

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Secret Life of Bees*

Author: Sue Monk Kidd

Sue Monk Kidd is a southern American writer best known for her novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. She graduated in 1970 from Texas Christian University with a B.S. in nursing, and worked throughout her twenties as a Registered Nurse and college nursing instructor. She got her start in writing when a personal essay she wrote for a writing class was published in *Guideposts Magazine* and reprinted in *Readers Digest*. She went on to become a Contributing Editor at *Guideposts*.

Name: Sue Monk Kidd
Born: 1948, in Sylvester, GA
Education: Texas Christian University, B.S., 1970; graduate study at Emory University
Interests: Reading, kayaking.



Career:

Author and nurse. Previously employed as a nurse, St. Joseph's Hospital, Fort Worth, TX, and instructor in nursing, Medical College of Georgia. Teacher of creative writing, speaker, and lecturer; Phoebe Pember House, Charleston, SC, writer in residence; Poets & Writers, Inc., board of advisors.

Awards:

Katherine Anne Porter Second Prize in Fiction, Nimrod/ Hardman Awards, 1993; fellowship in literature, South Carolina Arts Commission, 1993-94; South Carolina fiction project winner, South Carolina Arts Commission/ Charleston Post and Courier, 1993, 1995, 1997; Isak Dinesen Creative Nonfiction Award, 1994; 100 Distinguished Stories citation, *American Short Stories*, 1994, for *The Secret Life of Bees*, and 1996, for "In the Graveyard of Afterbirth"; named to the South Carolina Readers Circuit, 1994, 1995, 1996; Bread Loaf scholar in fiction, Bread Loaf Writers Conference, 1995; participant in Exchange Program in Fiction for South Carolina, Poets & Writers, 1996; nominee for Orange Prize for excellence in women's fiction, 2002, Book of the Year award, Southeast Booksellers Association, 2003, Literature to Life award, American Place Theatre, New York, NY, 2004, and Book of the Year award (paperback), *Book Sense*, 2004, all for *The Secret Life of Bees*.

Past Writings:

God's Joyful Surprise (nonfiction), Harper San Francisco (San Francisco, CA), 1988.
When the Heart Waits (nonfiction), Harper San Francisco (San Francisco, CA), 1990.
The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Journey from the Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine (nonfiction), Harper San Francisco (San Francisco, CA), 1996.
The Secret Life of Bees (novel), Viking (New York, NY), 2001.
The Mermaid Chair (novel), Viking (New York, NY), 2005.
Also author of *Love's Hidden Blessings*, a collection of essays. Contributor of short stories to Best American Short Stories. Contributor to periodicals, including *Readers Digest*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Anima*. Contributing editor, *Guideposts*.



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Media Adaptations:

The Secret Life of Bees has been adapted for the stage and produced at the American Place Theater, New York, NY; and has been optioned for screen adaptation by Focus Films. Unabridged versions of *The Secret Life of Bees* have been adapted for audiocassette and CD, read by Jenna Lamia, HighBridge Audio, 2002, and for audiocassette, read by Karen White, Books on Tape, 2002; *The Mermaid Chair* has also been adapted as an audiobook.

Sidelights:

Sue Monk Kidd became interested in writing when she was a child. "My desire to become a writer was born," she explained in her biography on her Home Page, "while listening to my father ply us with tales about mules who went through cafeteria lines and a petulant boy named Chewing Gum Bum." She wrote throughout her childhood, but at the age of sixteen stopped writing completely until long after she graduated from Texas Christian University with a nursing degree. "The only time I really doubted my career choice," she recalled in her biography, "was when my English professor said to me, and I quote, 'For the love of God, why are you a nursing major? You are a born writer.'" Kidd went on to work as a nurse and later as a nursing instructor.

In her thirties, Kidd nurtured her lifelong interest in spirituality with a serious study of Western religion and theology before turning to psychology and mythology. It was during this period that she returned to writing and published essays that grew out of her spiritual journey. She described her first book, *God's Joyful Surprise*, as "a spiritual memoir which chronicled my early experiences with contemplative Christian spirituality." She followed that book with *When the Heart Waits*, which portrays the psychological and spiritual transformation she later experienced. When her spiritual explorations took her into feminist theology in her forties, Kidd captured that experience in *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. "The book found a huge audience of women," she recounted in her biography, "and their response to it was astonishingly passionate."

But even as she was gaining recognition for her feminist religious studies, Kidd still held on to her childhood love for stories. She seriously studied the craft of fiction in various courses and conferences before starting her first novel in 1997. Three years later, *The Secret Life of Bees* was sold for publication.

Set in South Carolina in 1964, *The Secret Life of Bees* is the story of fourteen-year-old Lily, who has been raised by her abusive father and their black servant, Rosaleen. When Lily was only four years old her mother was killed. Her father blames Lily for his wife's death. Lily and Rosaleen run away from her abusive father and the police, who have beaten Rosaleen for trying to vote. Not knowing where to go, they head for Tiburon, South Carolina, the words on the back of the cross Lily's mother wore. In Tiburon they find Black Madonna Honey, an apiary run by three black sisters—August, June, and May—who allow Lily and Rosaleen to stay with them. There Lily is happy. She learns much about bees, and finds out what really happened to her mother. A writer for *Publishers Weekly* noted that the book "features a hive's worth of appealing female characters, an offbeat plot and a lovely style." In what he called a "sweeping debut novel" in his *Library Journal* review, David A. Berona pointed out that "the stunning metaphors and realistic characters are so poignant that they will bring tears to your eyes." Beth Kephart, reviewing the book for *Book* magazine, observed: "Goodness—what it is, what it looks like, who bestows it—is the frame within which this book is masterfully hung, the organizing principle behind this intimate, unpretentious, and unsentimental work."

