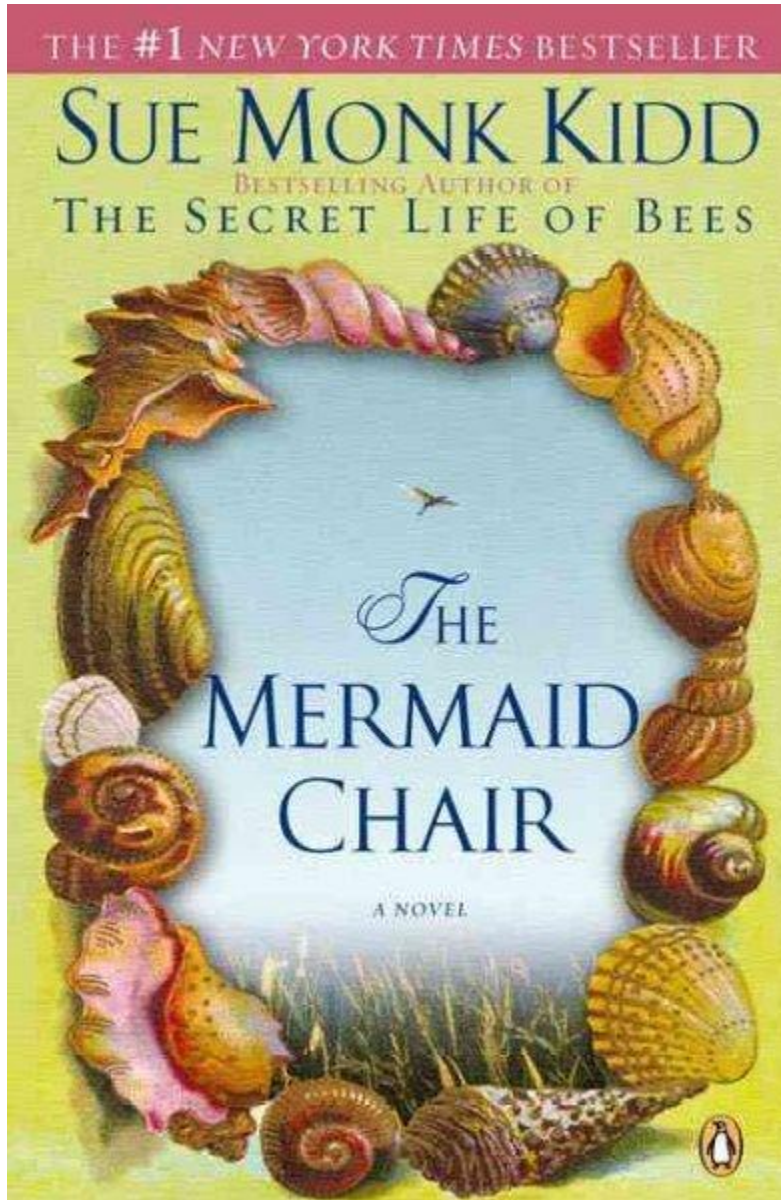


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



Jessie Sullivan's conventional life is transformed when she is summoned home to tiny Egret Island, where she meets Brother Thomas, a monk who is about to take his final vows, and encounters the legend of a beautiful and mysterious chair dedicated to a saint who had originally been a mermaid. By the author of *The Secret Life of Bees*.

About the author Source: <http://www.suemonkkidd.com/>

Sue Monk Kidd was born and raised in the tiny town of Sylvester, Georgia, which is tucked among the pinelands and red fields of Southwest Georgia,

a place she has lovingly referred to it as "an enduring somewhere." Her writing has been deeply influenced by place, and she mined her experiences of growing up in Sylvester as she wrote *The Secret Life of Bees*, her first novel.

Sue discovered her longing to be a writer when she was a child listening to her father's imaginative stories. In adolescence, encouraged by English teachers who described her as a "born writer," she began writing her own stories, as well as keeping prolific journals that chronicled her experiences, both internal and external, a practice she has continued throughout her life. Two books which she read at the age of fifteen- Thoreau's spiritual memoir, *Walden* and Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*- had a deep impact on her and would foreshadow the course she herself would eventually take as a writer: writing spiritual memoir and novels.

