



One Book for Greater Hartford 2003

The Color of Water

Resource Guide

Family / Intergenerational Book Discussion

Many of the themes of The Color of Water are accessible to children who are in the early elementary grades. Four of these themes are noted below. With each, there is a suggestion for a reading from The Color of Water from a children's book which is drawn from Jewish traditions, and from a children's book or books drawn from African American experiences. There are also suggestions for appropriate discussion prompts, activities, and a closing reading. Two of these closing readings are drawn from the Old Testament, albeit in a translation which is directed to the use of Christians. Although religious concerns in The Color of Water may not readily lend themselves to public discussion with children, they are of such prominence in the work that we felt they deserved acknowledgement in this way.

We have found that preschool and kindergarten children can stay amused at family book discussions if there are toys, books, and simple art supplies put out for them, and space for them to use these with their peers. If you are facilitating a book discussion with a number of young children present, you may wish to read only one of the recommended books, use the refreshments to break up the readings into two short segments, and keep discussion to ten minutes, more or less.

1. Home Places

In The Color of Water, James McBride describes his aging mother's affection for the place where she lived with her first husband, and their children:

Mommy...still loves Red Hook, one of the most dangerous and neglected housing projects in New York City. On any given day she'll get up in the morning, take the New Jersey Transit train from her home in Ewing, New Jersey, to Manhattan, then take the subway to Brooklyn, and wander around the projects like the Pope, the only white person in sight, waving to friends, stepping past the drug addicts, smiling at the young mothers pushing their children in baby carriages, slipping into the poorly lit hallway of 80 Dwight Street while the young dudes in hooded sweatshirts stare balefully at the strange, bowlegged old white lady in Nikes and red sweats who slowly hobbles up the three flights of dark, urine-smelling stairs on arthritic knees to visit her best friend, Mrs. Ingram in apartment 3G. (The Color of Water, p.33)

Follow this description of an unlikely "home place," with The Friday Nights Of Nana, by Amy Hest (Candlewick Press, 2001). This is a beautiful story of family warmth, and traditional religious observance in the home. Next, read Uptown, by Bryan Collier (Henry Holt, 2000). This presents Harlem from a child's perspective, with short descriptive phrases, a jazzy beat, and lively collages. A second choice would be In the Heart, by Ann Turner (HarperCollins, 2001). Turner gives a child's view of her immediate world as a series of "home places," and is suitable if the majority of children attending are very young.

Break for a snack of challah bread, which is mentioned in The Friday Nights of Nana. Served with tea or cocoa and fruit juice, challah can be purchased in a bakery, or made at home.

Start discussion of the readings with these questions:

What places are “home places” for characters in the readings?

Where do you feel really at home?

What do your “home places” look like?

How do people behave there?

How do you feel while you are there?

As participants contribute to this discussion, keep a record of words that are used to describe “home places” on an easel pad. These can name the place, describe the atmosphere, describe a feeling people have there, and so on. At the end of the discussion, post the completed pages at the front of the room.

Give the youngest children heavy white paper and crayons, and ask them to draw their house or apartment building. Encourage them to keep adding details. Give older children and adults good quality paper in an assortment of colors. Ask them to select words from the easel pad pages, and add more of their own, to create a list poem describing a personal “home place.” Ask them to give it a title naming the place, if they have not mentioned that place in the body of the poem. For example, a participant might title her work, “Elizabeth Park,” and write:

Green,
Birds singing,
Water fountain bubbling,
Sand on the hot slide,
Friends, bees,
Babysitters chatting,

Read , or ask one of the participants to read, Psalm 23, and ask participants to reflect on it as they travel home.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall want for nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside the waters of peace; he renews life within me, and for his name’s sake guides me in the right path.

Even though I walk through a valley dark as death I fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy staff and thy crook are my comfort.

Thou spreadest a table for me in the sight of my enemies; thou hast richly bathed my head with oil, and my cup runs over.

Goodness and love unfailing, these will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

New English Bible (Cambridge University Press; 1971)

2. Family Stories

James McBride describes a particular scene from his childhood that will strike a chord for many.

Mommy took great pride in our relationship to God. Every Easter we had to perform at the New Brown Church, playing our instruments or reciting a story from the Bible for the entire church congregation. Mommy looked forward to this day with anticipation, while my siblings and I dreaded it like the plague, always waiting until the morning of the event before memorizing the Bible story we would recite. I never had problems with these memory-crunching sessions, but one year my older brother Billy, whose memory would later serve him well enough to take him through Yale University Medical School, marched to the front of the Church wearing suit and tie, faced the congregation, started out, ‘When Jesus first came to...’ then blanked out completely. ...

‘Oh that’s all right now...’ murmured my godfather, Deacon McNair, from his seat on the dais next to the minister....”Try it again,” he said.

‘Okay,’ Billy said, swallowing. ‘When Jesus first came to...No, wait...Um. Jerusalem was... Wait a minute....’

.... A few more embarrassing seconds passed. Finally Deacon McNair said, ‘Well, you don’t have to tell us a Bible story, Billy. Just recite a verse from the Bible.’