The Mermaid Chair, Kidd's follow-up to her successful first novel, tells the story of Jessie Sullivan, a middle-aged housewife and part-time artist who is drawn back to her childhood home after receiving some disturbing news about her estranged mother. Leaving behind her loyal, though slightly controlling, husband, Hugh, Jessie ventures back to tiny Egret Island, located off the coast of South Carolina. Upon her return, Jessie finds that her extraordinarily devout mother, Nelle, has cut off her finger for reasons unknown. Jessie suspects her mother's descent into madness may have something to do with her father's tragic death over thirty-three years ago, for which Jessie has always blamed herself. Her quest for answers leads Jessie to the local monastery where even



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Sidelights: (Continued)

more mysteries await her. Here she finds a strange chair fashioned with the image of a saint who was once a mermaid, as well as a young monk, Brother Thomas, who is on the verge of taking his final vows. In him, Jessie finds a passion she thought was lost and she begins to feel a reawakening of her emotions, her sensuality, and her artistic vision. The secrets of the past collide with the uncertainties of the present in what a writer for *Publishers Weekly* described as an "emotionally rich novel, full of sultry, magical descriptions of life in the South." In her review for *Entertainment Weekly*, Jennifer Reese called this effort by Kidd "a goopy follow up" to her best selling debut, *The Secret Life of Bees*. Conversely, while reviewing Kidd's novel for *Time*, Lev Grossman pointed out that the author's "writing is so smart and sharp, she gives new life to old midlife crises, and she draws connections from the feminine to the divine to the erotic that a lesser writer wouldn't see, and might not have the guts to follow."

Further Readings:

Periodicals:

- Book*, January-February, 2002, Beth Kephart, "Sweet as Honey."
- Booklist*, December 1, 2001, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. 628; February 15, 2005, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Mermaid Chair*, p. 1036.
- Book World*, April 10, 2005, Donna Rifkind, review of *The Mermaid Chair*, p. 6.
- Entertainment Weekly*, April 1, 2005, Jennifer Reese, review of *The Mermaid Chair*, p. 75.
- Kirkus Reviews*, October 15, 2001, review of *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. 1447; February 1, 2005, review of *The Mermaid Chair*, p. 140.
- Library Journal*, Henry Carrigan, Jr., review of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Journey from the Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*, p. 100; December, 2001, David A. Berona, review of *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. 173. tt
- Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2002, Susan Salter Reynolds, review of *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. R15.
- New York Times Book Review*, March 31, 2002, review of *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. 17; May 22, 2005, Dana Kennedy, review of *The Mermaid Chair*, p. 24.
- Publishers Weekly*, March 1, 1991, William Griffin, review of *Love's Hidden Blessings*, p. 43; April 22, 1996, review of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, p. 65; August 6, 2001, Lucinda Dyer, "Sue Monk Kid: *The Secret Life of Bees*," p. 49; November 12, 2001, review of *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. 33; February 21, 2005, review of *The Mermaid Chair*, p. 155; March 28, 2005, Marcia Ford, "Sue Monk Kidd: Monk Kidd's Monk," p. S16; April 4, 2005, Bob Summer, "Sue Monk Kidd: Monk Kidd's Monk," p. 39.
- Time*, April 4, 2005, Lev Grossman, "Sex and the Sacred: A Bittersweet Novel of Midlife Crisis and Forbidden Love from the Author of *The Secret Life of Bees*," p. 69.
- Washington Post*, January 13, 2002, review of *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. T05.

Online:

- Sue Monk Kidd Home Page, [http:// www.suemonkkidd.com](http://www.suemonkkidd.com) (August 12, 2005).*
- Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2005.



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Secret Life of Bees*

About This 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."

Discussion Questions:

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?



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

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?



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

NoveList Reading Group Guide:

Author:

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" (<http://www.suemonkkidd.com/html/author.asp>). 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.

Summary:

Lily Owens, a fourteen-year-old white girl, lives with her abusive father T. Ray in a small town in racially divided South Carolina in the 1960s. She spends much of her time wondering about her mother Deborah, who died when Lily was only four. Lily's earliest memories are of her mother's death. All that she knows about it is that her mother died of a gunshot wound, and with some help from her father, Lily remembers that she herself was responsible for the death. One of the few mementos that Lily has is a picture that her mother kept of a black Virgin Mary with the words "Tiburón, S.C." on the back. In the absence of a mother, Lily is taken care of by Rosaleen, her black nanny.



