

*The Help*

By Kathryn Stockett

Berkley Books

Fiction

530 pages

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### **Little Changes for a Greater Good**

It's the 1960s, a time where equality was a scarce thing to come by. Confederate flags are still showcased proudly in the homes of wealthy white Southerners. Black maids raise white children in a world filled with prejudice and hate. The people of Jackson, Mississippi are stuck in a never-ending cycle of preempted social status. When the imaginary line between black and white people is crossed, there is no going back. Kathryn Stockett, in her first published novel, *The Help*, shows how change, while hard to come by, can take a community by force. "And why? Because they are suffocating within the lines that define their town and their times. And sometimes lines are made to be crossed."

Miss Eugene "Skeeter" was always different than her friends. Whether it was her tall, gangly figure that set her apart, her red curly hair, or the fact that no boy had ever paid attention to her, she was always different. Returning from Ole Miss' with only a college degree and no husband, she was even more of a disappointment to her mother. Elizabeth and Hilly, her dear friends since grade school, both happily married with children living the roles of high-society women, had an ideal life in the eyes of Skeeter's mother. When Skeeter thought of spending the rest of her life as editor of the Junior League, which was expected of her, she cringed. She felt she was always destined for something more. With a trust fund and a high social status, Skeeter always lived comfortably and didn't have to take many risks. Awakened by the realization that she could spark change, Skeeter is faced with the troublesome decision to stand up for what is right or to betray her friends.

Skeeter will strive to dispel common myths about African Americans by giving them a voice. With the help of big-hearted Aibileen and headstrong Minny, two unlikely allies, the trio endeavors the task of convincing other maids to share their experiences working in white homes. Skeeter tells the tales of true African American women's stories working as maids. "... We ain't doing civil rights here. We just telling stories like they really happen." The price of change may come at too much of a personal loss. As astonishing stories are disclosed, the threat of being found out always looms over them. Courage must be summoned, as steps for change are taken through, a "tell all" book about maid's lives working in a white southern home.

A southern home is something that author Kathryn Stockett is familiar with. Growing up in Jackson, Mississippi where the book is set, her childhood played a part in the storyline. She relates to the relationship Skeeter and Mae Mobley had with the maids who raised them, due to a similar

experience of her own. The maid who raised her, not her own mother, took on the mother figure in Stockett's childhood. This reflection of her own experiences helps make the book more personal. Graduating from the University of Alabama with a degree in English and Creative Writing, Stockett has since moved to New York City.

Slow in the start, *The Help*, seems to be just another book recounting the tough times African Americans had to face in a troubled history, the kind of book your history teacher would want you to read. Thick southern accents, with dated language will at first distract readers of the character's true personality and feelings. After overcoming this "language" barrier, the book starts to pick up pace.

Stockett does a fantastic job of giving each character a level of complexity while still being relatable. The reader will truly experience empathy as they read about the mistreatment Minny and other maids have faced at their places of work. Empathy is not the only feeling Stockett provokes, with her engaging novel. Every experience the characters go through the reader will be alongside them, grasping onto every word. Stockett allows the reader to connect with the characters on a personal level. I was compelled to open this book night after night due to my growing concern and curiosity about the uncertain factors in Minny, Aibileen and Skeeter's lives. I hoped that Skeeter and Stuart's new relationship would flourish and that Minny's attitude wouldn't lead her to trouble. I felt my heartache with Aibileen every time Mae Mobley was yelled at by her mother, cringing when told she wasn't good enough. Every detail is personal. This quality of the novel allows for a troublesome topic, which may be hard to comprehend for teens of this generation, easier to digest.

Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* brings a new light to the time period of the 1960s. Being both witty and serious, it is an eye-opening book that teaches readers a lesson about the cruelty of others and the importance of change. While it might not be easy to step out of your comfort zone, as Skeeter did, important shifts in society would not occur without these agents of change. Little changes and bits of awareness are what helped to make a larger change in American society. *The Help* is an important book for people of all ages to read as it sends across an important message of standing up for what you believe in, even if those around you do not agree.