



Miracle at St. Anna

James McBride

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Inspired by a historical incident that took place in the village of St. Anna di Stazzema in Tuscany and by the experiences of the famed Buffalo Soldiers of the 92nd Division in Italy during World War II, *Miracle at St. Anna* is a singular evocation of war, cruelty, passion, heroism, and love. It is the story of four American soldiers, the villagers among whom they take refuge, a band of partisans, and an Italian boy, all of whom encounter a miracle - though perhaps the true miracle lies in themselves.

Miracle at St. Anna Details

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Author : James McBride

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Saleh MoonWalker says

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Rowena says

I enjoyed this story about a troop of African-American soldiers fighting for the States in Italy. McBride is a very talented writer. I think he told the story very well; he captured the Italian mentality, especially towards superstition and how they viewed people different from themselves (in those days, anyway, the grotesqueness of war).

The "funny" thing about the African-American soldiers was that they were freer in Italy than they were in their own country. For me, that fact posed a few questions, for example, who exactly were the soldiers fighting for? A nation that didn't recognize them as equals? A nation in which they were not free themselves?

The characters in the story were very diverse and interesting. The ending wasn't exactly what I expected but, all in all, I loved this book.

alex says

This took me a long time to get through, because it's a heavy plot. Four black American soldiers are lost in the mountains of Italy after a terrible battle, trying to figure out who among the Italian peasants and freedom fighters they can trust, and not trusting each other or their white commanders. They've also picked up a young Italian boy who's half crazy from the atrocities he's witnessed, and who becomes the center of their world. This is beautifully written, and although the male characters are better fleshed out than the females (because McBride only writes from the perspective of the male characters), every person felt real and human to me.

Sequoia says

James McBride's memoir is a prime example how the well too deleted stories of the African-American experience can be shown without feeling beaten down with a stick. The powerful symbolism of the sculptured head was incredibly significant in the story. Unfortunately, Spike Lee's film completely missed the aforementioned symbolism. He obviously has some luggage to work out. Some great stories are best left in books.

Monica says

I loved this book. Loved the way it was written, the story it told, the poetry that moved within the sentences.

Set in Italy, towards the end of World War II...the lives of four men are changed forever. The simplicity of the Chocolate Giant as he lets love take over, the avoidance techniques of Bishop as he hides from what he's really hiding from, the strength of Hector who just wants to do what's right, and the leadership supplied by Stamps, who just wants it all to end. Mix up these four men into the lives of Italian villagers who just want to survive...and you get a story that really is a miracle.

I raced through this book, wanted to spend much more time reading each day than i actually could. When the ending arrived...i was sad, angry, frustrated, deeply involved...the sign of a great book and a good author...is to evoke all that.

Julie says

Although this is a work of fiction, the book was inspired by actual events from "... the collected experiences of black soldiers who served in the Serchio Valley and Apuane Alps of Italy during WWII."

Beautifully written. A compulsive read: another one I couldn't put down.

Matty says

Prior to getting into this novel, I had heard mixed emotions about the movie (which I have never seen) based upon James McBride's "Miracle at St. Anna" and directed by Spike Lee. Yet, one thing I've learned is that the book is almost always better than the movie.

"Miracle at St. Anna" was never on my list of books to read, but a friend of mine had come for a visit and while she was here, she had finished this novel and decided to leave it for me (I'm not one to turn down a free book). In the end, I'm glad that I had a chance to read this because "Miracle at St. Anna" portrays an unfamiliar side of WWII. The story follows a group of four buffalo soldiers who find themselves stranded in an Italian village - personally, I know very little of the Italian point of view during WWII, as well as that of African-American soldiers.

What I found interesting were the diverse dynamics and relationships throughout the book - buffalo soldiers/Italians, buffalo soldiers/white soldiers, Train/Angelo, the interaction within the group of the four African-American soldiers... the list goes on. In addition, I felt that the character development was excellent. Each of the four soldiers had such contrasting personalities, and I thought McBride did an excellent job of depicting this (and also with the other notable characters).

The storyline itself was quite interesting, as the paths of the buffalo soldiers, Italian villagers and partisans all converged. Without blatantly going into an all-out blitz concerning the massacre at St. Anna, McBride did just enough to show the reader its horrors. I'm not sure whether or not the "present day" subplot of Hector Negrón (which appears at the beginning and end of the novel) is really necessary. I understand that it ties

everything together (and to my knowledge, it is what much of the movie is based on), however, the meat of the novel lies within the time during WWII, and to me, that would have been enough.

P.S. Winn says

Really good war story that takes place during world war 2 and tells of the Buffalo soldiers and what they endured.

