

Reading Guide

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

Reading in the Region

Fall 2008

Note: This guide is meant to help you think of ideas as you read the text. You do not have to answer all or any of the questions; instead, you can use them to inspire or prompt thought. In the same manner, you should feel free to read McBride's work at your leisure, pace, and focus. Individuals may participate in this initiative to the level of each person's comfort—read, think, gather, and discuss to the extent that you wish. We look forward to many interesting and fruitful conversations as our community experiences James McBride's *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* and the issues it evokes.

Note 1: Discussion questions are also available on pages 309-311 of the 10th Anniversary Edition of the work. The same questions that are included in this anniversary edition can be found in the reading guide on the Penguin website (http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/color_of_water.html).

Note 2: The page numbers included in the questions below refer to those of the 10th Anniversary Edition (Riverhead Books, 2006).

Overarching/general questions:

- Discuss the significance of the chapter titles separately and/or in comparison to others within the book.
- What effect does alternating chapters focusing on aspects of McBride's life and that of his mother (Ruth McBride Jordan) have on our understanding of McBride, his mother, or any of the issues that the story of their lives evokes?
- How does McBride's recounting of his mother's life help him to discover himself and/or answer questions of race and identity that had troubled him his entire life?
- The lives of McBride and his family members are marked by historical events and people related to race relations in the United States. In particular, how does McBride perceive some of those people and events?
- The various members of McBride's family confront personal issues of race, identity, family, and religion. Compare the manner in which different individuals in his family deal with various issues.
- How would the story and our reaction to it differ if McBride had only offered his own autobiography or his mother's biography? How does having pieces of the two narratives woven together influence our experience of those two lives?

1. *Dead*

- Ruth says, “Rachel Shilsky is dead as far as I’m concerned. She had to die in order for me, the rest of me, to live” (2). What does she mean?
- Why is Ruth no longer a Jew?
- What are Ruth’s father and mother like? How does this early brief description of these two people differ from the various aspects of their character/personality we discover as we read the narrative? Can we tell even from these brief descriptions how Ruth feels about each of her parents?

2. *The Bicycle*

- What is the significance of the bicycle?
- How does McBride feel about his stepfather?
- How does McBride perceive his mother when he is a young boy?
- McBride describes his mother as “commander in chief,” “chief surgeon for bruises,” “war secretary,” “religious consultant,” “chief psychologist,” and “financial adviser (9). What evidence does the narrative he writes offer for each of these roles? Discuss the statements that his mother typically makes and that McBride uses as evidence of these roles (page 9) as connected to Ruth McBride Jordan’s eclectic philosophy of life.
- “Matters of race and identity she ignored” (9). Why does Ruth ignore these matters? How does this influence her children?
- Discuss the difference that McBride sees between TV show family life and his own.
- Avoiding the question of why she does not look like her son, Ruth says, “You ask too many questions. Educate your mind” (13). Discuss how Ruth values education, yet how her very statement offers a decided contradiction.

3. *Kosher*

- Describe Ruth’s family life when she was a child. How did she react to this lifestyle?

4. *Black Power*

- Characterize Ruth’s parenting style. How does that style influence the relationship between McBride and his siblings?
- McBride writes, “Yet Mommy refused to acknowledge her whiteness” (23). In what ways does she register this refusal?
- McBride describes the effect black power has on his neighborhood, and he suggests his appreciation for aspects of it, but he has fears for his mother in relation to this movement. Why is he afraid for his mother?
- Ruth’s rules for her children include a combination of privacy, good grades, and distrust of others. Why would she suggest such a policy?

