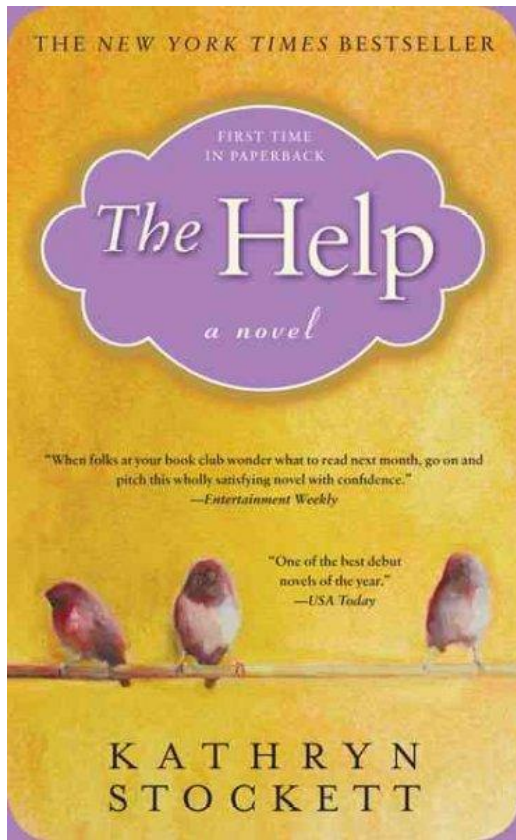


## About the book...



Be prepared to meet three unforgettable women:

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.

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

## About the author...



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. This is her first novel.

**Author interview...** (<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>)

**Q: What was the genesis of the novel?**

**A:** 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.**

**A:** 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 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 why my siblings and I had such a close connection with Demetrie is because 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 time were accurate?**

**A:** 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?**

**A:** 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 1960's?" 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 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, was writing in the voice of two African-American maids?**

**A:** 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 1960's and I hope 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?**

**A:** 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.

## Reviews

### *Library Journal*

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.

### *BookPage Reviews*

**Upstairs, downstairs** : Debut novelist takes on the South's troubled past

Stereotypes seem almost inevitable when someone tries to portray the relationships that existed 50 years ago between black people and white people in the South. Usually they swing from the extremes of *Mississippi Burning* to *Driving Miss Daisy*. So it's a bit surprising—and refreshing—that Kathryn Stockett, who wasn't born until years after that time, manages to capture something close to reality while avoiding most of the pitfalls in her first novel, *The Help*.

Set in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1962, *The Help* is told through three voices: Aibileen, an older black woman who has been taking care of white families since she was 13; Minny, a younger black woman who finds it difficult to curb her sharp tongue around her white employers; and Skeeter, a privileged white girl fresh out of college, who wants more from life than marriage to the first presentable young man her mother can produce.

Stockett, a Mississippi native who now lives in Atlanta with her husband and five-year-old daughter, says the idea of writing the book first came to her as an antidote to homesickness. She was working for a magazine consulting firm in New York City, but frequently found her thoughts turning to the South and to Demetrie, the black woman who cared for Stockett when she was growing up. Finally she asked her bosses if she could take a month off to write about these memories. She laughs when she remembers the response.

"They said, 'You're not in Mississippi anymore, Kitty.' They thought that people in Mississippi were a little more *leisurely* about jobs. I said, no, really, I don't want to be paid. I just want to

take a month off because I want to hunker down and write this story. And something happened—it was so nurturing and wonderful to hear Demetrie's voice again. I think that's really what drew me to the story, to hear her talking in my head 15 years after she had died."

Although Stockett wasn't born until 1969, seven years after the events depicted in her book, she said she not only had a wealth of information provided by the stories Demetrie had told her, but also from her parents and her 98-year-old grandfather.

"Demetrie worked for my grandmother and my grandfather, starting in the mid-50s, and my grandfather has the most remarkable memory. He doesn't just remember details, he remembers dates. He remembers the temperature on that day; he's kind of a savant that way. So I had a pretty good research tool right there in the living room with me."

Stockett re-creates an environment that will be all too familiar to the people who lived through it: a time when "colored" people could cook food for white folks, but couldn't sit down and eat with them. When a colored maid could wash the family's dishes, but had to eat from her own plate because of the "germs" she might pass to her employers.

And heaven forbid that the black maid use the same bathroom as her white "family"! This is the event that opens the novel and that first opens Skeeter's eyes to the injustice of this terribly skewed system. After listening to her friend, Hilly, present her plans for a "Home Help Sanitation Initiative" to their bridge group, Skeeter follows Aibileen, the maid, into the kitchen.

