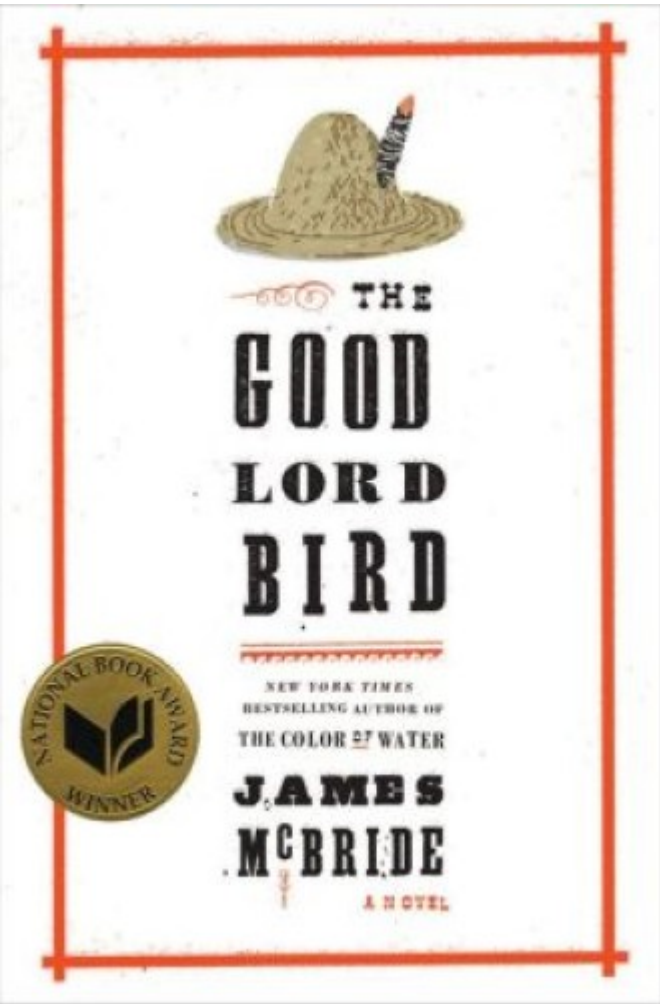
The Good Lord Bird: A Novel by James McBride

reviewed by Amy Frykholm in the March 19, 2014 issue

In Review



The Good Lord Bird: A Novel

By James McBride
Riverhead

I didn’t want to review this book. I just wanted to enjoy it. At every turn, it resisted my attempts to analyze it and replaced my literary critic’s instincts with laughter, pleasure, and suspense.

The Good Lord Bird, last year's National Book Award winner, is a tale of the antebellum South perhaps like none you've ever heard. A young slave living in the contested territory of Kansas, Henry Shackleford, is liberated by John Brown, who will later try to ignite a slave revolution by attacking Harper's Ferry in what is then Virginia. Because the 11-year-old boy is small, has a beautiful face, and is wearing a potato sack, Brown believes him to be a girl and takes the boy's father's dying words, "Henry ain't a . . ." to be "Henrietta." (This "is how the Old Man's mind worked. Whatever he believed, he believed. It didn't matter to him whether it was really true or not. He just changed the truth till it fit him. He was a real white man.") For the next three years, Henry is known as Henrietta or, in Brown's affectionate terms, Little Onion, whom Brown believes to be his good luck charm. Onion travels with Brown as he fights the Pro Slavers in Kansas, raises money and support back east, and prepares his doomed raid on Harper's Ferry.

The story is told in Little Onion's irreverent yet innocent voice. From the beginning Onion says that he doesn't want to be in Brown's ragtag army and that at any moment he will break free and run away. But the charade goes on so long that Henry becomes some piece of Henrietta, and the affection that Onion has for John Brown also grows more real.

In Onion's early hours in Brown's company, Brown gives him a dress and a bonnet to put on to replace the potato sack he had been wearing when he was "liberated." Onion's ambivalence about his position is conveyed with the humor that pervades the tale: "Ain't no way in God's kingdom was I gonna put on that dress and bonnet. Not in no way, shape, form or fashion was I gonna do it. But my arse was on the line, and while it's a small arse, it do cover my backside and thus I am fond of it. Plus, he was an outlaw and I was his prisoner."

One of the many remarkable things about this book is the way that historical figures step in and out of the story. McBride satirizes the revered Frederick Douglass with such acuity that it may send readers scrambling to their history books to find out why. Harriet Tubman appears as a transcendent figure, with the power to shame and inspire people into action. "The wind seemed to live in that woman's face. Looking at her was like staring at a hurricane," Onion says. Meanwhile, Brown is depicted as part crazy, part loving, part visionary, not afraid to decapitate people in the name of slavery's demise, but gentle with a mouse and with "every animal under God's creation."

While Henry lives as Henrietta, he continues to look for means of escape, but he also keeps choosing to return. Onion's moral development, as a child out only for himself to one who has real love for the company he keeps, is central to this picaresque. When Onion betrays his companions, he grapples with his choices and tries to right his wrongs. His desire to be free of Brown's mission never leaves him, but it becomes tempered by experience and challenged by circumstance. Onion is a reluctant participant in history, and yet he stays to the very end.

As the attack on Harper's Ferry unfolds, Onion thinks his religious conversion has finally come and has something to do with his praying instead of running, or with his choosing to pray as his options dwindle. His conversion prayer begins, "Lord, 'scuse me a minute. I has not had a high tolerance for the Word before but." That is as far as he gets before Brown exclaims, "Precious Jesus! Onion has discovered Thee! Success is at hand." But Onion's real conversion happens when he chooses to reenter the fray, to stand with those who have loved him even in folly and failure.

McBride notes in almost every one of his characters how the institution of slavery "twisted" the people "all kinds of different ways." In the mouth of Harriet Tubman, McBride comes the closest to commentary on the present moment: "I expect it'll happen in all our tomorrows, too, for when you slave a person, you slave the one in front and the one behind." McBride knows that the violence and oppression of slavery is not something that can be wiped away with one man's avenging sword, as John Brown would have it. It lives in us—and in our "tomorrows" we have to attend to it. *The Good Lord Bird* makes fun of one of America's saddest chapters, but it is proof that satire can be a healing and humanizing activity, rich and deep—that it can tell us how we came to be who we are and how we need to free ourselves from slavery's long reach.