

The Help

Kathryn Stockett

Author Background

- Birth—1969
- Where—Jackson, Mississippi, USA
- Education—B.A., University of Alabama
- Currently—lives in Atlanta, Georgia

Kathryn Stockett was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. After graduating from the University of Alabama with a degree in English and Creative Writing, she moved to New York City, where she worked in magazine publishing and marketing for nine years. She currently lives in Atlanta with her husband and daughter. This is her first novel.

(From the publisher.)

An interview with publisher Penguin Group, USA:

Q: Tell us about your own family maid and your and your family's relationship with her.

Growing up in Mississippi, almost every family I knew had a black woman working in their house—cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the white children. That was life in Mississippi. I was young and assumed that's how most of America lived.

My grandmother's maid was named Demetrie. She started working for my grandparents in 1955, when my father and uncle were still boys and she was twenty-eight. When they were grown, she looked after us, the grandchildren. I loved Demetrie dearly, and I felt so loved too. We got the best part of her.

I think another reason my siblings and I had such a close connection with Demetrie is that she never had children of her own. She'd grown up poor and lived with an abusive husband. When a person has that much sadness and kindness wrapped up inside, sometimes it just pours out as gentleness. She was a gentle soul. There haven't been enough people like her in this world.

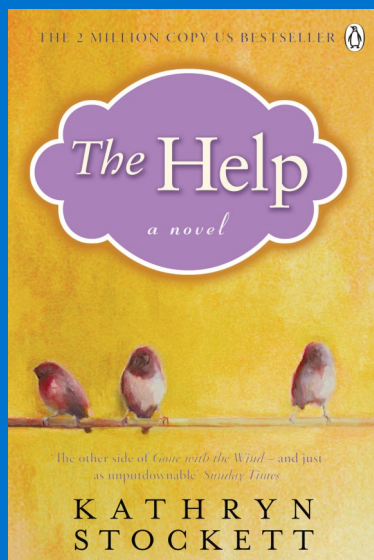
Q: Since you weren't alive in 1962, what research, if any, did you do to make sure the time period and social attitudes of the era were accurate?

It sounds crazy, but I would go to the Eudora Welty Library in Jackson and look at old phone books. The back section of the phone book captures so much about the mundane life in a certain time, which somehow becomes interesting fifty years later. The fancy department stores, the abundance of printing shops, and the fact that there were no female doctors or dentists— all helped me visualize the time. In the residential listings, most families just listed the husband's name, with no mention of the wife.

I also read the Clarion-Ledger newspapers for facts and dates. Once I'd done my homework, I'd go talk to my Granddaddy Stockett, who, at ninety-eight, still has a remarkable memory. That's where the real stories came from, like Cat-bite, who's in the book, and the farmers who sold vegetables and cream from their carts everyday, walking through the Jackson neighborhoods.

Q: You interviewed both African-Americans and whites from this time period. Was there anything surprising in what they told you?

One black woman from Birmingham told me she and her friends used to hide down in a ditch, waiting for the bus to take them to work. They were that afraid to stand on a street



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Author Background (continued)

corner because white men would harass them. Still, all of the black women I spoke to were

very proud of the jobs they'd had. They wanted to tell me where their white children live today and what they do for a living. I heard it over and over: "They still come to see me" and "They call me every Christmas."

The surprises actually came with the white women I interviewed. I realize there's a tendency to idealize the past, but some of the women I spoke to, especially the middle-aged generation, just fell apart before they even started talking. They remembered so many details: She taught me to tell time; She taught me to iron a man's shirt before I got married; She taught me how to wait for the green light. They'd remember and sigh.

Q: Were you nervous that some people might take affront that you, a white woman in 2008—and a Southern white woman at that— were writing in the voice of two African-American maids?