Her hope for a career in writing was not without an early detour, however. In what Sue has called an "inexplicable twist that is partly due to a failure of courage and partly due to the cultural climate of the South in 1966," she chose a more traditional path when it came time to go to college. She majored in nursing and graduated in 1970 from Texas Christian University with a B.S. degree, then worked throughout her twenties as a registered nurse on surgical and pediatric hospital units and as a college nursing instructor. During that time, she married Sanford (Sandy) Kidd, a graduate student in theology, and they had two children, Bob and Ann.

Shortly before Sue turned thirty the pull to writing returned. She was living in Anderson, South Carolina where her husband Sandy was teaching at a small liberal arts college. She enrolled in writing classes with the intention of writing fiction, but was soon diverted to non-fiction when a personal essay she wrote for class was published in Guideposts Magazine and reprinted in Readers Digest. Wanting to help support her family, she began a career as a freelancer, writing personal experience articles, most of them inspirational and art of living pieces.

Sue found immediate success as a freelancer, becoming a Contributing Editor at Guideposts. It was there she claims to have cut her writing teeth, studying the craft of fiction- character, plot, dialogue, etc- in order to write her non-fiction narratives, and gradually finding her own unique voice and style. She published several hundred articles during her freelance days, primarily in Guideposts Magazine, but in numerous other publications,

newspapers and journals.

It was during Sue's thirties that she began to experience an intellectual and spiritual flowering. She embarked on a serious study of the classics of Western spirituality, philosophy, depth psychology and mythology, while also reading voluminous amounts of literary fiction. She became deeply influenced by work of the monk and poet, Thomas Merton and Swiss psychiatrist, C.G. Jung, which would impact her writing in the years ahead.

Her first book was a spiritual memoir describing her advent into contemplative Christian spirituality: *God's Joyful Surprise*, published by Harper SanFrancisco in 1988. Her second book, *When the Heart Waits*, published by Harper SanFrancisco in 1990, was met with critical acclaim and revealed a deepening of Sue's voice. Rooted in contemplative spirituality, the memoir recounts her intense and vivid spiritual transformation.

Her most powerful awakening, however, still lay ahead of her. While in her early forties, Sue's explorations and study took an unexpected turn into feminist theology. The result was *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, published in 1996 by Harper SanFrancisco. This bold and highly successfully memoir had a groundbreaking effect within religious circles, evoking an astonishingly passionate response.

Another unforeseen shift unfolded during Sue's forties as her desire to write fiction returned. Feeling, by her own account, somewhat intimidated by the idea of pursuing her original dream, she nevertheless took the leap, enrolling in a graduate writing course at Emory University, and studying at Sewanee, Bread Loaf and other writers' conferences. She began by writing and publishing short stories in small literary journals. Soon she was garnering awards for her short fiction. (A list of Sue's writing awards are compiled below)

In 1997 she began writing her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, and worked on it for the next three and a half years. Published by Viking in 2002, it became a genuine literary phenomenon. A powerful story of coming-of-age, race-relations, the ability of love to transform our lives and the often unacknowledged longing for the universal feminine divine, the novel tells the story of a fourteen year old Lily, who runs away with her black housekeeper in 1964 in South Carolina and the sanctuary they both

find in the home of three eccentric beekeeping sisters.

The Secret Life of Bees has sold more than 3.5 million copies, spent over eighty weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and been published in more than 20 languages. It was awarded the 2004 Book Sense Paperback book of the Year, nominated for the Orange Prize in England and chosen as Good Morning America's *Read This!* Book Club pick. Taught widely now in college and high school class rooms, *The Secret Life of Bees* is fast becoming a modern classic. It has been produced on stage in New York by The American Place Theater and is being adapted into a movie by Focus Films.

Sue began writing her second novel, *The Mermaid Chair* in 2002, completing it in 2004. Published in the Spring of 2005, the novel explores a woman's pilgrimage to self-belonging, the inner life of mid-life marriage, and the little known region in the female soul where the sacred and the erotic intersect. Set on a South Carolina barrier island, it tells the beautiful and haunting story of 42 year old Jessie Sullivan, a married woman who falls in love with a Benedictine monk and the crisis and self-awakening this ignites.

