



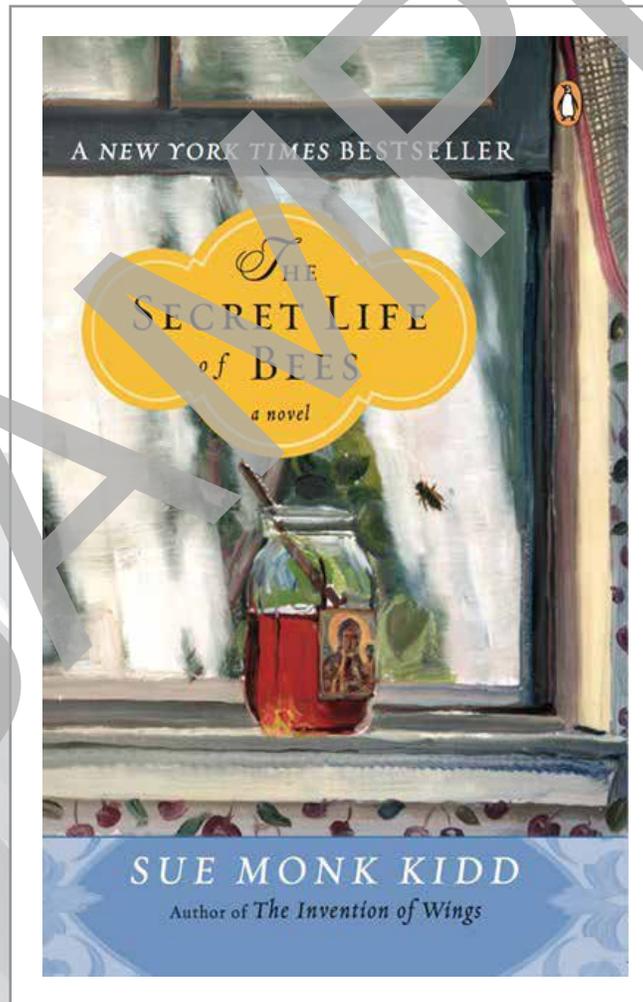
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **The Secret Life of Bees**

Sue Monk Kidd



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Secret Life of Bees

Sue Monk Kidd

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Comprehension

Predicting, inferring,  
cause/effect, conflict

### Literary Elements

Metaphor, simile, symbolism,  
irony, allusion, genre,  
characterization, theme,  
plot development, setting,

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,  
applications

### Thinking

Brainstorming, analysis,  
compare/contrast

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, monologue,  
oral presentation

### Writing

Poetry, point of view, sequel,  
time line, essay

### Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, montage;  
Drama—script; Music—  
ballad, appropriate  
selections; Current Events—  
articles, research

**Genre:** fiction

**Setting:** Sylvan and Tiburon, South Carolina, 1964

**Point of View:** first person

**Themes:** coming-of-age, self-discovery, resilience, family issues (abandonment, mental and physical abuse, rejection), persisting in love, coping with loss, racism, guilt, redemption

**Conflict:** person vs. person, person vs. self, person vs. society

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** reflective, yearning

**Date of First Publication:** 2002

## Summary

Lily Owens, the narrator and protagonist, lives with her harsh, inattentive father, T. Ray, on a peach farm near Sylvan, South Carolina. Her mother, Deborah, died under mysterious circumstances when Lily was four years old, and T. Ray has told Lily she is responsible for her mother's accidental death. Lily's black nanny, Rosaleen, is the primary maternal figure in Lily's life for the ten years following Deborah's death. Rosaleen is jailed and severely beaten when she attempts to register to vote, and Lily rescues her. The two decide to seek refuge in Tiburon, the town whose name is written on the back of Deborah's black Virgin Mary picture. There they find refuge and healing in the home of a black beekeeper, August Boatwright, and her two sisters. Lily discovers the secrets of her mother's past, finds security with her new "mothers," and attains redemption from the guilt of her mother's death.

