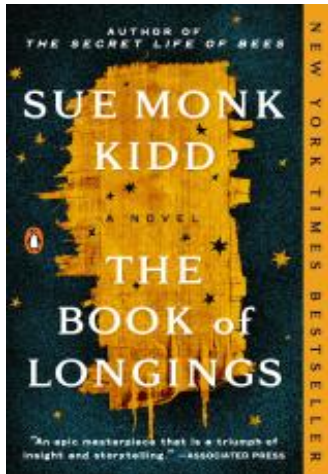


The Book of Longings

by Sue Monk Kidd



About the Book

An extraordinary story set in the first century about a woman who finds her voice and her destiny, from the celebrated #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES* and *THE INVENTION OF WINGS*

In her mesmerizing fourth work of fiction, Sue Monk Kidd takes an audacious approach to history and brings her acclaimed narrative gifts to imagine the story of a young woman named Ana. Raised in a wealthy family with ties to the ruler of Galilee, she is rebellious and ambitious, with a brilliant mind and a daring spirit. She engages in furtive scholarly pursuits and writes narratives about neglected and silenced women. Ana is expected to marry an older widower, a prospect that horrifies her. An encounter with 18-year-old Jesus changes everything.

Their marriage evolves with love and conflict, humor and pathos in Nazareth, where Ana makes a home with Jesus, his brothers and their mother, Mary. Ana's pent-up longings intensify amid the turbulent resistance to Rome's occupation of Israel, partially led by her brother, Judas. She is sustained by her fearless aunt Yaltha, who harbors a compelling secret. When Ana commits a brazen act that puts her in peril, she flees to Alexandria, where startling revelations and greater dangers unfold, and she finds refuge in unexpected surroundings. Ana determines her fate during a stunning convergence of events considered among the most impactful in human history.

Grounded in meticulous research and written with a reverential approach to Jesus's life that focuses on his humanity, *THE BOOK OF LONGINGS* is an inspiring, unforgettable account of one woman's bold struggle to realize the passion and potential inside her, while living in a time, place and culture devised to silence her. It is a triumph of storytelling both timely and timeless, from a masterful writer at the height of her powers.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the title of the novel. Ana is a character defined by her longings and aspirations. She is passionate about the power of writing, of narratives, of having a voice, as well as lifting up the voices of other women. How does the novel's theme of finding and expressing one's authentic voice unfold in the story? What forces work to silence contemporary women and what emboldens them?
2. What role does Ana's incantation bowl play in her quest to realize her longing? What is the importance of ritualizing one's faith or longings? If you were given an incantation bowl in which to inscribe your deepest longing, what might you write? What can our longings teach us?
3. Though fictional, *THE BOOK OF LONGINGS* is also a deeply researched account of life 2,000 years ago. What rules and customs surprised you? Which parts of the story feel especially relevant to modern-day life? Did you identify with Ana in any way?
4. Ana's aunt Yaltha is described as being as tough, clever, defiant and daring as she is nurturing: "Her mind was an immense feral country that spilled its borders. She trespassed everywhere" (page 4). What do you think is Yaltha's most profound influence on Ana? Has there been anyone in your life like Yaltha? How do you think you have been shaped by the older women in your life?
5. Though Ana is born to a wealthy family and has been afforded some education, her parents have arranged for her to marry an older man whom she despises, and they expect her to give up her scholarly ambitions. Are there inhibiting cultural expectations placed on women today, and if so, how much do they differ depending on other factors such as race, class and birthplace? How are these expectations represented in marriage ceremonies, then and now?
6. Discuss the relationship between Ana and Jesus. Were there moments they shared in the story that particularly resonated with you? What compromises did Ana make within the marriage? What does it mean to "belong" to someone? What does it mean to belong to oneself?
7. *THE BOOK OF LONGINGS* renders Jesus in a way that foregrounds his humanity, from his struggle with the stigma conferred upon him by the circumstances of his birth to his smile, which is "a broad, crooked arrangement on his face" (page 86). Ana also finds him to be "a peacemaker and provocateur in equal measures" (page 143), a man who both enlivens and emboldens her --- even as his audacity also reminds her of her own comparatively marginal place in society. Do you think mainstream depictions of Jesus emphasize his divinity at the expense of allowing for his authentic humanity? Did the novel alter your perception of his character and his life on earth or enhance your existing idea of him in some way?
8. Likewise, discuss the novel's portrayal of Jesus's mother, Mary, a character the author describes, endearingly, as "a kind woman with graying hair, who is often weary from chores, a mother who did a superb job on her son, who taught him a lot that she didn't get credit for." How does Mary capture the mystery of the dual nature of being both human and divine?
9. Sue Monk Kidd has explored feminist theology for years, along with what she calls "the missing feminine within religion," which eventually finds expression through the character of Ana. What do you think about the relationship between feminism and religious belief? In what ways can feminism become a spiritual quest?

