



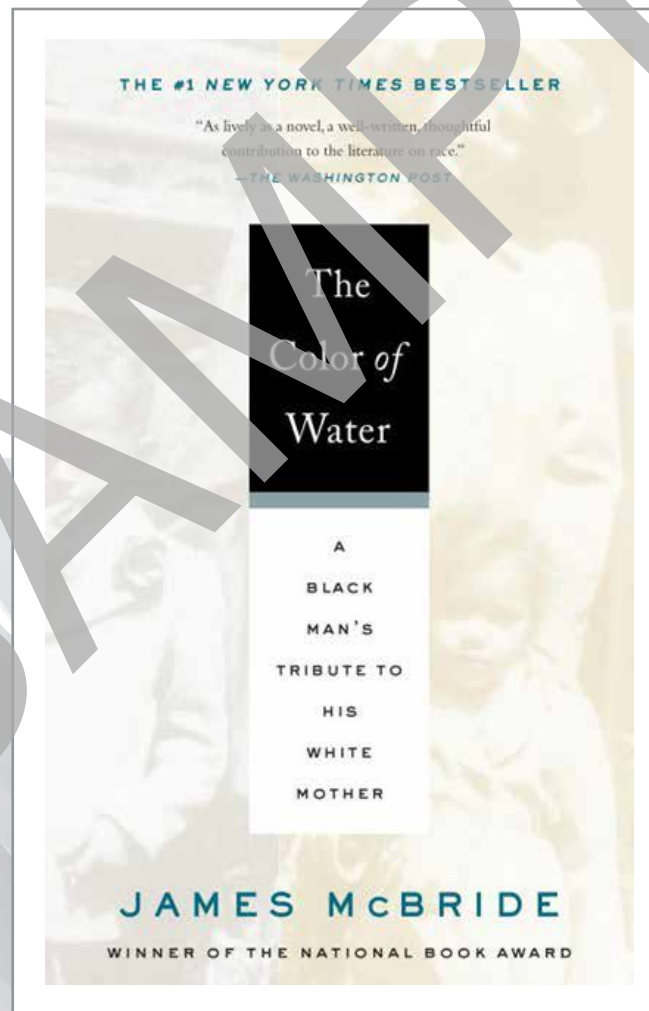
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Color of Water

James McBride



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Color of Water

James McBride

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Comprehension

Current events, cause/effect  
summarization

### Literary Elements

Characterization, simile,  
metaphor, theme, symbolism,  
irony, inference, sequence

### Thinking

Research, compare/contrast,  
analysis

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,  
application

### Writing

Poetry, critique, personal  
essay, eulogy, public service  
announcements

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, interview,  
oral presentation

### Across the Curriculum:

Art—collage, poster,  
caricature; Drama—script;  
Music—lyrics, appropriate  
selections; Current Events—  
articles, pictures

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**Genre:** memoir

**Setting:** Suffolk, Virginia; Harlem and Brooklyn, New York; other places in the United States; 1920s–1950s (Ruth); 1960s–1990s (James)

**Point of View:** first-person narrative, juxtaposing the stories of James McBride and his mother, Ruth McBride Jordan

**Themes:** self-identity, ethnicity, human dignity, alienation, family love

**Conflict:** James' search for his identity and ethnic background; Ruth's inward and outward conflicts with her childhood family

**Tone:** candid, conversational

## Summary

James McBride has always known his mother was different, but it is only after he is an adult that she reveals her background to him. As their stories intermingle, McBride learns the story of his Jewish mother, the daughter of a rabbi, who was born in Poland and came to the United States when she was two years old. She fell in love with Dennis McBride, a black man, became a Christian, and was alienated forever from her family. Ruth and Dennis established a Baptist church in Harlem.

James, Ruth and Dennis' eighth child, was born after his father's death. Ruth married Hunter Jordan, Sr., another black man, and four more children were born. Pushed by their mother's perseverance and unwavering faith, all 12 children eventually graduate from college, and some of them pursue additional degrees. In this tribute to his mother, James reveals his struggles with growing up in a chaotic, impoverished household; his search for his own racial identity; his difficulty understanding the racially charged atmosphere of the 1960s; and his questions about religion. As his mother relates the past to him, McBride comes to an understanding of himself and an even deeper appreciation for his extraordinary mother. When he asks his mother what color God is, she replies, "God is the color of water," hence, the name of the book.

