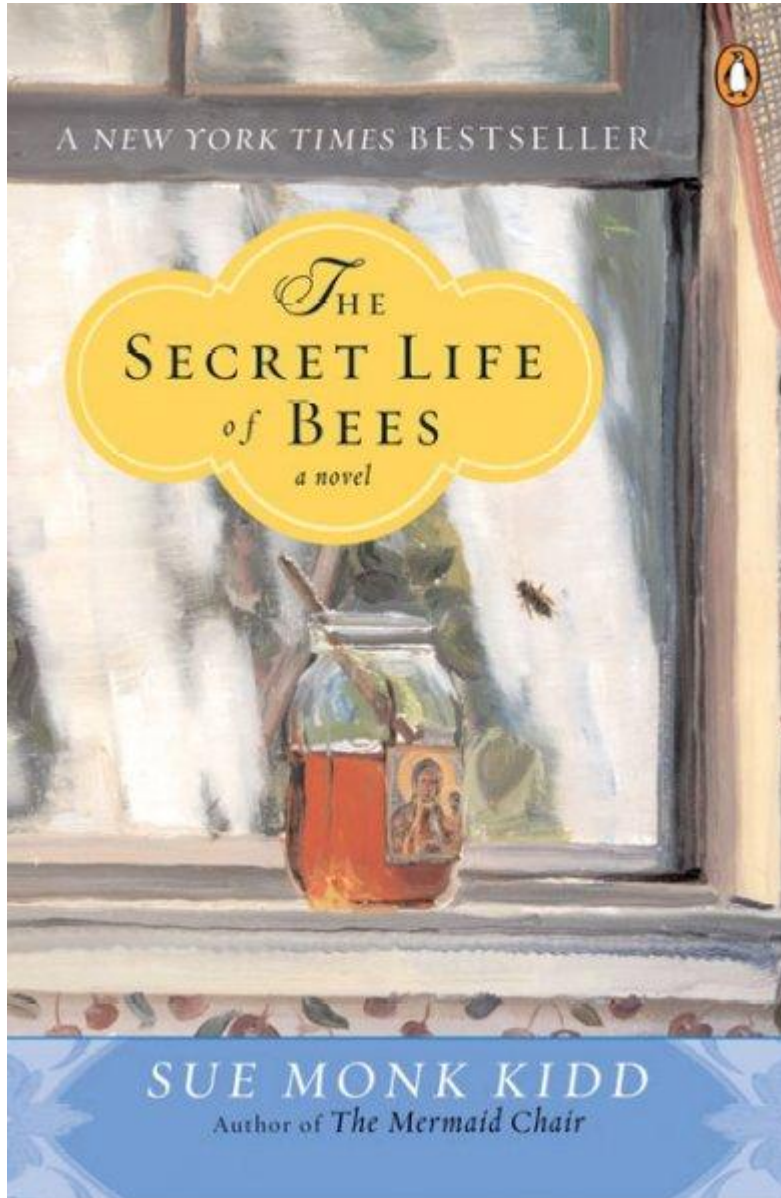


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

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

About the Book



After her "stand-in mother," a bold black woman named Rosaleen, insults the three biggest racists in town, Lily Owens, whose life has been defined by the tragic death of her mother, joins Rosaleen on a journey to Tiburon, South Carolina, where they are taken in by three black, bee-keeping sisters who show them the true meaning of love and family.

The Secret Life of Bees has a rare wisdom about life--about mothers and daughters and the women in our lives who become our true mothers.

About the Author *Source: NoveList*

The Secret Life of Bees is Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, yet she is no stranger to writing. Looking back on her early life, Kidd recalls "our most plentiful resource, next to family roots, was stories". Not surprisingly, then, one of her favorite pastimes as a child was writing tales in imitation of the authors who were most important to her -- the Brontës, Emerson, and Thoreau. Despite her early fascination with writing, however, Kidd did not

begin writing professionally until much later in her life. Instead, she attended Texas Christian University where she earned a degree in nursing.

It was not until after her children were born that Kidd began writing professionally. After her thirtieth birthday, she began taking writing courses and accepted an editor's position at *Guideposts* magazine. Most of her work was in non-fiction, as she wrote brief inspirational pieces based on true stories. Her work in non-fiction continued with her first books -- *God's Joyful Surprise* (1988), *When the Heart Waits* (1990), and *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996).