Hilmi Isa says

Miracle at St. Anna merupakan sebuah novel/fiksyen sejarah. Bukan sahaja penulisnya, *James McBride*, menggunakan watak-watak tentera yang berasal dari formasi tentera kulit hitam, Divisyen Infanteri ke-92 *Buffalo Soldiers*, yang sememangnya formasi tersebut bertempur di Itali ketika Perang Dunia Kedua, tetapi, turut menggunakan peristiwa berdarah pembunuhan beramai-ramai *St. Anna di Stazzema* pada 12 Ogos 1944 sebagai inspirasi dan latar belakang cerita novel ini.

Walau bagaimanapun, fokus cerita ditumpukan kepada empat watak tentera kulit hitam;

- a) *Aubrey Stamps*, merupakan ketua kepada mereka yang di bawah. Seorang yang berpangkat leftenan yang berdedikasi kepada tugasnya tetapi hati nuraninya mempersoalkan diskriminasi yang dialami oleh orang kulit hitam, baik di dalam kehidupan awam atau tentera.
- b) *Bishop Cummings*, seorang yang mementingkan diri dan tidak percaya kepada kewujudan dan kekuasaan Tuhan.
- c) *Hector Negron*, seorang *Hispanic* yang berasal dari Puerto Rico dan bertindak sebagai penterjemah.
- d) *Sam Train*, seorang yang bodoh-bodoh alang tetapi memiliki hati yang mulia. Seorang yang percaya kepada keajaiban.

Train menemui seorang budak yang bernama *Angelo Torancelli*, ketika unit platunnya diserang hendap di Terusan Cinquale. Angelo merupakan seorang budak lelaki yang merupakan satu-satunya mangsa yang terselamat daripada pembunuhan beramai-ramai di St. Anna di Stazzema. Kelima-lima mereka akhirnya tersadai di sebuah perkampungan yang berhampiran dengan tempat di mana peristiwa berdarah itu berlaku. Selama beberapa hari mereka di sana, terutamanya pada Stamps dan Bishop, mereka merasakan diri mereka lebih dihargai di tempat tersebut dan merasakan keadaan mereka tidak jauh berbeza dengan penduduk kampung. Jika penduduk kampung mahukan diri mereka selamat daripada ancaman tentera Jerman, mereka pula mahukan diri mereka dilayan sebagai manusia selayaknya walaupun mereka berkulit hitam. Di kampung tersebut mereka dihormati dan dilayan dengan baik. Ini dibandingkan dengan layanan yang mereka terima di tanah air sendiri, Amerika Syarikat.

Saya berpandangan penulisnya, McBride, berjaya memperkembangkan watak-watak utamanya dengan baik sekali. Saya rasa terhibur dan tidak berasa jemu membacanya. Tema ceritanya adalah lebih kepada kasih sayang antara manusia yang melampaui warna kulit. Terdapat juga beberapa kesilapan yang penulis lakukan pada pandangan saya. Namun, saya anggap kecil dan tidaklah seberapa besar kesalahannya. Sebagai contoh, penulis menyatakan Stamps memiliki pistol jenis revolver tetapi kemudian menyatakan dia memiliki pistol jenis automatik pula.

Book Concierge says

From the book jacket: McBride was inspired by an historical incident that took place in a Tuscan village and by the experiences of the Buffalo Soldiers of the 92nd Division, who served in Italy during World War II. It is the story of four American soldiers, the villagers among whom they take refuge, a band of partisans, and an Italian boy, all of whom encounter a miracle.

My reactions:

Like any good war story, McBride includes dangerous situations, tense relationships, descriptions of brutality, and strong characters who behave admirably in dire circumstances. Sam Train is a giant of a man, with limited intellectual capacity, but a strong faith and a tender heart. Bishop Cummings is a minister from Kansas City, but he seems more interested in gambling than fighting. Hector Negron is a Puerto Rican from Harlem who resents having been assigned to the Negro division, but whose modest knowledge of Italian is crucial to their mission. Second Lieutenant Aubry Stamps is an educated man, who went to officer candidate school, but is unable to understand or connect with the rural Southern blacks he is commanding. And then we have Angelo, the young Italian boy who has witnessed atrocities no one should have to see, and who is nearly dead when Train plucks him from the rubble.

I like magical realism, and McBride does a reasonably good job of using this technique. But he does not sugarcoat the realities of war, or of the conditions the villagers endured in Tuscany during this time period. The writing is realistic and visceral, though he does add small scenes of compassion that serve to ease the tension. At heart it is a story of brotherhood, redemption, and the power of love and faith.

