

# The Help: A civil rights era film that ignores the civil rights movement

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27 August 2011

*Directed by Tate Taylor; screenplay by Taylor, based on the novel by Kathryn Stockett*

*The Help*, based on the best-selling novel by Kathryn Stockett, is a film about race and class relations in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960s. A century after the American Civil War, the work makes clear, African-American women had few options but to labor as exploited domestics for wealthy white families. While socialites entrusted the raising of their children to the maids, the latter were barely able to tend to their own families.

This is provocative and potentially fascinating subject matter. Unfortunately, the film falls short of a credible presentation, as the reality of the situation is not tackled with any degree of seriousness. One of the most jarring elements is the absence of any reference to the mass struggles that shattered the Jim Crow structure in the South at the time, or any indication of their influence and atmosphere. This is not the concern of either the movie or the book. In fact, the book's jacket cover informs the potential reader that "Change begins with a whisper." And elevated to historical catalyst—or whisperer-in-chief—is the middle class do-gooder.

The narrative centers around three characters: Skeeter Phelan (Emma Stone), a recent college graduate from a background of white privilege intent on a career as a journalist, and Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) and Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer), black maids who agree to speak out about their lives at great personal risk. The three embark on a project to write an anonymous exposé.

Aibileen, who has raised 17 white children, acutely feels her lineage as the daughter of a maid and the granddaughter of a house slave. She suffers chronic indignities while attempting to compensate for the emotional blows delivered to the white offspring by their insensitive and absentee parents.

Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard) is the ringleader of a hair-sprayed crowd of Southern belles. One of the charities she hypocritically heads up is Hungry African Children. Her main effort, however, is promoting an initiative to require white families in Jackson to maintain racially segregated toilets in their homes. A wicked, heartless employer, she fires her maids without cause and sees to it that they are unemployable, going so far as to have one jailed for

taking desperate measures to obtain college tuition for her twin sons. The feisty Minny takes her revenge and Hilly's malevolent deeds don't go unpunished.

When Minny is booted out of Hilly's house, she is eventually hired by Celia Foote (Jessica Chastain), the wife of a wealthy businessman, who treats her like a human being. Celia herself is an outcast, whom Hilly views as white trash because of her humble origins and also resents because she secretly carries a torch for Celia's husband.

While there is much focus on Hilly and her band of bigots, the assassination of prominent NAACP leader Medgar Evers in Jackson in June 1963 by a white racist, an earthshaking event in the region, by contrast, is given short shrift by the filmmakers.

*The Help* is not simply a reductive—to say the least—period piece, whose main dynamic is a skirmish between good and evil, with blacks on one side and whites on the other. It rewrites, probably out of light-mindedness and lack of knowledge more than anything else, the history of social struggle in America and postwar history in general. It is not, however, directly for those weaknesses that the film has generated a certain amount of controversy, although one confined to a narrow social segment.

The film's defenders tout it as heartwarming and uplifting, with a Hollywood-type happy ending that symbolizes the progress made since the 1960s. In truth, there are several moving moments and the performances of all the leads are committed and passionate. Though not articulated, the subtext here has much to do with elation over the ethnicity of the present occupant of the White House. After all, the book was published in 2009 and the film released in 2011.

*The Help's* detractors—certain types of "lefts" and culturalist nationalists—complain that the film appropriates and distorts the black experience with the goal of pleasing a complacent, white audience. (One review headline suggests that it is "a feel-good movie for white people.") These elements also claim it is demeaning to portray African-American women in this manner, period dialect and all.

Neither the film's admirers nor critics have an attentive or penetrating insight into history. For one crowd, this episode was an unhappy deviation from the general course of American democracy, warts and all. For the other, it is further proof that America is a hopelessly racist country, as they seek to bolster identity politics and their claim to exclusive rights in the chronicling of African-American

history, as they perceive it. For this lot, it is unforgivable that the film's director and the book's author are white.

Film and book purport to deal with the atrocious reality of racism in the South in the 1960s. No such feat is accomplished. Rather a tepid presentation is offered up in a self-satisfied, albeit well-intentioned, manner.

