



Kathryn Stockett: **The Help**

(excerpt) 2009

Kathryn Stockett (b. 1969) was raised in Jackson, Mississippi. She earned a degree in English and creative writing from the University of Alabama. She is famous for her debut novel *The Help* from 2009, which has been made into a movie.

The Help takes place during the 1960s and is about the African-American maid and babysitter Aibileen from Jackson, Mississippi, who works for a white family, and the white, educated young woman, Skeeter Phelan, who has just started her career as a journalist. Skeeter comes up with the highly controversial idea of interviewing Aibileen and other African-American maids about what it is like to work for a white family.

The two women form an unlikely friendship along with other maids as they embark on putting the maids' stories in writing for publishing. They all risk a lot by writing the book, but this does not stop them in their fight to tell part of the African-American story.

PRE-READING

In pairs/small groups, answer the following question:
What is the point of writing a novel that takes place more than 50 years ago?



Actress Emma Stone as Eugenia 'Skeeter' Phelan in *The Help*

In this excerpt of *The Help*, we meet Miss Leefolt, who is the mother of the toddler Mae Mobley. Miss Leefolt is a stay-at-home-mom who lives in Jackson, Mississippi. Also, she is the employer of the African-American maid and nurse Aibileen, who tells the story.

The Help

pneumonia /numonjə/
lungebetændelse. Aibileen
confuses 'ammonia' (am-
moniak) with 'pneumonia'
diaper ble
frown rynke på panden
nekkid = naked
pitch høj tone
wag virre
pop (sb.) slag
hiss hvæse
pop (vb.) slå
potato-sack (vb.) slæbe
som en sæk kartofler

Late that afternoon, Miss Leefolt come home with her hair all teased up. She got a permanent and she smell like pneumonia.

"Guess what Mae Mobley done today?" I say. "Went to the bathroom in the toilet bowl."

5 "Oh, that's wonderful!" She give her girl a hug, something I don't see enough of. I know she mean it, too, cause Miss Leefolt do *not* like changing diapers.

I say, "You got to make sure she go in the pot from now on. It's real confusing for her if you don't."

10 Miss Leefolt smile, say "Alright."

"Let's see if she do it one more time fore I go home." We go in the bathroom. I get her diapers off and put her up on that toilet. But Baby Girl she shaking her head.

"Come on, Mae Mobley, can't you go in the pot for your mama?"

15 "Nooooo."

Finally I put her back down on her feet. "That's alright, you did real good today."

But Miss Leefolt, she got her lips sticking out and she hmphing and frowning down at her. Before I can get her diaper on again, Baby Girl
20 run off fast as she can. Nekkid little white baby running through the house. She in the kitchen. She got the back door open, she in the garage, trying to reach the knob to *my* bathroom.

We run after her and Miss Leefolt pointing her finger. Her voice go about ten pitches too high. "This is not your bathroom!"

25 Baby girl wagging her head. "*My bafroom!*"

Miss Leefolt snatch her up, give her a pop on the leg. "Miss Leefolt, she don't know what she do---"

"Get back in the house, Aibileen!"

I hate it but I go in the kitchen. I stand in the middle, leave the door
30 open behind me.

"I did not raise you to use the colored bathroom!" I hear her hiss-whispering, thinking I can't hear, and I think, *Lady, you didn't raise your child* at all.

"This is dirty out there, Mae Mobley. You'll catch diseases! No no
35 no!" And I hear her pop her again and again on her bare legs.



Aibileen (Viola Davis) and Mae Mobley (Eleanor Henry)

throat-pipe struberør,
 svælg
 tee-vee = TV
 cuss = curse
 Li'l Rascals børne-tv
 tuck putte i
 dime mønt
 be spanked blive slået

After a second, Miss Leefolt potato-sack her inside. There ain't nothing I can do but watch it happen. My heart feel like it's squeezing up into my throat-pipe. Miss Leefolt drop Mae Mobley in front a the tee-vee and she march to her bedroom and slam the door. I go give Baby Girl
 5 a hug. She still crying and she look awful confused.

"I'm real sorry, Mae Mobley," I whisper to her. I'm cussing myself for taking her out there in the first place. But I don't know what else to say, so I just hold her.

We set there just watching *Li'l Rascals* until Miss Leefolt come out,
 10 ask ain't it past time for me to go. I tuck my bus dime in my pocket. Give Mae Mobley one more hug, whisper, "You a *smart* girl. You a *good* girl."

On the ride home, I don't see the big white houses passing outside the window. I don't talk to my maid friends. I see Baby Girl getting spanked cause a me. I see her listening to Miss Leefolt call me dirty,
 15 diseased.

