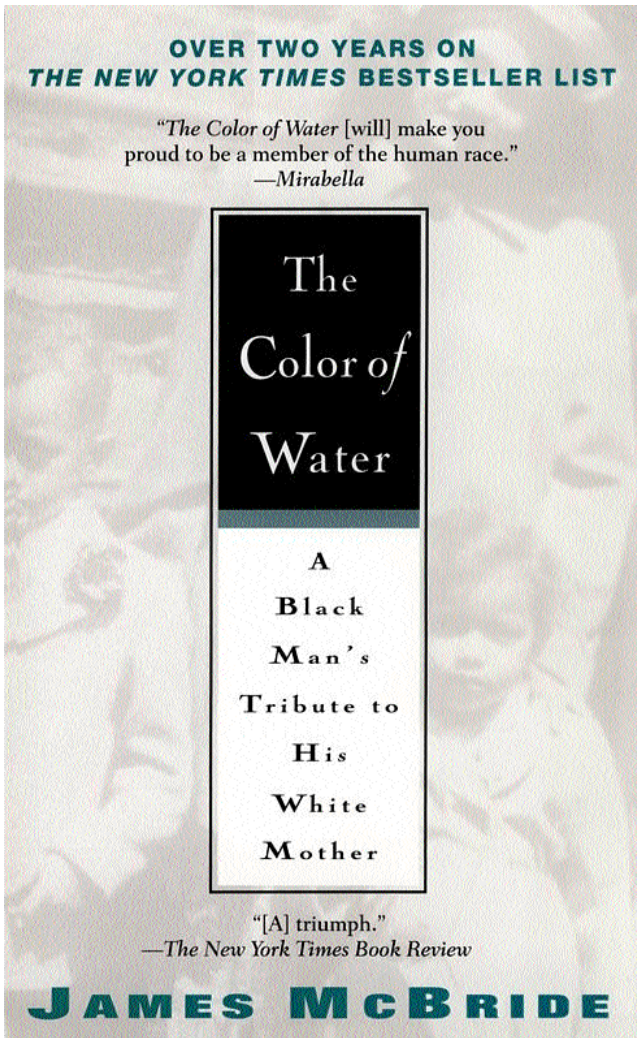


# One Book for Greater Hartford



A Reading Resource Guide

Connecticut Center for the Book at the Hartford Public Library

A Reading Resource Guide for  
One Book for Greater Hartford

# **The Color of Water**

**A Black Man's Tribute to  
His White Mother**

By James McBride





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## One Book for Greater Hartford

One Book is a regional effort to engage the community in a shared experience, the reading of one book. This is an accessible, affordable and fun literary event that we hope will encourage broad participation and offer opportunities to gather and discuss issues relevant to our community. From Seattle to New York, in large cities and rural centers, people are talking about books they might not have read if not for the One Book project.

Last year, we were delighted with the discussions One Book engendered when, as a community, we read the lyrical and passionate novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat.

This year, we present a powerful portrait suffused with issues of race, religion and identity. It is the story of a family's love and a mother's will and her unshakable insistence that only two things matter, school and church. We are proud to offer James McBride's memoir, *The Color Water, A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*, as the 2003 One Book.

We hope our Reading Resource Guide, prepared for *The Color of Water*, will serve as a useful tool to enhance your personal involvement in this regional endeavor. And, we hope you will join the greater community at the One Book author event in the sanctuary of Hartford's Asylum Hill Congregational Church on Thursday evening, October 9, to hear this talented writer and gifted musician speak and perform with his jazz quartet.

It promises to be a one-of-a-kind celebration of the literary arts!

Louise Blalock  
Chief Librarian, Hartford Public Library

## **Acknowledgements**

The 2003 One Book Project is done in partnership with the Greater Hartford Literacy Council, the Greater Hartford Arts Council, The Hartford Advocate and Preview Connecticut and the support of community members on the 2003 One Book for Greater Hartford Steering Committee representing: University of Hartford and Hartford College for Women, Hartford Public Schools, the Welles-Turner Library in Glastonbury, Fleet Bank, Barnes and Noble booksellers and Eden Books.

## **2003 Honorary Co-Chairs**

The Hartford Public Library also acknowledges the 2003 One Book for Greater Hartford honorary co-chairs Rabbi Donna Berman, executive director of Hartford's Charter Oak Cultural Center, and the Reverend Gary Miller, senior minister of the Asylum Hill Congregational Church, for their gracious support.

Built in 1876, the Charter Oak Cultural Center is the state's first synagogue. Restored by a group of Hartford-area residents, Charter Oak Cultural Center is now a non-profit arts resource for the exploration of the world's cultures, especially those strongly represented in the Hartford region.

The Asylum Hill Congregational Church has been a Hartford landmark since its founding in 1865. Its first pastor, Rev. Joseph H. Twichell enjoyed a 42 year ministry and was a close friend with the local luminary, Samuel B. Clemens, known as "Mark Twain." Twain's family pew is marked in the sanctuary. The church has nearly 1,800 members who reside in Hartford and in more than 20 surrounding towns. The Rev. Gary Miller is also a talented jazz musician.

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## The Power of Collaboration

**By The Rev. Gary Miller**

*Senior Minister*

Asylum Hill Congregational Church

*2003 Co-Chair*

One Book for Greater Hartford



I am very proud and very honored to be part of the One Book program. Our hope is that in this effort we can model what collaboration is all about.

We can also address the issues. They are race, religion, and education. They are of a family that struggles and strives to be together and to achieve and become all that the Creator has entrusted to them. In James McBride's *The Color of Water*, we see and experience a family journey which demonstrates no obstacle is too great. The story, and the collaboration of this family's members, is a life-changing experience.

But this is about collaborations as well. We live in a city and in a culture that struggles with collaboration. Everyone wants their own program... their own playing field ... wants to create the wheel over and over again. Yet, we have all the tools we need; we know what we need to do. We know what our children hunger for and crave. We need collaborations.

Perhaps we can model for the region of Hartford (with the One Book program) that collaborations do make a difference. I am honored and deeply delighted to be a part of this effort.

## Reflections on *The Color of Water*

**By Rabbi Donna Berman**

*Executive Director*

Charter Oak Cultural Center

2003 Co-Chair

One Book for Greater Hartford



I have been thinking a lot lately about the idea, promoted most recently by Hillary Clinton, that it takes a village to raise a child. I think it's absolutely true and I want to go one step further. I want to say that it takes a village, a community, partners, to help us absorb, create, dance with and rejoice in new ideas. That's not to say that one can't do it alone. It's just to say that reading and learning and thinking are even more delicious processes when they are shared with others. It may be my rabbinical training, but it occurs to me that this experience may, in fact, be a gift from God.

This is why I am so excited about "One Book for Greater Hartford." It is a program that offers us the precious opportunity to come together as a community to read and discuss a text from which we can all learn and grow. In graduate school I was first exposed to "Reader Response Theory" which, as I understand it, suggests that the interaction between a reader and a book is like taking two separate colors and blending them. Lo and behold, a third color emerges. So, too, when someone reads a book they bring their own lens and experience to it and both the text and the reader are changed in the process. It is a magical alchemy. How much more so is this the case when multiple readers come together to explore a text? A glorious array of colors will inevitably appear as readers interact with the written word before them, their neighbor next to them and maybe even the stranger from across town.

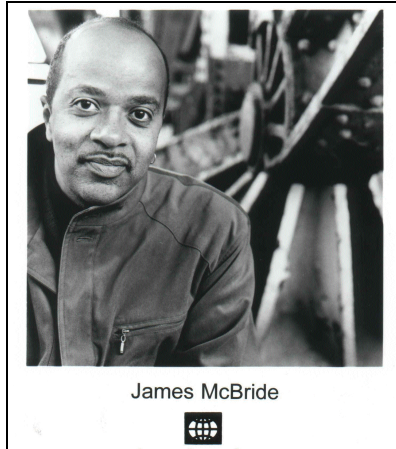
I believe *The Color of Water* will lend itself to the creation of just such a rainbow. It is a book that compels us to talk about things that are normally hard to discuss: race and religion and the differences that make us a richly textured society. Unquestionably, there are things that are difficult here. Some may claim that Mrs. McBride is a self-hating Jew.

## **Reflections on *The Color of Water***

Some may balk at the idea that Jewish people should not be classified as “white.” Others will be able to tell their own stories of first-hand experience with the injustices wrought by racism and anti-semitism, perhaps even in our own community. Who knows what other issues will be raised? We cannot know in advance. All we do know is that meaningful, even life-changing, conversation is guaranteed and that our village will be made stronger as a result.

## About the Author

James McBride, the author of *The Color of Water*, is both an accomplished writer and an award-winning composer/musician. His critically acclaimed 1997 memoir, which explores matters of racial identity, is a tribute to his mother, Ruth McBride Jordan, who once told him that education, not color, determines success in life.



*The Color of Water*, which won the 1997 Annisfield-Wolf Book Award for Literary Excellence and was an ALA Notable Book of the Year, has sold more than 1.5 million copies in the United States alone. His latest novel is *Miracle at St. Anna*.

McBride, a former staff writer for The Washington Post and the Boston Globe, is equally accomplished in the music field. He began his formal musical training in saxophone and piano at age 9 and by 17 was touring Europe with The American Youth Jazz Band. He has received several awards as a composer, including the 1996 American Arts and Letters Richard Rodgers Award and the American Music Festival's 1993 Stephen Sondheim Award. His current project is a solo CD entitled, *The Process*, of which a documentary film will be released later this year. McBride studied music composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and received a Masters in Journalism from Columbia.

## The Color of One Book

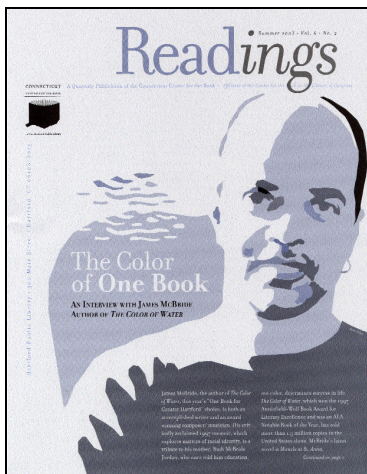
*James McBride was interviewed by Readings writer Christine Palm. Readings is a publication of the Connecticut Center for the Book, a program of the Hartford Public Library.*

*Q. As someone with a dual life — as a writer and as a musician — how do you resolve, or satisfy, both parts of your muse?*

A. I write in the mornings until noon or 1 p.m., then I do whatever I can musically in the time that is left.

*Q. Does this force you to divide or apportion your creativity?*

A. Not really. I consider myself a professional storyteller. I use both literature and music to tell stories.



*Q. You spent years as a working journalist. How did it feel to move into autobiography and, most recently, into the historical novel genre?*

A. That move meant creative freedom for me. Artistically, I found journalism to be too limiting. In newspapers, you go out to cover a story and the story ends up covering you. A simple story about a house fire for example, is not simple at all. There are a variety of reasons why a house burns up and catches fire, other than the obvious ones you normally read about. Journalism usually states the surface cause: arson, careless cigarette, etc. That's akin to being at the tailpipe of a car and catching the exhaust with your cupped hands. I want to be in the motor of the car, where the causality takes place, to describe what really happens.

*Q. But surely your journalistic experience helps inform your novels? Especially Miracle at St. Anna, for which you must have had to do a lot of research?*

A. It doesn't matter that much. You do the legwork, period. At the end of the day, nobody cares what school you went to, what paper you worked for, how many stories you wrote. It's elbow grease and the final product that counts. "Journalistic experience" is a word that is bit broad

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for my tastes. Even the least experienced cop reporter, for example, probably has a lot more journalistic experience than the talking heads that are on today's local television news and even beyond. If that weren't the case, then all the talking heads would look like me—ugly!

*Q. Hardly! But let's talk about your sources of inspiration. Who are some of the authors you admire and why? How did they influence your writing, if at all?*

A. I admire Pete Dexter, who handles his characters wonderfully. I admire Charles Frazier, Harper Lee, and Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* is probably one of the top five novels on any writer's list. I admire W.P. Kinsella, who is unafraid to let his imagination run free. I admire Kurt Vonnegut for the same reason.

*Q. There's a lot of breadth in that list. Are your musical tastes as diverse? I understand you've collaborated and/or performed with such luminaries as Anita Baker, Grover Washington, Gary Burton and Jimmy Scott. Whom do you admire among those you've NOT had the opportunity to work with?*

A. Of those I worked with, I admired Grover Washington Jr. the most. He was humble, generous, extremely talented and underrated as a saxophonist. Of those that I'd like to work with, hard to say. I suppose I'd like to work with Don Byron, the clarinet player and composer, but I don't think I'm good enough to play his music, which is as demanding as it is brilliant. I'd like to work with Joey DeFrancesco, the jazz organist. Joey cooks. I've admired his playing for a while.

*Q. That's interesting, since Byron is such a cerebral, conceptual player while DeFrancesco is more of a straight-ahead, instinctual guy...*

A. It's all music. It has a message in it, cerebral or not. Does it matter if you say "I love you" to someone in French, Arabic, English, or Yiddish? It's the message that counts.

*Q. How did your extended family respond to "The Color of Water"? Do you ever feel constrained by issues of loyalty and privacy?*

A. I did not use my extended family's real names when I wrote the book. I changed their names to protect their privacy, even though most

## The Color of One Book

of them had passed away by the time the book emerged. I think it's unfair to look back into the cone of history and cast aspersions on people for what you, in the comfort of your living room, feel they should have done. Still, I did feel a bit constrained by loyalty and privacy, but not to the point of keeping out elements that needed to be aired in order to drive home the facts.

*Q. Please say a word or two about the "One Book" movement. What does it mean to you to have one of your books chosen?*

A. It means a lot to me to have my book chosen as "The" book that any community reads. I'm honored. However, there are writers who are equally if not more deserving than I. I hope the "One Book" movement does not become the community equivalent of a talent show. I hope the choices remain literary, thoughtful and challenging. In the struggle to keep independent bookstores alive – they deserve our support—it's important that they be part of the 'One Book' movement, because they are key figures in terms of trolling through the tripe to find the gems that exist out here.

*Q. What do you hope readers get out of it and the ensuing discussion groups?*

A. In terms of what readers get out of my book, it's simple: we are all connected. Our commonalities are far greater than our differences.

*Q. Do you think there should be a "one record" movement? What if everyone in a given city or town listened to the same music together and discussed it. Is that plausible?*

A. No, I don't think it's plausible. If there were a 'one record' movement, it wouldn't be long before some enterprising musical entity, a music channel, a record company, got hold of the idea and co-opted it. A better idea would be to have a 'one American composer' movement, where entire communities were treated to the work of any one of the hundreds of gifted American composers who cannot find major orchestras to play their pieces. That would be an extraordinary thing.

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Q. *You mean like a Richard Rodgers Day, or one honoring Duke Ellington or Aaron Copeland...*

A. I mean more like George Walker, or other American composers who are alive and well and teaching today at universities or in some cases not teaching at universities. I mean those composers, men and women, who can't get major orchestras to play their music because 1) they are still alive 2) they haven't sipped tea with the right people and 3) they don't have the right pedigree in their musical resumes, or they don't have a degree that certifies their "validity."

