



A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE  
SECRET LIFE  
*of* BEES

*a novel*



Soon to  
be a major  
motion  
picture

SUE MONK KIDD

Author of *The Mermaid Chair*

*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*

*A*t 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 zzzzzzz 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.



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"THE TALE OF ONE MOTHERLESS  
DAUGHTER'S DISCOVERY OF WHAT FAMILY  
REALLY MEANS—AND OF THE STRANGE AND  
WONDROUS PLACES WE FIND LOVE." —*The Washington Post*



Set in South Carolina in 1964, *The Secret Life of Bees* tells the story of Lily Owens, whose life has been shaped around the blurred memory of the afternoon her mother was killed. When Lily's fierce-hearted black "stand-in mother," Rosaleen, insults three of the deepest racists in town, Lily decides to spring them both free. They escape to Tiburon, South Carolina—a town that holds the secret to her mother's past. Taken in by an eccentric trio of black beekeeping sisters, Lily is introduced to their mesmerizing world of bees and honey, and the Black Madonna. This is a remarkable novel about divine female power, a story that women will share and pass on to their daughters for years to come.

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