

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

A quick note before we get started: This conversation was originally recorded March 4, 2020, prior to James McBride's appearance at the Parma-Snow Branch of the Cuyahoga County Public Library. And exactly one week before COVID began shutting down the country. We edited this episode to reflect the events that have transpired since the original taping.

Karen Long

Hello, I'm Karen Long and you're listening to The Asterisk, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with writer James McBride.

A 2015 National Humanities Medalist, he originally won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 1996 for his first book, and memoir, "The Color of Water." In 2021, the Oberlin College grad won again for his brilliant comic novel, "Deacon King Kong."

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards juror Joyce Carol Oates observed, "Deacon King Kong is sort of a benign variant of 'The Wire.' It is robust and funny, confronting tragedy with an ebullient comic spirit, 'pulling its punches' in unexpected ways that repudiate disaster and resound just right."

McBride's 2013 National Book Award winning novel, "The Good Lord Bird," was released as a seven-part Showtime series in 2020. Welcome, Professor McBride. Welcome.

James McBride

Well, I'm delighted to be here.

Karen Long

I wanted to ask you as we start, about the dedication of "Deacon King Kong," which I lingered over. It's just a few words "For God's people -- all of 'em." 'E-M.' That feels so significant after the dash. Can you talk about it a little?

James McBride

Well, we live in shameful times. One religion is better than the other, and my god is better than your god. I think all of that is shameful. So I didn't write this book for Christians or Jews or Muslims or Hindus or

Buddhists. Just wrote it for god's people -- that's everyone. So I didn't really have an agenda in that way. I mean, why waste time talking about "my dog's bigger than yours"? We're all going to die anyway. I don't waste time with that kind of talk. It's not necessary. It doesn't do much.

Karen Long

I also lingered over the choice to write 'e-m' instead of 't-h-e-m.' It brought for me Jericho Brown's poem "N'em." 'N' apostrophe 'e-m.' Is there something even in the language of your dedication that sits in Red Hook more than it might sit in other places?

James McBride

Life is just simply an event in the great galaxy of time, and you can wrap it up however you like it, at some point it ends. And there's an eternity before this life and eternity after. And this life is just a small...the dash that's in between. So I try to keep it simple and keep it as open to whoever would like to come into the room as possible. That's really what the 'em' is about, the dash 'em.' It's about accessibility to everyone who wants to be heard or seen.

Karen Long

I know you get a lot of questions about music, and I know that you don't listen to music when you write, but the structure of music is in your mind sometimes when you write. Do you read it aloud to see how it hits the ear before you let it go to your editor?

James McBride

No, I don't do that. What I do is I just make sure that it has some sort of melodic integrity in the sense that the melody that's good is really straight and simple and pure. It doesn't mean it's unsophisticated. I mean, you can hear the third violin part in a Beethoven piece, and it'll make perfect sense. It doesn't necessarily need to be complicated. It doesn't have to be a passage full of 16th notes that require training at Oberlin Conservatory, but simplicity is always the easiest and the most basic structural foundation of any art that is successful. In jazz you're using road maps, which involve harmony and specific musical structures. And so when I put together stories with characters, I tend to give them a hollowing out that allows the structural integrity of their characters to sort of line up with what I hope they'll do. And once I do that, then they can start to talk on their own eventually. And then they have their own language and their own power.

Karen Long

So you only took one English class at Oberlin?

James McBride

That's right. Yeah.

Karen Long

Your professor, Tim Taylor, said you had a touch.

James McBride

Yeah. I remember him still. He wasn't even a full time professor there. I think he was filling in or he's an adjunct. He was a young man. He said, "You have a touch for this. You should think about doing it." Of course I didn't pay attention to him. But I did. I mean, I called him later on. When I was a reporter at the Washington Post, I called him, and I thanked him. There were two influential professors there, other than Wendell Logan. Wendell Logan was the one for me as a professor created the jazz form. But Geoffrey Blodgett, also, Geoffrey Blodgett taught history. Really you haven't lived until you heard Geoffrey Blodgett talk about Abraham Lincoln. Geoffrey Blodgett was gifted. He was a gifted teacher. So Oberlin had and still has many gifted teachers. And I'm so glad I went there. It gave me so much.

