**INTRODUCTION**

Twenty-two-year-old Skeeter has just returned home after graduating from Ole Miss. She may have a degree, but it is 1962, Mississippi, and her mother will not be happy till Skeeter has a ring on her finger. Skeeter would normally find solace with her beloved maid Constantine, the woman who raised her, but Constantine has disappeared and no one will tell Skeeter where she has gone.

Aibileen is a black maid, a wise, regal woman raising her seventeenth white child. Something has shifted inside her after the loss of her own son, who died while his bosses looked the other way. She is devoted to the little girl she looks after, though she knows both their hearts may be broken.

Minny, Aibileen’s best friend, is short, fat, and perhaps the sassiest woman in Mississippi. She can cook like nobody’s business, but she can’t mind her tongue, so she’s lost yet another job. Minny finally finds a position working for someone too new to town to know her reputation. But her new boss has secrets of her own.

Seemingly as different from one another as can be, these women will nonetheless come together for a clandestine project that will put them all at risk. And why? Because they are suffocating within the lines that define their town and their times. And sometimes lines are made to be crossed.

In pitch-perfect voices, Kathryn Stockett creates three extraordinary women whose determination to start a movement of their own forever changes a town, and the way women—mothers, daughters, caregivers, friends—view one another. A deeply moving novel filled with poignancy, humor, and hope, *The Help* is a timeless and universal story about the lines we abide by, and the ones we don’t.

**ABOUT KATHRYN STOCKETT**

Kathryn Stockett was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. After graduating from the University of Alabama with a degree in English and Creative Writing, she moved to New York City, where she worked in magazine publishing and marketing for nine years. She currently lives in Atlanta with her husband and daughter. This is her first novel.

**EXCERPT**

Two days later, I sit in my parents’ kitchen, waiting for dusk to fall. I give in and light another cigarette even though last night the surgeon general came on the television set and shook his finger at everybody, trying to convince us that smoking will kill us. But Mother once told me tongue kissing would turn me blind and I’m starting to think it’s all just a big plot between the surgeon general and Mother to make sure no one ever has any fun.
At eight o’clock that same night, I’m stumbling down Aibileen’s street as discreetly as one can carrying a fifty-pound Corona typewriter. I knock softly, already dying for another cigarette to calm my nerves. Aibileen answers and I slip inside. She’s wearing the same green dress and stiff black shoes as last time.

I try to smile, like I’m confident it will work this time, despite the idea she explained over the phone. “Could we . . . sit in the kitchen this time?” I ask. “Would you mind?”

“Alright. Ain’t nothing to look at, but come on back.”

The kitchen is about half the size of the living room and warmer. It smells like tea and lemons. The black-and-white linoleum floor has been scrubbed thin. There’s just enough counter for the china tea set.

I set the typewriter on a scratched red table under the window. Aibileen starts to pour the hot water into the teapot.

“Oh, none for me, thanks,” I say and reach in my bag. “I brought us some Co-Colas if you want one.” I’ve tried to come up with ways to make Aibileen more comfortable. Number One: Don’t make Aibileen feel like she has to serve me.

“Well, ain’t that nice. I usually don’t take my tea till later anyway.” She brings over an opener and two glasses. I drink mine straight from the bottle and seeing this, she pushes the glasses aside, does the same.

I called Aibileen after Elizabeth gave me the note, and listened hopefully as Aibileen told me her idea—for her to write her own words down and then show me what she’s written. I tried to act excited. But I know I’ll have to rewrite everything she’s written, wasting even more time. I thought it might make it easier if she could see it in type-face instead of me reading it and telling her it can’t work this way.

We smile at each other. I take a sip of my Coke, smooth my blouse.

“So . . .” I say.

Aibileen has a wire-ringed notebook in front of her. “Want me to . . . just go head and read?”

“Yes,” I say.

We both take deep breaths and she begins reading in a slow, steady voice.

“My first white baby to ever look after was named Alton Carrington Speers. It was 1924 and I’d just turned fifteen years old. Alton was a long, skinny baby with hair fine as silk on a corn . . .”

I begin typing as she reads, her words rhythmic, pronounced more clearly than her usual talk. “Every window in that filthy house was painted shut on the inside, even though the house was big with a wide green lawn. I knew the air was bad, felt sick myself . . .”


“When the mama died, six months later,” she reads, “of the lung disease, they kept me on to raise Alton until they moved away to Memphis. I loved that baby and he loved me and that’s when I knew I was good at making children feel proud of themselves . . .”

I hadn’t wanted to insult Aibileen when she told me her idea. I tried to urge her out of it, over the phone. “Writing isn’t that easy. And you wouldn’t have time for this anyway, Aibileen, not with a full-time job.”

“Can’t be much different than writing my prayers every night.”
It was the first interesting thing she’d told me about herself since we’d started the project, so I’d grabbed the shopping pad in the pantry. “You don’t say your prayers, then?”

“I never told nobody that before. Not even Minny. Find I can get my point across a lot better writing em down.”

