



Song Yet Sung

James McBride

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From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Good Lord Bird*, winner of the 2013 National Book Award for Fiction.

In the days before the Civil War, a runaway slave named Liz Spocott breaks free from her captors and escapes into the labyrinthine swamps of Maryland's eastern shore, setting loose a drama of violence and hope among slave catchers, plantation owners, watermen, runaway slaves, and free blacks. Liz is near death, wracked by disturbing visions of the future, and armed with "the Code," a fiercely guarded cryptic means of communication for slaves on the run. Liz's flight and her dreams of tomorrow will thrust all those near her toward a mysterious, redemptive fate.

Filled with rich, true details—much of the story is drawn from historical events—and told in McBride's signature lyrical style, *Song Yet Sung* is a story of tragic triumph, violent decisions, and unexpected kindness.

Song Yet Sung Details

Date : Published February 5th 2008 by Riverhead Hardcover (first published June 30th 2001)

ISBN : 9781594489723

Author : James McBride

Format : Hardcover 368 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Cultural, African American

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From Reader Review Song Yet Sung for online ebook

tamia says

I'll be honest, after Barack Obama won the election on 11/4/08 the LAST thing I wanted to do was read a book about the antebellum South. But alas, Song Yet Sung was the next reading in my African American women's bookclub. However I am so incredibly happy I read this book. The story is nothing short of captivating. It is extremely thought provoking.

Author James McBride does an amazing job of illustrating the complexities of slavery. By the end of the book I couldn't hate the slave owners or the slave hunters. Like the slaves, they were caught in a system that was far greater and far more powerful than any of them. Granted there is an obvious right and wrong - black and white (no pun intended) - when it comes to denying freedom to a race of people and treating them as animals, servants, and commodity. Slavery WAS an economic reality in the South (that also drove the economy in the North but he doesn't go there) that took nothing short of a war to end.

McBride doesn't let anyone off the hook. This isn't the story of evil White people. Slaves were slave hunters as well. McBride shows us how easily Blacks along with Whites believed a brazen lie: that it was ok to enslave a race of people because they WERE "less than" in every way.

...he also shows us how clearly that was far from truth. For anyone let alone hundreds of slaves to escape took courage, strength, wisdom, and strategy beyond comprehension. I don't want to give too much away but whether or not there really was a "code" we know some covert mode of communication existed that was created and carried out by cunning and ingenious souls.

The story itself is wonderfully told. Once you get to the chase it's hard to put the book down. McBride is a musician and that's obvious. Through McBride's descriptions I can only imagine the beauty of Maryland's Eastern Shore juxtaposed the ugliness and brutality slavery.

Liz's visions show us that we need to be ever vigilant. Just as slavery was an insidious cancerous epidemic way back when, so are poverty, racism, violence, and illiteracy today.

My only issue is that the story is tough to follow sometimes. The vernacular isn't from 2008 (understandably so) and McBride doesn't believe in quotation marks. The latter forced me to read back every now and again to catch who was saying what.

All in all though this is a great book.

Amy says

I picked this one up at a local used bookstore awhile ago and tried to read it but just couldn't get into it. Then, I saw a few goodreads friends had read it and enjoyed it so I decided to give it another chance. And, I'm

soooo glad that I did. I think I just wasn't in the right place to read it earlier.

But, this read was wonderful! I really enjoyed the book - the writing alone is outstanding. I was amazed at the luscious writing ... the descriptions of time and place were just amazingly well written. The author was able to describe the place in a way that just made me feel that I was there, experiencing every single, beautiful word. And, then, by putting that beautiful place up against the brutal and ugly world of slavery, McBride was able bring that time in our history alive for me.

The story is focused on the complexities of slavery - the system, the brutality. And it really brings all of it to life. And I was glad that McBride seemed to bring to focus the fact that no one was able to break the chains of the system - white or black. This was not a book focused on the evil of the white man - it was focused on the evil of SLAVERY itself. No blame really - just a exploration of the system and its complexities. That was quite refreshing and gave me a different perspective that usually seen in books about this time in history.

One element that I really found interesting was how McBride gave the reader a view modern-day African American society through the eyes of a slave. Those passages were fascinating to me. Those visions haunted me and gave me so much to think about.

I really enjoyed this book - very compelling and interesting. I definitely recommend it!