## Characters

**James McBride:** author; primary narrator; in search of his own identity

**Ruth McBride Jordan/Rachel Deborah Shilsky:** Jewish immigrant to the United States who grew up under the influence of a tyrannical, racist father; became "dead" to her family after her marriage to a black man and her conversion to Christianity

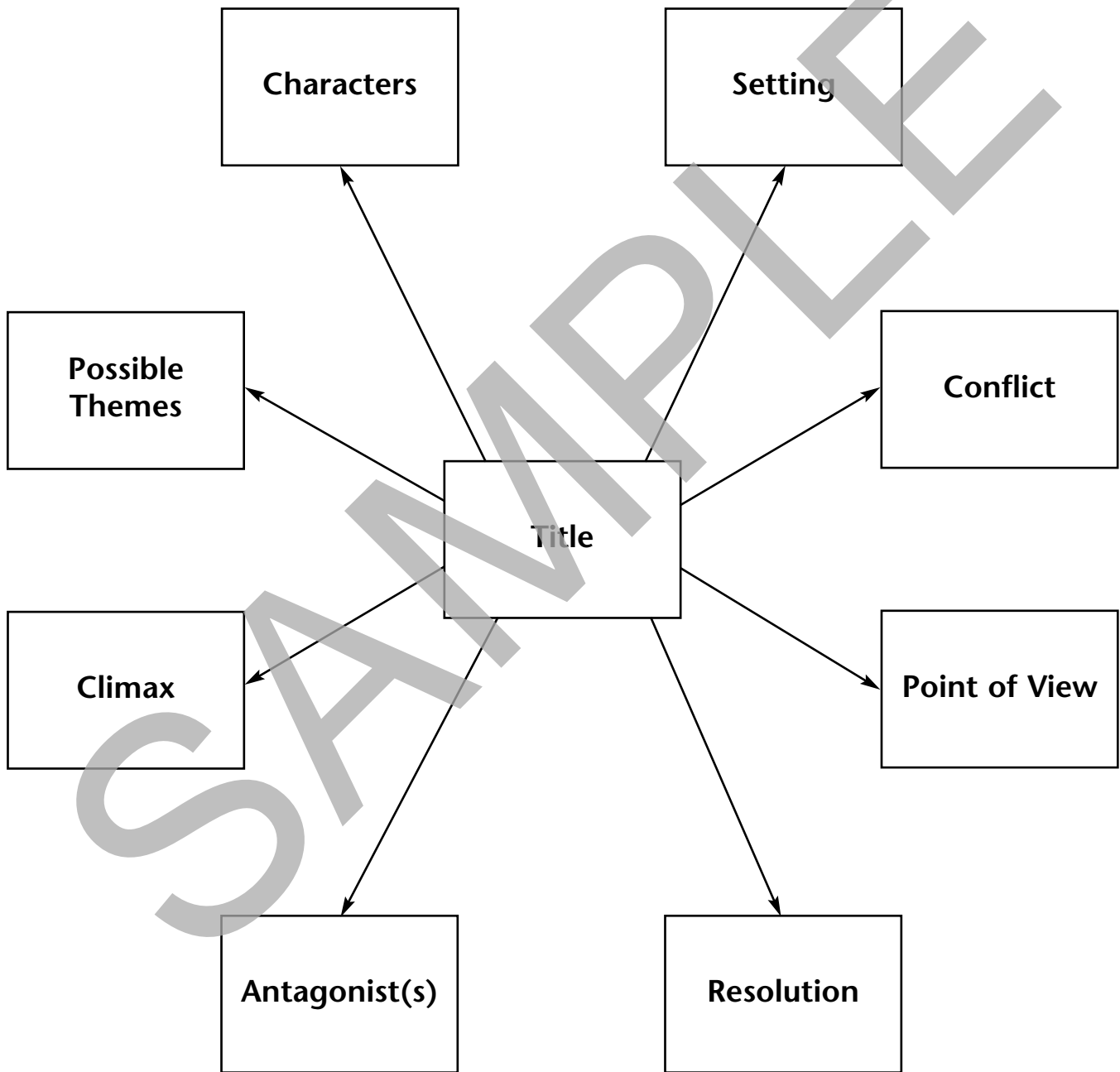
**Andrew Dennis McBride:** strong, compassionate black man; Ruth's first husband; Baptist minister

