

The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

1. What do you think are the main themes in THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES, and how are they explored? Which theme stood out particularly strongly for you?
2. How does Sue Monk Kidd use colour and texture to bring people and places alive?
3. What role does honey have to play in THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES?
4. 'Knowing can be a curse on a person's life. I'd traded in a pack of lies for a pack of truth, and I didn't know which one was heavier.' Discuss.
5. How does memory infuse THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES?
6. How does Sue Monk Kidd portray motherhood in THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES?
7. 'He chose to stand there and be one of them.' Discuss Zach's actions in chapter nine.
8. 'The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters.' To what extent do the characters in THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES manage this?
9. How did the ending of THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES make you feel?

Further Reading

THE MERMAID CHAIR – Sue Monk Kidd

WAITING TO EXHALE – Terry McMillan

DIVINE SECRETS OF THE YA YA SISTERHOOD – Rebecca Wells

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD – Harper Lee

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About the Book

A fabulous coming-of-age debut novel which has sold over 5 million copies worldwide and has now been made into a stunning feature film.

Lily has grown up believing she accidentally killed her mother when she was four. She not only has her own memory of holding the gun, but her father's account of the event. Now fourteen, she yearns for her mother, and for forgiveness. Living on a peach farm in South Carolina with her father, she has only one friend: Rosaleen, a black servant whose sharp exterior hides a tender heart. South Carolina in the sixties is a place where segregation is still considered a cause worth fighting for. When racial tension explodes one summer afternoon, and Rosaleen is arrested and beaten, Lily is compelled to act. Fugitives from justice and from Lily's harsh and unyielding father, they follow a trail left by the woman who died ten years before. Finding sanctuary in the home of three beekeeping sisters, Lily starts a journey as much about her understanding of the world, as about the mystery surrounding her mother.

Reviews

'I am amazed that this moving, original, and accomplished book is a first novel. It is wonderfully written, powerful, poignant, and humorous, and takes a line which is - refreshingly - strongly female without being cliché-feminist. It is also deliciously eccentric, which lifts it out of the usual category of a rite-of-passage novel into the realms of real distinction. Do read it!' **Joanna Trollope**

'This is the story of a young girl's journey toward healing, and of finding, at its end, not only wholeness, but the intrinsic sacredness of living in the world. I think it is simply wonderful!' **Anne Rivers Siddons**

'A novel of love and almost unbelievable courage, the quest of one young girl in search of her mother and so much more. Sue Monk Kidd takes on huge things, and by writing about what is mysterious, even difficult, in life, illuminates what is beautiful. She proves that a family can be found where you least expect it - maybe not under your own roof, but in that magical place where you find love. THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES is a gift, filled with hope!' **Luanne Rice**

'Sue Monk Kidd's eccentric, inventive, and ultimately forgiving novel is reminiscent of the work of Reynolds Price in its ability to create a truly original Southern voice' Anita Shreve 'Writing with the intimate voice of the memoirist and with the Southerner's abiding sense of place, Sue Monk Kidd has written a forgiving story for the motherless child in all of us' **Shelby Hearon**

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'Eccentric, inventive, and ultimately forgiving... a truly original Southern voice'

Anita Shreve

'With imagination as lush and colorful as the American South, a clutch of deliciously eccentric characters, and vivid prose, Sue Monk Kidd creates a rich, maternal haven in a harsh world' **Christina Schwarz**

'Sue Monk Kidd has written a wonderful novel about mothers and daughters and the transcendent power of love' **Connie May Fowler**

'What a splendid novel! It's wonderfully thoughtful and sensitive and compulsively readable' **Susan Isaacs**

An Interview with the Author

Was your childhood ambition always to be a writer? If not, what inspired you to start writing?

From my earliest memory, I always wanted to be a writer. It was how I responded to the question, 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' I used to write my own little stories in newspapers that I invented, but I lost touch with writing when I was about sixteen – I returned to it at thirty.

What do you enjoy most about writing?

I have a passion for creating stories and the power of stories. I believe we need less dogma in the world and more stories! I love the process of being swept into the spell of a narrative and I have a great love of language. Words can evoke emotion and create images. They also break hearts, reach out to us and educate us.

