

Fremont Great Books Book Club

Discussion Questions for “The Good Lord Bird” by James McBride

October 17, 2025

1. The novel opens with a newspaper article about the discovery of an old document, “a wild slave narrative.” Did the article adjust your expectations of the story to come?
2. The Old Man misidentifies Henry as a girl, forcing “Little Onion” to disguise himself as a girl for much of the story. Little Onion is also half black and half white at a time when being part-black meant you were treated as all black by white people. How does Little Onion’s attitude toward these disguised identities change throughout the novel? Is Little Onion able to do more as a girl than a boy? Or is the author subverting traditional notions of male/female abilities?
3. A review from NPR wrote: “Although Onion is a child of 10 when we meet him, as a committed ne’er-do-well he is difficult to embrace.” Did you find Henry to be a sympathetic character? A good narrator? Is Little Onion a hero, villain, or something else?
4. Were you familiar with John Brown and the events at Harpers Ferry before reading the book? Has the fictional retelling of John Brown’s violent protest against slavery changed your perceptions of this historical event? Was John Brown a hero, a villain, a counter-revolutionary, or something else?
5. Does the blending of actual, historical events and figures, such as John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, with the author’s fictional reimagining of them affect your view of history?
6. A review from “The New York Times” called the book “uproarious.” McBride himself calls the book a “caricature.” How does the author bring humor to a subject, slavery, not typically written about in this tone? Is McBride successful? What does humor allow us to contemplate about history that we might not have thought otherwise?
7. Loyalty is a major theme in the book. Political beliefs are a matter of life and death. Even Little Onion feels conflicted about whether to stick by John Brown’s side or flee from him. Where do the major characters’ loyalties lie, with regard to each other and with regard to the cause of abolition?
8. Fred tells Little Onion that a Good Lord Bird is “so pretty that when man sees it, he says, ‘Good Lord,’” and that a feather from this bird will “bring you understanding that’ll last your whole life.” What role do the Good Lord Bird and its feathers play in John Brown’s story? In Little Onion’s? Do the colors of a Good Lord Bird have significance, as well? Do you think the title is appropriate for the novel?
9. Since the publication of this book, repeated comparisons have been made to Mark Twain’s writing. What do you think? Does James McBride’s writing style remind you of any other authors or books? In what ways is this a “classic” American story and in what ways does it feel more contemporary?

EXTRA CREDIT

1. Have you seen Showtime’s mini-series based on “The Good Lord Bird?” What changes did they have to make to bring the book to the screen?
2. “The Good Lord Bird” won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2013. The other finalists were “The Flamethrowers” by Rachel Kushner, “The Lowland” by Jhumpa Lahiri, “Bleeding Edge” by Thomas Pynchon, and “Tenth of December” by George Saunders. Have you read any of these other books? Would you have given the National Book Award to McBride’s book?

SOURCES AND LINKS

[West Hampton Library Discussion Questions](#)

[Discussion Questions from the Publisher, Penguin/Random House](#)

[Literary Masters Essay](#)