Karen Long

Well, it gives us some bragging points with you, by proximity.

James McBride

Well, I think Oberlin is great.

Karen Long

Yeah.

James McBride

I think it's a great school. It's great. It's greater now than ever.

Karen Long

Another intersection is Jimmy Scott, who was born here.

James McBride

Yeah. He was from Cleveland. Yeah. I work with Jimmy's Band. Toured with him. Jimmy was great. I spoke at his funeral.

Karen Long

Did you?

James McBride

Yeah. In Harlem. I was late. I was the first one that was supposed to be first. But I was late. So they let this other lady speak. And she spoke so long that Calvin Butts, who was minister at Abyssinian, made her stop talking. And then he said after I said, okay, I just want two or three minutes. But I did speak at Jimmy's funeral. And he was a good person. He was talented. I mean, he was talented. He was extremely talented. Great. One of the great jazz musicians of all time. One of the greatest jazz singers ever.

Karen Long

And I know that close to your heart is the work of Toni Morrison. And we've been thinking a lot about her since she died in August 2019. Some of us have been gathering to reread her. One place you compare her to John Coltrane, another place you compared her to Ella Fitzgerald. Talk about that.

James McBride

Well, Mrs. Morrison, she was one of the great ones of our era. There's no question that the writers for years, for many years will be reading her the way they read Faulkner and Kurt Vonnegut and all the other greats. We just happened to live in the same time when she was walking this Earth. And her work shows that she's still alive. She really brought a vibrancy to literature and to African American life that just didn't exist in literature until she came along. Because she recognized the spiritual power of African American life without the infusion of religion. Religion was a very small part of her work, but she didn't need to call on Jesus Christ every five minutes on every page to make things go. She understood that African Americans are basically very spiritual people. In truth, Americans in general are very spiritual people. We just don't know what spirit to follow. That's our problem. We're very generous and kind and thoughtful people in general. We're just easily led.

Karen Long

When you look at your own writing, do you see Morrison's touch on it from the reading of her?

James McBride

I wish. No, I don't think of it that way. I certainly don't see it. I don't analyze my work and I haven't read a review in 25 years, so I don't know. I'm just not strong enough to read ... because I don't really oftentimes feel like I know exactly what I'm doing. I have sort of a structural idea about how things are supposed to go. But writing is an act of faith, really, as opposed to it being a technical exercise. You can't mention me and Mrs. Morrison -- Toni Morrison -- in the same breath, but I certainly was inspired by her. My guess is she lived in an enormous amount of pain, like many creative people, and dealt with it with extreme competence and extreme humility and without complaint. I don't know that I'm in that kind of pain. Not that you need that kind of pain to write, but you need something to motor that kind of consistent brilliance.

Karen Long

What makes you think she lived in extraordinary pain? I know her son died early.

James McBride

Well, you had a son who died. I think he was a musician. I don't know. I'm just guessing I've never met her. I saw her once. I saw her at the National Book Awards. She gave an award to Maya Angelou, but I never spoke to her. I didn't think it was appropriate to go up and just say, "Hey, guess what? Hey, guess who I am? I'm a writer too." It just didn't seem...

Karen Long

I feel you, she's so regal.

James McBride

Yeah, but I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. She seemed to be from what I gathered, a little bit shy. I make that assumption based on having read her work. I don't think you can troll through that much difficulty without experiencing a little bit of pain of it yourself. I mean, in "Deacon King Kong," for example, there are a lot of painful moments, but most of my painful moments are funny.

Karen Long

I'm sure you had an editor who said, don't think you can be funny unless a hundred people tell you you're funny. It's so hard to write funny.

