



A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE  
SECRET LIFE  
*of* BEES

*a novel*



SUE MONK KIDD

Author of *The Invention of Wings*

**Praise for**  
***The Secret Life of Bees***  
**by Sue Monk Kidd**

“This is the story of a young girl’s journey toward healing, and of the intrinsic sacredness of living in the world. Simply wonderful.”

—Anne Rivers Siddons

“It’s as if Kidd loaded up a take-home plate with treats, and you said, ‘Oh, I couldn’t,’ and then scarfed it down in the car on the way home.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Maybe it’s true that there are no perfect books, but I closed this one believing that I had found perfection.”

—*Book* magazine

“*The Secret Life of Bees* proves that a family can be found where you least expect it—maybe not under your own roof, but in that magical place where you find love. *The Secret Life of Bees* is a gift, filled with hope.”

—Luanne Rice

“The stunning metaphors and realistic characters are so poignant that they will bring tears to your eyes.”

—*Library Journal*

“A lushly written story.”

—*St. Petersburg Times*

“You’ll want to tear through the pages. Restrain yourself. The beautiful language and seamless unfolding of this well-written story deserve more. [It] merits sweet time and savoring.”

—*Southern Living*

“Buzz-worthy.”

—*People*

“Engaging debut novel.”

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Simply a beautiful book...Gorgeous language...Offers beauty, mystery, and resolution all at the same time.”

—*Nashville Scene*

“Writing with the intimate voice of the memoirist and with the Southerner’s abiding sense of place, Sue Monk Kidd has written a forgiving story for the motherless child in all of us.”

—Shelby Hearon

“Poignant and compelling.”

—*The Star-Ledger* (Newark)

“Splendid first work of fiction...A story of redemption...that promises to fill some of the holes life has gouged out of us.”

—*Virginian Pilot*

“Sue Monk Kidd has written a wonderful novel about mothers and daughters and the transcendent power of love, all the while masterfully illuminating the feminine face of God.”

—Connie May Fowler

“Kidd has written a triumphant coming-of-age novel that speaks to the universal need for love.”

—*New Orleans Times-Picayune*

“What a splendid novel! It’s wonderfully thoughtful and sensitive and *compulsively* readable.”

—Susan Isaacs

“With imagination as lush and colorful as the American South, Sue Monk Kidd creates a rich, maternal haven in a harsh world.”

—Christina Schwarz

“The chapters...dance on the edges of ‘Magical Realism,’ that blend of the fabulous and the ordinary that can invest a tale with a sense of wonderment, as is the case here.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“Dazzling fictional debut. Storytelling at its finest.”

—*Bookpage*

“I am amazed that this moving, original, and accomplished book is a first novel. It is wonderfully written, powerful, poignant, and humorous, and deliciously eccentric. *Do* read it.”

—Joanna Trollope

“Lily is fresh and funny, a welcome addition to the pantheon of gutsy southern girls from Harper Lee’s Scout to Kaye Gibbons’s Grace.”

—*Carolina Book Review*

“Uplifting.”

—*Booklist*

“A smooth-as-honey piece of Southern fiction...whose success lies...in its finely crafted writing...Its lyrical narrative voice and comforting message are a honeyed delight.”

—*Raleigh News and Observer*

“*The Secret Life of Bees* is a rich, lovely novel, brimming with energy and humor and hope. Its women will surely take prominent places among the heroines of Southern fiction.”

—Josephine Humphreys

“Gem of a first novel.”

—*Virginia Quarterly Review*

“Beautifully told and wonderfully humorous.... A warm, deftly told story about a girl and her search for the truth.”

—*San Antonio Times-Express*

“A powerful story...Kidd’s writing is sharp and descriptive. Before the first chapter had ended, I had recoiled, I had cried and I had laughed. I was also entranced, and knew I had to make the journey with Lily, her endearing caretaker Rosaleen and the marvelous Calendar sisters.... Let us hope that Kidd has more stories to tell.”

—*The State* (Columbia, South Carolina)

“An absolute joy to read.”

—*Time Out New York*

“Deeply satisfying...A hive’s worth of appealing female characters, an off-beat plot and a lovely style.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Sue Monk Kidd is an extraordinary storyteller. Beautifully written.”

