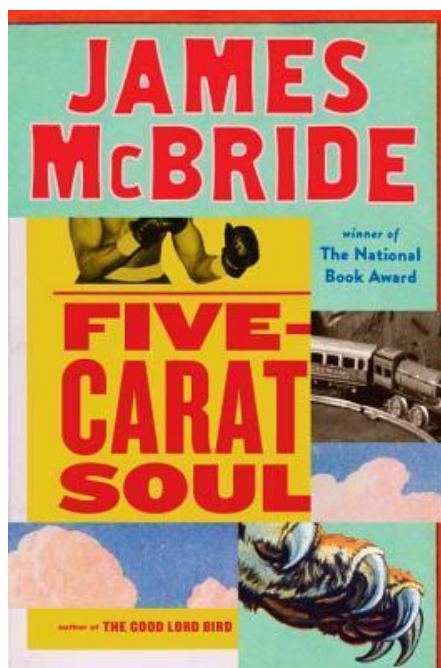




Five-Carat Soul

James McBride

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Exciting new fiction from James McBride, the first since his National Book Award-winning novel *The Good Lord Bird*.

The stories in *Five-Carat Soul*--none of them ever published before--spring from the place where identity, humanity, and history converge. They're funny and poignant, insightful and unpredictable, imaginative and authentic--all told with McBride's unrivaled storytelling skill and meticulous eye for character and detail. McBride explores the ways we learn from the world and the people around us. An antiques dealer discovers that a legendary toy commissioned by Civil War General Robert E. Lee now sits in the home of a black minister in Queens. Five strangers find themselves thrown together and face unexpected judgment. An American president draws inspiration from a conversation he overhears in a stable. And members of The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band recount stories from their own messy and hilarious lives. As McBride did in his National Book award-winning *The Good Lord Bird* and his bestselling *The Color of Water*, he writes with humor and insight about how we struggle to understand who we are in a world we don't fully comprehend. The result is a surprising, perceptive, and evocative collection of stories that is also a moving exploration of our human condition.

Five-Carat Soul Details

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From Reader Review Five-Carat Soul for online ebook

Brad says

Insanely fantastically smart, poignant, and funny (when called for) short stories. James McBride has considerable range as a storyteller and this collection of stories proves that point. I hadn't read Mr. McBride in a while and this collection reminded me, hot damn! the Man can write. Highly recommended!

Tayari Jones says

The best thing about short story collections is also the worst thing. This is that each story is. free-standing entity. You can read it and enjoy it and move on to the next. If you don't enjoy it, you can still move on to the next. I have never read a short story collection that didn't have at least ONE story that I could appreciate.

This collection is full of winners! My favorite stories were the ones in the second half of the book. THE CHRISTMAS DANCE had me sniffing in public. It was so odd-- I knew exactly where the story was going but it broke my heart just the same. My favorite favorite favorite was a long story-- broken into five chapters-- about the secret lives of zoo animals. I know it may sound silly, but it was so smart, funny, and emotional. I just loved it.

The stories in the middle about the young boys in a band were not as moving, but they were still pretty good. My guess is that much will be made about the guy who sells vintage toys and wants to buy Robert E Lee's toy train. I was impressed with that story on a head-level, but my heart was most moved by the stories in the latter half of the book.

Liza Fireman says

I loved the beginning of this book, it was intriguing, well written and I hoped that this time James McBride will win me over. But exactly like in *The Good Lord Bird*, he lost me quite quickly. Actually I didn't even know that it is a book of stories. And I am most of the time not a fan of stories. Few make them awesome (I can mention the exceptional Alice Munro for the millionth time), but the most, just don't.

I liked the beginning, the first story "The Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set". A toy collector, beautifully explains his profession:*Let me explain to you about the worth—and value—of antique toys. I have an art collector friend named Muriel, and we occasionally debate which of our respective trades is more lucrative and important to world history—an argument Muriel almost always wins. But one evening during one of these talks, after consuming a considerable amount of bourbon (which I'd generously supplied), I said: "Muriel, name me one piece of art in the world that is almost beyond wealth in terms of its worth, a piece that captures history's impact on the present. Name me one."*

Muriel sat back thoughtfully, smoking a Gauloise with one hand and holding her glass in the other. "I can think of several," she said. "The Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo's David. Various Impressionists. Monet. Van Gogh. Those are priceless. They all import some kind of history to the present."

"But do they have some kind of intrinsic value? One that you can assign money to?" I asked.

"I suppose so," she said.

"Aha!" I said, pouncing on her weakness. "Therein lies the difference. Antique toys don't work that way.

