

ONE BOOK
One Springfield



READING GUIDE

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

by James McBride

March 29 thru May 17, 2005

Springfield City Library
Springfield, Massachusetts

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Library Director's Welcome

Welcome to **One Book, One Springfield 2005** ... If you are browsing this guide, I hope that you have already decided to participate in the project, which has been in planning for more than a year and has included broad participation from people throughout the City. I want to personally thank the members of the **One Book, One Springfield** Steering Committee for their advice and support in bringing this project to fruition.

Joshua Bogin - *Friends of the Springfield Library, Springfield Public Schools.*

Jan Denney – *Springfield Library Commission; Executive Director, Catholic Charities.*

Tamson Ely – *Dean of Library Services, Springfield Technical Community College.*

Sylvia Humphrey-Spann – *retired branch library manager.*

Moraima Mendoza – *Spanish-American Union, Springfield Public Schools.*

Mary Ellen Miller – *Director of Faculty and Students, Community Music School of Springfield.*

Tom Paleologopoulos – *Springfield Public Schools.*

Jim Trelease – *noted author, reading expert.*

Erica Walch – *Armoury-Quadrangle Civic Association.*

Michele Webber – *Springfield Mayor's Office.*

Teresa Elgin-Smith, Linda Grodofsky, Ann Keefe – *Springfield City Library staff members.*

The Committee has selected a book that speaks to the issues that both haunt and inspire Springfield residents in 2005. *The Color of Water* intertwines themes of racial identity; music and culture; religion; and perhaps most of all, the important role that families play in the development of strong young people and a healthy community. These are the same themes that motivated the “Step Up Springfield” initiative, which encourages individuals and community groups to work together on behalf of our youth. The Springfield City Library is proud to sponsor **One Book, One Springfield** in an effort to provide further opportunities to bring people together to read, to discuss, to listen, and to enjoy the diversity of ideas and musical talent that our City has to offer. We will all be stronger with your participation. Thank you for joining us.

Emily Bader
Director, Springfield City Library

What is One Book, One Springfield?

Why one book and why Springfield? We live in a time when individuality, choice and diversity have become our mottoes. People living in Springfield, as in so many other cities in the United States, hail from many different countries, speak a variety of languages, hold different religious beliefs, have skin tones of many hues, and have hair of different color, texture and length. People of Springfield are also different in terms of their level of income, educational achievement and social status. So when a phenomenon comes along that allows all of these differences to be taken off the table, for everyone to be on common ground, we relish the opportunity.

This is the philosophy behind **One Book, One Springfield**. The Washington Center for the Book initiated the first **One Book** project in 1998. Everyone in the city is encouraged to read the same book within a certain time period. It can be in any format (written, books on CD, audiotape, translations, etc.). Then people gather in groups -- whether in libraries, at bookstores, in shopping malls, in living rooms, in restaurants, in houses of worship, in the workplace, in cyberspace, at the supermarket -- and they discuss the book. The many communities that have since launched their own **One Book** projects have found that reading and discussing one book brought people together and helped create a sense of community through shared reading.

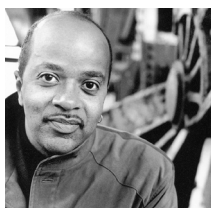
In our first year of a **One Book, One Springfield** library project, we have selected the book *The Color of Water* by James McBride. Everyone who lives, works, or attends school in Springfield is invited to participate. Students, workers, parents, neighbors, and friends -- everyone has the chance to read the same book (in Spanish, English, or on audiotape), attend lectures and panel discussions about the book's themes, see films related to the book, discuss their own views about what they read, and attend concerts that celebrate jazz, a major influence in the author's life. We are very fortunate that the author of this exceptional book will be joining us as well. Mr. McBride will be talking to us about his work and then he and his jazz band will perform for us.

All **One Book** activities are **totally free!** There will be many copies of the title in its many formats available to borrow in every branch of the Springfield City Library. Copies will also be available to purchase at Edwards Books (in Tower Square) at a 10% discount with your library card.

Please join us to help make **One Book, One Springfield** a citywide success!