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

When Rosaleen decides to exercise her new right to vote, she and Lily find themselves in deep trouble. When she is antagonized by several white men, Rosaleen pours the contents of her tobacco spittoon across the tops of their shoes, and the police soon arrive to arrest her. Rosaleen is quickly moved to the local hospital to recover from the beating she received at the hands of the white men. Although Lily is not arrested, she conceives an ingenious plan to rescue Rosaleen. She fools the guard at the hospital, and she and Rosaleen escape and head straight towards Tiburon.

When they arrive in Tiburon, Rosaleen sends Lily inside the general store to buy tobacco for her. Inside, Lily notices jars of honey, each of which has the same picture of the black Virgin that her mother had carried. She learns that a black woman named August Boatwright makes the honey at a farm on the outskirts of town where she lives with her sisters May and June. When Rosaleen and Lily show up on the doorstep, August takes them in without question. Lily soon learns, however, that the three sisters are rather odd. May is extremely sensitive, seeming to feel the pain of everyone around her. To help her deal with the pain, the sisters have built a version of the Wailing Wall, and May writes down all of the pains that she feels and places them in cracks in the wall. Moreover, the sisters and some of the other local blacks participate in a ritual worshipping of Our Lady of Chains, a black statue of the Virgin Mary who, according to local legend, provided solace to August's slave ancestors. Each year on Mary Day, they cover the statue in honey, a ritual to preserve the memory of Our Lady in their hearts.

August soon puts Lily to work in her honey business where Lily meets Zach, a young black man who aspires to be a lawyer. The two of them soon begin to fall in love, although both recognize that because of racial conflicts, they cannot express this love in any way. One afternoon when she and Zach go into town, a young black boy throws a bottle at a white man. Uncertain as to which of the black teens threw the bottle, the police put them all in jail. When May finds out that Zach has been jailed, the pain is too much for her, and she commits suicide.

In the aftermath of May's suicide, Lily finally opens up to August about her mother. She learns that August had been Deborah Fontanel's nanny, caring for her until she married T. Ray. After her marriage, Deborah became quite depressed, and she left T. Ray to return to be with August, leaving Lily with him. On the day that she died, Deborah had returned to get Lily to bring her back to August's house. Upon learning all of this, Lily becomes quite angry. She only comes to terms with the fact that her mother had left her when T. Ray shows up. Angry at Lily and ready to take her back home, T. Ray begins to confuse her with Deborah. Only at this point can Lily recognize that her father's abusiveness stems partially from the death of her mother. The novel closes with T. Ray driving off after having told Lily that she had, in fact, killed her mother. Lily remains unsure whether to believe him or not. At this point in her life, however, it no longer matters to her, for she has learned from August and from Our Lady of Chains how to start over again.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

What does August mean when she tells Lily that "everybody needs a God who looks like them" (p. 141)?



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

When Lily asks August for an explanation of why she puts the Black Madonna on the labels of her honey jars, August replies that she does it because “everybody needs a God who looks like them” (p. 141). Specifically, August refers to the black community. For them, the black Madonna becomes a way to recognize that they can have a divinity that reflects who they are and that addresses the concerns specific to their situations. As August puts it, “when they looked at her, it occurred to them for the first time in their lives that what’s divine can come in dark skin” (p. 140-141). Both historically and in the present, the black communities with which August was familiar needed a black divinity in order to feel that some higher power was looking out for their own specific needs.

At a deeper level, however, August’s claim reflects her own profound understanding of the purpose of religion. Later in the novel, she tells Lily that the Black Madonna is something more than just a “magical being”; instead, she is “something inside of you” (p. 288). August implies that the statue of the Black Madonna (as well as her picture on the honey jars) is simply a representation of what is inside. More than just a black divinity, the Madonna represents the ability of all individuals to find wholeness within themselves. For the black community, it is important that the Madonna is black. She is a “God who looks like them.” This does not make her unimportant to a fourteen-year-old white girl, however; it just changes what she sees in the Madonna. Lily, rather than seeing a black divinity, sees a mothering divinity, and she finds a little bit of herself in the Madonna just as the black community does.

What does Lily’s relationship with the three sisters and the Daughters of Mary suggest about racial identity?

The Secret Life of Bees is set in the early 1960s, and as such, questions of racial identity and racial politics play a prominent role in the novel. The conflict begins when Rosaleen tries to register to vote, and from that point forward, the novel depicts conflict between whites and blacks. Lily, a white girl who lives with three black sisters for most of the novel, becomes a key figure in understanding how the novel depicts the relationship between the two different communities.

At the level of the individual, the novel suggests that racial barriers can be overcome completely. Lily lives happily with August, June, and May, and although she does consider the question of her own whiteness, she learns that she can be a part of their lives in such a way that race does not matter. The clearest example of this occurs during one of the meetings of the Daughters of Mary after May’s death. The black women jokingly tell of white people’s funerals, and one even tells a tale of how the whites have converted a bank into a funeral parlor, complete with a drive-through window for viewing. Lily is shocked, and asks August to make sure they don’t put May in the drive-through window. When Sugar-Girl, one of the black women, overhears Lily’s comment, she exclaims “The drive-by window is at the white people’s funeral home. They’re the only ones with enough money to fix up something that ridiculous” (p. 208). Sugar Girl’s words fill Lily with happiness, for “not one person in the room said, Sugar Girl, really, talking about white people like that and we have a white person present. They didn’t even think of me being different” (p. 209). Being completely accepted like this deeply changes Lily. She concludes from it that her old way of thinking that blacks and whites should get along together would be better replaced with the goal of “everybody being colorless together” (p. 209). At the level of individuals, Lily achieves this goal, for her relationship with the three sisters and the Daughters of Mary is one in which race seems to play no factor at all.