*"Do you ever wish you could . . . change things?" [Skeeter] asks.*

*And I can't help myself. I look at her head on. Cause that's one a the stupidest questions I ever heard. She got a confused, disgusted look on her face, like she done salted her coffee instead a sugared it.*

*I turn back to my washing, so she don't see me rolling my eyes. "Oh no, ma'am, everthing's fine."*

Skeeter may have had her consciousness raised a tiny bit, but it takes a long while before she can treat Aibileen as a person, rather than a *colored* person. Likewise, it takes a lot for Aibileen to learn to trust Skeeter.

A key element of the book is Stockett's use of language. The rhythms of the dialect are nearly flawless, due in no small part to the author's refusal to use the "gonna," "cain't," "sho-nuff," spellings too many writers fall back on when trying to establish a sense of regionalism. Stockett credits this to her creative writing teacher at the University of Alabama.

"She taught me a lot of things, but she taught me one rule and that was, as long as it's a word in the dictionary, you can use it. So I had to be really creative in figuring out how to write idiom. As long as it didn't set off the Spell-Checker, that was the rule—I could use it."

Not all of the characters discriminated against in Stockett's novel are black. Celia Foote is a white girl from the wrong side of the tracks who married well, but can't break the barrier her background presents. Stockett felt she was important to the story, too.

"Just because you're white and good looking and rich doesn't mean you're going to walk in the door of the Junior League," she says. "I felt like if I was going to be talking about Southern women, I couldn't leave out the fact that sometimes, they love to snub their own kind."

While it was a daunting task to tackle stereotypes and successfully make her characters human, it took even more courage to write about this time and these issues as a white woman—something Stockett said she never forgot.

"You have to be careful what you say and how you say it, because people are really sensitive about this. We loved them [the black household workers] and they were part of our family but we didn't ask them to sit down at the table with us. That just wasn't done. Not that they were dying to sit down with us anyway, but there was a pretty well defined set of rules. And you knew what the rules were and you knew if you were breaking them."

Breaking rules forms the core of *The Help*, an idea summarized in what Stockett says is her favorite sentence of her first novel: "Wasn't that the point of the book? For women to realize, 'We are just two people. Not that much separates us. Not nearly as much as I'd thought.' "

*Rebecca Bain writes from her home in Nashville.*

#### *Kirkus Reviews*

The relationships between white middle-class women and their black maids in Jackson, Miss., circa 1962, reflect larger issues of racial upheaval in Mississippi-native Stockett's ambitious first novel. Still unmarried, to her mother's dismay, recent Ole Miss graduate Skeeter returns to Jackson longing to be a serious writer. While playing bridge with her friends Hilly and Elizabeth, she asks Elizabeth's seemingly docile maid Aibileen for housekeeping advice to fill the column she's been hired to pen for a local paper. The two women begin what Skeeter considers a semi-friendship, but Aibileen, mourning her son's recent death and devoted to Elizabeth's neglected young daughter, is careful what she shares. Aibileen's good friend Minnie, who works for Hilly's increasingly senile mother, is less adept at playing the subservient game than Aibileen. When Hilly, an aggressively racist social climber, fires and then blackballs her for speaking too freely, Minnie's audacious act of vengeance almost destroys her livelihood. Unlike oblivious Elizabeth and vicious Hilly, Skeeter is at the verge of enlightenment. Encouraged by a New York editor, she decides to write a book about the experience of black maids and enlists Aibileen's help. For Skeeter the book is primarily a chance to prove herself as a writer. The stakes are much higher for the black women who put their lives on the line by telling their true stories. Although the exposé is published anonymously, the town's social fabric is permanently torn. Stockett uses telling details to capture the era and does not shy from showing Skeeter's dangerous naïveté. Skeeter's narration is alive with complexity—her loyalty to her traditional Southern mother remains even after she learns why the beloved black maid who raised her has disappeared. In contrast, Stockett never truly gets inside Aibileen and Minnie's heads (a risk the author acknowledges in her postscript). The scenes written in their voices verge on patronizing. This genuine page-turner offers a whiff of white liberal self-congratulation that won't hurt its appeal and probably spells big success. Author events in the Southeast.

What perfect timing for this optimistic, uplifting debut novel (and maiden publication of Amy Einhorn's new imprint) set during the nascent civil rights movement in Jackson, Miss., where black women were trusted to raise white children but not to polish the household silver. Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan is just home from college in 1962, and, anxious to become a writer, is advised to hone her chops by writing "about what disturbs you." The budding social activist begins to collect the stories of the black women on whom the country club sets relies—and mistrusts—enlisting the help of Aibileen, a maid who's raised 17 children, and Aibileen's best friend Minny, who's found herself unemployed more than a few times after mouthing off to her white employers. The book Skeeter puts together based on their stories is scathing and shocking, bringing pride and hope to the black community, while giving Skeeter the courage to break down her personal boundaries and pursue her dreams. Assured and layered, full of heart and history, this one has bestseller written all over it.

