



Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis out of uniform in *The Help*

GAZETTE

The Help Love It or Leave It?

Two writers have their say about the film adaptation of the book that has everyone talking, from blogs to beauty shops

You may have heard that the novel *The Help* (Amy Einhorn Books/Putnam) by Kathryn Stockett is appearing as a movie this month. Viola Davis portrays one of several nannies putting their lives at risk by talking to a young White woman compiling an exposé on domestics in the segregated South. It's an interesting premise. Such a narrative could provide deeper resonance of the

underrepresented lives of working-class Black women in books and on the silver screen. And we all know Black female acting talent rarely gets attention these days.

I'VE READ THE NOVEL and seen a rough cut of the film. Events in *The Help* revolve around the humorous and ghoulish interactions between three young White women and their maids (portrayed on-screen by Davis, Octavia Spencer and Aunjanue Ellis) in Jackson, Mississippi.



Michele Wallace

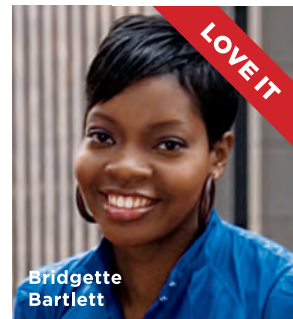
WE ALL WANT TO see the stunningly gifted Davis (a 2009 Oscar nominee as Best Supporting Actress for *Doubt*) break Hollywood's convention of ignoring dark-skinned women in leading dramatic and romantic parts. Perhaps the role of Aibileen is positioned to bring Davis to wider audiences, or garner another Oscar nomination. She may achieve both. Unfortunately, Davis's fine work as Aibileen,

and that of the equally stellar Spencer in the role of Minny, her best friend, is overshadowed because the movie's central plot pivots around a White woman, spunky Skeeter, played by Emma Stone. A recent Ole Miss grad, Skeeter returns to Jackson in the summer of 1962 and has the bright idea of secretly interviewing Black maids in town about their work conditions under their White mistresses, who also happen to be the heroine's good friends.

THE FILM AND NOVEL mute the dangers inherent in this plan. There could be serious consequences for White women who were seen as sympathetic to Blacks at that time. Instead Stockett treats the interaction between the maids and Skeeter as a minor yet significant episode in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. And *The Help* glosses over the reality of African-American triumphs we bled and died for, in order to make a feel-good Hollywood story.

I WONDER IF OTHER BLACK WOMEN who see this film will ask, When will we witness the mostly unsung heroism of the Septima Clarks, the Ella Bakers, the Fannie Lou Hamers and so many others to the civil rights struggle in America?

Michele Wallace is a professor of English at the City College of New York.



Bridgette Bartlett

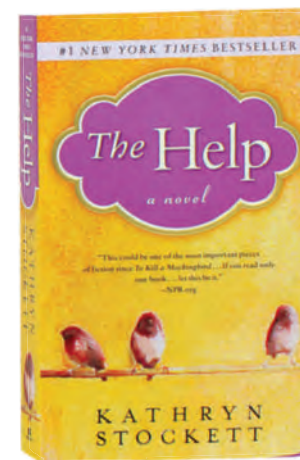
I'll admit it. I enjoyed the novel *The Help*. Like many of you, at first I thought, *Do we really need another story about a White heroine "saving" Black folks?* Though I was prepared for the worst when I started reading, Stockett's vibrant characters jumped off the page from beginning to end.

I COULD PICTURE the homes, hairdos and even feel the Delta heat every time I opened the book. It's through "the help," however, that the story comes alive as Stockett moves beyond one-dimensional portrayals of Black domestics. For instance, veteran maid Constantine instills confidence in her daughter Lulabelle, who ultimately thrives in Chicago.

UNLIKE SOME PEOPLE who have questions about the film, I don't think Aibileen, Minny, Yule May and Constantine reinforce stereotypes. The bonds these women form and nurture echo real connections between Black women. "The help" not only take care of White

children, they support one another too, even though they're all barely making it. They're proud of their work. They're perfectionists confined within the caste system of the segregated South. And domestic work was not restricted to Black southern women. My maternal grandmother did some domestic work, and my mother was a nanny when she migrated to New York in 1961. They taught me there is no shame in hard work. I took that life lesson with me while studying abroad in London in 2003, and when I purchased my first property in 2006. I'm now 35 and have gained so much from "the help." I cherish everything their lives have allowed me to do. I didn't need *The Help* to remind me of this fact, but many young people today just might.

Bridgette Bartlett is a freelance writer and creator of the Web site blackbridalbliss.com.



The Help has stirred lively debates within book clubs since its 2009 release.



Cooper claims in a lawsuit that Stockett used her name without permission.

IN HER WORDS

THE REAL AIBILEEN?

ABLENE COOPER DETAILS HER LIFE AS A MAID IN MISSISSIPPI AND EXPLAINS WHY SHE IS SUING THE AUTHOR OF *THE HELP*

I started working as a maid in 1975 when I was 24 years old, taking care of the family my mother had worked for. I love doing what I do and I've been lucky that the majority of the White people I've worked for treated me like part of their family. I admit that I didn't want any of my own children to have to do what I do for a living. I worked as hard as I could as a single mother so that they wouldn't have to. My children studied hard and were always honor students. My daughter is in cosmetology school and my oldest son works and attends Jackson State University, studying accounting.

I began working for the Stocketts (Kathryn Stockett's brother and sister-in-law) in October 1998, three months after my youngest son died from leukemia. I was still grieving and wasn't completely healed, but I needed to go back to work to support my family. I've read Ms. Stockett's book and it brought up a lot of bad memories for me. Losing a child is hard enough without having to relive that moment as a part of someone else's story. I feel as if she invaded my privacy and exposed one of the most awful times in my life to the world.

Stockett compared Aibileen's skin color to that of a cockroach, which I found completely offensive. I'm embarrassed by it, and this whole thing makes me feel as if she never really understood me after all these years.

I hope my story strikes a chord with Black women so they are fearless in standing up for what is right. When someone hurts you, always voice your opinion when you've been wronged. That's what I'm doing now.

—As told to Bené Viera

Editors' note: Amy Einhorn, whose imprint published *The Help*, has stated that they don't believe there is any basis to the legal claims.

THE HELP: DREAMWORKS II DISTRIBUTION CO.; WALLACE: COURTESY OF SUBJECT; BARTLETT: VANESSA MACK; COOPER: JAMES PATTERSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX.