

CHARACTERS

- Malachi the dancer— a Jewish dancer and friend of Moshe
- Chona— Jewish American who welcomes everyone into her store on Chicken Hill
- Moshe Ludlow— Romanian Jewish owner of the All-American Dance Hall and Theater in Pottstown, married to Chona
- Isaac— Moshe’s older cousin in Philadelphia
- Nate Timblin— Black resident on Chicken Hill
- Addie Timblin— Respected stateswoman on Chicken Hill, married to Nate
- Dodo— Addie’s 12-year old nephew who lost his hearing when a stove exploded
- Fatty Davis— Black owner of the Juke joint on Chicken Hill
- Enzo Carissimi, aka Big Soap— white Italian immigrant on Chicken Hill, close friends with Fatty
- Fioria Carissimi— Enzo’s mother
- Doc Earl Roberts— white doctor and member of Ku Klux Klan
- Bernice Davis— Fatty’s sister, Chona’s neighbor since childhood
- Patty Millison aka Newspaper— Black laundress on Chicken Hill and town information spreader
- Irv and Marv Skrupskelis— Jewish Lithuanian brother cobblers
- Rusty— young Black man on Chicken Hill
- Monkey Pants— boy with cerebral palsy at Pennhurst who befriends Dodo
- Pia Fabicelli— white cleaning lady and city news sharer
- Miggy Fludd— Black woman working at Pennhurst and living on Hemlock Row
- Anna Morse— funeral home owner in Linfield
- Bags— Rusty’s Uncle
- Carl Boydkinses— Doc’s cousin and KKK member
- Reverend Ed Spriggs, also known as Snooks— reverend on Chicken Hill
- Yakov Flohr— Chona’s father, owner of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store and first rabbi of Ahavat Achim
- Karl Feldman— rabbi after Yakov
- Shad Davis— Bernice and Fatty’s father, stonemason, built Heaven & Earth Grocery Store for Yakov and built Ahavat Achim
- Gene— Fatty’s older cousin in Philadelphia
- Gus Plitzka jr.— city council president and owner of the dairy on Chicken Hill
- Bullis— Black man who delivers eggs and coffee to Pennhurst
- Son of Man— violent pedophile employed at Pennhurst

SETTING

- Pottstown, Pennsylvania-1925
- Chicken Hill

THEMES

- Interconnectedness
- Community Building
- Mercy & Justice
- Survival & Healing from past trauma

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which elements of the book do you perceive to have a strong resonance with readers?
2. The book gives narrative voices to many of the community members, making each chapter a story within the larger narrative. It is like a piece work (scrap) quilt where small insignificant pieces of fabric can come together to create a whole quilt. (Consider the artist Bisa Butler). What do James McBride and Bisa Butler's work have in common?
3. What did you think of this narrative structure?
4. Why factors influenced the author's decision to use this narrative style rather than opting for a more straightforward approach?
5. What themes and motifs emerge throughout the narrative?
6. Was there a character that you were particularly drawn to? Why?
7. Why is The Heaven & Earth Grocery store so important? Why don't Chona and Moshe leave when they have the chance?
8. Why do certain people want to take Dodo away from his uncle and send him to Pennhurst? Why don't they just let it go?
9. Do you think Chona and Moshe's decision to shelter Dodo was a courageous act of kindness or a naïve choice that ultimately led to Chona's death? Could they have done something different?
10. What feelings and issues were residents of Chicken Hill dealing with? How have things changed and how have they stayed the same? Based on the interactions and relationships in the book do you believe the author has hope for America?
11. How were Doc Roberts and Son of Man similar? How were they different? How did they both managed to get away with their crimes for so long?

12. The two main couples of the story are Moshe/Chona & Nate/Addie. How are they alike? How are they different? What does their relationship mean to the overarching narrative?
13. When the story begins, it seems like it's going to be about murder, but it develops into a different kind of story. What is the story James McBride is trying to tell you?
14. What were your thoughts on the epilogue? Why was it necessary?

R. Malek-Librarian

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

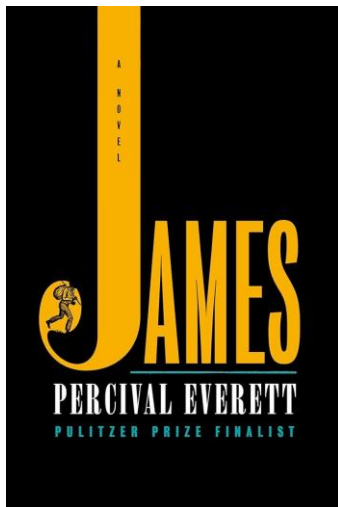


James McBride is an award-winning author, musician, and screenwriter. He has been a staff writer for the Boston Globe, People Magazine, and The Washington Post, and his work has appeared in Essence, Rolling Stone, and The New York Times. A native New Yorker and graduate of New York City public schools, McBride studied composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio. He received a 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."

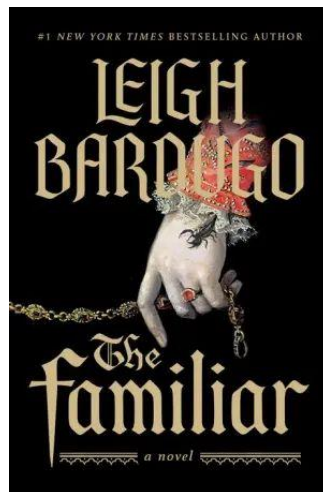
McBride was the 8th child of 12 born to Rev. Andrew D. McBride and Rachel Deboarh Shilsky. He often draws from his own experiences growing up in a large, poor American-African family led by an ethnically Jewish mother to bring empathy and compassion to his writing.

<https://www.jamesmcbride.com/bio/>
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_McBride_\(writer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_McBride_(writer))

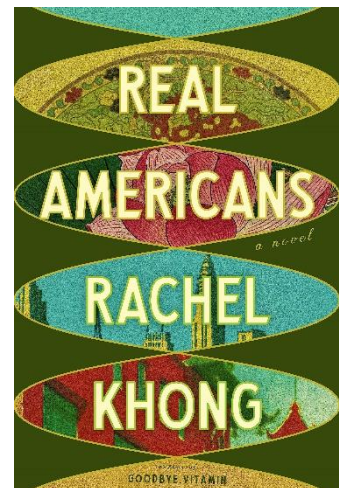
ADDITIONAL READING



James by Percival Everett



The Familiar by Leigh Bardugo



Real Americans by Rachel Khong