

# Books in a Box

# Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
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Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org



#### **Books in a Box Information**

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ♦ Go to www.wcls.org
- ◆ Click on "catalog"
- In the Subject Keyword Search type "book club kit"

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

## **Suggested 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 21st 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?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

### **Author Bio: Kathryn Stockett**

Source: excerpted from Contemporary Authors Online. Gale, 2010

Born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi, writer and editor Kathryn Stockett earned her undergraduate degree in English and creative writing from the University of Alabama, then headed to New York City with plans to work in publishing. She spent nine years there, working both in magazine publishing and in marketing, before moving to Atlanta, Georgia, where she lives with her husband and daughter. Since moving back to the South, Stockett has been focusing on writing for herself, having shifted her attention to fiction.



Her debut novel, *The Help*, garnered instant attention due to its unusual and rarely addressed subject matter: the relationship in the South between white families and the domestic servants, who were primarily black, whom they employed in their homes during the 1960s. Having grown up during this period in Mississippi, Stockett was familiar with the dynamic, but nervous about addressing it in a novel, understanding that it was a controversial subject and could result in criticism from both reviewers and from general readers. In an interview with a writer for Bookreporter website, Stockett explained her attitude as a child: "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." Only after she moved north did Stockett realize that she had grown up in a microcosm, and that her memories of her childhood were not of a universal experience. She found herself reminiscing with other Southerners she met in New York, trading stories about growing up with black domestic help. Gradually, those memories began to spark an idea and she decided to write a story about her relationship with her family's maid when she was a child.

Early on in the writing process, Stockett chose to frame her narrative from the point of view of a black maid. It seemed logical, and she had no qualms about her choice because at the time she did not believe anyone else would ever read the story. Only when she reached the stage of getting friends to look at her work did she start to get nervous about how she had portrayed the characters and whether their voices rang true. Stockett told the interviewer for Bookreporter Web site: "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."

#### **Reviews**

#### **Library Journal**

 $\star$ 

The Help, Kathryn Stockett. Penguin Group USA, \$16.00 (534p) ISBN 9780425232200

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

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

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

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

#### More

From an interview with publisher Penguin Group, USA:

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.

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 Grandaddy 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.

(book cover - United Kingdom)

# **Suggested Readalikes**

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou.

Little Bee, Chris Cleave.

The Outer Banks House, Diann Ducharme.

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Cafe, Fannie Flagg.

Saving Ceecee Honeycutt, Beth Hoffman.

Mudbound, Hillary Jordan.

The Secret Life of Bees, Sue Monk Kidd.

The Poisonwood Bible, Barbara Kingsolver.

To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee.

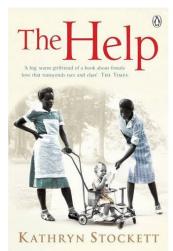
The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison.

The Persia Cafe, Melany Neilson.

Velva Jean Learns to Drive, Jennifer Niven.

The Color Purple, Alice Walker.

Jubilee, Margaret Walker.



#### **Web Resources**

Author website: http://www.kathrynstockett.com

The Root author interview: <a href="http://www.theroot.com/views/coping-help">http://www.theroot.com/views/coping-help</a>

The Seattle Times book review: http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/books/2014165763 help13.html