April Cote says

The beginning of the story was promising. A chase begins and you start to hope people escape. The chase goes on, and on, and on....and I hate to say it but I was bored. The ending was anticlimactic for me. I really had to push myself to finish this one.

Naomi Shank says

I listened to this audio CD while commuting to and from work and I was captivated at every sitting. The richness of the characters with their strengths, flaws, pride and foibles, the brutality and terror that was predominant during that period, the mysterious, spiritual and clairvoyant aspects of the slaves' inner world all engaged me deeply in this superbly written novel about the hunt for a beautiful escaped female slave on Maryland's eastern shore a decade before the Civil War and how she is protected by a network of slaves who all abide by "the code" . James McBride's lush and detailed descriptions of the scenery and terrain drew me completely into setting; his chalky, accented, gruff slang of the period made the character's and their stories feel uniquely realistic and I loved how he developed each character in a multi-layered fashion; drawing out their humanity and emotions at just the right moments in the story. The plot twisted and turned so much that I was always on the edge of my seat!

The topic of escaped slaves, and their harrowing, highly-risky journeys to freedom and the vicious greed of slave hunters who are determined to outwit them and break them down, and their courageous protectors' psychology, is one that is rarely discussed in the mainstream, when thinking about America's historical past. The interweaving of relationships between black and white, is much more intimate and complex than the master vs. slave framework and McBride's novel is a testament to how closely interwoven their relationships are. I was also very pleased to see how McBride brought out the African values of the slaves - values of

loyalty, belief in God and the ability to emphasize the good in others, that I experienced when I lived in Africa.

Margaret says

Song Yet Sung

Book Summary:

In the days before the Civil War, a runaway slave named Liz Spocott breaks free from her captors and escapes into the labyrinthine swamps of Maryland's eastern shore, setting loose a drama of violence and hope among slave catchers, plantation owners, watermen, runaway slaves, and free blacks. Liz is near death, wracked by disturbing visions of the future, and armed with "the Code," a fiercely guarded cryptic means of communication for slaves on the run. Liz's flight and her dreams of tomorrow will thrust all those near her toward a mysterious, redemptive fate.

My Review

I had a little difficulty with this book due to the writing style and commentary. I'm used to light flowing writing and this was more poetic and a little heavy. Reading about slavery and the evil associated with it is always difficult for me. With that said, I did end up finishing the book and I liked it.

The character of Liz was very interesting, she was called the Dreamer because of her strange dreams. Her dreams told of an indescribable future, one where young black men are loud and angry. Others where young black men helped others to look towards hope and promise. I thought it was brilliant to tie the past and the present together in this way. It was apparent that those who heard the dream didn't always understand what she was seeing but they knew she was seeing something. For me, the dreams were a sign of hope for the future.

I also found the concept of the code intriguing. When under pressure, people become resourceful or they die. It's long been said that slaves could communicate and send messages faster than the white man could move from plantation to plantation. I love how that was woven into this story. True or not it was a very creative element.

Overall the book struck a chord in me. A desire to know more about the times that are so painful in my history. There is a need to know where we came from in order to teach our children, to guide them, to keep them from falling in to an entirely different form of slavery.

From a Christian Perspective>

There was one passage that really jumped out at me:

"It's God's world. He washes you clean. He makes you whole. He puts rain in your garden and sunshine in your heart. Just pray when you get free, child. Pray for what you done, and what you gonna do." Song Yet Sung, James McBride

That passage really says so much in so few words. We have been washed in the blood, cleansed from

our sins, our hearts filled with joy. Prayer is what keeps us connected to Him. We need Him for guidance! We can't move forward without him!

Love & Blessings,
Margaret

Jackie says

I thought this book was absolutely ingenious. It's easy to read and yet its content is complex. It captured my attention at the very beginning and demanded its own quiet time. It's not the typical slave story, which is one thing that grabbed me and held me. Liz is "the Dreamer", who has a hand in helping free the slaves, no one knows how she fits into the scheme of things, they just know she's a part of the process. She is told the Code the slaves use to make their way to freedom by an elderly woman she meets while in the captivity of a slave catcher. Liz doesn't understand the Code but gains some understanding along the way.

Liz's dreams allowed her to see our present. I've often wondered what the slaves would think if they could see us now. It was Liz's dreams, the telling of her dreams, and the reactions to her dreams that was most significant for me in this novel. I think McBride effectively showed how complicated the relationships were as well as the inner turmoil many probably felt at the time. He did a good job of setting the scenes and injecting the history of the watermen and the slave catchers.