## **Literary Criticism**

*The Help* by Kathryn Stockett

By Elinor Teele, Published February 8, 2009

*The Help*

by Kathryn Stockett

## **Mississippi Slow Burning**

Hattie McDaniel, the Academy-Award winning actress who played Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* reportedly once said: "Why should I complain about making \$700 a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making \$7 a week being one."

Of course, she didn't have much of a choice. For McDaniel in Hollywood, like many black women throughout the United States, the only role that white folks would accept her in was a domestic one. Mammy was expected to be chief bottle washer, maid, cook, and helpmeet. She could tell outlandish stories, sing spirituals or drop pearls of wisdom – that was part of her "character" – but speaking her true mind was out. She was, to all intents and purposes, the invisible woman.

The story of these unseen women forms the basis of Kathryn Stockett's entertaining and problematic novel, *The Help*. Entertaining in that it is a yarn well spun, a tale of women's lives that has its antecedents in books like the *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* or *The Joy Luck Club*. Full of plot twists and sly humor, *The Help* is what you might call an old-fashioned page turner.

Problematic in that this page turner is set in Jackson, Mississippi during the early 1960s, and is told from three points of view. Skeeter, an educated and prosperous young woman with no real plans for the future, is white. Aibileen and Minny, the titular help who reveal their stories, are black.

Now this, on the face of it, should not be a problem. Toni Morrison was happy to speak in the voice of white people in her recent book *A Mercy* and reviewers, including this one, were happy to accept the premise. There are no rules in novels (critics have fun superimposing those later).

And if you're going to focus on the closeted, almost harem-like world of women in Jackson during the Kennedy years, choosing to speak with the voices of those who see all and hear all and ostensibly say nothing seems like a good choice.

Yet when an author treads into specific territories, the ground becomes awfully muddy. We're happy to let writers play around with being a Roman slave of the first century or a prostitute of the eighteenth, but when it comes to depicting a person who has lived through the Holocaust or the Civil Rights era, ah, then I think we hesitate. Does an author, even in the services of fiction, have a right to appropriate these stories?

Stockett is smart enough to know she will be asked this question, and she tackles it in a number of ways. For one, she starts and finishes *The Help* with Aibileen's narrative. Aibileen is middle-aged and without family – she lost a grown son to an industrial accident – but has raised seventeen white children as part of her duties. Maternal by nature, she nonetheless retains a dry sense of wit about her former charges:

And how I told him don't drink coffee or he gone turn colored. He say he still ain't drunk a cup of coffee and he twenty-one years old. It's always nice seeing the kids grown up fine.

Aibileen works for Miss Leefolt, taking care of her daughter, Mae Mobley, and spends most of her time silently shielding the fat little girl from her mother's verbal abuse.

Her friend Minny, on the other hand, has no problem with speaking her mind. Mother of five and married to an abusive drunk who works the night shift, Minny is known around Jackson as the best cook in the city and the one with the biggest mouth. If you can hear the theme tune of *Gone With the Wind* playing, Stockett can too:

If I'd played Mammy, I'd of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress.

After insulting the queen bee of the white hive, Miss Hilly, Minny is cast out from society, eventually ending up in the employment of a scatterbrained "white-trash" Miss Celia.

Between them, Aibileen and Minny have seen a lifetime of trouble and amusement, enough to fill a library. But Stockett leaves it up to Miss Skeeter to put the plot in motion. An aspiring writer, she decides to make her reputation by secretly interviewing black maids and compiling the experiences into one book. Maybe that will be her ticket to New York.



This being Mississippi at the height of segregation, library sit-ins and NAACP assassinations, complications invariably ensue. Miss Hilly, head of the Junior League and a filthily polite racist, begins to suspect Skeeter of radical notions and sets out to gun her and her conspirators down. This isn't an idle threat. Though a white man's fist hurts, Aibileen notes, a white woman's slander has the power to destroy lives:

No, white womens like to keep they hands clean. They got a shiny little set a tools they use, sharp as witches' fingernails, tidy and laid out neat, like the picks on a dentist tray. They gone take they time with em.

It takes a great deal of wit and will to combat Miss Hilly – toilets feature prominently in this battle – even as all three narrators must continue to deal with their regular lives. A Marilyn Monroe look-alike loses her mind, a handsome boyfriend appears and disappears, and personal tragedies loom. A grand finale is needed to tie up all these threads, and that's what is delivered (if a trifle too conveniently in a couple of instances).