James McBride

Yeah, it's really hard to write. Well, I write funny good. That's one thing I can do. I can't dwell with the Toni Morrisons. I can't sing that kind of song. I'm just not qualified. But I can write funny because I think that if you can't laugh, what's the point? If you're going to read a book, I can't write a book that is going to make you feel depressed. You want relief when you read a book. You want to feel better.

Karen Long

And so it is the company of characters that you create that provides us some relief. Sportcoat. Everybody has a relative who hits the sauce, right?

James McBride

Yeah, that's right. We all have an uncle like Sportcoat who starts drinking at 20 and he dies at 80, while we're getting out colonoscopies and all this. He's just motoring right along. He's got four lesions and six ulcers and 29 cancerous bulbs on his neck, and he's just walking along getting plowed. And meanwhile, we're going to the doctor and taking Lipitor and all this crap. It doesn't work. He's just making it. Not that Lipitor is bad. Lipitor is wonderful. Thank God for Lipitor. Dominus onus e pluribus unum. I don't want some drug manufacturer getting mad. Lipitor is very good. It works excellent, wonderful. Don't say I said -- ask your doctor because your doctor knows. But my point is sometimes people just stagger through life, and they just do just fine. They pray, they thank God for living, and they just roll right along.

Karen Long

He does all these odd jobs. He doesn't complain. I liked his company. I felt that way about the world you created.

James McBride

Well, I love that world. I loved it in the book, and I love it in real life.

Karen Long

And now we'll pause for a short break.

The Asterisk* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. We'll now return to the conversation.

Karen Long

I want to talk about your mother. Part of the reason I love you is I'm a mother. And you loved your mother. And she is living still as Morrison is living still because of what you managed to write. You said at one point that, "her perspectives helped me as a man, as a writer and as a person."

James McBride

Yeah, sure she did. She helped me enormously. She knew how to fail without complaining. She was a very smart and very wise person who understood what was important.

Karen Long

I love that she went back to school at 65.

James McBride

Yeah. She went to Temple. I had a friend who was at Temple when she was there. And my friend said that when they were having a test, my mother came out and they were standing in the hallway, before she came in the room, my mother said, "Listen, this test is kind of hard. Can you help me?" Yeah. We used to help her with her papers and stuff and she got through. She did a good job. That's all you can expect.

Karen Long

She got to raise those beautiful children who accomplished so much. And she got to see Barack Obama elected President.

James McBride

Yeah. My mother was good friends with Mrs. Barbara Bush. Yeah. Towards the end of her life, Mrs. Bush invited me to the literacy partners to raise money for literacy. Mrs. Barbara Bush was really into that. And she asked that I bring my mother along, and my mother normally would not go to anything like that. But she really liked Barbara Bush because she had raised all these kids.

Karen Long

Right.

James McBride

So she went and she never went to junk like that. But she went and Mrs. Bush really liked her and asked her to come visit her in Houston. And she did. And they became friends. They wrote letters to each other. She was friends with Mrs. Bush until she died. They just wrote letters back and forth. So I think during that election, she was pretty quiet about it, but I'm pretty sure that she wanted George Bush to win because she knew his mother.

Karen Long

Yeah.

James McBride

She liked Barack Obama a lot. She was very proud of him.

Karen Long

Yeah.

James McBride

But mother power is stronger.

Karen Long

It is.

James McBride

And so it was all about, well, Mrs. Bush got her son running. She didn't say anything about it to her kids, but I knew. Yeah.

Karen Long

So did you think when six years later, I think maybe eight years later, you've got the National Medal of the Humanities from President Obama that you wish your mom was there for that.

James McBride

Well, look, my mother really liked Barack Obama a lot, and she was very proud of him. But she liked Mrs. Bush's son better because she knew Mrs. Bush. That's all there is to it. My mother was of that generation that if they don't make a movie out your book, it ain't no good anyway, I think she would have been very proud, extremely proud that I got that award from President Obama, which was one of the highlights of my life. Surely it was a great moment, but I don't know. She would have loved it. I wish she had been alive to see it, but she wasn't. And really, the good news is that she lived long enough to see her children become successful. She died at home with her children around her. She didn't owe anyone anything. She didn't want to die in the hospital, and she became a historic figure. I just think that's amazing. That's how God works. So I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to be raised by someone who's so special.

