

# **The Secret Life of Bees Study Guide**

**The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd**

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# Introduction

*The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, was published by Viking Press in 2002. It was the first novel by Kidd, who had already found success writing inspirational personal memoirs such as *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996). A bestseller, the novel has become a favorite of book clubs around the country, including the "Read This!" Book Club sponsored by the ABC network morning show, *Good Morning America*.

*The Secret Life of Bees* is the story of Lily, a fourteen-year-old girl who runs away from her unloving father to search for the secrets of her dead mother's past. The setting of the novel is South Carolina in 1964, a time when racial tensions were inflamed by the civil rights movement and white racists' frequently violent responses to it. Against this backdrop, Lily and her house-keeper, Rosaleen, find shelter in the home of the eccentric Boatwright sisters, three African American beekeepers who worship before the statue of a Black Madonna they call "Our Lady of Chains." In the Boatwright household, Lily finds love and acceptance and begins to come to terms with the guilt she feels over her mother's death.

In the novel, Kidd addresses the sometimes painful divide between races and generations through a rich tapestry of religious symbolism, imagining for the Daughters of Mary (as the Boatwrights and their small circle of fellow worshipers call themselves) a nurturing, personal alternative to the Catholic faith.

## Author Biography

Sue Monk Kidd was born on August 12, 1948, and raised in the small town of Sylvester in southwestern Georgia. Her love of stories and writing developed early, inspired by her father's storytelling and the encouragement of English teachers. During adolescence, she wrote her first stories and kept a journal, but she set aside writing to study nursing at Texas Christian University. She graduated in 1970 and worked for most of the next decade as a registered nurse and as a college instructor. During this time she married Sanford Kidd, a theology student, and had two children, Bob and Ann.

Kidd rediscovered her interest in writing while living in Anderson, South Carolina, in the 1980s. She took writing courses at the local college where her husband was teaching. A personal essay that she wrote for class was accepted by *Guideposts* magazine and reprinted in *Reader's Digest*. She soon became a successful freelancer, publishing several hundred articles of personal, inspirational nonfiction in publications such as *Guideposts* and serving as a contributing editor to that magazine.

Kidd began publishing full-length works in the style of a spiritual memoir in 1988. In *God's Joyful Surprise*, she describes the process by which she came to embrace contemplative Christianity and converted from Southern Baptism to the Episcopal Church. A second volume of memoir, *When the Heart Waits*, was published in 1990, and *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, which reflected Kidd's growing interest in feminist theology, followed in 1996.

The next year Kidd began writing *The Secret Life of Bees*, which was published by Viking in 2002. The novel was phenomenally successful: it spent eighty weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, sold more than three million copies, and has been translated into twenty languages. It has become a favorite of book clubs since its publication, most notably the club sponsored by the ABC network morning program *Good Morning America*. *The Secret Life of Bees* also earned Kidd the recognition of her peers: it was awarded the BookSense paper-back book of the year in 2004 and was nominated for the British Orange Prize.

Kidd published a second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, to positive reviews in 2005. As of 2005, she and her husband were living in Charleston, South Carolina, where she was writer in residence at the Phoebe Pember House and an adviser to Poets & Writers, Inc.



## Plot Summary

When the Civil Rights Act is signed in 1964, it rocks the Deep South of America and sets in motion a series of catastrophic events. Racial hatred explodes, and many innocent black Americans are beaten or even killed. In South Carolina, a black housekeeper named Rosaleen Daily sees it as freedom of expression and recognition of equality for black Americans. For Lily Melissa Owens, a white fourteen-year-old American, it means watching those she loves be persecuted and allowing injustice to punish the only person she cares about, Rosaleen, her housekeeper.

As Rosaleen and Lily head into Sylvan, South Carolina, they encounter white men with a racial vendetta, landing Rosaleen in prison where she is brutally beaten. Lily, realizing that nobody is prepared to help Rosaleen accept her, refuses to stand idle and watch white men intimidate and ridicule her substitute mother. Lily rescues Rosaleen from torment and certain death and thus begins their journey of discovery.

Confused, Lily tries to understand racism, the death of her natural mother and why her father, T-Ray, feels he is unable to love her while she and Rosaleen run from the law. Believing that the things her mother left in the attic are clues, Lily devises a plan that will not only save them from incarceration but also answer the questions she feels are clouding her judgement and compromising her lifestyle.

Traveling to Tiburon, South Carolina, Lily hopes to unfold the mystery that surrounds her mother's death. Here, she and Rosaleen meet the Boatwright sisters, a bee-keeping trio that worships the Black Madonna. Welcomed not only into their household but also into their sisterhood, Rosaleen and Lily individually discover answers and are guided by August, May and June Boatwright and their beliefs. The Black Madonna, her wisdom, her strength and her guidance preside over the Boatwright household, creating a deep and significant religious meaning for a young and impressionable Lily. These gifted sisters shed light on life's methodologies and provide an incredible support structure for a scared and uncertain Lily as she comes of age.

A truly believable tale that provides an inspirational insight into life in the 60s, *The Secret Life of Bees* is a story of discovering your heritage, uncovering hidden secrets and maturing to become a caring, considerate and compassionate individual, despite adversity. It is about understanding your weaknesses, improving and developing yourself to make weaknesses become strengths and knowing the truth about who to trust in life.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Life on a peach farm in South Carolina in the 1960s would be hard for many, but for Lily Owens, a white teenager, it is slowly destroying her strength of character. Her father T-Ray resents her after the death of her natural mother, Deborah, and Lily blames herself for pulling the gun's trigger, even though she was too young to remember the event. At the age of fourteen, Lily can still hear the blast ricocheting around the room as she deals with longing for the mother she never knew.

Rosaleen Daily keeps the Owens house in order, cooks and has become a substitute mother for the young and naive Lily. The bees first appear in Lily's bedroom, in the summer of 1964. Rosaleen tells her that they are a symbol of death, and Lily realizes that she is the only one in the household that can hear and see them. Soon after their appearance, President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, bringing hope to thousands of black Americans in the South. Overjoyed at his decision, Rosaleen decides to register to vote. This brings trouble for Lily and Rosaleen as they embark on their journey into town. Confronted by three white men outside the Esso station and persecuted, Rosaleen defends her rights, which lands her in prison. Lily must wait for T-Ray and his cruel punishment.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Sue Monk Kidd describes her three main characters in great depth within this chapter. Lily is the heroine, and Rosaleen is the heroine's helper. Finally, T-Ray takes on the role of the antagonist. They are well-rounded, three-dimensional individuals who are both believable and realistic. All display strong opinions, views and mannerisms, which allows the reader to develop powerful images of each. Lily's relationship with her father T-Ray is well defined. The death of her mother is something Lily will never forget, and T-Ray has made her believe she is responsible. The guilt and loneliness eats into Lily's consciousness and positive demeanor. She doubts that she has any potential to become anything remarkable, and she is alienated from her peers and treated as an outcast. T-Ray contributes to her doubts, making her feel insecure and intimidated, controlling her every move and ensuring he has the upper hand. Lily cherishes her own private sanctuary and what few belongings she has as memories of her mother, as she struggles to understand who she is and what her mother's background is. Lily desperately needs answers to questions her mother took with her to the grave. The most significant question is whether Lily was a loved child. The reader begins to realize that Lily battles with her own form of hatred and persecution.

Kidd's inclusion of the Civil Rights Act into the plot compounds the conflict both the heroine and her helper are fighting against. While one fights against racial injustice and the other her father, both are trying to be recognized as individuals with rights. *The*



*Secret Life of Bees* is about understanding the basic rules and considerations of humanity and respecting the rights and freedom of your fellow man. References to President Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr., add to the meaning and effectiveness of Kidd's plot.

When Lily and Rosaleen embark on a journey into town, it is inevitable that they will encounter adversity and racial tension. The fact that Rosaleen defies the white men and their ill treatment displays great strength of character. The reader witnesses Lily's call to adventure and her defiance of the power that controls her. She finds an inner strength because of her belief in Rosaleen and the need to save her from discrimination.

The bees elaborate a profound concept that is both spiritual and real, offering intriguing clues for Lily and the reader to understand. T-Ray is unable to see the swarm because of his persona. He is essentially blind to his daughter and all that is important in her life. Rosaleen explains the bees as swarming around death, and Lily is experiencing spiritual death in her home life. Finally, the bees refuse to leave the jar that Lily captures them in until the racist events begin to unfold. The bees are an aspect of Lily, and the racism instigates the bees' action and Lily's growth.





## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Avery Gaston, the Sylvan chief of police, drives Rosaleen and Lily to jail, while Franklin Possey, one of the men from the Esso station, waits at the prison for his opportunity to beat an apology out of Rosaleen, as Avery turns a blind eye. Lily, seeing the wound above Rosaleen's eyebrow, is concerned, but the men tell her that it was an unfortunate accident. Knowing this to be a lie, Lily is unwilling to leave Rosaleen when T-Ray comes to collect her. Lily is forced against her will into T-Ray's vehicle, which results in a confrontation between Lily and T-Ray. Lily leaves the sanctity of her hometown and defies her father in the search for the truth, with Rosaleen by her side.

Rosaleen and Lily head for Highway 40, the road to Tiburon, South Carolina, freedom and answers to the legacy Lily's mother left behind. Rosaleen questions why Lily wishes to head to Tiburon, and Lily shows Rosaleen the picture of a Black Mary. Rosaleen tries to understand Lily's motives, as she tries to figure out why Mary is black. They discuss T-Ray, Deborah and their circumstances, which becomes an argument. Rosaleen and Lily momentarily go their separate ways before rekindling their relationship.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Black hatred is shown vividly within this chapter. Although the Civil Rights Act has been signed, it is evident it will take white Americans a great deal of time to accept the changes, and some will never accept change. The Franklin Posseys of the world will stop at nothing to demand that they be hailed as superior because of their skin color. Kidd creates a very moving and powerful chapter that allows the reader to grasp the depth of racial tension simply and effectively.

Lily's refusal to abandon the only person in her life who has shown her any affection gives the reader a taste of her strength of character. While she may be young and naive, she will not allow others to persecute someone she cares about, regardless of the consequences. She is willing to jeopardize everything for her moral and ethical beliefs, even when she must do it alone. Standing up to her cruel father is a monumental moment in Lily's life. She is breaking her bindings and seeking freedom from constraint. Rebelling against T-Ray demands a great deal of courage, and driven by her willpower, longing and determination, Lily takes her first steps towards her coming of age.

Lily's plan, though a little vague at first, develops, and she displays a great deal of intelligence when she frees Rosaleen from imprisonment. She is successful and feels triumphant to the point that she becomes over-zealous and headstrong, alienating the one person she needs to continue, Rosaleen. When they part company, Lily realizes that she is not capable of traveling alone into the unknown and understands that she

may have been a little egotistical. Finding Rosaleen again restores her confidence, and each accepts the other's idiosyncrasies.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Waking before Rosaleen, Lily studies the Black Mary picture, trying to understand why her mother would have kept it in the first place. She watches Rosaleen sleep and can see that her arms and legs have bruises on them as well as her head. Saddened by this, Lily questions God and the religion her mother must have worshipped, before waking Rosaleen and continuing on foot to Tiburon. They discuss their fate and what their plans are. Experiencing hunger pains Lily decides to stop at the Frogmore Stew general store, just outside of Tiburon, here she purchases two plates of barbecue pork and Coca-Cola's, and notices the Black Madonna picture on a jar of honey. Inquiring who manufactures the sweet, sticky, amber fluid, the gentleman behind the counter tells her August Boatwright, and gives her directions to her home.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Studying the Black Mary picture, Lily hopes for answers and ponders if she is in fact on the right track. She considers Rosaleen's ideas and questions her own authenticity and commitment. She begins to feel uncertain and wonders if she is capable of finding anything better in life and competent of having a future. Rosaleen's pessimism adds to Lily's confusion and begins to dampen not only her enthusiasm but also her optimistic outlook. Stumbling across the Black Madonna label at the store restores Lily's faith and gives her renewed hope. Believing she is on the right trail, she and Rosaleen go to find out more, though Lily is constantly aware that Rosaleen and she have broken the law. Lily is not only scared of the consequences of her actions but also desperately hoping that her father might care.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Rosaleen and Lily meet August Boatwright, an apiarist, and her two sisters, May and June. The Black Mary stands as a wooden statue in the Boatwrights' living room, astounding Lily and creating a powerful presence. They are invited to stay at the Boatwright home, and August offers Rosaleen a housekeeping position and Lily a beekeeping job. Lily's lies get bigger, and August can see right through her. Still, she extends her hospitality to the pair.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Feeling vulnerable, Lily takes comfort in lying to the Boatwrights when she first meets them, not because she wants to be deceitful but because she believes they will judge her before she is able to find the answers she seeks. August seems to be withholding information and waiting for the right timing, allowing Lily to have confidence in herself and begin to trust people.