Johnny D says

Mr. McBride, I assume that you regularly check out goodreads.com to see what the readership is saying about your work. I'm sure every criticism lobbed against your books stings you to your very core.

No doubt as you are trying to drift off to sleep you do so only after darkly pondering, "what did Barbara from Dallas mean when she said that I used chocolate as an adjective too many times. And, man, should I really listen to Trevor S. and censor my use of the n-word?"

I'm also certain that you love all the positive feedback, so I'll start with that. Sir, you tell a good tale. I thoroughly enjoyed the story. I loved the magic realism, I loved the dreams, and I thought the dialogue was generally quite good. I especially enjoyed the portrayal of the secret communication among the black Americans.

I do have a minor quibble, though. Oh, you know this was coming, didn't you?

Mr. McBride, you seriously need to work on your similes.

There, I said it.

There are two in particular that stick out in my mind - "her face was as smooth as ice cream." This one isn't

so bad. I see that you tried to avoid the cliché "as smooth as cream" but you still managed to leave me confused. Were you saying that her face was smooth, creamy and cold? Just how smooth was ice cream in Antebellum Maryland? Was her face a little bit sticky? What flavour are we talking here? Alright, I admit I probably thought a little too hard on this one so you can get away with it, I guess.

This next one, though, you're not getting away with - "as silent as a summer's night." Mr. McBride, I like alliteration as next as the next man but, for goodness sakes, summer nights are not silent at all. Between the frogs, the crickets, the raccoons, and the drunken college students, summer nights are quite noisy. Winter's nights, on the other hand, are usually rather quiet, especially if there's fresh snow. In future editions you might want to change this one to "as silent as a snowy night." That one's free. I admit it's not very good, but it's still about ten times better than the one you used.

To conclude, Mr. McBride, you can just message me if you need any help with your similes in future books.

You're welcome.

Suzanne says

Liz Spocott is a runaway slave in 1850 Maryland. She is shot in the head and captured by slave traders, when she manages to escape, setting free the other captures slaves at the same time. In McBride's novel, we are brought into the heart of slavery, and see it in total truth. We see that blacks could be loyal to their masters and not want to leave, and white owners who didn't always feel as if their slaves were merely property. McBride isn't saying that slavery wasn't bad, but that it's effect on everyone wasn't clear-cut, as we might view it today.

The character Liz Spocott is given visions (much like Harriet Tubman), but in her visions, she sees images of the future. Just like a 21st century person seeing images of slavery, Liz cannot fully process what she is seeing, and becomes convinced that the future will be terrible for people of color. I thought the author's play on time and context to be especially astute as he attempts to take an honest look at slavery.

This is one of those books that I will have to go back and read again at some point. The author weaves actual historical persons within his narrative, presenting a tale that is as colorful as it is thought-provoking. It is one of those novels that you appreciate even more once you've had a chance to digest it. 4 1/2 stars.

Nancy Oakes says

Set on the east coast of Maryland, in the mid 1800s, Song Yet Sung's main character is Liz Spocott a runaway slave, running away from the attentions of her sexually abusive master. When we first meet her, she's been shot, and ends up chained in an attic of a tavern belonging to Miss Patty Cannon, a notorious slave stealer who also picks up runaways and sells them to slaveowners in the south. (as an aside, Miss Patty was a real person.) Liz comes to be known as "the dreamer," because she has prophetic visions of the future. While in the attic, an older slave woman tells her bits and pieces of "the code," an intricate set of signals and words by which slaves can communicate and which also may offer the way to freedom. Eventually, all of the captives break away from the attic, and Patty Cannon decides to go after them to recoup her monetary losses. But there's also another person who is hired by Liz's owner to track her down, so the stakes become higher

for Liz and for the slaves that help her after her escape. It is only while she is on the run that she begins to understand the code, and she realizes, with the help of her dreams (visions of what freedom - or the lack of it - means in the future for slavery's descendants) that it is not yet complete.

What really sticks out in this novel is the notion that no one even remotely connected with slavery was free. For example, Denwood, the white slave tracker hired by Liz's owner has his own reasons for doing what he does; Miss Kathleen, the owner of slaves that help Liz is tied to her land and wholly dependent on her slaves after the death of her husband; even the villainous Miss Patty is dependent on slavery to make her living.

Overall, this was a fine novel, one that I can definitely recommend. I stayed up pretty much through the night to finish it, so that tells you something.