Sue serves on the board of advisors for Poets & Writers, Inc. and works to support their efforts for the literary arts and their advocacy for emerging writers. She is Writer in Residence at Phoebe Pember House in Charleston.

Today Sue lives beside a salt marsh near Charleston, South Carolina with her husband Sandy and their black lab, Lily. She writes in a book-lined, upstairs study where she can look out at the tidal creeks and marsh birds. She is at work on a new book.

Awards

The Mermaid Chair won the Quill Award for Fiction.

Reviews

Booklist

Kidd's debut novel, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2000), is a bona fide publishing success story: it was on the *New York Times* paperback best-

seller list for 81 weeks. Her follow-up, while quite different in plot, shares some themes with its predecessor. Forty-three-year old Jessie Sullivan is pulled out of her staid life in Atlanta with her husband and daughter, back to her childhood home on Egret Island after her mother, Nelle, cuts off one of her own fingers. Jessie has been uneasy with the island since her beloved father died when she was nine in a boating accident, a tragedy Jessie has always felt partially responsible for. At the behest of her mother's best friend, Jessie journeys back to the island to try to reconnect with the mother she's never been close to. Jessie wants to know what drove her obviously disturbed mother to sever her finger, and she thinks Father Dominic, one of the Benedictine monks who resides in a nearby monastery, might know more about her mother's state of mind. But it is another monk who claims Jessie's attention--handsome Brother Thomas, who ignites in Jessie a passion so intense it overwhelms her, leading her to question her marriage and rediscover her artistic drive. Kidd's second offering is just as gracefully written as her first and possesses an equally compelling story. It should appeal to the many readers who made her first novel a hit with book clubs.

Publishers Weekly * Starred Review *

Jessie Sullivan, the protagonist of this rewarding second novel by the author of the bestselling *Secret Life of Bees*, is awakened by a shrilling phone late one night to horrifying news: her mother, who has never recovered from her husband Joe's death 33 years earlier, has chopped off her own finger with a cleaver. Frantic with worry, and apprehensive at the thought of returning to the small island where she grew up in the shadow of her beloved father's death and her mother's fanatical Catholicism, 42-year-old Jessie gets on the next plane, leaving behind her psychiatrist husband, Hugh, and college-age daughter, Dee. On tiny Egret Island, off the coast of South Carolina, Jessie tries to care for her mother, Nelle, who is not particularly eager to be taken care of. Jessie gets help from Nelle's best friends, feisty shopkeeper Kat and Hepzibah, a dignified chronicler of slave history. To complicate matters, Jessie finds herself strangely relieved to be free of a husband she loves--and wildly attracted to Brother Thomas, né Whit O'Conner, a junior monk at the island's secluded Benedictine monastery. Confusing as the present may be, the past is rearing its head, and Jessie, who has never understood why her mother is still distraught by Joe's death, begins to suspect that she's keeping a terrible secret. Writing from the perspective of conflicted, discontented Jessie, Kidd achieves a bold intensity and complexity that wasn't possible in *The Secret Life of Bees*, narrated by teenage Lily. Jessie's efforts to cope with marital

stagnation; Whit's crisis of faith; and Nelle's tormented reckoning with the past will resonate with many readers. This emotionally rich novel, full of sultry, magical descriptions of life in the South, is sure to be another hit for Kidd.

Kirkus Reviews

According to Kidd's follow-up to *The Secret Life of Bees*, there's nothing like a little soulful adultery to get an anemic marriage back on track.

Atlanta housewife and part-time artist Jessie Sullivan has been in a mild funk since her daughter Dee started college. Then she and her sensitive but controlling husband, Hugh, receive news that her obsessively devout mother, Nelle, has purposely cut off a finger—whether out of misplaced piety or mental illness isn't known. With trepidation, Jessie returns to the South Carolina barrier island where she was raised to care for Nelle. She still carries guilt that a spark from the pipe she had given her father supposedly caused the boating accident that killed him when she was nine. Since then, Nelle has cooked for the neighboring monks, whose patron saint, Saint Senare, was an Irish mermaid before she found God. Jessie meets and is immediately attracted to the newest addition to the monastery, Father Thomas. A former lawyer whose wife and unborn child died in a freak accident, Father Thomas, who has yet to take his final vows, is in charge of the rookery, so he spends his days paddling alone down various creeks. Soon, Jessie is paddling with him while delving into her own sensuality and selfhood. No pure lust, but a spiritual coupling has taken place as evidenced, at least, by the pictures she creates of a mermaid diving deep toward the ocean floor, while there's much talk of being "damned and saved both." Jesse learns she isn't to blame for her father's death, but her relief is short-lived, since Nelle cuts off another finger. Loyal Hugh shows up to help and discovers Jessie's affair. Once the truth of Jessie's father's death is revealed, Nelle begins a real recovery, while a wiser, stronger Jessie returns to the ever-patient Hugh, who vows to be a better husband.

