

White mother who inspired her black son's lasting tribute



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Writing in *The Color of Water*, the best-selling book published in 1996, the author James McBride recalls once asking his mother if he was black or white. He got a sharp response: "You are a human being. Educate yourself or you'll be a nobody."

Ruth McBride Jordan, who has died at the age of 88, was very much somebody but she would have remained unsung to all but her family and close friends were it not for her son's book, which captured the imagination of a nation.

It is a story about racial identity, discrimination and a deep-rooted sense of what is right and just. A young Jewish woman, born in Poland the daughter of a rabbi, comes to New York as a two-year-old, moves to deepest Virginia, gets pregnant by a young black man, has an abortion, is sent back to New York for her own good, marries a black preacher, converts to Christianity, has eight children and, after his death, marries another African-American, a furnace stoker, and has four more before he, too, dies.

In spite of a modest income, she raises all 12 as any good mother, regardless of colour or creed, would hope to. All graduate from college and go on to professional lives. But she raises them at a time when interracial marriage is rare and regularly subject to verbal and other abuse, as James McBride details in his book. Its publication brings her fame, but she remains unchanged, shunning the celebrity circus (though she does get to meet former President George H.W. Bush and his wife).



She was born Ruchel Dwajra Zylska near Gdansk on April 1 1921. In America she changed her first name to Rachel and finally to Ruth. Her Orthodox rabbi father, who became Fishel Shilsky in his new country, moved the family to Suffolk, Virginia, when she was nine and he became a storekeeper. As a child she was subject to incessant anti-Semitism at school, but that was no worse than growing up with a tyrannical parent, who may also have subjected his daughter to sexual abuse. He refused to allow her to attend high school graduation ceremonies, because they were held in a church, and forbade her even to mix socially with gentiles and certainly never with blacks, an edict she ignored, leading to her teenage pregnancy and abortion.

Back in New York, she was working in a leather factory and hanging around Harlem at night when she met and married Andrew McBride, a Baptist minister. According to some accounts, he saved her from a life of prostitution. They settled in the all-black Red Hook Housing Projects, where he established a church that, after her conversion, became her place of worship, usually as the only white member of the congregation. Her son remembers her "butchering the lovely hymns with a singing voice that sounded like a cross between a cold engine trying to crank on an October morning and a whining Maytag washer".

She helped support the family with any number of part-time, low-paid jobs, while looking after their seven children. She was pregnant with the eighth, James, when Rev McBride died suddenly in 1957. A year later she married Hunter Jordan, who stoked city furnaces. They had four more children and moved to Queens before he died in 1972, leaving her and the family in poverty.

But she simply got more jobs, as a church secretary, a night typist in a bank, in a glass factory, until her large brood successfully completed their education. Leading them by example, she even earned her own degree at the age of 65, a bachelor's in social work administration from Temple University. After living for several years near Philadelphia, she finally found a home in Ewing, New Jersey.

Not that age and heart surgery slowed her down much. She stopped driving her car only two years ago, attended, and spoke at, a family wedding in New York last year and was planning to go and see the blockbuster movie *Avatar* when she died, surrounded by family.

As seen through the eyes of a son struggling to find his own racial identity, Ruth McBride Jordan combined pungent aphorisms and a deep belief in religion and education. The title of his book is taken from one of her pithy answers to his persistent question – is God black or white? "God", she replied, "is the colour of water", to which he needed only to add the subtitle, *A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother*.

But that was allied to the sheer force of a mother's will. James McBride wrote how she simply ignored all the racial epithets and dirty looks when she walked down a street, a white woman with her black children in tow. "She had absolutely no interest in a world that seemed incredibly agitated by our presence. The stares and remarks, the

glances and cackles that we heard as we walked about the world went right over her head.”

Still, she did raise her children black, because she knew that was how they would be perceived by society. Fortunately, America was not static and many of the obstacles and prejudices she had experienced growing up were becoming less acceptable. Yet she always dealt with the real world. She had no compunction in putting her children on buses out of the poor neighbourhoods where they lived so they could attend better schools.

It paid dividends; two are now doctors, two teachers, while others work as a university professor of African-American history, a social worker, a nurse, a finance director, a computer engineer and a recording engineer. James McBride was a journalist, with The Boston Globe and The Washington Post among others, and is now a musician and composer.

In all, 11 of her 12 children survive her, six sons and five daughters, along with 23 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

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