

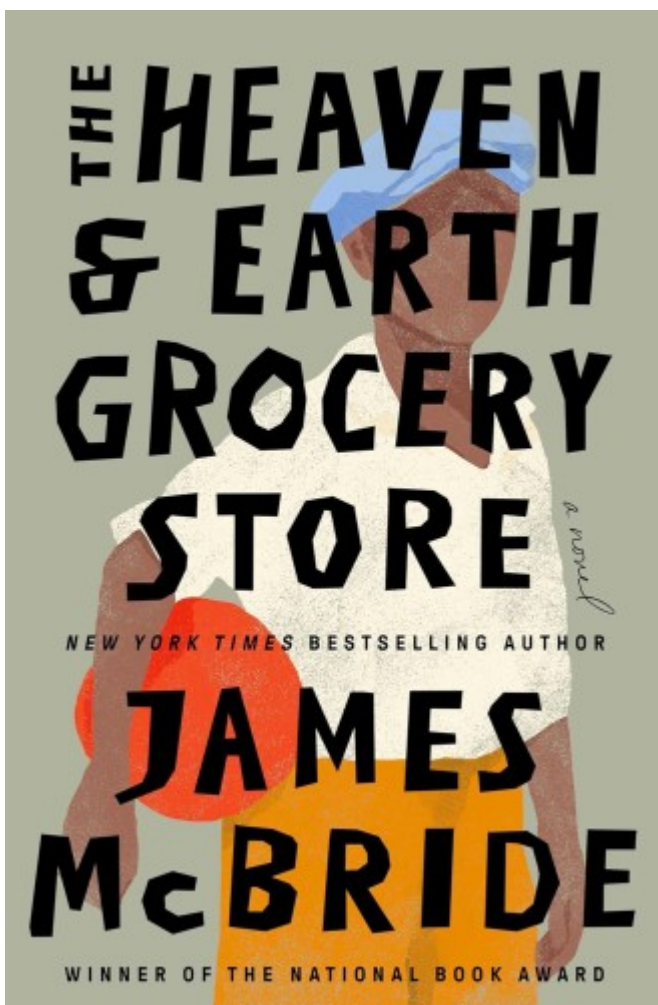
A novel driven by kindness

There are many reasons to adore James McBride's latest book.

by [Beth Kissileff](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

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In Review



The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store

A Novel

By James McBride

Riverhead Books

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How could anyone not fall in love with a novel inspired by the novelist's experiences working as a counselor at a camp that created a loving and inclusive environment for children with severe disabilities? The dedication of James McBride's sixth novel to Sy Friend—who directed the Variety Club Camp for Handicapped Children in Worcester, Pennsylvania, during the four summers McBride worked there as a young man—is one of many reasons to adore the book.

The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store may initially appear to be a feel-good novel about heartwarming relationships between unlikely comrades in a small town. But it quickly becomes clear that the characters are full of actual human nature—good and bad, altruistic and selfish at the same time. Characters who seem evil are given a backstory to allow the reader some sympathy. Characters who seem good emerge as multifaceted rather than purely angelic. The shading of humanity beyond simple binaries is one of the things McBride, son of a White Jewish mother and a Black Christian father, describes so well.

Much of the novel's action is centered around Moshe, a Jewish musical theater owner in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and his limping wife, Chona, who runs the eponymous Heaven and Earth Grocery Store—which fails to make a profit since Chona extends credit to so many in need. The store is situated in Chicken Hill, the town's Black and Jewish neighborhood. Most of the Jews have moved farther out, and Moshe wishes to as well. But Chona will not be moved from her store, needful as she is to extend kindness to all those in her orbit. Moving back and forth in time between 1972 and the 1930s, the story includes in the sweep of its action the owners of the juke joint in town, the janitors and carpenters, and the local doctor who is a member of the Klan, recognized easily through his robes.

It's rare to find a novel whose plot is driven by the kindness of its characters, even while others display mercenary qualities. In some of this book's most compelling and dramatic moments, members of the community work together across social and economic lines to prevent a young Black boy, Dodo, from being institutionalized after an accident kills his mother and leaves him deaf. As the story progresses, Dodo is shown other acts of kindness amid extreme cruelty—one of which remains with him to his dying day.

Rich descriptions of landscapes and of music are yet another delight of this novel. To the consternation of many in the town, Moshe opens up his theater space to Black musicians and patrons:

But once Chick Webb's band struck up, the silent, reticent Negroes of Pottstown transformed: they became a leaping mass of wild, dancing humanity. They frolicked and laughed, dancing as if they were birds enjoying flight for the first time. Webb's band played like wizards, four sets of gorgeous, stomping, low-down, rip-roaring, heart-racing jazz.

This kind of prose gives a glimpse into one of the novelist's other talents: McBride is a jazz musician who records and performs professionally. He describes Webb in this way: "Though he was a hunchback of some kind, he moved with a certain feeling of joy, a lightness, as if every moment were precious."

The awareness that the abilities of each human have worth and value, even as they differ, is one of the many delights of this novel. There are characters who have been maimed by illness or accident; there are others who suffer because someone has wrongly injured them. Still, as one of Dodo's guardians remarks to her formerly incarcerated husband, "You can forever remember the wrongs done to you as long as you live . . . but if you forget 'em and go on living, it's almost as good as forgiving."

We are all in need of kindness. *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* is a delightfully entertaining and superbly written novel that defines that moral quality.