Bestselling Kidd (*The Secret Life of Bees* (2002)) has a gift for language, but the saccharine aftertaste won't go away.

Literary Criticism

Religious Imagery in The Secret Life of Bees and The Mermaid Chair

Sue Monk Kidd's two popular novels on the Reading Club circuit, *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair*, appear to have little in common except their southern setting. The two novels take place on or near the coast of South Carolina. *The Bees* [*The Secret Life of Bees*] is primarily set in the small fictional town of Tiburon, and *The Chair* [*The Mermaid Chair*] is set on fictional Egret Island. However, these two settings are linked geographically and metaphorically in several ways. First, they share a strong sense of place that is integral to the stories. Second, they share an important link to the sea. Third, they share a common Gullah cultural heritage and similar religious imagery that are connected to this Gullah culture. Finally, they share common themes--rebirth and the importance of community--that are linked to these religious images. Place becomes a character in the two Kidd novels. The pink house and the Sea Island function as sanctuaries for those deeply wounded by painful relationships--Rosaleen, Lily, Jessie, and her mother. Brother Thomas, the Benedictine monk who lives in St. Senara's abbey on Egret Island, with whom Jessie falls in love, finds refuge within the cloistered community. Eudora Welty once said:

People give pain, are callous and insensitive, empty and cruel ... but place heals the hurt, soothes the outrage, fills the terrible vacuum that these human beings make. (Kidd, Journal 25)

The sea functions as a metaphor for life and death in the two novels. To the slaves, the sea represented the gulf between Africa and the New World, a place of loss and oppression. In the Sea Island culture, it was also a means of survival. The Masthead Mary and our Lady of Chains in *The Bees* and the Mermaid Chair are objects from the sea that represent both oppression and freedom.

The Sea Island Culture of the Gullah people developed on the cotton and rice plantations along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. These descendents of African slaves are commonly called Geechees in Georgia (Wikipedia). The Gullah people have preserved many unique African influences in their language, cuisine, crafts, storytelling, religion, music, etc. thanks to their geographical isolation and strong sense of community (Wikipedia). The aspects of Gullah culture that I will focus on in this paper are the communal and religious practices, which share significance in Kidd's two novels.

Both Kidd novels celebrate feminine communities that aid and bring healing to the female protagonists, Lily in *The Bees* and Jessie in *The Chair*, outside of their immediate families. In Gullah culture, the idea of the extended family rather than the nuclear family prevails. "Elderly females or