What is the significance of Lily’s relationship with Zach?



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

If Lily's relationship with the black women suggests that individuals can overcome their own racial prejudices, her relationship with Zach raises troubling questions about how blacks and whites get along at the societal level. Initially, Lily's friendship and love for Zach seem to be part of her own journey in understanding how racism has affected her. When she first meets Zach, Lily notes that "if he was shocked over me being white, I was shocked over him being handsome" (p. 116). Zach is unprepared to see a white girl living with the black women and Lily is unprepared to find a black boy physically attractive. The implications of their different races become even more troubling to Lily when she begins to fall in love with Zach. She thinks to herself "it was foolish to think some things were beyond happening, even being attracted to Negroes. I'd honestly thought such a thing couldn't happen, the way water could not run uphill or salt could not taste sweet" (p. 125). Lily's thoughts here reveal that despite her best efforts to love August, May, June, and Rosaleen, remnants of racism remain in her.

One of the most troubling aspects of the novel, however, is that once Lily has overcome these last bits of racism, her relationship with Zach still remains unresolved. As events unfold in the novel, the two finally come to a place where they can admit that they love each other. Yet immediately after their first kiss, Zach tells Lily "We can't be together now, Lily, but one day, after I've gone away and become somebody, I'm gonna find you, and we'll be together then" (p. 231). Zach's words echo things that he has said earlier in the novel—that whites would kill a black boy for loving a white girl and that Lily needs to keep her distance from him. Although racial identity is irrelevant to Lily and Zach as individuals, the novel suggests that the deeper racism in society forces them to recognize that, for the moment at least, their love is impossible. Lily's relationship with Zach thus offers a different perspective on racial conflict than does her relationship with the black women. Taken together, these different relationships ultimately suggest that for the races to live together peacefully, change must occur not only at the individual level, but also within society itself.

What does the novel suggest about the importance of stories?

Fairly early in the novel, Lily comments "one thing I was starting to understand was that August loved to tell a good story" (p. 107). This theme of story-telling continues to appear throughout the remainder of the book, and stories come to have two primary purposes. First, they allow the tellers to explain their worlds in a way that makes sense to them. Second, they become a way of recording things that matter.

One of the most important aspects of stories in *The Secret Life of Bees* is that they are rarely (if ever) "true" in the ordinary sense of the word. One of the stories that August tells Lily was about the time that August's mother, Big Mama, went out to the beehives on Christmas Eve and heard the bees singing the words of the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke. When Lily hears this story, she responds with skepticism, asking August if she believes that it really happened or not. August's reply demonstrates how stories can be used to explain the world not as it is, but as it should be: "'Well, yes and no,' she said. 'Some things happen in a literal way, Lily. And then other things, like this one, happen in a not-literal way, but they still happen'" (p. 144). Although the bees had not literally been singing the Christmas story, Big Mama nevertheless could create a story that painted the world as she knew it—a world in which all living creatures praised God. Stories thus become a way of imagining the world as it should be.

Stories also give meaning to life in the sense that they declare something to be important. Nowhere is this more evident than in the exchange between Lily and Zach when she visits him in prison. As Lily leaves, Zach asks her what seems like an odd question—"Are you writing in your notebook?" (p. 185). Lily isn't sure exactly what Zach means, but she tells him that she will write his story down, because "it's something everybody wants—for someone to see the hurt done to them and set it down like it matters" (p. 185). As a storyteller, Lily has a tremendous power; if she chooses an event to write as a story, she gives it both significance and permanence. Stories, then, become a way for an individual to look around at the world and declare what things really matter.



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NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

What is the significance of Our Lady of Chains?

Our Lady of Chains is the figure around whom August and her sisters have built a series of religious rituals. Periodically, women from the local community come into August's house where together they retell the story of Our Lady of Chains. Our Lady of Chains was discovered in the previous century by a slave named Obadiah. Obadiah and his family had prayed to God to send them freedom, and when he finds a statue of a black woman with her fist raised in the air, he recognizes this as an answer to their prayers. The people carry the statue back to their worship house, where they determine that she must be Mary, the Mother of Jesus. They develop a set of rituals around the statue to give them strength, and when their master carries her off, she returns to them, despite having been chained. The people called her "Our Lady of Chains" "not because she wore chains . . . [but] because she broke them" (p. 110).

August and her sisters carry on the tradition of Our Lady of Chains, leading a group of black women known as the Daughters of Mary in a series of elaborate rituals based on those of the Catholic Church. Not only do they offer up their prayers and praises to the Black Madonna, they also celebrate Mary Day on which they perform a mass where the women consume the body of Mary (represented by honey cakes) and where they chain the statue before a ritual unchaining the next day. Even Lily, who has had no exposure to Catholicism, recognizes that the rituals are heretical enough that she "felt sure the pope would have keeled over if he'd seen" them (p. 226).

