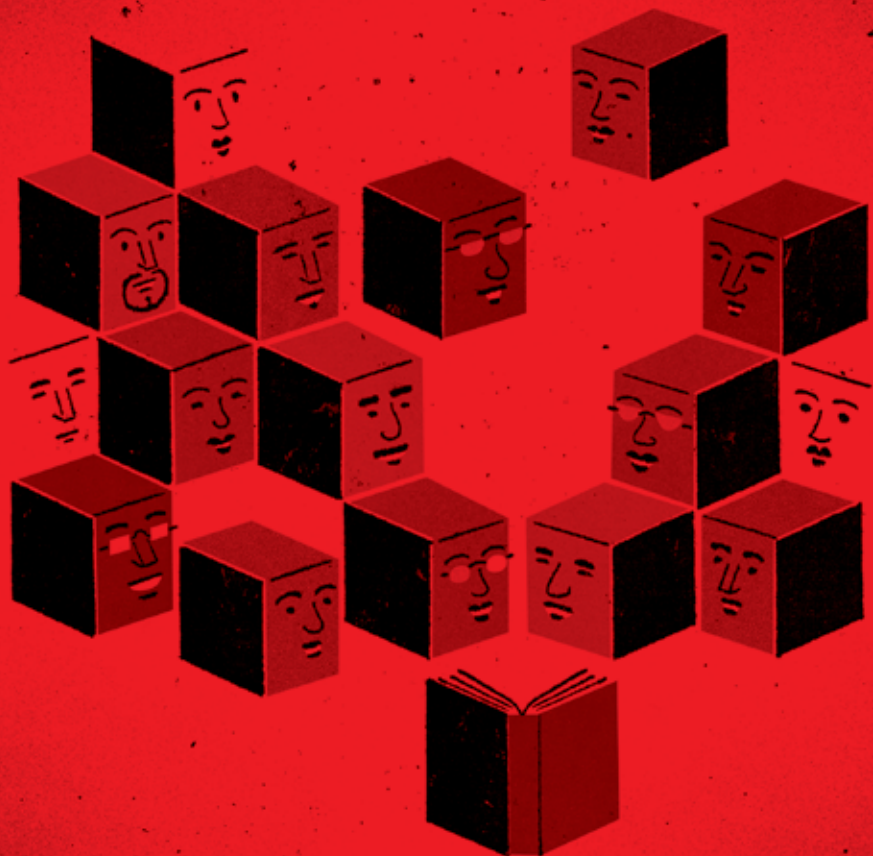


ONE MARYLAND ONE BOOK 2009



SONG YET SONG

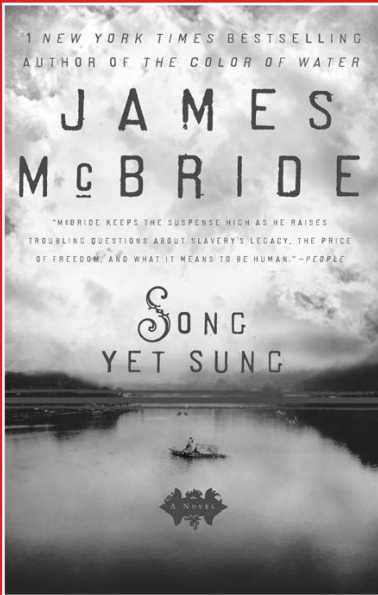
by James McBride

READERS' GUIDE

IMAGINE IF EVERYONE IN MARYLAND READ THE SAME BOOK AT THE SAME TIME. WHAT NEW THINGS WOULD WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT WITH EACH OTHER?

One Maryland One Book, a program of the Maryland Center for the Book at the Maryland Humanities Council, is Maryland's first and only statewide community reading project. It is designed to bring together diverse people in communities across the state through the shared experience of reading the same book and participating in book-centered discussions and other related programs at public libraries, high schools, colleges and universities, museums, bookstores, and other organizations.

The 2009 book selection is *Song Yet Sung* by James McBride. Set on Maryland's Eastern Shore in the 1850s, *Song Yet Sung* weaves an intricate and gripping tale of escaped slaves, free blacks, and slave catchers. It was selected to offer Marylanders the opportunity to discuss topics such as race, identity, the intricacy of relationships, and Maryland history. The Maryland Humanities Council has at the core of its mission a deep commitment to providing Marylanders with an opportunity to gather and discuss issues important to their lives, believing that a great work of literature provides an excellent springboard to do so.



GET THE BOOK

Pick up a copy of *Song Yet Sung* at your local public library or bookstore and start up a conversation with your family, friends, co-workers, or even the person sitting next to you as you ride the bus or train. This is your chance to take a moment and have a meaningful conversation with an old friend or make a new one.