Q. *Tell us about your latest project...*

A. These days, I'm writing my new book, a novel, and organizing a national tour promoting my new CD, *The Process Vol. 1*, which will be available in most book and record stores and on my website. It's part of a documentary I'm doing about the lives of ordinary jazz musicians of all types and races, who grew up to become the best musicians in their schools, their towns, their cities, then came to New York to live in relative anonymity. We'll be touring from Massachusetts to Oregon and back from Sept. 1 to Sept. 10.

Q. *Do you hope your CD and the film will shine some light on the more obscure musicians the way the documentary "Standing in the Shadows of Motown" gave long-overdue credit to the unsung heroes of that genre and time?*

A. I haven't seen the Motown piece but I'm happy it's been done. My piece is not like that. The musicians I work with have not had an entire label build its reputation on their shoulders. The real tragedy of *Standing in the Shadow of Motown* is that it yields proof once again that musicians are so undervalued in this society that they have to live to be in their 60's and 70's — if they make it that far — before they become treasured and recognized by anyone other than their peers. I mean, we have more television shows that give awards to stuntmen than we do to the musicians and composers who have created the artistic fabric of American society.

## **What Is a Memoir?**

A memoir, according to Harry Shaw's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is a biographical or autobiographical sketch; a record of facts and events connected with a subject, period or individual; a commentary on one's life, times and experiences. Memoir, usually spelled memoirs, is derived from the Latin word for "memory" or "remembering." An author's memoirs usually focus attention on personalities and events known to, or experienced by, the writer.

An autobiography is an account of ones self written by ones self. The author of the autobiography presents (or tries to) what she considers to be the major or most interesting events of her life. Autobiography and memoirs are usually lengthy, organized narratives prepared for others to read, but memoirs is more likely to focus on one phase of a person's life than on the whole of it.

## A Few Thoughts on Memoirs

By Lary Bloom

What value does the “average” life have as literature? It is a question I have heard, and answered, scores of times over the years. Over more than three decades as a Sunday magazine editor (including 20 years as a founding editor of Northeast at the Hartford Courant), I encouraged people to write about their lives; memoir became a distinctive, and popular, feature of these publications. To me as editor, it was the kind of writing that touched people most - “ordinary” lives, because there is no such thing as an ordinary life. Every life is worth documenting. Every life faces obstacle. Every life has drama and, potentially, the ability to offer insight.

Not every writer or potential writer, of course, has world-class talent. But people have much greater capacity to tell the stories of their lives than they might think. Some of these stories may have market value. And even those that never get published, or are not intended for publication, have the capacity to prove rewarding, perhaps even healing. In short, memoir writing is useful for anyone who has the instinct to do it. I’ve put down here ten rules for the potential writer of memoir.

1. ***Believe that you have a story to tell.*** Because you do. It may not be the story that others say you have, however. It is the story in your heart. Because no one else on earth has that story to tell. Yes, others may have gone through similar experiences. But no one walked in your shoes, thought what you thought, saw what you saw, did what you did, or didn’t do what you didn’t do.

2. ***Leave dishonesty in the other room.*** As a reader, you often decide to stop reading. You do this sometimes because the author lacks craft. You do this other times because you have the feeling, though you might not express it that way, that you’re not getting the straight story, and that somehow the author has relinquished, or never demonstrated, his or her authority. In short, there is no writing without honesty. Scary, I know. But put it on a page. No one else has to see it, until you’re ready.

## A Few Thoughts on Memoirs

3. *Understand the power of a story.* “Once Upon a Time” was a phrase you responded to as a child. Magical. It’s still magical, though you don’t have to use it literally. They say that God created human beings because He loves stories. Believe in their power.

4. *Learn to tell a story.* This is the rub, isn’t it? Memoir writing and fiction are very similar in this regard. That is, techniques of fiction are often used in the best memoir. For example, there is the question of structure. Start at the beginning, end at the end. The best memoir writing and the best fiction writing are indistinguishable in terms of form. They both use scene setting, an eye for detail, character development, and, climax.

Therefore:

5. *As a writer, read.* Biographies, historical nonfiction, novels, plays, poems - everything. You become part of the community of language. You notice, and dissect, good writing. You don’t copy it. But you are impressed by it, and influenced by it, and inspired by it. There is no way to “dabble” in writing. You must immerse yourself. It must become your life as a memoir writer. Everything you read, including the backs of cereal boxes, will be useful to you.

6. *Use your imagination.* Memoir writing is not simply presenting the facts. Facts do not make writing. Facts are a basis. You are not the only character in your memoir. What is going on inside the heads of others? You can’t know that, can you? You can only remember (possibly) what they said to you. You can’t know what they thought. Do you have the license to suggest what they thought? Of course you do.

7. *Do the unglamorous work.* Research, research, research. If you’re writing about childhood in Kansas City, or Willimantic, learn everything you can about those places. Revisit them. Go back to the room that once was so big but is now very small, and the park across the street that once featured a life-threatening cliff that unaccountably over the years eroded to a gentle slope.

## A Few Thoughts on Memoirs

8. *When in doubt, leave it out.* Great poets, such as Yusef Komunyakaa, stress the need for giving credit to the reader. While you do have the responsibility for being honest, you don't have the requirement of telling everything. The reader has imagination too.

