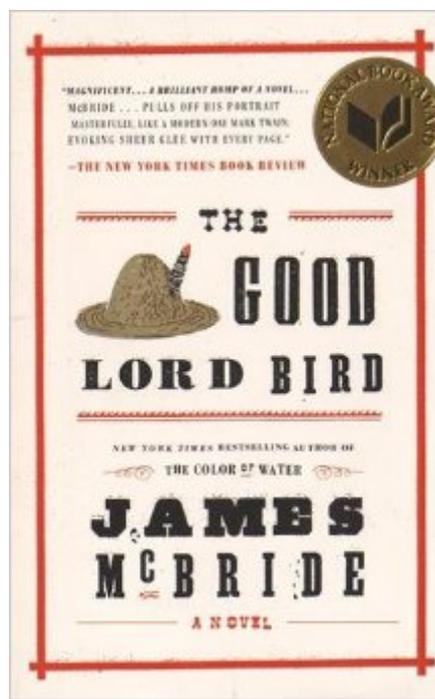


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The Good Lord Bird



Synopsis

Winner of the 2013 National Book Award for Fiction Soon to be a major motion picture starring Liev Schreiber and Jaden Smith A Washington Post, Publishers Weekly, Oprah Magazine Top 10 Book of the Year • A magnificent new novel by the best-selling author James McBride. • “cover review of The New York Times Book Review • “Outrageously entertaining.” • “USA Today • “James McBride delivers another tour de force” • “Essence • “So imaginative, you’ll race to the finish.” • “NPR.org • “Wildly entertaining.” • “4-star People lead review “A boisterous, highly entertaining, altogether original novel.” • “ Washington Post • From the bestselling author of The Color of Water, Song Yet Sung, and Kill ’Em and Leave, a James Brown biography, comes the story of a young boy born a slave who joins John Brown’s antislavery crusade—and who must pass as a girl to survive. Henry Shackleford is a young slave living in the Kansas Territory in 1857, when the region is a battleground between anti- and pro-slavery forces. When John Brown, the legendary abolitionist, arrives in the area, an argument between Brown and Henry’s master quickly turns violent. Henry is forced to leave town—with Brown, who believes he’s a girl. Over the ensuing months, Henry—whom Brown nicknames Little Onion—conceals his true identity as he struggles to stay alive. Eventually Little Onion finds himself with Brown at the historic raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859—one of the great catalysts for the Civil War. An absorbing mixture of history and imagination, and told with McBride’s meticulous eye for detail and character, The Good Lord Bird is both a rousing adventure and a moving exploration of identity and survival.

Book Information

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: Riverhead Books; Reprint edition (August 5, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1594632782

ISBN-13: 978-1594632785

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars • See all reviews • (873 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #28,328 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #54 in Books > Literature & Fiction > African American > Historical #3046 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical #3084 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Literary

Customer Reviews

I sometimes have qualms about reading a new book from an author who has really impressed me with an earlier work. So it was with James McBride who wrote one of my all time favorites, SONG YET SUNG, a novel that resonates deep within me to this day. When I saw his new book, THE GOOD LORD BIRD, being offered on Vine for review, my anxiety returned because I've been disappointed so many times by authors who have failed to live up to their earlier promise. I'm happy to say that Mr. McBride presents a book that reaffirms his mastery of historical fiction. BIRD is the story of a young black boy, Henry Shackelford, snatched up by abolitionist John Brown and taken away from his family after the youngster's father is killed in a scuffle. Mistaken for a girl by the crusty old man, Henrietta became his name, although Little Onion was Brown's pet name for him. What follows is Onion's account of Brown's rabid attempt to free all the slaves and Onion's adventures disguised as a girl. John Brown was a fanatical lunatic beset with God's direction. No one could sway him from his mission, control his madness, or change the way he went through life as an unkempt and disagreeable person. Onion was the exception and, although hunger, cold, and violence plagued the boy through most of his time with Brown, he remained loyal and closely bound to the demented old man for years. McBride has amazing ability to flesh out his characters through dialogue and verbal depictions. This entire book is written in the dialect of the 1850s, using colloquialisms and expressions of the period and place. It's a joy to read because of the endless asides that either amuse or anger the protagonists, depending on their frame of mind. The language flows easily through the book, transporting the reader to a time where intellect flowed from the land and undercurrent of poverty that existed. Dusty beards, smelly clothes, and threadbare boots were the byproducts of the time. Frigid cabins, miserable conditions, and wet travel through the wilderness were more common than comfortable surroundings. McBride immerses the reader in these environs through impeccable writing, neither belaboring nor offending the reader. John Brown's mission to free the slaves is the plot. McBride introduces us to historic figures that played important roles in Brown's life. We meet Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman in detailed studies. We experience the slaves' discomfort and uncertainty with their lives and their struggle to gain respectability. We hear the hateful and discordant voices of pro-slavery advocates mixed with the clarion calls for freedom by the abolitionists. We feel the violence of their struggles as they assert their rabid points of view. McBride does that for us with his remarkable insight and skill with words. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. You must read it, as well as McBride's other works. Schuyler T Wallace Author of TIN LIZARD TALES

