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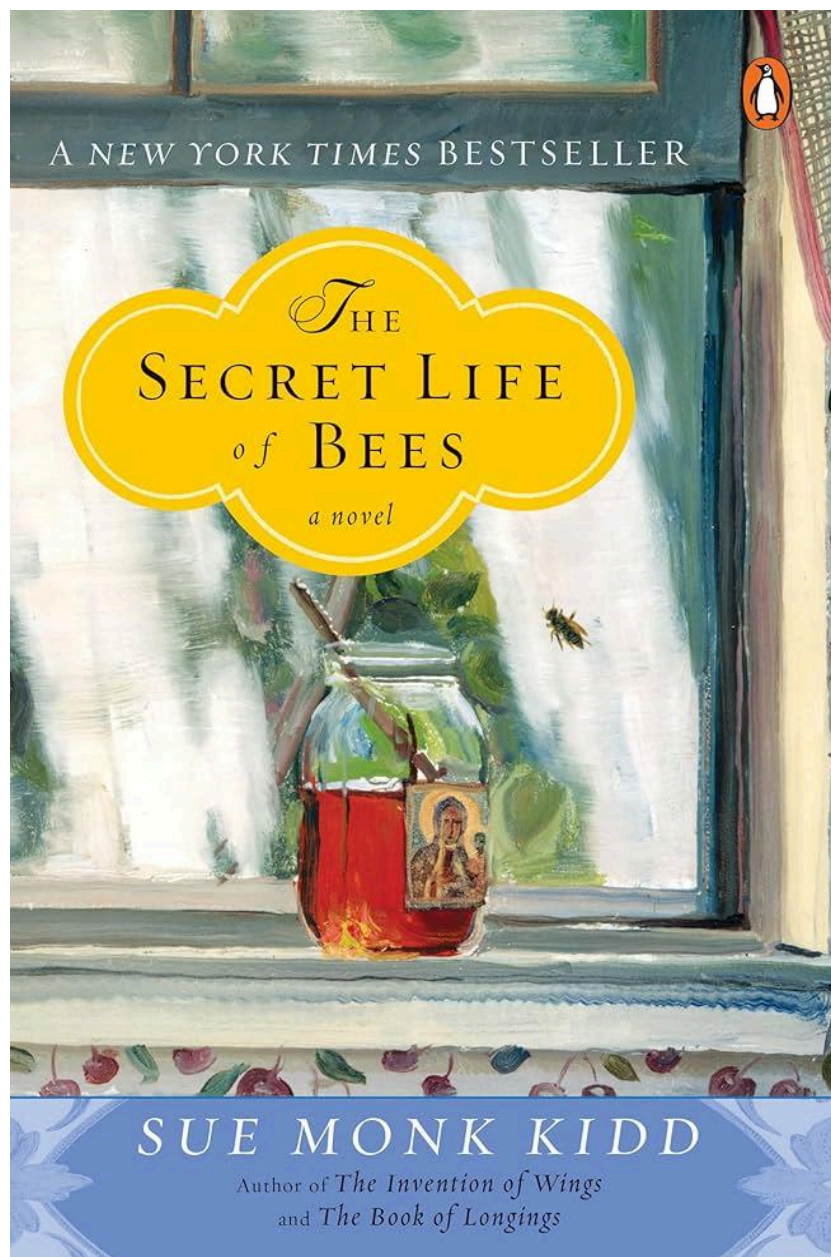
ENGL-112b, Sec 0

Dr. Warner

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***The Secret Life of Bees* (2001)**

By Sue Monk Kidd



About the Author:



Image source and Author's website:

<https://www.scrippscollege.edu/news/releases/campus-events/bestselling-author-sue-monk-kidd-to-give-scripps-college-commencement-address-with-daughter> <https://suemonkkidd.com/>

Sue Monk Kidd was born and raised in Sylvester, Georgia. She graduated from Texas Christian University in 1970 and later, in 2016, received an honorary doctorate from TCU. Her initial work focused on spirituality and feminist theology, then shifted in 2001 to fiction with the release of her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. The book was a best-seller, maintaining its place on the NY Times Bestseller list for over 2 ½ years and selling over 8 million copies worldwide. This success led to *The Secret Life of Bees* being adapted for the theatre and becoming a big-screen movie released in 2008 by Fox. In 2005, Kidd published her second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, and then two more novels, *The Invention of Wings* in 2013 and *The Book of Longings* in 2020, all of which reached bestseller lists. In 2019, Sue and her daughter Ann traveled the world together, which led them to co-write her memoir, *Traveling with Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story*, adding another bestseller tally to her publishings. In 2011, Kidd was inducted into the South Carolina Academy of Authors and, in 2022, the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. Kidd lives in North Carolina and continues to be involved in the literary community.