The subject matter of Kidd's non-fiction work plays an important role in *The Secret Life of Bees*, which she began writing in 1997 after taking a creative writing class at Emory University. Both *God's Joyful Surprise* and *When the Heart Waits* chronicle Kidd's own spiritual journey as she studied Benedictine, Jesuit, and Trappist monks. The notion of a spiritual community shows up in *The Secret Life of Bees* in the Daughters of Mary, a society of women who provide spiritual nurturing and comfort to each other. Similarly, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* details Kidd's experiences studying feminist theology, and the impact of that study can clearly be seen in *The Secret Life of Bees*. The resulting mix of fiction with theology and philosophy garnered multiple awards for the novel, including the 2004 Book Sense Book of the Year Award. In addition, the book was nominated for the prestigious Orange Prize in England.

In her online journal, Sue Monk Kidd writes that although the characters and situations in her fiction have parallels with her own life, they ultimately are "shaped by the mystery of imagination, which is fed to us through a stream of images, rising from the unconscious. The writer's task is to keep the way open for it and pay attention" (<http://www.suemonkkidd.com/html/Journal.asp>). What results in her writing is a purely fictional world that nevertheless is colored by Kidd's own experiences. It is not surprising then that the novel on which she currently is working revolves around religion and spirituality, two subjects of great concern to her. *The Mermaid Chair*, which will be published by Viking, tells the story of a middle-aged woman who falls in love with a monk living in a monastery off the coast of South Carolina.

Sue Monk Kidd currently lives with her husband in South Carolina.

Awards

The Secret Life of Bees was nominated for the Orange Prize (<http://www.orangeprize.co.uk/>).

Reviews Source: *NoveList*

Publishers Weekly

Honey-sweet but never cloying, this debut by nonfiction author Kidd (*The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*) features a hive's worth of appealing female characters, an offbeat plot and a lovely style. It's 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act, in Sylvan, S.C. Fourteen-year-old Lily is on the lam with motherly servant Rosaleen, fleeing both Lily's abusive father T. Ray and the police who battered Rosaleen for defending her new right

to vote. Lily is also fleeing memories, particularly her jumbled recollection of how, as a frightened four-year-old, she accidentally shot and killed her mother during a fight with T. Ray. Among her mother's possessions, Lily finds a picture of a black Virgin Mary with "Tiburon, S.C." on the back—so, blindly, she and Rosaleen head there. It turns out that the town is headquarters of Black Madonna Honey, produced by three middle-aged black sisters, August, June and May Boatwright. The "Calendar sisters" take in the fugitives, putting Lily to work in the honey house, where for the first time in years she's happy. But August, clearly the queen bee of the Boatwrights, keeps asking Lily searching questions. Faced with so ideally maternal a figure as August, most girls would babble uncontrollably. But Lily is a budding writer, desperate to connect yet fiercely protective of her secret interior life. Kidd's success at capturing the moody adolescent girl's voice makes her ambivalence comprehensible and charming. And it's deeply satisfying when August teaches Lily to "find the mother in (herself)"—a soothing lesson that should charm female readers of all ages.

Library Journal

This sweeping debut novel, excerpts of which have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, tells the tale of a 14-year-old white girl named Lily Owen who is raised by the elderly African American Rosaleen after the accidental death of Lily's mother. Following a racial brawl in 1960s Tiburon, SC, Lily and Rosaleen find shelter in a distant town with three black bee-keeping sisters. The sisters and their close-knit community of women live within the confines of racial and gender bondage and yet have an unmistakable strength and serenity associated with the worship of a black Madonna and the healing power of honey. In a series of unforgettable events, Lily discovers the truth about her mother's past and the certainty that "the hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters." The stunning metaphors and realistic characters are so poignant that they will bring tears to your eyes.

Kirkus

A wonderfully written debut that rather scants its subject of loss and discovery—a young girl searching for the truth about her dead mother—in favor of a feminist fable celebrating the company of women and the ties between that mothers and daughters. The prose is lapidary, the characters diverse, and the story unusual as it crosses the color line, details worship of a black Virgin Mary, and extensively describes the lives and keeping of bees. But despite these accomplishments, the fabulist elements (bees as harbingers of death, a statue with healing powers) seem more whimsical than credible and ultimately detract from the story itself. Lily Owens, just about to turn 14, narrates this tale set in South Carolina during July 1964. Since her mother died when she was four, Lily has been raised by African-American Rosaleen and by her sadistic father T. Ray Owens, a peach farmer who keeps reminding Lily that she killed her mother. When Rosaleen is arrested and beaten for trying to vote, Lily springs her from the hospital, and they head to the town of Tiburon because its name is on the back of a cross that belonged to Lily's mother. On the front is a picture of a black Madonna who can also be seen on the labels of jars of honey produced in Tiburon by local beekeeper Augusta Boatwright. Certain the secret to her mother's past lies in Tiburon, Lily persuades Augusta to take them in. As the days pass she helps with the bees; meets handsome young African-American Zach; becomes convinced her mother knew Augusta; and is introduced to the worship of Our Lady of Chains, a wooden statue of Mary that since

slavery has had special powers. By summer's end, Lily knows a great deal of bee lore and also finds the right moment to learn what really happened to her mother. Despite some dark moments, more honey than vinegar.