That McBride was able to keep his characterization and stylistic integrity focused through over four

hundred pages of first-person narrative in a linguistic mode authentic for a slave child in pre-Civil War times testifies to this literary masterpiece. Because of that linguistic authenticity, though, some readers might find this story difficult to deal with. I would caution that those who are likely to be distressed by repeated use of terminology that modern usage has come to consider vulgar, crude and racist would need to shelve their squeamishness in order to fully enjoy the extraordinary power and fascination of this narrative. On the other hand, those who are willing to accept the validity of McBride's setting will find the descriptions of John Brown's character and the "inspired irrationality" of his abolitionist crusade full of nuance and depth. The narrator character, the boy (cast by Brown as a girl) Henry (Henrietta) Shackelford - called Onion - speaks with complete authenticity and amazing insight. The various sons (and one daughter) of John Brown who appear in the story are portrayed with extraordinary intensity given the relatively minor parts they play. The Negro characters, both slave and free, are represented with similarly sharp delineation; in the case of Frederick Douglass, with more than slightly unflattering perspective. The plot is complex, and at times I felt that the time-line got somewhat confused. For those like me who are not fully conversant with the history of John Brown's exploits, I think at least a brief recap of dates, perhaps at the beginning of each part or at least as a summary at the end, might have lessened that confusion somewhat. However, I did not let this really distract me from my own intense involvement with and enjoyment of the story. Though it was not really "fast moving" in all parts, there was plenty of action and suspense. McBride has definitely produced a masterpiece, I believe.

I was disappointed that this book was so slow to take off. Given the marvelous reviews, I expected to get wrapped up in the story but after 88 pages, I was still having difficulty staying focused. I wanted to like it. I didn't altogether love the main character, Onion, and perhaps that is because she/he was a flawed individual, as most of us are. However, I did manage to finish the story and learn quite a bit about John Brown. Yes, the story was funny at times but overall, it was tough to read. While I acknowledge the clever use of folksy dialogue to illustrate the narrator, Onion, it created a tedious tale. I was a bit surprised at the negative portrayal of Douglass, and wondered why McBride felt the need to go there with such a revered figure in history. I'm glad to have finished the book but can't honestly say that I would recommend it to anyone else.

The author's apparent intention is to provide readers with a fictional, fleshed-out version of the John Brown which we encountered in high school history classes. Unfortunately, the picture created by Mr. McBride is of a superhero-ish stick figure rather than a believable human being. Mr. Brown is

portrayed as a callous killer who believes he is doing the Lord's work; his bullets never miss, and the bullets of his numerous enemies can't hit him; he needs little or no food or sleep, is repeatedly described as debilitated, but is almost supernaturally strong and quick. As he wanders the pre-Civil War landscape he encounters a number of historical figures (including Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas) who also are presented by Mr. McBride as one-dimensional (Tubman as mythic, Douglas as buffoon), Even the bit players tend to be cartoons, vested with extreme characteristics - exceptionally large and dumb; exceptionally small and wise. I didn't care for the book, and it's only saving grace is that it increased my interest in the time and place of the events portrayed.

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