

THE COLOR OF WATER: A BLACK MAN'S TRIBUTE TO HIS WHITE MOTHER

By James McBride

Critical Reading Guide

Personal

- Did you see yourself in any of the characters? How/Why?
- Do you have any questions about your parents' or grandparents' past? What would you like to learn more about?
- How would your hometown community respond to a family similar to James'? What do you think of this response?
- Why did Ruth's family declare her dead? Could this happen to you? How would you respond?
- Can you recall an incident in your own family history that resembles the author's experience with his mother and the bicycle? Why did you feel that way at the time? How do you feel about the incident now?

General

- Why is this book entitled *The Color of Water*? What is significant about the color of water?
- James writes about his mother: "It took many years to find out who she was, partly because I never knew who I was." Why is this statement significant?
- Why was the "question of race...like the power of the moon?" (94)
- Why does James call "mommy...a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts" (260)?

Education

- What role did education play in the book? How does your own experience compare?
- Ruth insisted that her children receive the best possible education. What did she do to ensure this?
- Describe the public school structure in New York in the 1960's. How is it different from the public school structure today?

English

- How did the structure of this book affect your reading experience? Which narrative voice do you most identify with? Why?
- When did James learn to put together music and writing? Why did he see these interests as conflicting?
- After reading the book, what image would typify James's existence to you?
- Describe the final epilogue at the conclusion of the wedding. What symbolism do you see?
- James asks, "Ma, what's a tragic mulatto?" (92). Describe the significance of mommy's reaction and response to James' question.

History

- Several of the McBride children became involved in the civil rights movement. Do you think that this was a result of the times in which they lived, their need to belong to a group that lent them a solid identity, or a combination of these factors? Why?
- Why is James frustrated by "a world that considers the color of your face an immediate political statement"? (262)
- In chapter 4, why did James hit the kid sitting behind him on the bus?

Math/Economics

- James was born in 1957, the 8th of 12 children. At this time, Ruth worked at a cafeteria. Factoring in cost of living between 1950 and 1960, how much income would Ruth have been required to earn in order for the family to live at the poverty line? For the family to be considered middle class?
- In 2007, what income level is required for a two parent household to raise a family of 12 children, assuming their socioeconomic status is middle class?

Music

- What role does music play throughout the story? Throughout his life, how does jazz affect James?
- Most of the McBride and Jordan children play at least one instrument. Why is music important in the life and times of these characters?
- Who are some of the most significant musicians during the book's time frame? What were their contributions to music and society?

Psychology

- At age five James was honored to be out in public with his mother; why at age ten did it become a dreaded event?
- Why does Ruth say that she's "light skinned?"
- What role does race play in the identity development of the characters?

Religious studies

- What role did religion play in the author's life? How does his experience compare to your own?
- Is it more accurate to describe "Jewish identity" as a religious or ethnic orientation? Or both? How would various characters in the book respond to this question?
- Why does Ruth believe that marriage "is not about black and white. It's about God?" (233)

Sociology

- How have our society's attitudes toward people of mixed heritage changed over generations?
- How do you think James McBride's life would have differed if he had been born 50 years earlier? 50 years later?
- 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" (82). Do you agree?

Sources: <http://www.springfieldlibrary.org/onebook/2005onebook/ReadingGuide.pdf>
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