About the Author

from the author's official website www.jamesmcbride.com



James McBride is an award-winning writer and composer. His critically acclaimed memoir, *The Color of Water*, won the 1997 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for Literary Excellence, was an ALA Notable Book of the Year, and spent more than two years on *The New York Times* bestseller list. In 2003 it was a selection of “New York City Reads Together” and “One Book for Greater Hartford” as well as the 2004 selection of “One Book/One Philadelphia.” *The Color of Water* has sold more than 1.7 million copies in the United States alone and is now required reading at numerous colleges and high schools across the country. It is a perennial favorite among book clubs and community-wide reading groups, and has been published in 16 languages and in more than 20 countries. McBride’s 2003 release, *Miracle at St. Anna*, is the story of an Italian orphan who befriends a black American soldier in Italy during World War II.

McBride is a former staff writer for *The Washington Post*, *People Magazine*, and *Boston Globe*. His work has also appeared in *Essence*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Times*. Aside from his literary honors McBride is also a musician. He has written songs for *Anita Baker*, *Grover Washington Jr.*, *Purafe*, *Gary Burton*, the *Silver Burdett* music textbook series, and even for the television character *Barney*. He is the recipient of several awards for his work as a composer in musical theater, including the 1996 *American Arts and Letters Richard Rodgers Award*, the 1996 *ASCAP Richard Rodgers Horizons Award*, and the *American Music Festival’s 1993 Stephen Sondheim Award*. His 2003 jazz CD/documentary project, “The Process” was seen on Comcast Cable nationwide in fall 2003.

McBride has been featured in *People*, *Newsweek*, *Savoy* and *USA Today*. He has appeared on several national radio and television shows including *The Rosie O’Donnell Show*, NPR’s *All Things Considered*, *Fresh Air*, *Morning Edition*, and in major news outlets in Australia, New Zealand, and across Europe. James is a native New Yorker and graduate of New York City public schools. He studied composition at The Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio and received a Masters in Journalism from Columbia University in New York at age 22. He also holds an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Whitman College and The College of New Jersey. In 2004, he was nominated by President George W. Bush and confirmed by the U.S. Senate to serve on the National Council on the Arts.

About *The Color of Water*

from the book jacket

Who is Ruth McBride Jordan? A self-declared “light-skinned” woman evasive about her ethnicity, yet steadfast in her love for her twelve black children. James McBride, journalist, musician and son, explores his mother’s past, as well as his own upbringing and heritage, in a poignant and powerful debut, *The Color Of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother*.

The son of a black minister and a woman who would not admit she was white, James McBride grew up in “orchestrated chaos” with his eleven siblings in the poor, all-black projects of Red Hook, Brooklyn. “Mommy,” a fiercely protective woman with “dark eyes full of pep and fire,” herded her brood to Manhattan’s free cultural events, sent them off on buses to the best (and mainly Jewish) schools, demanded good grades and commanded respect. As a young man, McBride saw his mother as a source of embarrassment, worry, and confusion—and reached thirty before he began to discover the truth about her early life and long-buried pain.

In *The Color of Water*, McBride retraces his mother’s footsteps and, through her searing and spirited voice, recreates her remarkable story. The daughter of a failed itinerant Orthodox rabbi, she was born Rachel Shilsky (actually Ruchel Dwara Zylska) in Poland on April 1, 1921. Fleeing pogroms, her family emigrated to America and ultimately settled in Suffolk, Virginia, a small town where anti-Semitism and racial tensions ran high. With candor and immediacy, Ruth describes her parents’ loveless marriage; her fragile, handicapped mother; her cruel, sexually-abusive father; and the rest of the family and life she abandoned.

At seventeen, after fleeing Virginia and settling in New York City, Ruth married a black minister and founded the all-black New Brown Memorial Baptist Church in her Red Hook living room. “God is the color of water,” Ruth McBride taught her children, firmly convinced that life’s blessings and life’s values transcend race. Twice widowed, and continually confronting overwhelming adversity and racism, Ruth’s determination, drive and discipline saw her dozen children through college—and most through graduate school. At age 65, she herself received a degree in social work from Temple University.

Interspersed throughout his mother’s compelling narrative, McBride shares candid recollections of his own experiences as a mixed-race child of poverty, his flirtations with drugs and violence, and his eventual self-realization and professional success. *The Color of Water* touches readers of all colors as a vivid portrait of growing up, a haunting meditation on race and identity, and a lyrical valentine to a mother from her son.