Lily finds it difficult to trust anyone, especially after T-Ray's abusive behavior and the death of her natural mother. She desperately clings to the little that she has left as snippets of the past. Though Lily has a feeling of belonging, she has never been so aware of her skin coloring. She has neglected to consider racial hatred being directed at whites. June seems to despise her, and Lily is suddenly aware of her coloring standing out. There is no way for her to blend in and go unnoticed, making her feel uncomfortable and different.

Meeting the Black Mary and understanding that the image in the picture is in fact a real entity is an incredible experience for Lily. The statue not only offers her a real chance of unraveling her mother's past but also gives her a spiritually uplifted feeling of guidance.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Rosaleen and Lily begin to bond with the Boatwright sisters as they begin working and living with them. Friendships begin to form, and the women begin to discover each other's idiosyncrasies, faults and personalities. While June questions Lily and Rosaleen's authenticity, August overlooks the visitors' hidden past, preferring to acknowledge the good points and extending her goodwill. Lily enjoys her newfound freedom at the Boatwrights' and the lack of T-Ray's influence in her life. Lily and Rosaleen are introduced to the Black Mary and the Boatwright sisters' form of religion. They also witness racial disputes unfolding around the country, making Lily question God and his reasoning behind creating different skin tones.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Freedom is an extremely powerful word, and Kidd expresses its depth through her heroine. Lily once felt ridiculed, controlled and unable to be herself because of T-Ray, which parallels the experience of black Americans under white suppression. While one individual dictates to Lily, many dictate to black Americans. They are unable to go where they please and enjoy what they want for risk of insulting a white person.

As Rosaleen and Lily begin to bond with the Boatwrights, Lily begins to feel she is genuinely liked, and she wonders if it could become more. Still, she experiences skepticism and feels discomfort and an inability to enjoy everything fully. She is ashamed of her skin coloring, confirming her need to be accepted as a member of the household. She needs to feel love and a sense of belonging. August becomes Lily's mentor, giving her aspirations and meaning in life.

August's character offers the reader a deeper understanding of how people must cope with their burdens in life. August displays an appreciation of other people's feelings and emotions and an ability to love unconditionally and without judgment. This in turn makes Lily crave her mother because August has shown her a new kind of feeling, as well as wisdom and direction.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Neil, June's boyfriend, wakes Lily as he repairs a truck. Later, he joins them in the kitchen for breakfast and asks too many questions. He makes Lily feel awkward, and she excuses herself and waits for the Sunday worshipers to begin to congregate at the Boatwrights'. These are the son and daughters of Black Mary. August begins her sermon, reading from the Bible and telling the tale of Black Mary. As June plays the piano, the congregation gets to their feet and sways, each member touching Black Mary's heart in some way and paying homage to her before departing. When Lily's turn comes, June stops playing, and Lily feels like an outcast. Her head is swimming, and she feels woozy. She passes out, and Rosaleen and August tend to her.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

June's inability to trust her feelings and follow her heart for fear of being hurt becomes apparent when she denies her feelings for Neil. Kidd allows the reader to formulate a strong opinion about June, questioning her likability and personality. For the reader, June's issues with love and trust explain why June seems distant towards Lily and unable to accept her.

When Neil questions Lily, she feels that her freedom may be compromised, and when she flees, it is a cry for help. She desperately wants to tell the truth, but she feels she would no longer be welcome and would be asked to leave, just when she is beginning to like the Boatwrights' home.

Lily experiences the religious ceremony and feels that she is a part of this very strong and bonded group. It is a spiritual and emotional awakening for Lily. She feels that the Black Madonna is the key to her answers, and when June denies her the same gift as the others, Lily feels not only an outcast but also unloved and exposed. The fact that both Rosaleen and August care for her deeply and are concerned for her well being suggests that Lily is loved by more than one person.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Lily feels the animosity building between June and herself, and she is aware of Zach, August's godson, hindering her ability to bond further with August. Even though Lily feels physically drawn toward Zach, she does not understand why.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Lily's inability to relax suggests that she is waiting for her life to be thrust back into chaos, as it has so many times before. She begins to doubt the harmonious longevity of her stay in the Boatwright home. June and Zach become hurdles, and she views them both as having the ability to sever her connection with August. While June poses a real threat since she may expose Lily and her past, Zach's return compromises Lily's position further. Lily believes that if she loses August's undivided attention, she will become insignificant, jeopardizing the feeling of being wanted that she has become accustomed to. The sexual attraction she feels is confusing, and readers witness our heroine, Lily, not only developing and growing in her mental capacity but also physically.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Lily and August share a touching moment, as they discover more about each other's beliefs and philosophies on life. Lily continues to question God's creation of skin pigment, and she is introduced to Mr. Forrest, the white Tiburon lawyer, when she accompanies Zach on his honey delivery to Forrest's legal office.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Lily is beginning to open up to August and trust her judgment and guidance, as evidenced through their conversations about their thoughts and views of life. As their bond develops, so does Lily's need to tell the truth and shed her burden. August teaches her to rely on herself and her inner strength more than other people and to have faith in herself. This gives Lily the courage to contact her father, which signifies her desire to be accepted by her kin. The fact that he has not changed and sounds angry is confirmation that he will never be what she longs for and that he is incapable of expressing love in any way.





# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Lily dissolves the barrier between June and herself, and they share a monumental embrace that forgives any differences they have. Lily then learns that her mother lived with the Boatwrights for some time before her death, and she is overwhelmed. Coming to the conclusion that now is the right time to confess her secrets, Lily summons up the courage to confront August. Nevertheless, before she can, Zach entices her to accompany him to the hardware store, where a racial dispute erupts that lands Zach in prison and destroys Lily's opportunity. Telling August will now have to wait.

With Zach in prison, the household is melancholy. Eager to see him released, they do not tell May to avoid upsetting her. Unfortunately, Zach's mother phones and divulges the circumstances to May, who reacts harshly.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

When June finally accepts Lily, it is a beautiful and very moving moment. Unable to deny that she too feels love for our heroine, June embraces Lily in a warm and heartfelt spiritual bonding.

Lily's discovery that May knew her mother is spiritually uplifting and gives her renewed hope of finding out more about Deborah. Lily feels compelled to ask about Deborah, but she is afraid of truth. Instead, she closes herself off and becomes jumpy, raising questions from August and June. Lily begins to visualize her mother in various rooms of the house, caught between the living and not living. When the pressure becomes too much, she knows that she must confide in August and test the strong bond she feels between them. When Zach is imprisoned, Lily feels that her worries are insignificant compared to Zach's, and she will not add to August's concerns because she loves her and cares deeply about Zach. The Boatwrights protect the less fortunate and try to understand each other's differences. They are compassionate and caring, and their inability to protect May has a profound effect on them all when May finds her burden overwhelming.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

May is found pinned under a huge boulder at the bottom of the river. She is dead, and Lily can envisage her passing. They are all devastated, and the household goes into mourning. The son and daughters of Black Mary come to a vigil ceremony and pay their respects to May. She is laid to rest, and Lily feels that she has finally become one of the household, regardless of her color.

June finds May's suicide note, and the Boatwright sisters hold each other. Her death gives hope to those who survived her, but it makes many, such as Zach, feel animosity and hatred for his incarceration, believing that it contributed to her death.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

August believes in others, and even though she understands May's fragile state, she respects May's wishes. Against her better judgment, August allows May to confront her suffering. Finding May dead makes all the characters question their actions and reevaluate the situation.

The draping of the hives, the manna and the vigil display how deeply the family, Zach and the daughters of Mary feel about May and the spiritual connection they all share. This exceptionally moving chapter allows the reader to feel the emotion and power connected with love and unity. The most significant aspect is the good that comes from May's death, which causes people who were scared or misguided to move on and begin to enjoy life as they should have. It teaches June that she is able to commit to Neil, and it teaches Lily that burdens are sometimes too much to take on alone.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

After May's burial, August shuts down the honey making, and she and June continue mourning their sister's death, leaving Lily feeling isolated and alone. She talks to Zach about his feelings regarding the death of May, and he tells her that since his visit to prison, he has a fire in his belly and is angry with white men. He speaks of riots, righteous courses, the Ku Klux Klan and revenge.

After a week of mourning, life returns to normal. June and Neil wed on Mary Day, a ceremony dedicated to the statue they all worship. After the ritual, Zach and Lily wander hand-in-hand down to the river. He kisses her and promises that once he has become a lawyer, they will be together.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Lily has come to rely on the Boatwrights' company, and when they are no longer there, she feels empty and lost, concerned that things will not return to the way they were before May's death. However, Lily is pleasantly surprised at how easily things return to normal at the Boatwrights' home after their mourning period has passed. When August remembers what Lily likes, it shows the reader how deeply August cares for the young girl and that the two of them share unusual similarities, as like-minded individuals. In addition, Kidd lets readers witness how August deals with grief, allowing herself time to deal with issues, resolving them and moving on.

Lily and Zach's discussion is one of realization and confrontation. Lily's strong desire for Zach's touch is undeniable, and yet he makes it quite clear that to cross the line will result in racial persecution and possibly death. He also shows his maturity when he tells Lily that wishing is a foolish and childish act. Physical differences such as skin color cannot be altered, and she should be proud of who she is. When Zach voices his hatred of white man's foolishness, it is refreshing. He cares for Lily, who is white, but he does not place her in the same context as those who are racist. When he later commits to Lily, it is as though May's death and the marriage of June and Neil has affected his judgement and made him able to understand the need to follow his heart.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Lily finally has a chance to tell August about her past. She reveals the situation regarding her mother and father, as well as the fact that she and Rosaleen are on the run from the law. She waits for judgement and believes that she cannot be loved because of who she is. August tells her that many people love her and that she cannot believe she is unworthy of love, simply because of the accidental death of her mother. Lily produces the picture of Black Mary, with Tiburon, S.C. on its back, and August finally understands how Lily found them, believing it to be fate.

Lily and August sit on the porch drinking iced water and discussing Deborah and her life. What August tells Lily raises more questions, and Lily despises her mother, feeling betrayed, deflated and empty.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

For Lily, finally divulging her secrets and confiding in August takes an incredible amount of courage. The truth has been eating her up inside, and as much as it terrifies her to get answers to her questions, she understands that she must know in order to move on in life. Lily is also concerned that the unconditional love she has found here with the Boatwrights will be compromised and that the joyful existence she has become accustomed to will be destroyed. Her ideas and preconceived thoughts of Deborah are fairytale delusions, which many children feel when a parent has left. She is hopeful that her mother will become her savior, and she suffers from a knight-in-shining-armor syndrome. August's intuition is confirmed as Lily tells her tale and fills August in on the details of her travel to the Boatwrights' home. When Lily declares that she is unlovable, August realizes the extent of her burden and how psychologically scarred Lily is from the experience.

August does not want to withhold any information from Lily and make the same mistake she did with May. She tells Lily everything she knows about Deborah, shattering Lily's fairytale and forcing her to view her mother in a more realistic light. This gives rise to new emotions, and August understands the need for Lily to let go of the past, grieve and move on.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Jars of honey sit waiting for delivery. Lily picks up each one of them and throws them at the wall until all are destroyed, releasing her anguish and years of pent up anger. She explains the events to Rosaleen as they clean up the mess the next day, and she waits for judgement that does not come. Lily feels foolish and unworthy when August arrives with a box full of Deborah's belongings for Lily, which they open together.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Lily experiences anger, as many people do after the death of a loved one. Even though her mother passed away many years before, she has never been given the opportunity to say goodbye and mourn her mother's death, as the Boatwright sisters have mourned May. Her mother Deborah's life and death were a mystery to Lily, but she hoped this woman was one of grandeur. Therefore, when the pedestal she has placed Deborah on becomes nonexistent and her idol falls, Lily feels angry, betrayed and abandoned. When August explains that people are not perfect and that we all make mistakes, she is offering Lily a way to move on and resolve her issues. August believes that the box of Deborah's things will help Lily grieve and initiate the healing process. It will also give Lily memories and trinkets to hold onto when she has passed her grieving period.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Lily is left to her own devices and thoughts, as she struggles with forgiveness, memories and beliefs. She tries to reconcile the past and move on. She eventually does this in her own time. Her vigil concludes, and her mother is finally laid to rest.

