

SUMMER READING STUDY GUIDE

***THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES* by Sue Monk Kidd**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Monk Kidd listened to her father's stories growing up in the tiny town of Sylvester, Georgia. Teachers encouraged her to write her own stories and keep journals. She graduated from Texas Christian University in 1970 with a degree in Nursing, working throughout her twenties as a registered nurse on surgical and pediatric hospital units, and as a college nursing instructor. She met and married Sanford Kidd, a graduate student in theology, and had two children. The pull to writing returned, and she took writing classes. She soon began a career as a freelancer, writing personal experience articles, and found immediate success. Her first book was a spiritual memoir describing her advent into contemplative Christian spirituality, *God's Joyful Surprise* (Harper 1988). After writing books about theology, she enrolled in a graduate writing course at Emory University and also studied at Sewanee and other writers' conferences. In 1997 she began writing her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. Other novels she has published include *The Mermaid Chair* and *The Invention of Wings*. She lives in Southwest Florida with her husband, Sandy.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Secret Life of Bees, set in the American South in 1964 amid racial unrest, tells the coming-of-age story of Lily Owens, a white 14-year-old girl who is searching for the truth about her deceased mother. She lives on a peach farm with her cruel father, T. Ray.

In the summer of 1964, Lily accompanies the family's black housekeeper, Rosaleen, to town to register to vote. Taunted by white men, Rosaleen is beaten, taken to jail, and later to the hospital. T. Ray reacts by punishing Lily, prompting her to run away. Back with Rosaleen, she heads to South Carolina to investigate her mother's picture of a black Madonna with the words "Tiburon, SC" written on the back. In a store she sees jars of honey with the same picture, leading her to the Boatwright sisters—August, June, and May—who raise bees and harvest honey, live in a bright pink house, and practice their own religion. Though the sisters provide a loving home for Lily, she is reluctant to ask about her mother. She befriends Zach, a boy who works with the bees, and witnesses additional examples of racism in the town. Eventually, she learns the truth about her mother.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Secret Life of Bees is set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement in the tumultuous summer of 1964. Minority groups in America, especially African-Americans, believed they were being denied the basic human rights provided for other American citizens by the U.S. Constitution, through the legacy of slavery and racism that accompanied the formation of this country. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 fueled fears that the civil rights work he initiated for American minorities would be lost. Yet in his first address to Congress, Lyndon Baines Johnson, the new President, urged for the passage of a civil rights bill that would further the progress made under Kennedy. The original purpose of the congressional bill, which became law as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was to provide protection for black men from discrimination based upon race, and was expanded to protect women from discrimination as well. Under this act, racial segregation and the infamous "Jim Crow" laws were declared abolished. When the Civil Rights Act passed, as illustrated in the story, many whites were angered by it, and continued to treat African-Americans cruelly. Despite the action and progress addressed in the new laws, racial tensions mounted. Racism persisted as a deep root in American society, despite political movements and social change. Other events make the 60s a compelling time in American history. The escalation of and subsequent protests against the Vietnam War; the continuation of the Cold War, manifested through the race to conquer space; and the changes in popular culture—rock and roll, the sexual revolution and the overall antiestablishment atmosphere—contributed to this volatile period.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY QUESTIONS

The Secret Life of Bees intertwines historical events with the study of honey bees. Before each chapter, Monk Kidd includes a fact about bees' life cycles or honey production, based on resources she lists at the end of the book. The Study Questions are organized chronologically by chapter.

Be sure you read The Penguin Reader's Guide at the end of the book. It includes a Conversation with Sue Monk Kidd and Questions for Discussion.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

1. What is the meaning of swarming bees?
2. What does Lily remember about the day her mother died?
3. Be able to describe Lily's life at home and at school.
4. What objects does Lily treasure that are connected to her mother?
5. What do you learn about T. Ray when he tells Lily "You act no better than a slut"? How does he punish her?
6. How does Rosaleen respond when a group of men challenge her as she attempts to register to vote?

Chapters 2-3

1. What happens after Rosaleen is arrested?
2. What does T. Ray tell Lily about her mother? How do you think she feels?
3. What decision does Lily make about Rosaleen?
4. Why do Rosaleen and Lily quarrel?
5. What does Lily learn about Madonna Honey?

Chapter 4

1. Who lives at August Boatwright's house?
2. What does Lily tell August about her identity?
3. Be able to describe the statue that Lily sees at the Boatwright's.
4. What is unusual about the rock wall on August's property?

Chapter 5

1. What does Lily learn about the role that honey plays in the Boatwright's life?
2. What is unusual about May?
3. Who is unhappy about Lily staying with the family? Why? How does Lily react?
4. What is the name of the black statue of Mary?
5. What more does Lily learn about the rock wall on the property?

Chapter 6

1. Who is Neil?
2. What is the story of Our Lady of Chains? Why was it given that name?
3. What happens to Lily when she tries to reach out to the statue?

Chapter 7

1. Who is Zach Taylor? How does Lily get to know him and what are her feelings toward him?
2. “Lily, I like you better than any girl I’ve ever known, but you have to understand, there are people who would kill boys like me for even looking at girls like you.” What does this comment say about the social climate of the times?
3. What gift does Zach give Lily? Why?

Chapter 8

1. Why is the Black Madonna label on the honey jars?
2. What does Our Lady of Chains represent to August?
3. What are some of the secrets that Lily learns about bees?
4. What month would Lily have picked to be named for? Why?
5. What rumor is the town stirred up about? What do they plan to do about it?
6. What is the question that Lily asks T. Ray to answer?

Chapter 9

1. What is a sign that the tensions between Lily and June are thawing?
2. What does Lily learn about her mother?
3. What happens to Zach when he goes to town with Lily? How does May react to the news about Zach?

Chapter 10

1. Why does May not return from visiting her wall?
2. What does the policeman advise Lily about the Boatwright’s?
3. What advice does May’s note give to her sisters?

Chapters 11-12

1. What are Zach’s plans for the future?
2. What is Mary Day? How do the Boatwright sisters celebrate it and what is its significance in the novel?
3. Why is Lily worried about Zach? What does he promise her?
4. Lily and August finally have their talk. What does August reveal? What does Lily reveal?
5. When Lily learns the truth about her mother, she thinks, “Knowing can be a curse on a person’s life. I’d traded in a pack of lies for a pack of truth.” How is she coping with this knowledge? What is she feeling now?

Chapters 13-14

1. What do the Daughters of Mary do after they remove the statue from the honey house?
2. What items does August give Lily? Do these items change her opinion of her mother?
3. What does Lily learn about a hive when the queen has died?
4. What does August mean when she tells Lily she has to “find a mother inside yourself”? What are the characteristics August tells Lily she needs?
5. What happens when T. Ray shows up?
6. Why does Lily chase after T. Ray?
7. Describe Lily’s life now that fall arrives in Tiburon.