- McBride writes, “Mommy’s house was an entire world that she created” (27). Describe that world and the manner in which it functions.
- McBride says that Ruth’s childhood experiences offered “the best and worst of the immigrant mentality” as a model (29). What does he mean, and how does this influence Ruth’s philosophy of life and, therefore, that of her children?
- McBride writes, “Yet conflict was a part of our lives, written into our very faces, hands, and arms, and to see how contradiction lives and survived in its essence, we had to look no further than our own mother” (29). How is conflict written into the McBride children’s very bodies? How did contradiction live and survive in his mother?
- How does Ruth respond to insults?
- What role does religion/spirituality play in Ruth’s life?

5. *The Old Testament*

- How would you characterize the life Ruth has with her family in Suffolk?
- How does her first husband change her life?
- Why is this chapter called “The Old Testament” and the next one “The New Testament”?

6. The New Testament

- Describe Ruth’s experience of church.
- McBride only sees his mom cry in church. How does she explain her crying?
- When McBride asks his mother about the color of God, she says “God is the color of water. Water doesn’t have a color” (51). What does this mean? How does it guide Ruth’s life?

7. *Sam*

- What experience does Ruth have with the KKK?
- How does Ruth describe the lives of black people in Suffolk?
- Describe Sam, Ruth’s brother.

8. Brothers and Sisters

- Describe the relationship between McBride and his siblings.
- How does McBride describe the lifestyle in their home, and what are the rules?
- McBride describes some of his siblings: Dennis (70-71), Helen (71-78), and Rosetta (74-78). Why would he focus on these siblings here?

9. *Shul*

- **What is ‘shul,’ and what is the relationship between this chapter and the next?**
- **What is the difference between the “Jewish school” and the “white school”?**
- **Who is Frances, and why is she important to Ruth?**
- **Why was Ruth “starving for love and affection” (83)?**

10. School

- **What attitudes toward Jews does Ruth express to her children?**
- **How do her children react to her speaking Yiddish and haggling with the Jewish merchants?**
- **What is the relationship between Ruth’s sense of education and her Jewishness?**
- **How does Ruth carefully take control her children’s education?**
- **How does McBride feel about music and books?**
- **In this chapter, McBride describes himself and suggests, “Yet I myself had no idea who I was” (91). Why doesn’t he know who he is?**
- **Encountering the term “tragic mulatto,” McBride goes to his mother for answers. How does she respond?**
- **How does McBride describe the question of race as it relates to his household? What is his mother’s approach to race?**
- **What effect do the 60’s and black power have on his family?**
- **What happens to Richie in relation to the law? How does Ruth handle this incident?**
- **What is the “king/queen system,” and how does it relate to Ruth’s power in the home?**
- **At the age of 10, how does McBride feel about going out in public with his mother? Why? Why does he recount the milk incident here? How does he feel about his mixed race background as an adult?**

11. *Boys*

- **With whom does Ruth first fall in love? How would the people of Suffolk have reacted to this relationship with Peter if they had discovered it?**
- **Why does Ruth say she likes black people?**
- **When Ruth’s mother discovers Ruth’s relationship with Peter, what does she do?**

12. Daddy

- **How does McBride feel about his stepfather? What is his stepfather like?**
- **What was his stepfather’s approach to race (page 125)? How did that guide his life?**

13. New York

- What happens in New York when Ruth goes there?
- Who is Bube? How does Ruth feel about her?
- What is Aunt Betts' reaction to Ruth's decision about her pregnancy?
- When Ruth says that her mother's sisters were "trying hard to be American" (135), what does she mean?

14. Chicken Man

- When his stepfather dies, his mother starts riding a bike and taking piano lessons. Why?
- How does McBride react to his stepfather's death?
- His mother sends McBride to Louisville to stay with Jack, his sister. Describe his stay there and the lessons he learns.
- Describe life on "the Corner." How do McBride's experiences there influence him?
- Who is Chicken Man?

15. Graduation

- Describe Ruth's graduation from high school and her feelings about leaving Suffolk.

