

The Help

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

In *The Help*, set during the civil rights era, an aspiring journalist decides to write a book about the African-American domestics in the small Mississippi town where she grew up. The movie, adapted by Tate Taylor from Kathryn Stockett's best seller, is a glossy Hollywood potboiler that uses a serious theme and historical context as cover. It's melodrama passing as drama.

The preposterous fable sets a group of spirited, courageous, loving black women against the white-gloved white women of the Junior League who abuse them. These caricatured villains are led by Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard), who sends her maid, Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer), out in a hurricane to use an outhouse so she won't spread her diseases in the sacred Holbrook bathroom, then fires her summarily when Minny overrides her edict. Doubtless Hilly's mistreatment of Minny is no worse than what many domestics suffered in Mississippi, but the movie piles on so many offenses that Hilly and her cohorts begin to seem like the devil's spawn. The young wife (Ahna O'Reilly) who employs Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) shunts her child onto Aibileen because she has no feeling for her. (She only intervenes to beat the little girl when she embarrasses her.)

Somehow the Junior Leaguers' prejudices have eluded Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (Emma Stone); she seems to have been shipped into town fully evolved from another culture. Skeeter wants to give the black women in her town a voice; she's also determined to find out what happened to Constantine Jefferson, a maid she adored who mysteriously vanished while she was at college. (In her two flashback scenes as Constantine, the legendary Cicely Tyson bestows a grace and dignity on the proceedings that they don't deserve.)

The plotting verges on the lunatic. Skeeter and the maids somehow keep her project secret until the book comes out. The idea that they can pull this off in a goldfish bowl of a town is ridiculous--especially since Skeeter arrives at a Junior League luncheon with a copy of the Mississippi statutes governing nonwhites clearly visible in her mesh handbag. At one point Hilly uses Skeeter's possession of the document

to threaten her, though exactly why anyone would object to a white woman reading the laws of her state isn't clear. (It's not as though the racists of Mississippi are pretending not to enact the Jim Crow laws.) The most scandalous story Skeeter hears involves an act of revenge Minny perpetrates against Hilly that, in the real Mississippi of the 1960s, would get her lynched.

It's appalling to use a chapter in American history that generated so many moving true stories as an excuse to whip one up that's so obviously fraudulent. And *The Help* has a built-in lie detector in the form of Viola Davis, whose characterizations are always so steeped in emotional authenticity that they expose the fakery around her. Davis gives a sensational performance as Aibileen. It's insulting to jack up the scene where Aibileen loses her job by inserting shots of the little white girl she's devoted to wailing and calling out her name. Luckily Davis is a pure emotional force who can't be tainted even by a movie as infuriating as *The Help*.