



Discussion Questions

The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store by James McBride

1. In *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*, James McBride takes readers into the lives of the people who live on Chicken Hill, a neighborhood of “ramshackle houses and dirt roads where the town’s Blacks, Jews, and immigrant whites who couldn’t afford any better lived.” As you read about Chicken Hill, how did you envision it? Did its description prompt memories of places that you’ve lived or recall from your past?
2. The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store is owned by Moshe Ludlow and his wife, Chona, who runs it, and it’s the center of neighborhood life. Are there places like that from your own life or in your past? How are they similar to (or different from) the Heaven & Earth?
3. Moshe desegregated the local theater by booking Black entertainers for Black audiences, and McBride writes in detail about the famous acts that played there. How courageous do you think

Moshe had to be to do this? Have you ever tried to change the traditions of a place or an organization?

4. Nate and Addie Timblin work for the Ludlows: Nate at the theater, Addie at the store. What similarities do you see between their relationship and that of Moshe and Chona? Do you see differences? What do you think the four have in common?

5. Dodo is a deaf boy from Chicken Hill who needs help—assistance that Nate and Chona provide. Why do you think those two were the ones who stepped in to help Dodo? Do you think they should have done anything differently? What do you think that Moshe and Addie could have done to keep Dodo safe? Or do you think his discovery was inevitable?

6. Doc Roberts is a local physician who was instrumental in sending Dodo to the Pennhurst sanatorium. He also had a complicated relationship with Chona. What about him do you think was most objectionable? Why do you think he was able to succeed for so long without being discovered?

7. Monkey Pants is the only inmate at Pennhurst who befriends Dodo, and the two strike up an unlikely friendship—one that is literally a lifesaver. Have there been people in your life who've stepped in to help you when you needed it?

8. Son of Man is the sadistic attendant on Ward C-1 at Pennhurst. What similarities to (or differences from) Doc Roberts did you see in him? Are they both evil in the same way?

9. The escape the characters engineered to extract Dodo from Pennhurst was possible thanks to the relationships they had with others in their community. How important do you think community was in these characters' lives?

10. At the end of novel you learn how the skeleton in the first chapter got in the well. Do you think the person whose skeleton it was got what he deserved? Do you think other characters in the novel did?