

Deacon King Kong

Reading Guide

1. The first line of the Deacon King Kong is: “Deacon Cuffy Lambkin of Five Ends Baptist Church became a walking dead man on a cloudy September afternoon in 1969.” How did that opening strike you when you began reading? What do you think of it now that you’ve finished the novel?
2. Deacon King Kong is full of overlapping stories of a Brooklyn neighborhood in 1969. What parts of these characters’ lives struck you as memorable or surprising?
3. Cuffy “Sportcoat” Lambkin is at the center of Deacon King Kong, yet he’s not a completely likable character. How do Sportcoat’s flaws affect you? Do they make him more annoying than interesting?
4. Five Ends Baptist Church is one of the cornerstones of the neighborhood. How important do you think the church is to its members? To the neighborhood? To the characters in the novel who don’t belong?
5. Deacon King Kong explores the lives of the residents of the Cause Houses beyond just Sportcoat. Which character struck you as one you’d like to know more about? What behavior or trait drew you to him/her?
6. Sportcoat’s relationship with his wife, Hettie, is complicated, as she’s been dead for two years. What do you think of their relationship? Do you think Hettie speaks to Sportcoat? Is she a ghost? An angel? Something else?
7. Deems Clemens and Frank Elefante are two characters that the others are afraid of. Do you think that fear is justified?
8. Elefante is tasked with finding something that his father kept for a friend from prison -- “a real treasure ... [that] will fit in the palm of your hand.” His searching leads him to unexpected places and people. What to you was the most interesting part of his search?
9. Deacon King Kong is the story of several communities whose lives overlap and sometimes bump against each other: the people who live in the Cause Houses, the members of Five Ends Baptist Church, the drug dealer and his posse, the cops in the neighborhood, the Italians who remain as the neighborhood changes. What did you find interesting about how the communities relate to each other?



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10. The characters in Deacon King Kong do a lot of searching, from tracking down Christmas Club money to trying to find a valuable artifact. Did you find it satisfying as a reader?
11. Throughout the novel McBride shows us how different characters connect with each another in unexpected ways. Which of the novel's relationships did you find most interesting? Most surprising.
12. The novel is full of some memorable names. Which one is your favorite?
13. James McBride uses humor throughout Deacon King Kong -- to amuse, to highlight, to reveal. Which scenes or passages did you find particularly funny?
14. How did McBride's writing affect you as a reader?
15. In addition to being an author, McBride is also an accomplished musician. Were there sections or passages where you sensed he might be using language or rhythms the way a musician might?
16. What surprised you about the novel? What surprised you about how the characters ended up?
17. Deacon King Kong takes place in 1969, just weeks after men walked on the moon for the first time and the Woodstock music festival took place. Why do you think McBride chose not to keep details of what was happening in the wider world out of the novel?
18. Not all of the plot strands in this novel are resolved by the end of the novel. Why do you think that is? Are there aspects of the story or characters that you'd like to know more about?
19. McBride dedicates Deacon King Kong to "God's people – all of 'em." Having read the novel, how does this dedication strike you?
20. If someone asked you to describe the novel in one sentence, what would you say?