Amidst all this hoopla, Stockett explicitly, some might say obviously, points out the narrators' widening awareness of the larger world. She has Aibileen reading seminal books by black Americans, Skeeter growing her hair long, and Minny dealing with domestic violence.

Yet when it comes to Skeeter's true dilemma – whether she is exploiting others for personal gain – Stockett chooses to nick the surface and move on. She is certainly careful to have Gretchen, a young maid, accuse Skeeter outright:

Another white lady trying to make a dollar off of colored people.

But it is an accusation that is never thoroughly investigated. Gretchen lasts all of a page before Aibileen firmly steps in to contradict such a notion. Similarly, to bolster Skeeter's case, over the course of the novel Stockett ensures that her white woman becomes more of a transcriber than a writer, with the maids often dictating or typing their own stories for her to edit. They will share the profits at the end; Skeeter will merely be the enabler.

Article from California Literary Review: <http://calitreview.com>

### **Discussion questions** (<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>)

1. Who was your favorite character? Why?
2. What do you think motivated Hilly? On one hand she's so unpleasant to Aibileen and her own help, as well as to Skeeter once she realizes she can't control her. But she's a wonderful mother. Do you think you 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 do you think 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 it's not until he literally gets up and walks away that the engagement falls apart?
- 6.** Do you think 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 hair shellac system that Skeeter undergoes seems ludicrous. Yet women still alter their looks in rather peculiar ways as the definition of "beauty" changes with the times. Looking back on your past, what's the most ridiculous beauty regimen you ever underwent?
- 9.** The author manages to paint Aibileen with a quiet grace and an aura of wisdom about her. How do you think she does this?
- 10.** Do you think there are still vestiges of racism in relationships where people of color work for people who are white? Have you heard stories of someone who put away their valuable jewelry before their nanny comes – so they trust this person to look after their child, but not their diamond rings?
- 11.** What did you think about Minny's pie for Miss Hilly? Would you have gone as far as Minny did for revenge?

## **Multimedia**

Youtube Interview "Kathryn Stockett on Novel's Success"  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGzmd0q5rTg>

**Readalikes (<http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/booklists/helpreadalikes.html>)**

*Four Spirits* by Sena Jeter Naslund

College student Stella Silver has enjoyed a life of privilege, in spite of losing her parents at a young age. When the bombings at Birmingham open her eyes to the depth of the hate fueling racism, she determines to join the civil rights movement, with memorable consequences.

*Freshwater Road* by Denise Nicholas

Nineteen-year-old Celeste is drawn to help register voters in Mississippi during the tumultuous Freedom Summer of '64. But the transition from privilege to harsh reality severely tests Celeste's idealism, and revisits the reasons her father decided to leave the South years before.

*Mudbound* by Hillary Jordan

Recently married, Laura McAllan moves from her refined Memphis home to a struggling farm in Mississippi's Delta region shortly after World War II. Faced with primitive conditions and a rocky relationship with her husband, Laura turns to the companionship of her black tenant farmer's wife. But with racial tensions at a high point and the arrival of Laura's unattached brother-in-law from Europe, events are set for a gripping conclusion.

*Right as Rain* by Bev Marshall

Starting as rivals, Tee Wee and Icey gradually become friends through tragedy and resilience while working as servants for the white Parsons family. Interweaving the stories of black and white families alike, friendships are tested after the strife of the Civil Rights movement and a murder trial reveals how much has- or hasn't- changed.

*The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd

After a run-in with Southern racists puts Lily Owens and her beloved caretaker Rosaleen in jeopardy, they flee to South Carolina. There they meet the remarkable Boatwright sisters, whose skill at beekeeping help Lily come to grips with a family tragedy.

*The Summer We Got Saved* by Pat Cunningham Devoto

Tab and Tina are teenagers blithely unaware of the upheavals in Civil Rights era Alabama. When a trip to Chattanooga exposes the girls to the realities of racial discrimination, their experience prompts them to reconsider their pride in their Southern heritage—and convince their own father of the need for change.

*We Are All Welcome Here* by Elizabeth Berg

Against the turmoil of 1960s Mississippi, a paralyzed white woman struggles to raise her daughter with the help of her African-American caretaker, Peacie.

## **Activity**

Have each group member bring a dish to pass related to the foods Minnie made. Ideas include: Caramel Cake, Custard Pie, Deviled Eggs, Strawberry Cake, Candied Peaches, Peach Cobbler, Fried Okra, Fried Chicken, Butter Beans, and many others.



Ann Arbor District Library