, Aunt Bernadetta, Uncle Hal, Lois and Enid - Other members of Hudis's family living in New York.

Frances Moody Falone - Rachel's only school friend in Suffolk.

Mrs. Brown - An older woman in Suffolk who befriended Rachel.

Peter - Rachel's first boyfriend, who impregnated her when she was fifteen years old. Later, he married someone else, whom he impregnated.

Rocky - Rachel's boss when she was a manicurist in New York, who tried to entice her to become a prostitute.

Eddie Thompson - Rachel's neighbor in Suffolk, who later helped James learn about his mother's side of the family.

Aubrey Rubenstein - One of the few Jews who remained in Suffolk and who helped James learn more of his family history.

Gerry Jaffe - Another acquaintance of the Shilskys, who owned a slaughterhouse.

Ruth McBride Jordan's and James McBride's Family and Acquaintances

Andrew Dennis McBride - James's biological father and Ruth's first husband, who supported her through difficult times and died of cancer before James was born. He was a musician and clergyman and reintroduced religion to Ruth's life.

Hunter L. Jordan - Ruth's second husband, who worked for the New York City Housing Authority. James's primary male role model. He bought a house for Ruth and her children and later died of a stroke.

Jacqueline (Jack) - Andrew McBride's daughter from a previous marriage, who helped Ruth and her children with food and emotional support.

Richard - Jacqueline's husband, who taught James a variety of life skills when he spent summers with them.

Andrew Dennis McBride - James's older brother and Ruth's oldest son, who was an artist and civil rights activist and became a doctor.

Rosetta McBride - James's older sister and Ruth's oldest daughter, who was appointed to keep the younger children in line and who became a psychologist.

William (Billy) McBride - James's older brother who enjoyed teasing him and who became a medical director.

David McBride - James's older brother and William's partner in crime when it came to teasing James. He became a University Chairman of Afro-American History.

Richard (Richie) McBride - James's brother. The absent-minded "Mad Scientist" son of Ruth who became a chemistry professor.

Dorothy McBride-Wesley - James's sister who became a medical practice office manager.

Kathy Jordan - James's attractive half-sister who grew up to be a special-education teacher and with whom Ruth lived later in her life.

Judy Jordan - James's half-sister who became a teacher in New York

Hunter Jordan - James's younger half-brother who became a computer consultant.

Henry Jordan - James's youngest half-brother, who disliked his mother's cooking. He attended North Carolina A&T University.

Walter, Henry, and Garland Jordan - Hunter L. Jordan's brothers, who welcomed the McBride and Jordan children into their lives.

Clemy - Hunter L. Jordan's southern cousin, who entertained the children with pony rides when they visited in the summer.

Aunt Candice - Ruth's first husband's aunt, who stayed and helped the family after his death. **Linwood Bob Hinson** - James's cousin, who looked like his father, Andrew Dennis McBride.

Stephanie McBride - The woman James married.

Marvin and Joe - James's teenage friends, who joined him in escaping life by getting high.

Chicken Man - An elderly, frequently drunk gentleman, who befriended, advised and philosophized with James when he stayed with Jacky and Richard, and who met a violent end.

Reverend Brown - The religious leader who married Ruth and Andrew and for whom the New Brown Memorial Church was named.

Reverend Owens - The leader of the Whosoever Baptist Church, where James and his family actively participated in weekly services.

Deacon McNair - James's godfather, also active in the Baptist Church.

Irene Johnson - Ruth's best adult friend, who died shortly after Hunter L. Jordan died.

Curtis and Minnie Ware - Andrew's friends from back home, who settled in New York and supported him during his lean financial years.

Sam and Trafinna Wilson - Friends who hosted a wedding reception for Andrew and Ruth McBride.

Lily - A friend of Ruth who was also in an interracial marriage.

David and Ann Dawson - A wealthy couple from Delaware, who provided a job and financial support so that James could travel with the American Youth Jazz Band to Europe.

Ernie Santosuosso - A jazz critic and James's close friend.

David Lee Preston - James's journalist friend, who also had a remarkable mother, Halina Wind, who survived the Holocaust.

Summary of the Book

Chapter by Chapter

(Note: The chapters alternate between James's story and the early history of his mother, Ruth McBride.)