Yet beneath the elaborate and heretical rituals associated with Our Lady of Chains, August Boatwright has two practical reasons for carrying on the traditions. The first is that the figure helps her and the other women to remember their past. As she begins to tell the story of Our Lady of Chains to Lily and the Daughters of Mary, August remarks "'Really, it's good for all of us to hear it again . . . Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here'" (p. 107). Later, as the women place chains on the statue, she says something similar: "'It is only a reenactment . . . To help us remember. Remembering is everything'" (p. 228). Like her stories, however, August's memories of the statue are delivered in such a way as to emphasize that which is liberating. Rather than focusing on the fact that the black Madonna was chained repeatedly, August focuses on the shattering of those chains and the strength that the statue provided to the slaves who found her. Our Lady of Chains thus becomes a necessary part of the memory of breaking free of the bondage of slavery.

August's other reason for carrying on the traditions of the black Madonna is that she recognizes that people need visible representations of spiritual qualities. She tells Lily that the statue is "really just the figurehead off an old ship, but the people needed comfort and rescue, so when they looked at it, they saw Mary, and so the spirit of Mary took it over" (p. 141). What August recognizes is that the spirit of the statue—the defiance of breaking free of chains and the strength of the balled up fist—come from within the people looking at her. She knows too that the people need a visible representation of that spirit in order to find it in themselves. By the end of the novel, Lily too has recognized this quality of the statue, and she associates Mary's Assumption with the spirit of the Madonna going "further and further inside of me" (p. 302). The power of the Madonna for her, as for August and the Daughters of Mary, comes from within.

What does Lily mean when she says that she wants to grow up to be an amnesiac?

As Lily tells August the story of her life and then hears August explain to her why her mother had lived in Tiburon, South Carolina, she decides that she wants to forget her entire past. She has just learned two important facts about her early life—that her mother married T. Ray because she was pregnant and that her mother had left Lily with T. Ray. Faced with this knowledge, Lily concludes "you think you want to know something,



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

and then once you do, all you can think about is erasing it from your mind. From now on when people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I planned to say, Amnesiac” (p. 249). Lily desires to forget all that she knows about her mother and father because the memories seem overwhelming. Her need to forget reveals that she has learned just how important and powerful stories can be. She believes that if she puts her early life into words, then it continues to have the potential to cause her pain; similarly, she feels sure that if she could forget the past, then it would no longer have any control over her at all.

Lily’s wish to be an amnesiac also puts her philosophy of life (at least at this point in the novel) in direct conflict with August Boatwright’s. For August, “remembering is everything” (p. 228). What August recognizes is exactly what Lily cannot—that she needs to be able to remember her past because her past is who she is. What August also realizes, though, is that by remembering through stories, she acknowledges that the past has shaped her life, while retaining some control over how memory operates. August remembers her life through the stories that she tells, shaping the past even as the past shapes her. For Lily to be an amnesiac, then, would be both to refuse to acknowledge her own past and to refuse to exert any control over how that past affects her in the present.

Why can Lily remember at the novel’s end?

Despite her wish to be an amnesiac, by the end of the novel, Lily has learned to remember both her father and her mother in ways that August Boatwright would entirely approve. Rather than remembering the abusive T. Ray who forced her to kneel on grits for hours at a time, she chooses instead to tell stories about T. Ray—stories that are of the “not-literal” sort that August described: “I still tell myself that when he drove away that day he wasn’t saying good riddance; he was saying, Oh, Lily, you’re better off there in that house of colored women. You never would’ve flowered with me like you will with them” (pp. 299-300). Although she knows that T. Ray probably wasn’t thinking this, Lily chooses to believe that he was, because she “believe[s] in the goodness of imagination” (p. 300). To put it another way, Lily has chosen to remember T. Ray in a certain way so that his bad qualities will no longer have any hold over her.

In a similar way, Lily chooses to tell the story of her mother differently. She no longer thinks of her mother as a bad woman who abandoned her child; instead, the story she decides to tell is one of forgiveness: “I guess I have forgiven us both, although sometimes in the night my dreams will take me back to the sadness, and I have to wake up and forgive us again” (p. 301). Instead of holding all of her resentment inside, Lily acknowledges the hurt that her memories cause and chooses to embrace the memories and forgive the hurt. The reason that Lily can remember at the end of the novel seems to be twofold. First, she recognizes in her father the damaging effects of refusing to remember. As she and T. Ray confront each other, he sees her not as Lily but as Deborah. As Lily sees her father mistake her for her mother, she recognizes that he has kept buried the same sorts of painful memories that she herself has; she also recognizes that his refusal to remember has destroyed him. She describes T. Ray’s memories as “a pain he’d kept locked up all this time” and “the dark doorway he kept hidden inside, the terrible place he would seal up now and never return to if he could help it” (p. 295-296). Although Lily herself never makes this connection, her desire to remember her mother and her father in a positive way begins only after she sees the effect of her father’s own efforts to bury and forget all the pain of his relationship with Deborah. The other reason that Lily finally can remember as the novel closes is that she realizes that the absence of a mother can be replaced by the love she experiences from the black women. As the novel closes, Lily recalls the moment when T. Ray drove off and she turned and saw all of the women on the porch. She realizes from that point that “I have more mothers than any eight girls off the street” (p. 302). These two events—the realization that T. Ray has experienced pain like hers and that the entire community embodies the spirit of motherhood—provide Lily the means to tell her own story, to remember in a way that allows for forgiveness rather than resentment.