Literary Criticism

The archetypal mother: the Black Madonna in Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees

In her 2002 novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, former *Guidepost* magazine contributor Sue Monk Kidd departs from Baptist conservatism to produce a fourteen-year-old heroine, Lily, who finds solace and spirituality in a black woman's face. Set in 1960s South Carolina, this novel captures the period's racial prejudice and white patriarchy but reproduces the time's rebellious fervor as well. As Lily faces the revelation of a sheriff who doles out injustice to her housekeeper, Rosaleen, and a Southern Baptist religion that reinforces the tyranny of her father, T. Ray, she longs for a mother. This search takes psychological and archetypal turns as Lily confronts her own implication in her mother's death. Her only link to the mother she never really knew is a picture of a Black Madonna with a South Carolina town printed beneath it. Kidd ties all the frayed strands of past to present for Lily in the home of three black beekeepers—May, June, and August—who have their own Black Madonna, whom they declare is "blessed among women" (90). Throughout the novel, Kidd scrupulously ties all her symbols, most importantly those of the lily and bees, to this black icon. Thus, Lily's search for an archetypal mother expands from a quest for psychological identity to a quest for a religion that offers some reflection of herself.

In 1996 Kidd wrote her spiritual autobiography, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, in which she recounts her own attempt to find a feminine face of God. This search sent her to visit monasteries, to read religious texts extensively, and to denounce the patriarchy of the Southern Baptist Church. An unlikely feminist, she speaks at length about a woman's plight in both conventional society and orthodox religion. As she puts it:

When she finally lets herself feel the limits and injustices of female life and admits how her own faith tradition has contributed to that, when she at last stumbles in the dark hole made by the absence of a Divine Feminine presence ...this woman will become pregnant with herself, with the symbolic female-child who will, if given a chance, grow up to reinvent the woman's life. (*Dance* 12)

Just as Toni Morrison did in *The Bluest Eye*, Kidd discusses the psychological damage of women's exclusion, exclusion from representation in society's power positions and in her viewpoint, exclusion from nearly all church images and stories. As she explains, "We find genuine female authority within when we become the 'author' of our own identity. By taking the journey to the feminine soul, we 'authorize' ourselves" (*Dance* 212). As she recounts in her own autobiography and again in the spiritual and psychological voyage of her heroine Lily, this writing a woman's self into being is often arduous. Though she does not offer Lily a safe or sweet early life, she does jolt her protagonist into a new way of thinking and a new way of interpreting old stories.

Throughout *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily is forced to examine institutional ideas of justice, and these revised thoughts inspire new ways of being, both for Lily and for Rosaleen. First, Lily discovers that the institution of local justice, the sheriff's office, only metes out fairness to white people. When Rosaleen goes to register to vote, she finds her path impeded by white men who want to denounce Civil Rights' progress. Empowered by the Civil Rights Act of 1963, she dumps her snuff can spit onto their shoes. When she is arrested after being beaten by these men, the sheriff opens her cell to these same men so they can continue the abuse. Though Lily had suffered through her own persecution at the hands of T. Ray, whose favorite form of punishment consisted in making his daughter kneel bare-kneed for hours on Martha White grits, Lily realizes that Rosaleen's injustice can produce life-threatening consequences. Fleeing from her hometown police after breaking Rosaleen out of her hospital jail, Lily concocts new stories for the many people who question a black woman and a teenaged white girl's being together on the road

In these new identities, Rosaleen and Lily try on different personalities as they become part of life in the beekeepers' pink house. This search for a new identity assumes archetypal dimensions. As Jungian psychologist Marion Woodman points out, "If we leave our father's house, we have to make ourselves self-reliant. Otherwise, we just fall into another father's house" (qtd in Dance 118). Rosaleen and Lily find their road to self-awareness paved by the calendar sisters, May, June and August. These names span a time frame of both sowing and reaping, spring to late summer. Appropriately enough, the harvest name, August befriends Lily, but not in the ways of the father. She does not deliver edicts and punishment like an Old Testament God or a T. Ray; instead, she lets Lily find her own way in her own time to the facts of her mother's death. As Nancy Chodorow points out in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, "The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense is separate" (169). If we could borrow from the psychological to parallel the spiritual, Kidd describes the difference this way:

Patriarchy had majored in divine transcendence, which means separateness from the material universe—being above all, beyond or apart from it. Divine Immanence, on the other hand, is divinity here. near and now, inherent in the material stuff of life. (Dance 160)

Divine Immanence for her represents the matriarchal view of spirituality, the interconnectedness of life, nature, and spirit.

