



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 15
Issue 2 October 2011

Article 17

8-16-2012

The Help (2011)

Carol Miles
carolmmiles@hotmail.com

Recommended Citation

Miles, Carol (2012) "The Help (2011)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol15/iss2/17>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

The Help (2011)

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Help* (2011).

“Change begins with a whisper.” This revolution to illuminate the oppressed and to give voice to the voiceless gains traction and volume from the most unlikely of sources, African-American maids in the Deep South. *The Help*, based on the best-selling novel of the same title by Kathryn Stockett, centers around the lives of three women: two African-American maids and a young aspiring writer. Encouraged by an editor to write about something that disturbs her, Skeeter, an Ole Miss graduate in journalism, embarks on a project of secret interviews recording the experiences of women domestics. Their testimonials detail the ironies of raising children who will one day rule over them and of waiting hand-and-foot on families while being invisible. In the Mississippi of 1963, this project not only poses a threat to their future employability, it is dangerous; and it is illegal.

Eugenia “Skeeter” Phalen (Emma Stone) longs to be a serious writer. From her untamed curly locks to her practical shoes, and seeming lack of interest in marriage and starting a family, she is unconventional by the standards of the day and among her peers. Aibileen, (Viola Davis) the elder maid, is a long-suffering, wise and gentle woman, old before her time having spent most of her life as a caretaker. With the death of her son, “a bitter seed has been planted

inside.” Minnie Jackson (Octavia Spencer) is a “sass mouth,” who has difficulty keeping a job except that she is undisputedly the best cook in town.

The three share a common enemy in Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard). Hilly, president of the Junior League, is the self-appointed social and civic arbiter for the society ladies of Jackson. Her “godless” behavior is bolstered by the fact that the law, both codified and de facto, is on her side. She manipulates her friends and terrifies her enemies with threats of social ruin and jail. But Hilly’s strategy backfires when the women, personally impacted by her vitriol, become fed up and find the courage to act, including a “terrible awful” for which one character must repent.

This story unfolds during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. While the film touches on certain key events that are historically significant, it largely skims over the uncomfortable spaces of racism and oppression that permeate the landscape. We are introduced to Jim Crow, but do not linger lest our attention and mood shift to a more somber tone. The physical acts of domestic violence, police brutality and hate crimes take place off screen. As Minnie observes, “We’re living in hell and we’re trapped.” The most poignant statement comes to us in a voice-over of Roy Wilkins offering commentary on the assassination of Medgar Evers. “There is no state with a record that approaches that of Mississippi in inhumanity, murder, brutality and racial hatred....”

From a theological perspective, the film attempts to draw a comparison between the plight of African-Americans with those of the ancient Israelites in captivity. The sermon at Aibileen's church is on Exodus 4:10. Perhaps Skeeter is the Aaron to Aibileen's Moses. The underlying message is of having courage in the face of adversity, not simply because it is right, but because one must overcome fear and for the sake of others.

The Christian imagery in the film is seen most overtly in the African-American community. It is the African-American community that gathers in church to pray, praise and petition the God of the oppressed. A modest cross hangs on the wall of Aibileen's bedroom and an iconic reproduction of an olive-skinned Jesus hangs on her living room wall. Below that is a portrait of her deceased son, Treelore. JFK is added following his assassination. These are all emblematic of her hopes, even those that death has attempted to thwart, for liberation.

By contrast, there are no explicit religious images in the white community. The closest we see of an organized belief system is the Junior League where Hilly truly perverts the bully pulpit she enjoys. She involves herself in various charitable projects and claims to be a Christian. Yet she devotes her time and energy to preserving the social order of segregation through political activism, intimidation and economic oppression.

What then motivates Skeeter to risk the legacy of privilege into which she has been born? Skeeter's professional ambition is clear. She desires to be a serious writer and wants to impress an editor for whom she hopes to work. To pique the interest of the editor she lies about having found a maid who agrees to be interviewed. The film gives no indication that religion or faith play a role in her project. However, a flashback to her teen years may offer a clue that there is a deeper if not more subtle spiritual component at the root of her daring. In this scene, Constantine comforts Skeeter by telling her that ugliness is something that grows inside of you. It is mean and hurtful, which is not godly. She has the power to reject the opinion of others and to choose her own life.

The Help is a delightful film. This ensemble cast delivers pitch perfect performances with heart and humor. However, this fictional story is set during a very painful era in our history. Viewers who can essentially submit to a conscious sedation of the soul may be able to walk away reveling in feelings of triumph. But it may eventually wear off. Overall, I recommend the film for the superb performances.