OVERVIEW

This memoir, which became a New York Times bestseller, describes the vibrant, inspiring, and incredibly moving tribute by the author to his mother. As a young boy growing up, James McBride always questioned his mother about who she was, where she came from, and why she was white. His mother always dismissed his questions, but finally she opened up and told him her story. Ruth Jordan was born Ruchel Dwarja Zylska on April 1, 1921 in Poland to Orthodox Jews. They later immigrated to America and her father became a traveling preacher, Rabbi Fishel Shilsky.

Old Man Shilsky was abusive towards his wife and children, depriving them of love and affection. He owned a store in a small town, hating gentiles and blacks. He instilled fear into his family. Ruth finally left to move in with relatives in New York City. There she met and fell in love with Andrew Dennis McBride. He introduced her to Metropolitan Church in Harlem, where she became a Christian after her mother’s death. Ruth Jordan’s life is a testimony of her struggles with low self-esteem; her identity as Christian convert from Judaism; and racism, biases, discrimination that she faced when she married Dennis in the mid 1940s. She had eight children with Dennis before his death.

Chapter 23 is the most poignant and touching part of the book. The chapter is labeled "Dennis," and in it she describes her feelings towards the man she loved, the man who taught her about life and opened her worlds in ways that she could never imagine. She says in her own words, "'What a man he was. I loved him. He was the kindest man I’ve ever known...He came from a home where kindness was a way of life. I wanted to be in this kind of family. I was proud to join it, and they were happy to have me.' " (p. 236)

Dennis and Ruth lived together before they got married; yet after she joined the church, she decided that they needed to get married. They moved to the Red Hook Housing projects in New York and started a church. Unfortunately, Dennis became ill and died in the hospital. She told
herself, "‘Lord, he won’t die, will he? He’s my husband. He’s my dream. He won’t die now, will he, Lord?’ I had no idea what to do. It just seemed like it wasn’t going to happen. I went home and prayed to the Lord not to take my husband. And then a few days later, he died. Lord...he just died." (p. 243)

An inner strength helped Ruth provide for her family and cope with her loss. Friends and family helped her, but she and her family still struggled. Out of desperation, she turned to her Jewish family. She located her Aunt Betts on the East Side of Manhattan. The door was slammed shut in her face when she asked for help. She contacted her sister Gladys, who was living in Queens. Gladys asked her to call back the next day, but when Ruth called again, Gladys’ husband hung up the phone on her.

Ruth Jordan eventually remarried and had four more children. Life did not get any easier for her or her kids, as her second husband also passed away. She was left to take care of twelve children. She stressed education and religion as a way to have a secure and healthy future. As her children were reaching adolescence, they all struggled with their identity. Yet, Ruth was a protective mother who did not divulge her past to her children or to anyone else.

Issues of religion, race, and socioeconomic status are all interwoven in this memoir. Yet it’s not those issues that are central to the story. In Chapter 23, she talks about interracial dating and marriage and laughs at those couples who appear on talk shows talking about Jungle Fever, complaining about their suffering. She states, "‘See, a marriage needs love. And God. And a little money. That’s all. The rest you can deal with. It’s not about black or white. It’s about God, and don’t let anyone tell you different. All this jungle fever! Shoot! The Jungle fever goes away, honey, and then what are you gonna do?’" (p. 233) She lived an incredible life, daring what few women did during the 1940s and 1950s. She was disowned by her family; they sat shivah for her and thought of her as dead. She married a African American man who became a pastor. She had twelve biracial children, and all twelve of them went to college and higher education. That’s amazing. Her children married and have children of their own.

Mommy’s children are extraordinary people, most of them leaders in their own right. All of them have toted more mental baggage and
dealt with more hardship than they care to remember, yet they carry themselves with a giant measure of dignity, humility, and humor. Like any family, we have problems, but we have always been close. Through marriage, adoptions, love-ins, live-ins, and shack-ups, the original dozen has expanded into dozens and dozens more—wives, husbands, children, grandchildren, cousins, nieces, nephews—ranging from dark-skinned to light-skinned; from black kinky hair to blond hair and blue eyes. In running from her past, Mommy has created her own naition, a rainbow coalition that descends on her house every Christmas and Thanksgiving and sleeps everywhere—on the floor, on rugs in shifts; sleeping double, triple to a bed, ‘two up, three down,’ just like old times. (p. 277)

Ruth Jordan is an extraordinary woman. She graduated in 1986 with a degree in social work from Temple University in Philadelphia. She travels regularly and works at the Jerusalem Church in Trenton, New Jersey; works as a volunteer with the Philadelphia Emergency Center; and runs a reading club in Ewing, New Jersey.

Though the Jordans’ suffering, hardships, pains, struggles, and toils, they have succeeded in life learning that the most important thing is to love and to be loved.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What would you do in the 1940s if you were a white woman who fell in love with a black man? Would you give up your religious identity, family, and friends to marry him?
- How would you deal personally with raising twelve biracial children during the 1960s in a single-parent, single-income home? Would you accept welfare? (Ruth Jordan did not.) How would you deal with the issues raised by Malcolm X?
- Ruth Jordan rarely discussed the issue of race, identity, and her past with her children and yet her past was still part of who she was. Would you keep a secret from your own children? Ruth Jordan grew up in an abusive situation—would you share that with your children?
- James McBride went down and interviewed the community in which his maternal grandfather grew up. He asked questions about who he was, where he came from, and what his grandparents were really
like. The news that Ruth Jordan left and married an African American man rocked their small community. If you were one of Ruth’s children, would you do the same?

• The author and his siblings wrestled with their identity throughout their lives. If you were married to someone outside of your own racial and ethnic background, how would you educate your child to the hostilities brought on by society? How would you prepare him or her to live within a society which tends to categorize people into single races?

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