August and Lily become individual threads of an intricately woven spiritual and natural tapestry. Kidd captures this feeling of nature's pattern in an early scene where Lily steals into the night to unearth artifacts from her mother, included among which is "the funny wooden picture of Mary with the dark face" (23). She caresses the few belongings her mother left her and then collapses into nature. In her words,

When I looked up through the web of trees, the night fell over me, and for a moment I lost my boundaries, feeling like the sky was my own skin and the moon was my heart beating up there in the dark ... I undid the bottoms on my shirt and opened it wide, just wanting the night to settle on my skin. and flint's how I fell asleep, lying there with my

mother's things, with the air making moisture on my cheek, and the sky puckering with light. (23)

In the original incarnation of this novel, Kidd's 1993 short story aptly titled "*The Secret Life of Bees*," published in *The Nimrod International Journal*, she provides a different motivation for Lily's night excursion. Instead of this voyage into the community of nature, Lily, this one aged thirteen instead of fourteen, sneaks from her father's house for a romantic tryst with her boyfriend, Sonny. In 1993 Kidd had embarked upon her own self-revelatory religious journey, but she had not yet abandoned the Southern Baptist Church or her role as writer for *Guidepost Magazine*. In other words, she was still allied with the instruments of patriarchy herself. In changing the story to Lily's search for mother in the novel, she moves her character from other-directedness to self-directedness, a hard turn left on the road to solace and spirituality, a move that parallels Kidd's own religious shift

Throughout the novel resonate the sound and activities of a natural matriarchal society, that of bees. Each section's heading features the inner workings of this communal society. We are then constantly reminded of the symbol, not only through the work of the characters, but also through our introduction to all plot action. As Hans Biedermann points out, "In the secular world the bee was a royal symbol, especially since the queen bee was long regarded as the king. It has been speculated that the French fleur-de-lis [lily] goes back to a stylized image of the bee" (35). He further points to the belief in antiquity "that bees do not procreate their young but instead gather them up from the flowers they visit, making the bee a symbol for the Virgin Mary" (35). In other words, Kidd corresponds all the major symbols of the novel, the bees, the lily, and the Black Madonna, to the Virgin Mary, at least that's one version of this icon in existence for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

The Black Madonna has been around in some form, as dark pregnant woman, since 18,000 B.C. (Birnbbaum 8). In such a case, she creates evidence of a pre-Christian matriarchal religion. In other words, she becomes a symbol, in some theories, of a community of women or like-believers worshipping figures of a dark woman and embracing the concept of finding the godlike within themselves, for they see their inner selves mirrored in a woman's face. When August directs Lily to a queenless hive of bees, she explains, "You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do" (288) More than just emotional self-nourishing, this inner parenting assumes a spiritual comfort as well, for August tells Lily, "Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She's not the statue in the parlor. She's something reside of you" (288, emphasis Kidd's). She then tells her not to look without for God, but rather to look within.

More recently, Dan Brown's blockbuster novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, posits Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus, as do many historians, who see in the Black Madonna Mary, wife of Jesus, and not Mary, mother of Jesus. Books such as Margaret Songbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* and Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* both present convincing evidence as to the matrimonial link. These authors supply a new examination of the meaning of holy grail or sangraal, which, literally translated, means holy blood. By examining genealogies, histories,

reports, and apocryphal books of the Bible, they deduce that Mary Magdalene carried the mingled blood of two noble families and the holy blood of Jesus in her womb. She then was the chalice or the Holy Grail represented in Arthurian lore. They provide compelling evidence that she had this child and then went into exile in Provence, France. I go into all this background to suggest evidence of an earlier matriarchal religion or religions, the type for which Kidd hungers in *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. These early followers of Mary believed in freedom and equality, in the mind and its powers. They believed in self-empowerment and sought the God within each of them. Unwittingly, for at least in interviews Kidd discusses only the image's correlation with the Virgin Mary, she points in this novel to such a community of women and like minds bent on finding the mother, or God-force within them.