A few passages really struck me:

To fight the enemy? Which enemy? The Germans? The Italians? The enemy was irony and truth and hypocrisy, that was the real enemy. That was the enemy that was killing him.

A Negro was trying to make rent, save up enough to buy milk for his kids, survive this fucked-up war, and still, when the war was over, when all the fighting was done and all the people made up, a German could go to America and live well, start a factory, work in business, run a bank, while Stamps would still be ... a nigger. He'd be lucky to get a job delivering their mail.

And this description of the Mountain of the Sleeping Man:

Once you see him, you cannot escape him. He follows you everywhere you walk, morning, noon or night, his gargantuan face just over your shoulder – an enraged, snoozing ogre, about to awaken.

Cheryl says

Reviews of this book were so wildly contradictory - and the movie reviews were similarly so - that I didn't know if this was worth the read. For me in the end, it was. It was honest in its portrayal of just how brutal war can be, not only to soldiers but to hundreds of innocent civilians. It was also honest in its portrayal of the second class citizenship held by African American soldiers even while fighting for their country in WWII. Was it uplifting? At times, yes. Was it sad? Yes. But all in all, beautifully written.

Empress5150 says

2007 must have been the year of reading books by authors who had written other books that I much preferred to the current one I was reading! Case in point with "Miracle at Santa Anna". Ok, it wasn't stinko awful, but it in no way can compare with McBride's perfectly wonderful (autobiographical) "The Color of Water". "Miracle" is a tale of black soldiers fighting in Italy during WWII. They stumble across a young orphan Italian boy and a group of Italian villagers and the head of a very famous statue from a bridge in Florence. I think the story is supposed to illustrate how miracles can be found in the crappiest of places and in the seemingly crappiest of people (that people can surprise you with how they will sacrifice for you). But, I'm not really sure, because by the end of the CDs, I was pretty bored and only finished it because I didn't really have anything else to listen to. BTW, I had started to listen to this back in 2003 driving home to California from New York but I just couldn't get into it. I probably should have simply forgone listening to it in 2007, too! I really hope McBride can come up with something better the next time.

Sherie says

This is my second book by McBride and he continues to impress. The Buffalo Soldiers are so named by the American Indians, because their nappy hair reminded them of their beloved bison's mane. They have been around since the late 1800's doing detail work that no white man would sully their hand with and had become a fixture in the American armed services for doing what white folks would not.

The story is about a detail of four men stand during a surge, where, without the support of their white commander, they wander off in search of safety. They do have baggage in the form of an injured child who is taken by Sam Train, the chocolate giant.

They encounter a remote Italian village which has never seen a black man and has no built-in prejudices. There is no Happily-Ever-After ending to this story, but there is redemption and love and forgiveness.

Brian DiMattia says

I'm torn on what to rate this book. I was sure it was a five most of the way through, but then had a major gripe with the ending. If ever there was a "4 1/2" star book it would be this.

A wonderful book that hooked me from the first chapter. The preview chapter was so intriguing that I didn't want to read the rest...I HAD to read the rest. And the rest didn't disappoint. The plot, four minority soldiers find an emotionally damaged boy behind German lines in WWII Italy and end up in a purgatory of infighting, secrets, horror and abandonment, was beautifully crafted. It moved at just the right pace, never so fast that you lost track of detail in the rush, and never so slow that you felt bogged down by every last little bit of exposition.

And the structure was fascinating. It has the feel of a dual narrative novel, a structure that gets confusing if done poorly, but if done well has a flow to it, letting your mind relax from one narrative and process what's happened while you see someone else in a different situation. Here, the alternate stream wasn't a narrative train, but a collection of short narratives about related characters, segments of history, and expansion on the different cultures that were meeting.

The whole thing was brilliantly done. The chapter on the history of the statue head was what made me decide I needed to own this book. The chapter on Italy during and after the war was deeply moving and human. The separate narrative about the officers in charge of the company was fascinating.

But there is one major flaw to this book. The ending. Not even the ending of the plot, because that was fine. The way the ending detailed "what happened" in the minds of each character. The story has five main characters, the four soldiers and the boy. It has four second level characters: A woman who helps the soldiers, her father, and two partisans. Of the main characters, only four have actual endings. Of the four secondary characters, only one or two have endings depending on your point of view.

When I say endings, I mean one final moment for the reader to see the character before they leave the narrative for a variety of reasons. Several characters find happiness, or meaning in their lives, or even redemption. But the rest of the ending seems slapped on, like McBride was pulling an all-nighter on a school project and around 3 AM said 'that's good enough.'

