

The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, by James McBride

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, James McBride's acclaimed bestseller, opens with a mysterious prologue. In June 1972, a skeleton is found at the bottom of an abandoned well in Chicken Hill, a poor neighborhood in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Before an investigation could be mounted, however, a hurricane blew through and washed away everything in its path.

The novel's story then reverts to the 1930s, when Chicken Hill was "a tiny area of ramshackle houses and dirt roads where the town's Blacks, Jews, and immigrant whites who couldn't afford any better lived." Moshe Ludlow, a Romanian Jew who had escaped oppression in Europe, ran the All-American Dance Hall and Theater, which catered to anyone who could buy a ticket. His wife Chona owned the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, the only Jewish grocery in Chicken Hill.

Chona, left lame after contracting polio as a child, "did not experience the world as most people did. She saw it as a place where every act of living was a chance for *tikkun olam*, to improve the world." A beloved member of the community, Chona did not care that the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store never turned a profit.

The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store is replete with a variety of conflicted characters. Nate Timblin, whose wife Addie worked in Chona's store, was a Black man with "a quiet that covered a kind of tempest. Nate claimed the South as his home, but he never spoke of his past." The town's sole physician, Doc Roberts, secretly was a Ku Klux Klan member. Polish-born Gus Plitzka, chairman of the town council, owed money to gangster Nig Rosen. Reverend Spriggs' African American congregation didn't trust their pastor entirely.

Nate and Addie were protective of their 12-year-old deaf nephew Dodo. Now orphaned, Dodo had lost his hearing after a faulty stove exploded. When state officials sought to have Dodo institutionalized at Pennhurst, a horrifying facility for the feeble-minded, the community came together. Chona, aided by Bernice, a childhood Black friend who lived next door, hid Dodo in her grocery's basement. Keeping Dodo safe, however, was an endeavor fraught with peril. Soon it was suspected that a snitch in their midst would give the young Black boy's whereabouts away.

As *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* progresses to its powerful and poignant conclusion, James McBride masterfully ties together Dodo's fate and the identity of that skeleton found decades later. Memorable and compassionate, *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* is highly recommended.