

The essays in this volume investigate the complexities of James McBride's prose. As of 2017, he has published five books, a collection of short stories, a music CD, two screenplays, and a variety of articles for a variety of periodicals. Arguably his most famous work, *The Color of Water* (1996), which is a composite memoir comprised of his mother's and his life's experiences, is the work that placed him solidly within the African American canon, and it has received the most scholarly attention. This collection does contain a few essays that discuss *The Color of Water*; however, its primary focus is to touch on the other fiction and prose books that he has published.

This volume breaks down into three parts: the Author, Critical Contexts, and Critical Readings. In the Author section, the first chapter is a biographical sketch on James McBride in which Mildred R. Mickle provides an overview of McBride's life, highlighting his major accomplishments; his expansion of the boundaries of the black diaspora to include his mother's Polish Jewish heritage; his survival from substance abuse; his contribution to American film in collaborating with Spike Lee to write the screenplay for *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008); and his legacy of poignantly written prose. Mildred R. Mickle also writes the chapter "On James McBride," which discusses his creation of a blues-themed "we-moir" in *The Color of Water* (1996).

The Critical Contexts section offers essays by Robert C. Evans, who defines what pluralism is and then applies a pluralist approach to analyzing and interpreting a passage from McBride's *The Good Lord Bird* (2013). Mildred R. Mickle's essay discusses how McBride's works critique the concept, production, and interpretation of history. Martin Kich compares and contrasts McBride's novel *Miracle at St. Anna* (2002) with select literature set in World War II Italy to show the almost silenced black male veterans' voice. Martin Kich also

writes a chapter that presents some of the major scholarly sources on McBride's work.

The Critical Readings section contains essays that critique McBride's memoir, his biography of James Brown, his fiction, and that present select information from reviews of his works. Robert C. Evans investigates the popularity of *The Color of Water* (1996). Tahirah Duncan Walker discusses McBride's *The Color of Water*, develops the concept of "cultural permeability," the fluidity of culture, and situates it within the larger context of the evolving American identity. Brianna Toth analyzes and interprets how superstition structures the narrative in the film *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008). Abandon Shuman analyzes and interprets how the concept of the code, historically from the Underground Railroad, deconstructs the system of slavery in *Song Yet Sung* (2008). Robert C. Evans presents a sampling of interviews that McBride gave on *The Good Lord Bird* to deepen readers' understanding of the crafting of the work, and Kelley Jeans presents a sampling of early reviews on *The Good Lord Bird* from 2013 to 2017 and discuss the reception of the work and the contribution it has made to African American letters. Justin Mellette compares and contrasts *The Good Lord Bird* with William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, noting how McBride's work deepens the dialogue about race and gender that Styron's novel opens. Martin Kich compares and contrasts *The Good Lord Bird* with Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man*, noting the similarities and differences in how McBride's work continues the dialogue about American identity that Berger's work began in the mid-1960s. Johnathon T. Lawrence explains the stylistic innovations that McBride uses to make the story of James Brown's life come alive for readers. And, Liyang Dong and Tana Jackson Shealey report on the favorable reactions that multiple students gave "Father Abe," one of the stories in McBride's collection of short stories, *Five-Carat Soul* (2017). This collection strives to encourage further exploration of James McBride's works.

# James McBride's *The Color of Water*: Some Reasons for Its Popularity

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Robert C. Evans

James McBride's *The Color of Water*—subtitled *A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*—has been one of the most popular biographical works of the last twenty years. Originally published in 1996, the book was reissued in 2006 in a “10th Anniversary Edition.” The cover of that printing announces that *Color*, when first issued, spent “over two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list,” and McBride himself, in an interesting “Afterword,” offers some intriguing information about the memoir's popularity. He notes, for instance, that by 2006 it had already sold “more than two million copies” (289), and presumably it has sold many more since then. McBride also reports that by the time he composed his “Afterword,” *Color* had been “translated into nearly twenty languages and was serialized by the *New York Times*” (289). He observes that it is routinely “studied by thousands of students every year in sociology, literature, history, and creative writing classes” (290).

Why has this book proven so popular? Why has it become the subject of so much sustained study and serious discussion? A few answers to those questions are laid out in the brief excerpts from various reviews printed in the opening pages of the anniversary edition. A reviewer for *The Washington Post*, for instance, called *Color* not only as “lively as a novel” but also a “thoughtful contribution to the literature on race” ([i]). A reviewer for the *Sunday Denver Post* described it as a “story about keeping on and about not being a victim. It's a love story” in which much “hilarity is mixed in with much sadness” ([i]). A writer for *The Nation* commended the memoir's “humor” and vivid treatment of “race and identity” ([i]). *The Detroit News* praised the work as “lyrical” and “deeply moving” ([i]), while *Publishers Weekly* extolled it as a story of success “against strong odds” ([ii]). Various reviewers emphasized

the book's discussions of race ([ii]), while a reviewer for *The Boston Globe* noted its value as a "coming of age" story ([ii]).