Summary of Plot

Chapter summaries were prepared by the One Book, One Philadelphia project

Note: The chapters alternate between James's story and the early history of his mother, Ruth McBride.

CHAPTER 1 – Dead (Ruth's early history)

James McBride's mother, Ruth, describes her early life. Born on April 1, 1921, to Polish Orthodox Jewish parents, Fishel Shilsky (Tateh) and Hudis Shilsky (Mameh), she was named Ruchel Dwarja Alyska. Her parents changed her name to Rachel when they immigrated to America. When Rachel was nineteen, as a way to mark her past as history, she changed her name to Ruth. Her father, a hard, unyielding man, worked as an itinerant rabbi and moved the family several times. Her mother, gentle and meek, suffered from polio. Ruth became dead to her family as a result of her marriage to James's African American father, Andrew Dennis McBride. Ruth's family recited kaddish and sat shiva. It is explained that in the Jewish faith, this ritual acknowledges the death of a family member or friend.

CHAPTER 2 – The Bicycle

James's stepfather, Hunter Jordan, dies. The death of the only father James has known, has a severe effect on him. James drops out of school and becomes involved in drugs and theft. His mother is distraught and spends hours riding a bicycle around the neighborhood. To James, who has just realized that his mother is white, her bicycle mania is embarrassing and an example of her differentness.

CHAPTER 3 – Kosher (Ruth's early history)

Ruth describes her parents' arranged marriage and how they got to America. At the time the family arrived, Ruth was two; her brother, Sam, was four. The family stayed with her grandparents, Bubeh and Zaydeh. She details the strict rules of Orthodox Judaism and how they affected her. Her grandfather died while she was still very young. His death, and the way it was handled, provoked a life-long fear of death in her.

CHAPTER 4 – Black Power

James becomes more aware of the divide between blacks and whites. Although his mother is white, she lives in a black world and refuses to acknowledge her whiteness. The Black Power movement is ascendant, and the Black Panthers are attracting more and more followers. Black pride is manifesting itself. In this environment, James is terrified for his mother's safety, yet she concentrates on raising her children to succeed. Reference is made to the fact that she and her husband, Andrew McBride, started the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church.

CHAPTER 5 – Old Testament (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth describes life with a traveling rabbi father. They lived in many places, for he was not considered good enough to be asked to stay on in a permanent position. Being poor and Jewish and having a handicapped mother embarrassed Ruth. The family moved south, to Suffolk, Virginia, where her father opened a grocery store in “the colored side of town.” She tells of her loathing of her father, who was harsh and unloving and sexually abused her.

CHAPTER 6 – The New Testament

James describes his mother’s love of God and paints a colorful description of family Sundays in church. Later, in the New Brown Church, the family plays and recites Bible stories on Easter. Here, as elsewhere, the emphasis on schooling and religion is paramount. The title, *The Color of Water*, comes from this chapter.

CHAPTER 7 – Sam (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth describes the South of the 30s, with the specter of the Depression and the ominous presence of the Ku Klux Klan. She illustrates how the black population navigated that era. Her brother, Sam, could tolerate neither the life he was leading nor the tyranny of his father, and he ran off. He joined the Army and was eventually killed in World War II.

CHAPTER 8 – Brothers and Sisters

James lives in a home of “orchestrated chaos.” The family’s life is described including James’s position as one of the five “young-uns” in a family of twelve children, his mother’s inability to cook, the importance of food, the sharing of clothes and musical instruments and the hatching of childhood plots. He sees his house as a combination three-ring circus and zoo. He describes some of his siblings – his sister Helen, the rebel; Rosetta, the resident queen of the house; his brother Dennis, the civil rights activist and artist with aspirations of becoming a doctor.

CHAPTER 9 – Shul (Ruth’s early history)

Ruth’s father performed circumcisions as handily as he slaughtered beef. Her mother sent the children to school, but her father objected to the influence of a gentile education and paid for the girls to receive private lessons in sewing and record keeping. The whites at Ruth’s school hated Jews. Jews were seen as different from everyone, and few liked them. Since her father dealt with black customers, she and her family were considered lower class. Her one salvation at this time was her friendship with Frances.

