**The Color of Water**

**Concept Analysis**

**Organizational Patterns:**

This memoir is written with a double voice. Chapters alternate between chapters in which the author’s mother recalls her experiences growing up Jewish in an Orthodox household in the South, and chapters in which the author himself reminisces about growing up as the biracial child of a white mother in New York and being one of twelve children. The chapters written from the mother’s perspective are italicized, which makes it easy to visually tell the chapters apart, and after reading for a few lines it is clear which story is which. The juxtaposition of the two stories is wonderful and readers can create inferences about why certain things happened in the author’s life as they discover more about his mother’s past. The author and his mother’s stories are memoirs, so some movement within the stories is expected, but they are both generally chronological and not difficult to follow.

**Issues related to the Study of Literature:**

- **Theme:**

  James McBride’s search for identity and struggle to understand who he is drive this book. The young McBride is biracial, has a white mother whose background is a carefully guarded mystery, has eleven siblings (“my family was huge, twelve kids, unlike any other family I’d ever seen” 6) and grew up in the Red Hook housing projects in Brooklyn. As the author struggles to find his place and to fit into a rapidly changing world (the story begins before the civil rights movement but also deals with that period as the author grows up) he’s at times frustrated by his mother and the fact that in his young mind, she essentially ignored “matters involving race and identity” (6). As he learns more about his mother’s past however and looks back on his own youth from an adult perspective, the author (and his audience) realize just how incredible his mother was, and how acutely aware she was of the struggles and challenges her children faced.

  Issues of race, equality and opportunity, family (who and what make up a family) love, tradition and change, identity and to some extent religion (although this is discussed in a cultural rather than theological sense) are all touched on in this book and provide an excellent springboard for teachers who want to pursue any of these topics. The book might also be used as reinforcement or extended learning if it is not taught explicitly in class but is used as a supplementary text to compliment other required class reading.

- **Setting:**

  The story takes place in New York City. The author first lives in the Red Hook Housing Projects in Brooklyn and later moves to St. Albans neighborhood in Queens with his family. An appropriate understanding of what it means to live in the Projects (albeit the projects of the fifties, sixties and seventies) as well as the socio-economic
status of the neighborhood the author later resides in are key to framing this book. The setting is not the point of the book of course, but it would benefit students to understand where the author is coming from in that sense.

The mother was born in a small town in Poland in 1921 (some background on the treatment of Jews in Poland at the time would be helpful- especially since that cultural/political context is referenced by the author’s mother) but most of her story takes place in Suffolk, Virginia. She lives in VA until 1941 when she graduates high school and leaves home for good. After high school the mother lives in Harlem until she moves to Brooklyn with her children. There are some brief trips to other Burroughs as well, but these are the most important places. Harlem would be another key setting to discuss with students as this was the era leading up to the civil rights movement and just after the Harlem Renaissance. Places like the Apollo Theater are mentioned in the book, and it might be helpful for students to know what that was, as well as who (historical figures) was active in Harlem at this time. Specifically it might be helpful for students as they consider that the author’s mother was a white woman living in Harlem during an exciting, but volatile time.

- **Point of View:**

  The author tells his story, but the chapters about his mother are told in her voice, from her point of view. She is the storyteller in those chapters, and her voice adds a lot to the story as a whole. It also provides an interesting situation for the audience who builds their picture of the mother from two sources- first hand from her own stories, and also based on the impressions and opinions the author held as a child.

- **Allusion:**

  This book contains many illusions to historical events, leaders and time periods that some students may not be familiar with. For instance students might not know why Ruth McBride’s mother “had spent a good deal of her life running from Russian soldiers in Poland” (12) The Holocaust and Nazi invasion are also referred to in the text. The book also alludes to Jungle Fever, Adam Clayton Powell, Malcolm X, numerous famous singers, Jackie Robinson and the list goes on…These references won’t be a problem if students don’t catch every one of them, but some of the more subtle allusions in the book will need to be clarified by the teacher in order for the text to have its full impact.

- **Similes:**

  McBride uses beautiful language to describe his experiences and feelings about growing up, and figurative language is used fairly frequently. For example the author explains that, “the part of me that wanted to understand who I was began to irk and itch at me, like a pesky mosquito bite that cries out to be scratched” (159) In describing his nightly routine as a child the author writes, “Mommy put us to bed each night like slabs
of meat, laying us out three and four to a bed” (7). Another time McBride claims that “the
sixties roared though my house like a tidal wave” (73). These and many other models
provide an excellent opportunity for students to practice using similes in their own
writing.