Summary of the Novel:

A 14-year-old white girl, Lily, lives alone with her abusive father, T-Ray, and under the weight of killing her mother when she was a small child. With her mother gone, her only solace is her nanny, Rosaleen. Two days after the 1964 Civil Rights Act was signed into law, Rosaleen was beaten and arrested, leaving her bedridden in the hospital. Lily's father, T-Ray, doesn't support Rosaleen and sparks

a fight with Lily. During the fight, T-Ray explosively tells Lily that her mother left her and didn't come back for her—Lily, in shambles over her father's words and the mistreatment of Rosaleen, decides to get Rosaleen and run away to Tiburon together. Tiburon is one of Lily's only clues to her mother's mystery. Once in Tiburon, Lily and Rosaleen find shelter at a black female-owned honey company with the Boatwright sisters. Lily and Rosaleen are welcomed into their household, where Lily learns beekeeping and forms relationships with the African American community there. Lily has a crush on Zach, a young black man she works with, and develops a deep bond with August Boatwright, who encourages her to open up about her past. While Lily explores her identity in Tiburon, she experiences societal prejudices for the first time. Zach is wrongfully arrested, there is a suicide, and all the while, she is hiding from her abusive father.

Quote 1:

“My mother died when I was four years old. It was a fact of life, but if I brought it up, people would suddenly get interested in their hangnails and cuticles, or else distant places in the sky, and seem not to hear me. Once in a while, though, some caring soul would say, “Just put it out of your head, Lily. It was an accident. You didn't mean to do it.”

“That night I lay in bed and thought about dying and going to be with my mother in paradise. I would meet her saying, “Mother, forgive. Please forgive,” and she would kiss my skin till it grew chapped and tell me I was not to blame. She would tell me this for the first ten thousand years (3).”

This passage is from the first couple of pages of *The Secret Life of Bees*. The main character, Lily, shows her emotional vulnerability as she yearns to connect with her mother. She is not only dealing with the loss of her mother but with the guilt of being the one to pull the trigger. These inner feelings can isolate a young person, especially Lily's age. Grief is complicated to understand and deal with, and Lily deals with it alone. She, at 14 years old, contemplates her death in the hopes of reuniting with her mother and no longer being alone.

Quote 2:

“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 (Chapter 8, 148).”

This passage intertwines the novel's title, *The Secret Life of Bees*, with Lily's secret life. The bees serve as a metaphor for the things that people deal with in silence, the unnoticed battles. When Lily arrives at the Boatwright's house, she hides her identity and lies about her situation. Most people don't know or care to understand what goes on within a bee hive, much like how people are oblivious to the internal state of others. This idea comforts Lily and finally makes her feel seen. August, a role model in Lily's life, appreciates the work done inside a bee hive and reaps the honey reward from their hard work.

Quote 3:

At the end of Chapter 12, "Every person on the face of the earth makes mistakes, Lily. Every last one.

We're all so human. Your mother made a terrible mistake, but she tried to fix it (August)."

"Goodnight," I said, and rolled onto my side.

"There is nothing perfect," August said from the doorway.

"There is only life (256)."

At this point in the novel, Lily finally tells August that she shot her mother, and August responds to her with love and wisdom. Throughout the book, Lily struggles with her identity and self-forgiveness. This passage is significant because August acknowledges life's imperfections and tells Lily that our mistakes and flaws make us human. Yes, her mother made a mistake, but she came back to fix it out of love. August reminds Lily that life has its ups and downs; these things are inevitable. Lily seems to dismiss August's wise words as a teenager, but this talk sparks Lily's healing journey. August has instilled the concept of compassion and forgiveness towards the flaws of human nature. Ultimately leading her towards the acceptance that both her mother and she are entangled in the shared experience of being human.

Classroom Use:

The novel *The Secret Life of Bees* deals with race, identity, sisterhood, and the complexity of family issues, making it a great book to introduce to teenage students. The protagonist, Lily, goes on a

journey of self-discovery with substantial family issues. Fighting with parental figures and struggling to know who you are resonates with a teen audience. Unfortunately, there are plenty of teens out there who relate to being abused verbally and physically by their immediate family members. The number of teens who feel unloved and unseen is too high. This novel would be an excellent tool to get students to see each other as individual human beings. As a high schooler, Lily goes through massive inner turmoil until she runs away and finds peace in a black female community that helps her deal with her trauma. The context of the Civil Rights movement introduces historical and social themes. The Boatwright sisters are significant symbols of female empowerment and were successful black women in the 1960's. This is particularly significant in fostering self-esteem and resilience among teen girls, especially women of color. Kidd doesn't give the Boatwright a narrative of a peaceful life from the jump. Instead, she explains the trials and tribulations of the Boatwright sisters and lets their journey to where they are now symbolize strength and courage. August becomes a mentor for Lily and guides her through womanhood. Discussing these societal issues from the 1960s can further teens' understanding of injustice and race issues while acknowledging the strength of those who suffer injustice.

