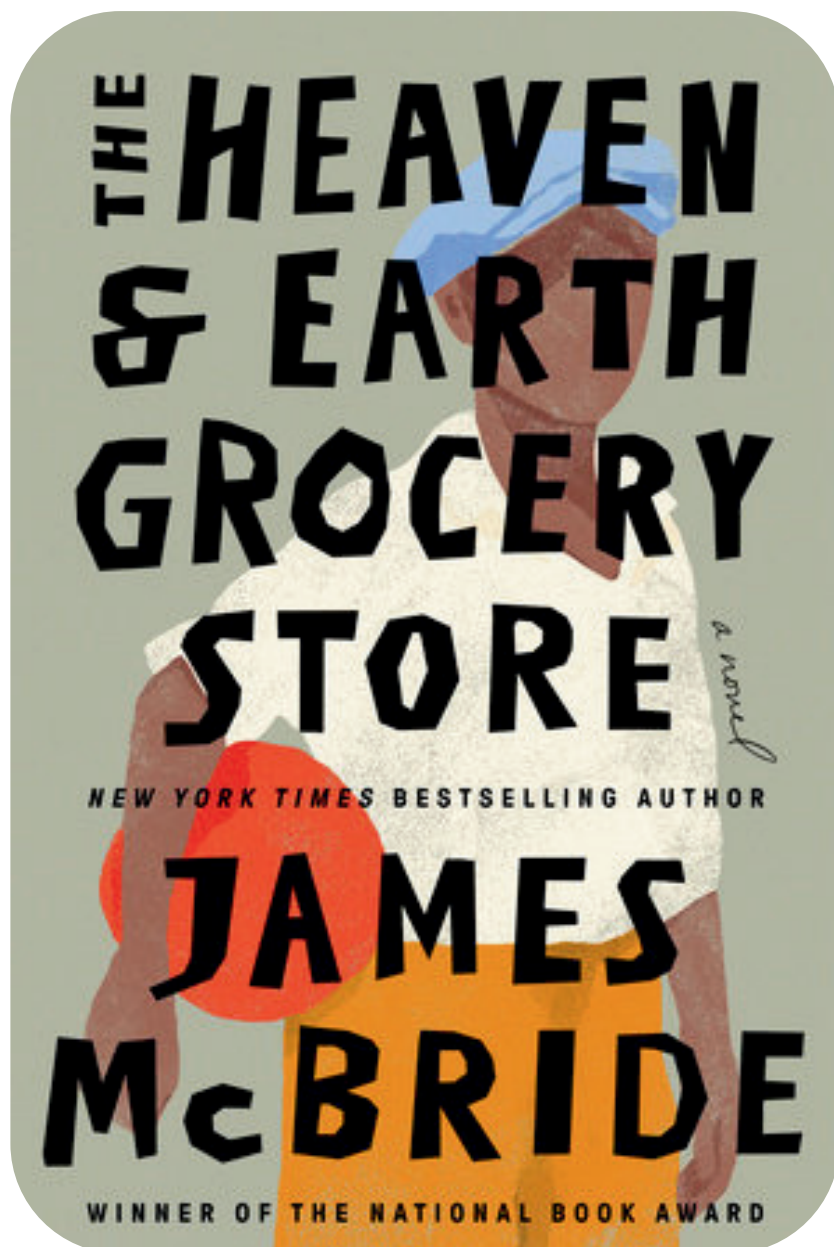


# THE HEAVEN & EARTH GROCERY STORE BY JAMES MCBRIDE

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## SYNOPSIS

In 1972, when workers in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, were digging the foundations for a new development, the last thing they expected to find was a skeleton at the bottom of a well. Who the skeleton was and how it got there were two of the long-held secrets kept by the residents of Chicken Hill, the dilapidated neighborhood where immigrant Jews and African Americans lived side by side and shared ambitions and sorrows. Chicken Hill was where Moshe and Chona Ludlow lived when Moshe integrated his theater and where Chona ran the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store. When the state came looking for a deaf boy to institutionalize him, it was Chona and Nate Timblin, the Black janitor at Moshe's theater and the unofficial leader of the Black community on Chicken Hill, who worked together to keep the boy safe.

As these characters' stories overlap and deepen, it becomes clear how much the people who live on the margins of white, Christian America struggle and what they must do to survive. When the truth is finally revealed about what happened on Chicken Hill and the part the town's white establishment played in it, McBride shows us that even in dark times, it is love and community—heaven and earth—that sustain us.

## PRAISE

“Delightful and absorbing...Zevin burns precisely zero calories arguing that game designers are creative artists of the highest order. Instead, she accepts that as a given, and wisely so, for the best of them plainly are...Expansive and entertaining...Dozens of Literary Gamers will cherish the world she's lovingly conjured. Meanwhile, everyone else will wonder what took them so long to recognize in video games the beauty and drama and pain of human creation.”