“So this is what you do on the weekends?” I asked. “In your spare time?” I liked the idea of capturing her life outside of work, when she wasn’t under the eye of Elizabeth Leefolt.

“Oh no, I write a hour, sometimes two ever day. Lot a ailing, sick peoples in this town.”

I was impressed. That was more than I wrote on some days. I told her we’d try it just to get the project going again.

Aibileen takes a breath, a swallow of Coke, and reads on.

She backtracks to her first job at thirteen, cleaning the Francis the First silver service at the governor’s mansion. She reads how on her first morning, she made a mistake on the chart where you filled in the number of pieces so they’d know you hadn’t stolen anything.

“I come home that morning, after I been fired, and stood outside my house with my new work shoes on. The shoes my mama paid a month’s worth a light bill for. I guess that’s when I understood what shame was and the color of it too. Shame ain’t black, like dirt, like I always thought it was. Shame be the color of a new white uniform your mother ironed all night to pay for, white without a smudge or a speck a work-dirt on it.”

Aibileen looks up to see what I think. I stop typing. I’d expected the stories to be sweet, glossy. I realize I might be getting more than I’d bargained for. She reads on.

“. . . so I go on and get the chiffarobe straightened out and before I know it, that little white boy done cut his fingers clean off in that window fan I asked her to take out ten times. I never seen that much red come out a person and I grab the boy, I grab them four fingers. Tote him to the colored hospital cause I didn’t know where the white one was. But when I got there, a colored man stop me and say, Is this boy white? The typewriter keys are clacking like hail on a roof. Aibileen is reading faster and I am ignoring my mistakes, stopping her only to put in another page. Every eight seconds, I fling the carriage aside.

“And I says Yessuh, and he say, Is them his white fingers? And I say, Yessuh, and he say, Well you better tell them he your high yellow cause that colored doctor won’t operate on a white boy in a Negro hospital. And then a white policeman grab me and he say, Now you look a here—”

She stops. Looks up. The clacking ceases.

“What? The policeman said look a here what?”

“Well, that’s all I put down. Had to catch the bus for work this morning.”

I hit the return and the typewriter dings. Aibileen and I look each other straight in the eye. I think this might actually work.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR THE HELP

“Lush, original and poignant, Kathryn Stockett has written a wondrous novel set in the deep south told through the authentic voices of Aibileen, Minnie and Skeeter, three unforgettable women whose lives
and points of view intersect vividly against a landscape of hopeful change in America. You will be swept away as they work, play and love during a time when possibilities for women were few but their dreams of the future were limitless. A glorious read."
- Adriana Trigiani

“The Help by Kathryn Stockett is a story that made me weep as I rejoiced for each of humanity’s small but steady triumphs over hate and fear. I will never forget this wonderful book.”
- Dorothea Benton Frank

“Daring, vitally important and deftly handled, I loved and admired The Help. It’s very courageous. VERY courageous. Fantastic.”
- Marian Keyes

“A wonderful book. A compelling and comically poignant tale about three women, and a time and a place that are in many ways very much still with us.”
- Beth Henley

**A CONVERSATION WITH KATHRYN STOCKETT**

**What was the genesis of the novel?**
Growing up in Mississippi, almost every family I knew had a black woman working in their house—cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the white children. That was life in Mississippi. I was young and assumed that’s how most of America lived.

When I moved to New York, though, I realized my “normal” wasn’t quite the same as the rest of America’s. I knew a lot of Southerners in the city, and every now and then we’d talk about what we missed from the South. Inevitably, somebody would start talking about the maid they grew up with, some little thing that made us all remember—Alice’s good hamburgers or riding in the back seat to take Willy May home. Everybody had a story to tell.

Twenty years later, with a million things to do in New York City, there we were still talking about the women who’d raised us in our mama’s kitchens. It was probably on one of those late nights, homesick, when I realized I wanted to write about those relationships from my childhood.

**Tell us about your own family maid and your and your family’s relationship with her.**
My grandmother’s maid was named Demetrie. She started working for my grandparents in 1955, when my father and uncle were still boys and she was twenty-eight. When they were grown, she looked after us, the grandchildren.

I loved Demetrie dearly, and I felt so loved too. We got the best part of her. She wasn’t our mother, so it wasn’t her job to discipline us or make us sit up straight. She just played with us and fed us, and she liked to make us laugh. When I was little, she told me that I had a tail, and I was always turning around, looking for it. I wasn’t exactly “quick” as a child.

I think another reason my siblings and I had such a close connection with Demetrie is that she never had children of her own. She’d grown up poor and lived with an abusive husband. When a person has that much sadness and kindness wrapped up inside, sometimes it just pours out as gentleness. She was a gentle soul. There haven’t been enough people like her in this world.

**Since you weren’t alive in 1962, what research, if any, did you do to make sure the time period and social attitudes of the era were accurate?**
It sounds crazy, but I would go to the Eudora Welty Library in Jackson and look at old phone books. The back section of the phone book captures so much about the mundane life in a certain time, which somehow becomes interesting fifty years later. The fancy department stores, the abundance of printing
shops, and the fact that there were no female doctors or dentists—all helped me visualize the time. In the residential listings, most families just listed the husband’s name, with no mention of the wife.