• Voice:

This text would be especially effective in helping students understand that illusive
writing trait we call “voice”. It’s hard to explain to students sometimes, but this text
makes it easier because of the clear distinction between the voice in the author’s chapters,
and the voice that’s present in his mother’s chapters. The mother’s voice shines through
in this text and is very distinct. Discuss with students what features make her chapters
unique. Also ask them to compare the writing in those chapters to the writing in an
Encyclopedia for example. This text has many meaningful opportunities to discuss this
trait that can otherwise be hard for students to grasp.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

I think this is a fantastic book for teenagers because it relates on multiple levels to issues
that they might be interested in. Because a central theme of the book is identity and how we (or
others) decide who and what we are (or will become) high school students will be able to
empathize with the author. Additionally, the book deals extensively with the idea of fitting in,
what it means to be a part of society, who is an “insider” vs. an “outsider” and concepts of
belonging to one group or another. The author primarily deals with these issues as he constructs
his own racial identity, but these challenges extend beyond race. Race is certainly the catalyst,
but all students deal with identity issues for a variety of reasons, and will be able to bring their
experience and opinions to the table.

The book also highlights prejudice, discrimination and inequality in both explicit and
indirect ways. The mother experienced her own struggles growing up as a Jew in pre (and post)
World War II America, and I think this is especially important for students to read, since many
might not be aware of that reality. Of course the author also talks about his own experiences
with prejudice, both as the director and the recipient of unkind actions. Students will also be
able to relate to this because many teens have felt that they’ve been treated unfairly for one
reason or another.

In addition to these specific issues, students will connect to the story of two people
growing up and negotiating the challenging divide between child and adult. Both the author and
his mother make good (and bad) decisions as they grow up and struggle to balance their sense of
independence with the demands of their families. Students who are also beginning to develop
their own ideas, opinions, sense of values and worldview will appreciate tagging along with the
author and his mother on their own journey of self-discovery.
Vocabulary Issues

This book contains numerous Yiddish words as well as the names of various Jewish traditions and ceremonies. The words can almost always be figured out by using context clues, or sometimes the author elaborates on the meaning. I do not anticipate this being a problem for students, however it is a good thing to be aware of. Students do not need to understand what all of these terms mean before reading the book. Some cultural traditions might be elaborated on if the teacher chooses to, but it is not essential for making meaning with the text.

The only other specific vocabulary that students might be unfamiliar with are the occasional words or phrases from the 1960’s or earlier that the author sometimes uses. Again, I do not anticipate that such vocabulary would pose any significant obstacle for students; rather it allows students to get a greater feel for the world the author grew up in and adds some fun texture to the story.

The language in this book is not difficult but it is well written and could be used as a great model for a memoir unit.

Background Knowledge

This book is set amidst the civil rights movement, and especially the Black Power movement, so at least a basic understanding of that period would be helpful. Additionally the historic realities of prejudice and inequality in the United States would need to be dealt with in order for students to grasp the motivation of some of the characters as well as the frequent allusions to historic figures. Some history and background on Jews in America and Jewish culture would also be helpful, although the book does a good job of explaining most things since the author is also learning about much of this for the first time. Anti-Semitism is discussed in the book, as well as interracial relations so students would need to understand the tensions that existed in America at this time between different racial or religious groups.

A bit of background on the time period in general (the book spans from pre-1940 to the early nineties, so the teacher would need to choose what periods to target) would be helpful to students as well. Background knowledge on 1960’s New York and the rural South just before and after WWII would also be valuable for students as they engage with this text. This is a great chance to combine a bit of history teaching with fantastic writing/literature instruction!

Implications for Students of Diversity

The title of this book “The Color of Water” wasn’t picked accidentally! Cross-cultural exchange is discussed thoroughly in this book, and regardless of who was in my class I would be sure to highlight the challenge and joy that it is to blend two cultures. This text can be used to encourage students to break out of their comfort zone and interact with people who might look, act or speak differently from themselves. Additionally the book could serve as an excellent springboard for discussion on race relations today in America; how far we’ve come and where we still need to go. As a class I would be sure to discuss and maybe write on the title of this book and what students think it means after having read the book. This text is about broadening
your horizons, opening your mind, being respectful, accepting and willing to learn about new cultures. Like the author discovered, our “Other” may be closer to us than we realize.

**Gender Issues**

Although gender issues are not the primary focus of the book, it is about a woman and the many roles she fills as mother, breadwinner, encourager, role-model, teacher, etc. Even if it’s not discussed explicitly, this is undoubtedly the story of an exceptionally strong, intelligent, and independent woman who is a good role model for all students, male or female. Additionally the novel discusses discrimination in a broader sense, so women’s issues could easily be brought into the classroom framework for the book if the teacher desired.

