

The Help

by Kathryn Stockett

About the Book

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

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

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

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

Praise for the Book

"This book was sitting on my desk and everyone kept coming in and when they'd see it they'd gush about it, "I love this book". So I brought it home and it didn't disappoint. It's very much a book like you would imagine Oprah would pick for her book club. Set in the early sixties, it's about female friendship and race relations and it's heartbreaking and heartwarming at the same time."

—John Searles, *The Today Show*

"This heartbreaking story is a stunning debut from a gifted talent."

— *Atlanta Journal*

"A wonderful book. A compelling and comically poignant tale about three women, and a time and a place that is in many ways very much still with us."

—Beth Henley, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of *Crimes of the Heart*

Courtesy of Penguin

About the Author

About Kathryn Stockett

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

A Conversation with Kathryn Stockett

Q. What was the genesis of the novel?

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

When I moved to New York, though, I realized my “normal” wasn’t quite the same as the rest of America’s. I knew a lot of Southerners in the city, and every now and then we’d talk about what we missed from the South. Inevitably, somebody would start talking about the maid they grew up with, some little thing that made us all remember—Alice’s good hamburgers or riding in the back seat to take Willy May home. Everybody had a story to tell.

Twenty years later, with a million things to do in New York City, there we were still talking about the women who’d raised us in our mama’s kitchens. It was probably on one of those late nights, homesick, when I realized I wanted to write about those relationships from my childhood.

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

My grandmother’s maid was named Demetrie. She started working for my grandparents in 1955, when my father and uncle were still boys and she was twenty-eight. When they were grown, she looked after us, the grandchildren. I loved Demetrie dearly, and I felt so loved too. We got the best part of her. She wasn’t our mother, so it wasn’t her job to discipline us or make us sit up straight. She just played with us and fed us, and she liked to make us laugh. When I was little, she told me that I had a tail, and I was always turning around, looking for it. I wasn’t exactly “quick” as a child.

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

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

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

I also read *The Clarion-Ledger* newspapers for facts and dates. Once I'd done my homework, I'd go talk to my Granddaddy Stockett, who, at ninety-eight, still has a remarkable memory. That's where the real stories came from, like Cat-bite, who's in the book, and the farmers who sold vegetables and cream from their carts everyday, walking through the Jackson neighborhoods. I found that people don't seem to remember "social attitudes." They remember what you could do, what you couldn't do, and especially those people who went ahead and did both.

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

It's a tricky question to ask. It is hard to approach someone and say, "Excuse me, but what was it like to work for a white family in the South during 1960s?" I guess I felt a lot like Skeeter did in *The Help*. But I did hear plenty of interesting stories. One black woman from Birmingham told me she and her friends used to hide down in a ditch, waiting for the bus to take them to work. They were that afraid to stand on a street corner because white men would harass them. Still, all of the black women I spoke to were very proud of the jobs they'd had. They wanted to tell me where their white children live today and what they do for a living. I heard it over and over: "They still come to see me" and "They call me every Christmas."

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

After a while, I started to better understand what they were feeling. I felt it, too. It wasn't just that they missed these women so deeply. I think they wished that they could tell them, one last time, "Thank you for everything." There was a sense that they hadn't thanked them enough.

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion Questions

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

Courtesy of Penguin