

# *Deacon King Kong* by James McBride

Martin County Library System Book Club Kit:

## *Deacon King Kong* by James McBride

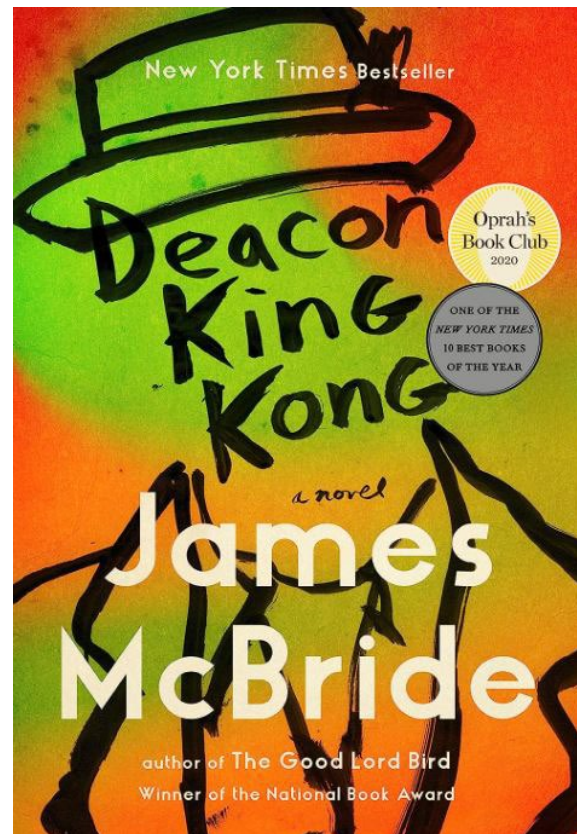
Included in the Kit:

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### Book summary

In September 1969, a fumbling, cranky old church deacon known as Sportcoat shuffles into the courtyard of the Cause Houses housing project in south Brooklyn, pulls a .38 from his pocket, and in front of everybody shoots the project's drug dealer at point-blank range.

The reasons for this desperate burst of violence and the consequences that spring from it lie at the heart of *Deacon King Kong*, James McBride's funny, moving novel and his first since his National Book Award-winning *The Good Lord Bird*. In *Deacon King Kong*, McBride brings to vivid life the people affected by the shooting: the victim, the African-American and Latinx residents who witnessed it, the white neighbors, the local cops assigned to investigate, the members of the



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Five Ends Baptist Church where Sportcoat was deacon, the neighborhood's Italian mobsters, and Sportcoat himself.

As the story deepens, it becomes clear that the lives of the characters—caught in the tumultuous swirl of 1960s New York—overlap in unexpected ways. When the truth does emerge, McBride shows us that not all secrets are meant to be hidden, that the best way to grow is to face change without fear, and that the seeds of love lie in hope and compassion.

Source: Author's website ([jamesmcbride.com/deacon-king-kong/](http://jamesmcbride.com/deacon-king-kong/))





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## Meet the Author

James McBride is an award-winning author, musician, and screenwriter. His landmark memoir, *The Color of Water*, published in 1996, has sold millions of copies and spent more than two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Considered an American classic, it is read in schools and universities across the United States.

His debut novel, *Miracle at St. Anna*, was turned into a 2008 film by Oscar-winning writer and director Spike Lee, with a script written by McBride. His

2013 novel, *The Good Lord Bird*, about American abolitionist John Brown, won the National Book Award for Fiction and will be a Showtime limited series in fall 2020 starring Ethan Hawke.

McBride has been a staff writer for *The Boston Globe*, *People Magazine*, and *The Washington Post*, and his work has appeared in *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New York Times*. His 2007 *National Geographic* story "Hip Hop Planet" is considered an important examination of African American music and culture. A noted musician and composer, McBride has toured as a saxophonist sideman with jazz legend Jimmy Scott, among other musicians. He has written songs for Anita Baker, Grover Washington Jr., Pura Fé, Gary Burton, and even for the PBS television character "Barney." (He did not write the "I Love You" song for Barney, but he wishes he did.) He received the Stephen Sondheim Award and the Richard Rodgers Foundation Horizon Award for his musical *Bobos*, co-written with playwright Ed Shockley. His 2003 *Riffin'* and *Pontificatin'* musical tour was filmed for a nationally televised Comcast documentary. He has been featured on





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national radio and television in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. He often does his public readings accompanied by a band.

In addition to being an author and a musician, McBride has other attributes. He admits to being the worst dancer in the history of African Americana, bar none (he claims he should be legally barred from dancing at any event he attends). And when he takes off his hat, fleas fly out. Little things, little talents.

