The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother
by James McBride

Chapter Summaries Provided by Free Library of Philadelphia
(Note: The chapters alternate between James’s story and the early history of his mother, Ruth McBride.)

CHAPTER 1 – Dead (Ruth’s early history)
James McBride’s mother, Ruth, describes her early life. Born on April 1, 1921, to Polish Orthodox Jewish parents, Fishel Shilsky (Tateh) and Hudis Shilsky (Mameh), she was named Ruchel Dwarja Alyska. Her parents changed her name to Rachel when they immigrated to America. When Rachel was nineteen, as a way to mark her past as history, she changed her name to Ruth. Her father, a hard, unyielding man, worked as an itinerant rabbi and moved the family several times. Her mother, gentle and meek, suffered from polio. Ruth became dead to her family as a result of her marriage to James’s African American father, Andrew Dennis McBride. Ruth’s family recited kaddish and sat shiva. It is explained that in the Jewish faith, this ritual acknowledges the death of a family member or friend.

CHAPTER 2 – The Bicycle
James’s stepfather, Hunter Jordan, dies. The death of the only father James has known has a severe effect on him. James drops out of school and becomes involved in drugs and theft. His mother is distraught and spends hours riding a bicycle around the neighborhood. To James, who has just realized that his mother is white, her bicycle mania is embarrassing and an example of her differentness.

CHAPTER 3 – Kosher (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth describes her parents’ arranged marriage and how they got to America. At the time the family arrived, Ruth was two; her brother, Sam, was four. The family stayed with her grandparents, Bubeh and Zaydeh. She details the strict rules of Orthodox Judaism and how they affected her. Her grandfather died while she was still very young. His death, and the way it was handled, provoked a life-long fear of death in her.

CHAPTER 4 – Black Power
James becomes more aware of the divide between blacks and whites. Although his mother is white, she lives in a black world and refuses to acknowledge her whiteness. The Black Power movement is ascendant, and the Black Panthers are attracting more and more followers. Black pride is manifesting itself. In this environment, James is terrified for his mother’s safety, yet she concentrates on raising her children to succeed. Reference is made to the fact that she and her husband, Andrew McBride, started the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church.

CHAPTER 5 – Old Testament (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth describes life with a traveling rabbi father. They lived in many places, for he was not considered good enough to be asked to stay on in a permanent position. Being poor and Jewish and having a handicapped mother embarrassed Ruth. The family moved south, to Suffolk, Virginia, where her father opened a grocery store in “the colored side of town.” She tells of her loathing of her father, who was harsh and unloving and sexually abused her.

CHAPTER 6 – The New Testament
James describes his mother’s love of God and paints a colorful description of family Sundays in church. Later, in the New Brown Church, the family plays and recites Bible stories on Easter. Here, as elsewhere, the emphasis on schooling and religion is paramount. The title, The Color of Water, comes from this
CHAPTER 7 – Sam (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth describes the South of the 1930s, with the specter of the Depression and the ominous presence of the Ku Klux Klan. She illustrates how the black population navigated that era. Her brother, Sam, could tolerate neither the life he was leading nor the tyranny of his father, and he ran off. He joined the Army and was eventually killed in World War II.

CHAPTER 8 – Brothers and Sisters
James lives in a home of “orchestrated chaos.” The family’s life is described, including James’s position as one of the five “young-uns” in a family of twelve children, his mother’s inability to cook, the importance of food, the sharing of clothes and musical instruments and the hatching of childhood plots. He sees his house as a combination three-ring circus and zoo. He describes some of his siblings – his sister Helen, the rebel; Rosetta, the resident queen of the house; his brother Dennis, the civil rights activist and artist with aspirations of becoming a doctor.

CHAPTER 9 – Shul (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth’s father performed circumcisions as handily as he slaughtered beef. Her mother sent the children to school, but her father objected to the influence of a gentile education and paid for the girls to receive private lessons in sewing and record keeping. The whites at Ruth’s school hated Jews. Jews were seen as different from everyone, and few liked them. Since her father dealt with black customers, she and her family were considered lower class. Her one salvation at this time was her friendship with Frances.

CHAPTER 10 – School
James is surprised to hear his mother speak Yiddish when she takes the children to Jewish stores for school clothes. Ruth’s Jewish values begin to emerge. His sister Rosetta’s education is paid for by a Jewish foundation. Ruth sends the children miles away to predominately Jewish schools, where they are seen as token blacks. During this time James discovers music and books. The 1960s sweep through the house, and the older siblings react to the changing times. In public, James becomes ashamed of his white mother.

CHAPTER 11 – Boys (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth details the travails of working in her father’s store, her feeling of being an outsider as a Jew, and the pain of attending a school where she is ostracized. She continues to like black people because they do not judge her. Her first boyfriend, Peter, is black. A black/white relationship is very dangerous in the South at this time. Fifteen-year-old Ruth becomes pregnant.

CHAPTER 12 – Daddy
James’s mother and his stepfather, Hunter Jordan, meet and marry. His younger brother, Hunter, is born. The family moves to a larger house in St. Albans, Queens. His stepfather visits on weekends while maintaining his apartment in Brooklyn. Although Hunter Jordan is a good man and loved by Ruth and her children, he cannot live in the chaos of the Queens house. Hunter Jordan has a stroke. James knows that his stepfather is going to die.

CHAPTER 13 – New York (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth’s mother knew that Ruth was pregnant. She sent Ruth to her relatives in New York. A colorful description of this extended family is provided. Aunt Betts helped Ruth obtain an abortion.