'mammies' function as matriarchs who teach children proprieties and family lore." Both of these communal social practices have roots in Africa (Pollitzer 130-33). Lily finds healing in the hive of three black beekeeping sisters within the pink house--May, June, and August. August symbolizes the queen bee, the matriarch, who imparts knowledge, wisdom, and love to Lily. Every August 15, the Daughters of Mary celebrate Mary Day and The Feast of the Assumption (Kidd 220-21) as a special remembrance for The Lady of Chains; their communal Sunday services in the pink house include music, swaying, and a conga line (Kidd 110). The celebration is reminiscent of the Gullah Praise Houses, where "African elders met its people ... combining religious worship, consolation, and hope" (Gullah Language & Culture). The trio of island women--Kat, Benne, and Hepzibah--perform a similar function for Jessie; the Gullah healer/priestess/historian Hepzibah takes on the role of the matriarch, the African griot (Kidd 32). The All Girls picnic (held annually on May Day) is the outward celebration of female community and solidarity, which includes dancing on the beach and wading into the ocean to "tie their threads together (and symbolically, their lives) ... and toss them into the waves" (Kidd, Journal 11). The "womb-like" maternal community container metaphor provides a nurturing space for the rebirth and renewal of the two characters (Kidd, Journal 11). Furthermore, both Lily and Jessie share similar struggles on their journeys for healing: reconciliation, betrayal and forgiveness, parental loss, mother-daughter relationships, and leaving home to find home (Kidd, Journal 8). The Gullah religion is a blend of African traditions and new world religious practices. In *The Bees* August tells Lily that their religion is "Orthodox Eclectic" (Kidd 90). The slave religion was a mixture of "the logic and spirit of African faith [coming] together with the imagery and narratives of Catholicism." In the New World, Africans were viewed by the Church and the slave-owners as "pagans with no belief systems, just a bunch of bizarre, unrelated rituals and superstitions"; the Church outlawed these activities and decided to give Africans Christianity as a "true faith." In spite of the "moral duty" of the Church to convert the slaves, "the old African faiths never died; they simply went underground" (Freeman 16-17). The slave owners introduced them to Christianity by way of membership in the Episcopal, Baptist, Presbyterian, or Methodist churches (Joyner 35-37; Adams). Despite the early influence of Catholicism, the evangelical style of preaching became increasingly attractive to the Low Country blacks "because its shouting, swaying, and ecstasy reinforced the slaves' traditional patterns of spirituality" (Pollitzer 136). By the 1840s the Baptist persuasion had the greatest appeal because of its less formal worship,

democratic and autonomous organization, toleration of emotional expression, and baptism by total immersion (Pollitzer 137). The "fervent singing, dancing, [chanting,] and praying, like one [spiritually] possessed, culminating in the ring shout, ... was reinterpreted in Christian terms." African dance celebrates births, weddings, funerals, and rites of healing ... (Pollitzer 155). African priests, medicine men, and diviners are respected, intertwined religious leaders who worship and dispense health at shrines in sacred localities through "invocations, libations, offerings, prayers, and songs." Native Africans believe in multiple divinities, or intermediaries, who have a father/son relationship to God, like the patron saints in Catholicism, who "may be approached for protection."

The Gullah folk religion was a "creolization":

The Gullah people adapted African beliefs to their own concept of Christianity in a dynamic and creative synthesis that helped them build a community of strength and solidarity that withstood the hardships of life. Religious faith raised up the slave, gave him hope and moral superiority, and contradicted the dehumanizing experience of slavery. (Pollitzer 143)

The formation of the African Methodist-Episcopal (AME) Church represents an amalgamation of Protestant religious practices with some of the Anglican traditions of Catholicism, so well-suited to the syncretic Gullah culture.

Major events in the life cycle, including death, are marked by elaborate African rituals. At puberty boys and girls are "indoctrinated through secret societies in the knowledge needed for adult life under the direction of leaders or spiritual parents" in an initiation symbolized by wearing new clothes, by ritual washing, and by total immersion (Pollitzer 138-43). At the end of both novels, the protagonists take part in an initiation ceremony, a rite of passage. The new beehive hat (Kidd 300) is an outward symbol of Lily's official acceptance into the sisterhood and her rebirth. Jessie walks into the sea, symbolic of baptism by immersion, and performs a ceremony of self-commitment to authenticate herself, a rebirth, a "second 'coming of age'" (Kidd, Journals 4, 5).

There are numerous Catholic images throughout both of the novels. In *The Bees* the primary symbols are the Black Madonna, Masthead Mary, and Our Lady of Chains. Lily and Rosaleen both feel the "curtain of protection" made by Black Mary (Kidd 92, 115) in the bee community. While "the Virgin Mary has functioned as a Divine Mother for millions of people across the centuries," the black-skinned Madonnas have a mysterious history (A Penguin Readers Guide 9). According to Kidd,

Approximately four hundred to five hundred of these ancient Madonnas still exist, mostly in Europe. They are among the oldest Madonna images in the world, and their blackness is purportedly not related to race or ethnic origins, but has to do with obscure symbolic meanings and connections to earlier goddesses ... Their stories reveal rebellious, even defiant sides. Black Madonnas in Poland and Central America have been the rallying images for oppressed peoples struggling against persecution.(A Penguin Readers Guide 9)

No wonder the Black Madonna, a symbol of freedom and consolation (Kidd, Journal 16), wraps her veil of protection over the oppressed African-American women and the abused Lily in the pink house. The story of "our Lady of Chains" refers to the masthead's part in freeing and consoling slaves on the islands near Charleston (Kidd 107-10; Kidd, Journal 16). The honey that the Boatwright sisters produce, "Black Madonna Honey" (Kidd 16), is the elixir of physical, emotional, and spiritual healing for Rosaleen and Lily.

