The Secret Life of Bees

by Sue Monk Kidd

About the Book

Sue Monk Kidd's ravishing debut novel has stolen the hearts of reviewers and readers alike with its strong, assured voice. Set in South Carolina in 1964, The Secret Life of Bees tells the story of Lily Owens, whose life has been shaped around the blurred memory of the afternoon her mother was killed. When Lily's fierce-hearted "stand-in mother," Rosaleen, insults three of the town's fiercest racists, Lily decides they should both escape to Tiburon, South Carolina--a town that holds the secret to her mother's past. There they are taken in by an eccentric trio of black beekeeping sisters who introduce Lily to a mesmerizing world of bees, honey, and the Black Madonna who presides over their household. This is a remarkable story about divine female power and the transforming power of love--a story that women will share and pass on to their daughters for years to come.

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?


Author Bio

Sue Monk Kidd is the award-winning and bestselling author of the novels THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES and THE MERMAID CHAIR. She is also the author of several acclaimed memoirs, including the New York Times bestseller TRAVELING WITH POMEGRANATES, written with her daughter Ann Kidd Taylor. She lives in Florida.

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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