Karen Long

One of her values that still is important to me is her insistence on privacy, and it feels like we're in a world where that's evaporated. Do you think she would have been able to maintain her privacy?

James McBride

Well, that's a good question. Yeah, I think so. Maybe not as much — you have to remember, because privacy was important for our survival.

Karen Long

Right.

James McBride

But she couldn't show up at work with kids, black kids. She would have lost her job. So a lot of times she was really careful about that. I suspect now, if she were raising the children now, it's just a different time. She would have probably found some other way to survive if she lost her job on account of having kids who were mixed or something like that. You have to remember, my mother's story was about survival and love for her children, and people who love their children figure out what to do. The really sad part is that we have a policy in this country of separating children at the border, which is probably something that we're all going to have to answer for if we haven't spoken out on it now, it's just absolutely disgraceful. It's just a blight and shame on whatever history however you frame it. It's nasty, horrible business. And so I think about her sometimes when I think about some of these kids who have been separated from their parents and the so-called I.C.E. And this Homeland Security and this other garbage, I think it's horrible, and I think people who don't speak out against it are making a mistake because we're going to pay for that. We're already paying for it. I don't know that a woman like her could raise twelve kids right now. I don't know that our society has that kind of temperament that allows that to happen. In the past, that was okay because she could hide in the black community, and the black community will accept just about any sinners, including its own. But nowadays it's a little different. It got more complicated. It's become infused with politics and religion and class.

Karen Long

Right. I would be so honored if you'd read a passage for the record from maybe both books but starting with "The Color of Water."

James McBride

"When I was 14, my mother took up two new hobbies: riding a bicycle and playing piano. The piano I didn't mind, but the bicycle drove me crazy. It was a huge old clunker. Blue with white trim with big fat tires, huge fenders and a battery powered horn built into the middle of the frame with a button you pushed to make it blow. The contraption would be a collector's item now, probably worth about \$5,000. But back then, it was something my stepfather found on the street in Brooklyn and hauled home a few months before he died."

James McBride

I was thinking about my mother recently, and I was saying to myself that before she passed away, a few months before she passed away, I realized I said, you know, when she dies. I mean, people will be talking about her for years and years, and she doesn't even know it.

Karen Long

Have you looked online at all study guides to "The Color of Water"?

James McBride

No. If I did that, I would quit writing completely. I mean, I was an innocent when I wrote this book. I was like The Beatles: "I Want to Hold Your Hand." Now, I'm like Teddy Pendergrass: "Turn Off the Lights." If I followed that stuff, I wouldn't be able to think properly. I just told the story as purely as I could. Sometimes stories just show themselves. I happened to be standing there when God just cleared his throat and coughed. And I just happened to be the one with a handkerchief. That's what it was.

Karen Long

How did you know to alternate the chapters?

James McBride

I didn't really, that was Cindy Spiegel's idea. Cindy Spiegel, who was the editor, decided that the book needed me in it. I didn't really want to put myself in it. I wasn't pleased about that idea, but it was Cindy who came up with that.

Karen Long

This sentence from "Deacon King Kong," where you reference "West Side Story" and "Porgy and Bess" is a barn burner. Do you want to try that for us?

James McBride

Oh, this is a reference to the ants.

James McBride

"And there the ants stayed -- a sole phenomenon in the Republic of Brooklyn, where cats hollered like people. Dogs ate their own feces. Aunties chain smoked and died at 102. A kid named Spike Lee saw God. The ghosts of the departed Dodgers soaked up all possibility of new hope and penniless desperation ruled the lives of the suckers too black or too poor to leave. While in Manhattan, the buses ran on time. The lights never went out. The death of a single white child in a traffic accident was a page one story, while phony versions of Black and Latino life ruled the Broadway roost, making white writers rich: 'West Side Story,' 'Porgy & Bess,' 'Purlie Victorious.' And on it went the whole business of the white man's reality lumping together like a giant lopsided snowball. The great American myth, the Big Apple, the Big Kahuna, the city that never sleeps. While the Blacks and Latinos who clean the apartments and dragged out the trash and made the music and filled the jails with sorrow, slept the sleep of the invisible and functioned as local color. And all the while the ants marched each fall, arriving at Building 17, kicking ass a roaring tidal wave of tiny death devouring Jesus's cheese."