Lily's battle with her father then begins. T-Ray finds Lily, and a confrontation erupts. The sisterhood gathers to protect Lily, and August offers to take good care of her, knowing that T-Ray wants to be rid of his memories and his daughter. T-Ray accepts the offer, and Lily stays with the Boatwright sisters.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

In the conclusion of the story, readers see Lily reach a milestone as she comes of age. She buries her mother within her mind after years of suffering and comes to terms with the events of the past. When August divulges that the Black Madonna is not a fairy godmother, she is trying to help Lily remain focused and realistic. Lily lived with delusions regarding her mother, and the last thing that August wants is for Lily to see the Black Madonna as a substitute. August wants Lily to understand exactly what the Black Mary symbolizes right from the beginning and for Lily to know that the power of Mary resides within her own spiritual being.

Lily's final confrontation is with her father, T-Ray. When he finds her, it is a deeply disturbing moment, and the reader questions if Lily is capable of overcoming this adversity. When she emerges not only triumphant but also unscathed, readers experience an almost euphoric feeling of achievement for our young heroine. The surprise Kidd offers is in the way Lily handles the situation. She displays calm, adult-like behavior that seems much older than her fourteen years, making T-Ray look childish.



# Characters

## Lily Melissa Owens

Lily is a fourteen-year-old girl whose mother died when she was four years old, an accident that Lily feels she was responsible for. She dresses in clothes she made in home economics. She is not a popular person in school. She has jet-black hair that resembles a nest of cowlicks, no chin, Sophia Loren eyes and an inferiority complex. She takes to picking scabs on her body and biting the flesh around her fingernails until they bleed. Boys, even the hard-up ones, ignore her. Rosaleen makes Lily wear breeches in the cold, which are neither fashionable nor complimentary, especially under her dresses. Girls become quiet when she walks past, because she has no fashion sense and is a little bit strange. Lily likes to daydream that Rosaleen is her mother and that the two of them share a bond. She finds a photo of the mother in the attic and often compares it with her eighth-grade picture. She notes that her mother had the same chin and looked very similar to her, though she was much prettier. Lily takes this to mean that she may grow to be more beautiful than she is at present. Lily sells peaches at the roadside stall in the summer. She loves reading and excels in school, with high verbal and math aptitudes. She enjoys Shakespeare and loves Thoreau, but she feels beauty school would be appropriate for her future until Mrs. Henry corrects her. Mrs. Henry tells Lily that she is far too intelligent for such a thing. Lily begins to loathe being asked what she plans to be when she grows up. With Mrs. Henry's encouragement, she plans to be a professor and a writer of books. Lily keeps a collection of everything she writes. Most of her stories have a horse in them. She also writes a philosophy of life, which began as a book but only ends up being three pages in length. She hates the peach stand because she cannot read when she is there, or else someone will drive past and mention it to her father T-Ray at church. Then she would be punished. Lily shares the same birthday as the country did, and she is a good liar.

## T-Ray Owens

Lily's father, T-Ray is a cold-hearted and controlling man, who rules Lily with an iron fist. T-Ray is strict and refuses to take Lily to football pep rallies or club car washes. He doesn't care that she wears clothes that are ugly, as long as she doesn't look like a tramp. Whenever Lily mentions her mother Deborah, T-Ray gets angry and throws things. He hates her reading, believing college to be a waste of time for girls when their place is within the home. He refers to Shakespeare as Julius Shakespeare and is an uneducated, primitive man. He never once celebrates Lily's birthday. T-Ray has attended church for forty years. He owns a peach farm, which he works all year round. In summer, he works from daylight to dusk, and he is only kind to Snout, his bird dog. Lily sees the sign of the property as T-Ray's way of mooning the world. He is a hard, calculating and ruthless man, who Lily has learned to loathe. He has punished Lily the same way since she was six, by sprinkling grits on the floor and making her kneel in them for hours while he cleans his fingernails with a pocketknife. He does not appear to



be racist, but he is a male chauvinist. T-Ray is a war hero and worshiped Deborah. When she left him, his heart was broken, making him an angry and cynical man.

## Rosaleen

Initially a peach picker, Rosaleen has helped maintain the Owens house and prepared their meals since Lily's mother passed away. She lives alone in a little house tucked back in the woods. She cooks and cleans every day, and she stands in as mother for Lily. She says that bees swarm before death. She is a hard, sharp, authoritative, single African-American woman who has no children of her own. Rosaleen was born in McCellanville, South Carolina, where her mama wove sweet grass baskets and sold them on the roadside to support her family. Rosaleen is one of six brothers and sisters, but she has not seen them in a long time. On occasions, she puts T-Ray in his place. She cooks a famous smothered chicken and brings Lily a birthday cake to celebrate her fourteenth birthday, including candles. Rosaleen has no manners and a body that slips out from her neck like a tent. She chews tobacco, spitting the residue wherever it may fall, and stools disappear when she sits on them.

## Rosaleen's Mother

Rosaleen's mother looked exactly like Rosaleen, with woolly braids, black blue skin, narrowed eyes and an eggplant-shaped body.

## Deborah

Lily's mother Deborah died on December 3, 1954, when Lily was four, after a shooting accident. She had black, generous hair thick with curls that circled her face. She smelled like cinnamon, which Lily later discovered was cold cream. She constantly argued with T-Ray. She was buried in Virginia, where her people were from. They moved to South Carolina when she was nineteen. Her father had died when she was a baby, and her mother died soon after the move. August was Deborah's housekeeper and nanny, and Deborah saw her as the only family she had after her parents' deaths. She moved to Sylvan with a girlfriend to be near August and married T-Ray because she was pregnant with Lily. Deborah often told August how beautiful Lily was, and she adored her daughter.

## Bitsy Johnson

Bitsy attends Sylvan High School, wears short skirts and is classed as a tramp, especially when she gets pregnant.





## Brother Gerald

The minister of the Ebenezer Baptist church, Brother Gerald is a middle-aged, white, racist man.

## President Johnson

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson is the president of the United States. On July 2, 1964, he signs the Civil Rights Act into law. This signifies new independence for black Americans.

## Mrs. Henry

Lily's teacher, Mrs. Henry gives her credit for being an exceptionally bright and gifted student and encourages her to make something of herself and her future. This warmhearted and caring lady lends Lily her novels over the summer and wants her to seek out a scholarship.

## Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr., is a black American man of the cloth and civil rights activist, who is arrested in Florida in 1964 for wanting to eat in a white restaurant.

## August Boatwright

A tall, black woman who makes Black Madonna Honey, August keeps bees all over the country. The eldest of the Boatwright sisters, her hair has a flour-dusted appearance, and her skin is the color of almond butter. She wears rimless glasses, and she has a face of a thousand caramel wrinkles. When she wears her beekeeping outfit, she looks like an African bride. She is a kind, considerate and insightful woman, who is extremely intelligent. August knows and understands a great deal about culture and teaches Lily things about Eskimos and other peoples. She loves peanuts in her Coca-Cola, a delicacy she and Lily share. She studied at Negro College in Maryland to be a teacher. She worked for nine years as a housekeeper before becoming a history teacher. August is against marriage because she loves her freedom more.

## June Boatwright

June has short hair and a stern and suspicious face, and she plays the violin. She worked for several years as a funeral dresser in a colored funeral home after graduating from Negro College in Maryland. She almost married ten years ago but was stood up at the altar, and now she has a fear of marriage and commitment.



## May Boatwright

May Boatwright was born a normal, happy child, but she changed when her twin sister April died. Since then, May cannot differentiate between the world's suffering and her own. She absorbs the world's pain, which has a detrimental affect on her personality. As a form of healing, August suggests that May use a mourning wall, which May builds herself from river stones. She slips prayers into the crevices of the wall. She has developed muscled arms from carrying large rocks. May usually does not watch television since it makes her cry. When she becomes upset she rocks back and forth and scratches her face. She behaves like an over-grown child, and she has short braids that stick out straight. She is naive, unassuming and hums "Oh Susanna" when she has to do unpleasant things. She hates killing things, and Lily later discovers she taught her mother to rescue cockroaches. May likes to have a banana for breakfast every morning, but it has to be perfect. If it is bruised, she peels another until she finds a perfect one. May and Rosaleen get along exceptionally well, and they share an understanding. Both are great cooks, and May is exceptionally smart in this area, since she reads cookbooks nonstop. May commits suicide by drowning herself in the river after Zach is put in prison because she can no longer stand her sadness.

## Walter Cronkite

A television news anchor, Walter Cronkite has an all-knowing face and voice. He fills the Boatwrights in on racial happenings, making Lily aware of her skin coloring and feel ashamed of herself.

## The Boatwrights' Mother

The Boatwright sisters are named after calendar month during spring and summer because their mother loved these seasons. There were originally four sisters, but April passed away when she was a child. Their mother was a Catholic.

## Zach Taylor

Zach Taylor is an assistant beekeeper at the Boatwrights'. When Lily arrives, he is away for the week, visiting family in Pawley's Island. He drives a black Lincoln 59 Ford Fairlane, which is his pride and joy. He has broad shoulders, a narrow waist, short-cropped hair and a dimple in his cheek, and he is a handsome black man. Zach's father left when he was small, and his mom works as the lunchroom lady at the school where June works. Zach is a junior at the black high school. He is an A student who plays halfback on the football team. He has worked as a beekeeper with August since the beginning of his high school years. He wants to be a lawyer but has doubts that he will make it because of racial tension. He was August's godson.



## Jack Palance

Jack Palance is a white movie star who is supposedly coming to Tiburon and insists on taking his colored girlfriend into the white section. This will cause trouble and make angry white local men retaliate.

## Mr. Clayton Forrest

Clayton Forrest is a white lawyer who likes fishing and has a great deal of time for Zach, telling him stories of cases he has won and letting him explore his office when Zach delivers honey and bees wax. Forrest has sandy hair, bushy eyebrows and blue eyes. A smile crinkles in his face, and he wears suspenders and a bow tie. Forrest is a kind and gentle man.

## Avery Gaston

The policeman that drives Lily and Rosaleen to jail is Avery Gaston. He is married, and his wife makes the food for the prisoners. He is the chief of police, and his residence is in front of the cells. The white men at the Esso station call him shoe, and Lily cannot understand why. He has the ears like that of a small child, which appear totally disproportionate to his body.

## Franklin Possey

Franklin Possey is a racist, irrational and violent white man, who would prefer to kill blacks rather than look at them. Possey smashes a flashlight into Rosaleen's head, creating an inch-long gash just above her eyebrow.

## Hospital Policeman

The hospital policeman is an unfit, young-looking man, who flirts with the nurse on duty.

## Woman in Hospital

Old and bird-like with a Blackberry face, the woman in the hospital's mouth opens wide, and her tongue curls like a misplaced comma. She requests water, and Rosaleen gives her some.

## Colored Man

The colored man drives a beat-up Chevy truck, full of cantaloupes. He is traveling to visit his sister in Colombia, and he stops and picks up Lily and Rosaleen as they



hitchhike along Highway 40. He takes them ninety miles towards Tiburon, South Carolina, and drops them off three miles outside of town at dusk. He allows them to take two cantaloupes for their supper.

## **Neil**

A tall black man with horn-rimmed glasses, Neil is sweet on June and has proposed to her many times. He is a kind, caring and determined man who is willing to patiently wait for June. He is the new principal at June's school and a studious mechanic.

## **The Daughters of Mary**

The daughters of Mary are a group of black women who meet at the Boatwrights' on Sunday for a special religious service. They are all spiritually connected and extremely good friends. The group consists of Queenie and her daughter Violet, Lunelle, Mabelee, Cressie and Sugar Girl. There is one son of Mary, Otis Hill, Sugar Girl's husband.

## **Queenie and Her Daughter Violet**

Queenie and her daughter Violet always dress alike but wear different hats. They are jovial African-American women.

## **Lunelle, Mabelee and Cressie**

Lunelle, Mabelee and Cressie are African-American women who make hats. They wear clip-on earrings and rouge, and they are exceptionally beautiful.

## **Otis Hill**

An African-American man who wears oversized suits and has stubby teeth, Otis Hill is the son of Mary, the only male member of the Boatwrights' worship group.

## **Sugar Girl**

The wife of Otis Hill, Sugar Girl wears vibrantly colored clothes and likes to look glamorous.



## Objects/Places

### The Peach Sign

A flesh-colored sign in the shape of a peach, with a crease down the center of it, signifies the entrance to the Owens property. Perched on a sixty-foot pole, many that pass refer to it as the "Great Big Fanny." Lily sees it as her father, T-Ray's, way of mooning the world, which is his style.