CHAPTER 10 – School

James is surprised to hear his mother speak Yiddish when she takes the children to Jewish stores for school clothes. Ruth’s Jewish values

begin to emerge. His sister Rosetta's education is paid for by a Jewish foundation. Ruth sends the children miles away to predominately Jewish schools, where they are seen as token blacks. During this time James discovers music and books. The 60s sweep through the house, and the older siblings react to the changing times. In public, James becomes ashamed of his white mother.

CHAPTER 11 – Boys (Ruth's early history)

Ruth details the travails of working in her father's store, her feeling of being an outsider as a Jew, and the pain of attending a school where she is ostracized. She continues to like black people because they do not judge her. Her first boyfriend, Peter, is black. A black/white relationship is very dangerous in the South at this time. Fifteen-year-old Ruth becomes pregnant.

CHAPTER 12 – Daddy

James's mother and his stepfather, Hunter Jordan, meet and marry. His younger brother, Hunter, is born. The family moves to a larger house in St. Albans, Queens. His stepfather visits on weekends while maintaining his apartment in Brooklyn. Although Hunter Jordan is a good man and loved by Ruth and her children, he cannot live in the chaos of the Queens house. Hunter Jordan has a stroke. James knows that his stepfather is going to die.

CHAPTER 13 – New York (Ruth's early history)

Ruth's mother knew that Ruth was pregnant. She sent Ruth to her relatives in New York. A colorful description of this extended family is provided. Aunt Betts helped Ruth obtain an abortion.

CHAPTER 14 – Chicken Man

James watches his mother succumb to grief over her second husband's death. She rides her bike for hours, starts piano lessons, and lets the house fall into disrepair. James stays out of the house as much as possible to avoid the impact of watching his mother suffer. James's life unravels as well. He is sent to stay with his half-sister Jack in Louisville, Kentucky. He hangs out with his brother-in-law and his "boys" and gets a "street corner" education. James secures a job pumping gas, but loses it when he gets into a fistfight. He meets Chicken Man, an alcoholic who waxes philosophical when sober.

CHAPTER 15 – Graduation (Ruth's early history)

Ruth remained in New York after her abortion, but went back to Suffolk to finish high school. She discovered that Peter had married after getting another girl pregnant. She began to have opinions of her own and determined to leave Suffolk. She worried about leaving her mother behind, for she had always been her mother's "eyes and ears."

She went to graduation only at the behest of her best friend, Frances, but at the last moment realized that she could not step into the Protestant Church where the ceremony was being held. The next day she caught a Greyhound bus to New York City.

CHAPTER 16 – Driving

James's mother has always taken the subway. As far as he knows, she has never learned to drive. She asks James to teach her to drive. After one lesson she refuses ever to drive again. His mother is falling apart, grieving not only over the loss of her husband, but also over her secret past – the loss of her Jewish family and her guilt over leaving her mother. Jesus is her salvation. When James returns for his junior year of high school, he resolves to mend his ways.

CHAPTER 17 – Lost in Harlem (Ruth's early history)

When Ruth returned to New York, she worked in Aunt Mary's leather factory and lived with her Bubeh. Aunt Mary hired a new man, Andrew "Dennis" McBride, a top-notch leather-maker and an artisan. Ruth discovered the magic of Harlem. As a result of Aunt Mary's meanness, she quit her job and was hired as a manicurist in a barbershop run by Rocky, a pimp. Because she was worried about her mother, she asked Dennis to find out about her Mameh and her sister, Dee Dee. In telling Dennis about Rocky, Ruth felt ashamed. She left Harlem.

CHAPTER 18 – Lost in Delaware

James's mother announces they are moving to Delaware. After much vacillation she buys a house in Wilmington. She has five kids at home now and seven in college. They find that life in Wilmington is racially charged and very different from New York City. Ruth wants to go back, but knows she cannot. She feels she has made a terrible mistake. Prayer turns her around. James focuses on his music and is selected to travel to Europe with the American Youth Jazz Band. He meets his benefactor, Mrs. Dawson. He is accepted into the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio.