—Tom Bissell, *The New York Times*

“A tour de force... A moving demonstration of the blended power of fiction and gaming...Zevin describes herself as ‘a lifelong gamer.’ That level of experience could very well have produced a story of hermetically sealed nostalgia impenetrable to anyone who doesn't still own a copy of ‘Space Invaders.’ But instead, she's written a novel that draws any curious reader into the pioneering days of a vast entertainment industry too often scorned by bookworms. And with the depth and sensitivity of a fine fiction writer, she argues for the abiding appeal of the flickering screen.”

—Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

“Whatever its subject, when a novel is powerful enough, it transports us readers deep into worlds not our own. That's true of *Moby Dick*, and it's certainly true of *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*, which renders the process of designing a great video game as enthralling as the pursuit of that great white whale....There are...smart ruminations here about cultural appropriation, given that the game, *Ichigo*, is inspired by Japanese artist Hokusai's famous painting *The Great Wave at Kanagawa*....It's a big, beautifully written novel about an underexplored topic, that succeeds in being both serious art and immersive entertainment.”

—Maureen Corrigan, *NPR's Fresh Air*

“Engrossing...Though it contains plenty of nostalgia for the pioneer age of 1990s game design, this isn't primarily a novel of nerdy insider references....Videogames happen to be the medium by which [Zevin's characters] best express themselves and share in each other's life.”

—Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal*

## AUTHOR BIO | JAMES MCBRIDE



PHOTO: © CHIA MESSINA

James McBride is an accomplished musician and author of the National Book Award-winning *The Good Lord Bird*, the #1 bestselling American classic *The Color of Water*, and the bestsellers *Song Yet Sung* and *Miracle at St. Anna*. He is also the author of *Kill 'Em and Leave*, a James Brown biography. A recipient of the National Humanities Medal in 2016, McBride is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University.

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**Learn more about James McBride at [jamesmcbride.com](http://jamesmcbride.com) and in select interviews:**

[James McBride: Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction](#)

[James McBride on music, writing and 'The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store'](#)

[James McBride discusses the themes in his new novel, 'The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store'](#)

[James McBride on 'The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store' \(Get Lit\)](#)

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BOOK CLUB IN A BAG: THE HEAVEN & EARTH  
GROCERY STORE

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*, James McBride takes readers into the lives of the people who live on Chicken Hill, a neighborhood of “ramshackle houses and dirt roads where the town’s Blacks, Jews, and immigrant whites who couldn’t afford any better lived.” As you read about Chicken Hill, how did you envision it? Did its description prompt memories of places that you’ve lived or recall from your past?
2. *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* is owned by Moshe Ludlow and his wife, Chona, who runs it, and it’s the center of neighborhood life. Are there places like that from your own life or in your past? How are they similar to (or different from) the Heaven & Earth?
3. Moshe desegregated the local theater by booking Black entertainers for Black audiences, and McBride writes in detail about the famous acts that played there. How courageous do you think Moshe had to be to do this? Have you ever tried to change the traditions of a place or an organization?
4. Nate and Addie Timblin work for the Ludlows: Nate at the theater, Addie at the store. What similarities do you see between their relationship and that of Moshe and Chona? Do you see differences? What do you think the four have in common?
5. Dodo is a deaf boy from Chicken Hill who needs help—assistance that Nate and Chona provide. Why do you think those two were the ones who stepped in to help Dodo? Do you think they should have done anything differently? What do you think that Moshe and Addie could have done to keep Dodo safe? Or do you think his discovery was inevitable?
6. Doc Roberts is a local physician who was instrumental in sending Dodo to the Pennhurst sanatorium. He also had a complicated relationship with Chona. What about him do you think was most objectionable? Why do you think he was able to succeed for so long without being discovered?
7. Monkey Pants is the only inmate at Pennhurst who befriends Dodo, and the two strike up an unlikely friendship—one that is literally a lifesaver. Have there been people in your life who’ve stepped in to help you when you needed it?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

8. Son of Man is the sadistic attendant on Ward C-1 at Pennhurst. What similarities to (or differences from) Doc Roberts did you see in him? Are they both evil in the same way?

9. The escape the characters engineered to extract Dodo from Pennhurst was possible thanks to the relationships they had with others in their community. How important do you think community was in these characters' lives?

10. At the end of novel you learn how the skeleton in the first chapter got in the well. Do you think the person whose skeleton it was got what he deserved? Do you think other characters in the novel did?

## READ-A-LIKES

Did you enjoy *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*? Would you like to read similar titles or authors?

Check out these recommendations below.

- [Cloud Cuckoo Land](#) by Anthony Doerr
- [The Interestings](#) by Meg Wolitzer
- [Then We Came to the End](#) by Joshua Ferris
- [Fates and Furies](#) by Lauren Groff
- [The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay](#) by Michael Chabon
- [Interior Chinatown](#) by Charles Yu
- [Trust Exercise](#) by Susan Choi
- [The Nix](#) by Nathan Hill
- [No One Is Talking About This](#) by Patricia Lockwood
- [Sea of Tranquility](#) by Emily St. John Mandel
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