To read this novel with the other possibilities of Black Madonna interpretation in mind enables us as readers to envision this little congregation in Tiburon, South Carolina, with new possibilities. These masthead gatherers may just form one of the concentric circles of matriarchal worship. They, like their historical echo loops, combine into a community of worshippers bent on discovering their own divinity and recognizing their part in the greater scheme of nature. Clearly, if we read the Black Madonna only as Virgin Mary, we find ourselves "kneeling on the grits" of Catholicism, a religion far from matriarchal. In fact, one of the arguments presented in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* is that the Catholic Church tried to extinguish the symbols and texts, such as the Gnostic Gospels and the Dead Sea Scrolls that supported Mary Magdalene as the thirteenth apostle. When it found itself unable to destroy all the followers of the Magdalene through the Crusades--and yes, these texts point to a link with the cult of Mary Magdalene to those "holy" wars--the pope proposed a bait and switch tactic. The Catholic Church would itself worship Mary, just not that Mary. It would elevate Mary of Nazareth who mothered the Christ child. To the early church she seemed less threatening and easier to obscure into Jesus's background. This theory helps to explain the Catholic faith's inability to classify Mary, whom in ideology it sees as just a vessel for the Christ child.

Besides the link between this icon and at least the possibility of matriarchal religions, the Black Madonna also serves as psychological archetype of an indomitable spirit, a soul not defeated by the persecutions of slavery, for in the history of this masthead figure, escape figures prominently. "Our Lady of Chains" cannot be contained in prisons of men, for she arrives unscathed back to her original locale every time she is moved. Since Lily and Rosaleen escape their patriarchal home to find sanctuary in this matriarchal one, this icon provides a mirror of sorts to Lily, who, upon first seeing the imposing statue, reflects, "Standing there, I loved myself and I hated myself. That's what the black Mary did to me, made me feel my glory and my shame at the same time" (71). When Lily works up the courage to touch the figure's red heart, she somehow discovers her own. She then releases her hurts and wounds and realizes that they "provided me with some real nice sympathy, with the feeling I was exceptional. I was the girl abandoned by her mother. I was the girl who kneeled on grits. What a special case I was" (278). Instead of focusing on the anguish and absence, Lily learns to parent herself. As Marion Woodman puts it, the Black Madonna archetype has an earthiness about her. She represents the bounty of the harvest, nature, sexuality, and childbirth, "the whole feminine love of life." When she observes the Eucharist performed over the dark Mary-, Lily recounts, "Me, I had never seen grown-ups feed each other, and I watched with the feeling that I might

burst out crying. I don't know what got to me about it, but for some reason that circle of feeding made me feel better about the world" (226).

After having grown up with T. Ray, whom Lily describes as having "gone to church for forty years and was only getting worse," Lily welcomes a religion that embraces her, that feeds her, that provides a woman's face (3). From her own experience growing up in the southern Baptist church, Kidd remarks:

In the Baptist tradition we'd prefaced most conversations about Mary by saying. She was just a woman," emphasizing her lesser place. In fact, if the Christmas story hadn't been read once a year in the Baptist churches I'd attended, it would have been easy to forget Jesus had a mother at all. (*Dance* 40)

In Gnostic texts, Mary of Nazareth is herself depicted as the product of an immaculate conception. When asked why *The Book of Mary* was excluded from the Bible, one biblical scholar concluded the omission was more ideological than historical. As he put it, "to include this story of Mary the editors of the Bible would have been forced to present her story before her son's. They didn't want Mary to overshadow Jesus" (*Banned from the Bible*).

Whether we want to stretch from Mary of Nazareth's divinity to that of a woman branded whore by the Catholic Church, we see the politics of Jesus's story. As Jean-Yves Leloup notes in his translation and commentary on *The Gospel of Mary, Magdalene*, "Only in 1969 did the Catholic Church officially repeal Gregory's labeling of Mary as a whore" (xvi). That original equation of the Magdalene with a woman of ill repute occurred in a sermon Pope Gregory I delivered in the year 591 (xvi). If theologians have realized for hundreds of years that Pope Gregory's rendering of Mary was incorrect, why did the Catholic Church let that incrimination stand for so long? Or perhaps more to the point, why did the Catholic Church persecute early translators of the Bible? What did it deem so threatening about the masses' coming to the text themselves?

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, T. Ray, whom Kidd equates with the patriarchal church, prohibits Lily's reading. Lily says, "he would half kill me," if someone even reported her reading to her father (15). She ponders further, "What kind of person is against reading?" (15). Reading is self-empowerment, and reading produces questions and new interpretations. Just as the early Catholic Church had forbidden a parishioner's reading of scripture because this enlightened person might seek counsel directly with God, neither does T. Ray want Lily to question his authority. He sees society not as concentric circles but rather as a vertical line, a power structure competitive, not cooperative, in nature. For him and for the institutions supporting this hierarchical power structure, women and blacks have no place in the line-up.

