



# The Good Lord Bird Reader's Guide

BY JAMES MCBRIDE

Category: Literary Fiction |  
Historical Fiction

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## READERS GUIDE

### Questions and Topics for Discussion

#### INTRODUCTION

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.

#### ABOUT JAMES MCBRIDE

James McBride is an accomplished musician and author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *The Color of Water*. His second book, *Miracle at St. Anna*, was optioned for film in 2007 by Black Butterfly Productions with noted American filmmaker Spike Lee directing and co-producing. McBride has written for *the Washington Post*, *People*, the *Boston Globe*, *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *New York Times*. He is a graduate of

Oberlin College. He was awarded a master's in journalism from New York's Columbia University at the age of twenty-two. McBride holds several honorary doctorates and is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University. McBride lives in Pennsylvania and New York.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The novel opens with a newspaper article about the discovery of an old document—"a wild slave narrative." Did having this context from the outset adjust your expectations of what would come? Would you have read the novel differently if this article hadn't been included?
- When they first meet, the Old Man misidentifies Henry as a girl, forcing "Little Onion" to disguise himself as a girl for much of the story. How does Little Onion's attitude toward this disguised identity change throughout the novel? How does he use it to his advantage? When does it become a hindrance?
- Discuss the significance of the title. Fred tells Little Onion that a Good Lord Bird is "so pretty that when man sees it, he says, 'Good Lord,'" and that a feather from this bird will "bring you understanding that'll last your whole life." What role do the Good Lord Bird and its feathers play in John Brown's story? In Little Onion's? Why is the title appropriate for the novel?
- In what ways is this a narrative about Onion? In what ways it is a narrative about larger issues? How do these two aspects of the novel interact?
- How familiar were you with John Brown and the events at Harpers Ferry before reading the book? Has the fictional retelling changed your perceptions of John Brown as he relates to American history?
- The novel includes several historical figures—John Brown, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman. Does the blending of actual, historical events and figures with the author's fictional reimagining of them make you rethink history? Explain why or why not.
- Consider the use of dialect in the novel. The narrator, Little Onion, speaks with a very particular dialect; the Old Man, who constantly refers to the Bible, speaks with a different cadence and rhythm entirely. Little Onion says of the Old Man: "He sprinkled most of his conversation with Bible talk, 'thees' and 'thous' and 'takest' and so forth. He mangled the Bible more than any man I ever knowed . . . but with a bigger purpose, 'cause he knowed more words." What roles do speech, dialect, and elocution play in this story?

- The Old Man attaches significance to several unlikely objects; among his collection of “good-luck baubles” are the feather of the Good Lord Bird and the dried-up old onion that Henry eats, earning him his nickname. Why does a man like John Brown accumulate such objects? Why does he call them both “good-luck charms” and “the devil’s work”? Do you own any objects to which you attribute good or bad luck or attach other superstitious beliefs?
  - In the abstract, a funny story about slavery might not seem possible. How does the author bring humor to a subject not typically written about in this tone? Is he successful? What does humor allow us to contemplate about history that we might not have thought otherwise?
  - Since the publication of this book, repeated comparisons have been made to Mark Twain. Do you see this similarity? If so, where? Does James McBride’s writing style remind you of any other authors or books? In what ways is this a “classic” American story, and in what ways does it feel more contemporary or otherwise different?
  - Loyalty is a major theme in the book. Political beliefs are a matter of life and death. Even Little Onion feels conflicted about whether to stick by John Brown’s side or flee from him. Where do the major characters’ loyalties lie, with regard to each other and with regard to the cause of abolition? Are the allegiance lines as cut-and-dried as you might expect?
  - The measures that John Brown and his posse take in *The Good Lord Bird* could be seen today as those of revolutionaries, even terrorists. What would your response to Brown and his actions have been if you had lived during that tumultuous era of American history?
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