

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 counternarratives. 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 legalized system of oppression that ruled the South for more than 100 years was not undone by white girls and their mammies.

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, hardline 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 Crespino** writes, "Because of the Council's influence, no place in the United States ... came closer to resembling the repressiveness of apartheid South African 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