## About the Author

Sue Monk Kidd was born and raised in Sylvester, Georgia. Demonstrating an early desire to write, Kidd began writing stories and keeping a prolific journal as an adolescent. Two books she read as a teenager, Thoreau's spiritual memoir *Walden* and Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, influenced her greatly. Upon graduating from Texas Christian University in 1970 with a B.S. degree in nursing, Kidd worked as a registered nurse and instructor in college nursing classes. Shortly before her thirtieth birthday, she enrolled in writing classes. Her career as a freelance writer began when an article of hers was accepted for publication by *Guideposts* magazine. She concentrated primarily on inspirational personal experience articles and eventually became a Contributing Editor at *Guideposts*. Her first book was a spiritual memoir, *God's Joyful Surprise* (1987). Other nonfiction works include *All Things Are Possible* (1988), *When the Heart Waits* (1990), *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996), *A Luminous Presence* (2005), and *Firstlight* (2006), a collection of her early writings on spirituality.

Following her enrollment in a graduate writing course at Emory University, Kidd began to write and publish short stories in small literary journals. She expanded her short story "The Secret Life of Bees" into a full-length novel, and it was published in 2002.

*The Secret Life of Bees* went on to sell more than 5.5 million copies, has been published in more than 20 languages, and was listed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for approximately 80 weeks. The novel was named the 2004 Book Sense paperback of the year, and "Good Morning America" chose it for the "Read This!" Book Club. The book is widely taught in high school and

## Chapter 1

Bees swarming in Lily's room cause her to reflect on her mother's death. Though Rosaleen loves her unconditionally, Lily struggles with emotional rejection at school and her father's cruel punishment and neglect. Rosaleen plans to register to vote but is arrested following a racially charged altercation.

Vocabulary
presumptuous
paradise
insomniac
conjure
imbecile
philosophy
oblivious
motes
parsonage

### Discussion Questions

1. Examine the epigraph at the beginning of the chapter, and explain how you think it relates to the story. Do this for all subsequent chapters. *(Answers will vary. When Lily was four years old, her mother, i.e., the "Queen Bee" of the home, died. Lily has keenly felt the effects of her absence for the last ten years, and her lack of a mother has affected her self-image, her relationship with her peers, and her overall view of life.)*
2. Correlate the arrival of the bees with the summer of 1964 in Lily's life. Examine the allusion to the angel Gabriel and the possible implications of Rosaleen's comment that "Bees swarm before death" (p. 2). *(Lily believes the bees were sent to prepare her for the upheaval in her life during that summer. She compares their arrival to the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary. Gabriel's*

*arrival prepared Mary for the birth of the Christ child [Bible, Luke 1:26–35]. Just as Gabriel brought news of Mary's miraculous future, so too do the bees bring news of Lily's miraculous future. Answers will vary, but Rosaleen's comment suggests that the bees are also an ominous sign. Students should discuss various kinds of "death" that the bees may foreshadow as well as how the bees may be symbolic of both life and death.)*