Toys are priced based on emotion. The ones in the best condition have the saddest stories. The sadder the story, the more valuable the toy. That is a human element and it's one that no painting has. The specific history of sorrow or joy in a child's life, when determining the price, means the sky's the limit. Because there is no limit to sadness at a child's suffering, or the happiness a parent feels at a child's wonder. Thus the emotion contained within the product, when determining the worth of a child's life, is tied to a child's innocence, which gives that product infinite value."

So why did McBride lose me? Maybe because all the stories finished abruptly. Maybe because the stories are very uneven. Mixed bag that didn't keep me interested. About 2.5 stars.

Danny Cerullo says

James McBride is an author who wears his heart on his sleeve and that is an amazingly refreshing thing in a literary scene full of writers trying to out cynic each other. Five-Carat Soul is a collection of fairly simple stories with a ton of heart.

Marlene England says

I'm a big fan of James McBride's writing, so I had high expectations when I dug into the advance copy of FIVE-CARAT SOUL. And I was not disappointed. This is a stellar collection of stories brilliantly told as only McBride can tell them. I enjoyed every page.

Andre says

A new short story collection from the award winning author James McBride. This collection is interesting in that two of the stories stretch over five short chapters. The balance of the book contains standalone stories. The writing is always engaging, inviting and creative with a prose that is artistic. The book starts off with the Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set, a legendary railroad toy set supposedly commissioned by confederate general Robert E. Lee for his son and it was the only one made. It somehow ends up in Queens, NY on top of a refrigerator in the house of a very disinterested Reverend Hart.

This story is narrated in the first person by the Jewish toy dealer Leo Banskoff. This is a great choice to open the collection because it is a hoot. Written with humor, intrigue and mystery, will encourage the reader to want more. And James McBride delivers ever more with the four chapter Five Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band, a group of teens from the Bottom who form a band but rarely ever have gigs and we get a uproarious sendup of the various members lives and situations that could only exist in a place like the Bottom.

There is a five chapter story, Mr. P & the Wind that uses animals in a zoo as the narrators, the first thought is 'oh come on' but McBride makes it work somehow and manages to make you reflect on the possibilities of animal communication. A sure fire bestseller because these stories explore the human, animal, the spirit, heaven, hell and history with a storyteller's fine flair. And the ordering of the stories are just right, starting solid and finishing strong. Do enjoy. Thanks to edelweiss for providing an advanced ecopy in exchange for a fair and honest review. Book publishes Sept. 26, 2017.

Tim says

The first story was best but predictable. The remaining stories were too depressing for my tastes. 3 of 10 stars

Bkwmlee says

3.5 stars

When it comes to fiction books, I tend to prefer novels over short story collections, as I like being able to spend a good amount of time getting to know a character(s) and immersing myself into their story. With short stories, especially ones that feature different characters in each story, this becomes a bit of a challenge – it usually takes a bit more effort and concentration on my part to really get into the stories and hopefully connect with the characters. While I would say that overall, I liked almost all of the stories in James McBride's latest short story collection *Five-Carat Soul*, there were a few that really stood out to me and that I enjoyed reading more than others. My favorites were definitely the first story about the railroad box car set as well as the series of stories about the Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band.

The author James McBride is a wonderful storyteller and obviously one with heart as well. All of the stories in this collection explored different facets of the human condition in a way that was both fascinating and poignant, with well-timed doses of humor throughout (where appropriate of course). Some of the stories were also fun and imaginative, such as the one where the main characters are zoo animals, with the story narrated primarily by a lion (McBride stated in his Author's Note that he wrote this particular story after taking his nephews on a trip to the zoo). There was also a pretty significant historical aspect to the stories, as several of them revolve around important figures and/or events from American history, such as the Civil War and General Robert E Lee, Abraham Lincoln and his famous Emancipation Proclamation, World War II military history, etc. -- some of the stories were also spiritual in nature while others were more philosophical and metaphorical. For me though, I enjoyed the "historical" stories the most, as I'm somewhat of a history buff for one, and two, I wasn't really in the mood for anything too deep or too philosophical at the moment, as I already had a few things going on in my personal life that over-exerted my brain power a bit too much, so in a way, I resented a little having to ponder too deeply with some of the stories. Perhaps if I re-read these stories later on during a different period of my life, I may be able to connect with them a little better.

One of the things that sets McBride's stories apart from other short story collections is his brilliant use of different, distinctive voices for each story. I've read short story collections in the past where it was often difficult to distinguish the narrative voice from one story to another and at times, it caused confusion for me. With McBride's stories, this was never an issue because each of his narrators had a voice that was uniquely their own; not only that -- the writing style was also very different from one story to another, to the point that, at times, it was easy to forget that each story was written by the same author.

