Kathryn Stockett’s Biography

Born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi, writer and editor Kathryn Stockett earned her undergraduate degree in English and creative writing from the University of Alabama, then headed to New York City with plans to work in publishing. She spent nine years there, working both in magazine publishing and in marketing, before moving to Atlanta, Georgia, where she lives with her husband and daughter. Since moving back to the South, Stockett has been focusing on writing for herself, having shifted her attention to fiction. Her debut novel, The Help, was published by Amy Einhorn Books in 2009, and proved to be one of the hit books of the summer season.

Kathryn Stockett was born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi, where she also grew up. Her parents divorced when she was six and she was raised largely by her grandparents and their maid, Demetrie. Her mother was a young, attractive wild woman who was often travelling with her journalist boyfriend. When Stockett’s father had custody of his kids, he stuck them in one of the Ramada Hotels that he owned. Moving around a lot with almost no parental supervision, Demetrie was the major stabilizing force in Stockett’s young life.

Stockett published her first novel, The Help, in 2009 based on her remembrances of Demetrie and growing up as a white woman in 1970s Jackson, Mississippi. The Help became an instantaneous international hit that continues to hold a spot on the New York Times Bestseller List over two years late. It was then adapted into a Dreamworks movie in 2011.

Stockett’s unexpected success was clouded, however, by a 2011 divorce with her husband of 10 years, tech salesman Keith Rogers. The divorce was amicable and they share custody of their daughter, eight-year-old Lila.
*The Help* garnered instant attention due to its unusual and rarely addressed subject matter: the relationship in the South between white families and the domestic servants, who were primarily black, whom they employed in their homes during the 1960s. Having grown up during this period in Mississippi, Stockett was familiar with the dynamic, but nervous about addressing it in a novel, understanding that it was a controversial subject and could result in criticism from both reviewers and from general readers. In an interview with a writer for BookreporterWeb site, Stockett explained her attitude as a child: "Growing up in Mississippi, almost every family I knew had a black woman working in their house--cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the white children. That was life in Mississippi. I was young and assumed that's how most of America lived." Only after she moved north did Stockett realize that she had grown up in a microcosm, and that her memories of her childhood were not of a universal experience. She found herself reminiscing with other Southerners she met in New York, trading stories about growing up with black domestic help. Gradually, those memories began to spark an idea and she decided to write a story about her relationship with her family's maid when she was a child.

Early on in the writing process, Stockett chose to frame her narrative from the point of view of a black maid. It seemed logical, and she had no qualms about her choice because at the time she did not believe anyone else would ever read the story. Only when she reached the stage of getting friends to look at her work did she start to get nervous about how she had portrayed the characters and whether their voices rang true. Stockett told the interviewer for Bookreporter Web site: "I'll never know what it really felt like to be in the shoes of those black women who worked in the white homes of the South during the 1960s and I hope that no one thinks I presume to know that. But I had to try. I wanted the story to be told. I hope I got some of it right."
In a review for Entertainment Weekly, Karen Valby remarked that "Stockett jumps effortlessly between her women's voices. She has created a world of memorable supporting characters--from the bitch in the Junior League to Skeeter's oilman suitor--to surround them."

Mary Emrick, in a review for the Mississippi Business Journal, dubbed Stockett's effort "a poignant novel that gives us hope for a brighter future of mutual love and respect between the two races." Rebecca Kelm posited and then answered an excellent question in a review for Library Journal: "Is this an easy book to read? No, but it is surely worth reading." A Publishers Weekly reviewer found the book to be "a superb intertwining of personal and political history."
Summary of *The Help*

*The Help*, a first novel from Kathryn Stockett, is the story of a young white woman in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960s and a group of black maids who work for the families of her friends. Stockett writes about the struggles the women face as they chafe against the written and unwritten rules that limit their lives.

*The Help* is set in the early 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi, and told primarily from the first-person perspectives of three women: Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter. Aibileen is an African-American maid who cleans houses and cares for the young children of various white families. Her first job since her own 24-year-old son, Treelore, died from an accident on his job is tending the Leefolt household and caring for their toddler, Mae Mobley. Minny is Aibileen's confrontational friend who frequently tells her employers what she thinks of them, resulting in her having been fired from nineteen jobs. Minny's most recent employer was Mrs. Walters, mother of Hilly Holbrook. Hilly is the social leader of the community, and head of the Junior League.

When Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan returns to her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi fresh from college with a diploma, her mother dismisses it as “a pretty piece of paper.” And so the novel *THE HELP* truly begins, for its Skeeter’s story that drives the pages. It’s the age old story of a child now grown, still hoping to appease an unyielding parent. In this case Charlotte Phelan, who in Skeeter’s eyes is pretty, petite, in short everything a Southern belle should be while Skeeter is not.

Skeeter thinks of herself as too tall, with whitish blond hair that’s too kinky, a nose flawed by having a slight bump along the top and fair skin that’s “downright deathly when I’m serious.”
Although Skeeter enjoys the monthly bridge games with childhood friends Hilly Holbrook and Elizabeth Leefolt, she runs afoul of Hilly when she jokes about the former’s mission to see that all the white residents of Jackson, Mississippi have separate bathrooms outside of their homes for the black help. For as Hilly believes, “everybody knows they (blacks) carry different kinds of diseases than we do.”