3. Identify Lily's father, and discuss her relationship with him. Assess the effect this relationship has on Lily. Note the impact Mrs. Henry has on Lily's self-esteem. *(Her father, T. Ray Owens, is a peach farmer who cares only for his dog. Lily has almost no good memories of him. She repeatedly tries to connect with him to no avail. One example would be the incident where Lily wakes him to show him the bees, which have retreated into the walls. T. Ray responds as he usually does to any perceived infraction of hers—by threatening to make her kneel on grits for an extended period. T. Ray refuses to take Lily to any school events and will not buy suitable clothes for her. He also makes fun of her for reading and will not allow her to read while she is waiting to sell peaches. Answers will vary, but T. Ray's rejection and her lack of a mother cause Lily to have low self-esteem and no real sense of self-identity. In the "darkness" of her poor self-image, Mrs. Henry, her English teacher, offers Lily hope for a brighter future by telling her she is intelligent enough to become a professor or a writer. When Lily realizes T. Ray does not and will never love her, she resolves to run away.)*
4. Examine information about the death of Lily's mother, and analyze its effect on Lily. Discuss T. Ray's account of the death, and tell whether you think Lily is responsible. *(Lily's only memory of her mother is the day she died. She remembers a number of details about her mother, such as how her hair looked and how she smelled, but she can never form a clear picture of her face. She remembers her mother picking her up and dropping things into an open suitcase on the floor. This was followed by a heated argument between her parents. Her mother tried to protect her when Lily was shoved by her father. Then her mother went into the closet and grabbed a gun, which T. Ray snatched from her and began waving in the air. The next thing Lily recalls is picking up the gun off the floor and hearing it discharge. At times she thinks she was holding the gun when it exploded, but sometimes she thinks the explosion came later. The night before she started first*

grade, T. Ray told her that her mother had been cleaning out the closet, that Lily picked the gun up off the floor, and that the gun went off and killed her mother. Lily has borne the burden of guilt for her mother's death ever since she was a small child. Answers will vary, but T. Ray was very shaken up when Lily told him what she remembers about her mother's death. This seems to imply that Lily may not be guilty after all.)

5. Discuss the relationship between Lily and Rosaleen. (Rosaleen is the black woman who has taken care of Lily for the past ten years. Although she has no interest in helping Lily learn to dress correctly or become more "charming," Lily knows Rosaleen loves her unconditionally and will stand up to T. Ray for her. When her father ignores her birthday, Rosaleen bakes her a cake. Lily daydreams that Rosaleen is white and becomes her real mother by marrying T. Ray or that she is a black orphan whom Rosaleen adopts. Rosaleen is appalled by T. Ray's cruel treatment of Lily, e.g., welts and bruises on Lily's knees from being forced to kneel on the grits for an hour.)
6. Analyze how Lily reacts to life without her mother and how she copes. Note the significance of the items in the tin box. (She misses her when faced with issues such as training bras and her desire to participate in cheerleader tryouts. She yearns for her when she has her first menstrual period because she has no one but Rosaleen with whom to share the experience. She accidentally finds a paper bag with a few traces of her mother, i.e., her picture, a pair of gloves, and a small wooden picture of a black Virgin Mary. These mementoes become Lily's "lifeline" to her mother. She keeps them in a tin box, which she buries in the orchard. Occasionally, she digs up the box and lies under the trees, wearing the gloves and smiling at her mother's photograph. She studies the caption on the back of the Mary picture, "Tiburon, S.C.," and locates the town on a map, determined to go there someday. This becomes important to the plot when she and Rosaleen run away to Tiburon.)
7. Discuss the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (see Background Information on page 5 in this guide), and analyze its effect on Rosaleen. Note Lily's premonition. (After watching President Johnson sign the Civil Rights Act on TV, Rosaleen resolves to register to vote and begins practicing her signature in order to pass the literacy test. Lily is worried because she overhears people at church speaking skeptically about Negroes getting their civil rights and she is aware that Martin Luther King was arrested for trying to eat in a "white" restaurant. She realizes that white people will not quietly accept the changes the Civil Rights Act is setting in motion.)
8. Examine the cause/effect of events surrounding Lily's birthday. Analyze what this reveals about Lily and about T. Ray. (Although T. Ray has never paid attention to her birthday, Lily hopes this year will be different; she mentions her birthday and hints at her desire for a charm bracelet. T. Ray ignores her; his silence reminds her that she doesn't even "exist" to him. Seeking consolation, Lily goes to the orchard and digs up the mementoes of her mother; she falls asleep holding them. T. Ray finds her in the orchard and thinks she has been there with a boy; he forces her to kneel on grits for an hour. Lily has hidden the pictures of her mother and Mary inside her waistband; she feels the pictures while kneeling on the grits, and it seems her mother is there with her. Lily desperately wants to be out of the house on her birthday; she goes to town with Rosaleen, which sets in motion all subsequent events in the story. Answers will vary, but Lily is bound to her life with T. Ray until she realizes that there is no love to unite them as family. T. Ray drives Lily away with his behavior. In many ways, Lily's literal and figurative journeys in the story are as much about her relationship with her father as they are about her mother.)
9. Examine the evidence of racism toward Rosaleen, and correlate with actual events following the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (see Background Information on page 5 in this guide). (When Rosaleen and Lily go inside the white church to rest, the minister is anxious for