The one issue I had with this book was that some of the stories ended a bit too abruptly, sometimes right in the middle of a significant thought or idea, it seemed, and so it gave me the feeling that the stories were incomplete or that there was perhaps something I missed. There were a few times where I turned the page expecting to read more but instead it cut to the next story already, which left me feeling a little jilted – not to mention the slight effort in having to shift gears mentally after realizing I would be reading a completely different story.

Overall, I liked this short story collection well enough, but didn't "love" it like I thought I would. Again, it could just be me though, since there are quite a few 4 and 5 star reviews for this collection from other

readers, so I suggest checking those out as well. Despite my rating, I would still recommend this collection of stories for its varied and interesting take on different societal issues as well as human behavior.

Received advance reader's copy from Riverhead Books (Penguin Publishing Group) via Edelweiss

Faith says

These stories cover a range of places and time periods. Some of them are poignant, charming and surprising, while others are heavy handed and clumsy. For me, the better stories are at the beginning of the book and I particularly liked the first story "The Underground Railroad Box Car Set". Unfortunately, I found "Mr. P and the Wind" to be an unbearable allegory with talking zoo animals. Since it was the final, and longest, story in the book it left me with a poor impression. However, overall there was a lot more good than bad with this collection.

Demi says

My book club picks some incredible books. This collection of short stories is marvelous—poignant and unexpected, culminating in a fable that left me feeling heartbroken and hopeful at once.

Diane S ? says

4.5 McBride shows us in this fantastic grouping of stories, a wide range of experiences from the viewpoint of blacks. They cover different points of history, from the Civil War and on. The Five-Carat Soul was the band name of a group of youths, starting from the age of nine, telling of life in the Bottoms, the section of a town in Pennsylvania that they called home. There are several of these connecting stories, narrated by a young boy called, Butter. Chronicling daily life but also some notable happenings. I enjoyed these stories, very realistically portrayed and experiencing them from the viewpoint of a young boy made them even more noteworthy.

I did, however, have three favorites. The first story about a white toy collector who covers and has the opportunity it to acquire a one of a kind train set. Made to order for Robert E. Lee, who gave it to his young son, it is discovered in the home of a black preacher. What happens is surprising and the ending even more so. Two stories made me cry. One set shortly after the Civil War and concerns a young boy named Abe Lincoln. Some of the black soldiers tell him his daddy, Abe Lincoln would be visiting soon. The boy believes him, and in fact Abe does come, accompanied by someone unexpected. The ending of the story is also unexpected. The second story is the Christmas dance and the story within is told by a few men who had been part of the Buffalo Soldiers. Again the ending is unexpected and quite beautiful.

This may be my favorite book of short stories this year. Though will admit that I didn't care for the last, those were a bit of a let down. All in all though these stories are in and of themselves complete, something that in shorts is not always the case. I think McBride is a natural born storyteller, which is what makes this genre a perfect fit.

ARC from Edelweiss.

BookBully says

Following up a National Book Award Winner can't be an easy task for any author. Luckily, James McBride delivers with FIVE-CARAT SOUL, a collection of short stories. Some stand on their own while others are linked. No matter, with possibly one exception (sorry, "The Moaning Bench") these are stories to savor and enjoy.

Right out of the gate, I laughed out loud in several spots while reading "The Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set," the tale of a toy collector and his Great White Whale. The next four selections are linked and follow a pre-teen and his group of friends/bandmates as they struggle to grow up in The Bottom, a lower income neighborhood. And the last four stories, under the title of "Mr. P & The Wind," are narrated by a beleaguered lion living inside a zoo. The "Mr. P" of the title arrives in the first selection and changes the lives of each and every captured animal.

Fans of THE GOOD LORD BIRD will recognize McBride's sly humor and attention to the tiny details that inform his characters. Recommended for short story lovers, especially fans of Tim Gautreaux and Ron Rash.

Trish says

On his website James McBride has a short biographical video in which he talks about his mother, his music, and his writing. Every one of the twelve kids in his New York City family growing up played music and read books. McBride himself plays saxophone, and played in a traveling band while writing his first book, The Color of Water. McBride says "we're all the same...there's none of that black and white stuff when one gets to the nursing homes...they're all just happy their body parts are still functioning." That may well be, but please let's not wait that long to get past race.

McBride's yarn-spinning tone is in full voice right from the first story, "The Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set," where we learn about the fabulously valuable toy railroad set made for General Robert E. Lee's five-year-old son Graham by Horace Smith, of Smith & Wesson fame. Rumors of the train set swirled for more than a century before a photograph of it appeared one day at the home of a seller of vintage toys living in Buck's Country, Pennsylvania.

The very finest stories in this collection come at the end, including "Mr. P & The Wind," a fable which really should be published as a stand-alone paperback storybook for adults with pen-and-ink drawings, like that of Chekov or Kipling at the end of the 19th Century. In this story, animals residing in a zoo discuss their lives before zoo-dom, what their real natures are like, and their understanding of reincarnation. One thing they'd learned very well in the zoo was that humans—the Smelly Ones—were able to kill expeditiously but they had little to no understanding of the Order of Life.