CHAPTER 1 – Dead (Ruth's early history)

James McBride's mother, Ruth, describes her early life. Born on April 1, 1921, to Polish Orthodox Jewish parents, Fishel Shilsky (Tateh) and Hudis Shilsky (Mameh), she was named Ruchel Dwarja Alyska. Her parents changed her name to Rachel when they immigrated to America. When Rachel was nineteen, as a way to mark her past as history, she changed her name to Ruth. Her father, a hard, unyielding man, worked as an itinerant rabbi and moved the family several times. Her mother, gentle and meek, suffered from polio. Ruth became dead to her family as a result of her marriage to James's African American father, Andrew Dennis McBride. Ruth's family recited kaddish and sat shiva. It is explained that in the Jewish faith, this ritual acknowledges the death of a family member or friend.

CHAPTER 2 – The Bicycle

James's stepfather, Hunter Jordan, dies. The death of the only father James has known, has a severe effect on him. James drops out of school and becomes involved in drugs and theft. His mother is distraught and spends hours riding a bicycle around the neighborhood. To James, who has just realized that his mother is white, her bicycle mania is embarrassing and an example of her differentness.

CHAPTER 3 – Kosher (Ruth's early history)

Ruth describes her parents' arranged marriage and how they got to America. At the time the family arrived, Ruth was two; her brother, Sam, was four. The family stayed with her grandparents, Bubeh and Zaydeh. She details the strict rules of Orthodox Judaism and how they affected her. Her grandfather died while she was still very young. His death, and the way it was handled, provoked a life-long fear of death in her.

CHAPTER 4 – Black Power

James becomes more aware of the divide between blacks and whites. Although his mother is white, she lives in a black world and refuses to acknowledge her whiteness. The Black Power movement is ascendant, and the Black Panthers are attracting more and more followers. Black pride is manifesting itself. In this environment, James is terrified for his mother's safety, yet she concentrates on raising her children to succeed. Reference is made to the fact that she and her husband, Andrew McBride, started the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church.

CHAPTER 5 – Old Testament (Ruth's early history) Ruth describes life with a traveling rabbi father. They lived in many places, for he was not considered good enough to be asked to stay on in a permanent position. Being poor and Jewish and having a handicapped mother embarrassed Ruth. The family moved south, to Suffolk, Virginia, where her father opened a grocery store in "the colored side of town." She tells of her loathing of her father, who was harsh and unloving and sexually abused her.

CHAPTER 6 – The New Testament James describes his mother's love of God and paints a colorful description of family Sundays in church. Later, in the New Brown Church, the family plays and recites Bible stories on Easter. Here, as elsewhere, the emphasis on schooling and religion is paramount. The title, *The Color of Water*, comes from this chapter.

CHAPTER 7 – Sam (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth describes the South of the 30s, with the specter of the Depression and the ominous presence of the Ku Klux Klan. She illustrates how the black population navigated that era. Her brother, Sam, could tolerate neither the life he was leading nor the tyranny of his father, and he ran off. He joined the Army and was eventually killed in World War II.

CHAPTER 8 – Brothers and Sisters

James lives in a home of “orchestrated chaos.” The family’s life is described including James’s position as one of the five “young-uns” in a family of twelve children, his mother’s inability to cook, the importance of food, the sharing of clothes and musical instruments and the hatching of childhood plots. He sees his house as a combination three-ring circus and zoo. He describes some of his siblings – his sister Helen, the rebel; Rosetta, the resident queen of the house; his brother Dennis, the civil rights activist and artist with aspirations of becoming a doctor.

CHAPTER 9 – Shul (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth’s father performed circumcisions as handily as he slaughtered beef. Her mother sent the children to school, but her father objected to the influence of a gentile education and paid for the girls to receive private lessons in sewing and record keeping. The whites at Ruth’s school hated Jews. Jews were seen as different from everyone, and few liked them. Since her father dealt with black customers, she and her family were considered lower class. Her one salvation at this time was her friendship with Frances.

CHAPTER 10 – School

James is surprised to hear his mother speak Yiddish when she takes the children to Jewish stores for school clothes. Ruth’s Jewish values begin to emerge. His sister Rosetta’s education is paid for by a Jewish foundation. Ruth sends the children miles away to predominately Jewish schools, where they are seen as token blacks. During this time James discovers music and books. The 60s sweep through the house, and the older siblings react to the changing times. In public, James becomes ashamed of his white mother.

CHAPTER 11 – Boys (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth details the travails of working in her father’s store, her feeling of being an outsider as a Jew, and the pain of attending a school where she is ostracized. She continues to like black people because they do not judge her. Her first boyfriend, Peter, is black. A black/white relationship is very dangerous in the South at this time. Fifteen-year-old Ruth becomes pregnant.