**Hunter Jordan, Sr.:** Ruth's second husband; dies when James is 14 years old

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## Story Map

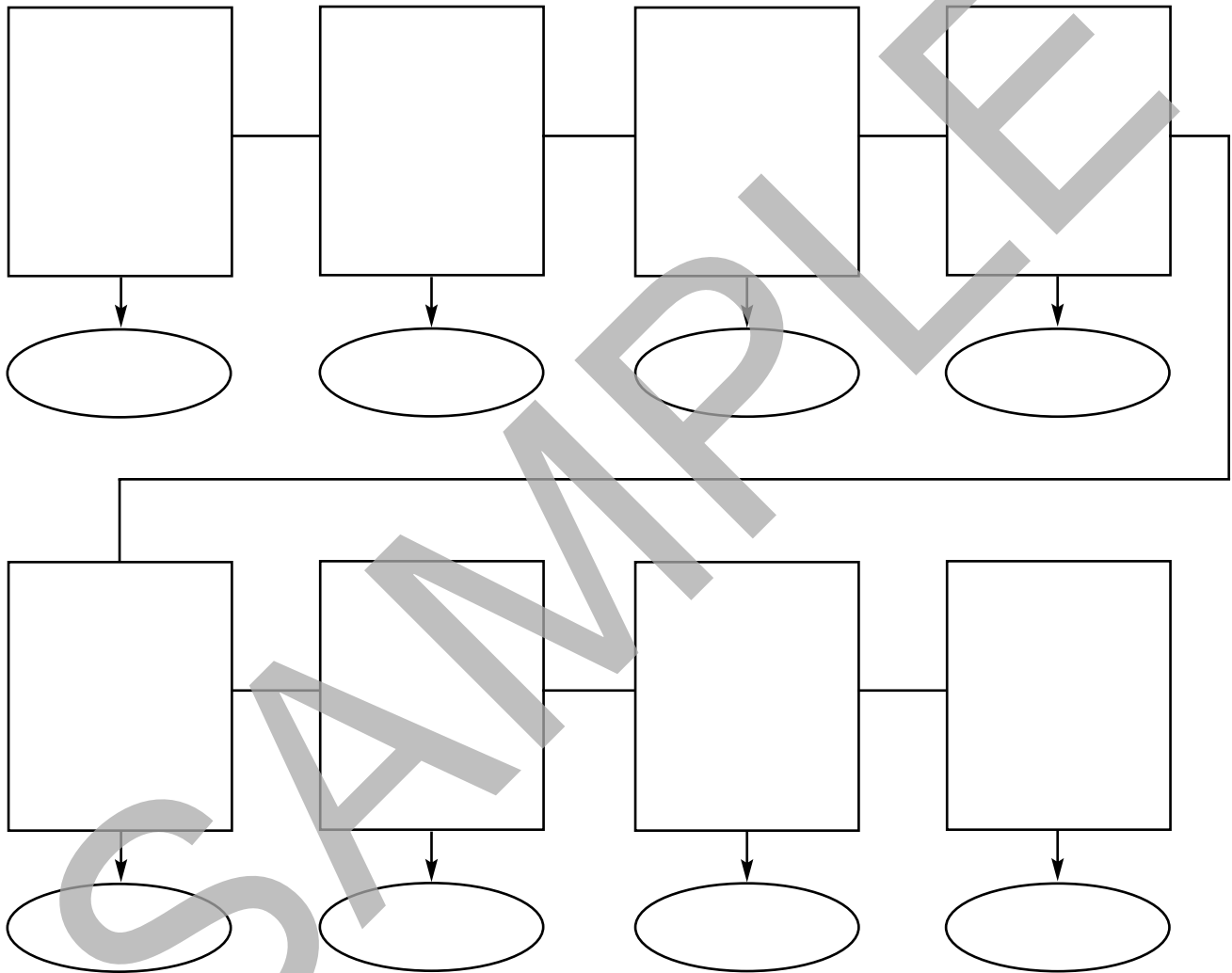
**Directions:** Use the diagram below with a partner or small group to free associate thoughts about the novel after you have finished reading it. Jot down your thoughts in a similar format on a large piece of paper.



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## Inference Flow Chart

**Directions:** Fill in the boxes of the flow chart with the events portrayed in the story. In the ovals beneath, state what emotions and feelings are inferred.



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**Note:** Examples of literary devices found in each section are included in the Supplementary Activities. Guide students to identify these devices as they read the novel.

## Chapters 1–3, pp. 1–19

Ruth reveals portions of her past. James relates events from his childhood and tells of his and Ruth's despair after the death of his stepfather.

### Vocabulary

infallible (5)  
unkempt (14)

reefer (6)  
dowry (15)

nonchalance (8)  
claustrophobic (18)

motley (14)

### Discussion Questions

**Note:** The responses to the discussion questions are phrased in the past tense for Ruth's memoirs and in the present tense for James' memoirs.

