



The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store

James McBride

A big-hearted, neighborly novel set in a 1920s-30s Pennsylvania town where a Jewish-owned grocery store anchors a community of immigrants and Black residents who look out for one another. It is the kind of book that feels like pulling up a chair at someone's kitchen table.

Reading level: Moderate

Best for: clubs who love character-driven stories with heart, humor, and a strong sense of neighborhood

Discussion

WARM-UP

1. Settle in with your drink and tell us: what was the first scene that made you feel cozy or at home in this book?
2. If you could pop into Chicken Hill for an afternoon, which character would you most want to share a slice of pie with, and what would you talk about?

DIGGING IN

1. The grocery store is a gathering place. Where in your own life have you found a 'Heaven and Earth' spot, a place where people just take care of each other?
2. Which small act of kindness in the story stayed with you the longest, and why do you think it landed so softly?
3. McBride writes neighbors who look out for one another across all kinds of differences. What did reading those moments feel like, and did any of them remind you of people in your own life?
4. Food, music, and gossip move through these pages constantly. Which sensory detail comforted you the most as a reader?

GOING DEEP

1. There is a lot of quiet grief tucked inside the warmth of this book. How did McBride hold both at once for you, and how did that mix sit with you when you closed the cover?
2. By the end, what did this story leave you feeling about community and what we owe each other? Did any part of it gently shift how you want to show up for the people around you?

On the table

🍽️ **Warm challah with butter and honey**

A nod to the Jewish heart of the grocery store, and the easiest comfort on a plate

🍲 **Slow-cooked beef stew with potatoes and carrots**

Depression-era stick-to-your-ribs cooking that suits a Pennsylvania winter and a long, gentle chat

🍰 **Apple cobbler with vanilla ice cream**

Homey orchard dessert that feels like a neighbor brought it over still warm

To sip

🍷 **Hot spiced apple cider (no alcohol)**

Non-alcoholic, served in mugs, smells like the whole house is hugging you

🍵 **Honey chamomile tea (no alcohol)**

Soft, grandmotherly, perfect for the slow middle stretch of conversation

🍷 **Bourbon with a splash of cider**

A little warmth for the grown-ups, in the spirit of back-porch sipping

Run of show

7:00 Arrive and nest

Greet folks at the door with cider, point to the stew, let everyone settle into soft seats with blankets nearby

7:20 Bowls and warm-up

Once everyone has food, do the two warm-up questions while people eat

7:45 Heart of the conversation

Move through the four theme questions slowly, no rush, let tangents about real life happen

8:30 Cobbler and the deep cut

Bring out dessert and tea, then ease into the two deep questions in softer light

9:00 Trivia and scorecards

Light, low-stakes trivia round, then pass out scorecards and bookmarks

9:20 Linger and leftovers

Send people home with cobbler in to-go containers and the next book pick

HOST TIPS

- Lower the lights, add a couple of lamps and candles, and have blankets within reach so people physically relax
- Cook the stew the day before so the house smells like home when guests arrive and you are not stuck at the stove
- Let silences breathe; cozy nights are about feelings, so do not rush to fill every pause

Playlist

warm, vintage, front-porch Americana with a little klezmer and gospel soul

01 Sentimental Journey - Doris Day

03 Take My Hand, Precious Lord - Mahalia Jackson

05 Dream a Little Dream of Me - Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong

07 Stardust - Nat King Cole

02 Bei Mir Bistu Shein - The Andrews Sisters

04 Moon River - Audrey Hepburn

06 What a Wonderful World - Louis Armstrong

08 Will the Circle Be Unbroken - The Carter Family

Trivia

1. Who is the author of The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store? (James McBride)
2. In what U.S. state is the fictional town of Pottstown, where the novel is set, located? (Pennsylvania)
3. What is the name of the hillside neighborhood where much of the story takes place? (Chicken Hill)
4. The novel is largely set in which decade between the world wars? (The 1920s and 1930s)
5. James McBride is also well known for which 1995 memoir about his mother? (The Color of Water)
6. Besides writing, McBride is also a professional musician on what instrument? (Saxophone)
7. The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store won which major U.S. book prize in 2023, awarded by the Kirkus organization? (The Kirkus Prize for Fiction)
8. Two of the central communities living side by side on Chicken Hill are Jewish immigrants and which other group? (African American residents)

Rate the book

Coziness ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Characters You'd Hug ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Sense of Place ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Heart ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Lingering Warmth ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

One word for how this book made me feel: _____

The character I want to bring soup to: _____

A scene I will think about on a quiet evening: _____

YOU'RE INVITED

Pull Up a Chair at the Grocery Store

Come for stew, cider, and a slow, kind conversation about James McBride's *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*. Wear something soft and bring your appetite.



Plan your own book club night

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