10. How do you think Ana's and Jesus's relationships to holiness differ, and how are they alike? Consider the significance of their names for God --- Jesus speaks of "Father," while Ana speaks of "I Am Who I Am." How does Ana's concept of the divine evolve as the story develops? What power and allure does the feminine spirit of God, known as Sophia, hold for her?

11. When Yaltha confesses her private loss to Ana, Ana thinks to herself, "We women harbor our intimacies in locked places in our bodies. They are ours to relinquish when we choose" (page 186). What are some of the different ways the characters cope with loss and injustice? Consider the behavioral differences and the variety of coping mechanisms employed by the men and women in the novel. How do grief and grievance manifest differently in characters such as Ana, Judas, Yaltha and Jesus?

12. When Ana is confronting motherhood and the choice to bear children, Yaltha tells her, "I don't doubt you should give yourself to motherhood. I only question what it is you're meant to mother" (page 196). How much do you think the idea that a woman's purpose is fulfilled by having children persists today? Are women's creative ambitions outside of the family still viewed as less fundamentally fulfilling somehow? Has motherhood impacted your passions and pursuits?

13. Kidd revisits a theme she first wrote about in *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES*: finding a family where one least expects. Discuss the ways that Ana, Yaltha, Tabitha and Diodora come together to form a family after Jesus's death. In what ways do the Therapeutae become Ana's place of belonging?

14. At the beginning of the novel, Ana writes in her incantation bowl, "When I am dust, sing these words over my bones: she was a voice" (page 13). Near the story's end, she composes her opus, *Thunder: Perfect Mind* (a historically real document that was found in the Egyptian desert in 1945). Later, Ana buries copies of it and all her narratives on the side of a cliff to preserve them for future generations. Do you feel she realized her longing to become a voice? What thoughts and feelings did the excerpts from *Thunder: Perfect Mind* (pages 335-36) stir in you? Could Ana's writings be considered sacred texts?

15. At the end of the novel, Ana ponders why Jesus's followers have removed her from the story of his life: "Was it because I was absent when he traveled about Galilee during his ministry? Was it because women were so often invisible? Did they believe making him celibate rendered him more spiritual?" (page 407). Why do you think Ana would have been silenced and erased?

16. If Jesus having a wife were a more accepted narrative, how do you think it would affect the religious and cultural legacy of Christianity?

17. Over the course of Ana's journey, *THE BOOK OF LONGINGS* returns to the idea of the largeness within people. How do you conceive of your own largeness? What inspires it? What inhibits it? Do you agree with Yaltha that "it isn't the largeness in you that matters most, it's your passion to bring it forth" (page 353)?

Author Bio

Sue Monk Kidd's debut novel, *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES*, spent more than 100 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, has sold more than six million copies in the United States, was turned into both an award-winning major motion picture and a musical, and has been translated into 36 languages. Her second novel, *THE MERMAID CHAIR*, was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and was adapted into a television movie. Her third novel, *THE INVENTION OF WINGS*, an Oprah's Book Club 2.0 pick, was also a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. She is the author of several acclaimed memoirs, including *THE DANCE OF THE DISSIDENT DAUGHTER*, her groundbreaking work on religion and feminism, as well as the *New York Times* bestseller *TRAVELING WITH POMEGRANATES*, written with her daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor. She lives in North Carolina.

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