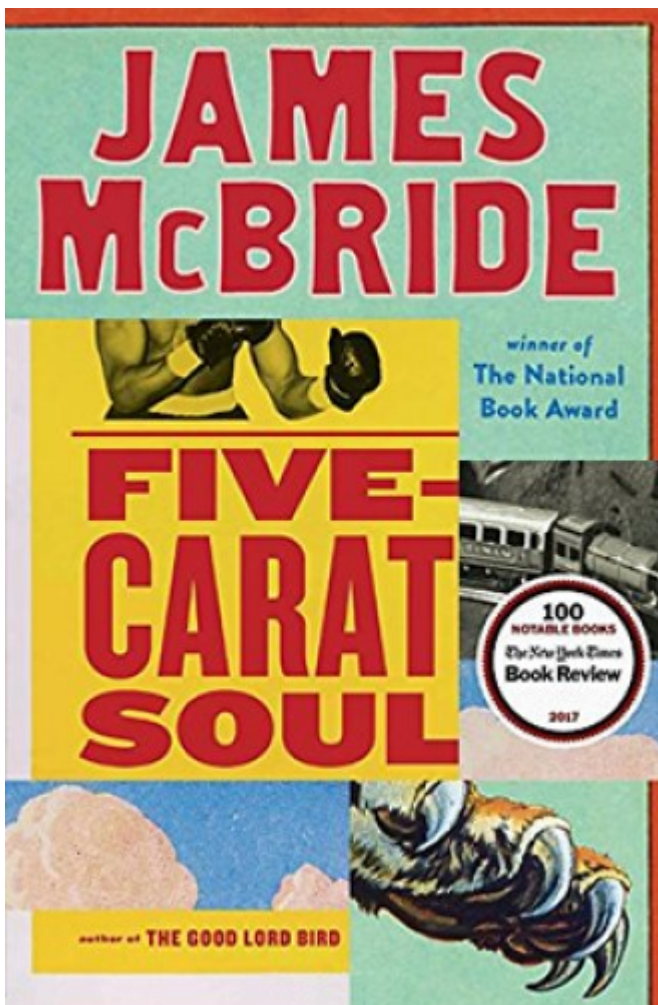


The sparkle of James McBride's stories

***Five-Carat Soul* is filled with hilarious storytelling, unusual characters, and stark realities.**

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [January 17, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Five-Carat Soul

By James McBride
Riverhead Books

In his 2013 National Book Award-winning novel, *The Good Lord Bird*, James McBride takes the outsized historical figure of abolitionist outlaw John Brown, puts the pulse of a wired fanatic in him, and sends him cavorting across the country in madcap militia attacks. *The Good Lord Bird* is more than an entertaining, exaggerated historical romp, however. The humor also serves to highlight the pathos and grief of the pre-Civil War violence and the horror of slavery. McBride gives us the same mix of hilarity and poignant truth in his collection of short stories, *Five-Carat Soul*.

In “The Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set,” a toy collector locates a one-of-a-kind train set created by gun maker Horace Smith for Robert E. Lee’s son Graham. The toy was later stolen by a slave who headed north to freedom. The collector knows that the train is worth millions of dollars in 1992, and he is ecstatic when he tracks it to its current owner, a Rev. Spurgeon Hart. As he talks to Hart’s wife on the phone, the collector realizes that he’s dealing with some unusual characters.

“Could you mention to your husband that I want to see it? ... When will he be home? ...”

“Can’t tell you. Old Spurg is hard to catch. He’s always on the job. Working for the boss, like they say.”

I could feel beads of sweat forming on my neck. “Who’s his boss?”

“The Son of man.”

She hung up.

The collector finds the Harts’ house in a poor neighborhood. As he exits his car, a group of young men nearby are blasting loud music from a boom box. The preacher’s wife answers the door in a sweatshirt that reads: “Kill the noise! Turn up Jesus!”

She laughs at the collector for his interest in “that old train,” but invites him back to the kitchen, where she quotes Bible verses, offers him a slice of sweet potato pie that tastes like “mush and old goat cheese,” and asks him if he “has Jesus in his soul.” The collector glances around the room at pictures of Jesus “in various states of repose and torture” and notes that “dangling at the end of the light switch was a glow-in-the-dark crucifix of Jesus hanging off the cross with blood oozing out of his

wounds.” McBride continues to fine-tune his comic couple until the moment of the satisfying resolution regarding the collector and the toy train. The story seems finished.

But the story continues, picking up years later, when the collector sees Hart on the street one night and follows him. In the raw, ear-blasting scene that follows, a different story unfolds—one that includes the toy train’s history as symbol of long-endured and long-suppressed injustices.

McBride also succeeds with the novella “The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band.” Twelve-year-old Butter narrates four stories from his life in The Bottom, a poor black suburb in Pennsylvania. Butter and his friends Toy Boy, Ray Ray, Dex, Bunny, and Blub play baseball at the intersection of a couple of dirt roads. Some of them play in the band named in the title. They try to keep their distance from meaner groups of boys, avoid the temptations that would put them in jail, and coexist with economically struggling parents.

With punchy, funny dialogue and unsparing descriptions, the boys often intuit the truth about their community and its residents. Here’s Butter’s description, in “Buck Boy,” of a pastor who is always looking for attention from the TV stations:

It do seem like whenever there’s a fresh-cooked chicken or a television camera around, Rev. Jenkins don’t be far off.... He’s a big, fat man. I seen him undress at the pool one time, and it took me five minutes to see all of him. He got a slicked-back hairdo and he wearing one of his fine suits. He sports some of the most killing suits you ever seen. He’s going with the pink pinstripe suit today, and when he bust through the crowd, people bounced off him like he was a beach ball.

In “Goat,” Butter’s friend Seymour (known to his friends as Goat) wins a race but is denied the sports medal because he can’t produce a birth certificate to prove his age. His teacher, Miss McIntyre, determines to set things straight. Butter says she’s “a nice lady, but she don’t know nothin’ about The Bottom,” because she drives into Goat’s dangerous neighborhood looking for his house. When she knocks on the door, Goat’s mother peeks out.

“Are you Seymour’s mother?” Miss McIntyre asked.

“If you mean is I the someone who teaches him not to brush his teeth and clean his nose out in public, yes, I am his mother,” Mrs. Shays said, “But if you from social services and come out here fending and proving and pretending you know everything, which must be a terrible strain on a person, than I ain’t nobody.”

“So you are his mother, then?” Miss McIntyre said.

“If it look like buzzard and smell like buzzard, miss, it ain’t catfish.”

The humor in these stories keeps us reading. But in each one, the plot unfolds to reveal a reality that is cast into sharp relief by the storytelling. In “Buck Boy,” the attention-loving preacher in pink is presiding at the funeral of a young man shot while robbing a local store. In “Father Abe,” the yearning of an orphan persuades a tired Union soldier to suddenly change his postwar plan. In “The Christmas Dance,” two elderly men reveal the secret nightmare they experienced as black soldiers in World War II.

Not all of McBride’s stories wield the same power. The one that was written for the author’s nephews might have been more successful as a children’s book. But the ones that clarify injustice by making it hit us just as we are laughing the hardest—those stories are evidence of McBride’s genius.