JOIN IN

We invite you to join Honorary Chair, Maryland's First Lady Katie O'Malley, and thousands of other Marylanders at one of the many book discussions and related programs happening around the state in September and October. Look for James McBride at the Baltimore Book Festival at noon on Sunday, September 27, and other venues around the state in late October.

Song Yet Sung by James McBride
26 chapters; 362 pages (excluding the Author's Note)
Classified Adult literature
Riverhead Trade Paperbacks 2009 ed.
ISBN 978-1-59448-350-9

To find One Maryland One Book programs in your area, go to www.onemarylandonebook.org and click on the calendar.

**LETTER FROM THE HONORARY CHAIRPERSON
FIRST LADY KATIE O'MALLEY**



Greetings,

On behalf of the State of Maryland, I am delighted to invite you to participate in One Maryland One Book, our state's community reading project. Last year's inaugural One Maryland One Book programs took place in 22 of 24 jurisdictions across Maryland and drew over 6,000 participants. We are looking toward greater success this year, having confirmed community partners in every Maryland district. This is a great project that offers an opportunity for residents around the state to connect through the shared experience of reading the same book, and then opening new dialogues with one another.

This year's selection is *Song Yet Sung* by James McBride, the award-winning author of *The Color of Water*. Set on the Eastern Shore in the 1850s, *Song Yet Sung* is a fictional story of slavery and freedom in antebellum Maryland. Mr. McBride spent countless hours on the Shore, learning about its history and people. The story reveals interesting characters whose lives provide a springboard for discussing our identity, our relationships, and our families today.

A program of the Maryland Humanities Council, One Maryland One Book is only possible due to the generosity of our community partners and sponsors, whom we thank for their enthusiastic support. I encourage you to take this opportunity to make a little time for reading and conversation in your life, and hope that you will join me and thousands of Marylanders by going to your local public library or bookstore to get a copy of *Song Yet Sung*.

Thank you for being a part of this special project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Katie O'Malley". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Katie O'Malley
First Lady of Maryland



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



James McBride is an author, musician and screenwriter. His landmark memoir, *The Color of Water*, is considered an American classic and is read in schools and universities across the United States. His debut novel, *Miracle at St. Anna*, was made into a major motion picture directed by Spike Lee. It was released by Disney/Touchstone in September 2008. McBride also wrote the script for the film, now available on DVD. His newest novel, *Song Yet Sung*, was released in paperback in January 2009.

McBride is also a saxophonist who tours with his six piece jazz/R&B band. He served as a sideman with jazz legend Jimmy Scott, among others. He has written songs (music and lyrics) for Anita Baker, Grover Washington, Jr., Purafe, Gary Burton, and even for the PBS television character “Barney.” (He did not write the “I Love You” song for Barney but wishes he did.)

He is a former staff writer for *The Boston Globe*, *People Magazine* and *The Washington Post*. His work has appeared in *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New York Times*. His April 2007 *National Geographic* story entitled “Hip Hop Planet” is considered a respected treatise on African American music and culture. He has been featured on national radio and television programs in America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

McBride is a native New Yorker and a graduate of New York City public schools. He studied composition at The Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio and received his Masters in Journalism from Columbia University in New York at age 22. He holds several honorary doctorates and is currently a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University. He is married with three children.

ABOUT THE BOOK

In the days before the Civil War, a group of slaves breaks free in the labyrinthine swamps of Maryland’s Eastern Shore, setting loose a drama of violence and hope among slave catchers, plantation owners, watermen, runaway slaves, and free blacks. Among them is Liz Spocott, a runaway slave, near death, wracked by disturbing visions of the future, and armed with “the Code,” a fiercely guarded cryptic means of communication for slaves on the run. As she makes her desperate flight among the denizens of the swampy marsh lands, Liz’s extraordinary dreams of tomorrow create a freedom-seeking furor among the once complacent slave community. It is one that will thrust them all into a world of haunting choices and inexorably closer to a mysterious, redemptive, and unexpected fate.¹