Teaching ideas and introducing the book:

For this novel, I would have my students silently write about who they are and what makes up their identity. They will most likely write down all the positive things that have happened in their lives and the things they like the most about themselves. I would encourage them to acknowledge the 'bad' things that have benefitted them. It is always easier to see the good in the good and more challenging to see the good in the bad. This project would emphasize everything that makes you who you are and the importance of being at peace with the past. For example, I love how kind I am to others, but I wouldn't be this kind if I weren't treated so poorly in my teen years. For the context of the social climate, I would play some videos about the civil rights movement. The novel discusses voting rights and has important scenes that follow two days after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law in 1964. Watching videos and providing articles to read while bridging the gap between the novel and the historical context.

Why should you give this book to teens?

The novel *The Secret Life of Bees* deals with race, identity, sisterhood, and the complexity of family issues, making it a great book to introduce to teenage students. The movie adaptation does not do the book justice.

- Because teens who feel unseen by their parents or adult figures can see themselves in this novel.
- Because women of color can see the resilience and strength, the Boatwright sisters demonstrate throughout the novel.
- By the end of this novel, those who can't relate to social and race issues can gain a deeper understanding of injustice and civil rights.
- This novel teaches teens how to forgive themselves and others due to the flaws of human nature.

The novels have multiple positive messages for teens and serve as a reminder to be compassionate toward yourself and others. Community is essential, and love is powerful.

How does it fit best into Chapters 4-8 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*?

Chapter 4: “Books about Real-Life Experiences”

- *The Secret Life of Bees* deals directly with real-life experiences like race issues, suicide, and police brutality. The author, Kidd, does not shy away from the reality of racism and prejudice. Multiple passages emphasize the pain and trials of black Americans in the 1960's amid the Civil Rights Movement. August Boatwright is portrayed as a strong black woman who owns her own business, unwavering from her positive outlook on life. Another Boatwright sister, May, cannot ignore the brutality of life and wears her depression and grief on her sleeve, showing another tangible outcome of their journey. The last Boatwright sister, June, acknowledges how life has

treated her, stays angry at white people, and is constantly on the verge of rage. All three sisters show the reality of life and the different roads, either depression, anger, or happiness, that each takes to cope and formulate their identity due to the trials of life.

- Lily, specifically in *The Secret Life of Bees*, deals with domestic abuse, family issues, grieving a loved one, and suicidal thoughts. At the beginning of the novel, we find out that Lily, as a child, has shockingly killed her mother. Gun violence is predominant in domestic violence cases, and often, children are put in the middle of adult arguments. Lily not only deals with the grief of losing her mother but also the subsequent loss of her father and the guilt of it all.

Quantitative:

Word Count: 93,316

Page Count: 336.

Lexile: Ages 15- 18. 840L

AR: ATOS reading level 5.7, Interest level: upper grades (UG 9-12). AR Points: 15.

Dale-Chall: 5-6 grade level. Readability: Age 9-15.

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 5 grade.

Overall, I would recommend *The Secret Life of Bees* to 9th graders.

Qualitative:

Levels of meaning:

- This novel mentions violence and abuse, fueled by prejudice and anger.
 - With this theme, the novel dives deeper into how to deal with grief, anger, and forgiveness.
 - Life does not hold back, it is up each individual to deal with these internal issues and chose a path of healing.
 - The significance of this message is that when life gives you lemons, you make the best lemonade out of it that you can. Healing from trauma is essential to setting yourself free from the anger that tries to envelope life.

Structure:

- There are 14 chapters in this book.
- The narrative is told from a first person point of view through 14 year old Lily. Supported with dialogue from multiple side characters in the story, August, T. Ray, May, Zach, and June.
- There are flashback memories from the main character that emphasize Lily's trauma and the internal conflict she has with her guilt and identity.
 - For example, Lily relives the moment that she shot her mom three different times in the novel. Demonstrating the long-term effects of trauma and the importance of dealing with grief and forgiving your past.
- There are a variety of sentence structures, mostly accessible, casual language that allows the reader to follow the story and relate.

Language conventionality and clarity:

- The language in this novel is very easy to understand.
 - Since the novel revolves around race issues, there is some explicit language, including several mentions of the N word. Damn and asshole are also mentioned by Lily's abusive father.
 - This explicit language fueled the banning of *The Secret Life of Bees* in southern states such as Texas in 2015.
 - Some figurative language includes metaphors, personification, and imagery. The title itself is a metaphor for Lily's life.

Knowledge Demands:

- The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and knowledge of the social climate in the South is very important to understanding the novel. Slight context is given and Lily provides insight to how a white child in the 1960's would be confused over the argument of human rights.
 - For example, in chapter one Rosaleen and Lily are watching tv as the news reports that the President has signed into law the Civil Rights Act. Lily doesn't know if she should be worried for Rosaleen or excited and Rosaleen is over the moon about being able to vote.

This is crucial info for understanding what happens to Rosaleen when they go into town to vote.