Have you experienced a community based on 'sisterhood' as in your novel?

I have belonged to different groups of women for many years. I love belonging to a community where women can tell stories and have them validated. Many of the groups that I have belonged to have encouraged me to write. I started writing non-fiction, but my female group encouraged me in my desire to write fiction. I feel that women's groups can help bring forth creative life. Lily herself is reborn through a circle of women. The pink house is like a womb where the rebirth happens and it's a very feminine place. I was surprised that the film ever got made, given that there are no Alpha males in the story and the cast is almost entirely women. The house is like a hive made up of the queen and female worker bees.

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Did you know much about beekeeping before you wrote the novel?

I knew nothing about bee-keeping but I did lots of research. I read lots of books and visited an apiary. They are wonderful places to experience first-hand, especially the smell of the honey; it's a very sensual experience. You also feel very powerful emotions when the hive is opened and thousands of bees whirl out; it's a truly heart-pounding moment.

I was drawn into the mystique of the world. Bees are incredibly intelligent and are an excellent metaphor for humans. They are present in mythology and symbolism and they are sacred creatures in Greek myths.

How does the writing process work for you and how has it changed over the years?

I have a very disciplined approach to writing and I've always approached it as my day job. I show up and write all day. But there is no one way to go about it. All writers have to find out what works for them. There is also an element of writing that is very mysterious. There's a creative madness that you have to tap into where there are all these characters and stories. So the writing process is a blend of steady discipline and creative madness.

What are some of your favourite books and authors?

In high school I loved the Brontë sisters who I read and reread. Also Jane Austen – I loved the British novelists and I wanted to be one! When I was in college I read *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, this was a very profound event and was probably my seminal reading experience. I mostly read literary fiction but I also read non-fiction particularly Carl Jung. I am also very influenced by Paul Theroux. My other favourite authors are Amy Tan, Barbara Kingsolver, Alice Walker – particularly *The Colour Purple*, and also J.M. Coetzee.

I'm reading *Stealing Athena* at the moment. But I always think of the big influences on my writing as being specifically those from the American South such as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Toni Morrison.

How does it feel, seeing your novel as a film?

In the beginning I didn't think it would ever happen I was very sceptical and it took seven years. I was really nervous because the book had done very well and I was worried the film wouldn't stay true to it. When I saw the script I was so relieved because it really captured the heart and soul of the novel. When I saw the first private screening I didn't expect to love it as much as I did. The cast was extraordinary and the actors embodied the characters beautifully. I knew my readers would be happy with it.

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Have you thought about how *The Mermaid Chair* would transfer to the big screen and who do you see playing the lead roles?

Actually *The Mermaid Chair* was made into a TV movie in 2006 – I thought it was rather remarkable that this happened before *The Secret Life of Bees*. It was also a good adaptation of the novel although with TV it has to fit into a certain format. I thought Kim Basinger was very powerful as the lead.

Can you tell us a little about what you're working on next?

My next book is a memoir which will be out next autumn. I co-authored it with my daughter, Anne Kidd Taylor who is now thirty-two and a fantastic emerging writer. We decided to go travelling when I turned fifty and she'd just finished college. We were both trying to figure out our place in the world and it was an experience refinding one another as mother and daughter. The book spans three trips where we visited Greece, Turkey and France.

The title is *Travelling with Pomegranates* and the subtitle is 'A Mother-Daughter story' The pomegranates are a symbol and refer to the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

What one piece of advice would you give a writer just starting out in his or her career?

There is so much advice I could give. Read a lot! When I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* I thought, how could I ever write about a young girl in the South during the Civil Rights movement after that? But reading helps you see the excellence of other stories and helps hone your writing skills. Write as much as possible but do allow yourself to write badly – you need to be able to perfect the craft. A lot of writers quit because they get frustrated with their work, but it's a process that comes with time. A writing community is also a great inspiration.

About the author

Sue Monk Kidd is the author of two widely acclaimed memoirs, *THE DANCE OF THE DISSIDENT DAUGHTER* and *WHEN THE HEART WAITS*. Her fiction has appeared in several literary journals. She lives beside a salt marsh in Charleston, South Carolina with her husband.