



# The Help

Rated PG-13. Our Ratings: V-3; L -3; S/N -2.. Running time: 2 hours 17 min.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;the Lord loves the righteous.The Lord watches over the strangers;he upholds the orphan and the widow,but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.Psalm 146:7b-9

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.

Proverbs 31:8

Considerable controversy has erupted around Kathryn Stockett's best selling *The Help*, a novel set in 1963-64 Jackson, Mississippi about three women. Recent college graduate Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (Emma Stone), a member of upper crust society apparently has been liberalized by her out of state education and sets out to convince two "colored" maids to reveal to her their experiences for a proposed book. Aibileen (Viola Davis) and her best friend Minny (Octavia Spencer), well aware of the danger to themselves and their families, are two maids that are extremely reluctant at first to cooperate, but slowly come around. With filmmaker Tate Taylor's adaptation being released there is even more criticism of the work. Having been enamored of the novel, and only a little disappointed at the film because of its prettied up ending, I had half-completed a review full of praise for the work that largely ignored the criticism. Then I saw Tulane Professor Melissa Harris Perry's savaging of the film on Lawrence O'Donnell's *The Last Word*. Full of admiration for her insightful remarks on other subjects when she was a frequent guest of both Mr. O'Donnell's and of "The Rachel Madow Show," I felt it necessary to lay aside what I had written and start over. The criticism from others that a white woman ought not to be writing about the black experience can easily be dismissed because it ignores an author's imagination and ability to emphasize with someone of a different sex, color or culture. How poorer we would have been if Tolstoy had not written *Anna Karenina* or Harper Lee *To Kill a Mockingbird* merely because they were not of the same sex as their protagonists! Prof. Perry's charge that the story gives a false picture of history and trivializes the Civil Rights struggle is a more serious charge, one that drew me up short because over 40 years ago I participated in a small way in that struggle, traveling in 1964 with a friend to volunteer for the Mississippi Summer Project sponsored by a coalition of civil rights organizations known as COFO. The film's Aibileen and Minny reminded me of some of the black women I met back then. Upon first meeting they were very deferential to us as whites, but when they learned that we were with the Movement, their servile demeanor vanished. We learned the truth of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem: "WE wear the mask that grins and lies, It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,— This debt we pay to human guile;" The book and film gets this right, especially in its depiction of Aibileen who cannot but help overhear the racist remarks of the gossipy white ladies playing bridge while she serves them refreshments. Aibileen works for Elizabeth Leefolt (Ahna O'Reilly), a shallow woman who avoids caring for her toddler daughter whom she regards as too chubby to be "adorable." To counter the mother's neglect, Aibileen daily looks into face of little Mae Mabley (Elinor and Emma Henley) and tells her that she is a good and worthy person. Left out, unfortunately, are the little anti-racist stories that she tells the child in the hope that they will undermine the racism fed to her by her parents and society. (I love the name of the hero in one of them, a sci-fi tale, *Martian Luther King!*) During a bridge party at Elizabeth's home Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard) does not care if the maid overhears her obsessing aloud that every white home should be required to have a separate bathroom for "the help" to avoid the danger of contamination. Aibileen ignores the slights and insults of Hilly, whereas her short-tempered friend Minny is frequently out of work because she talks back. How she gets even with Hilly for firing her results in an amusing

episode that makes Miss Jane Pittman's spitting into a spiteful white woman's cup of water seem almost benevolent. Prof. Perry stated that the novel/film trivializes and falsified the history of the Civil Rights movement is partly based on what she regards as the too brief depiction of the news of the murder in Jackson of NAACP President Medgar Evers. There is some basis for this charge, and even more so, I felt in that no mention whatever is made of the preparation by the black community for COFO's "Mississippi Summer Project." The publication of the book, also called *The Help*, takes place sometime in the first half of 1964, so the two events are contemporaneous. The coming to the state of almost a thousand white college students, ministers, lawyers, teachers, and doctors was major news in and out of Mississippi. The state's media was full of apocalyptic articles about this "invasion," and COFO's headquarters (located appropriately on Jackson's Lynch Street) was frequently the target of bricks and a bomb. And yet none of this was mentioned in the book or the film. (Spoiler follows) I was also, as mentioned earlier, disappointed that the film depicts Skeeter's racist mother as mellowing and, upon her daughter's leaving for a publishing job in NYC, coming over to her side and declaring how proud she is of what she has done. Giving in to the desire for a happy ending was a bit of a betrayal of the book and lessened the sense of the cross born by so many whites who found themselves cut off from their families when they broke free of the bonds of racism. This "cross" is better depicted in an earlier film about a maid and her employer, the beautifully understated *The Long Walk Home*. *The Help* is similar to *Driving Miss Daisy* in that each is a work by a white person who wants us to feel good about race relations. The latter came out in 1989, the same year in which Spike Lee's far darker *Do the Right Thing* was released. Just as Lee's film gave a truer picture of race relations in America, so does the cable film *Freedom Song* (partially produced by its star Danny Glover) give a fuller picture of the cost for Mississippi blacks of the struggle for equal rights. Nonetheless *The Help* is well worth seeing and discussing. Despite its flaws, the story is filled with moments of grace and of confrontation. Although the character of Hilly is flat, with few if any redeeming traits revealed, that of Aibileen and Minny is shown in depth. The charge that this is another film in which a white person must "save" the blacks is a bit unfair, in that sometimes the oppressed do accept their situation with little thought of changing things until someone or some event from the outside leads them to see their situation in a different light or perspective. On the last night in Mississippi of my friend and myself two elderly ladies came up to us after the freedom rally. One said, "We thank God that y'all came down here and opened our eyes. Now we see that we don't have to put up with things the way they are." The other said, "I might not live to see it, but my children and grandchildren will see the day of freedom." A major theme in the book that survived the transformation into film is the role of the church. Although Hilly claims to be a "Christian," we never see her or Skeeter attending church, but we certainly see that Aibileen and Minny are active church members. The brief portion of their pastor's sermon shown is a fine summation of Dr. King's non-violence ethic, and the celebration at church of the publication of the maids' book is a beautiful moment of solidarity. Flawed or not, *The Help* can be the occasion for looking back to see where we were as a nation, how far we have come, and what yet remains to be done to arrive at Dr. King's "the beloved society."

