

'Miracle' worker

Memoirist McBride tries his luck at fiction with war tale

By MICHAEL GILTZ

BEST-SELLING author James McBride knows one thing for sure: He's one lucky guy.

"In a lot of ways," said the 44-year-old author, who struck pay dirt in 1996 with his memoir, "The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother," which has sold a remarkable 1.5 million copies.

One doesn't have to venture farther than McBride's memorabilia-stuffed office near Times Square to see the extent of his good fortune.

Among the mementos is a photo of jazz musician James Moody (McBride is an accomplished tenor saxophonist who toured with the legendary Little Jimmy Scott); a short story called "The Brave Bat" written by his 8-year-old son, Jordan; and countless Quincy Jones CDs (more on Q later).

But for all his success — family, fame, fortune — McBride, a onetime *Journalist*, doesn't consider himself a great writer.

"I'd rather sit around with a bunch of journalists and drink beer, smoke cigarettes and tell dirty jokes than be with a bunch of writers thinking deep thoughts," he said.

Still, McBride, who lives with his wife and three kids in Bucks County, Pa., but commutes into the city regularly, has plenty of stories to share.

"The Color of Water" told of his childhood in New York, growing up in Brooklyn's Red Hook housing project as the mixed-race son of a Polish-Jewish mother and a black father (and, later, a black stepfather). He was one of 12 siblings.

The family, he recalled, never seemed to have money, but he managed to excel at school (he credits his indomitable mother, Ruth), attend college and pursue various careers. It's an exhilarating, entertaining story that's now part of some high school and college curricula.

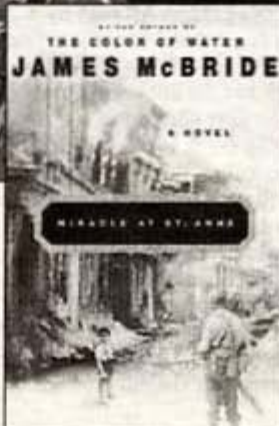


N.Y. Post: Don Holiday

Author James McBride will tour colleges with his jazz band.

His new book, "Miracle at St. Anna," is a fictional World War II story about black soldiers trapped behind enemy lines in Italy. Based on a real-life troop that was massacred by German soldiers, it shows how very different men thrown together by war bond in a crisis.

McBride did plenty of research for the book, including learning about the black heroes of the 92nd Infantry Division in Italy (named Buffalo Soldiers during the Civil War because whites thought the blacks' hair resembled buffalo manes) and one of their leaders, Lt. General William J. McCaffrey, who is white.



"Miracle at St. Anna"

Riverhead
265 pages, \$24

"He's 85 years old, and he told it like it was," said McBride. "A black soldier told me, 'I didn't like any of my commanders. But the one I would salute at his grave site if I'm still alive was McCaffrey.'"

"I've never met him. We've written 20 letters over four years. He was profound. We found out we had music in common. I sent him a couple of Audra McDonald CDs, and that did it. He changed my perspective about what a professional soldier is."

McBride knows that it's not easy to go from memoirist to novelist.

"There aren't many people who make the jump," he said. "They don't have anything else to say."

For a time, it seemed the biggest break for this former staff writer at the *Washington Post* and *People* magazine would be working on the autobiography of Quincy Jones.

Since Jones had the choice of anyone he wanted, McBride seemed an inspired pick. It didn't pan out that way.

"It worked out terribly," said McBride of their collaboration.

"When the book was done, Quincy didn't like it, and we had a parting of the ways. He sees himself a certain way, and that didn't jibe with what was written in the book. What I wrote was honest and true. I did my best to rewrite [sections] to his satisfaction, and at a certain point, I said, 'This is it; I can't rewrite this anymore.'"

When the book came out, it was a notable flop.

In addition to writing, McBride is now busy putting together a 12-piece jazz band for a fall tour of college campuses. He's also looking forward to rewrites on his award-winning musical, "Bobos," about a teenage boy who wants an expensive pair of sneakers.

But the fate of "Miracle at St. Anna" is uppermost in McBride's mind. He's hoping Hollywood will come knocking.

It didn't happen for "Color," which was optioned by Showtime, TNT and ABC, but never filmed.

"Maybe it's just not meant to be a movie," said McBride. "There was a producer who called here a few months ago, all hot and bothered. I didn't even call him back. I feel I've been stood up at the prom too many times."