I could forgive even the clumsy handling of the secondary characters, but my favorite of the main characters seemed to be left nowhere. What happens with him is described, but he doesn't get the chance to express it himself, to sum anything up, or to leave the text on a note of completion. The others do, and it really bothered me! I was left thinking less of a book that I had absolutely loved up to that point, because a character that had been very important up until then seemed to be simply forgotten about by his author.

Still, on the whole the book was good enough that I'll stick with five stars. For now. You know, unless I change my mind which I'm bound to. Repeatedly!

Miles says

This is a deeply well written book. Black American soldiers lost behind the lines in mountain-top Italian towns, late in the Second World War, wrestle with what and who they are fighting for (America? the White man? each other? Italian villagers? self-respect? or?) McBride plays with the improbable events that may or may not be miraculous - a touch of magical realism, or perhaps simply a way of conveying the subjective experience of his characters - but mostly he keeps it real. He paints what feels like an authentic portrait of American black men of the 1940s in the US army and the racist white officers who command them, and of Italian villagers and partisans struggling against, and sometimes not against, the German army. These meetings convey realities and attitudes that I had not thought of very much. When I think of 1944 or 1945, I think of the Battle of the Bulge and my father's experience in Europe. But, of course, here, here in Italy, there was a whole other brutal campaign, which McBride brings alive in intimate and personal ways. This is a beautifully written portrait of people, soldiers and civilians, caught in war from what was for me a novel point of view.

Leah Beecher says

I read this one several years ago and somehow it slipped through the cracks of my goodreads review, as sometimes happens. I just finished James McBride's *Song Yet Sung*, and was reminded that I read this. Like all his other books, it takes a look at what it means to be black at an important time of history. The writing is excellent, the story very memorable, and the theme spiritual without out being heavy-handed Christian-lit

genre. Spike Lee has since made it into a movie. A movie I have never seen and rated R probably for violence and language. As a library volunteer and advocate I am always looking for good books that have been made into movies as way to introduce good literature into our entertainment obsessed culture. This would be a good fit.

Elizabeth says

I bought this book months ago, but kept passing it over for other supposedly 'more interesting' reading - so was caught off guard as I began reading it and became engrossed in this story of the black soldiers (Buffalo Soldier) of WWII. The setting is the Italian countryside with the final German stand before the end of the war. The story revolves around 4 American soldiers, the young Italian boy they rescued who needs medical attention, and the Italian people they met in the village below the St. Anna di Stazzema church - and of course, the miracles experienced there.

War stories are not my preferred genre, but this is mostly a story of the human social/political condition - the division between black and white Americans in this era, the ongoing battle between Italian fascists and partisans, but most important to me, the compassion and humanity that can overcome these combative circumstances.

Rhonda says

We read this in our church group, mostly because everyone got to suggest a book and three of the men are WWII veterans, God bless them. The man who suggested this book fought in this particular area and he heard it was an accurate depiction of the terrain.

One hears little about this part of the war where the Germans fortified positions telling their soldiers to fight to the death. Having seen part of this terrain, it is amazing that anyone made it more than 100 yard without dying.

This story is about several Negro soldiers essentially caught behind the enemy lines on a scouting expedition. Most of this story has to do with built in prejudice, reaction to that prejudice and the relationships which come about with people in an Italian village. It is a powerful and yet sad account of not only the way war is fought but of the separations that exist between people. I was so impressed with this book that I wrote a letter to Mr. McBride telling him how much I enjoyed his book.

It is very well written and the characters are well-developed, sometimes sadly. I wasn't too keen on a book about war, but the interaction truly warms your heart.

Charlie says

This is a story of courage and redemption thru the eyes of four Buffalo Soldiers. Well written and interesting story. A good book to read of little-known world war black soldiers and how they fought in WW11.

danielle says

Ok, maybe I'm too jaded, but I was really thrown by the whole "magical Negro" theme in this book. (I mean, there's also a "magical Italian boy" theme. . .but still). I think McBride is half African American, but does that really complicate things? I'm not sure. In any case, linguistically speaking, I hated how the translated Italian did not have the syntax or flow of real Italian. That might sound nitpickily pretentious, but I love how in Julia Alvarez, even when her characters are written as speaking English (but they're really speaking Spanish), the words flow like Spanish words, almost like a direct translation. Or in Excellent Cadavers, same thing with the Italian. McBride's English translations are chunky and inaccurate, clearly Germanic in origin. That threw off my reading. It doesn't appear that he speaks any Italian, which is fine, but he could have at least had a speaker look at his passages.

That being said, while the narrative isn't half bad, the ending is really troublesome and vague.
