

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *The Color of Water*

*by James McBride*

written by Joan Langham

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## Chapter 1—Dead

1. James McBride's mother, Rachel, was raised in a Jewish home. When she left to marry a gentile, her family mourned as if she were dead. She describes the Jewish rituals of mourning, saying, "They say prayers, turn their mirrors down, sit on boxes for seven days, and cover their heads."

Write a diary entry from Rachel's perspective, describing how her family's actions make her feel.

2. In the first chapter, Rachel briefly mentions the Holocaust, which destroyed all of her mother's family in Dobryzn, Poland.

The topic of the Holocaust has filled volumes. In a brief paragraph, summarize what you already know about the Holocaust, answering the questions of when, where, why, what, and who.

3. *The Color of Water* is written in two different voices: that of James, and that of his mother, Rachel. The first chapter is written in Rachel's voice.

Rewrite the last paragraph of Chapter 1, changing the voice to that of James. Think about how the paragraph would be different from James's perspective.

4. In this section, Rachel describes her parents. From her description, you can sense her disdain for her father. For instance she says that he was able "to slick himself out of anything." She also describes her father as a fox and calls him "hard as a rock." In contrast, she affectionately describes her mother as "gentle and meek."

Following this example, describe two people you know, carefully choosing words and phrases to compare and contrast their personalities.

## **Chapter 2—The Bicycle**

5. After James's stepfather dies, his mother decides to ride a bike everywhere she goes. The author creates an amusing image of his white mother riding through Queens on an old, ratty bike. However, while the scene may be amusing to an outsider, to James it was extremely embarrassing.

Perhaps someone you know has done something that embarrassed you. Describe an embarrassing incident from your past as if it were a scene in a movie. What actors would you cast in this scene?

6. Before James was born, his biological father died. Soon after, his mother married again and had four more children. As a small boy with eleven brothers and sisters, James valued the brief moments he could spend with his mother as she walked him to the bus and picked him up at the end of the day.

Describe a memorable childhood experience in which you spent time with a parent or relative.

7. James's mother had many memorable words of advice for her family: "Put God first...What's money if your mind is empty?...School is important... Never, ever, ever tell your business to nobody." As a boy, the author was unsure at times why these principles were so important to his mother, but tried to follow her advice. Later in life, he would come to cherish these words of wisdom.

What advice have you been given by parents, relatives, teachers, or other important people in your life? List some memorable statements you have heard, and describe how they have influenced you.

8. From the portrait McBride paints of his mother, the word *courageous* would seem to describe her well. Although her accomplishments do not earn her fame or fortune, she exhibits exceptional courage in the decisions she makes.

Write a letter to James McBride describing why you think his mother was courageous. Include specific examples from her life.

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## **Chapter 3—Kosher**

9. McBride gives Chapter 3 the curious title “Kosher.” In this chapter, his mother explains the Jewish tradition of keeping Kosher, saying, “you had your dairy meals and your meat meals. So you eat all dairy one meal and all meat the next.”

Considering the theme of the chapter, what would you choose as an alternate title?

10. Rachel affectionately remembers her Jewish grandparents who lived in Manhattan: their tidy apartment, their Jewish dress and customs, and the love they showed her. Being very close to her grandfather, Rachel is distraught when he dies and the family buries him within a day. This sudden death and burial create claustrophobia in Rachel, as she develops a fear of being buried alive.
- A. In a journal entry, describe someone who is very close to you, as Rachel describes her grandparents. Incorporate sensory details like sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and feelings that you associate with this special person.
- B. Write an obituary for Rachel’s grandfather. Include details of his life and personality, and a description of his family.

## **Chapter 4—Black Power**

11. When James was a young boy, his older brother Richie often played tricks on him. For example, one day when James was asking questions about the family's origins, Richie told James that he was adopted. James was not sure whether his brother was telling the truth, and the idea troubled him.

Have you ever played a trick on someone? Describe one of the times in which you carried out an act of mischief, like Richie does in this chapter. Be sure to include details about the planning, action, and results of your trick.

12. As a young boy, James asked his mother many questions. He wanted to know if she was white. He wanted to know if she loved him. He wanted to know about his grandparents. His mother, however, was evasive, if not completely silent, on each of these topics.

Compare James to another brother or sister in terms of his curiosity about the family's origins. Why do you think these issues matter so much to James?

13. In Chapter 4, the author describes the emphasis placed on cars by the teens he grew up with in the 1960s. He remembers their souped up vehicles with impressive names, and the way they would drive fast to impress on-lookers.

Describe your first car, or the car of your dreams. Make your description come to life by describing the sights, smells, and sounds of the car, and your reactions to it.

14. Rachel has very strong opinions and very clear commands for her children. She instructs them on the importance of "absolute privacy, excellent school grades," and trusting "no outsiders of either race."

Imagine that you are one of the McBride children having a conversation with a brother or sister. Create a dialogue in which the children discuss their opinions on one of the three points listed above. In the dialogue, describe the effects of these rules on the family's daily life.

## **Chapter 5—The Old Testament**

15. In this chapter, Rachel reveals a troubling secret from her past. She describes how her father, while claiming to be a rabbi and a servant of God, abused her in her youth. However, rather than being embittered by her past, Rachel makes positive choices to ensure that her children will have a respectable and trustworthy father-figure.

Psychologists have long claimed that parents play an important role in shaping the lives of their children. In your opinion, what personal characteristics would make someone a good father-figure? Make a list of qualities you think a father should have in order to positively influence his children.

16. Growing up, Rachel's life was difficult for several reasons. Her father was abusive towards both Rachel and his wife. Furthermore, the family moved often, making it impossible for Rachel to maintain close friendships.

Imagine that you have a friend who comes to you for help regarding similar problems to those Rachel faced. What would you say to someone with a difficult family life, or someone whose family moved often? Write an email in which you advise this friend on how to cope with such problems.

17. In her youth, Rachel's schoolmates taunt her with cruel names like "Christ killer" and "Jew baby." Meanwhile, at home, her father tells his wife, "I get sick to look at you" and "Why do you bother trying to look pretty?" Surrounding by such hurtful words, Rachel develops low self-esteem.

In your opinion, why do people say hurtful things to one another? Drawing on your own experiences as well as examples from the book, freewrite for ten minutes on the topic of verbal abuse, including its causes and effects.