¹from the back cover

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 At the beginning of the book we learn that Liz is a runaway slave. Throughout the book she talks about freedom but refuses all attempts from others to assist her in making her way to freedom. After running away, what changed and why do you think Liz decided not to seek freedom in the North?
- 2 Throughout the story, intricate relationships are revealed between blacks/whites, free/enslaved, watermen/townfolk, etc. What do these relationships reveal about that period in history? Are relationships between various races today more complicated? Less? The same? Why?
- 3 How would you describe the Woolman? Why is he such a mystery? What do you believe is his role in this story?
- 4 Amber believes that “Some [people] is up to the job of being decent, and some ain’t.” What do you think of this assessment? Is decency an inherent trait, or is it a conscious choice? Which character do you feel exhibits this inherent decency? Which doesn’t?
- 5 Although he is a notorious slave catcher, Denwood Long (the Gimp) commands a degree of respect even from those he has caught. But he himself claims, “I’m going to hell in spite of redemption.” What does the Gimp mean and in what ways is he a slave to his own personal history?
- 6 If you were enslaved in the antebellum United States, would you try to escape? Why or why not? What are the dangers of escaping? Of staying?
- 7 Why did Liz kill the Woolman? Do you think she had any thought of saving the Gimp? If so, why?
- 8 Consider the ending of the novel—the violent deaths and Liz’s precarious future. At the same time, Amber is free, Miss Kathleen’s future is secure, and Woolman’s son offers a link to the far-off-coming of the “song yet sung.” Overall, did this novel leave you with a sense of hope? Did it provide you with any new insights on human nature? On America?
- 9 If you were the Dreamer, what would you predict America’s future race relations would be in another 100 years based on what is happening today?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We hope that your participation in One Maryland One Book inspires you to keep reading, talking, and delving into the many thought-provoking topics revealed in *Song Yet Sung*. The following are other books and movies that might be of interest. We encourage you to continue your exploration!

NONFICTION

Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America

Fergus M. Bordewich

A multi-dimensional history using contemporary scholarship, *Bound for Canaan* focuses on the founders and heroes of the Underground Railroad.

Fleeing for Freedom: Stories of the Underground Railroad as Told by Levi Coffin and William Still

Edited by George and Willene Hendrick

Levi Coffin was a Quaker, an abolitionist, and a conductor on the Underground Railroad. William Still was an African American, an abolitionist, and the child of slaves. Their narratives provide first-hand accounts of how the Underground Railroad really functioned.

The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics

James Oakes

This is a major history of Civil War America through the lens of its two towering figures: Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass.

Enslaved: True Stories of Modern Day Slavery

Jesse Sage and Liora Kasten

Enslaved is a groundbreaking collection of first-hand accounts of twenty-first century enslavement around the world as told by seven former slaves and one slaveholder.

Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs and the Chesapeake Bay

William Warner

The Pulitzer Prize-winning story of the Chesapeake blue crab and the watermen who struggle to earn a living on the Bay.

A Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South

Steven Weisenburger

On a frigid Sunday night in January 1856, a 22-year-old Kentucky slave named Margaret Garner gathered up her family and raced north, towards freedom. When capture was at hand, Margaret turned on her children with a knife rather than see them returned to a life of slavery, leading to the most notorious fugitive slave trial in history. Margaret's story served as the inspiration for Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech

Shane White and Graham White

A truly original work, Shane and Graham White provide an opportunity to understand slavery in a different context—through music. The accompanying CD includes field hollers, work songs, spirituals, and sermons.

FICTION

Kindred

Octavia Butler

A young woman from the twentieth century is repeatedly summoned back in time to antebellum Maryland to aid her slave-owning ancestor each time his life is in danger.

The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride: A Rediscovered African American Novel

Julia C. Collins

Focusing on the lives of a beautiful mixed-race mother and daughter whose opportunities for fulfillment through love and marriage are threatened by slavery and caste prejudice, this was the first novel published by an African American woman. In 1865 it appeared as a serial in *The Christian Recorder*, the national newspaper of the AME Church.

The Wake of the Wind

J. California Cooper

This lyrical, moving family saga spans more than a century and focuses on the descendants of Kola and Suwaibu, best friends who were captured by slavers and transported to America.

The Bondwoman's Narrative

Hannah Crafts and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Purportedly one of the earliest novels written by an African American woman, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was unpublished for 150 years until its rediscovery by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. It tells the story of Hannah Crafts, a young slave working on a wealthy North Carolina plantation, who runs away in a bid for freedom.

Sweet smoke

David Fuller

Cassius is a secretly literate slave who is desperately looking for the killer of his mother-figure, Emoline Justice, a free black woman.

Someone Knows My Name

Lawrence Hill

Hill spins the tale of Aminata, who was abducted from Africa only to be bound by slavery in America. Over the course of 60 years she fought for freedom and her home.

Chesapeake: A Novel

James A. Michener

Chesapeake is the 400-year saga of America's great bay and its Eastern Shore. Following Edmund Steed and his family, this novel takes readers from the unspoiled world of the Native Americans to the voyages of Captain John Smith, the Revolutionary War, and right up to modern times.

A Mercy

Toni Morrison

A slave living at a plantation in Maryland offers up her daughter, Florens, to a relatively humane Northern farmer, Jacob, as debt payment from their owner. The ripples of this choice spread to the inhabitants of Jacob's farm.