CHAPTER 19 – The Promise (Ruth's early history)

Ruth was through with the fast life. She got a job as a waitress and dated Dennis. Dennis was a talented violinist, but black musicians were not allowed in orchestras. He got a job in a factory. He and Ruth began living together – a situation considered scandalous. Dennis's family and friends accepted her. When she called home, her father told her that her mother was sick and he needed help with the store. She returned to Suffolk and found her father having an affair and wanting a divorce. Dee Dee begged her to remain in Suffolk, and against her better judgment, Ruth promised that she would. It was a promise she would find she could not keep.

CHAPTER 20 – Old Man Shilsky

In 1984, James is working on the staff of the Boston Globe, unable to decide whether he wants to be a musician or a writer. He is also caught between the two worlds of black and white. Because he needs to run from his confusion and pain, he goes to Suffolk to seek his mother's old friend, Frances. Instead, he meets Eddie Thompson, who knew his mother as Rachel. Eddie tells him about "Old Man Shilsky" – a detestable and mean-spirited man, who disliked and cheated blacks.

CHAPTER 21 – A Bird Who Flies (Ruth's early history)

In 1941, Ruth's Bube died. Ruth decided to return to New York. Her father tried to get her to stay; she refused. He told her that if she married a black man, she could never come home again. She boarded the bus and discovered that her mother's Polish passport had been placed in her lunchbox. She resumed her relationship with Dennis and got a job in a glass factory. Her mother became gravely ill, but Ruth was not allowed to see her. When Mameh died, Ruth was guilt ridden. Dennis provided strength and support. She began going to Metropolitan Church in Harlem with him. She started the conversion to Christianity.

CHAPTER 22 – A Jew Discovered

In 1992, while standing in front of a synagogue in Suffolk, James acknowledges his own connection to the synagogue and to Judaism. His search for the Shilsky family ends. He now understands the isolation his mother and her family suffered. He leaves for New York City.

CHAPTER 23 – Dennis (Ruth's early history)

Ruth stayed on the black side after her mother died. Dennis was afraid to marry her because of the condemnation that would ensue. They continued living together and going to the Metropolitan Baptist Church, where she admired Rev. Abner Brown. She describes these years as her "glory years." In 1942, she joined the Metropolitan Church and became the church secretary. She and Dennis married and had their first child in 1943. They lived in a one-room apartment for nine years, which she describes as the happiest years of her life. In the early 1950s, they moved to the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn. When Reverend Brown died, she and Dennis started their own church, and Dennis got a divinity degree. When she was pregnant with her eighth child, James, Dennis died of lung cancer. None of Ruth's own Jewish family would help her. She met and married James's stepfather, Hunter Jordan.

CHAPTER 24 – New Brown

James realizes that Andrew McBride left behind the groundwork for Ruth to raise twelve kids. In 1994, the family attends the 40th

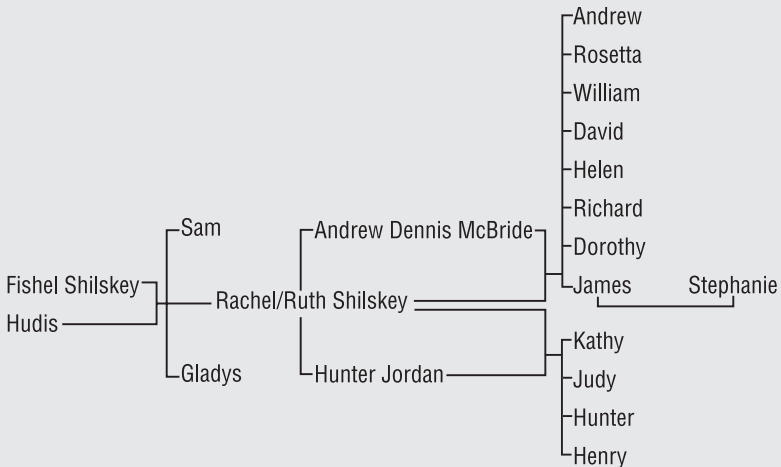
anniversary of the New Brown Church. Ruth, now 74, addresses the assembly speaking stiffly at first, and then with certainty and joy.

CHAPTER 25 – Finding Ruthie (Ruth’s early history)

In 1993, Ruth is doing well but is preoccupied with thoughts of her own mortality. It has taken years for James to find out who his mother is. The journey of discovery leads him to embrace his mixed race. He knows now that he can be both a musician and a writer.