9. *Show the work to the most important reader you have. Yourself.* Don't worry about the embarrassing things in it before then, or what the effect will be. Take the memoir and read it aloud to yourself. Read it for rhythm. For sense.

10. *Experience the joy of rewrite.* When it's done, it's not done. Of course you must let it go at some point. But not before you've been over every word, every sentence, every paragraph. Not before you've excised unnecessary words, or examined the text for fraud you've committed against it. Say to yourself when you're ready, and as you pound your fist on the table, "Yes. This is exactly what I want to say and how I want to say it."

## **A Few Thoughts on Memoirs**

### **Book Resource List:**

Lary Bloom, *The Writer Within*.

Nancy Slonim Aronie, *Writing From The Heart*.

Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*.

Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*.

David Sedaris, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*.

William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*.

David Hays and Daniel Hays, *My Old Man and The Sea*.

Mark Twain, *Roughing It*.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile*.

Philip Levine, *The Mercy*.

Billy Collins, *Questions About Angels*.

## A Few Thoughts on Writing - The Process

By Gina Greenlee

A friend phoned me to ask if I thought her idea for a book was a “good” one. I countered. “Do you think it’s a good idea?” Having had some experience with the book publishing industry I explained that more than a great literary agent, a fabulous book contract and a six-figure advance, the critical element for turning her idea into a book would be her passion for it. Only passion for her subject - the simmering embers of nurtured logs vs. the migratory star flames of kindling - would provide the persistent heat necessary to fuel her journey toward book publication.



She thought her idea was great - until she encountered her first hurdle. “Forget it,” she told me a mere two hours later, after conducting some cursory market research. “There’s too much competition.” And with that, the tiny light of her idea flickered out.

To paraphrase self-publishing guru Dan Poynter - writing your book won’t be easy but it will be worth it.

The personal and familial triumphs that conclude *The Color of Water* demonstrate the worth of James McBride’s fourteen-year investment in unearthing his mother’s history and turning it into a book.

Of the inspiration-to-publication stories recounted in the annals of world literature, fourteen years is a relatively short road, though McBride’s book was seeded in childhood: “The little ache I had known as a boy was no longer a little ache when I reached thirty. It was a giant, roaring, musical riff, screaming through my soul like a distorted rock guitar with the sound turned all the way up, telling me, Get on with your life: Play sax, write books, compose music, do something, express yourself, who the hell are you anyway?”

McBride sets out to answer that question in his book, as writing is more an act of discovery than a declaration of what is known. It is a potent

## A Few Thoughts on Writing - The Process

device for burrowing below life's integument to the crimson jugular of personal truths. And it is the clarity of those truths - the willingness to bring one's whole self to the page - that tethers the reader to *The Color of Water*.

In his thread of coiling first-person mother and son narratives, McBride unabashedly reveals, "I had to find out more about who I was, and in order to find out who I was, I had to find out who my mother was." Yet, his challenge of self-excitation never obscures the book's centerpiece: Ruth McBride Jordan.

Though we partly experience Jordan through the filter of a loving son, the emotional reach of her life experience largely stems from the fact that she conveys it herself - in her own way, in her own voice. Had she been unwilling to relinquish her lifelong distrust of personal revelation to submit to interviews as an act of motherly love, *The Color of Water* would be devoid of the tsunami of personality thundering through her narrative: "...in those days, folks got infections and lost their fingers and teeth like it was lunch." Or, "That man was the finest preacher I've ever heard to this day. He could make a frog stand up straight and get happy with Jesus." And, "That's why I tell ya'll to make sure I'm dead when I die. Kick me and pinch me and make sure I'm gone, because the thought of being buried alive, lying there all smushed up and smothered and surrounded by dead people and I'm still alive, Lord, that scares me to death."

Fourteen years of fanning the embers brought *A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* to light. And despite Jordan's protestations - "Who am I? I ain't nobody! I can't be telling the world this!" - her story is well worthy of the page.

*Gina Greenlee is an opinion columnist for The Hartford Courant and an essayist for The New York Times.*

## Discussion Questions for *The Color of Water*

1. What was this memoir, *The Color of Water*, a witness to? Why did James McBride take the time and energy to write it? What does he want us to see that we might not have seen before?
2. 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 what you know, and don't know, about your family background shaped your self-image?
3. Their mother insisted that the McBride children keep family business private and she exhibited deep suspicion of authority figures. "If anyone asked us about our home life, we were taught to respond with, 'I don't know,' and for years I did just that. Mommy's house was an entire world that she created." (p. 27) Why do you think she demanded these behaviors from her children?
4. In Chapter 1, James McBride says of his mother, "Matters involving race and identity she ignored." (p. 9) Is that true?
5. For someone with such an unhappy childhood and such troubling family experiences, how do you explain Ruth's commitment to the mothering of such a large family?
6. Ruth was a strong-willed and extraordinary mother whose "children's achievements are her life's work." (p. 275) Was she a loving mother? Were kindness and tenderness part of her mothering? Do you think of her as heroic or flawed?
7. James feared for his mother's safety, yet he was embarrassed by her appearance and personality as she went about her business in the neighborhood. What contributed to his mix of feelings?
8. Ruth was extremely sensitive as a child. How did she become so tough?