CHAPTER 12 – Daddy

James’s mother and his stepfather, Hunter Jordan, meet and marry. His younger brother, Hunter, is born. The family moves to a larger house in St. Albans, Queens. His stepfather visits on weekends while maintaining his apartment in Brooklyn. Although Hunter Jordan is a good man and loved by Ruth and her children, he cannot live in the chaos of the Queens house. Hunter Jordan has a stroke. James knows that his stepfather is going to die.

CHAPTER 13 – New York (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth’s mother knew that Ruth was pregnant. She sent Ruth to her relatives in New York. A colorful description of this extended family is provided. Aunt Betts helped Ruth obtain an abortion.

CHAPTER 14 – Chicken Man

James watches his mother succumb to grief over her second husband’s death. She rides her bike for hours, starts piano lessons, and lets the house fall into disrepair. James stays out of the house as much as possible to avoid the impact of watching his mother suffer. James’s life unravels as well. He is sent to stay with his half-sister Jack in Louisville, Kentucky. He hangs out with his brother-in-law and his “boys” and gets a

“street corner” education. James secures a job pumping gas, but loses it when he gets into a fistfight. He meets Chicken Man, an alcoholic who waxes philosophical when sober.

CHAPTER 15 – Graduation (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth remained in New York after her abortion, but went back to Suffolk to finish high school. She discovered that Peter had married after getting another girl pregnant. She began to have opinions of her own and determined to leave Suffolk. She worried about leaving her mother behind, for she had always been her mother’s “eyes and ears.” She went to graduation only at the behest of her best friend, Frances, but at the last moment realized that she could not step into the Protestant Church where the ceremony was being held. The next day she caught a Greyhound bus to New York City.

CHAPTER 16 – Driving

James’s mother has always taken the subway. As far as he knows, she has never learned to drive. She asks James to teach her to drive. After one lesson she refuses ever to drive again. His mother is falling apart, grieving not only over the loss of her husband, but also over her secret past – the loss of her Jewish family and her guilt over leaving her mother. Jesus is her salvation. When James returns for his junior year of high school, he resolves to mend his ways.

CHAPTER 17 – Lost in Harlem (Ruth’s early history)

When Ruth returned to New York, she worked in Aunt Mary’s leather factory and lived with her Bubeh. Aunt Mary hired a new man, Andrew “Dennis” McBride, a top-notch leather-maker and an artisan. Ruth discovered the magic of Harlem. As a result of Aunt Mary’s meanness, she quit her job and was hired as a manicurist in a barbershop run by Rocky, a pimp. Because she was worried about her mother, she asked Dennis to find out about her Mameh and her sister, Dee Dee. In telling Dennis about Rocky, Ruth felt ashamed. She left Harlem.

CHAPTER 18 – Lost in Delaware

James’s mother announces they are moving to Delaware. After much vacillation she buys a house in Wilmington. She has five kids at home now and seven in college. They find that life in Wilmington is racially charged and very different from New York City. Ruth wants to go back, but knows she cannot. She feels she has made a terrible mistake. Prayer turns her around. James focuses on his music and is selected to travel to Europe with the American Youth Jazz Band. He meets his benefactor, Mrs. Dawson. He is accepted into the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio.

CHAPTER 19 – The Promise (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth was through with the fast life. She got a job as a waitress and dated Dennis. Dennis was a talented violinist, but black musicians were not allowed in orchestras. He got a job in a factory. He and Ruth began living together – a situation considered scandalous. Dennis’s family and friends accepted her. When she called home, her father told her that her mother was sick and he needed help with the store. She returned to Suffolk and found her father having an affair and wanting a divorce. Dee Dee begged her to remain in Suffolk, and against her better judgment, Ruth promised that she would. It was a promise she would find she could not keep.

CHAPTER 20 – Old Man Shilsky

In 1984, James is working on the staff of the Boston Globe, unable to decide whether he wants to be a musician or a writer. He is also caught between the two worlds of black and white. Because he needs to run from his confusion and pain, he goes to Suffolk to seek his mother’s old friend, Frances. Instead, he meets Eddie Thompson, who knew his mother as Rachel. Eddie tells him about “Old Man Shilsky” – a detestable and mean-spirited man, who disliked and cheated blacks.