The central Catholic image in *The Mermaid Chair* is The Mermaid Saint, a mythical mermaid saint based on St. Senara. An actual church saint, she is the sacred feminine image central to the story of *The Mermaid Chair* (Kidd, Journal 6). The fabled Mermaid of Zennor, Asenora, fell in love with one of the choristers of the St. Senara Church in Cornwall, England and lured him into the sea. According to legend, St. Senara was a mermaid before her conversion who "continued to pine for the sea." Kidd blended these two legends for her novel. The real Mermaid Chair, which was the inspiration for the novel, sits in the St. Senara Church (Kidd, Journals 3, 6; "Where Do Mermaids Lurk?"). In the novel, if a person sits in The Mermaid Chair, his/her prayers will be answered (Kidd 34, 111-114). Sitting in The Chair, Jessie's father is released from the bonds of his disease; Jessie finds consolation for her father's death, and she finds the freedom to love herself. Another central religious image in the novel is the legend of St. Eudoria, who, like Jessie's mother, cut off her finger and planted it in the ground, along with Sedna, an Inuit sea goddess whose fingers were severed (Kidd 220-223, 247, 258). Her father's death is linked to the plant "dead finger" growing on the island (Kidd 298, 304-306), which conjures up the African medicine men (Pollitzer 138) and Gullah "grannies," community healers who practiced folk medicine for faith and healing (Adams).

Other religious images in *The Bees*, which primarily reflect Catholic and Anglican traditions, include the Virgin Mary, angels (Kidd 2, 38, 289), manna (Kidd 207), rosary beads (Kidd 90), prayer cards (Kidd 139), the sign of the cross (Kidd 90), Hail Marys (Kidd 90, 191), and holy water (Kidd

269). The wailing wall (Kidd 80) and the salvation gloves (Kidd, Journal 15) come from Jewish and Baptist practices respectively. Besides the monastery and the monks in *The Mermaid Chair*, other religious, mainly Catholic, images include Ash Wednesday, rosaries, saint medals, holy cards, Jesus statues, Joan of Arc (Kidd 6, 18, 19, 291, 294), crucifixes/crosses (Kidd 26, 77, 187), madonnas (Kidd 43, 57, 83, 200, 331), saints, litanies (Kidd 47, 61, 80), prayer books/missals (Kidd 55, 117), stations of the cross (Kidd 60, 196), milagros (Kidd 94), scapulars (Kidd 100), candles, confessions, blessings (Kidd 104), wafers (Kidd 120), vespers (Kidd 191), vows (Kidd 226-227), Lord's Supper, Easter, holy oil, basin and pitcher, vestments (Kidd 237), the masses, etc. The belief in departed spirits which stay on the earth in the form of animals after death and "hags," dead spirits actually living as members of the community, appear on Egret Island as reminders of Gullah religious beliefs (Adams; Kidd 56, 87, 157).

