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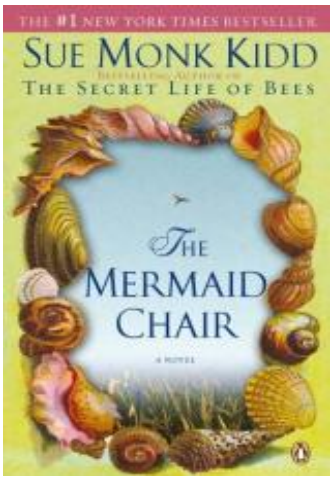
The Mermaid Chair

by Sue Monk Kidd



About the Book

Sue Monk Kidd's stunning debut, **The Secret Life of Bees**, has transformed her into a genuine literary star. Now, in her much-anticipated new novel, Kidd has woven a transcendent tale that will thrill her legion of fans and cement her reputation as one of the most remarkable writers at work today.

Inside the abbey of a Benedictine monastery on tiny Egret Island, just off the coast of South Carolina, resides a beautiful and mysterious chair ornately carved with mermaids and dedicated to a saint who, legend claims, was a mermaid before her conversion. Jessie Sullivan's conventional life has been "molded to the smallest space possible." So when she is called home to cope with her mother's startling and enigmatic act of violence, Jessie finds herself relieved to be apart from her husband, Hugh. Jessie loves Hugh, but on Egret Island --- amid the gorgeous marshlands and tidal creeks --- she becomes drawn to Brother Thomas, a monk who is mere months from taking his final vows. What transpires will unlock the roots of her mother's tormented past, but most of all, as Jessie grapples with the tension of desire and the struggle to deny it, she will find a freedom that feels overwhelmingly right.

What inspires the yearning for a soul mate? Few writers have explored, as Kidd does, the lush, unknown region of the feminine soul where the thin line between the spiritual and the erotic exists. **The Mermaid Chair** is a vividly imagined novel about the passions of the spirit and the ecstasies of the body; one that illuminates a woman's self-awakening with the brilliance and power that only a writer of Kidd's ability could conjure.

Discussion Guide

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 your self? 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?

Author Bio

Sue Monk Kidd?s debut novel, THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES, spent more than a hundred 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 number one *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. Her latest novel, THE BOOK OF LONGINGS, was both a *New York Times* bestseller and a number one IndieBound 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.

Critical Praise

"As a stylist, Kidd is in firm command of her subject. She crafts the Low Country as still life, with impressionistic beauty, complete with Gullah denizens.... **The Mermaid Chair** provides more than the easy reach for casual readers, for underlying the woman-come-home plot, Kidd provides depth to her characters through thematic contradictions: spirituality versus the erotic, Christian versus mythological, new life through death, ultimately reconciling this writer's overall credo: There is no happiness or spiritual contentment without an appreciation for emptiness and the necessary experience of hell.... **The Mermaid Chair** exceeds Kidd's first novel both in scope and in depth. While it is darker in tone, deeper with dysfunction, Kidd reprises the old techniques. She textures her novel with complex characters, rich imagery and seamless symbolism.... **The Mermaid Chair** proves her versatility as a storyteller, her devotion to craft and

a heart for the genuine character."

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Publication Date: March 7, 2006
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 368 pages
Publisher: Penguin
ISBN-10: 0143036696
ISBN-13: 9780143036692