



Summary

In 1972, when workers in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, were digging the foundations for a new development, the last thing they expected to find was a skeleton at the bottom of a well. Who the skeleton was and how it got there were two of the long-held secrets kept by the residents of Chicken Hill, the dilapidated neighborhood where immigrant Jews and African Americans lived side by side and shared ambitions and sorrows. Chicken Hill was where Moshe and Chona Ludlow lived when Moshe integrated his theater and where Chona ran the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store. When the state came looking for a deaf boy to institutionalize him, it was Chona and Nate Timblin, the Black janitor at Moshe's theater and the unofficial leader of the Black community on Chicken Hill, who worked together to keep the boy safe. As these characters' stories overlap and deepen, it becomes clear how much the people who live on the margins of white, Christian America struggle and what they must do to survive. When the truth is finally revealed about what happened on Chicken Hill and the part the town's white establishment played in it, McBride shows us that even in dark times, it is love and community--heaven and earth--that sustain us.

About the Author

James McBride is an award-winning author, musician, and screenwriter. His landmark memoir, *The Color of Water*, published in 1996, has sold millions of copies and spent more than two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Considered an American classic, it is read in schools and universities across the United States.

His debut novel, *Miracle at St. Anna*, was turned into a 2008 film by Oscar-winning writer and director Spike Lee, with a script written by McBride.

His 2013 novel, *The Good Lord Bird*, about American abolitionist John Brown, won the National Book Award for Fiction and will be a Showtime limited series in fall 2020 starring Ethan Hawke.

McBride has been a staff writer for *The Boston Globe*, *People Magazine*, and *The Washington Post*, and his work has appeared in *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New York Times*. His 2007 *National Geographic* story “Hip Hop Planet” is considered an important examination of African American music and culture.

A noted musician and composer, McBride has toured as a saxophonist sideman with jazz legend Jimmy Scott, among other musicians. He has written songs for Anita Baker, Grover Washington Jr., Pura Fé, Gary Burton, and even for the PBS television character “Barney.” (He did not write the “I Love You” song for Barney, but he wishes he did.) He received the Stephen Sondheim Award and the Richard Rodgers Foundation Horizon Award for his musical *Bobos*, co-written with playwright Ed Shockley. His 2003 *Riffin’ and Pontificatin’* musical tour was filmed for a nationally televised Comcast documentary. He has been featured on national radio and television in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. He often does his public readings accompanied by a band.

In addition to being an author and a musician, McBride has other attributes. He admits to being the worst dancer in the history of African Americana, bar none (he claims he should be legally barred from dancing at any event he attends). And when he takes off his hat, fleas fly out. Little things, little talents.

A native New Yorker and a graduate of New York City public schools, McBride studied composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio and received his master’s degree at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. In 2015, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama “for humanizing the complexities of discussing race in America.” He holds several honorary doctorates and is currently a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University.

Courtesy of <https://www.jamesmcbride.com/bio/>

Discussion Questions

1. In *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*, James McBride takes readers into the lives of the people who live on Chicken Hill, a neighborhood of “ramshackle houses and dirt roads where the town’s Blacks, Jews, and immigrant whites who couldn’t afford any better lived.” As you read about Chicken Hill, how did you envision it? Did its description prompt memories of places that you’ve lived or recall from your past?
2. The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store is owned by Moshe Ludlow and his wife, Chona, who runs it, and it’s the center of neighborhood life. Are there places like that from your own life or in your past? How are they similar to (or different from) the Heaven & Earth?
3. Moshe desegregated the local theater by booking Black entertainers for Black audiences, and McBride writes in detail about the famous acts that played there. How courageous do you think Moshe had to be to do this? Have you ever tried to change the traditions of a place or an organization?
4. Nate and Addie Timblin work for the Ludlows: Nate at the theater, Addie at the store. What similarities do you see between their relationship and that of Moshe and Chona? Do you see differences? What do you think the four have in common?
5. Dodo is a deaf boy from Chicken Hill who needs help—assistance that Nate and Chona provide. Why do you think those two were the ones who stepped in to help Dodo? Do you think they should have done anything differently? What do you think that Moshe and Addie could have done to keep Dodo safe? Or do you think his discovery was inevitable?
6. Doc Roberts is a local physician who was instrumental in sending Dodo to the Pennhurst sanatorium. He also had a complicated relationship with Chona. What about him do you think was most objectionable? Why do you think he was able to succeed for so long without being discovered?
7. Monkey Pants is the only inmate at Pennhurst who befriends Dodo, and the two strike up an unlikely friendship—one that is literally a lifesaver. Have there been people in your life who’ve stepped in to help you when you needed it?

Discussion Questions

8. Son of Man is the sadistic attendant on Ward C-1 at Pennhurst. What similarities to (or differences from) Doc Roberts did you see in him? Are they both evil in the same way?
9. The escape the characters engineered to extract Dodo from Pennhurst was possible thanks to the relationships they had with others in their community. How important do you think community was in these characters' lives?
10. At the end of novel you learn how the skeleton in the first chapter got in the well. Do you think the person whose skeleton it was got what he deserved? Do you think other characters in the novel did?