‘Any verse?’ Billy asked.

‘Any verse you want,’ the Deacon said.

‘Okay.’ Billy faced the church again. Every face was silent, watching him.

‘Jesus wept,’ he said. He took his seat.

Dead silence.

‘Amen,’ said Deacon McNair. (*The Color of Water*, p.53)

Next, read *The Keeping Quilt*, by Patricia Polacco (Simon and Schuster, 1988). This award-winning book documents the life a quilt, from the time it is made by a family of Russian immigrants, through its use by successive generations of the family as a wrap for newborn children and as a *huppa* in traditional weddings, to its current ownership by the author. Follow *Keeping Quilt* with *Aunt Flossie’s Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*, by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard (Clarion Books, 1991). In this book, two young African-American sisters try on their Aunt Flossie’s beautiful hats, and hear the story – happy or sad - that each one carries for Aunt Flossie.

Crab cakes may not be to everyone’s taste, but Baltimore is also known for its cakes. Make a Baltimore Cake from the recipe below, or purchase a pound cake as a substitute. Serve with iced tea, or juice.

Baltimore Cake

3 cups cake flour

2 cups sugar

3 eggs

1 cup butter

Beat sugar and eggs until creamy and smooth. Add eggs one at a time. Gradually mix in flour.

Bake at 350 degrees for 25 minutes.

From the Baltimore International College website, <http://bic.staging.xigroup.com/displayrecipes.asp>

Family stories routinely move us to laughter or tears. Even if they describe a time in the distant past, they can connect us very immediately with our ancestors. Family stories can also be a powerful

presence in the lives of adults, as the stories associated with the family quilt are for Patricia Polacco. Start a discussion of family stories with these questions.

Do you think Billy McBride is glad that his brother put that story in The Color of Water? Would your brother or sister do that to you? (Of course they would.) Do you have a funny family story to share, maybe with an embarrassing moment, like Billy's?

Do you own something that is associated with your family history, or that is associated with a tradition of your family? Do you use or display something special during family celebrations, as Patricia Polacco's family uses the quilt at weddings?

Who tells the stories in your family today? Is there any special place where your family stories are told, like a picnic or a reunion? Are you teaching important family stories to your children? Would you like to make a public resolution, right now, to tape some of the storytellers in your family, or write their stories down?

A fan is a necessary accessory for children and adults who are listening to the family storyteller on a front porch, or at a picnic. Following the discussion, create simple fans by gluing together two large circles of cardboard, sandwiched around and above a craft stick handle. Encourage participants of all ages to decorate their fans with summertime images and colors, using markers..

In closing, read, or ask a participant to read, Aunt Sue's Stories.

Aunt Sue's Stories

By Langston Hughes

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun.
Black slaves
Walking in the dewy night.
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice.
Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue's stories.

And the dark-faced child, listening.
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all.
But that they came

Right out of her own life.

The dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's stories.

From Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art (HarperCollins, 2001)

3. Ties of the Heart

This is a story Ruth McBride-Jordan, a white woman, tells her son about meeting her African-American fiancé's family.

Well, once they managed to pull their jaws from off the floor, they said, 'Our house is your house. Sit down and eat.' And I didn't have any problem with them, or with any of Dennis's family. They took me in with open hearts and made me one of their own; the only thing was it sometimes took a minute for them to get over the shock of seeing a black and white together – like Aunt Candis, Dennis's aunt....She was the grandchild of slaves. When I first came to North Carolina and walked into her house, she said, 'I just hope you excuse me for looking at you so hard, because I've never had a white person in my house before, and I've never been this close to a white person before.' And I said, 'All right,' and she was my friend until she died....We wouldn't have made it without Aunt Candis. She came up from North Carolina and cared for y'all after Dennis died, because I was grieving and lost and I couldn't move....She took the train all the way up to New York from North Carolina and took care of all eight of you, including you, James, and you weren't but a tiny child. She had never been to the city before. She'd never seen so much cement and so many tall buildings in her life. Your stepfather, he bought her a big gold watch after he married me and she left to go home to North Carolina. He said, 'That's some woman,' and he was right. (The Color of Water, p. 195)

Remind participants that they heard one Amy Hest book at the first session. Then, read a second book by this author, When Jessie Came Across the Sea (Candlewick, 1997). This narrative explores the emotions of an orphaned girl who has the chance to move from Eastern Europe to the New York, at the beginning of the last century. Despite her fears, and the difference between life on the lower East Side, and the life she has known, she manages to assemble a circle of loved ones around her in the New World..

Follow this with a reading of Alice Walker's poem, Women. The poem is given below, but, if possible, read from Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art (HarperCollins, 2001). This will allow the audience to see the powerful portrait of Harriet Tubman, by William H. Johnson, that the editor has selected to illustrate this poem.

Women

By Alice Walker

They were women then
My Mama's generation
Husky of voice – Stout of
Step
With fists as well as

Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed
Starched white
Shirts
How they led
Armies
Headragged Generals
Across mined
Fields
Bobby-trapped
Ditches
To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of It
Themselves

Finnish with a reading of Full, Full, Full of Love, by Trish Cooke (Candlewick, 2003). This short, gentle story depicts an African-American family gathering for a traditional Sunday dinner at “Gran’s” house.

