



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on August 12, 2011

“The Help” — A Review

Kathryn Stockett could not have written *The Help* 50 years ago. Which is the point of the story. But the Jackson, Mississippi, native has joined Margaret Mitchell, Harper Lee, Donna Tartt, and a few others on the list of Southern women writers whose first, and sometimes only, novels have become instant bestsellers. Perhaps because the American South is unique in its culture and history, it continues providing fodder for great stories. Stockett's 2009 debut novel has spent 116 weeks on the USA Today bestseller list and before the manuscript was even completed, the author's lifelong friend Tate Taylor snagged it to make into a movie. Taylor served as the film's director, guiding it to completion almost as true to a book as a movie can get.



On the surface, the story is about Southern white society in Jackson, Mississippi, and the black domestic help who serve it. Set in the early 1960s, it is told first through the almost pitch-perfect voice of Aibileen (played by Viola Davis), a black maid, who becomes convinced to aid young Jackson Junior Leaguer Skeeter (Emma Stone) in writing a book about "what it feels like to be a black maid working for a white woman in Jackson."

Skeeter gets the idea for a book after hearing her friend Hilly Holbrook propose the "Home Health Sanitation Initiative," and realizing how hurtful the idea was to Hilly's maid, who is Aibileen. Neither knows where the book will take them, but Aibileen's best friend, no-nonsense Minnie (Octavia Spencer) has a good idea. Jim Crow laws at the time declared it illegal for any of them to participate in such "rabble-rousing," yet the three women conspire to write in secret a book that will turn Jackson on its ear.

Every single actor delivers brilliant performances, but of particular note is that of Jessica Chastain, who plays a young broken-hearted Southern woman, Celia Foote, who, try as she might, just cannot break into Jackson society. She develops an unlikely bond with Minnie, who is so sassy she cannot keep a job. The two, rejected by white Jackson, become each other's salvation, as Minnie softens to Celia, and Celia becomes dependent on Minnie. Chastain is spectacular in the role.

Sissy Spacek has a secondary role as Hilly's slightly wacky but likeable mother, and her performance is wonderful. Hilly, the antagonist — played by Bryce Dallas Howard, who has perhaps the most difficult task of portraying the town shrew, the woman you love to hate — splendidly performs her role as the doer of all things hateful in Jackson. "Miss Hilly" is unspeakably mean to her black maids, and eventually turns on even her best friend, Skeeter — who has bucked the Old Guard to stand up and do the right things.

Allison Janney, Mary Steenburgen, Leslie Jordan, and finally, Cicely Tyson, round out a perfectly cast



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ensemble who portray the uniquely Southern characters.

But underneath, the story is really about courage. Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minnie find they've embarked on a perilous mission just in order to tell the story, and their efforts have a price. As the civil rights movement is shifting the paradigm for the South, these women choose to take on the uncertainties of exposing the hegemony of white Jackson; however, more than that, they question the roles that seem to have been predetermined for them. Skeeter chooses to write rather than seek a husband; Aibileen chooses to use her life standing against the abuse that cost her only son his life; and as for Minnie — well, Minnie learns that all white people are not the enemy.

The story is compelling, funny, sad, touching, stinging, and heartbreaking. Because of these complex emotions and the presentation of complicated social situations, suggestions of domestic violence, and the unfortunate use of profanity, *The Help* is not suitable for children, and even though it carries a PG-13 rating, is quite adult in its themes. Thankfully, the story portrays no sexual scenes, though it does include a slightly graphic scene of a miscarried baby, and the resulting heartbreak of its mother.

Because the relationships in the movie are about women — mothers and daughters, employers and employees, wives and friends, as also black maids with the white children they raise — there's a risk that this film will be labeled just another Southern "chick flick." But its theme of courage and standing for what's right raises it above that genre.

As a daughter of Dixie, this writer found *The Help* to be poignant and painful, in its reminders of race relations in the South just 50 short years ago. Stockett and Taylor, along with a spectacular cast, and an entirely believable setting, succeeded in capturing a piece of history that is a bit close to home, but a hopeful lesson in what a few brave souls can do when it comes to setting things right.



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