A native New Yorker and a graduate of New York City public schools, McBride studied composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio and received his master's degree at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. In 2015, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama "for humanizing the complexities of discussing race in America." He holds several honorary doctorates and is currently a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University.

Source: Author's website ([jamesmcbride.com/bio/](http://jamesmcbride.com/bio/))



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## Discussion Questions

1. The first line of the *Deacon King Kong* is: “Deacon Cuffy Lambkin of Five Ends Baptist Church became a walking dead man on a cloudy September afternoon in 1969.” How did that opening strike you when you began reading? What do you think of it now that you’ve finished the novel?
2. *Deacon King Kong* is full of overlapping stories of a Brooklyn neighborhood in 1969. What parts of these characters’ lives struck you as memorable or surprising?
3. Cuffy “Sportcoat” Lambkin is at the center of *Deacon King Kong*, yet he’s not a completely likable character. How do Sportcoat’s flaws affect you? Do they make him more annoying than interesting?
4. Five Ends Baptist Church is one of the cornerstones of the neighborhood. How important do you think the church is to its members? To the neighborhood? To the characters in the novel who don’t belong?
5. *Deacon King Kong* explores the lives of the residents of the Cause Houses beyond just Sportcoat. Which character struck you as one you’d like to know more about? What behavior or trait drew you to him/her?
6. Deems Clemens and Frank Elefante are two characters that the others are afraid of. Do you think that fear is justified?
7. Elefante is tasked with finding something that his father kept for a friend from prison -- “a real treasure ... [that] will fit in the palm of your hand.” His searching leads him to unexpected places and people. What to you was the most interesting part of his search?
8. *Deacon King Kong* is the story of several communities whose lives overlap and sometimes bump against each other: the people who live in the Cause Houses, the members of Five Ends Baptist Church, the drug dealer and his posse, the cops in the neighborhood, the Italians who remain as the neighborhood changes. What did you find interesting about how the communities relate to each other?





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9. Throughout the novel McBride shows us how different characters connect with each another in unexpected ways. Which of the novel's relationship did you find most interesting? Most surprising?
10. The novel is full of some memorable names. Which one is your favorite?
11. James McBride uses humor throughout *Deacon King Kong* -- to amuse, to highlight, to reveal. Which scenes or passages did you find particularly funny?
12. How did McBride's writing affect you as a reader?
13. What surprised you about the novel? What surprised you about how the characters ended up?
14. *Deacon King Kong* takes place in 1969, just weeks after men walked on the moon for the first time and the Woodstock music festival took place. Why do you think McBride chose not to keep details of what was happening in the wider world out of the novel?
15. If someone asked you to describe the novel in one sentence, what would you say?

Source: Milton Public Library ([miltonlibrary.libguides.com/BookClubGuides/DeaconKingKing](http://miltonlibrary.libguides.com/BookClubGuides/DeaconKingKing))

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## Recipes

Pigs in Blankets (from Martha Stewart's *Appetizers*, 2015)

- All-purpose flour, for surface
- 2 sheets puff pastry (about 1 pound), preferably all-butter
- Honey Dijon mustard
- 18 fully cooked sausages (each about 5 inches long), such as frankfurters, Andouille, or chicken sausages
- 1 large egg, beaten
- Poppy seeds, for sprinkling (optional)
- Flaky sea salt, such as Maldon, for sprinkling (optional)
- Mustards, such as brown or whole-grain, for serving (optional)



On a lightly floured work surface, roll each pastry sheet out into a 12-inch square, then cut into 4-inch squares. Lightly brush lower half of each square with mustard, center a sausage on mustard-coated edge, and brush top inch with egg. Roll sausages in pastry, pressing seams to tightly seal. Brush tops with egg, then sprinkle with poppy seeds or flaky salt. Cut each at an angle into thirds. Freeze pigs in blankets, uncovered, on a parchment-lined baking sheet until firm. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place frozen pigs in blankets 1 inch apart on parchment-lined baking sheets. Bake until pastry is puffed and golden brown, about 25 minutes. Serve warm with mustards.

Source: Milton Public Library ([miltonlibrary.libguides.com/BookClubGuides/DeaconKingKing](http://miltonlibrary.libguides.com/BookClubGuides/DeaconKingKing))

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## Dark & Stormy Mocktail

- 60ml – Lyre’s spiced cane spirit
- 15ml – Lime juice
- 90ml – Ginger beer (try Artisan Fiery Ginger Beer)
- 7.5ml – Vanilla syrup
- Ice cubes
- Lime wheel to garnish

Add all the above ingredients to a highball glass.  
Stir until blended and then add a few ice cubes  
and garnish with the lime.



Source: mydrybar ([mydrybar.com/best-rum-mocktails/](http://mydrybar.com/best-rum-mocktails/))

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