Family Tree

Family tree was prepared by the One Book, One Philadelphia project



Discussion Questions

1. Discuss Ruth McBride's (the author's mother) refusal to reveal her past. How did that influence 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?
2. Their mother insisted that the McBride children keep family business private and she was suspicious 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. "*It was in her sense of education, more than any other, that Mommy conveyed her Jewishness to us.*" Do you agree with this statement? Is it possible that Ruth McBride Jordan's unshakable devotion to her faith, even though she converted to Christianity from Judaism, stems from her Orthodox Jewish upbringing?
8. 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?
9. The young James once asked his mother what a "*tragic mulatto*" was. Ruth tells her adult son "*Me and Dennis caused a riot on 105th Street once...*" (p.232) with their mere presence as a couple. How has American society's attitude 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.)

- 10.** The author creates a dual narrative by alternating chapters between his words and his mother's. Which voice did you identify with most?
- 11.** How did this structure affect your reading experience?
- 12.** The McBride children's struggle with their identities led each to his or her own "*revolution*." Is it also possible that that same struggle led them to define themselves through professional achievement?
- 13.** All of Ruth's children seem to run from their mother? Why? What was more of a factor, her race or her personality?
- 14.** 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?
- 15.** "*Our house was a combination three-ring circus and zoo, complete with ongoing action, daring feats, music, and animals.*" Does Helen leave to escape her chaotic homelife or to escape the mother whose very appearance confuses her about who she is?
- 16.** "*Mommy's contradictions crashed and slammed against one another like bumper cars at Coney Island. White folks, she felt, were implicitly evil toward blacks, yet she forced us to go to white schools to get the best education. Blacks could be trusted more, but anything involving blacks was probably substandard... She was against welfare and never applied for it despite our need, but championed those who availed themselves of it.*" Do you think these contradictions served to confuse Ruth's children further, or did they somehow contribute to the balanced view of humanity that James McBride possesses?
- 17.** While reading the descriptions of the children's hunger, did you wonder why Ruth did not seek out some kind of assistance?
- 18.** Ruth's stern upbringing seems to have quite an impact on the way she disciplines her children. Should she have shared more of her background with her children? Would it have affected their respect for her and her rules?
- 19.** Ruth's family disowned her for being in love with a black man. Did it surprise you to find such intolerance between one minority group and another? What circumstances might push the limits of tolerance if it involved you own children?
- 20.** How have our society's attitudes toward people of mixed heritage changed over generations?

21. How did James McBride change after discovering more about his mother’s background? Have you ever discovered something in your own family history that changed the way you look at yourself?

22. While reading the book, were you curious about how Ruth McBride Jordan’s remarkable faith had translated into the adult lives of her children? Do you think that faith is something that can be passed on from one generation to the next, or do you think that faith that is instilled too strongly in children eventually causes them to turn away from it?

23. Do you think it would be possible to achieve what Ruth McBride has achieved in today’s society?

“Complex and moving ... suffused with issues of race, religion and identity. Yet those issues, so much a part of their lives and stories, are not central. The triumph of the book—and of their lives—is that race and religion are transcended in these interwoven histories by family love, the sheer force of a mother’s will and her unshakable insistence that only two things really mattered: school and church ... The two stories, son’s and mother’s, beautifully juxtaposed, strike a graceful note at a time of racial polarization.”

— *The New York Times Book Review*

Reading Critically

*Reading Critically was 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.

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:*

Sometime an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or 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.

“James McBride evokes his childhood trek across the great racial divide with the kind of power and grace that touches and uplifts all hearts.”

— *Bebe Moore Campbell*

Suggestions for Participants

Suggestions 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 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 or 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.