In the 1960s South this patriarchal structure, reinforced by conventional religion, was also racist in nature. At the time Rosaleen is beaten by white men who find her uppidity, she holds church fans she had taken from the church where she and Lily had rested, a church that would not have allowed her as a black woman to worship. To examine Christianity's role in the abuse of blacks would take another paper, but I do want to quote Frederick Douglass on this topic. A freed slave and abolitionist, Douglass knew

first-hand the atrocities committed by slave owners, but he is clear to point out that the worst abuse occurred at the hands of the religious, for these men rationalized their harshness with text from the Bible. As he puts it,

The religion of the South is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,--a justifier of the most appalling barbarity.--a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,--and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholder find the strongest protection. (731)

Blacks then in America have had a complex relationship with the church whose ideology and texts on the one hand served to oppress them and on the other provided some comfort and solace, but only in a rewriting from white ideology.

An example of this rewriting is Rosaleen's personal religion typified by her altar, a "special shelf with a stub of candle, creek rocks, a reddish feather, and a piece of John the Conqueror root, and right in the center a picture of a woman, propped up without a frame" (29). Lily describes this shelf as a "religion she'd [Rosaleen] made up for herself, a mixture of nature and ancestor worship" (29). Note, however, that the center of the altar, a place generally reserved for pictures of Jesus, is a picture instead of Rosaleen's mother. In other words, her religion is woman-centered *In Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. Kidd cites Dr. Beatrice Bruteau who likens the absolute reality, the I Am, with God and sees natural patterns within the many divine relationships exemplified in dance:

When we see the dance, the dancer takes on expression, shape, immediacy, presence, and meaning for us. We can observe the relationship of the dance to the dancer, and we understand that the choreography is infinite. We cannot look at just one movement or one dance and say, that is the dance. (137)

Or, if we borrow from William Butler Yeats, himself a mystic of sorts, we pose the question: "Who can tell the dancer from the dance?" (64). If all living things possess their own divinity, then we need not look up to find God, we need only to recognize that presence and revel in the dance of nature.

One facet of this acceptance of inward divinity instead involves coping with imperfection. After all, it's easy to perfect a deity that is light years away but quite a different matter to find God and perfection in the mirror. When Lily finally asks August about her mother, August gingerly tells her Deborah's story. This story, this making Deborah a real person, is Lily's first step in recognizing her part in her mother's death. She has then to see her mother as a person in order to feel her loss. Lily finds out that her mother left her father and her because she suffered from depression. August provides a coda to her revelation when she says, "Every person on the face of the earth makes mistakes, Lily Every last one. We're all so human ... There is nothing perfect ... There is only life" (256). Angered by her mother's abandonment, Lily smashes jars of honey and cuts herself in the process. She is now ready to find out the last part of Deborah's story, a story in which she as a small child played a principal role.

Throughout this whole novel of religious quest and struggle toward self-actualization and awareness, Kidd provides mirrors. Seeing what Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia

Hopkins call Skekhinah or "the feminine face of God" in the Black Madonna, Lily finds her spiritual center, the same feeling she had gotten from her bare-breasted night vigil. Through August, Lily sees a face her mother saw and faces a truth about her mother, the final portion of which T. Ray must deliver. When August presents Lily with more artifacts from her mother, she prefaces the unveiling by saying, "If you look in here, you're gonna see your mother's face looking back at you" (273; emphasis Kidd's). Unfortunately for Lily, T. Ray also sees Deborah's face when he looks at Lily. He wants to force her return. As the emblem for conventional religion and society's patriarchal struggle, he bullies, proving that he too is damaged by this power principle. For a few minutes, T. Ray sees before him the young wife who left him, here in the haven she had chosen, instead of his teenaged daughter. After slapping her across the face, he stands over Lily and screams, "Deborah ... You're not leaving me again" (294). Lying next to the Black Madonna that also had been knocked to the floor, Lily smells honey, the preservation rubbed into the icon's face and figure, and the same honey she herself had hurled into the wall venting her own anger at her mother's leaving her. In that moment Lily understands T. Ray. As she picks up Mary and rights her, T. Ray struggles to deal with his own actions. He illustrates the problem Kidd points out in *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* when she writes, "Cut off from nature, we get sick inside" (220). Patriarchy then inflicts psychological damage to the men who seem outwardly to profit from it.

If T. Ray typifies patriarchal punishment to maintain its vertical hierarchy, then August represents the subversion of that order and a return to nature, human nature most notably. Though she could have shamed him as she stands witness to his wrath against Lily, August considers his feelings. As Lily remembers from earlier conversations with August, "If you need something from somebody, always give that person a way to band it to you" (298). August wants Lily; she wants to nourish instead of starve her soul. T. Ray's one act of generosity, which he offers with a "Good riddance," is his letting Lily remain within this matriarchy, this earlier home of her mother. Before he leaves, however, Lily discovers that she herself had shot her mother. Though an accident, her death resulted from Lilly's pulling the trigger. As Kidd has noted, "The truth may set you free, but first it will shatter the safe, sweet way you live" (*Dance* 15). On a firmer footing now, Lily absorbs the truth. She has grown into a person who can face the past and look to the future.