Break for a dessert of vanilla ice cream , one of the delicious foods Gran serves in Full, Full, Full of Love. Offer it with tea or coffee, as she did, or juice.

After refreshments, start a discussion by asking these questions:

The Color of Water and the Walker poem depict strong women. How do they use their strength to support and raise up the people they love? What barriers do they overcome to do this?

We associate familial love and the cooking and sharing of good food, as depicted in Full, Full, Full of Love. What food does your family associate with familial love and family gatherings? Who prepares this food? Does it represent some historical or cultural tradition, as well as family preference?

Next, ask participants to create a tribute to someone who has loved and supported them, or loved and supported someone they hold dear. Set out alphabet and word stamps, stickers, colored paper, wrapping paper, gel pens, scissors, rubber cement, and white glue. Encourage everyone to write their name, the name of the person who is being honored in the tribute, and the date on their work.

You may wish to point out that James McBride’s mother changed her name from “Rachel” to “Ruth,” before reading a closing piece from the biblical story of Ruth. In that story, Ruth decides to stay with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after her father-in-law dies, she herself is widowed, and her widowed sister-in-law returns to her family.

‘You see,’ said Naomi, ‘your sister-in-law has gone back to her people, and her gods; go back with her.’ ‘Do not urge me to go back and desert you,’ Ruth answered. ‘Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where

you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. I swear a solemn oath before the LORD your God: nothing but death will divide us.’ *Ruth, 1:15-18. New English Bible (Cambridge University Press; 1971)*

As participants leave, ask them to bring a few items with them to the next session that they can use to create a collage. The theme of the collage will be their school or work, activities, or hobbies, as of right now. Letterhead, business cards, report cards, school pictures, other photographs, scraps of yarn or cloth or wood (if these represent hobbies), and anything else participants think of that can be glued to cardboard are welcome.

4. Back in the Day: Memories of Childhood

James McBride recalls his mother waiting with him for the bus in the morning, and meeting the bus in the afternoon, when he started kindergarten.

It became the high point of my day, a memory so sweet it is burned into my mind like a tattoo, Mommy walking me to the bus stop and every afternoon picking me up, standing on the corner of New Mexico and 114th Road, clad in a brown coat, her black hair tied in a colorful scarf, watching with the rest of the parents as the yellow school bus swung around the corner and came to a stop with a hiss of air brakes. (*The Color of Water*, p.11)

Follow this with a reading of *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, by Simms Taback (Viking,,1999). This clever tale won Taback the 2000 Caldecott Award, as the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children. It is based on a Yiddish ballad which Taback loved to have sung to him as a child. You may wish to pause, and then read the book again, pointing out the proverbs on the walls of Joseph’s house. This second reading will allow the audience to appreciate the clever die-cuts, a signature of Taback’s illustrations.

Next, read *The Hickory Chair*, by Lisa Rowe Fraustino (Scholastic, 2001). A man relates his childhood memories of his grandmother, and the surprising gift she gave him.

Take a break for a glass of tea with lemon, the way Joseph drinks it, and a sweet pastry such rugalah or rugelach, which can be purchased in bakeries with an eastern European clientele.

After the break, start a discussion with these questions:

What was your first day of school like? How did you get there? Do you remember what you wore, or if you had something new or special to bring with you? Do you have both a good and a bad memory from your first years of school?

Do you have a favorite rhyme or song from your early childhood, like Simms Taback? Who taught you that rhyme, or sang you the song? Why was it your favorite? If you were illustrating it, for a book, what would your illustration have in it?

The grandmother in *Hickory Chair* smells like “lilacs, with a whiff of bleach.” Her face is “warm,” her kisses are “salty,” and she has a “molasses voice.” Do you have a childhood memory that connects to your senses in this way?

Prepare for the activity portion of the discussion by putting out sheets of cardboard or poster board, alphabet stamps and stickers, construction and wrapping paper, current magazines, rubber cement, white glue, gel pens, scissors, fairly new magazines, and other collage materials out for

participants. Some participants may have brought additional materials from home, as they were prompted to do at the end of the last discussion. Encourage participants to create collages which reflect their activities and interests at this very moment in time. Remind participants to sign and date their work, and keep it. It can be a message to them at a later point of what they were thinking and doing in the fall of 2003.

In closing, read, or ask someone else to read, Primer, by the first African American Poet Laureate of the United States.

Primer

By Rita Dove

In the sixth grade I was chased home by
the Gatlin kids, three skinny sisters
in rolled-down bobby socks. Hissing
Brainiac! and *Mrs. Stringbean!*, they trod my heel.
I knew my body was no big deal
but never thought to retort: who's
calling *who* skinny? (Besides, I knew
they'd beat me up.) I survived
their shoves across the schoolyard
because my five-foot-zero mother drove up
in her Caddie to shake them down to size.
Nothing could get me into that car.
I took the long way home, swore
I'd show them all: I would grow up.

From I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry (Houghton Mifflin, 1998)