### The Owens Property

Located off the main highway just outside the town of Sylvan, South Carolina, is T-Ray and Lily's peach growing enterprise. A peach stand and two signs are located at the entrance.

### Peach Stand

Lily often works at the peach stand over the summer break. When nobody purchases peaches and sales are slow, she watches trucks passing while sitting on an upturned milk crate because T-Ray will not allow her to read books.

### Wooden Sign

Signifying the entrance to the Owens property, the wooden sign has "Owens Peach Enterprise" written in ghastly orange lettering. It sits alongside the sixty-foot peach sign and the stand where Lily sells the fruit.

### Deborah's Photo

Standing in front of an old car wearing a light-colored dress with shoulder pads, Lily's mother Deborah smirks at the camera. Her expression says, "don't you dare take this shot," but Lily can tell she is toying with the person who holds the camera. Lily found the photo in the attic in a brown paper bag that was stapled closed, and she treasures it and keeps it hidden from T-Ray so that he cannot destroy it.

### Deborah's Gloves

Made of white cotton and stained the color of age, Deborah's gloves were also found in the brown paper bag in the attic by Lily. She once stuffed cotton balls into the pair of gloves and pretended they contained her mother's hands. She held onto them all night for reassurance.



## Picture of Mary

A picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus, had been cut from a book, pasted onto a sanded block of wood two inches in diameter and varnished. "Tiburon, S.C." is written on the back in cursive handwriting. Lily found this inside the brown paper bag in the attic, along with her mother's gloves and photo. The only thing Lily finds obscure is that Mary is a black woman, while the Mary she knows to be the mother of Jesus is white.

## Tin Box

Lily hides Deborah's photo and gloves in a tin box along with the picture of the Black Mary. She buried these under the thirty-second tree, eight rows left of the tractor shed, in her secret hiding place.

## The Orchard

The orchard is full of succulent peaches, and it is the livelihood of T-Ray and Lily. The rows of hundreds of trees keep Lily's tin box safe from destruction. The orchard houses a long tunnel of trees that no one knows about except for Lily, and this is where she makes her secret hiding place.

## Lily's Secret Hiding Place

A long tunnel of trees in the peach orchard becomes Lily's private safe haven where she hides from T-Ray and the memories of her mother's death. She began coming here before she learned to tie her shoelaces. It is a beautiful place to lay on her back and just admire the twinkling stars and moon on a clear night. Eight rows left of the tractor shed, Lily has buried her precious tin box under the thirty-second tree.

## Tiburon, South Carolina

Tiburon is a small town two hours from Sylvan and Lily's home. Many times, Lily has wondered whether her mother visited here. The town is home to dry paddocks, Hereford cows, farmhouses with wide porches, ties swing suspended from trees and windmills, all parched by the sun. The highway asphalt turns to gravel. Like Sylvan, minus the peaches, a Confederate flag flies in the mouth of the cannon on Main Street, and two-story buildings line the pavement. There is a soda fountain with chrome trim, which sells cherry Cokes and banana splits. The Worth insurance agency and Tiburon County rural electric office also reside in the town, along with the Amen Dollar Store, which sells hula hoops, swimming goggles and boxes of sparklers. Finally, the Farmers Trust Bank and the post office complete the town center.



## Sylvan, South Carolina

The closest town to Lily's home, Sylvan houses both whites and blacks, and it is often plagued by racial disputes. The mixed raced town has a segregated population of 3,100 residents, with no Catholics, only Baptists and Methodists. On the worst side of town, there are two old houses on cinder blocks with fans wedged in the windows, dirt yards, collarless dogs and women in pink curlers.

## Esso Station

On the corner of West Market and Park Street, the Esso station is a catch-all place for men with too much time. They often play cards outside on plywood boards that serve as tables.

## Green Pickup

Franklin Possey and his men follow Lily and Rosaleen to the police jail in a green pickup. It has a gun rack inside, and they follow closely, beeping their horn, scaring Lily and shouting profanities.

## Police Car

The police car has no door handles or window cranks in the rear, and it is hot and stuffy inside in the summer heat.

## Jail Cells

The jail cells smell of alcohol and are just behind Avery Gaston's personal residence.

## Duffel Bag

The pink duffel bag belongs to Lily. When she packs to leave home, she fills it with seven pairs of underwear, thirty-eight dollars, five pairs of shorts, some tops, a nightgown, shampoo, a brush, toothpaste and toothbrush, a rubber band for her hair, a map and the tin box that contains her mother's precious trinkets.

## Sylvan Memorial Hospital

A low brick building situated in town, the Sylvan Memorial Hospital has one wing for whites and one wing for blacks. It smells of carnations, old people, rubbing alcohol, bathroom deodorizer and Jell-O. Air conditioners poke out from the windows in the white section, but the black patients have only fans to stir the hot air. A policeman leans on the



desk at the nurses' station, chatting to the nurse when he should be guarding Rosaleen's door. There are six beds in Rosaleen's ward, and her sheet struggles to cover her body.

## **White Ford**

The white Ford is Brother Gerald's car, in which he picks Lily up and takes her to town. Inside, it looks like a normal car, instead of being a monument of God.

## **Highway 40**

Rosaleen and Lily hitchhike to Tiburon, South Carolina, along Highway 40.

## **Camping Place on Highway 40**

Three miles outside of Tiburon, South Carolina, Lily and Rosaleen sleep under a bridge beside a creek. The water shines in the full moon. Kudzu vines drape between pine trees like giant hammocks and remind Lily of fairy tales. The next morning, when they wake, a barrage of mist covers the water. Blue dragonflies dart about, and Lily appreciates Mother Nature.

## **Sylvan High School**

The school Lily attends in Sylvan is Sylvan High School.

## **Martha Whites**

Martha Whites is fine powdered dry grits that T-Ray sprinkles over the floor and makes Lily kneel on as punishment for her bad behavior. Lily's knees swell with hundreds of welts and pinprick bruises that develop into blue stubble across her skin. She has become used to this form of punishment since T-Ray uses nothing else and has been doing this to her since she was six.

## **Ebenezer Baptist Church**

T-Ray and Lily attend church at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Blacks are not permitted, and the deacons stand with their arms locked to prevent colored folks from entering. Made of red bricks, the church has little or no character. There are no leadlight windows, only milky panes that filter light through. The air is lifeless inside, and wooden pews run either side of a walkway. The steeple, visible through a grove of trees, is always welcoming and one of the first things people see as they near the church. Lily recalls the hymnbook holders having a picture of a white church and white people on





them. She once sung here with her book upside down, and T-Ray smiled at her. It is the only time she thought he might love her.

## Thursday Afternoons

Thursday afternoons usually signify a big peach selling day, since the women of town need to prepare for Sunday cobblers.

## Rosaleen's House

Rosaleen's house has a special shelf with the stub of a candle, creek rocks, a reddish feather and a piece of John of Conqueror roots surrounding a picture of her mother. This is her way of worshiping God and all that is good.

## Frogmore Stew General Store

The general store has a bulletin board outside and sells deer rifles, foodstuffs, general-purpose goods and household goods. It is also a restaurant. It has been open since 1854 and smells of pickled eggs, sawdust and cured hams. A colored man cooks pork in the side yard, and the restaurant is situated in the back. A man with a bow tie, who stands behind the counter, greets customers as they enter the store. This is where Lily first sees the Black Madonna Honey and inquires who makes it. The gentleman behind the counter tells her that August Boatwright makes the honey and instructs her where to find August.

## The Boatwrights' Home

The Boatwrights have a two-story classical home that is painted a shocking scorched pink, like Pepto Bismol, a color which May selected. A delicate picket fence surrounds the home. A jasmine vine covers the fence, and its weight is about to make the fence topple. It smells like furniture wax inside and has fringed throw rugs on the floor, velvet chairs, a piano, many mirrors on the walls and a carved woman three-foot tall standing in the parlor.

## The Boatwrights' Property

The property has fourteen beehives and pine woods stretch beyond the honey house in every direction. These twenty-eight acres were left to August by her granddaddy. The property includes a plot of tomatoes, orange zinnias and lavender Gladiolus, grass, a crude stone wall with notes tucked in the crevices, bird baths and feeders everywhere.



## **Black Mary/Black Madonna**

Made of wood, the Black Mary statue depicts Jesus' mother. It is twisted like driftwood and weathered, with a face like a map of storms. The right arm is raised with her fingers closed, and she is serious looking with a faded red heart painted on her breast and a crescent moon painted where she would have been attached to a ship. She is a roaring force, with an aura that feels pure. She sees right into your soul, exposing your core and all your good and bad qualities.

## **Supers**

From the outside, the supers look like dresser drawers, but inside are frames of honeycomb, each frame filled with honey and sealed with beeswax.

## **Uncapper**

The uncapper is a tool used to remove the wax from the honeycomb.

## **Spinner**

The spinner separates the honey and the debris, therefore separating the good from the bad.

## **Honey House**

A converted a garage in the back corner of the Boatwrights' yard, painted pink to match the house, is filled with honey-making machines, big tanks, gas burners, racks and waxy honey comb. The sweetness inside is overwhelming, and the floor is sticky. Lily and Rosaleen first reside here when they come to the Boatwrights. In the back corner of the honey house are a sink, a full-length mirror, a curtainless window and two wooden cots.

## **Amen Dollar Store**

August buys clothing for Rosaleen at the Amen Dollar Store clothing shop in Tiburon. She purchases a bra, three waistless Hawaiian-style dresses, four pairs of panties and a pale blue cotton nightgown.

## **Steam-Heated Knife**

The steam-heated knife is a tool used to slice the wax caps off the honeycombs.



## **Bees' Wax Candles**

August makes candles with tiny violets pressed into them. She uses a pound of wax per candle and ships them via mail order.

## **Boatwrights' Products**

The Boatwright sisters make honey, candles and all-purpose bees' wax for furniture and medicinal purposes.

## **Honey Wagon**

The honey wagon is a flatbed truck that the women drive around the farm to check their hives and collect honey.

## **Smoker**

The smoker is a small pot filled with pine straw and tobacco leaves. When lit, it emits smoke that calms the bees.

## **Wailing/Mourning Wall**

The wailing/mourning wall is May's wall for grieving. August adapts the idea from the Jewish people in Jerusalem. By writing prayers on small pieces of paper and sticking them in the wall, the grieving person is healing his or her pain.

## **The Daughters of Mary**

The daughters of Mary are a group of black women that meet at the Boatwrights' on Sundays for special religious services that they conduct instead of attending church. One male also joins them. This is Otis, and he is classed as a son of Mary.

## **Son of Mary**

Otis Hill is the son of Mary, a black man who is married to Sugar Girl. He has a stubby appearance and wears oversized suits.

## **Lily's Room in the Boatwright House**

All the women Lily has grown to love spoil her when she moves into the Boatwright house. After June marries, Lily is given her room, along with a new bed and a white



French provincial dressing table. Violet and Queenie donate a flower rug, and Mabelee sews blue and white polka dot curtains with fringed balls along the hem. Cressie crochets four eight-legged octopuses from various yarns, and Lunnel creates the hat that she has promised.

## **Manna**

Manna is a wooden bowl that contains a mixture of sunflower, sesame, drunken and pomegranate seeds drizzled with honey and baked to perfection.



# Themes

## Civil Rights and Equality

The Civil Rights Act that President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed on the 15th of June 1964 was passed after 73 votes to 27 ruled in favor of the act. It made racial discrimination in public places a crime and demanded equal employment opportunities regardless of culture, race or color. It also required African Americans to have voting rights in the Deep South. Kidd includes the Civil Rights Act and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., within her story to show the rise of deep-seated resentment, creating tension and an incredibly powerful and moving plot.

Equality is explored prominently throughout the book, not only in relation to civil rights but also in relation to gender segregation. T-Ray constantly puts Lily down and refuses to acknowledge her intelligence and ability in anything more than fill a typical female role, such as a beautician, a mother or a housewife. Lily's female teacher tells her that she has potential and boosts her desire to follow her aspirations.

## Racism

Racism is a violation of the civil and human rights of any human being due to race. It affects the social, cultural, economic, intellectual, technical and political spheres. Although humans are one single species who share the same needs for survival, our views and opinions sometimes cloud our judgment and make some of us perceive ourselves as superior. Kidd displays these violations throughout her book. She explores many different aspects of racism. When Lily and Rosaleen enter Sylvan on the wrong side of town, conflict arises resulting in them being imprisoned, showing the social aspects of racism. The Sylvan white population is predominantly Baptist or Methodist, while the blacks develop their own religion based on their beliefs. This shows a cultural divide generated through racism. A political aspect of racism is broached when whites may simply vote while blacks must prove they are worthy by signing their names in perfect cursive handwriting.