CHAPTER 21 – A Bird Who Flies (Ruth’s early history)

In 1941, Ruth's Bubeh died. Ruth decided to return to New York. Her father tried to get her to stay; she refused. He told her that if she married a black man, she could never come home again. She boarded the bus and discovered that her mother's Polish passport had been placed in her lunchbox. She resumed her relationship with Dennis and got a job in a glass factory. Her mother became gravely ill, but Ruth was not allowed to see her. When Mameh died, Ruth was guilt ridden. Dennis provided strength and support. She began going to Metropolitan Church in Harlem with him. She started the conversion to Christianity.

CHAPTER 22 – A Jew Discovered

In 1992, while standing in front of a synagogue in Suffolk, James acknowledges his own connection to the synagogue and to Judaism. His search for the Shilsky family ends. He now understands the isolation his mother and her family suffered. He leaves for New York City.

CHAPTER 23 – Dennis (Ruth's early history)

Ruth stayed on the black side after her mother died. Dennis was afraid to marry her because of the condemnation that would ensue. They continued living together and going to the Metropolitan Baptist Church, where she admired Rev. Abner Brown. She describes these years as her "glory years." In 1942, she joined the Metropolitan Church and became the church secretary. She and Dennis married and had their first child in 1943. They lived in a one-room apartment for nine years, which she describes as the happiest years of her life. In the early 1950s, they moved to the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn. When Reverend Brown died, she and Dennis started their own church, and Dennis got a divinity degree. When she was pregnant with her eighth child, James, Dennis died of lung cancer. None of Ruth's own Jewish family would help her. She met and married James's stepfather, Hunter Jordan.

CHAPTER 24 – New Brown

James realizes that Andrew McBride left behind the groundwork for Ruth to raise twelve kids. In 1994, the family attends the 40th anniversary of the New Brown Church. Ruth, now 74, addresses the assembly speaking stiffly at first, and then with certainty and joy.

CHAPTER 25 – Finding Ruthie (Ruth's early history)

In 1993, Ruth is doing well but is preoccupied with thoughts of her own mortality. It has taken years for James to find out who his mother is. The journey of discovery leads him to embrace his mixed race. He knows now that he can be both a musician and a writer.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss Ruth McBride's refusal to reveal her past and how that influenced her children's sense of themselves and their place in the world. How has your knowledge—or lack thereof—about your family background shaped your own self-image?
2. The McBride children's struggle with their identities led each to his or her own "revolution." Is it also possible that that same struggle led them to define themselves through professional achievement?

3. Several of the McBride children became involved in the civil rights movement. Do you think that this was a result of the times in which they lived, their need to belong to a group that lent them a solid identity, or a combination of these factors?
4. **"Our house was a combination three-ring circus and zoo, complete with ongoing action, daring feats, music, and animals."** Does Helen leave to escape her chaotic homelife or to escape the mother whose very appearance confuses her about who she is?
5. **"It was in her sense of education, more than any other, that Mommy conveyed her Jewishness to us."** Do you agree with this statement? Is it possible that Ruth McBride Jordan's unshakable devotion to her faith, even though she converted to Christianity from Judaism, stems from her Orthodox Jewish upbringing?
6. **"Mommy's contradictions crashed and slammed against one another like bumper cars at Coney Island. White folks, she felt, were implicitly evil toward blacks, yet she forced us to go to white schools to get the best education. Blacks could be trusted more, but anything involving blacks was probably substandard... She was against welfare and never applied for it despite our need, but championed those who availed themselves of it."** Do you think these contradictions served to confuse Ruth's children further, or did they somehow contribute to the balanced view of humanity that James McBride possesses?
7. While reading the descriptions of the children's hunger, did you wonder why Ruth did not seek out some kind of assistance?
8. Do you think it was naïve of Ruth McBride Jordan to think that her love for her family and her faith in God would overcome all potential obstacles or did you find her faith in God's love and guidance inspiring?
9. How do you feel about Ruth McBride Jordan's use of a belt to discipline her children?
10. While reading the book, were you curious about how Ruth McBride Jordan's remarkable faith had translated into the adult lives of her children? Do you think that faith is something that can be passed on from one generation to the next or do you think that faith that is instilled too strongly in children eventually causes them to turn away from it?

11. Do you think it would be possible to achieve what Ruth McBride has achieved in today's society?

THEME: EXAMINING THE TITLE

Why does Ruth tell James, "God is the color of water?" (51)

What is the effect of his accepting this?

Why does he say that his brother, Richie, did not accept this? (51)

Why is the phrase, the color of water, the title of this book?

THEME: RACE

Why does Ruth say, "She's light-skinned"? (xvii)

Why is this in the paragraph before the book begins?