Lily then is allowed to flower in the seasonal house of May, June, and August. Nourished in the fertile soil of a Black Madonna and an accepting, cooperative life and household, Lily becomes an integral part of the commune, the hive. She learns to mother herself and to discover the harmony of this life. Of her like-titled short story, Kidd has written, "One of the first short stories I published told the story of a southern girl named Lily who struggles to find the strength of her feminine wings in a world that routinely clips them" (206). In this novel, however, Kidd allows her heroine flight, transcendence, and belonging.

Source: Emanuel, Catherine B. "The archetypal mother: the Black Madonna in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*." *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 51 (2005): 115+. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions *Source:*

<http://www.suemonkidd.com/SecretLifeOfBees/ReadersGuide.aspx>

1. Were you surprised to learn that T. Ray used to be different, that once he truly loved Deborah? How do you think Deborah's leaving affected him? Did it shed any light on why T. Ray was so cruel and abusive to Lily?
2. Had you ever heard of "kneeling on grits" before? What qualities did Lily have that allowed her to survive, endure and eventually thrive, despite T. Ray?
3. Who is the queen bee in this story?
4. Lily's relationship to her dead mother was complex, ranging from guilt, to idealization, to hatred, to acceptance. What happens inside a daughter when she discovers her mother once abandoned her? Is Lily right— would people generally rather die than forgive? Was it harder for Lily to forgive her mother or herself?
5. Lily grew up without her mother, but in the end she finds a house full of them. Have you ever had a mother figure in your life who wasn't your true mother? Have you ever had to leave home to find home?
6. What compelled Rosaleen to spit on the three men's shoes? Did something in her finally say "Enough!"? Can you imagine yourself in her situation? What does it take for a person to stand up with conviction against brutalizing injustice? What did you like best about Rosaleen?
7. Had you ever heard of the Black Madonna? What do you think of the story surrounding the Black Madonna in the novel? How would the story be different if it had been a picture of a white Virgin Mary? The women in the pink house drew consolation and power from the Black Madonna. Do you know women whose lives have been deepened or enriched by a connection to an empowering Divine Mother?
8. Many women in our society are isolated from other women. Why is it important that women come together? What did you think of the "Calendar Sisters" and the Daughters of Mary? How did being in the company of this circle of females transform Lily?
9. May built a wailing wall to help her come to terms with the pain she felt inside. Even though we don't have May's "condition," do we also need private and public "rituals," like wailing walls, to help us deal with our grief and suffering?
10. How would you describe Lily and Zach's relationship? What drew them together? Could you appreciate how taboo their love was in the South in 1964? Did you root for them to be together?

11. Project into the future. Does Lily ever see her father again? Does she become a beekeeper? A writer? What happens to Rosaleen? What happens with Lily and Zach? Who would Zach be today?

Multimedia

'Secret Life of Bees' A Moving Tale (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95780698>

A discussion of the novel and movie from NPR.

The Secret Life of Bees (Movie)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1328993>;

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1330370>

(Call number: DVD Drama Secret; Blu-ray Drama Secret)

Lily Owens is a young girl who lives on the peach farm that her abusive father owns. Rosaleen is a black woman hired by Lily's father to be a stand in mother for Lily. Rosaleen insults some of the biggest racists in their town. Lily and Rosaleen run away to a town Lily believes that her mother once lived in. They go to live with the three Boatwright sisters on their honey farm. She finds solace in their mesmerizing world of beekeeping.

Further Reading

***Book Club To Go!* *The Mermaid Chair* by Sue Monk Kidd**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1245020>

(Call number: Fiction Kidd)

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, ne 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.

Traveling With Pomegranates: A mother-daughter story by Sue Monk Kidd

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

(Call number: 921 Kidd)

An introspective and beautiful dual memoir by the #1 New York Times bestselling novelist and her daughter. Sue Monk Kidd has touched millions of readers with her novels *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair* and with her acclaimed nonfiction. In this intimate dual memoir, she and her daughter, Ann, offer distinct perspectives as a fifty-something and a twenty-something, each on a quest to redefine herself and to rediscover each other. Between 1998 and 2000, Sue and Ann travel throughout Greece and France. Sue, coming to grips with aging, caught in a creative vacuum, longing to reconnect with her grown daughter, struggles to enlarge a vision of swarming bees into a novel. Ann, just graduated from college, heartbroken and benumbed by the classic question about what to do with her life, grapples with a painful depression. As this modern-day Demeter and Persephone chronicle the richly symbolic and personal meaning of an array of inspiring figures and sites, they also each give voice to that most protean of connections: the bond of mother and daughter. A wise and involving book about feminine thresholds, spiritual growth, and renewal, *Traveling with Pomegranates* is both a revealing self-portrait by a beloved author and her daughter, a writer in the making, and a momentous story that will resonate with women everywhere.

