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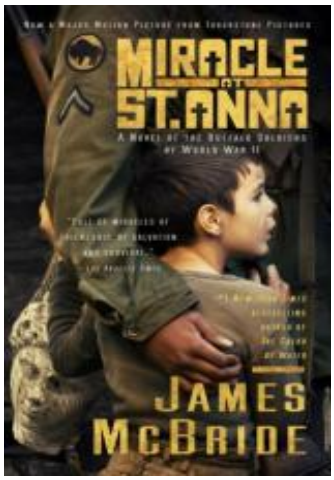
Miracle at St. Anna

by James McBride



About the Book

With his bestselling memoir **The Color of Water**, James McBride created a fascinating story of growing up in the projects of Red Hook, Brooklyn and a vivid portrait of his indomitable mother. Now, in his first novel, he broadens his scope from personal history to the larger history of WWII and the little known role that black soldiers played in it.

The story begins in 1983 with the abrupt and unexplained shooting by Hector Negron, a New York City postal employee, of a man who wanted only to purchase a stamp. Why Hector has killed this man and how he came to possess the head of the statue of the Primavera, which had adorned the Santa Trinita bridge in Florence since the sixteenth century, is the mystery that **Miracle at St. Anna** sets out, in a most circuitous fashion, to solve.

Stepping back forty years, the novel plunges us into the world of the all-Negro 92nd Division, into the fierce fighting of WWII in the mountains of Italy, and into the hearts and minds of four unforgettable soldiers. It is a war in which the unquestioned racial attitudes of 1940s America take on life-and-death consequences on the battlefield, as white commanders willfully jeopardize their black troops. It is, as private Bishop says, "a white man's war.... Niggers ain't got nothing to do with it." But when Sam Train, an illiterate giant of a soldier from North Carolina, saves a white Italian boy from the invading Germans, a journey begins that will take Sam, Bishop, Hector Negron, and Lieutenant Stamps far from their Division commanders to the remote mountain village of St. Anna di Stazzema. Here they will encounter the village witch, a beautiful young woman, partisan fighters led by the legendary "Black Butterfly," and an Italian family that treats them with an equality they have never before experienced. More importantly, it is here, in the aftermath of a brutal Nazi massacre, that they will witness miracles and make the powerful discovery that "everybody got something to do with everything."

With a view of the war that is both panoramic in its sweep and deeply personal in its exploration of the human spirit, **Miracle at St. Anna** brings to life a largely overlooked historical moment and extends the reach of James McBride's considerable storytelling powers.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think McBride chose to frame his WWII story with the post office episode that takes place in 1983? How does this narrative frame clarify or comment on the picture of the war it contains?

2. What knowledge of the African American experience in WWII did you bring to **Miracle at St. Anna**? How did reading the novel deepen your understanding of this aspect of the war?

3. In a fiery argument with Stamps, Bishop says, "So now the great white father sends you out here to shoot Germans so he can hang you back home for looking at his woman wrong.... The Negro don't have doodleysquat to do with this...this devilment, this war-to-free-the-world shit" [p. 147-9]. In what ways does the war reveal the racism and hypocrisy entrenched in American society? How are the black soldiers treated by their white commanders? How are they treated by the Italians? Is Bishop's cynicism justified?

4. Why does Train become so attached to the young Italian boy he rescues? What does the boy offer him that he's never had before? What does Train learn from him? Is the boy, as Train claims, "an angel"?

5. The novel is titled **Miracle at St. Anna** but several miracles occur in the book. Which of these is the miracle referred to in the title? What effects do these events have on those who experience them? Do you think McBride wants us to read them as divine manifestations of God's power or simply as remarkable occurrences?

6. Why does Rudolfo betray the Italian partisan hero Peppi, the "Black Butterfly"? What are the consequences of that betrayal? How is Rudolfo's treachery revealed?

7. Why does McBride tell the history of the statue's head that Train carries with him throughout the war? What does this history add to the story? Is it possible to read the entire novel as a complex elaboration of that statue's journey from a sixteenth-century marble mountain in Carrara, Italy, to late twentieth-century New York City?

8. In the Acknowledgments, McBride says that the book began when he was boy listening to his stepfather and step-uncles tell stories about the war. What struck him most forcefully was not the stories themselves but his Uncle Henry's pride in his service. In what ways does the novel**ó**and its stories of the Buffalo Soldiers of the 92nd Division**ó**reflect that pride?

9. Train, Stamps, Bishop, and Hector are four distinctive and vividly drawn characters. How are they different from one another? What varying attitudes do they have about the war? What larger themes does McBride address through the conflict between Bishop and Stamps?

10. In a moment of mistrust of the Italians, Hector thinks: "He was glad he didn't love anybody. It was easier, safer, not to love somebody, not to have children and raise kids in this crummy world where a Puerto Rican wants to kill an innocent woman for doing nothing more than trying to help him" [p. 138]. Why would Hector feel this way? In what sense is the entire novel about love and the risk of loving?

Author Bio

James McBride, a writer and musician, is a former staff writer for *The Boston Globe*, *People* magazine, and *The Washington Post*. A professional saxophonist and composer, he has received the Richard Rodgers Development Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Music Theater Festival's Stephen Sondheim Award for his work in musical theater composition. He lives in South Nyack, New York.

Critical Praise

"World War II provides a dazzling backdrop for James McBride's first novel."

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