When does the color of her skin matter to Ruth?

How important to James is it that his mother, Ruth, is white?

Does James know why he hit the Black Panther's kid on the bus? (36)

Why was the "question of race...like the power of the moon?" (94)

Why did James think it odd that "race was something he [his stepfather] never talked about"? (125)

Why did racism smash James "across the face like a bottle..."? (205)

THEME: RELIGION

Why does Ruth believe that marriage "is not about black and white. It's about God"? (233)

Why does Ruth tell James that being Jewish is a "real workout, which is maybe why I'm not a Jew now"? (2)

Why did Ruth's family declare her dead? Could this happen to you?

Why is Judaism dead for Ruth? ("truly gone from their world..." (284 – 285)

What strengths of Ruth that James loves and values do you think might have come from her Jewish background?

Why is Christianity so important to her?

Why does she believe it is the same God? Why is religion important to Ruth?

Why must James accept Jackie's advice to "Put yourself in God's hands?" (161)

Why does this book end with the quote from "Proverbs"? (291)

THEME: IDENTITY

Why does James have to find "Ruthie" before he can find himself?

Why does James's mother's first name change from Ruchel to Rachel to Ruth?

Why has he structured the book with alternate, parallel chapters (see table of contents)?

Is James the "Jew Discovered?" (219)

Why is James frustrated by "a world that considers the color of your face an immediate political statement"? (262)

Why does James believe that his mother's practices represented the best and the worst of the immigrant mentality?

When did he learn to put together music and writing? Why did he see these interests as conflicting?

Why wasn't James's experience as an outsider at school similar to Ruth's?

What strategies did Ruth and James have in coping with life's misfortunes?

After reading the book, what image would typify James's existence to you?

THEME: FAMILY/PARENTING RELATIONSHIPS

Why is the list of Ruth's children, their education and their present work included? (275)

Why is it important to tell us that James is the eighth of twelve children? (65)

Why does James state that "the image of her riding that bicycle typified her whole existence to me"? What are "mommy's contradictions"? (29)

Why does James call "mommy...a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts"? (260)

Was Ruth's Mameh a good mother?

What did Ruth learn from her parents that made her a good mother?

How was the influence of Ruth's father apparent in the way she raised her own children?

What did Ruth try to do differently from the way she was brought up?

How were her values different? Were any of her values similar?

How did James's perceptions of his mother and stepfather change as he matured?

How did help from extended family members affect the lives of Ruth and James?

THEME: GENERAL

What effect did James's successful quest to learn his mother's history have on both himself and his mother?

What role did New York City play in Ruth's and James's lives?

Additional Discussion Questions

1. What part did religious laws and custom play in Ruth's family's objection to her marriage?
2. Explain James' statement that "the image of her riding that bicycle typified her whole existence to me." After reading the book, what image would typify James' existence to you?
3. James' mother's first name began as Rúchel to Rachel to Ruth. Explain how the changing of her name was a vehicle for change in her life.
4. Compare the differences and similarities to the burial and mourning process practiced by Ruth's family to your own.
5. Although Ruth had an antagonistic relationship with her father, explain how his influences were apparent in the way she raised her own children.
6. Give examples from the book that support James' statement that his mother's practices represented the best and the worst of the immigrant mentality.
7. Do you agree with Ruth's assessment that Mameh was a good mother?
8. Ruth and James were both outsiders at school. How did they adapt and survive in this hostile environment?
9. How did James' perceptions of his mother and stepfather change as he matured?
10. Explain the important role that New York City played in Ruth's and James' lives.
11. Ruth and James had their own ways of coping with life's misfortunes. Explain and compare their strategies.
12. Both Ruth and James were sent to live with a trusted family member when they were in trouble. How did their experiences shape their lives?
13. What effect did James' successful quest to learn his mother's history have on both himself and his mother?

Helpful Web Sites

More about the Author

<http://www.library.phila.gov> – Site of the Free Library of Philadelphia that contains information about the author and events around the One Book, One Philadelphia project

<http://www.jamesmcbride.com> – James McBride’s site that tells about his writing and music

<http://www.powells.com/authors/mcbride.html> - An interview with James McBride in which he discusses his second book, writing, music and offers his personal views on all three

Information about the Jewish Religion and Culture

<http://www.jewfaq.org> – According to the author of this site, “Judaism 101 is an online encyclopedia of Judaism, covering Jewish beliefs, people, places, things, language, scripture, holidays, practices and customs.”

