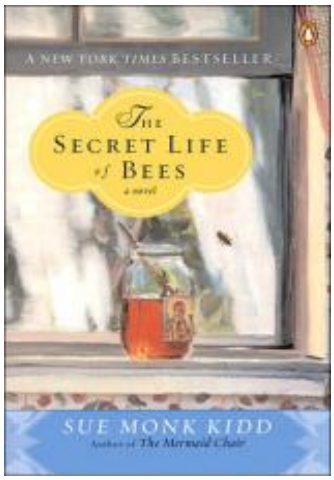
The Secret Life of Bees

by Sue Monk Kidd



About the Book

Set in the American South in 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act and intensifying racial unrest, Sue Monk Kidd's **The Secret Life of Bees** is a powerful story of coming-of-age, of the ability of love to transform our lives, and the often unacknowledged longing for the universal feminine divine. Addressing the wounds of loss, betrayal, and the scarcity of love, Kidd demonstrates the power of women coming together to heal those wounds, to mother each other and themselves, and to create a sanctuary of true family and home.

Isolated on a South Carolina peach farm with a neglectful and harsh father, fourteen-year-old Lily Owens has spent much of her life longing for her mother, Deborah, who died amid mysterious circumstances when Lily was four years old. To make matters worse, her father, T. Ray, tells Lily that she accidentally killed her mother.

Lily is raised by Rosaleen, her proud and outspoken African-American nanny. When Rosaleen attempts to exercise her newly won right to vote, she is attacked by the three worst racists in town and is thrown into jail. Lily is determined to save Rosaleen and finally escape her own father as well. Seizing the moment, she springs Rosaleen from jail, and the two set out across South Carolina in search of a new life.

Their destination is Tiburon, South Carolina**?**a town they know nothing about except that in a box of Lily's mother's belongings there is a cryptic picture of a black Virgin Mary with the words "Tiburon, South Carolina" written on the back. There they are taken in by three black beekeeping sisters who worship the Black Madonna. It is here, surrounded by the strength of the Madonna, the hum of bees, and a circle of wise and colorful women, that Lily makes her passage to wholeness and a new life.

Captured by the voice of this Southern adolescent, one becomes enveloped in the hot South Carolina summer and one of most tumultuous times the country has ever seen. A story of mothers lost and found, love, conviction, and forgiveness, **The Secret Life of Bees** boldly explores life's wounds and reveals the deeper meaning of home and the redemptive

simplicity of "choosing what matters."

In the end, though she cannot find the mother she lost, Lily discovers and comes to terms with her mother's past, finds a hive of new mothers, and falls in love with the great universal mother.

Discussion Guide

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"? 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 to 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? 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? Do you know women whose lives have been deepened or enriched by a connection to an empowering Divine Mother?

8. 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. Even though we don't have May's condition, do we also need "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? 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 to Lily and Zach? Who would Zach be today?

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

"It's as if Kidd loaded up a take-home plate with treats, and you said 'Oh, I couldn't,' and then scarfed it down in the car on the way home."

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