INTRODUCTORY WORK

Language

1. Read the text aloud in pairs. Explain the unusual spelling.
 2. Online, listen to the African-American female Mississippi accent on the International Dialects of English Archive. Do you see/hear any similarities between the Mississippi dialect and the spelling in this excerpt? (If you have watched the film *The Help*, does the dialect sound like the actors in the movie?)
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FURTHER ANALYSIS

The women

1. Based on this excerpt, analyze in what ways Aibileen and Miss Leefolt differ from each other.
2. Why does Miss Leefolt call Aibileen “diseased”?

Mae Mobley

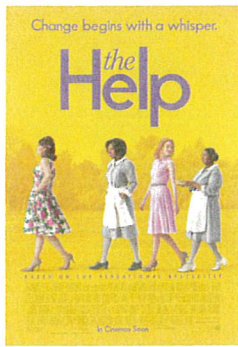
1. Why does Aibileen tell Mae Mobley: “You a *smart* girl, you a *good* girl”?
 2. Based on this excerpt, do you think Mae Mobley will grow up to become like her mother or like her nanny in her way of understanding racial differences? Argue your point.
 3. When is a child old enough to understand racial differences? Back up your answer with examples from the text.
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POST-READING 1

- A. Individually, find at least three themes that are presented in this excerpt. Back up your arguments with examples from the text.
 - B. Afterwards, walk around in the classroom and pair up to explain your findings to each other. Talk with at least two classmates. How many themes did you find altogether?
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POST-READING 2

Does the fact that the author is white add anything to the novel? Pair up with a partner. One of you takes the standpoint that it does, and your partner takes the standpoint that it does not. Present your arguments and refer to the text and other material from the book when relevant.



Tate Taylor: The Help

(movie) 2011

For an introduction to *The Help*, have a look at p. 145.

Watch the movie *The Help* from 2011, directed and written by Tate Taylor. Afterwards, you will be able to work with the questions on pages 150-151.

PRE-READING

Get into groups of two, three or four classmates in accordance with the number of people in the photos. Pick out a photo to work with.

1. Come up with a conversation that you imagine could take place during the 1960s and one that could take place today. How do the conversations differ? Why?
2. Learn the conversations by heart. Afterwards, the various groups perform their conversations for the class.



INTRODUCTORY WORK

Skeeter

1. In what way is the character Skeeter introduced in the movie?
2. Find three adjectives that you believe characterize Skeeter and explain why.
3. Why does Skeeter initially want to write a book about the maids' stories?
4. Explain Skeeter's development during her time in Jackson.

Aibileen

1. Find three adjectives that you believe characterize Aibileen and explain why.
2. Which social issues are shown through Aibileen's character?
3. Discuss why Aibileen suddenly dares to tell her story.

Minnie

1. Find three adjectives that you believe characterize Minnie and explain why.
2. Which social issues are shown through Minnie's character?

Miss Hilly

1. Find three adjectives that you believe characterize Miss Hilly and explain why.
2. Account for Miss Hilly's status in Jackson. How does her status change over time?
3. Explain Miss Hilly's view of African Americans. Give examples from the movie.

FURTHER ANALYSIS

Stereotypes

1. Which characters can be seen as stereotypes? Why?
2. Apart from the maids, who else can be described as 'the help' in this film? Why?
3. In what ways can Skeeter's role be viewed as provoking for the audience of today? Why?

Time

1. What role do historical events in the US in 1963 play in this film?
2. What purpose do these events serve in the film?

Message

1. Is this a story about black America or white America? Or both? Argue your point(s).
2. What story is told about black and white America in *The Help*?
3. Is the purpose of *The Help* to inform or to justify the past? Argue your point(s) and back it/them up by adding examples from the movie.

POST-READING 1

In pairs/small groups, you are to make a presentation for the class based on one of the following work questions. One group answers one question. All groups must include relevant photos and quotes to argue their points. All members of the group must participate in the oral presentation. If necessary, look up information online.

1. Based on other texts you have read in this book, explain why history makes an impact on how African Americans are viewed in the US today. You should use examples from *The Help* to prove your point.
2. Explain why the films listed below and others like them have all premiered recently. (Look up the movies online if you do not know them.)

The Rosa Parks Story (2002)

500 Years Later (2005)

The Help (2011)

Twelve Years a Slave (2013)

The Butler (2013)

Selma (2014)

3. Using examples from other texts in this book as well as examples from *The Help*, argue whether racism is still present in the US today. How?

POST-READING 2

In pairs, take turns describing the pictures p. 145, p. 147 and here below to each other. Together, discuss which themes from the film are expressed through these images. Argue your point. Afterwards, walk around the classroom in pairs and compare your answers.



On the left Octavia Spencer as Minnie Jackson and on the right Viola Davis as Aibileen Clark