This piece ranks as a bedtime story for grownups, a just-long-enough, miraculously inoffensive and reassuring vehicle for dispensing wisdom and life experience, certainly exceeding the feel-good but ultimately empty bloviation of the Dr. Seuss book often gifted at graduations, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* The animals communicate in Thought Shapes which do not register to humans who have not learned the language. In this way, whales can communicate with lions and panthers, difficult and exciting though that is to comprehend. A Smelly One, Mr. P, learns to Thought Shape.

Four of the stories in this collection center around the five-and-a-half-member Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band, and we could see what they were learning from their neighborhood: Pig and Dirt were former members, Bunny, Dex, half-member Ray-Ray, Beanie, Goat, and Butter, our narrator. The time was different back then, when the band practiced over Mr. Woo's grocery, before Mr. Woo killed "Buck Boy," who had tried to rob him.

Then there was "Blub" the young man the band boys always thought was younger. He had a tender heart and was easily led, and ended up working a murder charge until Butter could tell the court a story about Blub back when he gave more love than he got, back when a girl with a cat could darn near break his heart. "It ain't him," Butter would testify. "They got the wrong man."

In "The Moaning Bench" we get a whiff of the everlasting...the everlasting hellfire that awaits those who have not examined what it means to be penitent. In "The Christmas Dance" we review again the role of black soldiers in Italy during the Second World War. Two survivors of a horribly-ravaged regiment were surprised in a 1944 Christmas Day attack that took out most of their fellow soldiers. On Christmas Day every year they get together to dance, and to remember.

Two stories tell of Abraham Lincoln, whose difficult choices and grief binds him to us even now. "The Fish Man Angel" was my second favorite story in the collection. Lincoln's loss is palpable as he curls up in the stable with his dead boy Wille's favorite pony, sharing loneliness and warmth. From that vantage point he overhears the cruelty of one black man speaking to another and fixes that problem at least.

The second of the Lincoln stories, "Father Abe," describes a young mixed-race orphan called Abe Lincoln seeking clarification about his parentage: surely if his name is the same as the president, wouldn't that man would be his father? The 9th Louisiana Colored Infantry Regiment, briefly and exhaustedly paused in Richmond, VA near the end of the war, found Little Abe persistent in his demand to know which man was his father.

Stories like these seem designed to entrance even much-older children who have their own children. That's the thing about McBride. His writing allows adults time to relax, to play a little. He feeds our credulous, childlike selves; we put aside his work to think on it a bit. McBride has a reservoir of humor and goodwill that saves his work from both despair and from too great an optimism.

Ken says

My first McBride (as I did not read the much-lauded *Good Lord Bird*), *Five-Carat Soul* is an eclectic mix of shorts--one of those deals where you average stars because it scores 5 on technical merit and 3 on entertainment value.

Some of the stories are set in our time, some in history, and some in a fantasy world of sorts. The opener, about a toy collector who's on to the Holy Grail of toys (a toy train once owned by Robert E. Lee, of all people), gets the set off to a peppy start but ends rather flat. You know. Where you scratch your head and say, "Really? That's the best you can do? Then you're trying too hard."

Two of the stories are extended and divided into chapters--the eponymous one, about young boys who are pals and supposedly form a band (though the band figures precious little here) and the finale, which offers animals in a zoo who communicate in "Thought Speak." Shades of *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. Humans are called "Smelly Ones" and are, in most respects, inferior to animals (called "Higher Orders"). Shades of *Gulliver's Travels* with its witty Houyhnhnms. I don't know. It all sort of got out of control and everybody

thought spoke too much for their own good.

More enjoyable was "Father Abe" (shades of Lincoln in the Bardo), which features Honest Abe visiting the stable to see son Tad's pony after son Tad dies. Abe overhears some of the slaves chatting it up, esp. a father-son duo meant to add poignancy to the father-no-son duo.

The collection has been compared to Twain and, in its way, that's a valid claim. Check out the dialect. McBride is a cool hand with the dialect. And Twain was a big fan of animals as higher-ups in the scheme of things. The damned human race did little for Mark (except provide big fat satirical targets).

A rather quick, sprightly read. Some Civil War, some contemporary, and some zooey. Overall, a worthwhile collection. You'll like some more than others, but show me a short story collection where that is NOT the case and I'll make you mayor.

Renee says

4.5

Some of the most poignant, insightful and unpredictable stories I have ever read; I enjoyed each and everyone one of them. James McBride has an unrivaled storytelling skill and meticulous eye for character and detail.

I listened to this book on audio and the narrations were top notch.