I also read *The Clarion-Ledger* newspapers for facts and dates. Once I’d done my homework, I’d go talk to my Grandaddy Stockett, who, at ninety-eight, still has a remarkable memory. That’s where the real stories came from, like Cat-bite, who’s in the book, and the farmers who sold vegetables and cream from their carts everyday, walking through the Jackson neighborhoods.

I found that people don’t seem to remember “social attitudes.” They remember what you could do, what you couldn’t do, and especially those people who went ahead and did both.

**You interviewed both African-Americans and whites from this time period. Was there anything surprising in what they told you?**

It’s a tricky question to ask. It is hard to approach someone and say, “Excuse me, but what was it like to work for a white family in the South during 1960s?” I guess I felt a lot like Skeeter did in *The Help*.

But I did hear plenty of interesting stories. One black woman from Birmingham told me she and her friends used to hide down in a ditch, waiting for the bus to take them to work. They were that afraid to stand on a street corner because white men would harass them. Still, all of the black women I spoke to were very proud of the jobs they’d had. They wanted to tell me where their white children live today and what they do for a living. I heard it over and over: “They still come to see me” and “They call me every Christmas.”

The surprises actually came with the white women I interviewed. I realize there’s a tendency to idealize the past, but some of the women I spoke to, especially the middle-aged generation, just fell apart before they even started talking. They remembered so many details: *She taught me to tell time; She taught me to iron a man’s shirt before I got married; She taught me how to wait for the green light.* They’d remember and sigh.

After a while, I started to better understand what they were feeling. I felt it, too. It wasn’t just that they missed these women so deeply. I think they wished that they could tell them, one last time, “Thank you for everything.” There was a sense that they hadn’t thanked them enough.

**Were you nervous that some people might take affront that you, a white woman in 2008—and a Southern white woman at that—were writing in the voice of two African-American maids?**

At first, I wasn’t nervous writing in the voice of Aibileen and Minny because I didn’t think anybody would ever read the story except me. I wrote it because I wanted to go back to that place with Demetrie. I wanted to hear her voice again.

But when other people started reading it, I was very worried about what I’d written and the line I’d crossed. And the truth is, I’m still nervous. I’ll never know what it really felt like to be in the shoes of those black women who worked in the white homes of the South during the 1960s and I hope that no one thinks I presume to know that. But I had to try. I wanted the story to be told. I hope I got some of it right.

**Of the three women—Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter—who is your favorite character? Were they all equally easy or difficult to write? Were any of them based on real people?**

Aibileen is my favorite because she shares the gentleness of Demetrie. But Minny was the easiest to write because she’s based on my friend Octavia. I didn’t know Octavia very well at the time I was writing, but I’d watched her mannerisms and listened to her stories at parties. She’s an actress in Los Angeles, and you can just imagine the look on her face when some skinny white girl came up and said to her, “I’ve written a book and you’re one of the main characters.” She kind of chuckled and said, “Well, good for you.”

Skeeter was the hardest to write because she was constantly stepping across that line I was taught not to cross. Growing up, there was a hard and firm rule that you did not discuss issues of color. You changed
the subject if someone brought it up, and you changed the channel when it was on television. That said, I think I enjoyed writing Skeeter’s memories of Constantine more than any other part of the book.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Who was your favorite character? Why?

2. What do you think motivated Hilly? On the one hand she is terribly cruel to Aibileen and her own help, as well as to Skeeter once she realizes that she can’t control her. Yet she’s a wonderful mother. Do you think that one can be a good mother but, at the same time, a deeply flawed person?

3. Like Hilly, Skeeter’s mother is a prime example of someone deeply flawed yet somewhat sympathetic. She seems to care for Skeeter— and she also seems to have very real feelings for Constantine. Yet the ultimatum she gives to Constantine is untenable; and most of her interaction with Skeeter is critical. Do you think Skeeter’s mother is a sympathetic or unsympathetic character? Why?

4. How much of a person’s character would you say is shaped by the times in which they live?

5. Did it bother you that Skeeter is willing to overlook so many of Stuart’s faults so that she can get married, and that it’s not until he literally gets up and walks away that the engagement falls apart?

6. Do you believe that Minny was justified in her distrust of white people?

7. Do you think that had Aibileen stayed working for Miss Elizabeth, that Mae Mobley would have grown up to be racist like her mother? Do you think racism is inherent, or taught?

8. From the perspective of a twenty-first century reader, the hairshellac system that Skeeter undergoes seems ludicrous. Yet women still alter their looks in rather peculiar ways as the definition of “beauty” changes with the times. Looking back on your past, what’s the most ridiculous beauty regimen you ever underwent?

9. The author manages to paint Aibileen with a quiet grace and an aura of wisdom about her. How do you think she does this?

10. Do you think there are still vestiges of racism in relationships where people of color work for people who are white?

11. What did you think about Minny’s pie for Miss Hilly? Would you have gone as far as Minny did for revenge?