—Ursula Hegi

PENGUIN BOOKS

## THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES

Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, spent more than one hundred weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, has sold more than six million copies in the United States, was turned into an award-winning major motion picture, and has been translated into thirty-six languages. It has been nominated for and received numerous awards both here and abroad. Her second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, was a number one *New York Times* bestseller and adapted into a television movie. She is also the author of several acclaimed memoirs, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Traveling with Pomegranates*, written with her daughter Ann Kidd Taylor. She lives in Florida.

# *The Secret Life of Bees*

*Sue Monk Kidd*



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014,

U.S.A. Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria

3124, Australia Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto,

Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2 Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community  
Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India Penguin Books (N.Z.)

Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:

Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America by Viking Penguin, a  
member of Penguin Putnam Inc. 2002

Published in Penguin Books 2003

Copyright © Sue Monk Kidd Ltd., 2002

All rights reserved

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are  
the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any  
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments,  
events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE HARDCOVER EDITION AS FOLLOWS:

Kidd, Sue Monk.

The secret life of bees / by Sue Monk Kidd.

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-101-01096-9

I. Title.

PS3611.I44 S38 2001

813'.54—dc21 2001026310



Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Version\_2

*For my son, Bob,  
and Ann and Sandy  
with all my love*

# Contents

[\*Praise for The Secret Life of Bees\*](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

[\*Title Page\*](#)

[\*Copyright\*](#)

[\*Dedication\*](#)

[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter One\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Two\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Three\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Four\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Five\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Six\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Seven\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Eight\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Nine\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Ten\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Eleven\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Twelve\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Thirteen\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter Fourteen\*\*](#)

## *Credits*

# Acknowledgments

I am deeply thankful to the following: My agents, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh and Virginia Barber, for the amazing way they have supported and championed this novel. My editor, Pamela Dorman, whose brilliant guidance and editing have made all the difference. The people at Viking who have worked assiduously on behalf of this book—Susan Petersen Kennedy, Clare Ferraro, Nancy Sheppard, Carolyn Coleburn, Louise Braverman, Paul Slovak, Leigh Butler, Hal Fessenden, Carla Bolte, Paul Buckley, Roseanne Serra, Bruce Giffords, Maureen Sugden, Ann Mah, Laura Tisdell, and everyone in the sales department, which has been so supportive. Dave and Janice Green, dedicated beekeepers at Pot o’Gold Honey Company in Hemingway, South Carolina, who took me into their world of bees and were an invaluable source of help. Poets & Writers, Inc., for its superb Writers Exchange program, which provided me with such key and timely opportunities regarding this novel. *Nimrod*, the literary journal that published my short story “The Secret Life of Bees” (Fall/Winter 1993), on which the first chapter is based, giving me the encouragement I needed to develop the story into a novel. Debbie Daniel, writer and friend, who read early portions of the book and offered insights. Ann Kidd Taylor, who read the manuscript as I wrote and gave me excellent feedback and assistance. Terry Helwig, Trisha Sinnott, Curly Clark, Carolyn Rivers, Susan Hull Walker, Carol Graf, Donna Farmer, and Lynne Ravenel—extraordinary women, who saw me through. My wonderful, supportive family—Bob, Ann, Scott, Kellie, Roxie, Ben, Max, my parents (who are nothing like the parents in this novel). And most of all, my husband, Sandy, for more reasons than I can name.

# **The Secret Life of Bees**

*The queen, for her part, is the unifying force of the community; if she is removed from the hive, the workers very quickly sense her absence. After a few hours, or even less, they show unmistakable signs of queenlessness.*

—Man and Insects

# Chapter One

At night I would lie in bed and watch the show, how bees squeezed through the cracks of my bedroom wall and flew circles around the room, making that propeller sound, a high-pitched *zzzzzz* that hummed along my skin. I watched their wings shining like bits of chrome in the dark and felt the longing build in my chest. The way those bees flew, not even looking for a flower, just flying for the feel of the wind, split my heart down its seam.

During the day I heard them tunneling through the walls of my bedroom, sounding like a radio tuned to static in the next room, and I imagined them in there turning the walls into honeycombs, with honey seeping out for me to taste.

The bees came the summer of 1964, the summer I turned fourteen and my life went spinning off into a whole new orbit, and I mean *whole new orbit*. Looking back on it now, I want to say the bees were sent to me. I want to say they showed up like the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary, setting events in motion I could never have guessed. I know it is presumptuous to compare my small life to hers, but I have reason to believe she wouldn't mind; I will get to that. Right now it's enough to say that despite everything that happened that summer, I remain tender toward the bees.

