

Book Review: The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store
By James McBride

It's rare that I finish reading a book and am left feeling empty and unsatisfied. But that's the case with James McBride's novel "The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store." It was like opening a beautifully wrapped present, removing all the colorful tissue paper, and finding a package of white boxer shorts inside. Meh!

And that surprised me. The book has been on The New York Times best seller list for nearly six months, and I waited two months while it passed through several readers' hands at the local library before it was my turn. Surely a book this popular would not disappoint.

But it did. And it's hard to explain why.

The story opens in 1972 with state troopers in Pottstown, Pennsylvania finding human skeletal remains at the bottom of a well. A litany of names (which on page 5 meant absolutely nothing to me) of people long since deceased is presented before McBride whisks us 47 years back in time to events that led up to the bones finding their way into the well.

McBride takes us to Chicken Hill, a poor neighborhood in Pottstown populated primarily by immigrant Jews and African Americans. He introduces a wide range of colorful and interesting characters: Moshe Ludlow, a theater owner, and his wife Chona, who runs the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store; Nate Timblin, a local black worker, and his wife Addie; their nephew Dodo (a nickname because a stove explosion left him deaf) who lives with them; Doc Roberts, who everyone seems to despise; and a host of others.

And McBride does a good job providing detailed backstory on each of these characters. But maybe too much backstory. Because while McBride spends a great deal of time painting vivid pictures of these folks, and their struggles to make ends meet while living in the margins of white Christian America, he neglects to move the story forward. We have all these people, but where is this story going? Nowhere, unfortunately.

And the character with the potential to be most interesting, Malachi, whom McBride introduces right at the start, seems to vanish into the abyss.

It takes until approximately 20 pages remain before McBride gets around to connecting all the dots. But by that time, the ending is anticlimactic. He's already dropped enough hints, or it's so blatantly obvious what's going to happen, that any anticipation is gone. I finished and thought, okay, on to the next book. I had no real interest in discussing it. Which, of course, makes writing a review all the more challenging.

I know I'm in the minority here, but for me, "The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store" attempted to light too many fires and wound up barely generating a spark. I give the book 2 out of 5 stars, and welcome your feedback.