## Single Parent Families

Readers see two single-parent families and situations within Sue Monk Kidd's novel. One displays adversity and negativity, while the other displays unconditional love, guidance and deep nurturing qualities, the complete opposite of the first.

The first family is Lily's household with her father. The hostility and solidarity that Lily endures within a single-parent family border on abuse. Her father T-Ray is incapable of love after Deborah, Lily's mother, leaves them both. Resentment consumes him, which he vents on Lily. The fact that she reminds him of Deborah in both mannerisms and looks is apparent in Chapter 14, when he cannot differentiate between Lily and her



mother as he tries to force Lily into returning home. T-Ray is so cold and calculating that his constant ridicule of Lily might disillusion and repress her. Tray offers no support, and it is inevitable that she will either retaliate or remain intimidated for life.

The second family is the Boatwright sisters' household. Lily is welcomed with open arms into the Boatwright sisters' home by August and May. She is later accepted by June. The sisters not only encourage Lily to be what she desires to be, but they are also supportive, love her unconditionally and teach her how to find her strength. Their faith in Lily to overcome her fears and speak the truth about her past is a monumental symbol of the unity these women share.

## Puberty and Adolescence

Both puberty and adolescence refer to coming of age, and while one is physical and the other psychological, they both differentiate a child from an adult. Puberty is physical development and sexual maturation. Within the story, Lily physically matures and begins understanding the chemistry that exists between the sexes. When Lily first meets Zach, she feels woozy yet stimulated by his look and smell. She feels compelled to touch him. Later, the union becomes stronger, and they kiss. They are unable to hide their feelings and swear that when the time is right they will be together. Lily's most evident psychological change, during the process of her adolescence or psychological maturation, comes in Chapter 14. Readers witness her dealings with T-Ray. While he is barbaric and tries to force her to return home with him, Lily remains calm and refuses to allow her rage to consume her. Rationally, she deals with adversity and becomes victorious knowing that T-Ray will never influence her life again.

## Race Relations

In South Carolina in 1964, people of different races lived in strictly separate worlds. *The Secret Life of Bees* is set in the months following the passage of the Civil Rights Act in July of that year; appropriately for that summer, much of the novel is seen through the prism of race. Rosaleen's troubles begin when she is harassed by racists on her way to register to vote, and social conventions of the segregated community keep Zach and Lily from acting on their affection for each other. Our Lady of Chains gets her name because the chains of slavery were unable to hold her. Lily initially is too self-conscious of her whiteness to touch the statue of Our Lady and feels she can only do so secretly. Sue Monk Kidd offers a range of responses to issues of race among her characters. Lily decides that "everybody being colorless together" would be the ideal situation. Zach, on the other hand, after he is arbitrarily arrested and held for days by the racist local police, becomes more dedicated to fighting racial injustice. April Boatwright killed herself after years of depression that began when she was not allowed to eat ice cream in a whites-only establishment, and her twin sister, May, kills herself in the wake of Zach's racially motivated arrest. By the end of the novel, race relations are changing in positive, individual ways. Rosaleen eventually registers to vote, and Zach leads the way in integrating Tiburon's formerly segregated high school.



## Search for the Mother

For a child, the loss of a mother is one of the most profound of traumas. If that child has an uncaring father and no other maternal figures, the damage is compounded. In the novel, Lily's solution is creating an elaborate fantasy about her mother, whom she imagines she will see one day in heaven. She runs away to Tiburon and finds August Boatwright because of the need to fill an emptiness within her—a "motherless place." August and her sisters are part of a small group of worshipers called the Daughters of Mary, who consider their spiritual mother to be Our Lady of Chains. As a kind of controlling maternal presence, she is also symbolized in the novel by the queen bee, mother of the entire hive, who gives the hive purpose. Lily blossoms under the maternal care of August, who also teaches her that the divine mother, the Virgin Mary, is accessible everywhere, most especially inside her own heart.

## The Natural World

The natural world holds much symbolic and actual importance for the characters in Kidd's novel. Rosaleen and Lily bathe in a river and sleep under the stars before they reach the Boatwright household, where August's beekeeping has made her especially acute to the rhythms and secrets of nature. Each chapter of the novel begins with a quotation from a nonfiction work on bees and beekeeping that comments on the action that follows. The honey the bees produce is a vital part of life for the Boatwrights, who use it for its healthful properties, sell it for their livelihood, and include it in the religious rituals of the Daughters of Mary. The bees also provide August and Lily with life lessons about the roles people play in society and how, as a queen bee gives life to her hive, so motherhood brings life and purpose to society. Even the names of the Boatwright sisters, May, June, and August, seem to suggest a connection to the natural world and its seasonal changes as well as a love for the fertility of nature associated with warm weather.

## Community of Women

Through the Daughters of Mary, Kidd depicts a feminist, matriarchal alternative to the racist white male religious and civil authorities who otherwise dominate the town of Tiburon. The Boatwrights and the other Daughters worship a divine feminine presence, the Virgin Mary. The Virgin's nurturing qualities stand in sharp contrast to Brother Gerald, the Baptist preacher at the church in Sylvan. The Daughters' worship revolves around shared meals and communally treasured rituals. By the end of the novel, Rosaleen and Lily both have found a place for themselves in this mostly female community, which is guided by principles of strength and grace—as when August and the Daughters stand up to T. Ray when he comes to claim Lily, firmly but without threats or violence.

## The Importance of Ritual

The characters in Kidd's novel use rituals to stay connected with others as well as with the past. Early in the novel, Lily attaches ritual importance to the few items of her mother's that she possesses. She keeps them buried in a particular spot outside and looks at them only in secret. She has a pair of gloves that she wears to imagine what her mother must have been like. May Boatwright has developed her own ritual to cope with the anxiety she feels over the misfortunes of others. She writes a prayer for the suffering party on a slip of paper and inserts the paper in a wailing wall she constructed behind the Boatwright house. After May dies, Lily takes over maintaining the wall.

The most important rituals in the novel are those pertaining to Our Lady of Chains. When August tells the story of Our Lady, it is clear that the other Daughters have heard the story many times. On their annual celebration of Mary Day, they follow a ritual of chaining the statue, then anointing it with honey. They also share a Communion using honey cakes. The rituals of Our Lady connect the Daughters to the first slaves who drew strength from her, as well as the generations who have passed before them. For August, particularly, they connect her to the mother and grandmother from whom she learned the rituals.





# Style

## Point of View

Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* is written in the first person from the point of view of Lily Melissa Owens, the fourteen-year-old heroine. By seeing the story through Lily's eyes, readers are able to feel her pain and anguish at having been abandoned by her mother and understand her personal struggle to come to terms with her life and her animosity towards her father. We also witness her growth and development as she matures. Once a pessimistic young lady, she changes into one who begins to see the world and herself in a more positive light. She understands what love is, that she can be loved and that she can love others without dire consequences. This is especially evident when Lily feels she must lie to August, allowing Lily time to grow fond of August and love her before she tells August the truth.

The reader is also able to understand racial tension through Lily's point of view. Even though Lily is a young white girl growing up in South Carolina during the 1960s and experiencing racial tension, she sees herself as an equal to black people. A profound section of the novel includes Lily's realization that June will not accept her because she is the only white person in amongst a household of blacks. This signifies that blacks can also be racist towards whites and that a young, naive Lily has not contemplated this type of reversal. This makes the story powerful, emotional and captivating.

## Setting

*The Secret Life of Bees* is set in South Carolina between 1964 and 1965, as the President of United States, Lyndon Johnson, signs the Civil Rights Act into law. Racial tension is high, and white people refuse to let blacks associate with them. Kidd mentions Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and his arrest in Florida for wanting to eat in a white restaurant, Nat King Cole and many other prominent black Americans.

The narrative focuses on two towns in South Carolina, Sylvan and Tiburon. Both have a population of approximately 3,000 to 4,000 people, including both blacks and whites. This setting allows the author to explore racism in the American South. The young heroine Lily is born in Sylvan and travels ninety-six miles south to Tiburon in search of answers to the puzzling riddle of the Black Madonna and her mother.

## Language and Meaning

Kidd's female characters are exceptionally well developed, realistic and believable while her males seem to have less depth. They do not seem to possess the same three-dimensional personas. This personifies feminist theology, a subject Kidd has researched and studied in her younger years. The book provides a significant statement of female



equality and bonding regardless of color or creed and portrays a universal understanding between those of the same gender.

The use of dialogue throughout the story allows the reader to have a sound understanding of each character's cultural, religious and educational experiences. Kidd effectively yet simply uses dialogue, allowing the reader to grasp a clear and emotional understanding of how all the characters interact and communicate with each other. Female intuition appears throughout the book, and the phrases "it is not what you say but how you say it" and "reading between the lines" come to mind, especially when Lily constantly lies to August to cover up her and Rosaleen's past. August has already deciphered the truth through an unspoken understanding and simply disregards the fabrication.

## Structure

*The Secret Life of Bees* is a story that examines Lily Melissa Owens' coming of age, as readers witness her in a struggle to understand herself and her environment. The book has a spiritual and philosophical message and explores the characters' inner needs, strong goals and personal frustration. Kidd has incorporated her own discoveries through her exploration of religion, spiritual awakening and feminist outlooks.

This story is a combination of internal and external transformation as Lily, the main character, begins to understand racial tensions and her inner strength to overcome her fears and support her opinions. She battles to rescue Rosaleen from racist brutes and impending death, while she protects herself from the persecution and ridicule of T-Ray, her abusive father.

Kidd's research into beekeeping and bees stands out. She evidently has spent hours in honey houses and at hives, because some of the scenes within the story cause the readers' senses to tingle. The hum of thousands of bees rushing to defend their homes, the ambience within the bees' territory and the emotions of the young heroine Lily are profound. Readers can almost taste, smell and hear what she does.

The Black Mary was discovered in a Trappist monastery in South Carolina. When Kidd visited this monastery, it inspired her to use the unusual statue within her story, especially since the Black Madonna and the bee symbol are so closely related. Marry is often called the Queen Bee because she is the mother of thousands, and she is thought of as the beehive because she offers sanctuary.

## Religious Symbolism

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily Owens is introduced to a group of women who formed a religious faith founded on the perseverance of their slave ancestors and a black wooden statue of the Virgin Mary. The symbols of their religion—not just the Madonna, but the honey from August's hives and the chains that represent a resistance to slavery—are important to them and to the novel as a whole. Lily has actually been aware of the Black



Madonna since her childhood. One of the few possessions she has to associate with her mother, who died when Lily was four years old, is an icon—a picture of a dark-skinned Mary glued to a small wooden plaque. As she comes to learn from August Boatwright, that image of Mary is only one of many dark-skinned representations of her around the world. Late in the novel, Lily looks at a book filled with these Black Madonnas and sees that the Archangel Gabriel is frequently pictured as presenting a lily to Mary to symbolize the coming birth of Jesus. Lily's name is a religious symbol itself. This realization on her part goes along with her growing sense of self-worth.

## Nature Symbolism

Nature symbolism is an important feature of *The Secret Life of Bees*, most obviously in the form of the bees August Boatwright keeps. Much of August's understanding of life comes from the years she has spent tending to and observing the bees. She shows Lily that the bees have a "secret life," that each bee has a purpose in the functioning of the hive, and that without a queen bee—the "mother of thousands," as August says—the rest of the hive loses its purpose. Lily understands that what she learns about the bees can be applied to her own life. The honey the bees produce is also vital to the Boatwright household. They take it medicinally, shampoo and bathe in it, and use it for their religious rituals. The nature symbolism and religious imagery in the novel are inseparable. The bees, August explains, represent death and rebirth. Early Christians used drawings of bees to communicate in code with each other. The names of the Boatwright sisters themselves—August, May, and June—symbolize their closeness to nature and love of life, associated as they are with the warm, fertile months of the year (another sister, April, died as a teenager).