## Discussion Questions for *The Color of Water*

9. In talking about her early years when her family moved frequently, Ruth says “We attracted a lot of attention when we traveled because we were poor and Jewish and my mother was handicapped. I was real conscious of that. Being Jewish and having a handicapped mother. I was ashamed of my mother . . . .” (p. 38) Do you see parallels between her maternal relationship and the author’s?

10. In talking about poverty when she was growing up, Ruth says, “Back then it was a different kind of poor... you didn’t need money as much.” (p.82) Do you agree?

11. In telling of her school years in Suffolk, Va. Ruth admitted to her son that she stopped using the name Rachel to try to quell the ridicule she suffered for being Jewish. In light of this, what do you think of the author ascribing “complete nonawareness of what the world thought of her” (p. 7) to his mother?

12. The quote on p. 38 continues “. . . but see, love didn’t come natural to me until I became a Christian.” Then, in the story of the months after her mother’s death, she says “. . . and that’s when I started going to Metropolitan Church in Harlem . . . . It helped me to hear the Christian way, because I needed help, I needed to let Mameh go, and that’s when I started to become a Christian and the Jew in me began to die.” (p. 217) In an interview with Richard Vara of the Houston Chronicle the author offers this assessment of her conversion “[My mother] didn’t convert to Christianity because she hated Judaism. She converted because she hated her father.” Where do you think the truth lies? From your reading of the memoir, why do you think she converted to Christianity? What do you think she gained from her conversion? What losses did she suffer?

13. What are the elements of Ruth’s Jewish faith and upbringing that she holds onto?

14. As a boy, the author says “I created an imaginary world for myself. I believed my true self was a boy who lived in the mirror. I’d lock

## Discussion Questions for *The Color of Water*

myself in the bathroom and spend long hours playing with him. . . . I had an ache inside, a longing, but I didn't know where it came from or why I had it. The boy in the mirror, he didn't seem to have an ache." (p. 90) And then he goes on to say he hated this alter ego. What do you make of this? Why do you suppose he chose a "boy in the mirror" as his doppelganger? (His twin, his familiar, his enemy and his friend rolled into one?)

15. James nearly stopped going to school and took up risky activities shortly after his stepfather died. What else may have contributed to his rebellion and what brought him back?

16. The young James once asked his mother what a "tragic mulatto" was. Ruth tells her adult son "[m]e and Dennis caused a riot on 105th Street once..." (p. 232) with their mere presence as a couple. How has American society's attitudes toward people of mixed heritage changed in McBride children's lifetime? Have feelings about interracial couples become less extreme in the past generation or so? (Tell us why you think so, or not.)

17. The author creates a dual narrative by alternating chapters between his words and his mother's. Which voice did you identify with most? Why?

18. How did this structure affect your reading experience?

19. Do you think the subtitle, *A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* accurately captures the story? If you are unhappy with it, what substitution would you make?

20. Do you think it would be possible to achieve today what Ruth McBride has achieved for and with her family?

21. Do you think James McBride should have pressed his mother to reveal/revisit her past? Do you feel he really understands his mother by the end of the book?

## **Bibliography of Works by James C. McBride**

*The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*

*Miracle at St. Anna*

*The Process* [CD and film documentary]

## **Bibliography of Works about James C. McBride**

*Contemporary Black Biography*, vol. 35. Gale. 2003

*Contemporary Authors*, vol. 153. Gale. 1997

## Suggestions for Further Reading

O. H. Bennett, *The Colored Garden*.

Paul Berman (ed.), *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*.

Keith Michael Brown (compiler), *Sacred Bond: Black Men and Their Mothers*.

Judith Bruder, *Convergence: The Reconciliation of Judaism and Christianity in the Life of One Woman*.

Jayne Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*.

Jaroldeen Edwards, *Things I Wish I'd Known Sooner: Personal Discoveries of a Mother of Twelve*.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*.

Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*.

Scott Minerbrook, *Divided to the Vein: A Journey into Race and Family*.

Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn (ed.), *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*.

John Ridley, *A Conversation with the Mann*

Rosemarie Robotham (ed.), *Mending the World: Stories of Family by Contemporary Black Writers*.

Lucinda Roy, *Lady Moses*.

Rebecca Walker, *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*.

Rafi Zabor, *The Bear Comes Home*.

## Filmography

1. *Mr. and Mrs. Loving.* (1996)

Fact-based movie follows the interracial relationship of a Virginia couple in the 1960's, leading all the way up to the resulting landmark Supreme Court decision on miscegenation laws. USA. Dir. by Richard Friedenberg. Available from Hallmark Home Entertainment.

2. *Mississippi Masala.* (1992)

Denzel Washington stars as Demetrius, who becomes involved in a romantic relationship with an Indian woman, Mina, much to the chagrin of her father – he believes his daughter is above such a connection. USA. Dir. by Mira Nair. Available from Samuel Goldwyn Company.

3. *Secrets and Lies.* (1996)

The focus is on family and identity in this story of an adopted upper-class black Londoner who seeks out her birth mother, who – surprisingly – turns out to be a white factory worker. When the family meets, many difficult questions and issues are raised. France. Dir. by Mike Leigh. Available from October Films.