Aibileen Clark, the maid waiting on the ladies as they play bridge, overhears Skeeter’s flippant reply. “Maybe we ought to just build you a bathroom outside Hilly.”

That sets off Skeeter and Hilly’s battle of wills throughout the novel. Not only does Skeeter have to endure her mother’s constant criticisms, but also Hilly’s attempts to run her life. Hilly fires the first warning shot, when she threatens to remove Skeeter as the editor of their Junior League’s newsletter for her untimely joke. For Hilly is hell bent on having her *Home Help Sanitation Initiative* bill placed into law.

A somewhat dejected Skeeter tries to engage Aibileen in conversation once they’re in Elizabeth Leefolt’s kitchen by themselves. Skeeter notes the radio station Aibileen’s listening to, telling her the preacher’s sermon reminds her of the station her childhood maid, Constantine always listened to. Skeeter also tries to broach the subject of Hilly’s sanitation bill, and wonders aloud to a woman who’s lived her whole life under segregation “Do you ever wish you could…change things?”

To which Skeeter covertly attempts to do just that.

Though she’s landed a job giving out housekeeping tips for the local paper, Skeeter longs to be a writer. One day, after hearing Aibileen talk about her recently deceased son’s idea to write about his experience as a black worker, Skeeter is encouraged when a New York editor likes her premise of writing about the female domestics in Jackson, Mississippi. For as
Skeeter implores “Nobody ever asked Mammy (*From Gone with the Wind*) how she really felt.”

She enlists the help of Aibileen to gather up more maids so that she can write a manuscript about their experiences as the Help. Aibileen brings along a friend, the sassy Minny Jackson. Minny has lost a number of jobs because of her sharp tongue, yet with a bit of cunning from Aibileen she lands a job with Miss Celia Foote, a woman who’s an outcast in Hilly’s society circle because she ‘s white trash. Minny and Celia begin a wacky relationship, partly because Celia doesn’t want her husband to know she’s enlisted a maid to help her around the house.

As Skeeter’s manuscript on the domestics takes shape, she also finds progress in her love life once Hilly sets her up on a blind date with a state senator’s son. Stuart Whitworth appears to be the answer to both Skeeter and her demanding mother’s prayers. Because by now Charlotte Phelan has been diagnosed with cancer. Skeeter retreats to a time when she was most comfortable, under the care of the loving maid Constantine. So while she peppers Aibileen with questions over Constantine’s rather abrupt departure, Aibileen silently mourns her son’s untimely death. To compensate for her loss, Aibileen develops a strong, loving bond with Miss Leefolt’s daughter Mae Mobley, and her attempts to teach the child how to potty underscore the absurdity of having an outhouse strictly for the Help. In one scene, Mae Mobley refuses to use the toilet, insisting that Aibileen go first.

There are several relationships woven throughout the novel. Skeeter and her mother, Skeeter and Hilly, Skeeter and the black maids, Skeeter and Stuart Whitworth. Though she dare not tell Stuart what she’s working on, he appears supportive of her quest to become a writer. Stuart even tells her she’s pretty, something Skeeter has waited all her life to hear. The other relationships include Minny and Miss Celia, Minny and her abusive husband Leroy,
and Minny’s friendship with Aibileen. Aibileen in turn develops a growing admiration for Skeeter, a close friendship with Minny, and motherly affection for the love starved daughter of frazzled housewife Elizabeth Leefolt, two year old Mae Mobley.

When Skeeter misplaces a satchel filled with research information crucial to her novel, Hilly finds it and demands to know what she’s up to. Because she has to grovel in front of Aibileen, Skeeter gets a taste of what the black help go through. Skeeter lies and pretends her literature is nothing of importance and turns the conversation back to Hilly’s stress over her husband’s political ambitions. But with each lie and hidden meetings with her African American confidants, Skeeter is drawn more and more into seeing how unfair the system of segregation is.

As the novel ends, Skeeter learns the part her mother played in Constantine’s decision to leave their employ. And once her book, apply titled Help is published, its thinly veiled descriptions of actual residents causes a ripple effect, enveloping everyone who reads it. Minny’s husband is fired from his job because of her participation in crafting the book. She finally decides to leave him after he takes his anger out her one too many times. Skeeter and Stuart’s engagement is called off the very night he finally gives her a ring, after she reveals the project was her doing. And Hilly threatens to not only sue Skeeter, but to enact revenge on all the maids whose stories are included in the book. In order to dull her bluster, Aibileen counters with the special pie Minny fooled Hilly with. Its seems Minny, a woman well revered as the best cook by far of all the local help was able to prepare a pie which included her own feces in the mix. And unfortunately, Hilly ate two slices.

While Skeeter’s book becomes a best seller, enabling her to finally break free of a still ailing mother and the strict social norms of her town, Aibileen is let go from Elizabeth Leefolt’s household at Hilly’s insistence. Though her heart is heavy at leaving Mae Mobley,
Aibileen is comforted by a new position as the unknown cleaning advice columnist, a position that Skeeter relinquished for a job in New York City. Aibileen, along with all the other maids who contributed to the novel have royalty payments to look forward to, though the amount is not enough to live on. Still, the novel ends on an oddly hopeful note, as Aibileen leaves with her head held high, convinced that she’s not too old to start over.