## Coming-of-age Novel

The coming-of-age novel has a rich history in Southern literature. The pains of adolescence and self-discovery that Lily undergoes are similar to those experienced by the young female main characters of other twentieth-century novels by Southern women, including Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). (Those novels have other similarities to *The Secret Life of Bees* as well: *To Kill a Mockingbird* also explores racial intolerance in a small Southern town during the days of segregation, and the central relationship in *The Member of the Wedding*, between Frankie and her family's housekeeper, Berenice, is much like the relationship between Lily and Rosaleen.) In these coming-of-age novels, a girl makes the first awkward steps toward maturity and gains some wisdom about the world around her. Lily's path to maturity involves an acceptance of her conflicted feelings about the mother who abandoned her, and a spiritual awakening that allows her to discover the nurturing presence of the Black Madonna in herself. It also involves a tentative realization of her sexuality, in the form of her first romance with August's godson and beekeeping assistant, Zach Taylor. Zach's ambitions and the fact he is black and Lily is white lead them to promise each other that they will be together in a more tolerant future.



## Storytelling

Storytelling is a vital part of Southern literature, dating back at least as far as Joel Chandler Harris's "Uncle Remus" stories and Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). For Southerners, storytelling can be a pastime, a folk art, and a way to pass down family histories. Kidd has said in interviews that one of her earliest inspirations as a writer growing up in Georgia was her father's knack for storytelling. In *The Secret Life of Bees*, August uses stories to teach Lily. In the story of Sister Beatrix, a nun who grows tired of the convent and runs away and returns years later, disappointed with life in the outside world, to find that the Virgin Mary has been filling in for her at the convent the entire time. August later tells Lily that she intended Sister Beatrix to represent Lily's mother, Deborah, and hoped Mary could fill in for her, providing Lily the mother figure she desperately desires. August also tells the story of the Black Madonna, Our Lady of Chains, as a way of reaffirming the sense of community that the Daughters of Mary feel and reminding them of the courage of their slave ancestors. The statue, originally a ship's masthead discovered by a slave on a coastal plantation, became a source of comfort and strength to the other slaves, particularly when it shrugged off the chains the plantation owner attempts to use to lock it in the barn for fifty straight nights. August also tells Lily of the story of Aristaeus—the first beekeeper, according to Greek myth—whose bees were killed by the gods but then reborn in the body of a sacrificial bull. After that, August explains, people believed bees had the power over life and death.

# Historical Context

## Book Clubs and Inspirational Literature

Book clubs have grown in popularity in the twenty-first century thanks to high-profile reading projects such as Oprah Winfrey's televised monthly club and promotion by publishers and bookstores. Previously unknown authors have found themselves propelled up the bestseller lists through book-club promotion. The *Secret Life of Bees* received a similar boost after its publication in 2002 when it was selected as the *Good Morning America* "Read This!" book for October of that year. In 2003, the Penguin paperback edition of the novel was published in a format friendly to book clubs, with an author interview and questions for discussion appended to the end.

Sue Monk Kidd's novel was well poised for success as a book-club favorite because of its focus on issues of interest to women readers, the majority of book-club participants. Its predominantly female cast of characters, small-town setting, and themes of motherhood and female friendship link it to other novels popular with reading groups, by authors such as Toni Morrison and Rebecca Wells. The book deals with race, a perennial subject of interest, but through the eyes of its white protagonist, perhaps making the issue more accessible to a broader audience.

*The Secret Life of Bees* also appeared at a time when literature explicitly about spiritual matters was viewed with renewed interest—four months after September 11, 2001, as Laura T. Ryan points out in her article on Kidd in the *Syracuse Post-Standard*. Kidd's novel is very much in the spirit of her earlier inspirational writing, with her main character learning to reconnect her soul to an inner feminine presence. Its success among book clubs and its inspirational message seemingly combined to give the novel enormous mainstream appeal.

## Civil Rights—era South

The South in the 1960s is the setting for a large number of plays, movies, novels, and stories. Southern writers who are old enough to have lived through that era have frequently attempted to come to terms with their experiences of racism and the progress and disappointments of the civil rights movement from both sides of the color line. *The Secret Life of Bees* is set specifically during the immediate aftermath of the signing of Civil Rights Act in July 1964, a time marked by often brutal, racially motivated violence in the South, which is also alluded to in the novel. Lily finds in May Boatwright's wailing wall a slip of paper that says "Birmingham, Sept 15, four little angels dead," a reference to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Alabama the previous year, in which four girls were killed.

The Civil Rights Act put the force of federal law behind the constitutional rights of African Americans, particularly with respect to public accommodations such as restaurants,



stores, and hotels. Voter-registration rallies such as the one Rosaleen plans to attend in the novel were common after state laws set up to make it difficult for black people to vote were struck down. Tens of thousands of black South Carolinians registered to vote in the first half of the 1960s.

Still, for some African Americans, social progress did not come quickly enough. Young black men such as Zach Taylor in Kidd's novel were increasingly drawn to more-militant groups such as Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity, which he founded in 1964. Zach becomes preoccupied with the activities of such groups after his arrest.

## Critical Overview

*The Secret Life of Bees* was met with generally positive reviews when it was published in 2002. Sue Monk Kidd had already established a reputation for herself as a writer of inspirational literature, and many reviewers seemed to approach the novel in that spirit, praising it for its upbeat message of the power of love. Jarrod Zickefoose, writing in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, suggests that the reader must force sympathy for Lily, but that "August's deep spirituality, her security and her wisdom form a character that permeates the pages." In the April 2002 *Women's Review of Books*, Rosellen Brown ultimately concludes that the novel "has less sting in the end than its swarm of griefs would seem to promise," but admires Kidd's vision of "a sort of beloved community, part Oz, part ashram, part center for racial reconciliation." The novel was well received in England as well, as indicated by Rachel Simhon's review in February 23, 2002, edition of the *Daily Telegraph*. Simhon describes the novel as "by turns funny, sad, full of incident and shot through with grown-up magic."

As the novel became a success in book clubs and reading groups around the country, it continued to garner positive notices. Ann-Janine Morey, writing in the February 22, 2003, issue of *Christian Century*, observed that the racial plot of the novel was "imperfectly integrated" with the story of Lily's spiritual journey, but recommends "this captivating first novel about love and forgiveness" to both adult and younger readers. *The Secret Life of Bees* sold 3.5 million copies and spent nearly two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and a motion-picture adaptation is in the works.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3





# Critical Essay #1

*Brower is an editor and freelance writer. In this essay, he discusses the importance of mysteries in the characters' lives in The Secret Life of Bees.*

As suggested even in its title, the driving forces behind the characters' actions in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* are mysteries. They may be mysteries that characters cherish—as with the kind represented by the supernatural events of the story of Our Lady of Chains recited ritually by her worshippers, the Daughters of Mary—or ones that they want desperately to resolve, as with Lily Owens's pursuit of answers about her mother's life and death. Characters keep secrets even from those they love, and nature seems to withhold its secrets from all except those who know how to look for them.

Lily's relationship with her mother, Deborah, whom Lily accidentally shot and killed when she was four years old, exists only in the imagination of the now fourteen-year-old teenager. Her abusive father, T. Ray, does not discuss his dead wife. Other than her memories of the day of Deborah's death, Lily has only a few mementos of her mother—a photograph, a pair of white gloves, and, most significantly, an icon of a dark-skinned Virgin Mary—which she keeps buried in her father's peach orchard. She digs them up occasionally and uses them to spin elaborate fantasies about the sort of woman Deborah was. The significance of the Black Madonna icon is a complete mystery to Lily, and the inscription on the back in her mother's hand, "Tiburon, S.C.," is what draws her to that small Southern town and the Boatwright sisters.

Lily learns who the Black Madonna is almost immediately upon arriving in Tiburon, but this knowledge only involves her in greater mysteries. The figure of Mary that August Boatwright and her sisters call Our Lady of Chains was originally a masthead, washed up, according to their legend, from an unknown ship near a plantation on the South Carolina coast in the days of slavery. It communicated in secret with the slaves of the plantation, exhorting them to furtive acts of flight and resistance. Amazingly, under its own power it repeatedly escaped the chains the plantation owner used to lock it in the barn. Shrouded in myth, Our Lady of Chains comes to represent, over the course of the novel, the mysteries Kidd portrays as the most powerful of all: those of the human heart.

The person who initiates Lily into these mysteries is August, beekeeper and apparent leader of the Daughters of Mary. As Lily keeps secrets from August—the truth about her life and especially the reason she has come to Tiburon—so August keeps from Lily the fact that she recognized her almost immediately from her resemblance to her mother, for whose family she served as housekeeper when Deborah was a child. Only when Lily is willing to be honest with August—and, more importantly, with herself—does August tell her about her mother.

Mysteries, indeed, are a vital part of life to August. As a beekeeper, she appreciates that the life of the hive is mostly hidden within the wooden bee boxes she has spread throughout the area. Taking Lily on as a sort of apprentice, she explains to her the inner



workings of the hive, "the secret life we don't know anything about." Lily imagines that she loves "the idea of bees having a secret life, just like the one I was living," but her glimpse at this hidden life seems to have an overwhelming effect on her. Lost in a cloud of bees after August opens a bee box, Lily drifts into a trance in which her anguish about the "motherless place" within her is soothed by the queen bee, "the mother of thousands," as August tells her. Other secret aspects of nature are cherished by August, for whom the advances of scientific knowledge can also mean "the end of something." After watching a news report about the imminent launch of the unmanned rocket *Ranger 7* to the moon, August remarks:

[A]s long as people have been on this earth, the moon has been a mystery to us. Think about it. She is strong enough to pull the oceans, and when she dies away, she always comes back again. My mama used to tell me Our Lady lived on the moon and that I should dance when her face was bright and hibernate when it was dark.... Now it won't ever be the same, not after they've landed up there and walked around on her. She'll be just one more big science project.

As August's mother's story suggests, the mysteries of nature and those of the Black Madonna are inextricably intertwined. The origins of the story of Our Lady of Chains that the Daughters of Mary listen to August recite on their annual celebration of "Mary Day" (the Feast of the Assumption) are unclear. August says of their worship of Our Lady of Chains that she and her sisters "take our mother's Catholicism and mix in our own ingredients." August learned the story from her grandmother, as it had been passed along through generations along with the black wooden statue. The Daughters become entranced when August tells the story, chanting at the climactic, supernatural explanation of the statue's name—and as she does later when surrounded by bees, Lily is overwhelmed by the experience and faints.

The emotional, religious, and nature themes of *The Secret Life of Bees* all appropriately come to a climax around the same point of the novel. Having been prevented from talking to August by her and June's period of mourning after sister May's suicide, Lily finds the courage finally to come clean during the Daughters' celebration of Mary Day, when the story of Our Lady's unsuccessful imprisonment is reenacted, the black statue wrapped in chains overnight and then anointed in honey the next day. Lily has to share her sleeping space in the honey house with the chained effigy the night after learning that her mother had abandoned Lily, at least temporarily, to her father; she lashes out violently, shattering the glass jars stored there, seething with anger over her mother's betrayal:

I felt a powerful sadness, not because of what I'd done, as bad as that was, but because everything seemed emptied out—the feelings I'd had for her, the things I'd believed, all those stories about her I'd lived off of like they were food and water and air. Because I was the girl she'd left behind. That's what it came down to.

With her worst fears about Deborah confirmed, Lily looks even more desperately to Our Lady and to August to fill the motherless place within her. As she is the keeper of the secrets of life inside her beehives, so August seems to be, more than any of the other



Daughters, keeper to the secrets of Our Lady of Chains. Thus, the most important lesson she has to teach Lily about Mary is that the nurturing power of her divine motherhood—to Lily she is, like the queen bee, "mother to thousands"—is actually located within:

You don't have to put your hand on Mary's heart to get strength and consolation and rescue, and all the other things we need to get through life.... You can place it right here on your own heart. *Your own heart.*

Lily's recognition of this symbolic importance of the Mary statue enables her to begin to forgive herself for killing her mother, as well as forgiving her mother for abandoning her (an abandonment that became permanent when Deborah came back to collect Lily and, in the ensuing scuffle with her enraged husband, was accidentally shot by her daughter). Even so, in this healing process there is the acceptance of mystery:

Drifting off to sleep, I thought about her. How nobody is perfect. How you just have to close your eyes and breathe out and let the puzzle of the human heart be what it is.

Lily's spiritual development to some extent mirrors Kidd's own embrace of a feminist spirituality, as described in her 1996 spiritual memoir *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, the book that she wrote immediately preceding beginning work on *The Secret Life of Bees*. Kidd was a practicing Southern Baptist for most of the first forty years of her life but had a spiritual awakening that led her to reconnect with her feminine soul, as she terms it—"a woman's inner repository of the Divine Feminine." Lily is nominally a Baptist in Kidd's novel, but the leader of her Baptist church, Brother Gerald, is mean and cowardly. As Lily has her own spiritual awakening, she finds nourishment in the mysteries of Our Lady and the secrets of nature, as opposed to the tyranny of white authority, represented by corrupt police, an un-Christian minister, and her abusive father. Thus the novel ends with an abundance of mothering for Lily, with her summer of discovery turning into an "autumn of wonders." Lily's last line of the novel—"They are the moons shining over me"—explicitly calls to mind her and August's conversation earlier in the novel about the mysteries of the moon and the Virgin Mary's presence in it. With the acceptance of mystery comes a measure of serenity in Lily's life.