them to leave and will not loan them fans. Three men taunt Rosaleen and call her derogatory names. She pours the spit from her snuff jug across the men's shoes. They grab Rosaleen and demand that she clean their shoes. Although the men assault her, the white police officer arrests her on charges of assault, theft [the fans], and disturbing the peace. He takes her and Lily to jail. Like the three civil rights workers killed in Mississippi, Rosaleen is arrested on false charges and beaten. Both incidents are motivated by a desire to prevent African Americans from voting.)

- Analyze the irony of the statement, "We loved them in the Lord, Brother Gerald said, but they had their own places" (p. 30). (Although the minister claims to love black people, they are not welcome in his church and are not allowed to use his fans. Deliberately alienating a population of people because of their race is the very opposite of love. The minister is a hypocrite.)
- Prediction:** What will happen to Rosaleen and Lily?

### Supplementary Activities

- Mrs. Henry improves Lily's self-image and helps her see her true potential. Write a paragraph about a teacher who has been a positive influence in your life.
- Use the Metaphors and Similes chart on page 34 of this guide to write at least one simile and one metaphor from this section. Include an interpretation for each example. This is an ongoing assignment for each section and will include both similes and metaphors where applicable. Examples: **Similes**—"wings shining like bits of chrome" (p. 1); "shadows moved like spatter paint" (p. 4); **Metaphors**—hair: tower of beauty (p. 3); Lily and Rosaleen: prize float (p. 32).

## Chapters 2–3

Lily rescues Rosaleen from the hospital where she is taken after being beaten in jail. They leave Sylvan to escape T. Ray and Rosaleen's probable death at the hands of the racists. They head for Tiburon, the town listed on the back of the picture of the black Virgin Mary. There Lily spots jars of honey bearing the same image of Mary and finds out that they are the product of a local beekeeper named August Boatwright.

Vocabulary
decapitate
brazen
wrench
pious
blaspheme
anointed

### Discussion Questions

- Discuss Rosaleen's treatment during and after her arrest. Why do you think Gaston does not protect her? (*The three men follow the police car and harass Rosaleen, but Gaston does nothing to stop them. He smiles and tells Lily that he can't predict what the men will do. When they reach the police station, the men are waiting and begin to beat Rosaleen, whose hands are handcuffed behind her back. Gaston finally intervenes, but his statement, "Now's not the time" [p. 36], implies that he will allow the men to continue the beating later. When Lily sets out to rescue Rosaleen from jail, she finds that Rosaleen is in the hospital with several stitches in her head, the result of a severe beating. Lily knows the men will eventually kill Rosaleen if she does not get her away from Sylvan. Gaston does not protect Rosaleen because he shares the racist views of her attackers.*)
- Examine Lily's confrontation with T. Ray. Describe and analyze her reaction to his allegation that her mother left her. (*He is furious with her for being involved in Rosaleen's arrest, and Lily knows she will face a "torture chamber" of grits. Before he leaves to pay his workers, he threatens*

## Character Chart

**Directions:** In the boxes across from each of the feelings, describe an incident or time in the book when each of the listed characters experienced that feeling. You may use “not applicable” if you cannot find an example.

	Lily	August	T. Ray	Rosaleen
Frustration				
Anger				
Fear				
Humiliation				
Relief				
Empathy				

# Story Map