4. *The Joy Luck Club.* (1993)

Film follows the powerful stories of four Chinese women and the sacrifices made and struggles they endured for their families. USA. Dir. by Wayne Wang. Available from Buena Vista Pictures.

5. *Smoke Signals.* (1998)

Story about making peace with your personal history. Two young Native American men – Victor and Arnold – travel from the reservation that they live on to Phoenix, where Victor's father has recently passed away. Along the way, Victor struggles with his complicated feelings about his father and his past. USA. Dir. by Chris Eyre. Available from Miramax Films.

6. *Mixing Nia.* (1998)

Light-hearted tale of a biracial woman grappling with identity issues. USA. Dir. by Alison Swan. Available from Xenon Entertainment Group.

## Filmography

7. *An American Love Story*. (1998)

10-episode documentary series focusing on the 30-year marriage of black man and a white woman. USA. Dir. by Jennifer Fox. Available from First Run/Icarus.

8. *The Way Home*. (1998)

Documentary presenting the viewpoints of 64 women who come together over an eight-month period to talk about race, gender and class in the U.S. USA. Dir. by Shakti Butler. Available from New Day Films.

9. *Interracial Marriage*. (1992)

Film examines how and why couples of different colors, religions, and ethnic roots are drawn to one another and how these differences are dealt with in relation to friends and family. USA. Available from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

10. *Domino: Interracial People and the Search for Identity*. (1994)

This documentary profiles six interracial people and follows their quests to forge their own identities. USA. Available from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

*Most audiovisual materials (videos, DVDs, etc.) purchased or borrowed are for home use only. Be aware that if you use them for a public program you must first get permission, called **Public Performance Rights**, from the copyright holder. Forms are available on the Internet. A reference librarian can assist you.*

## Webliography

### Sites related to *The Color of Water* and its themes:

[www.jamesmcbride.com](http://www.jamesmcbride.com)

The author's personal website.

[www.lib.utk.edu/refs/lifeofthemind/further.html](http://www.lib.utk.edu/refs/lifeofthemind/further.html)

Life of the Mind book program of the University of Tennessee gives easy access to an array of interviews, articles and study materials on James McBride's *The Color of Water*, their 2003 selection.

[www.hometoharlem.com](http://www.hometoharlem.com)

Current and historical information on the neighborhood to which Ruth migrated.

[www.brooklyn.com](http://www.brooklyn.com)

Material on the borough that includes Red Hook.

[www.nyc.gov](http://www.nyc.gov)

The official website for New York City.

[www.suffolk.va.us/home.html](http://www.suffolk.va.us/home.html)

The official website of today's Suffolk, Virginia.

[www.hirr.hartsem.edu](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu)

Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research provides social scientific religion research information that is helpful for religious leaders and the public.

[www.shamash.org/trb/judaism.html](http://www.shamash.org/trb/judaism.html)

A gateway page to a myriad of Judaism and Jewish Internet resources, created and maintained by Andrew Tannenbaum of Brookline Massachusetts.

[www.intermix.org.uk](http://www.intermix.org.uk)

A British organization dedicated to highlighting the achievements of mixed-race individuals and re-framing the mixed-race experience as a positive contribution towards greater social harmony.

## **Webliography**

[www.neamf.org](http://www.neamf.org)

The New England Alliance of Multiracial Families, founded in 1992 to support multiracial families of all backgrounds and life circumstances.

[www.personalhistoryhelp.com](http://www.personalhistoryhelp.com)

Established by Amy J. Oaks Long, an instructor of Family History at Brigham Young University, to help people interested in the process of creating a personal history.

[www.rootsweb.com](http://www.rootsweb.com)

Describes itself as the oldest and largest free genealogy site.

### **Sites Related to One Book Projects, Book Groups and Reading**

[www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html](http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html)

Ideas from the Library of Congress and other states for One Book activities.

[www.readinggroupguides.com](http://www.readinggroupguides.com)

An online community for reading groups with lists of recommended books, information on authors and more.

[www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org)

The Great Books Foundation offers people of all ages an exciting way to read and discuss outstanding works of literature.

[www.bookmuse.com](http://www.bookmuse.com)

Materials, support, and guidance for the reading and discussion of books.

[www.aalbc.com](http://www.aalbc.com)

The African American Literature Book Club aims to increase everyone's knowledge of the diversity of African American literature, and serve as a resource for aspiring and professional writers.

[www.literature-awards.com](http://www.literature-awards.com)

A comprehensive list of literature awards.

## Webliography

[www.acqweb.library.vanderbilt.edu/acqweb/bookrev.html](http://www.acqweb.library.vanderbilt.edu/acqweb/bookrev.html)

Links to many book review sites.

[www.bookpage.com](http://www.bookpage.com)

Site of the monthly general interest book review, *BookPage*, distributed through public libraries and bookstores.

[www.genrefluent.com](http://www.genrefluent.com)

Expert help with selection of genre reading and special attention to teen reading interests.

[www.webrary.org/rs/rsmenu.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/rsmenu.html)

Illinois's Morton Grove Public Library has led the way for online reader services.

[www.iconn.org/public\\_onsite.html](http://www.iconn.org/public_onsite.html).