<http://www.askarabbi.com> – This is a site to submit questions about all aspects of Judaism to, and read previously submitted questions with answers from, any of ten Rabbis.

<http://www.pinenet.com/~rooster/hasid1.html#HASID1-Q1> – Site on Hasidic Jews

Information about the Black Power Movement

<http://blackquest.com/link.htm> - A site with general information on many links to topics from African-American History and culture.

<http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/concepts/power.html> - This page is part of a web site that was developed as an assignment for part of a course through the English Department of the University of Michigan.

Information about Jazz

<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/> - A web site that is presented as a Monthly Webzine featuring profiles, interviews, reviews and a jazz journalist of the month with a timeline and history of jazz.

<http://www.redhotjazz.com/> - A web site that explores the history of jazz before 1930 offering RealAudio files as well as biographies, discographies, essays and suggested readings.

Multiracial/ethnic Information

<http://www.ameasite.org/> - A site with information about the multiracial/ethnic community with related readings and additional recommended sites whose mission is “to educate and advocate on behalf of multiethnic individuals and families by collaborating with others to eradicate all forms of discrimination.”

Historical Perspectives

<http://www.facinghistory.org> – The site, Facing History & Ourselves offers teachers and others in the community occasions to study the past, explore new ideas and approaches, and develop practical models for civic engagement that link history to the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world and the choices that young people make daily.

March 31, 1996

Rachel and Her Children

By H. JACK GEIGER

THE COLOR OF WATER A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother. By James McBride. 228 pp. New York: Riverhead Books. \$22.95

There are two voices in this complex and moving narrative, and -- on the surface -- they could not seem more different. One is the voice of a black musician, composer and writer who traces his own evolution and that of his 11 brothers and sisters from childhood in a Brooklyn housing project to accomplished maturity.

The second voice is that of Rachel Shilsky, daughter of a failed itinerant Orthodox Jewish rabbi in a virulently anti-Semitic and violently racist small Southern town. She recalls her own bitter childhood, her flight to the Jewish Bronx and then to the Harlem of the early 1940's, and her marriage to a black minister.

With him, she bore her first eight children, fervently adopted Christianity and founded a black Baptist church. Widowed, she remarried -- this time to a solid, kindhearted black furnace fireman for the housing authority -- and bore four more children. Widowed again, alone and poor, she struggled fiercely to raise her family and assure her children's success.

Inevitably, these voices are connected and ultimately convergent, for Rachel Shilsky and James McBride are mother and son. Just as inevitably, their accounts are suffused with issues of race, religion and identity. Yet those issues, so much a part of their lives and stories, are not central. The triumph of the book -- and of their lives -- is that race and religion are transcended in these interwoven histories by family love, the sheer force of a mother's will and her unshakable insistence that only two things really mattered: school and church.

Not that it was easy. James's early childhood, in addition to containing all the ordinary joys, pangs and struggles of life in the orchestrated chaos of a large family, was touched by multiple confusions. His father died of cancer before he was born; his stepfather died when he was young. His mother's whiteness puzzled, often embarrassed and sometimes alarmed him, for he perceived danger from whites who disliked her for being a white person in a black world -- "Look at her with those little niggers!" was what he often heard in public -- and from blacks who saw her as an interloper. And there were other startling moments: shopping with her black children and bargaining heatedly in Hasidic stores, his

mother would suddenly shout -- in Yiddish -- "I know what's happening here!" to end the argument.

Since conflict about racial identity was a part of their lives, "written into our very faces, hands and arms," Mr. McBride writes, in his house "the question of race was like . . . a silent power, intractable, indomitable, indisputable and thus completely ignorable." Not completely. Is God black or white, he asked his mother in frustration. In the answer that gives the book its title, she said: "God's not black. He's not white. . . . God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color."

Black Power, the era of Bobby Seale and Malcolm X, hit the family like a tidal wave. The oldest McBride brother, already an Ivy League medical student, was simultaneously a civil rights activist and union organizer. But James, a high school honor student, drifted into truancy, then petty crime, then drugs. Sent to Kentucky to live with an older sister, he flirted with more serious crime. Back home in high school, he discovered music and writing, won a scholarship to Oberlin College and was on his way.

It was "in her sense of education . . . that Mommy conveyed her Jewishness to us," he thinks now, and that is what sustained him. She schemed shrewdly to have all her children bused to schools in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, sure that learning was a priority there. "Every morning we hit the door at 6:30, fanning out across the city like soldiers armed with books, T squares, musical instruments." She paraded them "to every free event New York City offered: festivals, zoos, parades, block parties, libraries, concerts."

