

The Secret Life of Bees, by Sue Monk Kidd

reviewed by [Ann-Janine Morey](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

Ten years ago Sue Monk Kidd was a traditionally grounded Christian writer. But like her engaging narrator Lily Owens, Kidd is on a spiritual journey, heralded by her 1996 nonfiction work *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* and confirmed in this captivating first novel about love and forgiveness. Guided by bees and a group of women devoted to a black Madonna, 14-year-old Lily Owens embarks upon a spiritual quest that carries her through the shadow of racism and her own spiritual suffering and brings her to adulthood.

The context for her quest is South Carolina in 1964, a transformative year for civil rights. America had survived the fury and sorrow of 1963: the murder of Medgar Evers, the Birmingham church bombing and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The next year brought the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the murder of three civil rights workers. Against this backdrop and often in conversation with these events, Lily and Rosaleen, a black woman who acts as her stand-in mother, flee the dubious charms of Sylvan, South Carolina.

Lily is running away from her father, T-Ray, who seems to care more for his dog than his daughter. She is an articulate, socially awkward teenager whose memory of her mother comes from her fourth year, when her mother was killed in a domestic dispute. Lily suspects she may be partially responsible for her mother's death, and her guilty hunger for parental love is the emotional axis of the novel.

When Rosaleen gets arrested during her attempt to register to vote, Lily liberates her from the hospital where she has been incarcerated, and the fugitives make their way to Tiburon, South Carolina. There a trio of beekeeping sisters, May, June and August, whose self-sufficient business produces Black Madonna honey and a remarkable alternative religious community, takes them in. In the sitting room of the house is a wooden statue of a black Madonna, rescued from an old ship prow. A faded red heart is painted on her breast, and she extends her fisted arm "like she

could straighten you out if necessary." Every evening the sisters kneel and pray before this figure, whom they call "Our Lady of Chains," creating their own liturgy and rituals from a blend of Catholicism, slave stories, African traditions, Judaism and any number of meditative traditions. Every year the household observes "Mary Day," and the legend of the chains is reenacted with music, dance and food.

Lily, a sometime Baptist, is captivated by the woman-centered practices of the "calendar sisters." She learns that traditionally the Madonna is sometimes associated with honey and beekeeping, and she discovers how the creative life of the hive becomes a symbol of the living heart of the great Mother. The hum of the hive is the "oldest sound there was. Souls flying away." Once August's mother heard the bees "singing the words to the Christmas story right out of the gospel of Luke." Indeed, the hidden throb of the hive swells from the place where "everything is sung to life." Like the life-force of bee-hum, Mary's spirit is "hidden everywhere. Her heart a cup of fierceness tucked among ordinary things," observes Lily.

Imperfectly integrated with her spiritual journey is Lily's account of racism, as Rosaleen prepares again to register to vote, and a neighbor is arrested on trumped-up assault charges during an altercation with local racists. Because Lily is so absorbed in her own emotional deprivation, these events finally take on secondary importance, and there is a tidiness to the novel's conclusion that does not do justice to the powerful forces that have been invoked. It's understandable why sister June might have been suspicious of this white girl who wants to listen into their lives and finally take up residence. It's still all about her at the end.

Despite the historical realism of the novel, there is a fairy-tale quality to it. Three wise black women rule a magical universe of sweetness and organic communion and offer their healing to weary travelers. Lily is an appealing narrator, but sometimes she seems much younger than 14 and sometimes much older. August is given to speeches telling us wise things we might better have seen than heard, and I found Mary's identity as the mother of sorrows unconvincing.

But these are minor criticisms. Though adults will find *The Secret Life of Bees* a satisfying read, the clarity of the novel's prose will make it appealing to a younger audience as well. I'll be passing it on to my middle-school daughter for its warm invitation to think about mother love and forgiveness.