*Color*, in fact, is an intriguing book partly because it consists of two "coming of age" stories blended together in one volume. This structure is both innovative and effective: chapters in which McBride recounts his own development alternate with chapters in which his mother (known as both "Ruth" and "Mommy") describes her challenging but inspiring autobiography. A white woman born to recent Jewish immigrants in the early 1900s, she tells how her cruelly self-centered father, an ineffective, hypocritical rabbi, mistreated his long-suffering, partially disabled wife. That wife was nonetheless a devoted and loving mother to her various children, including Ruth. The family operated a grocery store in the black section of a small town in Virginia during the Great Depression. There Ruth fell in love with a young black man. When she discovered that she was pregnant, she went to live with relatives in New York, where she had an abortion. Eventually, though, she married another black man, Andrew McBride, with whom she had eight children. When Andrew—a loving, devoted, deeply religious man who inspired her to convert to Christianity—died prematurely, she had four more children with her second husband, Hunter Jordan, another strong, loving black man who also predeceased her. The losses of both husbands were devastating, but her strong Christian faith helped sustain her.

McBride's book, as its subtitle suggests, is an affectionate celebration of his mother as well as a meditation on his own developing identity. Ruth, shunned by her own family for marrying an African American, mistreated by many whites for the same reason, and anything but wealthy, nevertheless eventually triumphed over all the prejudices and other challenges she faced, especially the challenges of being a widow (twice) with twelve children to raise. Ultimately the book celebrates her achievements as a wife, church leader, and nurturing if somewhat eccentric parent of a dozen accomplished, successful offspring who succeed largely because of the life lessons they learned from their mother. The book is appealing as biography, autobiography, social history, and especially as the history of one

complicated but inspiring human being and the family she helped create. It deals with complex issues of race and racial mixture as well as with matters of personal growth and individual identity.

These, however, are just a few of the reasons *The Color of Water* has attracted strong, sustained, and enthusiastic attention. There are many more reasons why the book deserves its status as a kind of contemporary classic. These involve such matters as language, structure, themes, tone, and characterization (to mention just a few). The book is well worth reading not only because of its themes but perhaps especially because of how well it is written.

### Language and Phrasing

One real strength of *The Color of Water* is its frequently vivid phrasing. McBride, who began as a journalist and who is now a prize-winning novelist, already shows in this early work a real gift for lively language. Anyone could have written a book with themes, structures, characters, and stories similar to those found in McBride's volume, but few writers have the kind of talent for memorably putting words together that McBride reveals in *The Color of Water*. Take, for instance, Ruth's memory of her family's store, which she describes as "a rickety, odd, huge wooden structure that looked like it was held together with toothpicks and glue" (40).<sup>1</sup> Or consider McBride's own depiction of his hospitalized stepfather, who had just suffered a stroke: "His hand, a strong, brown, veined hand that I'd seen gripping wrenches and tools and pipe fittings hundreds of times, was nearly limp, covered with IV gauze and connected to an IV" (126). In both instances, the effectiveness of the phrasing depends in part on realistic details strung together as lists of striking adjectives. After his stepfather dies, McBride reports that "Daddy's gold Pontiac sat in the front of the house for months, leaves gathering around the tires and bird crap gathering on its hood" (137). Here the phrasing's effectiveness depends largely on the balanced sentence structure as well as the juxtaposition of romantic and unromantic details.

Sometimes McBride’s vivid phrasing goes on for long stretches at a time, as when he describes some of the black men he met as a teenager when he temporarily lived in Louisville:

The men on the Corner were southern working men: plumbers, carpenters, painters, drunks, con artists, retired army lifers from nearby Fort Knox, tobacco workers from Brown and Williamson, and some just plain ol’ hustlers. They were big, muscled men with white teeth and huge arms, who wore work clothes and undershirts, painters’ pants, and work boots; they smoked filterless Pall Malls and Tareytons and drove big cars—Electra 225’s, Cadillacs, and long Oldsmobiles. They liked fine women, good whiskey, crap games, and the local softball league, in which they fielded a team of good-natured alcoholics. (144-45)