MARYLAND STORIES

Free to Stay: The True Story of Eliza Benson and the Family She Stood by for Three Generations

Nan Hayden Agle

Free to Stay is a moving biography that tells the story of lifelong friendship, devotion, and loyalty. Eliza Benson, a young slave from St. Michaels, Maryland, was given to Braddie Harrison Spencer as a child and stayed with the family her entire life.

Voices of the Chesapeake Bay

Michael Buckley

Taken from what began as a radio program, these stories offer diverse perspectives of the Chesapeake Bay area and Eastern Shore as told by local celebrities, public figures, and elected officials.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass

The biography chronicles Douglass' journey from slave to statesman.

An Island Out of Time: A Memoir of Smith Island in the Chesapeake

Tom Horton

Smith Island is a marshy archipelago in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. Although it is only nine miles from the mainland, its watermen and their families live much as their ancestors did 300 years ago. Horton offers an intimate portrait of a deeply traditional community that is on the verge of vanishing.

Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero

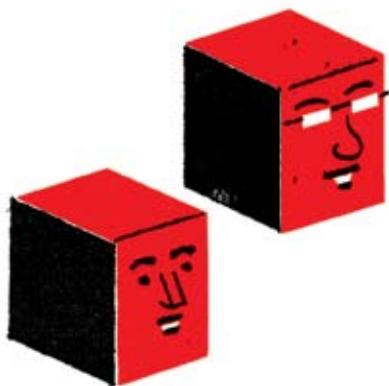
Kate Clifford Larson

Drawn from new documents as well as genealogical research, this biography traces the life of Tubman from her African ancestors to freedom and her work on the Underground Railroad, revealing new details about her accomplishments and personal life.

Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life

Beverly Lowry

A fictionalized biography, this book takes the reader with Tubman on slave-freeing raids into the heart of the South, along the treacherous route of the Underground Railroad, and onto the battlefields of the Civil War.



TEEN READING

Chains

Laurie Halse Anderson

A young orphaned enslaved girl and her sister are relocated to Colonial-era New York City where they must fight for their dignity and eventually their very livelihood while the American Revolution is picking up steam.

The Lord's Oysters

Gilbert Byron

This is a nationally-acclaimed novel that captures with vivid fidelity the life of the Chesapeake watermen and their families in the early twentieth century.

Stealing Freedom

Elisa Carbone

Based on a true story, *Stealing Freedom* shares the life of Anna Maria Weems, who was enslaved in Maryland in the mid 1800s. When her family disappeared, she struck out on her own to try to follow the Underground Railroad to freedom.

Growing Up in Slavery

Sylviane A. Diouf

This well-illustrated, brief volume will give young people a realistic impression of what it was like to grow up as a child under slavery.

Copper Sun

Sharon Draper

Amari is 15 when she is stolen from her village in Africa and sold into sexual slavery in South Carolina. With the help of some friends, she makes a daring plan to escape to the Spanish colony of Florida.

Glory Field

Walter Dean Meyers

This narrative follows 241 years of Lewis family history, from the capture of a 15-year-old in Sierra Leone in the 1750s to a modern-day city-dweller trying to make his own way.



MOVIES

Amistad, 1997

Oscar-nominated movie that weaves the story of mutiny aboard a slave ship traveling from Cuba to America in 1839

Beloved, 1998

Based on the novel by Toni Morrison and set shortly after the Civil War, the story revolves around Sethe, a former slave living outside of Cincinnati who is haunted by visits from her deceased daughter.

Nightjohn, 1996

Sarny, a young enslaved girl, is taught to read by former runaway slave, Nightjohn. By stealing a Bible, Sarny sets in motion a series of events that lead to attempted escapes and Nightjohn's punishment at the hands of the plantation owners.

Race to Freedom: The Underground Railroad, 1994

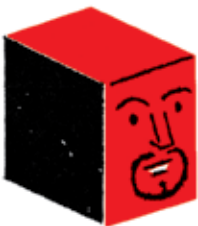
Race to Freedom is the story of the escape of four slaves to Canada through the Underground Railroad via a carefully constructed network of whites and free blacks who risk their lives to shelter, feed, and conceal the slaves in their courageous quest for freedom.

Roots, Television mini-series, 1977

Roots tells the family history of Kunta Kinte from slavery to emancipation.

Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narrative, HBO Films 2003

This documentary features dramatic readings from the Slave Narrative collection of the Works Progress Administration.



The content and resources for this Guide were created and compiled with the assistance of the Maryland State Library Resource Center at the Enoch Pratt Free Library. Portions of this Guide have been reprinted with permission from Penguin Group, Inc.

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