July 1, 1964, I lay in bed, waiting for the bees to show up, thinking of what Rosaleen had said when I told her about their nightly visitations.

"Bees swarm before death," she'd said.

Rosaleen had worked for us since my mother died. My daddy—who I called T. Ray because "Daddy" never fit him—had pulled her out of the peach orchard, where she'd worked as one of his pickers. She had a big round face and a body that sloped out from her neck like a pup tent, and she was so black that night seemed to seep from her skin. She lived alone in a little house tucked back in the woods, not far from us, and came every day



to cook, clean, and be my stand-in mother. Rosaleen had never had a child herself, so for the last ten years I'd been her pet guinea pig.

*Bees swarm before death.* She was full of crazy ideas that I ignored, but I lay there thinking about this one, wondering if the bees had come with my death in mind. Honestly, I wasn't that disturbed by the idea. Every one of those bees could have descended on me like a flock of angels and stung me till I died, and it wouldn't have been the worst thing to happen. People who think dying is the worst thing don't know a thing about life.

My mother died when I was four years old. It was a fact of life, but if I brought it up, people would suddenly get interested in their hangnails and cuticles, or else distant places in the sky, and seem not to hear me. Once in a while, though, some caring soul would say, "Just put it out of your head, Lily. It was an accident. You didn't mean to do it."

That night I lay in bed and thought about dying and going to be with my mother in paradise. I would meet her saying, "Mother, forgive. Please forgive," and she would kiss my skin till it grew chapped and tell me I was not to blame. She would tell me this for the first ten thousand years.

The next ten thousand years she would fix my hair. She would brush it into such a tower of beauty, people all over heaven would drop their harps just to admire it. You can tell which girls lack mothers by the look of their hair. My hair was constantly going off in eleven wrong directions, and T. Ray, naturally, refused to buy me bristle rollers, so all year I'd had to roll it on Welch's grape juice cans, which had nearly turned me into an insomniac. I was always having to choose between decent hair and a good night's sleep.

I decided I would take four or five centuries to tell her about the special misery of living with T. Ray. He had an orneriness year-round, but especially in the summer, when he worked his peach orchards daylight to dusk. Mostly I stayed out of his way. His only kindness was for Snout, his bird dog, who slept in his bed and got her stomach scratched anytime she rolled onto her wiry back. I've seen Snout pee on T. Ray's boot and it not get a rise out of him.

I had asked God repeatedly to do something about T. Ray. He'd gone to church for forty years and was only getting worse. It seemed like this should tell God something.

I kicked back the sheets. The room sat in perfect stillness, not one bee anywhere. Every minute I looked at the clock on my dresser and wondered

what was keeping them.

Finally, sometime close to midnight, when my eyelids had nearly given up the strain of staying open, a purring noise started over in the corner, low and vibrating, a sound you could almost mistake for a cat. Moments later shadows moved like spatter paint along the walls, catching the light when they passed the window so I could see the outline of wings. The sound swelled in the dark till the entire room was pulsating, till the air itself became alive and matted with bees. They lapped around my body, making me the perfect center of a whirlwind cloud. I could not hear myself think for all the bee hum.

I dug my nails into my palms till my skin had nearly turned to herringbone. A person could get stung half to death in a roomful of bees.

Still, the sight *was* a true spectacle. Suddenly I couldn't stand not showing it off to somebody, even if the only person around was T. Ray. And if he happened to get stung by a couple of hundred bees, well, I was sorry.

I slid from the covers and dashed through the bees for the door. I woke him by touching his arm with one finger, softly at first, then harder and harder till I was jabbing into his flesh, marveling at how hard it was.

T. Ray bolted from bed, wearing nothing but his underwear. I dragged him toward my room, him shouting how this better be good, how the house damn well better be on fire, and Snout barking like we were on a dove shoot.

"Bees!" I shouted. "There's a swarm of bees in my room!"

But when we got there, they'd vanished back into the wall like they knew he was coming, like they didn't want to waste their flying stunts on him.

"Goddamn it, Lily, this ain't funny."

I looked up and down the walls. I got down under the bed and begged the very dust and coils of my bedsprings to produce a bee.