The central religious image in *The Bees* is the honey, a metaphor for healing. In ancient times, "bees were considered a symbol of the soul, of death and rebirth" and "honey was regarded as a magical, sacred substance." Some medieval hymns "referred to the Virgin Mary as the beehive, and Christ as the honey that flowed from her. In some stories, the Virgin Mary was associated with the queen bee, and in ancient Greece the goddess Demeter was referred to as the queen bee, and her priestesses were the worker bees, who served her" (Kidd, Journal 18). There are numerous references to honey (and honeycombs) in both the Old and New Testaments, although there is no evidence that the Hebrews cultivated honey bees (Tenney 379). In the Bible, honey is used for nourishment; for example, Samson, Jonathan, and John the Baptist ate it (Judges 14:8; I Samuel 14:25-43; Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6). Honey is also used as a gift to ask for favors (Gen. 43:11; Jeremiah 41:8; II Sam. 17:29; I Kings 14:3), a trade commodity (Ezekiel 27:17), and a first-fruits offering but never as a sin offering (Lev. 2:11; II Chron. 31:5). The Land of Canaan is described as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8; Ezekiel 20:15); honey is "good," "sweet," and "satisfying" (Prov. 24:13; 25:16, 27; Song of Solomon 4:11; 5:1; Ezekiel 3:3; Psalm 81:16; Rev. 10:9), but we are cautioned not to eat too much (Prov. 27:7). In Proverbs the honeycomb is compared to pleasant words, "sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (16:24). Honey is God's loving provision for his children (Deut. 32:13; Job 20:17; Ezekiel 16:13, 19) (Hebb). August tells Lily that, according to lore, "[w]hen a bee flies, a soul will rise" (Kidd 206). "[W]hen the Christians hid from the Romans down in the catacombs, they used to scratch pictures of bees on the walls. To

remind each other that when they died they'd be resurrected" (Kidd 206). Kidd uses angels as well as bees as images of spiritual renewal throughout the novel.

A close examination of the religious imagery in Kidd's two novels reveals a shared, rich, unique geographical, historical, cultural, and religious context that celebrates life, community, and spiritual renewal.

Source: Hebb, Judith. "Religious Imagery in The Secret Life of Bees and The Mermaid Chair." Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference (14 Apr. 2006): 1-9. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 267. Detroit: Gale, 2009. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions *Source: <http://www.readinggroupguides.com>*

1. How does a woman like Jessie become "molded to the smallest space possible"? What signs might appear in her life? What did Jessie mean when she said part of the problem was her chronic inability to astonish herself?
2. Jessie comes to believe that an essential problem in her marriage is not that she and Hugh have grown apart, but that they have grown "too much together." What do you think she means by that? How important is it for Jessie to find her "solitude of being?" How does a woman balance apartness and togetherness in a relationship?
3. How would you describe Nelle before and after her husband's death? What is your interpretation of the mysterious factors that led her to cut off her finger? What do her fingers symbolize? How does the myth of Sedna --- the Inuit mermaid whose severed fingers became the first sea creatures --- shed light on Nelle's state of mind?
4. Jessie feels that she has found a soul mate in Whit. Do you find this word inviting or repellent? When we speak of looking for a soul mate, what do we mean? Is there really such a thing?
5. Why do you think Whit came to the monastery? Would you describe him as having a crisis of faith? In what ways does he vacillate between falling into life and transcending it? What do you think of his decision at the end about whether to leave or to stay?

6. Islands are often places of personal trial and distillation of self --- such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or *Lord of the Flies*. What are the emotional islands each character is stranded on? What is the significance of the Egret Island setting? How does each character finally escape the island of his or her making? What does the trial on the enchanted island reveal about each character?
7. St. Senara only becomes a saint once an abbot hides her fish tail and prohibits her from returning to sea. On one hand, she has lost her wild nature and freedom to swim away, but on the other hand, she has gained sainthood among the humans she has grown to love. What is the significance of this tale in Jessie's life? When she leaves her husband to return to Egret Island, is she the wild mermaid or the stranded saint? How does the duality of the mermaid and the saint play out in women's lives? Can a woman contain both? Why do you think mystics and poets have drawn comparisons between sensual delight and Godly delight?
8. The mermaid chair is a central image in the novel. What does it symbolize? What role does it play in the novel? In Jessie's life? In her father's? How does it become a place of dying and rebirth for both of them, literally and figuratively?
9. How would you describe Jessie's relationship with her father? How did having an absent father affect her? How did it affect her relationship to Hugh? What do you think Kidd was suggesting by the image of the whirley girl?
10. Jessie breaks away from creating her tiny art boxes and begins to paint, finding her true gift. Why is she unable to take up her authentic creative life before this? What role do her paintings play in her metamorphosis? How does Jessie's series of paintings of diving women reflect her own experience? What role does the motif of diving play in the novel?
11. The novel celebrates the hallowed bonds of women and suggests how a true community of women can become a maternal circle that nurtures a woman toward self-realization and helps her to give birth to a new life. How do Kat, Hepzibah, and even Benne, play

a role in Jessie's transformation? What has been the importance of female communities in your own life?

