

Not Helpful

Name: _____

Period: _____

Making kids read *The Help* is not the way to teach them about the civil rights struggle.

By Jessica Roake



Photo by Dale Robinette/DreamWorks II Distribution Co. LLC

In September, 10th-grade students at a Maryland private school were asked to write a historical essay about the black experience in the South during the Jim Crow era with "specific examples of prejudice" taken from their summer reading text. The three books the students could choose from were presented as equally valid sources for an American history essay on Jim Crow. The books: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, and *The Help*.

The idea of introducing students to the history of America's own violent, terror-driven apartheid era through a reading list that is two-thirds books written from the white perspective by white authors is absurd; the idea that *The Help* should be used as some kind of primary text for understanding the black experience in this country is ludicrously offensive. Yet *The Help* in particular has turned up on many reading and resource lists for English and history classes in recent years, and some teachers use the book and its movie adaptation as a way to explore the civil rights movement. One high school in Ohio assigned the book as the lone summer reading for every English class, from ninth-grade language arts through 12th-grade British literature. School reading guides and online study sites are filled with questions about the state of race relations in 1963 Mississippi, with answers drawn only from the "history" presented in *The Help*. One teacher on E-notes reassures a student asking about historical fiction that *The Help* is "considered to be [a] reliable account of the events and emotions of the times."

The Help follows an aspiring writer, Skeeter, as she realizes the injustices suffered by the black women who have raised white children—including herself—for generations. Skeeter undertakes a secret project: stories from the perspective of "the help" (parts of the book are written in the "dialect" of Aibileen and Minnie, the two principal black characters). In the process, Aibileen shares her pain, Skeeter gets to move to New York, and Minnie bakes a pie so humiliating that it shames the white villainess, Hilly, into keeping their identities secret. Though Aibileen is fired and must leave the little white girl who loves her, she feels "lighter" and decides to be a writer herself. The book aims to assure readers that the lines that divide people are, as Aibileen says, "in our heads. Lines between black and white ain't there neither. Some folks just made those up, long time ago. And that go for the white trash and the so-ciety ladies too."

Like *The Help*? Fine. *The Help* is a readable, sometimes charming, sentimental work of fiction, and this is not a critique of its merits as a novel. Want to use *The Help* to teach about the civil rights movement or the history of American race relations? No. As a work of history, or even historical fiction, *The Help* is at best a gross oversimplification and at worst a horrible lie of a book. When *The Help* is used as an educational resource, the terror-filled realities of the time are glossed over or omitted in favor of a heartwarming—and entirely fictional—idea that racial equality came about because white people realized their unfairness and did something about it. The book pervasively downplays hard-won victories within the black community by transferring ownership of momentous societal shifts to good-hearted white Mississippians. What kind of historical understanding can we expect of students fed these kinds of fictions?

It's easy to see why *The Help* is appealing to many teachers and curriculum committees. Kathryn Stockett's writing is accessible, and it must be a relief for beleaguered teachers to present material that's already familiar to students thanks to the Oscar-winning film. (Plus, screening the movie takes up three full 45-minute periods.) And *The Help*'s neat narrative enforces a noble idea of history: When a minority group peacefully demands full status and rights, the American people,

as a whole, always come to understand that it is only right, proper, and American to treat people equally. It is an attitude that doesn't dwell in details or complicated counter-narratives. It's easy to understand this kind of history and easy to teach. But aside from being willfully oblique, this idea of history also denies the ignoble aspect of our American story, the part that makes history whole and real. The larger American culture may often deny history's harder realities, but it is essential that teachers do better.

The problem in 1963 Mississippi wasn't solely that the Aibileens and Minnies carried the inhuman burden of the mammy. It was a set of objective circumstances that were horrifically violent and dehumanizing. Jim Crow was a time of systematic oppression, when an entire population was terrorized because of the color of their skin. Lines were not, as Stockett has Aibileen say, in anyone's head. They were real. Rape, lynchings, firebombings, beatings, burnings, and police brutality were used as tools to control a group of people whose continued subjugation fueled a racist culture and economy.

And Mississippi? A state, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression"? Mississippi was the most dangerous state in the country for anyone seeking racial justice. Between Reconstruction's end and the early '60s, according to historian Charles Payne, the state recorded 539 lynchings, the highest rate in the country. In 1963, the year in which *The Help* is set, there were 21 reported acts of violence that fell within the FBI's definition of terrorism—shootings, firebombs, murders—in Mississippi, more than any other state. And though this number comes from the exhaustively researched *Political Violence and Terrorism in Modern America: A Chronology*, the actual number of racially motivated crimes is undoubtedly far higher, as many crimes—like rape, assault, and harassment—often went unreported, unprosecuted, or completely ignored by complicit police. In March of 1963, after a particularly gruesome spate of attacks on civil rights workers, the Commission on Civil Rights recommended withholding federal funds from Mississippi for being "in defiance of the Constitution." Mississippi was the front line for virulent, headline segregationists and an epicenter of racial violence.

When not employing outright Klan-style violence, groups like the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and the White Citizens' Council silenced integrationists, civil rights workers, and even moderate sympathizers through the more genteel power structures—banks, courts, businesses, and politicians—they ran. Everything from libel and blackmail to severe economic reprisals and police violence were used on anyone remotely connected to integration. Historian Joseph Crespiro writes, "Because of the Council's influence, no place in the United States ... came closer to resembling the repressiveness of apartheid South Africa than did Mississippi."

The White Citizens' Council is the group to which *The Help*'s villain, Hilly Holbrook, belongs, and though she is a vile creature, she is ultimately silenced through the subversive actions of two black women. This kind of resolution trivializes the power of the White Citizens' Council—essentially a racist cabal of upper-class Southern whites—and diminishes the tremendous courage and sacrifice of the real people who fought this power. The problem was not that a few bad apples like Hilly Holbrook were especially cruel to their maids. Hilly Holbrook would have been one of countless white citizens who enforced a racist caste system, decades in the making, that crushed resistance through reprisal and violence. Brave individuals risked everything to fight this brutal repression, and their struggle demands an accurate historical telling. These gains were not achieved through sympathetic white girls and poop pies.

There are so many excellent books that use the power of narrative to bolster historical understanding—books that are richer, deeper, and just so much better than *The Help*. Those seeking fiction that focuses on Jim Crow and racial injustice can read *Invisible Man*, *The Street*, *Passing*, or the more recent *Bombing*. For riveting, narrative nonfiction about the forces and shifts that shaped race in this century, *Sons of Mississippi* and *The Warmth of Other Suns* are essential. Anne Moody's memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is a vivid, historically detailed look at black life in rural Mississippi, written by a woman whose involvement in the civil rights movement is made all the more remarkable because of the often terrifying historical context she provides. * *She Would Not Be Moved* sheds fresh light on Rosa Parks and dissects the sexism and racism that transformed a dedicated activist into a tired old lady in the public eye. James Baldwin's writing remains clear, compelling, and moving, and *The Fire Next Time* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are classics. *12 Million Black Voices* presents lives of black people—in both the rural South and urban North—in the 1930s, with prose by Richard Wright accompanying powerful photographs by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, among others. Of course, there are even more unsettling stories, like *Your Blues Aren't Like Mine* and the lyrical *A Breath for Emmet Till*, but because they seek to capture the brutality and ugliness of Jim Crow, they're often deemed too disturbing for students—which should be the point but is often the problem.