In passages like these, McBride conjures up not just a few men he happened to know but a whole slice of society and an entire moment in time. The writing “shows” more than it “tells,” and it also reveals an alertness to sound and rhythm that makes it seem almost musical, as in the alliterative phrases “big, muscled men” and “painters’ pants,” or in the following list of plain but evocative adjectives and nouns: “fine women, good whiskey, crap games, and the local softball league,” where McBride effectively saves the longest phrase for last. In phrasing like this, McBride shows himself to be a writer with a good ear as well as a sharp eye. Anyone who reads *The Color of Water* will find it hard to forget some of the text’s vivid passages and the characters and conditions those passages fix both on the page and in the mind’s eye. Examples include the memorable description of a friend known as “Chicken Man”—a “small man with deep, rich, almost copper-toned skin, a wrinkled face, and laughing eyes” (145). The vivid depiction of Chicken Man goes on for the rest of a long, detailed paragraph that is one of the best pieces of sustained writing in the entire book (145-46). McBride brings Chicken Man to life so clearly and compellingly that this character’s later, sudden death—described in just a few anticlimactic words—will make most readers feel as if they, too, like McBride, have lost a solid friend.

# Select Chronology of James McBride's Life\_\_\_\_\_

Mildred R. Mickle

## McBride's Childhood

**1957** James McBride is born on September 11 in New York City, New York. His mother, Rachel Shilsky (1921–2010), was a Polish Jewish immigrant, who came to America with her family to escape religious persecution from the Nazis. In 1942, Rachel Shilsky changed her name to Ruth, renounced Judaism, converted to Christianity, and married James' African American father, the Reverend Andrew D. McBride, who did not live to see James born.

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**1958** Ruth McBride marries Hunter Jordan, who becomes James McBride's stepfather until Jordan dies in 1972.

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## McBride's Education

**1979** McBride earns a BA in music composition from Oberlin College.

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**1980** McBride earns an MA in journalism from Columbia University.

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## McBride's Careers

**1980-82** McBride works as a journalist at *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wilmington News Journal*, *People Magazine*, *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *People Magazine*. He resigns to focus full time on gathering information and writing his memoir, *The Color of Water* (1996), which was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for a couple of years.

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## Nonfiction

*The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1996)  
*Kill 'Em and Leave: Searching for James Brown and the American Soul*,  
(2016)

## Co-Authored Nonfiction

*The Autobiography of Quincy Jones* (2001) by Quincy Jones and James  
McBride

## Select Nonfiction Articles

- “In Praise of a Great Mother. She’s Not Like Anyone You’ve Met Before.” *Boston Globe, New England Magazine* 9 May 1982.
- “Wallace Roney and the Quest to Be Heard: A Washingtonian, His Trumpet and His Struggle.” *The Washington Post* 12 Dec. 1987: D1.
- “The School of Hard Bop: At Coolidge High, Taking Notes from Marsalis.” *The Washington Post* 18 Dec. 1987: G1.
- “All Work and All Play: Marcus Roberts, Practicing for Perfection.” *The Washington Post* 17 Jan. 1988: F1.
- “Yelena Khanga’s Voyage of Discovery: A Black Soviet Journalist, Learning-and -Teaching-in the Land of Her Grandparents.” *The Washington Post* 4 Feb. 1988: B1.
- “Black Russian Seeks Her Roots in America.” *The Toronto Star* 7 Feb. 1988: H8.
- “What Color Is Jesus? When Your Mother Is White and Your Father Is Black, the Questions Never Stop.” *The Washington Post* 31 Jul. 1988: W24.
- “Adopting Across the Color Line.” *New York Times* 3 Jun. 1996: 15.
- “At Last, Getting It Right on Interracial Adoptions.” *The Houston Chronicle* 20 June 1996: 37.

**Mildred R. Mickle** is Associate Professor of English and Co-Head of the Letters, Arts, and Sciences major and Head of African and African American Studies at Penn State University Greater Allegheny. She designed and coordinated the Creative Writing Certificate and the Africana Certificate programs at Penn State Greater Allegheny. She also coordinates the creative offerings for Penn State Greater Allegheny's Teaching International program. She is also Theatre Coordinator at Penn State Greater Allegheny. In April 2016, she and her theatre class performed an original play that she and the class co-wrote, called: *Traveling Boogie in the 'Burgh: A Play on Blues and Jazz in Global Pittsburgh*. In May 2017, her advanced Shakespeare class filmed *Shakespeare's Unlife or The Unlife of Shakespeare*, and in December 2017, her theatre class performed *Anansi's Adventures on the Make*. In September 2017, she played Mrs. Crosby in *The Goodbye Girl* performed at The Theatre Factory in Trafford, Pennsylvania. Her research interests are in African American studies, American studies, women's studies, theatre, poetry, speculative fiction, and creative writing. She has published a variety of essays on speculative fiction and poetry. She is a published poet and an amateur watercolorist and oil painter. In her spare time, she also participates in a YMCA art group, dedicated to supporting local artists and making art affordable to the public. She edited the following books: *Critical Insights: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks*, and *Critical Insights: Maya Angelou*.