"They were here," I said. "Flying everywhere."

"Yeah, and there was a goddamn herd of buffalo in here, too."

"Listen," I said. "You can hear them buzzing."

He cocked his ear toward the wall with pretend seriousness. "I don't hear any buzzing," he said, and twirled his finger beside his temple. "I guess they must have flown out of that cuckoo clock you call a brain. You wake me up again, Lily, and I'll get out the Martha Whites, you hear me?"

Martha Whites were a form of punishment only T. Ray could have dreamed up. I shut my mouth instantly.

Still, I couldn't let the matter go entirely—T. Ray thinking I was so desperate I would invent an invasion of bees to get attention. Which is how I got the bright idea of catching a jar of these bees, presenting them to T. Ray, and saying, “Now who's making things up?”

My first and only memory of my mother was the day she died. I tried for a long time to conjure up an image of her before that, just a sliver of something, like her tucking me into bed, reading the adventures of Uncle Wiggly, or hanging my underclothes near the space heater on ice-cold mornings. Even her picking a switch off the forsythia bush and stinging my legs would have been welcome.

The day she died was December 3, 1954. The furnace had cooked the air so hot my mother had peeled off her sweater and stood in short sleeves, jerking at the window in her bedroom, wrestling with the stuck paint.

Finally she gave up and said, “Well, fine, we'll just burn the hell up in here, I guess.”

Her hair was black and generous, with thick curls circling her face, a face I could never quite coax into view, despite the sharpness of everything else.

I raised my arms to her, and she picked me up, saying I was way too big a girl to hold like this, but holding me anyway. The moment she lifted me, I was wrapped in her smell.

The scent got laid down in me in a permanent way and had all the precision of cinnamon. I used to go regularly into the Sylvan Mercantile and smell every perfume bottle they had, trying to identify it. Every time I showed up, the perfume lady acted surprised, saying, “My goodness, look who's here.” Like I hadn't just been in there the week before and gone down the entire row of bottles. Shalimar, Chanel No. 5, White Shoulders.

I'd say, “You got anything new?”

She never did.

So it was a shock when I came upon the scent on my fifth-grade teacher, who said it was nothing but plain ordinary Ponds Cold Cream.

The afternoon my mother died, there was a suitcase open on the floor, sitting near the stuck window. She moved in and out of the closet, dropping

this and that into the suitcase, not bothering to fold them.

I followed her into the closet and scooted beneath dress hems and pant legs, into darkness and wisps of dust and little dead moths, back where orchard mud and the moldy smell of peaches clung to T. Ray's boots. I stuck my hands inside a pair of white high heels and clapped them together.

The closet floor vibrated whenever someone climbed the stairs below it, which is how I knew T. Ray was coming. Over my head I heard my mother, pulling things from the hangers, the swish of clothes, wire clinking together. *Hurry*, she said.

When his shoes clomped into the room, she sighed, the breath leaving her as if her lungs had suddenly clenched. This is the last thing I remember with perfect crispness—her breath floating down to me like a tiny parachute, collapsing without a trace among the piles of shoes.

I don't remember what they said, only the fury of their words, how the air turned raw and full of welts. Later it would remind me of birds trapped inside a closed room, flinging themselves against the windows and the walls, against each other. I inched backward, deeper into the closet, feeling my fingers in my mouth, the taste of shoes, of feet.

Dragged out, I didn't know at first whose hands pulled me, then found myself in my mother's arms, breathing her smell. She smoothed my hair, said, "Don't worry," but even as she said it, I was peeled away by T. Ray. He carried me to the door and set me down in the hallway. "Go to your room," he said.

"I don't want to," I cried, trying to push past him, back into the room, back where she was.

"Get in your goddamned room!" he shouted, and shoved me. I landed against the wall, then fell forward onto my hands and knees. Lifting my head, looking past him, I saw her running across the room. Running at him, yelling. "Leave. Her. Alone."

I huddled on the floor beside the door and watched through air that seemed all scratched up. I saw him take her by the shoulders and shake her, her head bouncing back and forth. I saw the whiteness of his lip.

And then—though everything starts to blur now in my mind—she lunged away from him into the closet, away from his grabbing hands, scrambling for something high on a shelf.

When I saw the gun in her hand, I ran toward her, clumsy and falling, wanting to save her, to save us all.