Suggestions for Further Reading

NON-FICTION

Christian—Jewish Relations

Growing up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith

291.420973 W969g (CL)

Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism

296.39 BLACK ZI (CL)

Jewish-Christian Relations Since the Second World War

296.39 WIGODER (CL)

For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity

296.396 GREENBER (CL)

Understanding Your Neighbor's Faith: What Christians and Jews Should Know About Each Other

296.396 UNDERSTA (CL)

African-American—Jewish Relations

Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America

305.800973 K162b (CL)

Strangers & Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks & Jews in the United States

305.800973 STRANGER (CL)

No Monopoly on Suffering: Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights (and Elsewhere)

305.8009747 D265n (CL)

Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews

305.896073 B764 (CL)

Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin

305.896073 L562j (CL)

Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States

305.896073 S927 (CL)

Racism in America

The Ethnic Moment: The Search for Equality in the American Experience

305.800973 E84 (CL)

Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940

305.800973 H132m (CL)

The Jim Crow Laws and Racism in American History

305.896073 FREMON Jim Crow (CL, EFP, ES, MS)

Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South

305.896073 REMEMBER (CL) and 323.1 REMEMBER (MS)

Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South

323.092 E29s (CL)

Multicultural Families

Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural

306.846 H138 (CL)

Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons

306.8743 L457b (CL)

Sacred Bond: Black Men and Their Mothers

306.8743 S123 (CL, FP, MS, PP, SA)

Mothering Without a Compass: White Mother's Love, Black Son's Courage

306.8743 THOMPSON Motherin (CL)

Education

African American Mothers and Urban Schools: The Power of Participation

370.19 W736a (CL, EFP, MS)

The Struggle for Equality; School Integration Controversy in New York City

370.1934 S972 (CL)

The Great School Wars, New York City, 1805-1973; A History of the Public Schools as Battlefield of Social Change

370.9747 RAVITCH (CL)

Getting the Best Education for Your Child: A Parent's Checklist

371.01 K43g (CL)

How Communities Build Stronger Schools: Stories, Strategies, and Promising Practices for Educating Every Child

371.19 DODD (CL)

Family Involvement in Children's Education: Successful Local Approaches: An Idea Book

371.192 FAMILY (CL)

Jazz Music

The Jazz Cadence of American Culture

781.65 J339a (CL)

Jazz in American Culture

781.65 TOWNSEND Jazz in (CL)

A Century of Jazz

781.6509 C23c (CL)

Jazz: A History of America's Music

781.6509 WARD Jazz (CL, SA)

Literature

Mending the World: Stories of Family by Contemporary Black Writers

810.8035204 MENDING (CL)

**History and Memoir
American Jewish Women's History:
A Reader**

920.72089 AMERICAN (CL)

The Sweet Hell Inside: A Family Memoir

929.2 HARLESTO Ball (CL)

The Sweeter the Juice

929.2 T219H (CL, SA)

From the Old Country: An Oral History of the European Migration to America

973.04034 S798f (CL)

Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments

973.04924 B567 (CL)

Our Parents' Lives: The Americanization of Eastern European Jews

973.04924 COWAN (CL)

Generation without Memory: A Jewish Journey in Christian America

973.04924 R637g (CL)

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

973.0496073 WALKER Black wh (CL, FP) and YBKW (CL,SA)

Lost in America: A Journey with My Father

974.7275004 NULAND (CL)

The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South

975.004924 E92p (CL)

Biography

Confessions of a Secular Jew: A Memoir

BIO GOODHEAR EUGENE Autobiog Confessi (FP)

Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community

BIO KING MARTIN LUTHER Schneier Shared d (CL)

The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts

BIO MCKINLEY CATHERIN Auto (CL)

Divided to the Vein: A Journey into Race and Family

BIO MINERBRO SCOTT Auto (CL)

Always Wear Joy: My Mother Bold and Beautiful

BIO FALES-HI SUSAN Auto (CL)

Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance

BIO OBAMA BARACK Auto (CL) and E O1195 (FP, PP, SA)

FICTION

The Colored Garden

FICT BENNETT, O.H. Colored (CL)

A Conversation with the Mann

FICT RIDLEY JOHN Conversa (CL, PP)

Lady Moses

FICT ROY LUCINDA Lady (CL, FP, MS, PP, SA)

The Bear Comes Home

FICT ZABOR RAFI Bear (CL, MS)

Supporters and Partners

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Step Up Springfield

Temple Beth El

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For more information, contact:

Ann Keefe
Springfield City Library
Tel: (413) 263-6828, ext. 294
Fax: (413) 263-6825
akeefe@springfieldlibrary.org
www.SpringfieldLibrary.org/onebook.html

Springfield City Library
Springfield, Massachusetts