



The Help

By Kathryn Stockett

First published in 2009

Genre & subjects

Historical fiction

Domestic fiction

Synopsis

Aibileen is black maid, raising her 17th white child, but with a bitter heart after the death of her son. Minny is the sassiest woman in Mississippi. Skeeter is a white woman with a degree but no ring on her finger. Seemingly as different as can be, these women will come together for a clandestine project that will put them all at risk.

Author biography

Kathryn Stockett is originally from Jackson, Mississippi. Kathryn and her brother were children of a local hotelier and general contractor. She spent her time after her parents divorce away from her mother living in various places.

This hotel was next door to the "Stockett Stables" which preceded the hotel. The "Stables" were a place of leisure for the young Stockett offspring. Kathryn's father lost most of his businesses in this period through bad business deals and walked away owing many local businesses money. Still Kathryn and her brother graduated from Jackson's most exclusive private all-white (at the time) school Jackson Preparatory School.

Reflective of her first novel, Stockett was raised by an African American domestic worker after her parents divorce. Until 2001, Stockett lived in New York City, where she worked in publishing. She now lives in Atlanta and has a daughter from a previous marriage.

Discussion starters

- Who was your favourite character? Why?
- 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?
- 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?

- How much of a person's character would you say is shaped by the times in which they live?
- 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?
- Do you believe that Minny was justified in her distrust of white people?
- 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?
- 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?
- The author manages to paint Aibileen with a quiet grace and an aura of wisdom about her. How do you think she does this?
- Do you think there are still vestiges of racism in relationships where people of colour work for people who are white?
- What did you think about Minny's pie for Miss Hilly? Would you have gone as far as Minny did for revenge?

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