Readers advisory tool "What Do I Read Next?" made available by Connecticut Digital Library.

## **Reading Critically:**

*(Reading Critically and Leading the Discussion were prepared by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library)*

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience. They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths deepen the reader's appreciation of the book.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group.

### **1. Make notes and mark pages as you go:**

Reading for a book discussion - whether you are the leader or simply a participant - differs somewhat from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book in preparation for a discussion, ask questions of yourself and mark down pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, "Is this significant?" or "Why does the author include this?" Making notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

### **2. Ask tough questions of yourself and the book:**

Obviously, asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book more meaningful.

### **3. Pay attention to the author's message:**

As with any skill, critical reading improves with practice. Remember that a good author uses every word in a text deliberately. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing about himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective.

## **Reading Critically:**

### **4. Analyze themes:**

Try to analyze the important themes of a book and to consider what premise the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking herself, "what if... " questions.

### **5. Get to know the characters:**

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.

### **6. Notice the structure of the book:**

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? If so, how do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the order the author chose make sense to you?

### **7. Make comparisons to other books and authors:**

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by other authors that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

## Leading the Discussion:

Research the author using resources such as *Current Biography*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Something About the Author*. Find book reviews in *Book Review Digest* and *Book Review Index*. *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* gives biographical and critical material. These resources are probably available at your local library. The Internet is often another good source for reviews of the book and biographical information about the author.

1. Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Remember, questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion quickly.
2. Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You'll often find that the questions you've prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.
3. Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.
4. Don't be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the "I just didn't like it" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of another book that you liked or disliked?
5. Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Of course, every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his or her background, upbringing, experiences, and view of the world. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was killed. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder; or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim.

## **Suggestions for Participants:**

*(Suggestions for Participants and Sample Questions are based on New York Public Library's book discussion program.)*

A good discussion depends in large part on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions:

- 1. SPEAK UP.** Group discussion is like a conversation; everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.
- 2. LISTEN** thoughtfully to others. Try to understand the other person's point of view Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question.
- 3. BE BRIEF.** Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as a few words as possible. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion keeps everyone in the conversation.
- 4. SHARE YOUR VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE.** Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comments of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.
- 5. COME WITH YOUR OWN QUESTIONS IN MIND.** As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.

## Sample Questions

1. What makes the book distinctive?
2. Is the period in which the book is set important to the theme?  
Why? Are the values presented dated? How?
3. Is the setting of the book important to the theme? Why?  
How realistic is the setting?
4. Does the theme of the book relate to the protagonist's gender? How?
5. What did the author attempt to do in the book? Was it successful?
6. Would it make a good movie? Why?
7. What is the author's worldview?
8. Were the plot and subplots believable? Were they interesting?
9. Did the author leave loose ends? What were they?
10. How understandable were the motivations of the characters?  
What motivated the behavior of the characters?
11. How is the book structured? Flashbacks? From one point of view?  
Why do you think the author chose to write the book this way?
12. How does the language of the book help convey the theme?
13. Does the author rely heavily on imagery and symbolism?

## **Book Club How-To's:**

*(From the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library)*

### **Preplanning and organizing the first meeting:**

**1. Make clear what is expected of participants:** Careful reading, active participation in selecting and discussing books, and having fun.

**2. Decide what types of books your group wants to read:** Only fiction? Prize winners? Classics? Anything and everything? Does the book have to be available in paperback?

**3. Figure out the logistics:** How long should the meetings be? (We find that the best discussions last between 45 and 90 minutes.) Will you meet at a library? Coffee shop? Private homes? Do reminder messages need to be sent out by mail or phone?

**4. Decide how the book club will be run:** Will you have a leader? Will the same person be in charge for each meeting, or will you rotate leaders? Some groups bring in an outside "expert" (who may need to be paid). Do you want the leader to give a brief biography of the author and a selection of reviews of the book under discussion?

**5. Choosing the books to discuss:** Choosing what books to read is one of the hardest, most enjoyable, frustrating, and important activities the group will undertake. Members of the group should be prepared to compromise and to read outside their regular areas of interest. (Some people will drop out if the books chosen are not what they want to read; don't worry, this is a normal occurrence.) Go with the majority opinion, but remind people that there can be a big difference between "a good read" and "a good book for a discussion " (See next section.) Choose books well in advance (at least three months). People need to know what's coming up so they can read ahead. In addition, you don't want to have to spend time at each meeting deciding what to read next.

## **What makes a good book for discussion:**

People often ask what qualities make a book a good candidate for book discussion. Probably the most important criteria are that the book be well written, have an interesting plot and three-dimensional characters. Good book-discussion books present the author's view of an important truth and sometimes send a message to the reader. A good book-discussion book often stays in the reader's mind long after the book is finished and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time the reader learns something new.

During a book discussion, what you're really talking about is everything that the author hasn't said—all those white spaces on the printed page. For this reason, books that are plot driven (most mysteries, westerns, romances, and science fiction/fantasy) don't lend themselves to book discussions. In genre novels and some mainstream fiction, the author spells out everything for the reader, so that there is little to say except, "Gee, I never knew that" or "Isn't that interesting." Librarians, booksellers, and friends can often supply you with suggestions of good books to discuss.