**Source:** Charles Brower, Critical Essay on *The Secret Life of Bees*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Morey discusses how Kidd mingles historical realism and fairy-tale elements in the novel.*

Ten years ago Sue Monk Kidd was a traditionally grounded Christian writer. But like her engaging narrator Lily Owens, Kidd is on a spiritual journey, heralded by her 1996 nonfiction work *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* and confirmed in this captivating first novel about love and forgiveness. Guided by bees and a group of women devoted to a black Madonna, 14-year-old Lily Owens embarks upon a spiritual quest that carries her through the shadow of racism and her own spiritual suffering and brings her to adulthood.

The context for her quest is South Carolina in 1964, a transformative year for civil rights. America had survived the fury and sorrow of 1963: the murder of Medgar Evers, the Birmingham church bombing and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The next year brought the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the murder of three civil rights workers. Against this backdrop and often in conversation with these events, Lily and Rosaleen, a black woman who acts as her stand-in mother, flee the dubious charms of Sylvan, South Carolina.

Lily is running away from her father, T-Ray, who seems to care more for his dog than his daughter. She is an articulate, socially awkward teenager whose memory of her mother comes from her fourth year, when her mother was killed in a domestic dispute. Lily suspects she may be partially responsible for her mother's death, and her guilty hunger for parental love is the emotional axis of the novel.

When Rosaleen gets arrested during her attempt to register to vote, Lily liberates her from the hospital where she has been incarcerated, and the fugitives make their way to Tiburon, South Carolina. There a trio of beekeeping sisters, May, June and August, whose self-sufficient business produces Black Madonna honey and a remarkable alternative religious community, takes them in. In the sitting room of the house is a wooden statue of a black Madonna, rescued from an old ship prow. A faded red heart is painted on her breast, and she extends her fisted arm "like she could straighten you out if necessary." Every evening the sisters kneel and pray before this figure, whom they call "Our Lady of Chains," creating their own liturgy and rituals from a blend of Catholicism, slave stories, African traditions, Judaism and any number of meditative traditions. Every year the household observes "Mary Day," and the legend of the chains is reenacted with music, dance and food.

Lily, a sometime Baptist, is captivated by the woman-centered practices of the "calendar sisters." She learns that traditionally the Madonna is sometimes associated with honey and beekeeping, and she discovers how the creative life of the hive becomes a symbol of the living heart of the great Mother. The hum of the hive is the "oldest sound there was. Souls flying away." Once August's mother heard the bees "singing the words to the Christmas story right out of the gospel of Luke." Indeed, the hidden throb of the hive



swells from the place where "everything is sung to life." Like the life-force of bee-hum, Mary's spirit is "hidden everywhere. Her heart a cup of fierceness tucked among ordinary things," observes Lily.

Imperfectly integrated with her spiritual journey is Lily's account of racism, as Rosaleen prepares again to register to vote, and a neighbor is arrested on trumped-up assault charges during an altercation with local racists. Because Lily is so absorbed in her own emotional deprivation, these events finally take on secondary importance, and there is a tidiness to the novel's conclusion that does not do justice to the powerful forces that have been invoked. It's understandable why sister June might have been suspicious of this white girl who wants to listen into their lives and finally take up residence. It's still all about her at the end.

Despite the historical realism of the novel, there is a fairy-tale quality to it. Three wise black women rule a magical universe of sweetness and organic communion and offer their healing to weary travelers. Lily is an appealing narrator, but sometimes she seems much younger than 14 and sometimes much older. August is given to speeches telling us wise things we might better have seen than heard, and I found Mary's identity as the mother of sorrows unconvincing.

But these are minor criticisms. Though adults will find *The Secret Life of Bees* a satisfying read, the clarity of the novel's prose will make it appealing to a younger audience as well. I'll be passing it on to my middle-school daughter for its warm invitation to think about mother love and forgiveness.

**Source:** Anne-Janine Morey, "*The Secret Life of Bees*," in *Christian Century*, Vol. 120, No. 4, February 22, 2003, pp. 68-70.



## Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, Kidd discusses the religious symbolism of the Black Madonna and the theme of racism in the novel.*

Sue Monk Kidd was happily writing inspirational essays for Christian magazines, driving carpool for her two kids, and generally being a good Southern Baptist wife and mother when she found herself in the midst of a feminist awakening.

That spiritual journey led her to join the Episcopal Church and affected nearly every aspect of her life, including her writing. But she could have never imagined where she would end up—on the bestseller list.

After chronicling her transformation in two spiritual memoirs—*When the Heart Waits* (1990) and *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996), both by HarpersSanFrancisco—she turned to her first love: fiction.

Her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, published last year by Viking, has sold more than 1 million copies and been on the bestseller list for the better part of a year. Although ostensibly about a young girl's coming of age in the South in the 1960s, it also has been called "one of the more interesting books about Mary" by *Publishers Weekly*.

*So do you believe God is a woman?*

My understanding of the divine is that God is neither male nor female. I believe that God is beyond gender. As theologian Sallie McFague says, "God is she, he, and neither." I really believe that is true.

There is no image that creates an adequate picture of God, but we have to have a way to speak about God, and in order to do that, we have to use images and forms and symbols and metaphor and language. The crux of it is we want these images and forms and symbols to be inclusive. Religion has mostly told us that there was only one form or one image, and that is male, so we've had a rather limited picture of God.

It's very important, as August pointed out, for us to understand that the image of God can be in a feminine form, too, or a feminine symbol. When that happens, women are able to wake up in profound ways to their own spiritual depths.

It's a pivotal thing for a woman, psychologically and spiritually. They often are able to break free of a lot of silence, dependence, even self-hating. I have seen this, and it is true in my own life. It has profound and pervasive implications for women and for little girls.

*As a Protestant, how did you become so close to Mary?*

Mary had been left out of my experience completely. When Lily in the novel says, "We didn't allow Mary in our church except Christmas," that was really Sue speaking, and





that was true of my experience. I had no relationship really with Mary other than this sort of Christmas figure that appeared now and then.

When I had my own feminist spiritual awakening, as I describe in *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, I went on a quest for images of the divine feminine. Mary wasn't one of the first images I found. But then I began to wonder about the Christian tradition, because my roots there are deep and important. So I looked at the threads of the sacred feminine in our tradition. Sometimes I wish they were stronger, but they're there.

I first discovered icons of the Black Madonna at a Greek Orthodox convent in Greece, and later at a Benedictine monastery in Switzerland, where this very dark-skinned Black Madonna was enthroned and they sang "Salve Regina" to her. I saw in their faces how this symbol functioned within the Catholic Church, how it kept alive this enormously important feminine aspect within religion.

Then I began to cultivate my own relationship with the Black Madonna and with Mary in general. I began to read about her, put icons of Mary in my study, in my prayer room. I bought a rosary. As a Protestant, it was really quite new. I was sort of a blank slate, because I didn't have all this background with Mary. I saw her as carrying such a fierce independence, almost a dissidence, about her.

*Of course, that is not how most Catholics see Mary. They have experienced a very white madonna.*

Yes, a lot of Mary's independence has been whitewashed in the white Mary. She got herself tamed, and that was not particularly helpful for a lot of women in the church. The Black Madonna is a whole other story.

Her darkness has great power in it. She becomes a flashpoint for independent spirit, for women conjuring up their own strength and their own power, being their own authority. Which is why in the novel the masthead Black Madonna has her fist balled up. I didn't mean that as an image or symbol of aggression; I meant it as an image that could reflect this great sense of dignity and empowerment and authority that the Black Madonna has.

She also has a subversive streak in her, which I resonate with. Yes, I'm a Christian, but I'm pretty much a dissident sort of Christian in a lot of ways. The Black Madonna is not submissive. You rarely will see her with the dipped chin, the lowered eyes, that kind of handmaiden look. In most other images she looks directly at you with a stare that rattles your bones. She has that powerful, fierce look about her. In many cases she was the Madonna of oppressed people.

I think we have a large frontier here, ways to begin to develop and understand powerful divine feminine images that come right out of our Christian tradition and see how they can begin to reflect what is missing to us.

*You often describe yourself as a dissident. What does that mean to you?*



In some ways I'm not particularly dissident at all. I was always the "good girl." But then I began to wake up to all kinds of things about Christianity, things that had been left out, the lack of inclusion. I was on the threshold of entering my 40s, and I began a long process of looking at my life as a woman and what it meant to be spiritual as a woman.

It was a profound awakening, and initially very tumultuous, as I describe in *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. It was not a comfortable place for me to find myself, and yet I was compelled to follow my own truth. The journey can be long and painful but ultimately very freeing. Often we have to let go of so many things, and at the time it feels like loss. But in essence we're really stepping into our destiny.

I think dissidents and mystics are kind of like first cousins. A mystic is one who encounters and follows the divine voice within him or herself, even when it veers from tradition or the convention. I think a dissident does the same thing. Dissidents listen to the dictates of their own conscience. A dissident is one who must come to know what his or her truth is, which is really difficult, and then have the courage to stand by that truth and voice that truth, sometimes even in the face of enormous backlash.

*Do you think things have improved since the '60s?*

We have come a long way since 1964. At the same time, we have so much farther to go. We still have not figured this out the way we need to, but we have made strides. One thing we need are new images, images of unity and inclusion. As a human family we have to expand our hearts.

That's why I put the heart on the Black Madonna in the novel and had the characters come and touch it. What I was suggesting is that there is a wisdom in the heart of the Black Madonna and we must make contact with this or we are not going to survive. I think it's urgent that we begin to widen out our hearts and become more compassionate.

*You have written two books of spiritual memoir. Now that you're written a novel, how do you feel about memoir?*

I want to write another memoir. In my spiritual journey I need to give voice to what's going on in my soul. Sometimes I wish that wasn't so because it makes me feel very vulnerable and exposed, and that's not exactly comfortable. I'm an introverted, contemplative person who loves her solitude, but I have this really strong soulful compulsion to write about my spiritual experience. So many things I've experienced become somehow finished for me when I'm able to write them in a memoir.

It sounds so selfish to be focusing on your own experiences in writing, poring over them and dissecting them. But I found it so freeing. It helps us transcend our experience; it frees us from the ego in a strange way. I guess it is a paradox.

*Is that why spiritual memoir has become such a popular genre these days?*

Yes. People really respond to it. We want to read other people's experience in order to understand our own. And writers are writing it to understand it in order to step beyond it.





*There are common themes in both your fiction and your nonfiction. Is that intentional?*

I think I really am at heart a fiction writer who took a side trip with my non-fiction writing for a while. I'm sure I will write other nonfiction books, but at my core I'm a fiction writer. And as a fiction writer, I must tell a true story that comes out of my own depths, my own unconscious. It won't be factually true, but true to life, true to the deep human pathos we all experience and also the kind of overcoming and healing that we can experience.

I didn't set out to include themes from my nonfiction in my fiction. I don't think we should set up a social agenda for fiction writing and then try to write a story to make a point. That was never in my mind. But if you write your most authentic story—what you're put here to tell—it does weave together your own experiences and ideas. It's just a natural process.

I'm a spiritual person. My orientation to the world is very spiritual. So if I write authentically it's going to reflect my own spiritual orientation and view. As a person with a spiritual slant, I don't just want to mirror a society or culture that is lost and filled with hopelessness. There are enough books about that. I think writers can reflect the reality of the world we live in, but we can go beyond that and also say there is hope, and there is transformation, and there is this transcendent power of love that can change our lives.

**Source:** Heidi Schlumpf, "All Abuzz about the Black Madonna: An Interview with Sue Monk Kidd," in *U.S. Catholic*, Vol. 68, No. 11, November 2003, pp. 26-30.



