

- II. **Short Essay:** After reading H. Jack Geiger's review, "Rachel and Her Children" (*New York Times Book Review*, May 31, 1996), of James McBride's *The Color of Water*, agree or disagree with Geiger's statement: "There are two voices in the complex and moving narrative...One is the voice of a black musician, composer and writer [James McBride]... The second voice is that of Rachel Shilsky, daughter of a failed Orthodox Jewish rabbi..." Use examples from the narrative account(s) to support your ideas. 20 points.

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THE COLOR OF WATER BOOK REVIEW

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It is pretty clear that Geiger completely missed the underlying point of this book. *The Color of Water* is not so much about telling Rachel's story, but exists rather to show the gradual discovery of a hidden past and how it led to the development of the ethical and moral character of James McBride.

While he lauds the achievements of his siblings and family as a whole, all made possible no doubt by the success and scalability of his mother's teachings, the real celebration is in McBride's realization of the events *behind* all of the lessons.

As he gains insight into the actions that shaped his mother's life, McBride finds the justification for her value system which was conferred on him. This finally allows him to accept his mixed-heritage identity, an accomplishment that would have never been possible to achieve without first delving into Rachel's history.

Even the chapters describing his confusion during childhood seem to focus more on analyzing the character of Rachel and her world view than on McBride's experiences. Sometimes his feelings seem to be included solely to facilitate the introduction of new ideas and concepts employed by his mother. For example, it was somewhat impossible for a small child like McBride to be able to understand the complexities and nuances of the race relations all around him simply by justifying that God is the color of water.

The constant questioning of his identity and the emphasis on his mother's unclear responses to this personal crisis shows that McBride was not writing this book to tell the everyday stories of the family, but was instead hoping to figure out what drove and motivated Rachel.

The lack of explanation of this motivation may have accounted for McBride's struggle to understand his black and white allegiance. By deciding to hide her past from her children, Rachel was forced to provide ambiguous answers to questions about race, which only hindered and further destabilized the young McBride's perceptive on the issue. The feelings of never belonging that resulted from his mother's cloudy treatment of race eventually made their way into other aspects of McBride's life, notably when he abandons the pursuit of education for drugs.

The overall lack of clarity in his past may have also contributed to the constant drifting in his professional life. The struggle to choose between music and writing serves as a metaphor for the indecisiveness that he feels toward his racial self-awareness. McBride's realization that he was able to be both a writer and a musician came only after years of dreading the seemingly inevitable choice of one over the other. Experience and an understanding of what both careers would entail were necessary for him to realize that he was really meant for both.

It also took his investigating and experiencing (from his mother's perspective) the Jewish side of his history to become comfortable with a mixed-heritage sense of self that was entitled to him. So while the story of Rachel was necessary for McBride's viewpoints to change, it was only an aid to help explain his reasoning; the story of McBride's change is the real driving force of this story.