

## Not Helpful

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

By Jessica Roake

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In September, 10<sup>th</sup>-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 12<sup>th</sup>-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 perversely 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?