## Quotes

"He didn't believe in slumber parties or sock hops, which wasn't a big concern, as I never got invited to them anyway, but he refused to drive me to town for football games, pep rallies, or beta club car washes, which were held on Saturdays. He did not care that I wore clothes I made for myself in home economics class, cotton print shirtwaists with crooked zippers and skirts hanging below my knees, outfits only the Pentecostal girls wore. I might as well have worn a sign on my back: I Am Not Popular, and Never Will Be." (Page 10, Chapter 1)

*"Your sorry mother ran off and left you. The day she died, she'd come back to get her things, that's all.*

*"God and Jesus, you make him take it back.*

"The memory settled over me. The suitcase on the floor. The way they'd fought. My shoulders began to shake in a strange, uncontrollable way. I held the jar pressed between my breasts, hoping it would steady me, but I couldn't stop shaking, couldn't stop crying, and it frightened me, as though I'd been struck by a car I hadn't seen coming and was lying on the side of the road, trying to understand what had happened." (Page 50, Chapter 2)

"I waited for Rosaleen to say how ridiculous that was, but she squinted straight ahead as if weighing the possibility.

"'Well, it's not true,' I said, my voice rising like something had seized it from below and was shoving it up into my throat.' And if he thinks I'm going to believe that story, he has a hole in his so-called brain. He only made it up to punish me. I know he did.'

"I could have added that mothers had instincts and hormones that prevent them leaving their babies, that even pigs and opossums didn't leave their offspring, but Rosaleen, having finally pondered the matter, said, ' You're probably right. Knowing your daddy, he could do a thing like that.'" (Page 66, Chapter 2)

"She smiled at me then. 'Lily; child, there ain't gonna be any place that will take a colored woman. I don't care if she's the Virgin Mary, my body's letting her stay if she's colored.'

"'Well, what was the point of the Civil Rights Act?' I said, coming to pay full stop in the middle of the road. 'Doesn't that mean people have to let you stay in their motels and in their restaurants if you want to?'

"'That's what it means, but you gonna have to drag people kicking and screaming to do it.'" (Page 75, Chapter 3)

"'Rosaleen... Smith, and Lily... Williams,' I lied and then launched in. 'See, my mother died when I was little, and then my father died in paycheck to accident last month on our



farm in Spartanburg County. I don't have any other kin around here, so they were going to send me to a home.'

"August shook her head. Rosaleen shook hers, too, but for a different reason." (Page 91, Chapter 4)

"I hadn't had to time to sort out my reasons. I wanted to say, because I just want to be normal for a little while - not a refugee girl looking for her mother, but a regular girl paying a summer visit to Tiburon, South Carolina. I want time to win August over, so she won't send me back when she find out what I've done. And those things were true, but even as they crossed my mind, I knew they didn't completely explain why talking to August about my mother made me so uneasy." (Page 98, Chapter 4)

"It was May who taught me the honey song:

"Place a beehive on my grave

"And let the honey soak through.

"When I'm dead and gone,

"that's what I want from you.

"The streets of heaven are gold and sunny,

"but I'll stick with my plot and a pot of honey.

"Place a beehive on my grave

"and let the honey soak through." (Page 102, Chapter 5)

"'Well,' she said, 'back in the time of slaves, when the people were beaten down and kept like property, they prayed every day and night for deliverance.

"'On the islands near Charleston, they go to the praise House and sing and pray, and every single time someone would I ask the Lord to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom.'" (Page 134, Chapter 5)

"That's when I knew I would never find a better friend than Zachary Taylor. I threw my arms around him and leaned into his chest. He made it sound like *whoa*, but after a second his arms folded around me, and we stayed like that, in a true embrace. He moved his hands up and down my back, till I was almost dizzy.

"Finally he unwound my arms and said, 'Lily, I liked you better than any gal I've ever known, but you have to understand, there are people who would kill boys like me for even looking at girls like you.'" (Pages 167 to 168, Chapter 7)



"She laughed again. 'You know, some things don't matter that much, Lily. Like the color of our house. How did it fit in the overall scheme of life? But lifting a person's heart - now, that matters. The whole problem with people is - '

"'they don't know what matters and what doesn't,' I said, filling in her sentence and feeling proud of myself for doing so." (Page 183, Chapter 8)

"Dear T. Ray,

"I am sick to death of you yelling at me. I am not deaf. I am I'm a stupid for calling you up. If you were being tortured by Martians and the only thing that could save you was telling them my favorite color, you would die on the spot. What was I thinking? All I had to do was remember the Father's Day card I made for you when I was nine and still hoping for love. Dear remember it, well of course you don't, I do, because I nearly killed myself working on it. I never told you I was up half the night with a dictionary looking up words to go to with the letters in daddy." (Page 201, Chapter 8)

"Dear August and June,

"I'm sorry to leave you like this. I hate you being sad, but think how happy I'll be with April, Mama, Papa, and big Mama. Picture us up here together, and that will help some. I'm tired of carrying it around the weight of the world. I'm just going to lay it down now. It's my time to die, and it's your time to live. Don't mess it up.

"Love, May." (Page 261, Chapter 10)

"The big shock, though, was all the pictures of Mary being presented with a *lily* by the angel Gabriel. In every one, where he showed up to tell her she was going to have the baby of babies, even though she wasn't married yet, he had a big white Lily for her. As if this was the consolation prize for the gossip she was in for. I closed the book and put it back on shelf. " (Pages 289 to 290, Chapter 12)

"Knowing can be a curse on a person's life. I'd traded in a pack of lies for a pack of truth, and I didn't know which one was heavier. Which one took the most strength to carry around? It was a ridiculous question, though, because once you know the truth, you can't ever go back and pick up your suitcase of lies. Heavier or not, the truth is you was now.

"In the honey house, August waited till I crawled under the sheets, then bent over and kissed my forehead.

"'Every person on the face of the earth makes mistakes, Lily. Every last one. We're all so human. Your mother made a terrible mistake, but she tried to fix it.'

"'Goodnight,' I said, and rolled onto my side.

"'Day is nothing perfect,' August said from the doorway.



"There is only life." (Page 317, Chapter 12)

"Rosaleen came home, a bona fide registered voter in the United States of America. We all sat around that evening, waiting to eat dinner, while she personally called every one of the Daughters on the telephone.

"I just wanted to tell you I'm a registered voter,' she said each time, and there would be a pause, and then she'd say, 'President Johnson and Mr. Hubert Humphrey, that's who. I'm not voting for Mr. Pisswater.' She laughed every time, like this was the joke of jokes. She would say, 'Goldwater, Pisswater, get it?'" (Page 351, Chapter 14)

"This Mary I'm talking about sits in your heart all day long, saying, 'Lily, you are my everlasting home. Then she ever be afraid. I'm enough. We are enough.'

"I close my eyes, and in the coolness of the morning, they're among the bees, I felt for one clear instant what she was talking about.

"When I opened my eyes, August was no where around. I looked back toward the house and saw her crossing the yard, a white dress catching the light." (Page 358, Chapter 14)

# Adaptations

- *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) is available on audio cassette and audio CD in both abridged and unabridged versions. An audio version can also be downloaded from [audible.com](http://audible.com). A movie adaptation of the book is forthcoming from Fox Searchlight.

## What Do I Read Next?

- Sue Monk Kidd's *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (1996) is an account of the author's spiritual development that suggests an autobiographical component to Lily's development in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Kidd describes her dissatisfaction with the conservative Southern Baptist faith in which she was raised and her embrace of a feminist spirituality.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is the only novel by Harper Lee. Like *The Secret Life of Bees*, it is the story of a young girl coming of age in a racially divided Southern town. It won the Pulitzer Prize and was adapted into a popular, Oscar-winning motion picture in 1962.
- Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976) offers a different perspective on the Virgin Mary than Kidd's in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Warner, who is also a fiction writer, discusses many symbolic usages of the image of Mary throughout history, including Black Madonnas, and argues that most portrayals of Mary in the Catholic tradition have been used to make women feel inferior.
- *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (1989), compiled by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, is the companion volume to the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*. It offers firsthand accounts from real-life counterparts to Rosaleen and Zach Taylor, African Americans who stood up for their rights to vote and patronize public establishments.
- *Robbing the Bees: A Biography of Honey—The Sweet Liquid Gold That Seduced the World* (2005), by Holley Bishop, is a history of beekeeping, a description of life inside a hive, and a personal account of the author's obsession with bees and honey.



## Topics for Discussion

What provokes the men of the Esso station to attack Rosaleen, and why does she retaliate? (See pages 38 to 40.)

Lily is incredibly intelligent. How does she manage to persuade the young policeman to leave his watch? (See pages 59 to 60.)

To extract honey from the comb, several procedures are followed that use machinery. What process does August explain to Lily when she first arrives at the Boatwrights'? (See pages 95 to 96.)

The Boatwrights life is ruled by honey. When and where is the product used and for what purposes? (See page 103.)

What is bee etiquette, and what does August teach Lily about it? (See page 114.)

How are May and April connected, and how does April die? (See page 114.)

What are the origins of Black Mary, and what nickname was she given? (See pages 134 to 137.)

Why does August select the Black Madonna/Mary as a label for her honey, and what significance does it hold for the Daughters of Mary? (See page 175.)

What does Lily whisper to the Black Madonna as she touches her heart? (See page 204.)

Who is Aristaeus, and what relevance does he hold for the beekeepers? (See page 256.)

How does Lily's tale of the fish relate to Zach, and what significant point is she trying to make? (See pages 284 to 285.)

How does the final day of the Assumption of Mary celebrations unfold? (See pages 331 to 333.)

What is August's meaning in telling the tale of Beatrix to Lily? (See pages 356 to 357.)

What personal views do you have on racism, and do you believe the Civil Rights Act needed to be passed?

*The Secret Life of Bees* is a coming of age story, where the main character grows and becomes an adult. Can you relate this story to an event in your life that taught you something profound when you were younger?





- Each chapter of the novel begins with a quotation or quotations about bees and beekeeping. Pick a chapter and explain how the quotations from the beginning relate to the events of that chapter. Identify the character in the novel you think is the "queen bee" and explain why.
- In the novel, there are a variety of references to factual events that occurred in 1964, the year in which the novel is set. Identify one of these references and prepare a news report for the class like the ones the characters watch in the novel, explaining what has occurred.
- Zach and Lily promise each other that someday they will be together. Write a scene in which they meet today in their sixties. Would they end up together? Would the social conventions that kept them apart before still keep them apart today?
- Find another creative work—a novel, story, movie, poem, or painting—in which bees appear. What do the bees represent in that work? Explain three ways in which the symbolism of the bees in the work you found is similar to or differs from their symbolism in Kidd's novel.
- May's wailing wall behind the Boatwright house helps her cope to some extent with the traumas that occur in her life and with life generally. The Boatwright sisters also have their daily prayers and weekly services before Our Lady of Chains as important rituals in their home. What are some examples of rituals, religious or otherwise, in your own home? What functions do they serve? Write a scene that describes your family following these rituals.



## Further Study

Begg, Ean C. M., *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, Penguin, 1997.

Begg identifies some five hundred occurrences of Black Madonnas around the world. The author associates the dark-skinned Madonnas with paganism and Gnostic Christianity.

Flynn, Nick, *Blind Huber*, Greywolf, 2002.

Flynn's poetry collection is based around the life of Frenchman François Hubert, a seventeenth-century blind beekeeper, whose lifelong study of bees was responsible for much of the understanding of bees' behavior.

Johnson, Elizabeth A., *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Crossroad, 1992.

Johnson's collection is considered one of the best basic works on the subject. It explains many of the feminist underpinnings to Kidd's portrayal of Our Lady of Chains in the novel.

Moody, Anne, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Doubleday, 1968.

Moody's firsthand account of growing up as an African American in the segregated South and participating in civil-rights protests is a vivid depiction of events referred to in *The Secret Life of Bees*.

Tate, Linda, *A Southern Weave of Women: Fiction of the Contemporary South*, University of Georgia Press, 1994.

This survey of Southern women fiction writers since World War II helps put Kidd's novel into a context of the Southern novel in general.



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Brown, Rosellen, "Honey Child," in the *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 19, Issue 7, April 2002, p. 11.

Kidd, Sue Monk, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

—————, *The Secret Life of Bees*, Penguin, 2003.

Morey, Ann-Janine, "The Secret Life of Bees," in *Christian Century*, Vol. 120, Issue 4, pp. 68-70.

Ryan, Laura T., "A Dream No Longer Deferred," in the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, March 13, 2005, p. 4.

Simhon, Rachel, "Honey Is the Balm," *Daily Telegraph* (London), [www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2002/02/24/bobees23.xml](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2002/02/24/bobees23.xml) (February 23, 2002)

Zickefoose, Jarrod, "Alternate Worlds, Past Passions in These Coming-of-Age Stories," in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 17, 2001, p. J11.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of *Novels for Students (NfS)* is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *NfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.





Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

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Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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