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NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

Did Lily really kill her mother?

One of the questions that the novel raises is whether Lily actually killed her mother or not. Because the book is written from a first-person perspective, for most of the novel, we have only Lily's memories of the events. At first, Lily seems to remember killing her mother. "Time folded in on itself then," she remembers. "What is left lies in clear yet disjointed pieces in my head. The gun shining like a toy in her hand, how he snatched it away and waved it around. The gun on the floor. Bending to pick it up. The noise that exploded around her" (p. 7-8). Although Lily can admit to herself that the memories are disjointed, she can only remember that she herself was responsible for her mother's death.

As the novel progresses, however, there are hints that Lily's memories are not as clear as she claims. For instance, when Lily recalls the conversation that she had with T. Ray the night before she began first grade, she remembers the outrage that her father expressed when she claimed to remember her mother's death: "'Goddamn it, you were four years old,' he said. 'You don't know what you remember'" (p. 18). Later in that same conversation T. Ray told Lily exactly what she should remember, that "'you'd picked it [the gun] up off the floor. Then it just went off'" (p. 19). T. Ray's insistence that he be able to control Lily's memory suggests that he has reason to want her to remember things in a particular way. When T. Ray reappears at the end of the novel, it seems that the question will be answered. Lily asks him directly how her mother died, and T. Ray gives what seems a straightforward response: "'I could tell you I did it. That's what you wanna hear. I could tell you she did it to herself, but both ways I'd be lying. It was you who did it, Lily. You didn't mean it, but it was you'" (p. 299). Even after all she has been through, however, Lily still doubts T. Ray's motivations. She speculates that he may have been telling the truth, but she also knows that "you could never know a hundred percent with T. Ray" (p. 299).

Thus one of the central questions raised by the novel remains unanswered at the end. The point, however, is not that Lily cannot ever know whether she is responsible for her mother's death or not. The point is that she has learned to use her imagination and the love that she feels both from within herself and from the community around her to carry on with her life despite the uncertainty.

What is the significance of the novel's title?

One morning when Lily goes out with August to do "bee patrol," August asks her to put her ear to the hive and listen. What Lily hears is a high-pitched hum, the sound of thousands of bee wings fanning the air performing what August calls "bee air conditioning" (p. 148). August goes on to explain to Lily that "'most people don't have any idea about all the complicated life going on inside a hive. Bees have a secret life we don't know anything about'" (p. 148). Lily immediately latches onto this phrase, and the idea of the "secret life of bees" resonates throughout the novel.

The simplest explanation of the title is just what Lily makes of it. She "loved the idea of bees having a secret life, just like the one [she] was living" (p. 148). Lily seems to take comfort in the fact that the insects that she and August care for can carry on an entire life appearing to be one thing, while living a different life underneath. While this phrase certainly carries this meaning for Lily at the time she hears it, it has other meanings as well. Although Lily doesn't consider it at the time, the bees' lives are not entirely secret; August has just explained one of their secrets and will explain others to Lily. In this sense, Lily's understanding of *The Secret Life of Bees* is a foreshadowing of events to come. Later in the novel, Lily learns that just as August has insight into *The Secret Life of Bees*, so too has she known about Lily's secret life from the very first.



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

What is perhaps the most important meaning of the novel's title is not revealed until the very end of the novel. One of the secrets of the bees that August reveals to Lily is that there is a definite social structure in which every bee has its place. August describes the nest builders, the field bees, the mortician bees, the nurse bees, the drones, and the queen, each of which fits perfectly into its own role in keeping the hive functional. While Lily initially focuses on the secrecy of the bees' hidden life, by the end of the novel it becomes clear that the secret social structure has become even more important to her. One of the last details recorded in the book is that Lily has taken over May's duties as "wall keeper," writing down all of the hurts and pains and placing them in the Wailing Wall. Lily has found her place within a small community of black people in Tiburon, South Carolina, and although the outside world labels her a "nigger lover" (p. 301) and cannot understand the secrets of this hive, the novel closes with Lily having found her role in it.

Further Reading:

Haven Kimmel, *The Solace of Leaving Early* (2002)

Langston Braverman drops out of graduate school and returns to her childhood home in Indiana hoping to write a novel. Instead, she finds herself caring for two young girls who, after watching both of their parents killed, insist that they have seen visions of the Virgin Mary, who has renamed them Immaculata and Epiphany.

Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987)

At times funny, at times tragic, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* is the story of Mrs. Threadgoode, who tells tales about growing up in the South to her friend Evelyn. The stories she tells are of two women, Idgie and Ruth, who learn to look out for themselves in the face of abusive relationships.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson before Dying* (1993)

Jefferson, a young black man living in Louisiana, is wrongfully convicted of murdering a white man and is sentenced to death. The novel tells the story of Jefferson's developing friendship with Grant Wiggins, a white man who has been asked to give him lessons in manhood. As both men learn from each other, their friendship offers hope in the otherwise racist and segregated world of the mid-twentieth century South.