But only as an adult did James McBride convince his mother -- now Ruth McBride Jordan -- to tell the story of Rachel Shilsky, to describe her past. And it is her voice -- unique, incisive, at once unsparing and ironic -- that is dominant in this paired history, and its richest contribution.

"I'm dead," she begins, referring to the ritual Orthodox memorial observance her Jewish relatives held when she married but, in a larger sense, describing her Jewish identity. Her father, rabbi turned storekeeper, was a cold, sexually abusive tyrant who kept his children in virtual servitude, exploited his black customers and ultimately abandoned his wife. Rachel had only one friend. She couldn't get a part in her high school musical because the other girls refused to dance next to a Jew. She couldn't go to her graduation because it was held in a church. A grandmother and aunts in New York provided summertime relief. She moved north, worked for her relatives -- and then found Harlem, freedom in a new identity and a new life in the lives of her children.

Near the end of the book, Mr. McBride lists his siblings' careers: two doctors, a social worker, a historian and professor of African-American history, a graduate student in nurse-midwifery, a chemistry professor, a medical practice office manager, two teachers, a computer engineer and a businessman. The author himself has been a staff writer at *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*. And there is one more achiever: at 65, Ruth McBride Jordan went back to school and earned a college degree in social work.

She is living now with a daughter in New Jersey, her son reports. "Every day she rises, spirits her two grandchildren off to school and drives around central New Jersey. . . . Sometimes she'll get up in the morning and disappear for days at a time, slipping away to her old stomping grounds, the Red Hook Housing Projects. . . . Despite the fact that my siblings often urge her to stay out of the projects, she won't. 'Don't tell me how to live,' she says." The two stories, son's and mother's, beautifully juxtaposed, strike a graceful note at a time (we are constantly told) of racial polarization. Together, I think, they give new meaning to some tired phrases. Try "multicultural" and, even more, "family values."

H. Jack Geiger is the Arthur C. Logan Professor of Community Medicine at the City University of New York Medical School.

Black Man, Jewish Soul

MARINA BUDHOS

THE COLOR OF WATER: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother.

By James McBride. Riverhead Books. 228 pp. \$22.95.

James McBride grew up about a mile away from where I did, in Queens, a borough of racially and ethnically separate communities. In the sixties, those of us who came from mixed families felt the racial fault lines start to crack. The quiet streets exploded with militant politics, standoffs between Jewish

teachers and local black community boards, kids hanging out on the boulevards, popping acid and drinking malt liquor. In *The Color of Water* James McBride describes what it was like to grow up smack in the middle of this ferment, in a family of twelve half-black, half-white kids, headed by an indomitable Jewish mother. Told with humor and clear-eyed grace, McBride's memoir is not only a terrific story, it's a subtle contribution to the current debates on race and identity.

Several recent memoirs by black authors explore Du Bois's double consciousness of moving between black and white worlds. Unlike Henry Louis Gates in *Colored People*, Brent Staples in *Parallel Time* and Ellis Cose in *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, McBride reveals a double consciousness embedded in the home. Though his mother hid her Jewish identity, she couldn't conceal

her whiteness. During the sixties, McBride always had to make room for a mother who complicated the picture. He admits "fear[ing] black power very deeply for the obvious reason. I thought black power would be the end of my mother."

McBride carries his double consciousness into the book's form, because *The Color of Water* is really two memoirs: McBride's childhood and his mother's story, complete with her Yiddish and Southern diction, unfolding in alternating chapters, mother's and son's voices playing off each other like jazz riffs on memory (McBride is a jazz musician and composer). The sheer strength of spirit, pain and humor of McBride and his mother as they wrestled with different aspects of race and identity is vividly told.

Ruth McBride Jordan, born Ruchel Dwajra Zytska in Poland, had a miserable childhood. Her tyrannical father, an itinerant rabbi who became a shopkeeper in Suffolk, North Carolina, sexually molested

Marina Budhos is the author of the novel House of Waiting (Global City).

her and eventually abandoned her ailing mother. Ruth escaped her grim home by crossing the formidable color line; in the thirties, she moved to New York—and Harlem—eventually marrying a black musician, Andrew McBride, a “true man” who “could make a dog laugh.” They had eight children and founded the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church in the Red Hook Housing Projects in Brooklyn. After McBride died, Ruth married Hunter Jordan, a furnace fireman—also black—had another four children and moved to a stucco house in St. Albans, Queens.

