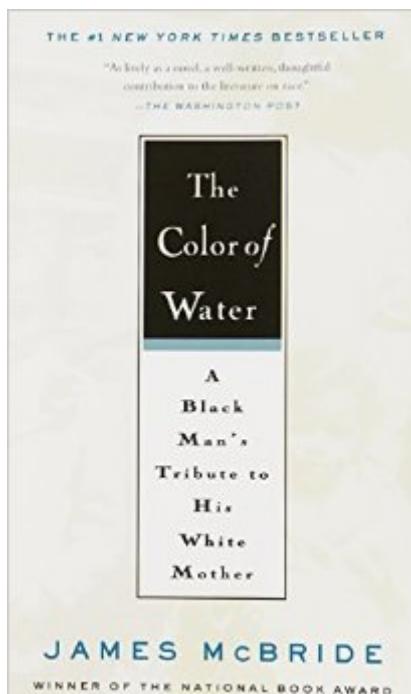


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# The Color Of Water: A Black Man's Tribute To His White Mother, 10th Anniversary Edition



## Synopsis

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 confusionâ "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 collegeâ "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.

## Book Information

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## **Customer Reviews**

This book is, indeed, a tribute to the author's mother. In it, the author, a man whose mother was white and his father black, tells two stories: that of his mother and his own. Tautly written in spare, clear prose, it is a wonderful story of a bi-racial family who succeeded and achieved the American dream, despite the societal obstacles placed in its way. The author's mother was a Polish Orthodox Jew who migrated to America at the age of two with her family during the early nineteen twenties. They ultimately settled down in Virginia, where she led an isolated and lonely life; shunned by whites because she was Jewish and shunned by blacks because she was white. She was raised in a predominantly black neighborhood, where her father, a despicable and harsh man who brutalized his handicapped wife, ran a local grocery store, where he priced gouged his black clientele. She left home and moved to New York when she was nineteen and never looked back. She met and married the author's father, a black man, when mixed race marriages were still frowned upon by both whites and blacks. Still, she always felt more comfortable around blacks than around whites. When he died sixteen years later, she married another black man who nurtured her eight children by the author's father and proceeded to give her four more children. The author tells of his childhood, of his family, and of the issue of race that ultimately colored his life while growing up in predominantly black neighborhoods, where his mother stood out like a sore thumb because of the color of her skin. It was always an issue his mother avoided discussing with him, as for her it was not an issue. It was not until the author wrote this book that his mother discussed the issue of race within the context of her own life. From this dialogue emerges a fascinating look at the issues of race, as well as religion, and how it impacts on an individual's identity within our race conscious society. It is also a very personal story. While the author's family was economically disadvantaged, his eccentric and

independent mother always stressed education. She was a strict disciplinarian who brooked no nonsense from her twelve children. A convert to Christianity through her first husband, with whom she founded a Baptist church, she provided her children with the will to succeed. Consequently, all twelve eventually went to college and did her proud. The story of this unique family is told from two distinct, parallel perspectives: that of the author and that of his mother. While both are interesting, it is his mother's story that dominates this beautifully written book, which is, indeed, a tribute to her. It is truly a story told from the heart, as the love that the author has for his mother is evident with every written word.

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Subtitled "A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother," this book is exactly that -- a man's account of his research into his mother's background. McBride's mother raised twelve fantastically successful children despite enormous obstacles. Unfortunately, McBride seems to value resume-type accomplishments more than ones of character. He tells us every degree earned by his brothers and sisters, but very little about them as people. What type of personalities do they have? Who are their families? What are their passions? I would have liked to have known. McBride takes a removed stance, as if it were somebody else's family that he was assigned to report on. His background in journalism may help explain the odd distance McBride maintains. In the end, I knew a lot about the details of his mother's life, but little of her inner existence. Perhaps this limited amount was all that McBride could tell. Perhaps all we really know about people is what they present to the outside world. Despite the alternating points of view (McBride alternates chapters as "himself" and "his mother") McBride never climbs far enough into his mother's head to make her seem real to me. My favorite scene: McBride's mother speaks at a church celebration/reunion. Overcome by emotion, she throws away her notes and speaks ad lib, from the heart. I wish that McBride had followed her lead when writing this book.

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