Pat Conroy, *Beach Music* (1995)

Jack McCall, a former South Carolinian now living in Rome, must confront a past that includes the tragic suicide of his wife Shyla. When he returns to South Carolina, all of his old feelings of love and hate for the South resurface in a deeply moving story of one man's quest to find some sort of peace in life.

September, 2004

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Devon Fisher, who holds an M.A. in English from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and is currently a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Secret Life of Bees*

Reviews:

Booklist Review: Kidd's warm debut is set in the sixties, just after the civil rights bill has been passed. Fourteen-year-old Lily Owens is haunted by the accidental death of her mother 10 years earlier, which left her in the care of her brutal, angry father but also Rosaleen, a strong, proud black woman. After Rosaleen is thrown into jail for standing up to a trio of racists, Lily helps her escape from the hospital where she is being kept, and the two flee to Tiburon, a town Lily believes her mother had a connection to. A clue among her mother's possessions leads Lily to the Boatwright sisters, three black women who keep bees. They give Lily and Rosaleen the haven they need, but Lily remains haunted by her mother's death and her own involvement in it. Although she fears her father is looking for her, Lily manages to find solace among the strong women who surround her and, eventually, the truth about her mother that she has been seeking. An uplifting story. -Kristine Huntley (Reviewed December 1, 2001)

School Library Journal Review: Adult/High School—Lily Owens, 14, is an emotionally abused white girl living with her cold, uncaring father on a peach farm in rural South Carolina. The memory of her mother, who was accidentally killed in Lily's presence when she was four, haunts her constantly. She has one of her mother's few possessions, a picture of a black Madonna with the words, Tiburon, South Carolina, written on the back. Lily's companion during her sad childhood has been Rosaleen, the black woman hired to care for her. Rosaleen, in a euphoric mood after the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, goes to town to register to vote and insults one of the town's most racist residents. After she is beaten up and hospitalized, Lily decides to rescue her and they go to Tiburon to search for memories of her mother. There they are taken in by three black sisters who are beekeepers producing a line of honey with the Black Madonna label. While racial tensions simmer around them, the women help Lily accept her loss and learn the power of forgiveness. There is a wonderful sense of the strength of female friendship and love throughout the story. -Penny Stevens, Andover College, Portland, ME (Reviewed May 1, 2002)

Publishers Weekly Review: 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. (Jan. 28) Staff (Reviewed November 12, 2001)



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

Reviews: (Continued)

Library Journal Review: 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. Public libraries should purchase multiple copies. David A. Beron, Univ. of New Hampshire, Durham (Reviewed December 15, 2001)

Kirkus Reviews: 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. (*Kirkus Reviews*, October 15, 2001)

The Women's Review of Books, April 2002

Honey Child. Brown, Rosellen.

The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd. New York: Viking, 2002, 301 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

Anyone who reads a great deal of fiction—for the purposes of reviewing, teaching, contest judging, "blurbing"—will tell you that authority announces itself immediately. Though it's impossible to know on page one whether a writer possesses depth, consistency, or even seriousness of purpose, we can usually tell whether we're in good hands by the end of a few sentences. Sue Monk Kidd's fine first novel *The Secret Life of Bees* begins with a paragraph in which she establishes the voice that will carry us pleurably through her story, and lays out, implicitly, the emotional terrain she will take us through. The narrator is lying in bed listening to the bees that have squeezed through the cracks in her bedroom wall. She describes their sound, the glint of their wings, "and felt the longing build in my chest. The way those bees flew, not even looking for a flower, just flying for the feel of the wind, split my heart down its seam."



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

Reviews: (Continued)

By the end of that paragraph we know a lot—short of her name and age—about Lily Owens. If we're paying attention, we take note of the demographics: bees at large in her bedroom, cruising in not via door or window but through less than solid walls. And, of course, we notice the attentiveness to detail of a sensitive, empathetic observer. Finally, unavoidably, we hear the desperate sadness of someone with modest emotional expectations—"not even looking for a flower"—that are not being met. This is solid writing, efficient, elegant and poignant.

It is 1964, in small-town Georgia peach country. Lily turns out to be the fourteen-year-old daughter of T. Ray, a man of implacable rage and vengefulness who in his bad moments, which are many, makes his daughter kneel on grits (a particularly Southern form of legal brutality). He mocks her, he beats her; his generally cruel behavior accounts for her envy of the freedom of honeybees. But, worse, the reason Lily has no one to stand between her and the tyranny of her father is that she herself, at the age of four, appears to have shot her mother accidentally when she picked up a gun in the course of a confrontation between her parents. Now, to turn the thumbscrews still tighter, T. Ray taunts his daughter by claiming that on the day of the shooting, her mother was about to flee and planned to leave her behind.

Abandoned twice over and accustomed to pain, it's no wonder that, in her futile attempts to conjure up her mother, Lily thinks, "Even her picking a switch off the forsythia bush and stinging my legs would have been welcome." Her mother, when they meet in heaven, will forgive her "for the first ten thousand years" and for the next ten thousand will fix Lily's hair, because "You can tell which girls lack mothers by the look of their hair."