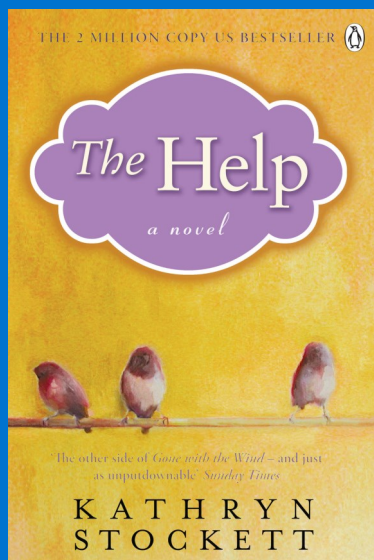
At first, I wasn't nervous writing in the voice of Aibileen and Minny because I didn't think anybody would ever read the story except me. I wrote it because I wanted to go back to that place with Demetrie. I wanted to hear her voice again.

But when other people started reading it, I was very worried about what I'd written and the line I'd crossed. And the truth is, I'm still nervous. I'll never know what it really felt like to be in the shoes of those black women who worked in the white homes of the South during the 1960s and I hope that no one thinks I presume to know that. But I had to try. I wanted the story to be told. I hope I got some of it right.

Q: Of the three women—Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter—who is your favorite character? Were they all equally easy or difficult to write? Were any of them based on real people?

Aibileen is my favorite because she shares the gentleness of Demetrie. But Minny was the easiest to write because she's based on my friend Octavia. I didn't know Octavia very well at the time I was writing, but I'd watched her mannerisms and listened to her stories at parties. She's an actress in Los Angeles, and you can just imagine the look on her face when some skinny white girl came up and said to her, "I've written a book and you're one of the main characters." She kind of chuckled and said, "Well, good for you." Skeeter was the hardest to write because she was constantly stepping across that line I was taught not to cross. Growing up, there was a hard and firm rule that you did not discuss issues of color. You changed the subject if someone brought it up, and you changed the channel when it was on television. That said, I think I enjoyed writing Skeeter's memories of Constantine more than any other part of the book.

(Author bio and interview from Penguin Group USA.)



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Book Summary

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Kathryn Stockett, 2009

Penguin Group USA

464 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780425232200

Twenty-two-year-old Skeeter has just returned home after graduating from Ole Miss. She may have a degree, but it is 1962, Mississippi, and her mother will not be happy till Skeeter has a ring on her finger. Skeeter would normally find solace with her beloved maid Constantine, the woman who raised her, but Constantine has disappeared and no one will tell Skeeter where she has gone.

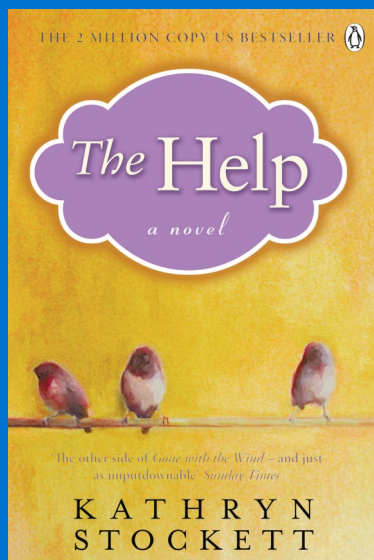
Aibileen is a black maid, a wise, regal woman raising her seventeenth white child. Something has shifted inside her after the loss of her own son, who died while his bosses looked the other way. She is devoted to the little girl she looks after, though she knows both their hearts may be broken.

Minnie, Aibileen's best friend, is short, fat, and perhaps the sassiest woman in Mississippi. She can cook like nobody's business, but she can't mind her tongue, so she's lost yet another job. Minnie finally finds a position working for someone too new to town to know her reputation. But her new boss has secrets of her own.

Seemingly as different from one another as can be, these women will nonetheless come together for a clandestine project that will put them all at risk. And why? Because they are suffocating within the lines that define their town and their times. And sometimes lines are made to be crossed.

In pitch-perfect voices, Kathryn Stockett creates three extraordinary women whose determination to start a movement of their own forever changes a town, and the way women—mothers, daughters, caregivers, friends—view one another. A deeply moving novel filled with poignancy, humor, and hope, *The Help* is a timeless and universal story about the lines we abide by, and the ones we don't.

(From the publisher.)