12. In perhaps the most moving and cathartic moment in the novel, Jessie goes to Bone Yard beach and speaks vows of commitment to herself- "Jessie. I take you, Jessie for better or worse to love and to cherish." What does it mean to make a "marriage" to yourself? Paradoxically, Jessie discovered that belonging to herself allowed her to belong more truly to Hugh. Does an inviolate commitment to oneself enhance one's commitment to a relationship?
13. In your mind, was Jessie's father's death a sin? Jessie isn't sure if choosing to end one's life in order to spare oneself and one's family extreme suffering was horning in on God's territory and usurping "the terrifying power to say when," or whether it was usurping God's deep heart by laying down one's life as a sacrifice. What do you think?
14. *The Mermaid Chair* suggests that a love affair may be a common response to a marriage that has lost its way, but that in the end it is not a solution. In what way do you think the novel is a "cautionary tale?" Why do you think Jessie is unable to heed the warnings from Kat and Hepzibah? How could Jessie have found awakening without betraying her marriage?
15. Upon her return home, Jessie says "There would be no grand absolution, only forgiveness meted out in these precious sips. It would well up from Hugh's heart in spoonfuls and he would feed it to me. And it would be enough." Why does Jessie return to Hugh? Why is Hugh able to accept her back into his life? How has their relationship changed since she left for Egret Island? How has Jessie changed?

Multimedia

Sue Monk Kidd (Video Clip)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTJO1cmUXsk>

Author of the moving *The Secret Life of Bees*, which spent more than 75 weeks on *The New York Times* Bestseller List, Sue Monk Kidd reads from her work, including her new novel, *The Mermaid's Chair*. Kidd is acclaimed

for her ability to weave together vividly drawn Southern locations and emotional tales of spirituality and feminism.

Further Reading

Traveling With Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story by Sue Monk Kidd

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1343652>

(Call number: 921 Kidd)

A wise and involving book about feminine thresholds, spiritual growth, and renewal, "*Traveling with Pomegranates*" is a revealing self-portrait by the beloved author of "*The Secret Life of Bees*" and her daughter, a writer in the making.

The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey From Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine by Sue Monk Kidd

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146350>

(Call number: 921 Kidd)

Still, the initial idea of telling my story in this book gave me pause. The hardest thing about writing is telling the truth. Maybe it's the hardest thing about being a woman, too. I think of Nisa, the old African woman who was telling her story . . . She said, "I will tell my talk . . . but don't let the people I live with hear what I have to say . . . I know that feeling. But in the end, Nisa and I, we told our truth anyway.

When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Lifes' Sacred Questions by Sue Monk Kidd

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146351>

(Call number: 248.4 Ki)

Selected as *Virtue* magazine's "Book of the Year" for 1991, Sue Monk Kidd's inspirational autobiographical account of personal pain, spiritual awakening, and divine grace.

Book Club To Go!* *The Secret Life Of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308903>

(Call number: Fiction Kidd)

Sue Monk Kidd is an extraordinary storyteller. In "*The Secret Life of Bees*," she explores a young girl's search for the truth about her mother; her courage to tear down racial barriers; and her joy as she claims her place within a community of women.

Author's official website

<http://www.suemonkkidd.com/>

Information, news, and resources from the author.

Read–Alikes

Winterton Blue by Trezza Azzopardi

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1284610>

(Call number: Fiction Azzopardi)

Haunted by his brother's death twenty years earlier, tormented Lewis finds solace in a new relationship with Anna, a woman whose memories about her subdued late father prevent her from supporting her septuagenarian mother's daredevil lifestyle.

Plant Life by Pamela Duncan

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1201352>

(Call number: Fiction Duncan)

When her life falls apart and her marriage ends, Laurel Granger returns home to tiny Russell, North Carolina, where the simple life of a small southern town teaches her lessons about forgiveness, friendship, family, and freedom.

Liars and Saints by Maile Meloy

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1206817>

(Call number: Fiction Meloy)

The Catholic Santerre family of California navigates through a succession of life-altering events and revelations, during which its members are driven by jealousy, propriety, love, deceit, and tragedy.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extra!

Share any creative pursuits or hobbies you might have with the group. How do those things add to your life?