For Reflection/Discussion This will contain spoilers necessary for discussion.

1. You might want to deal first with the criticisms of the book. What do you think of the charge that a white person cannot, or should not, be writing about the black experience? Do you think the book/film trivializes the Civil Rights movement? Or does it show in microcosm how resistance to an oppressive power begins?
2. How do Aibileen and Minny "wear the mask"? How was this used by whites to show that "our coloreds is happy"? That "everything would be fine if those outside agitators would leave us alone."
3. How do you explain Skeeter's being different from Hilly and the other white women? Although not shown, how must her education have been outside the state? How is it often necessary for a person to leave their home environment in order to grow beyond local parochialism? What price does the person usually pay for obtaining a broader perspective? Have you experienced this (assuming that you were educated or worked away from your home town)?
4. What is Celia's problem, and how does Minny help her? How is her character changed somewhat in the film? How is the line between her and Hilly just as rigid as that

between whites and African Americans? On pages 311-312 of the novel there is a scene (left out of the film) in which Minny and Aibileen are talking about Celia and the lines that divide people. We see the wisdom of Aibileen when she observes that the lines don't exist, that they exist only in our minds. What implications does she draw from this—and what truth do you see in this? What lines have been planted in your mind when you were young, and do they still apply—or, if you have erased them, what led you to do so? (A delightful film about crossing lines—or barriers—is the so-called children's film *Babe*.)<sup>5</sup> What role does the church play in the story? How is the pastor's sermon a good summary of the ethics of the Civil Rights movement, at least in 1963 and 1964? How did this change when Stokely Carmichael and others rose to prominence?<sup>6</sup> The pastor also describes courage as “doing right in spite of weakness.” How is this a good description of the situation of the three women? In what ways are they, like the oppressed everywhere, weak? (And this might include Celia also.) What does the choir sing in response to his sermon?<sup>7</sup> What do you think of the way in which sisterhood is depicted? How are men portrayed? Other than the pastor, are they positive figures? We see little of LeRoy, Minny's husband, but what is their relationship? And who helps Minny see that she does not have to continue to submit to him? Is Stuart Whitworth a strong character, or is he merely an extension of his society's racism? Which for him proves stronger—his love or his racism?<sup>8</sup> It is partly Skeeter's desire to find out why, when she was away at college, her beloved Constantine left the family that led to the idea of writing the book. How was the inclusion of the flashbacks to her and Constantine a good addition? How was Constantine like Aibileen? How does the film tone down considerably the circumstances that led to the firing of Constantine?<sup>9</sup> The book better describes the heartbreak that a mammy endures when her small charge grows up and absorbs and is changed by society's racism. How in the film do we see Aibileen trying to counter Elizabeth's attitude toward her little daughter? What do you think of the anti-racism tales she tells the little girl (unfortunately omitted by the filmmakers)? How can such stories be subversive?<sup>10</sup> Going back to Celia, why do you think that she has escaped the racism of her “white trash” background? Note that historically, politicians have used racism to keep poor whites and blacks from uniting against the plantation/business ruling class. (This was especially true in Mississippi when in the late 19th century poor whites and blacks almost came together in a coalition that threatened the ruling class—and then came the revision of the state constitution in the 1890s that wiped out all the gains of the Reconstruction period and kept poor whites and blacks apart.)<sup>11</sup> I was intrigued, especially in the novel, at how many times Minny uses the word “fool.” Using a concordance, check out the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and see how often this word is used in them. How do many of the passages apply to the targets of Minny's displeasure (and in what ways)?<sup>12</sup> What moments of grace do you see in the film? How does what Minny did to Hilly go against these? We find the chocolate pie incident amusing, but when you think about this, how does it go against Minny's faith?<sup>13</sup> How does Hilly show that she is not a person of grace? What does she do when her maid asks for a loan so she can send both of her sons to college? What irony do you see in that her favorite charity is the “Poor Starving Children of Africa”?<sup>14</sup> What do you see the meaning of the last words, “Once I told the truth about that I felt free”?<sup>15</sup> The murder of Medgar Evers is shown as inconveniencing the white passengers on the bus, but how much more momentous was it for the African Americans? An excellent film depicting Evers last years as state NAACP president and how he was able to learn from the students whom he mentored is *For Us the Living* (thus far available only on VHS, which can be bought through Amazon.com). Then a good follow-up to this would be *Ghosts of Mississippi*, telling the story of how the persistent Mrs. Evers and a white states attorney finally brought the killer to justice.<sup>16</sup> Other films worth exploring: *The Long Walk Home* starring Whoopi Goldberg and Sissy Spacek as a maid and mistress who are changed by the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Also, the superb *Freedom Song* in which early in 1963 an African American father clashes with his teenaged son over the latter's desire to join the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee's desegregation campaign in Mississippi.<sup>17</sup> Check out Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem “We Wear the Mask” and see how he ties it in with Christ, making a prayer not unlike some of the psalms in which a distressed person cries to God for help.

Note that there is an even more comprehensive Bible study guide for this film at [www.edifymedia.com/bible](http://www.edifymedia.com/bible).

“We Wear the Mask” is reprinted from *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Paul Laurence Dunbar. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1913. Many Internet sites feature this.