Within his sprawling clan, James was the sensitive kid who watched closely. Since my own mother also fled a rigid Orthodox Jewish home to marry an Indian Guyanese, I understand perfectly the ethos his parents forged to enable their kids to make it: “She and my father brought a curious blend of Jewish-European and African-American distrust and paranoia into our house,” McBride writes, and believed “money without knowledge was worthless, that education tempered with religion was the way to climb out of poverty in America.” McBride and his siblings attended largely Jewish schools and were taught to respect Jews for their love of education and hard work, but also endured their patronizing attitudes.

His family’s alloy of cultural influences, the mistrust of and respect for Jewishness, is painfully familiar. Unlike my agnostic mother, though, Ruth transformed her stringent Orthodox background into a Christian fervor that ruled the house. McBride’s was a black childhood inflected with both a soaring faith in the church and his own Jewishness, however unnamed: “My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul.”

Lovingly, McBride zeroes in on his remarkable mother: There’s the image of her riding a claptrap bicycle around the neighborhood, showing “her complete non-awareness of what the world thought of her, a nonchalance in the face of what I perceived to be imminent danger from blacks and whites who disliked her for being a white person in a black world. She saw none of it. She rode so slowly that if you looked at her from a distance it seemed as if she weren’t moving, the image frozen, painted against the spring sky.”

McBride captures best the turbulent sixties that “roared through my house like a tidal wave.” In one riveting scene 9-year-old McBride boards a camp bus and is mesmerized by an “outstandingly cool” black father who says goodbye to his son

with “the kind of handshake that lasts five minutes, fingers looping, thumbs up, thumbs down, index fingers collapsing, wrists snapping, bracelets tingling.” A moment later, discovering that this cool dude is a Black Panther, he panics, and races to the window to warn his mother. In a confused rage, McBride turns to the other boy and punches him “square in the face with my fist.”

As a teenager, the question of identity still gnawed: “[It was] an ache I had, like a constant itch that got bigger and bigger as I grew” and exploded into a full-scale rebellion of drugs, joining a soul band and nearly dropping out of high school. As an adult, McBride bounced between a career as a journalist and gigs as a jazz musician. For those of us raised in mixed homes, the moment when we step into the world brings painful but fruitful self-reckoning. We’re finally giving voice to our hybridity, trying to figure out how we’re going to act *out there*. McBride realizes that his own split is the black and white divide he has not been able to fuse within himself.

When McBride leaves the threshold of his complicated home and moves through college to his adult life, the book loses momentum. The perfectly syncopated rhythm of memories falters. Suddenly we’re in Suffolk, North Carolina, wandering around with a grown man in search of his mother’s past, not quite sure how we got here. We get a cursory summary of how racism “smashed me across the face like a bottle when I walked into the real world” and how his “own humanity was awakened” by discovering the Jewish half of his identity. While this is earnest and heartfelt, we don’t know the adult McBride as well as we did the young one. We hunger for the fully detailed journey.

Recent memoirs by black and ethnic authors have expressed two impulses: to tell of the journey of the assimilated self, and to pay homage to one’s roots. What McBride offers is a moving example of how the self is formed by a subtle combination of these influences. It’s that subtlety of consciousness that makes him so alert to the complexities of race that permeate our everyday lives. McBride’s memoir also dishes up some important truths about growing up as a mixed-race kid in a country built on white supremacy, where one is seen as either a pathetic half-breed, or black, with no in between. (One day a young McBride asks his mother what a “tragic mulatto” is—a phrase he’s just read. Ruth tells him a joke about a bunch of students naming beans—pinto and lima—when one girl pipes up, “We’re all *human*

beans!" "That's what you are," Ruth tells her son. "A *human* bean!")

Interracial families are hardly tragic: They just rally with humor and strength. And Ruth's no-nonsense, loving description of the world she adopted is eloquent testimony to the black community's capacity to absorb difference. As she tells it, "I stayed on the black side because that was the only place I *could* stay. The few problems I had with black folks were nothing compared to the grief white folks dished out. With whites it was no question. You weren't accepted to be with a black man and that was that."

Reading this book I recalled my own West Indian dad trying to teach algebra at a St. Albans high school to students who wanted to join the revolution. At home, he feared his own kids might fall into the gutter. Not far away, an extraordinary woman was bravely raising her family as she knew best. I laughed and thrilled to her brood of twelve kids, whooping it up during times that confused us all. I wish I'd known them. I'm glad James McBride wrote it all down so I can. ■