Elizabeth says

Utterly compelling and gripping. Beauty. Ugly. Truth.

Highly recommend!

Will return with comments and or review.

Renee says

After the 10th or so page, i flipped to the back of the book to see how long it was and said "thank god, another 340 pages....". Yes, it is that good. This book is filled with rich history and much of the story is drawn from historical events (The story of Harriet Tubman).Song Yet Sung brings into full view a world long misunderstood in American fiction: how slavery worked, and the haunting, moral choices that lived beneath the surface, pressing both whites and blacks to search for relief in a world where both seemed to lose their moral compass. This is a story of tragic triumph, violent decisions, and unexpected kindness.

Book Concierge says

5***** and a ❤

McBride is best known for his memoir *The Color of Water* . Here he turns his talents to an historical novel based on the true story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad that brought so many slaves to freedom in the North.

Liz Spocott, a house slave and mistress to her master, is struck on the head and afterwards can see the future in her dreams. The book opens with Liz in captivity in the attic of a tavern, run by the notorious Patty Cannon and her band of slave stealers (they capture slaves they find alone, hold them until a broker comes to town, ship them south and sell them). She is chained to an elderly "woman without a name," who recognizes Liz's gift and tries to impart to Liz the secret code of slaves on the freedom train. The lesson is incredibly brief, and Liz is badly wounded (she's been shot in the head, though the musket ball hasn't penetrated her skull) and half delirious. But still she remembers just enough so that when the opportunity presents itself Liz

manages to get free (and also free the 13 other slaves in the attic with her).

Of course this means that Patty and her gang will stop at nothing to find Liz. As if that weren't enough, her master has also hired a well-known slave catcher, The Gimp, to bring Liz back to him. The other slaves are afraid of her because of her perceived powers. The rumor mill is alive with stories about The Dreamer and her magic. So Liz is all alone, ill, and barely knows a few key parts of the code.

The entire novel takes place in the swamps, marshes, inlets, and woods of Maryland's Chesapeake Bay shore area (Dorchester County to be exact) in about 10 days' time. It's remote and unforgiving. But Liz finds help ... first from The Woolman (a former slave who has been raised in the backwoods and swamps) and then from Amber (the slave of Missus Kathleen Sullivan, whose husband, along with Amber's brother died oystering six months previously).

I thought it was a compelling read, and I learned much about the Underground Railroad and life in pre-Civil War Maryland. I was immediately drawn into the story and stayed up way too late trying to finish it.

When I originally read the book in April 2010, I rated this 4.5 stars because I was not sure it would appeal to everyone. But the more I thought about this book, and the more I talked about this book with other readers, the more I came to realize that I was unfairly down-grading the book. It is a FIVE-STAR book without question.

UPDATE Jan 2011 – I listened to the audio book, narrated by Leslie Uggams. She does a fine job, but there's something about her voice that just isn't quite right. I think her pitch is too high; a man's voice might have been better.

Michael says

I was very satisfied with the emotional and mental ride of this tale about a runaway woman slave in eastern Maryland. It features a nice ensemble of interesting characters with intersecting agendas and dreams, and it highlights the strange social circumstances in a slave state bordering non-slave states and the creative efforts of people who supported the "Underground Railroad" for runaways to reach safety in the northern states or Canada. The first two lines reveal a critical magical realism element of the story, the ability of the lead character to see scenes from the future in her dreams:

On a grey morning in March 1850, a colored slave named Liz Spocott dreamed of the future. And it was not pleasant. She dreamed of Negroes driving horseless carriages on shiny rubber wheels with music booming throughout, and fat black children who smoked odd-smelling cigars and walked around with pistols in their pockets and murder in their eyes.

Liz wakes up in an attic chained to other runaways in the clutches of a disreputable merchant in caught or stolen slaves named Patty Cannon. Liz is recovering from a musket shot to the head, which makes her dreams even more powerful than when she first developed the talent (or curse) when whacked as a child. A fellow prisoner known as The Woman with No Name tunes her into mysteries of the coded communications she can use to find people who help runaways should she get loose again:

Scratch a line in the dirt to make a friend. Always a crooked line, 'cause evil travels in straight lines. Use double wedding rings when you marry. Tie the wedding knot five times. And remember, it's not the song but

the singer of it. You got to sing the second part twice—if you know it. Don't nobody know it yet, by the way. ... And it ain't the song, it's the singer of it. It's got to be sung twice, y'know, the song. That's the song yet sung.