The Dance of the Dissident Daughter 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.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Read-Alikes *Source: NovelList*

Swan Place: a novel by Augusta Trobaugh

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1195648>

(Call number: Fiction Trobaugh)

Now this uniquely gifted storyteller gives us her most radiant and resilient character yet: fourteen-year-old Dove, born into a hardscrabble world of poverty and abandonment, forced to become wise beyond her years by life's tough breaks. A series of family tragedies leaves Dove, her younger sister, Molly, and their baby brother, Little Ellis, in the care of their stepmother, seventeen-year-old Crystal. Overwhelmed by raising three orphaned children on her own, Crystal turns to their Bible-thumping Aunt Bett, and Dove herself takes on much of the responsibility for looking after her siblings. But the fragile new household is disrupted when Molly's deadbeat blood father threatens to bring a custody suit. Determined to keep the family together, Crystal and Dove flee with the children to a secret refuge called Swan Place. It is here that the emerging woman Dove meets a group of devout Black women who transform her life-and the lives of her family-in unusual and profound ways. With insight and compassion, Trobaugh once

again illuminates the battles-large and small-we wage daily in the face of adversity, the everyday miracles that help us survive, and the faith that carries us through.

Your Blues Ain't Like Mine by Bebe Moore Campbell

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1075341>

(Call number: Fiction Campbell)

"ABSORBING...COMPELLING...HIGHLY SATISFYING." --*San Francisco Chronicle* "TRULY ENGAGING...Campbell has a storyteller's ear for dialogue and the visual sense of painting a picture and a place....There's a steam that keeps the story moving as the characters, and later their children, wrestle through racial, personal and cultural crisis." -
-*Los Angeles Times Book Review* "REMARKABLE...POWERFUL." --*Time* "*YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE* is rich, lush fiction set in rural Mississippi beginning in the mid-'50s. It is also a haunting reality flowing through Anywhere, U.S.A., in the '90s....There's love, rage and hatred, winning and losing, honor, abuse; in other words, humanity....Campbell now deserves recognition as the best of storytellers. Her writing sings." --*The Indianapolis News* "EXTRAORDINARY." --*The Seattle Times* "A COMPELLING NARRATIVE...Campbell is a master when it comes to telling a story." --
Entertainment Weekly *YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE* won the NAACP Image Award for Best Literary Work of Fiction

Her Own Place by Dori Sanders

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1079701>

(Call number: Fiction Sanders)

"Somewhere in the first five pages of *HER OWN PLACE* the glow begins....And you begin to glow because it just feels so good." *THE BOSTON GLOBE* This is Mae Lee Barnes, story--from girlhood to womanhood to motherhood--and all stops in between, living the troubled, joyous, and indomitable life of a black matriarch during a time of change that will alter her life and her family's forever....

Holly by Albert French

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1101237>

(Call number: Fiction French)

Set in the final year of World War II in a small North Carolina town, *Holly* is the story of a young white girl from the wrong side of the tracks. Her world is transformed when she falls in love with a handsome, educated black soldier just back from the war. Their relationship touches off a maelstrom that leaves no doubt as to the consequences of crossing proscribed boundaries.

In Search of Satisfaction by J. California Cooper

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1093914>

(Call number: Fiction Cooper)

The folk flavor of her storytelling has earned her constant comparison to Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, but through four collections of short stories and two novels, J. California Cooper has proven that hers is a wholly original talent --one that embraces readers in an ever-widening circle from one book to the next. With *In Search Of Satisfaction*, Cooper gracefully portrays men and women, some good and others wickedly twisted, caught in their individual thickets of want and need. On a once-grand plantation in Yoville, "a legal town-ship founded by the very rich for their own

personal use," a freed slave named Josephus fathers two daughters, Ruth and Yinyang, by two different women. His desire, to give Yinyang and himself money and opportunities, oozes through the family like an elixir, melding with the equally strong yearnings of Yoville's other residents, whose tastes don't complement their neighbors'. What Josephus buries in his life affects generations to come. J. California Cooper's unfettered view of sin, forgiveness, and redemption gives *In Search Of Satisfaction* a singular richness that belies its universal themes.

Extras!

Serve local honey at your book discussion.