CHAPTER 14 – Chicken Man
James watches his mother succumb to grief over her second husband’s death. She rides her bike for hours,
starts piano lessons, and lets the house fall into disrepair. James stays out of the house as much as possible to avoid the impact of watching his mother suffer. James’s life unravels as well. He is sent to stay with his half-sister Jack in Louisville, Kentucky. He hangs out with his brother-in-law and his “boys” and gets a “street corner” education. James secures a job pumping gas, but loses it when he gets into a fistfight. He meets Chicken Man, an alcoholic who waxes philosophical when sober.

CHAPTER 15 – Graduation (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth remained in New York after her abortion, but went back to Suffolk to finish high school. She discovered that Peter had married after getting another girl pregnant. She began to have opinions of her own and determined to leave Suffolk. She worried about leaving her mother behind, for she had always been her mother’s “eyes and ears.” She went to graduation only at the behest of her best friend, Frances, but at the last moment realized that she could not step into the Protestant Church where the ceremony was being held. The next day she caught a Greyhound bus to New York City.

CHAPTER 16 – Driving
James’s mother has always taken the subway. As far as he knows, she has never learned to drive. She asks James to teach her to drive. After one lesson she refuses ever to drive again. His mother is falling apart, grieving not only over the loss of her husband, but also over her secret past – the loss of her Jewish family and her guilt over leaving her mother. Jesus is her salvation. When James returns for his junior year of high school, he resolves to mend his ways.

CHAPTER 17 – Lost in Harlem (Ruth’s early history)
When Ruth returned to New York, she worked in Aunt Mary’s leather factory and lived with her Bubeh. Aunt Mary hired a new man, Andrew “Dennis” McBride, a top-notch leather-maker and an artisan. Ruth discovered the magic of Harlem. As a result of Aunt Mary’s meanness, she quit her job and was hired as a manicurist in a barbershop run by Rocky, a pimp. Because she was worried about her mother, she asked Dennis to find out about her Mameh and her sister, Dee Dee. In telling Dennis about Rocky, Ruth felt ashamed. She left Harlem.

CHAPTER 18 – Lost in Delaware
James’s mother announces they are moving to Delaware. After much vacillation she buys a house in Wilmington. She has five kids at home now and seven in college. They find that life in Wilmington is racially charged and very different from New York City. Ruth wants to go back, but knows she cannot. She feels she has made a terrible mistake. Prayer turns her around. James focuses on his music and is selected to travel to Europe with the American Youth Jazz Band. He meets his benefactor, Mrs. Dawson. He is accepted into the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio.

CHAPTER 19 – The Promise (Ruth’s early history)
Ruth was through with the fast life. She got a job as a waitress and dated Dennis. Dennis was a talented violinist, but black musicians were not allowed in orchestras. He got a job in a factory. He and Ruth began living together – a situation considered scandalous. Dennis’s family and friends accepted her. When she called home, her father told her that her mother was sick and he needed help with the store. She returned to Suffolk and found her father having an affair and wanting a divorce. Dee Dee begged her to remain in Suffolk, and against her better judgment, Ruth promised that she would. It was a promise she would find she could not keep.

CHAPTER 20 – Old Man Shilsky
In 1984, James is working on the staff of the Boston Globe, unable to decide whether he wants to be a musician or a writer. He is also caught between the two worlds of black and white. Because he needs to run from his confusion and pain, he goes to Suffolk to seek his mother’s old friend, Frances. Instead, he
meets Eddie Thompson, who knew his mother as Rachel. Eddie tells him about “Old Man Shilsky” – a detestable and mean-spirited man, who disliked and cheated blacks.

**CHAPTER 21 – A Bird Who Flies (Ruth’s early history)**
In 1941, Ruth’s Bubeh died. Ruth decided to return to New York. Her father tried to get her to stay; she refused. He told her that if she married a black man, she could never come home again. She boarded the bus and discovered that her mother’s Polish passport had been placed in her lunchbox. She resumed her relationship with Dennis and got a job in a glass factory. Her mother became gravely ill, but Ruth was not allowed to see her. When Mameh died, Ruth was guilt ridden. Dennis provided strength and support. She began going to Metropolitan Church in Harlem with him. She started the conversion to Christianity.

**CHAPTER 22 – A Jew Discovered**
In 1992, while standing in front of a synagogue in Suffolk, James acknowledges his own connection to the synagogue and to Judaism. His search for the Shilsky family ends. He now understands the isolation his mother and her family suffered. He leaves for New York City.

**CHAPTER 23 – Dennis (Ruth’s early history)**
Ruth stayed on the black side after her mother died. Dennis was afraid to marry her because of the condemnation that would ensue. They continued living together and going to the Metropolitan Baptist Church, where she admired Rev. Abner Brown. She describes these years as her “glory years.” In 1942, she joined the Metropolitan Church and became the church secretary. She and Dennis married and had their first child in 1943. They lived in a one-room apartment for nine years, which she describes as the happiest years of her life. In the early 1950s, they moved to the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn. When Reverend Brown died, she and Dennis started their own church, and Dennis got a divinity degree. When she was pregnant with her eighth child, James, Dennis died of lung cancer. None of Ruth’s own Jewish family would help her. She met and married James’s stepfather, Hunter Jordan.

**CHAPTER 24 – New Brown**
James realizes that Andrew McBride left behind the groundwork for Ruth to raise twelve kids. In 1994, the family attends the 40th anniversary of the New Brown Church. Ruth, now 74, addresses the assembly speaking stiffly at first, and then with certainty and joy.

**CHAPTER 25 – Finding Ruthie (Ruth’s early history)**
In 1993, Ruth is doing well but is preoccupied with thoughts of her own mortality. It has taken years for James to find out who his mother is. The journey of discovery leads him to embrace his mixed race. He knows now that he can be both a musician and a writer.