16. Driving

- How does Ruth feel about driving? What distinction is there between Rachel and Ruth in terms of driving?
- What has McBride seemingly learned from Chicken Man? How does McBride react to these lessons?
- Why does it take Ruth so long to recover from her second husband's death? How does she respond/cope?
- On what is Ruth perfectly clear, and how does that conviction influence her life?

17. Lost in Harlem

- What role does Andrew McBride (Dennis) play in Ruth's life?
- Why does Ruth describe Harlem as 'magic'?
- Who is Rocky, and what role does he play in Ruth's life? How does Dennis react?

18. Lost in Delaware

- How is Wilmington different from New York, and how does that influence McBride's family?
- With what does McBride replace his "anger at the world," and how does this change his life? Who is Mrs. Dawson, and how does she influence McBride?
- McBride writes, "She was always sending me off on a bus someplace, to elementary school, to camp, to relatives in Kentucky, to college" (189). Compare these different bus trips. Why does his mother keep putting him on busses?

19. *The Promise*

- How does Dennis, McBride's father, feel about music?
- Describe Dennis' family.
- Why does Ruth go back to Suffolk, and what happens while she is there?
- What does she promise Dee Dee, her sister, and why does she break that promise?

20. Old Man Shilsky

- What did McBride and his friends think would happen to racism when they graduated from college? What really happened?
- What does McBride learn from Eddie Thompson?

21. *A Bird Who Flies*

- Describe Ruth's departure from Suffolk.
- Why won't the family let Ruth see her mother when she is in the hospital? How does Ruth react to her mother's death?
- What does Ruth's mother mean by her statements about "a bird who flies" (218)? How might this relate to Ruth's own life?

22. A Jew Discovered

- Who is Aubrey Rubenstein, and what does McBride learn from him?
- After he talks to Aubrey Rubenstein, McBride states that he has found that for which he has been looking. For what had he been looking, and why would he say this at this point in the narrative?
- Why would McBride feel lonely that night in the hotel? What transformation/realization occurred as the sun rose the next morning?

23. Dennis

- Describe Ruth's rendition of the mother-son relationship in light of race relations.
- What does Ruth think a marriage needs?
- How does Ruth feel about Rev. Browns preaching?
- What effect does Dennis have on Ruth's life?
- How does Ruth describe the nine years in the one-room kitchenette?
- In 1950, the McBride family moved to the Red Hook Housing Projects in Brooklyn. How does Ruth describe Red Hook?
- Dennis and Ruth start New Brown Memorial in the 1950s. How does Ruth relate to this church throughout her life (see next chapter)?
- What was the event that constitutes the only time Ruth ever went south with Dennis?

24. New Brown

- Describe the 40th-anniversary gala of the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church.
- What was Andrew McBride's (Dennis') legacy?

25. Finding Ruthie

- Why did it take so long for McBride to understand who he was?
- How does McBride recount his experience with race in the workplace?
- With two worlds bursting inside himself, McBride realizes he needs to know who his mother is to understand himself (266). Why wouldn't he already know his mother?
- How does Ruth react to the idea of this book being written?
- What does Ruth do when she is 65?
- How does McBride describe Ruth's approach to life?
- Describe Ruth's return to Suffolk and her reunion with Frances.
- McBride says that Ruth's "children's achievements are her life's work" (275) and then lists their academic achievements and careers. Given Ruth's focus on education, does this way of including the specifics of all her children make sense?
- Describing the variety of people in his family, McBride says his mother "created her own nation" (277). What does he mean?

Epilogue

- Who is David Lee Preston, and what role does he play in McBride's life?
- How does Ruth interact differently with her daughters than she does with her sons?

- **How does Ruth react to going to a Jewish wedding?**

Afterword

- **Why does Ruth attend four different churches regularly?**
- **How has Ruth reacted to her fame and the reaction to this book?**
- **What does McBride say about love?**

Thanks and Acknowledgments

- **At the end of this section, McBride quotes Proverbs 3:6. In what way can we see this passage in Ruth McBride Jordan's life and that of her son?**