

THE TRUTH about the CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

by MARTHA SOUTHGATE

I RESISTED THE fictional and soon-to-be cinematic juggernaut that is *The Help* for quite some time. In an otherwise extremely positive review in 2009, EW summed up my feelings quite well: "The backstory is cringeworthy: A young, white first-time author—inspired by her own childhood relationship with her family maid in Jackson, Miss.—sets out to write a novel from the point of view of black maids in the midst of the civil rights era." Cringeworthy indeed. Further, the plot of the book itself—young white woman encourages black housekeepers to tell their truth through the vehicle of a book the white woman writes—I found both implausible and condescending to those maids. An oral history of black maids published in 1962?

I don't think so. I'm acquainted with intelligent readers—both black and white—who enjoyed the book. I also greatly respect the talented actresses in the film who have proclaimed their affection for it. But I still couldn't get on board. When I took a closer look at what Kathryn Stockett hath wrought, I didn't much like what I saw—but *The Help* is only a symptom, not the disease.

There have been thousands of words written about Stockett's skills, her portrayal of the black women versus the white women, her right to tell this story at all. I won't rehash those arguments, except to say that I found the novel fast-paced but highly problematic. Even more troubling, though, is how the structure of narratives like *The Help* underscores the failure of pop culture to acknowledge a central truth: Within the civil rights movement, white people were the help.

The architects, visionaries, prime movers, and most of the on-the-ground laborers of the civil rights movement were African-American. Many white Americans stood

beside them, and some even died beside them, but it was not their fight—and more important, it was not their idea.

Implicit in *The Help* and a number of other popular works that deal with the civil rights era is the notion that a white character is somehow crucial or even necessary to tell this particular tale of black liberation. What's more, to imply that what the maids Aibileen and Minny are working against is simply a refusal on everyone's part to believe that "we're all the same underneath" is to simplify the horrors of Jim Crow to a truly damaging degree.

This isn't the first time the civil rights movement has been framed this way fictionally, especially on film. Most Hollywood civil rights movies feature white characters in central, sometimes nearly solo, roles. My favorite (not!) is Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*, which gives us two white FBI agents as heroes of the movement. FBI agents! Given that J. Edgar Hoover did everything short of shoot Martin Luther King Jr. himself in order to damage or discredit the movement, that goes from troubling to appalling.

Why is it ever thus? Suffice it to say that these stories are more likely to get the green light and to have more popular appeal (and often acclaim) if they have white characters up front. That's a shame. The continued impulse to reduce the black women and men of the civil rights movement to bit players in the most extraordinary step toward justice that this nation has ever known is infuriating, to say the least. Minny and Aibileen are heroines, but they didn't need Skeeter to guide them to the light. They fought their way out of the darkness on their own—and they brought the nation with them.

◆ Southgate's fourth novel, *The Taste of Salt*, will be published in September.



Russell Simmons, and Tyler Perry were all invited to see the film. "Afterwards Tyler called me and said, 'Stace, I loved the movie. I want to reach out. You know I have a big following? I'm going to tweet to them.'"

Perhaps no endorsement, however, will mean as much to Taylor as that of

the woman who helped raise him. Next week, 60-year-old Carol Lee will step onto an airplane for the first time. In Los Angeles, DreamWorks will put her up in a suite at a five-star hotel. She'll get her hair and makeup done and be chauffeured to the Hollywood premiere. There she will accompany

Taylor, the man she walloped as a child for throwing a fake spider on her, down the red carpet.

DAVIS HOLDS the role of Aibileen protectively close. And yet she also laments the limited variety of female characters she expects to play on screen. "It's not an issue of Hollywood," she says. "It's an issue of culture. I mean, I'm a black woman from Central Falls, Rhode Island. I'm dark-skinned, I'm quirky, I'm shy, I'm strong, I'm guarded, I'm weird at times, I'm sensual, I'm not overtly sexual. I am so many things in so many ways and I will never see myself on screen. I actually had a person walk up to me once and say, 'So, what person from history do you want to be? Do you want to just [play strong characters]? I had to stop them and say, 'Just write a story. Just take a risk and tell the most fantastical story that you've ever wanted to tell and then put it in my lap or Octavia's lap, or Cicely Tyson's lap, or Angela Bassett's lap.' There are a few movies coming out this year with African-American women in them. Very few are being made. Black actresses have enough obstacles in our way without someone protesting an opportunity for us to show our work on screen. I don't like it. But give it a chance!"

In a just world, Viola Davis would play the romantic lead in a movie that is marketed to audiences of all colors. And her painful certainty that she will never see a contemporary black woman on screen as layered and as complex as she is will be turned on her head. "If I woke up tomorrow and 100 percent wrong about this, I would be so happy," she says. "But I've been doing this for 23 years."

"That's why it's imperative that we celebrate this project," says Spence. "Because if it doesn't make money, the end of the day no one is going to care about whether Viola did a good job or not." She lets out an exasperated sigh and cuts to the quick. "Put your butt in the seat." ■ (Additional reporting by Shaunna Murphy)