



James McBride
The Color of Water

The First Year Experience at FGCU

Summer 2003 Reading Assignment

Welcome to Florida Gulf Coast University's First Year Experience. In order to foster a greater sense of community and to initiate students into university level learning, all incoming Freshmen will read James McBride's *The Color of Water*. This autobiographical work will provide a foundation for two courses that all students will take in the fall—IDS 1301 Styles and Ways of Learning and ENC 1101 Composition I. In addition, all Freshmen will be expected to attend the Freshman Convocation on Sunday, September 14, where James McBride will be the keynote speaker.

The purpose of the First Year Experience is to assist high school seniors as they transition into a university community where they will encounter new social experiences and where the intellectual expectations are more rigorous. Reading McBride's *The Color of Water* will help create a community of learners by providing Freshmen and the faculty at Florida Gulf Coast University with a common text to discuss.

Some Guidelines For Critical Reading and Thinking About Literature

Before you begin reading *The Color of Water* and considering the questions outlined below, it is important to understand why we read and how we go about reading in a productive and constructive way. Literature helps a reader explore what it means to be human and provides the opportunity for learning and self-understanding. Readers often try and make sense of texts by making connections with other works they've read or with their own experiences.

When we think critically about literature we build on our personal responses—recording them, reviewing them, discussing them, and supporting them with evidence found in the text itself. Critical thinking/reading does not mean searching for one right answer. There may be as many answers as there are readers. Your best answers are those that analyze and articulate your responses in light of supporting evidence from the text itself. This is critical thinking, a process that can make your opinions about literature well-informed ones.

Writing is an excellent way to learn about literature and to learn about the self. As you read, make notes in the margins, underline passages that speak to you or seem particularly important, commenting on themes, ideas, and issues that you wish to return to later. Write your ideas down as you read so that you can use that information to shape your response to the work and so that you can share your responses with others in class. Much of what we learn is also learned through conversations. Sharing responses with others, and listening to their feedback, helps readers and writers to clarify ideas and expand initial responses.

Among the many factors that influence our response to literature is identification with characters, circumstances, and issues. Our personalities, backgrounds, and experiences can and will have a strong impact on these connections. Further, by showing us a view of life that is different from our own, literature might influence our beliefs and behaviors. We often learn from literature as we learn from life itself. Who we are and how we respond to literature is influenced by many factors. Family, religion, race, gender, friends, and our own experiences help shape our views in significant ways.

The Assignments

With this information in mind, critically and carefully read James McBride's novel, *The Color of Water*. As you read, consider the following themes and highlight passages in the text that examine those themes. These themes will be discussed in your Styles and Ways of Learning and your Composition I classes, so you will be expected to be able to locate passages and trace themes across the book during the fall semester.

- 1.) *The Color of Water* describes the author's and his mother's engagement with diverse cultures. What does the text suggest about cultural diversity? What can we learn from the text about the development of personal identity in relation to diverse cultures? Identify specific passages that focus on cultural diversity. Ultimately, explore the connections you are able to make between these ideas and your own life.
- 2.) Consider how the author discusses the development of his sense of identity. What does the text reveal about the author's experience with issues of personal identity? Locate passages that focus on conflicting ideas about identity and the development of new perspectives about the self. Think about how you have dealt with such issues in your own life.
- 3.) What was McBride's own experience with education? Consider how we learn and what we learn from the world around us in relation to the ideas found in this autobiographical work. Identify specific passages in the text that focus on the theme of education. Finally, consider your own experiences and the role education has played in your own life.
- 4.) What does the text reveal about McBride's ideas regarding community? What does community mean to him? To his mother? To his siblings? Identify specific passages from the text that examine the role of community. Consider how you define community and the role community has played in your own life.

Assignment for Composition I

Consider what McBride suggests about cultural diversity in his work and write a 3-4 page, double spaced essay that analyzes his discussion of cultural diversity and connects that discussion to your own life. Before you begin to write, you might research some definitions of cultural diversity and spend some time discussing the role of cultural diversity with your family and friends. In your essay, be certain to refer to specific sections from the text that illustrate your thesis, as well as specific aspects of your own life. Your essay should be typed, thoughtfully revised, and ready to be turned in on the first day of class.

Assignment for Styles and Ways of Learning

Consider what McBride suggests about how we come to be who we are and write a 3-4 page, double-spaced essay that analyzes the role and importance of family and family heritage, of asking questions (of yourself and of others), and of education in the development of your own identity and sense of self. Consider how your identity influences the way you view and approach your education. As a part of this exercise, engage those who raised you and who had the most influence on you in this exploration. Talk with them over dinner, interview them, call or e-mail those who may not be nearby. Use specific sections from the text to support your own ideas and the feedback you get from others about yourself. Your essay should be typed, thoughtfully revised, and ready to be turned in on the first day of class.

Each of your essays should be carefully written, with a clear introduction that concludes with a strong and focused thesis statement (underline or bold your thesis statement); a strong body with at least three to five paragraphs and good topic sentences; and a strong conclusion that sums up your discussion. You should consider the audience for this essay to be your fellow incoming freshman; as you write your essay consider what your purpose might be in writing this essay—what would you want to communicate to your audience about these topics? Make certain that you cite all sources correctly using MLA documentation (see **Documentation for Essays** in *Quick Links* section of the website).