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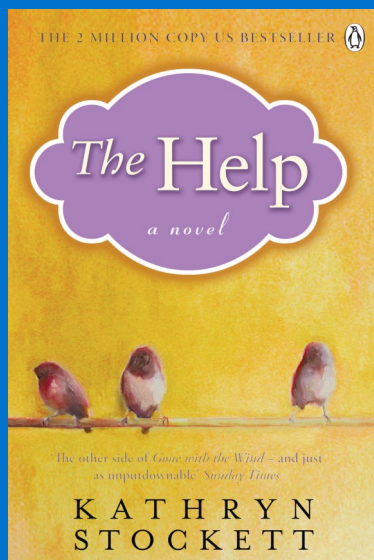
Discussion Questions

1. Who was your favourite character? Why?
2. What do you think motivated Hilly? On the one hand she is terribly cruel to Aibileen and her own help, as well as to Skeeter once she realizes that she can't control her. Yet she's a wonderful mother. Do you think that one can be a good mother but, at the same time, a deeply flawed person?
3. Like Hilly, Skeeter's mother is a prime example of someone deeply flawed yet somewhat sympathetic. She seems to care for Skeeter— and she also seems to have very real feelings for Constantine. Yet the ultimatum she gives to Constantine is untenable; and most of her interaction with Skeeter is critical. Do you think Skeeter's mother is a sympathetic or unsympathetic character? Why?
4. How much of a person's character would you say is shaped by the times in which they live?
5. Did it bother you that Skeeter is willing to overlook so many of Stuart's faults so that she can get married, and that it's not until he literally gets up and walks away that the engagement falls apart?
6. Do you believe that Minny was justified in her distrust of white people?
7. Do you think that had Aibileen stayed working for Miss Elizabeth, that Mae Mobley would have grown up to be racist like her mother? Do you think racism is inherent, or taught?
8. From the perspective of a twenty-first century reader, the hair shellac system that Skeeter undergoes seems ludicrous. Yet women still alter their looks in rather peculiar ways as the definition of "beauty" changes with the times. Looking back on your past, what's the most ridiculous beauty regimen you ever underwent?
9. The author manages to paint Aibileen with a quiet grace and an aura of wisdom about her. How do you think she does this?
10. Do you think there are still vestiges of racism in relationships where people of colour work for people who are white?
11. What did you think about Minny's pie for Miss Hilly? Would you have gone as far as Minny did for revenge?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

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Reviews

In *The Help*, Kathryn Stockett's button-pushing, soon to be wildly popular novel...the two principal maid characters...leap off the page in all their warm, three dimensional glory. Book groups armed with hankies will talk and talk.... [A] winning novel.

New York Times

Powerful.... [Stockett's] attention to historical detail, dialect and characterization create a beautiful portrait of a fragmenting world.... This heartbreaking story is a stunning debut from a gifted talent.

Atlanta Constitution Journal

Thought-provoking.... [Stockett's] pitch-perfect depiction of a country's gradual path toward integration will pull readers into a compelling story that doubles as a portrait of a country struggling with racial issues.... This is already one of the best debut novels of the year.

Entertainment Weekly

(*Starred review.*) Four peerless actors render an array of sharply defined black and white characters in the nascent years of the civil rights movement. They each handle a variety of Southern accents with aplomb and draw out the daily humiliation and pain the maids are subject to, as well as their abiding affection for their white charges. The actors handle the narration and dialogue so well that no character is ever stereotyped, the humor is always delightful, and the listener is led through the multilayered stories of maids and mistresses. The novel is a superb intertwining of personal and political history in Jackson, Miss., in the early 1960s, but this reading gives it a deeper and fuller power.

Publishers Weekly

Set in Stockett's native Jackson, MS, in the early 1960s, this first novel adopts the complicated theme of blacks and whites living in a segregated South. A century after the Emancipation Proclamation, black maids raised white children and ran households but were paid poorly, often had to use separate toilets from the family, and watched the children they cared for commit bigotry. In Stockett's narrative, Miss Skeeter, a young white woman, is a naive, aspiring writer who wants to create a series of interviews with local black maids. Even if they're published anonymously, the risk is great; still, Aibileen and Minny agree to participate. Tension pervades the novel as its events are told by these three memorable women. Is this an easy book to read? No, but it is surely worth reading. It may even stir things up as readers in Jackson and beyond question their own discrimination and intolerance in the past and present.

Rebecca Kelm - Library Journal