

"the color of water" by james mcbride essay sample

[Life](#), [Death](#)



Hunter Jordan is Ruth McBride's second husband and James McBride's primary male role model, and after his death the house becomes chaotic and James's grades drop. His grief and anger turn James towards crime and drugs. In order to "straighten James out," his mother, Ruth, sends him to Louisville, Kentucky, to live with Jack, his sister. James does not see Jack's home as punishment because he has a great respect for her. He feels liberated at her house; he is away from summer school and his chaotic home in New York. While spending time in Kentucky, James enjoys "hanging out" with Jack's husband, Big Richard. Big Richard introduces him to Chicken Man, who greatly affects James's life.

James looks up to all of the boys on the Corner, but Chicken Man is his favorite. Chicken Man is "completely incoherent when he is drunk, but when sober he is one of the chief philosophers of the corner" (146). When James gets fired from his job, he wants revenge and suggests violence. Chicken Man becomes serious and gives two words of advice, "Forget it." He does not want James to end up in jail and on the Corner. He always has James's best interest at heart, unlike James's friends back in New York.

The most important lesson Chicken Man teaches James is about education. James knows each man on the Corner is intelligent (including himself), but still he continues to flunk out of school. Chicken Man tells him no one will beg him to go back to school. He recognizes his failures in life and urges James to work hard and receive an education. He wants James to be a more active role in his own life and tells him, "If you want to drop out of school and shoot people and hang on this corner all your life, go ahead. It's your life!" (150). When he spends summers on the Corner, James witnesses the consequences

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of a lack of education, the tendency to drink or use drugs, and the use of violence to resolve situations. He gains the motivation to apply himself in school and become successful.

Chicken helps James find determination and understands education is the key to bettering oneself and becoming successful. By making a negative example of himself and the other men on the Corner, Chicken Man helps James to modify his life. James reaches a turning point after the summers with Chicken Man and his stepfather's death becomes less painful. James turns towards God for comfort instead of drugs and crime. He becomes responsible and begins to care for the rest of his family. His self-discipline inspires James to pursue his education and his love of music. Chicken Man helps James discover himself and to become successful, responsible, and educated.