And loose she gets again, as she is very desperate not to be sent back. She has run away from a plantation owner in Virginia, the “Captain”, who has raped her and wants her for an easy concubine.

Besides Patty and her gang of thugs, an expert slave catcher, Denwood, has been hired to track her down too, lured from his current profession as an oysterman by money. He has growing moral reservations about such work and is in a detached state from grief over loss of a son. Liz is helped by several fascinating characters, including a teenaged slave boy named Amber who serves a kindly widow, a white blacksmith, and a very large and mysterious black man called the Woolman, who has hidden deep in the swamps for years with his son. The initially simple story of escape becomes a rich and complex drama when the Woolman’s son becomes seriously injured and ends up in the hands of authorities, and he takes some drastic actions in response.

I feel McBride is masterful in the way he makes his main characters evolve. Each is challenged by fate and choice. Freedom is revealed as more than the circumstances of being born a slave or not. Liz herself struggles over the hatred she feels for whites as a whole (“his children, his dreams, his lies, his world”; “they are raised to evil”), but her uncle has counseled her that their conception of blacks as inferior makes their hatred understandable and that she must rise above that:

That's why you got to leave yourself to God's will. Chance belong to God. It's an instrument of God. ... Captain ain't got nothing to do with that. He can't touch it.

Later an old man who helps her casts some light on the dark future her visions portend for her race:

They ain't no different than the folks around here. Some is up to the job of being decent, and some ain't. ... It don't matter whether it's now or a hundred years from now, or a hundred years past. Whatever it is, you got to live in a place where you can at least make a choice in them things.

In addition to the great drama and overlay of ideas in this story, McBride does well to evoke a keen sense of place and the power of connection to the natural environment:

Several times she stared at the water of the inlet and considered drowning herself in it. But each time she considered it, something attracted her attention. The ticking of a belted kingfisher. The scow call of a green heron. The odd coloring of a marsh hibiscus. She had the strangest feeling ever since leaving Patty Cannon's attic, a kind of awareness that seems to lay new discoveries at her feet at the oddest moments. Her head, which had acquainted a familiar dull throb since she'd been wounded, had developed a different kind of pain, an inner one, as if something had come unsprung. She felt as if air were blowing through an open window in her head somewhere. It hurt surely. Yet, because of that new pain, or perhaps because of it, she began to feel a light-headed sense of discovery, as if every plant, every breeze, every single swish of leaf and cry of passing bird, contained a message.

This book holds up well amid what seems to be a plethora of recent books that focus on the careers of slaves (for me they include novels by Edward Jones, David Fuller, and Toni Morrison). As with great books that encompass the subject of war, the “purpose” of such books and benefits of their reading has less to do with their conveying of history than using the extreme circumstances as a lens to explore the best and worst in human nature. After great enjoyment of this novel and McBride’s memoir, “The Color of Water”, I look forward to his recent “The Good Lord Bird”.

Afia says

I was absorbed in this book from start to finish. The storyline is superb and the characters are complex. It weaves gender, race, class, and geography to create a very real and moving portrait of what it must have been like to live during this time in eastern Maryland. McBride does an excellent job in the "gray" areas of the last 13 years of slavery. You really see how the institution dehumanized everyone, even the so called "civilized" people.

The book does an excellent job in dealing with questions such as

What does it mean to be free?

What does it mean to be human?

What does it mean to own another person?

What are people willing to do for money?

What does it mean to be loyal?

Who is an ally? Enemy?

A final note: I am not sure I would have read it as soon as I did but I was attracted to the book by its hauntingly beautiful cover when I was at my local bookstore.

Jana says

This was a hard one to rate. I would have given it a five if not for the violence and language. But it's hard because that graphic detail was a big part of what made the book what it is. I was really intrigued by so much of this book--the "code" the author comes up with as part of the Underground Railroad. I appreciated that it didn't divide by race who was good and who was bad. My favorite lines of the book:

---But I don't know who I am.

---Well, there it is, he said ruefully. That's a problem, ain't it. If you don't know who you are, child, I'll tell you: you's a child of God.

---With all I seen, I don't know that I believe in God anymore, she said.

---Don't matter, the old man said. He believes in you.

The writing is beautiful, and I loved how it put together ideas of race, religion, freedom, and identity. I just wish McBride could have done it without all that other stuff.