#### Ruth

1. Analyze why Ruth begins her narrative with "I'm dead." (Her family pronounced her dead 50 years before when they went through traditional mourning for her because she married a black man. The key point in this narrative is Ruth's statement, "Rachel Shilsky is dead as far as I'm concerned. She had to die in order for me, the rest of me, to live." Ruth felt that the real person inside of her could never have lived if she had remained under the tyrannical control of her father. pp. 1–3)
2. Examine Ruth's background and analyze what she reveals about her family and her Jewish faith. (She was born in Poland in 1921 and came to America with her parents and older brother Sam in 1923, where her father "Americanized" their name to Shilsky, and she became Rachel instead of Ruchel. She left the family home in Virginia in 1941 and has never returned. Her father [Tateh] was an Orthodox Jewish rabbi who escaped from the Russian army and fled to Poland, where he married Hudis [Mameh] in an arranged marriage. Hudis' family had class and money, and she became Tateh's "meal ticket to America." He never loved Hudis, who was crippled, paralyzed on the left side, and almost blind in one eye. Memories of her father include his deceitfulness, his harshness, and his threats to send her back to Europe. Her mother, whom Ruth feels she failed, was a warm, loving mother and a dutiful, submissive wife. pp. 2–3, 15)
3. Discuss Ruth's memories of Jewish traditions and of her grandfather's death. (Everything had to be kosher, which in Ruth's memory meant having completely different table settings for every meal, never mixing foods [such as dairy with meat], and not eating pork. The Sabbath lasted from Friday evening at sundown until Saturday at sundown. They could not turn light switches off and on, tear paper, ride in a car, go to a movie, or light a stove. They could only sit and read by candlelight. After a death, they covered the mirrors in the house, adults covered their heads, and no one would say "death." Ruth became claustrophobic after her grandfather's death because she wasn't sure he was really dead when he was buried. She insisted that her family make sure she was dead before burying her. pp. 15–19)

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## James

4. Discuss why James begins his memoirs with a narrative of when he was 14 years old. (*James' stepfather, Hunter Jordan, died when James was 14. Some of his most poignant memories of his mother revolve around her grief over his stepfather's death. His portrayal of Ruth riding her bicycle symbolizes an escape mechanism during the grieving process. To James, the bicycle also typifies his mother's entire existence, i.e., her oddness, her "nonawareness" of what the world thinks of her, her nonchalance toward the dangers of being a white person in a black world. His memories of this time period of his life also reflect his own grief and ensuing "revolution."* pp. 5–9)
5. Examine James' memories of his stepfather and the effect his death has on James. (*Memories: Hunter Jordan is a cross between "quiet Indian and country black man." He is soft-spoken and works hard but is tough, bold, and quick when necessary. He marries James' mother, a white Jewish woman with eight mulatto children, and together they have four more. He is the only father James has ever known because his own father, Andrew McBride, died when Ruth was pregnant with James. Effects of Jordan's death: James becomes truant from school, fails every class, and spends a year going to movies and doing nothing constructive. He smokes marijuana, snatches purses, and shoplifts.* p. 6)
6. Examine James' depiction of his mother. (*He thinks she is strange. She doesn't socialize, can speak Yiddish, distrusts authority, and insists on complete privacy. She ignores matters involving race and identity, and her past is a mystery. She is commander-in-chief of the house since his stepfather doesn't live with them during the week. After James starts school, he realizes his mother looks more like his white teacher than like the mothers of the other black students. She stands apart from other mothers when waiting for James to arrive on the bus. When he asks why she looks different, she tells him that she does look like him, that she is his mother, and that he must forget everything except school.* pp. 9, 12–13)
7. Why do you think James' mother does not give him a straight answer to his questions about why she looks different? (*Answers will vary.* pp. 12–13)
8. Contrast the reality of James' home life with his "dream." (*Reality: poor; busy, distracted parents; stepfather home only on weekends; there are so many children that they must sleep three or four to one bed; there is never time for an individual child; the children fight over their "rights," i.e., "kill or be killed." The high point of his first day of school is being alone with his mother for the first time. Primary instructions to the children are to stick near or close to a brother or sister and not to tell family business to anyone. Dream: "Father Knows Best" home; neat, orderly, quiet; only enough children to fit on Dad's lap; father comes home every day after work.* pp. 9–11)

## Supplementary Activities

1. After reading about James' first day of school, have students write their own "First Day of School" memoir.
2. Have students write a poem or paragraph or make a collage about their first experience with the death of someone they knew.
3. Have students begin a list of literary devices. Examples: **Similes**—The sensation was like a tractor pulling my curls off (p. 11). It (James' memory of his mother walking him to school)