The only care Lily has grown up with has been supplied by her black housekeeper, Rosaleen, who—in the tradition, pioneered by Dilsey, of indispensable servants who don't cut their charges much slack—is a bracing combination of warmth and coolness, affection and correction. On the day of Lily's fourteenth birthday, which her father pointedly ignores, Lily and Rosaleen take a fateful walk into town so that Lily can buy herself a present and Rosaleen can register to vote.

So begin the complications, which become considerably tangled but emotionally simple: this is how two women, a female Huck and Jim, make a break for freedom and dignity. Like bees that seem to fly randomly, they will turn out to know exactly what they need and what will feed them.

Rosaleen, challenged, gets herself jailed for spitting on a white man's shoes, a provocation both brave and foolhardy; the feisty Lily springs her and, loosed from their assorted prisons, they take off. Lily is carrying one of her few mementoes of her mother, the "end-all mystery," a small wooden picture of a black Madonna on the back of which someone has written the words "Tiburon, N.C." There, not surprisingly, is where she heads, and there, aided by the kind of coincidence that under the circumstances is probably not as implausible as it seems, she encounters in the Tiburon general store the same strange painting of Mary on a bottle of locally made honey. As if to forestall scepticism, but quite in character, Lily insists that "there is nothing but mystery in the world, how it hides behind the fabric of our poor, browbeat days, shining brightly, and we don't even know it."

Suffice it to say, when Lily and Rosaleen follow their yellow brick road to the idiosyncratic compound of three black women bee-keepers, May, June and August, they come upon a trio that embodies every form of maternal nurturance and emotional education Lily needs, and a comfortable nest for Rosaleen as well. In the Boatwright sisters, for whom the black Madonna is queen, Kidd has created a wonderful fantasy, a sort of beloved community, part Oz, part ashram, part center for racial reconciliation.

August, the oldest, is wise and patient, the kind of woman who knows every secret intuitively. May, the youngest, whose twin committed suicide years earlier, is now more sensitive than a tuning fork: whenever something disturbs her loving nature, she flees to her own private "wailing wall" to subdue her demons. The middle sister,



Book: The Secret Life of Bees

Reviews: (Continued)

June, gives Lily what appears to be the swat of a reverse racism that the humane, naive young girl, as white as her name, cannot understand. And there is a boy, Zach, black and beautiful, who (rather too un-selfconsciously for Georgia in 1964) dares, without notable angst, to love Lily. Flies (rather than bees) in the ointment also land him in jail and compromise the peace of the farm. But all is well in the end, every uncertainty settled as surely as if this were a detective story. Lily even sees her way to a hedged sympathy for her father, who, she realizes, lost a wife the day she lost a mother.

Both the strength and the weakness of *The Secret Life of Bees* are exemplified by the presence at the head of every chapter of brief excerpts from books such as *Man and Insects*, *The Queen Must Die: And Other Affairs of Bees and Men*, *Exploring the World of Social Insects*, *Bees of the World*. Glosses for what's to come, they raise the engaging and unanswerable question of whether we're like the bees or the bees are like us. But though the quotations are undeniably intriguing, their smooth fit with the story is a touch too perfect, as if to point out conveniently snug connections we must not be allowed to miss. Kidd must have found them irresistible.

But this is, they confirm, a novel in which everything meshes smoothly. Though it is never frivolous, there is in it the sweetness and trust that things will work out in the end that one tends to see in comedy, not tragedy; or perhaps, more appropriately, in the comfort of fairy tales that put their characters through harsh trials so that, every demon slain, they can triumph reassuringly over danger. At tale's end, the princess-scully maid, the cast-out wanderer through the dark wood, will be saved, even cherished. For all the volatility of its subjects—violent death, child abuse both physical and emotional, suicide, racism and injustice—I had a hard time believing that anything truly terrible or irrevocable would be allowed to happen in these pages. There are no rough edges, no threat of unresolvable pain, though many atrocious things happen, or threaten to happen, along the way.

To be fair, whether that is cause for complaint or celebration will finally be a matter of taste. Lest this description seem to patronize an ingenious and generous book, let me add that Kidd scatters a good deal of wisdom like Hansel and Gretel's redemptive bread crumbs en route to the consoling denouement. "It was foolish to think some things were beyond happening," Lily thinks, dreaming about the flawless Zach, "even being attracted to Negroes. I'd honestly thought such a thing couldn't happen, the way water could not run uphill or salt could not taste sweet. A law of nature... You gotta imagine what's never been, Zach had said." Taken in that spirit, the world Kidd has imagined has the force of homespun myth.

Lily finds a good many of these perceptive, confiding discoveries planted along the road to a reconciliation not only with herself but with her history and her future; they make her endearing and her story a satisfying blend of salty sweetness. But there are those—clearly I vacillated—who will also find its lovingkindness like honey, nourishing but a touch cloying. Curmudgeonly, perhaps, but unless a book is meant for the very young we resist comfort that comes too readily. A consoling balm, *The Secret Life of Bees* has less sting in the end than its swarm of griefs would seem to promise.

ROSELLEN BROWN's most recent books are the novel *Half a Heart* (Picador) and the reissue of her collection of stories, *Street Games* (W. W. Norton). Copyright 2002 *Women's Review, Inc.*