Life in poverty-stricken Mississippi for much of the 20th century was harsh and oppressive, especially for the black population. From 1882 to 1930, some 537 blacks were lynched in the state, and as late as 1955, 14-year-old Emmitt Till was brutally tortured and murdered. Southern Democratic governors, including Mississippi's Ross Barnett, were semi-fascist types. Beatings, assassinations, such as the murder of Evers, gunned down in the driveway of his home, and Klan violence were quasi-legal, state-approved activities. It took four decades to successfully jail Evers' killer, white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith.

Taylor and Stockett portray the white socialites as the main tormentors of the black population. But in reality, this is the periphery of the periphery. At issue is the ugly face of American capitalism. The violence and terror in the South were not some inexplicable aberration.

The lynchings which swelled horrifically in number in the post-Reconstruction period were rooted in the explosive development of modern American capitalism and the inequality and social misery, and social struggle, it generated. Racism was consciously used as a weapon to divide whites and blacks, and maintain the entire system of class exploitation. Portions of the most backward and oppressed of the white population bought into the racist argument, but economic and social transformation, including the organized rise of the industrial working class in the 1930s and postwar years, undermined the apartheid system—despite the reactionary role of the Democratic Party and the scandalous betrayals of the trade unions.

The movie opens in Jackson in 1962. Very few places and times in American history seethed so with rage and social tensions. This was the context of the Evers assassination, not Hilly's bridge club shenanigans. Further, it has to be said that the film is a sanitized version of the book, which itself offers a sanitized view of the period.

A few horrors described in the book are tellingly omitted from the film. For example, in the novel, a son of one of the maids mistakenly uses a bathroom designated for whites and is chased down, beaten and blinded. And another: the book states that in 1963 a man named Carl Roberts was "found cattle-branded and hung from a pecan tree" for calling the governor "a pathetic man with the morals of a streetwalker." Such politically motivated sadism—all too common at the time—is avoided by the filmmakers. Why?

Hollywood films, even in a frightfully conservative era, were able to deliver far more complex pictures of race and class relations. One could cite, for instance, Douglas Sirk's 1959 masterpiece, *Imitation of Life*, and Raoul Walsh's 1957 *Band of Angels*. Both works, in one fashion or another, point to the source of racism in social relationships and conditions. *The Help*, however, cringes in the face of hard facts and removes the blemishes of its "good" characters, even refusing to

show Minny's husband's transgressions against her on screen.

In several interviews, Stockett states that "I grew up in the 1970s, but I don't think a whole lot had changed from the '60s." Perhaps in her constricted world, this is true. It is also true that no section of the working class has been liberated, although a layer of the black middle class has been cultivated and co-opted by the ruling strata. The titanic battles in the 1960s did make a difference. The black population and its white allies took up a courageous fight that inspired and moved the whole population. It had a worldwide impact.

It is ironic that the filmmakers choose 1963 to illustrate their notion that "Change begins with a whisper." An unfortunate choice! The combined conditions of poverty and racism were provoking a powerful popular response. President John F. Kennedy, whose own murder late in the year spoke to the explosive contradictions of postwar American society, was obliged to order his advisers to look into the conditions of economic deprivation. The government feared that riots would erupt that summer. In fact, some 900 demonstrations took place over civil rights and jobs in 1963 in 100 US cities, culminating in the massive March on Washington in August. *Twenty thousand people* were arrested and 10 killed in the course of those protests.

This was also the year in which a *New York Times* headline in October raised the specter of death by starvation in Appalachia during the coming winter. In eastern Kentucky, a state of virtual civil war existed between miners and coal operators. Michael Harrington's *The Other America* appeared, documenting the persistence of social misery in the US.

Of all this—which influenced the lives and thinking of millions, especially in the South—in *The Help*, not the hint of a hint.

Insofar as they have a worked out conception, Stockett and the filmmakers apparently see social change occurring through the benevolence of liberalism extended from on high. Again, it would be mistaken, in our opinion, to view this as the product of racism, or even as something exceptional to *The Help*'s makers. Much of it is simply the product of the shallowness and, to be blunt, ignorance of this social layer in regard to all burning social and historical questions. This is an insipid view of the civil rights era from an industry that currently offers colorless and ahistorical versions of nearly every era.



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