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James McBride

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The Color of Water

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

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 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 10—School

29. During his days in school, James looked to music and books as escapes from the “painful reality” of racial hatred that surrounded him.

Reality may be painful to different people for a variety of reasons— people endure sickness, persecution, divorce, poverty, loneliness, and many other hardships. Like McBride, many people have a place of escape, whether it be a physical place, or a state of mind.

Write a journal entry about a place where you go, or something you do or think about that helps you to escape from reality when you are faced with troubles.

30. Another way the young McBride copes with the stresses of life is by inventing an imaginary friend. He not only talks to this friend, but he also fights with him in the mirror.

When you were a child, you might have had an imaginary friend like McBride’s. Describe an imaginary friend from your childhood, or invent one. Write a complete description of your friend, including his or her name and personality. What did you do with your friend, and how did having this friend help you cope with reality?

31. McBride’s schoolmates stereotype him by assuming that all black people can dance. He declares that he cannot dance, but defuses the situation by putting on a James Brown imitation that makes the children laugh and applaud. Although he enjoys the attention and short-lived acceptance this gains him, the prejudiced beliefs of his fellow students still hurt James.
- A. As this chapter demonstrates, stereotyping people leads to inaccurate ideas, conflicts, and hurt feelings. Imagine that you are a student in James’s school. Write a letter to the school newspaper about the harmful effects of stereotypes.
- B. Imagine that you are in James’s place during this scene. How would you have reacted? Rewrite the scene, putting yourself in James’s place.

Chapter 16—Driving

45. In Chapter 16, McBride gives a humorous account of his mother's driving. The situation is ironic because Rachel had driven in her youth, but now seems as if she had never driven before. When her poor driving nearly injures her children, Rachel finally decides to ride a bicycle for transportation.
- A. Have you had a similar experience either learning to drive or observing someone else's poor driving? In a phrase poem, compose 8-10 lines that tell about your driving experience.
 - B. Rewrite this account of Mrs. McBride's driving as a scene in a play. You may use creative license to alter details in adapting the story for the stage.
46. When James visits his sister Jack, she challenges him with the statement, "You have to choose between what the world expects of you and what you want for yourself." This comment makes James think long and hard about the direction his life is taking.

Applying Jack's challenge to your own life, think about "what you want for yourself." Make a list of three short-term and three long-term goals. Then, choose the most important goal, and write out a one-paragraph plan for achieving it.

47. In addition to losing her second husband, Rachel also lost her best friend around the same time. The author notes how difficult these two losses were for his mother, and how she "wobbled," but "did not fall." After the death of her best friend, Rachel tells her children, "You only have one or two good friends in life."

Compose an e-mail in which you tell one of your best friends how much he or she means to you. Explain in the email why you chose this friend, and why he or she stands out from the rest.