Karen Long

Bravo sir.

James McBride

Yeah, that business of the ants was just one of those things where it falls together in your mind. I don't mean that poke fun or rage at the white writers who brought - you know - these are talented people who do this. But on the other hand, many elements of Black life have powered the cultural machinery of America and taken it all around the world. And most of the people who do it never get credit for it, nor did they get paid for it.

Karen Long

So did Ethan Hawke do right by you when he got the rights to "The Good Lord Bird"?

James McBride

He did, indeed, he surely did. He did a great job. He really understands John Brown. He did a great job. He understands John Brown very well. He did a superb TV series based on the book. I can't wait until it comes out. Probably won't come out until the fall of 2020, but it's great. He understands John Brown better than anybody around, partly because he just did so much research on him. He also understands religion and the power of religion in American life.

Karen Long

He's a smart person.

James McBride

Well, he's a writer, too, so he understands writing. He wrote the first master script and then the script was broken out, and they had five or six screenwriters who wrote the individual.

Karen Long

A cottage industry.

James McBride

Well, there's a writer named Mark Richard who was the showrunner who put all these writers together. And really, Mark was really responsible for making the show, for bringing Ethan's vision into -- and to some degree -- my vision onto the screen. And I thought he did a great job.

Karen Long

That's reassuring. How do you feel about the book to screen process? You and Spike did it from the jump with yours with "Miracle at St. Anna."

James McBride

Well, the screenplay is all muscle. A screenplay is not like a novel where you get to explain yourself and get backstory and allow the reader to see the whole room. Screenplay is more like a director who says to his lighting person, "I want to see that fire hydrant three minutes in, so throw a light on it." You throw a light on the fire hydrant, and then the audience sees that, and then you pull the light, and then you throw it onto the tenement steps, and then you pull the light, and then you shade it so that you're guiding the audience along. But it's all muscle. You don't have time to discuss "Porgy & Bess" and "Purlie Victoria," you don't have time to riff off the reason why we're here. You just have to show us we're here, and then we're moving somewhere else. And the big why you've already stated or you're going to say later, but you only get one or two of those. You don't get a whole bunch of them to fool with.

Karen Long

Right. It's a tauter tightrope.

James McBride

Yeah. There's no space to play.

Karen Long

Yeah.

James McBride

You state the melody and you get out the room, you eat your oatmeal and you leave. You're going to have oatmeal, scrambled eggs and grits and bacon and eggs. No, you're not having all this oatmeal. Maybe some butter, and that's it. Goodbye. You paid your \$15 or you got whatever. The audience, that's what the audience is getting. Spiderman is going to win at the end. And that's it.

Karen Long

And the feast, I would argue, lies elsewhere on the printed page.

James McBride

Look, there's no question that if you really want to be a creative person, you ought to read books.

Karen Long

And your mother gave you that in music.

James McBride

What else do you need? I mean, you could throw some science in there, I suppose, a little bit of Albert Einstein. But you don't really need more than... I think creativity drives everything. And I think in order for one to do that well, you have to be able to understand the power of the written word.

Karen Long

Well, it is marvelous to be in your company, both on the page and here on the podcast.

James McBride

Well, I'm delighted to be here on your initial podcast. I hope this is first of many, and I'm glad that I'm the first one.

Karen Long

The Asterisks* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby with help from producer Tara Pringle Jefferson. Cleveland Public School students working with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society wrote and performed our original score. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prizes. Visit Anisfield-Wolf.org to learn more on the history of the award, about previous winners, and upcoming events. And thank you for listening.