**The Central Question or Enduring Issue**

More than anything else, this is the story of a mother and her son trying to find themselves in a sometimes unfair and hostile world. It’s the story of learning to be true to yourself even if society or the people closest to you disagree. Sometimes, the right thing to do isn’t the popular thing to do, and there are many times where the author and his mother stand alone in the face of injustice. Still, the family in this story eventually finds the strength they need in one another as they overcome the adversities they face.

Just as our students face immense pressure (from their peers, their parents, ourselves and society as a whole) to become certain people, the author struggles as the outside world tells him what he should be and who he should become. Instead of giving in however, the author and his mother stand up for themselves and fight hard to maintain their unique identity instead of being shoved into a category “black” or “white” by the outside world.

The author explores the impact of race, religion, and family on personal identity and leads his audience to question who they are and how they became the person that they are today. How does the reader’s individual and family history (just like the author’s mother) affect their future and current identity? These are obviously particularly relevant themes for students who are in the midst of asking themselves many of these same questions. As they question who they are and who they might become, it may be helpful to read a book about someone who struggled with- gasp- the very same things!

**Research Issues/Project Ideas**

1) **Character journal** - students could research what it might have been like to be Black or Jewish in the Jim Crow South. Then, students would create journal entries from the perspective of Ruth, or her boyfriend Peter. Based on their research, students would create ten journal entries from this perspective detailing aspects and routines of their everyday life as well as some of the main events of the book. Students will include the feelings, frustrations and hopes their character might have had during this time.

Watanabe, BYU, 2008
2) **Personal Interview**- students could collect transcripts of a few interviews with civil rights leaders, as well as an interview they conduct with a parent of another role model. The student could ask their parent what experiences they’ve had with discrimination or closed-mindedness in their own life. What was a time their parent had to stand up for something that was right? Afterwards, students would compile a presentation highlighting the most interesting things they learned from their personal and researched interviews and present this information to the class.

3) **Family History Compare and Contrast**- in this project, students would have to conduct a bit of research on their own family history. They would need to research two parents and two grandparents. Where did each person grow up? Were they religious or not? Find out about each person’s family and record two stories/memories that are important to that family member. Students must then synthesize their research into a series of mini-biographies, ending with their own personal history. This might cause students to reflect on the importance of family in their own life and to see how their family’s lives have directly or indirectly affected their own—just like the author does in this story.

4) **Contemporary Rights Activist**- the civil rights movement didn’t end in the 1960’s. Pick a contemporary issue/population/or law that you think is treated unfairly. Research one part of the law and create a timeline of important events relating to your particular group or issue. Then write a series of letters suggesting a change. Required letters might include a letter to the student’s congressman and senator, a letter to the school board, a letter to the ACLU or other organization, a letter to the President, a letter to the editor of a local paper, and a letter to be published in the school’s student-run newspaper.

5) **Compare and Contrast Lit. Response**- students will write a letter to the teacher (or another student perhaps?) comparing this book with another that they have read in class this year. In what ways did the issues of the books overlap? How were the main characters similar or different and how did they react when placed in similar situations? Which book did you like better and why? I’ve done this activity before with Richard Wright’s *Native Son* but there are many texts that could be used successfully in conjunction with this one.

6) **Education Now**- Education is an important part of this book. Ruth McBride Jordan went back to school and received her degree at the age of 65! Why do you think this was so important to her? How was education a transformative power in the lives of her children? For this project students will need to research and create portfolios for three different colleges/universities that they are interested in attending. Each portfolio needs to include basic school stats such as where it is located, the cost of tuition, what housing options are available, demographic statistics, retention rates, etc. Students would then need to go into detail and elaborate on programs that they might be interested in at each school (and why), pros and cons of attending each
school, challenges that students might face as they make the leap to college, as well as a thorough list of scholarships that the individual student could qualify for at each school. A summative essay/introduction would accompany the portfolios and would make explicit connections to the text by explaining how and why education is personally relevant to the life of this student.

Information/Functional Texts
1) Historical records of interracial relations/marriages
2) Non-fiction books about the Black Panthers, Civil Rights Movement, the Holocaust and/or Anti-Semitism
3) Maps of the New York Burroughs in the early 1960’s
4) Magazine and Newspaper clippings about integration (both sides)
5) Newspaper clippings about lynching
6) “Letter to a Northern Editor” by William Faulkner
7) Biographies of Malcolm X, MLK and other civil rights leaders
8) Scholarly articles about race relations in the US
9) Timelines of landmark civil rights events/cases
10) Laws, photographs and documentaries from or about the South under Jim Crow