

Movie Review: *The Secret Life of Bees*

Director: Gina Prince-Bythewood

Production Company: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Cast: Queen Latifah, Dakota Fanning, Jennifer Hudson, Alicia Keys, Sophie Okonedo, Paul Bethany, Nate Parker, Hilarie Burton

Rating: PG-13 for thematic material, language and some violence

By Gregg Tubbs



“I killed my mother when I was four years old.” When a film opens with a line like that, you wonder how in the world it can turn itself around into something so love-filled and life affirming. But that’s just what *The Secret Life of Bees* does. Like a thousand little bees working slowly and diligently over a long summer to fill their combs with sweet honey, *The Secret Life of Bees* works its way into your heart. Anchored by Queen Latifah, Dakota Fanning and a strong ensemble cast, *Bees* brings us an unlikely quintet of unique women in a story of sisterhood, sorrow, catharsis and the healing power of love.

Based on Sue Monk Kidd's best-selling coming-of-age novel set in South Carolina in 1964, *The Secret Life of Bees* tells the touching tale of Lily Owens (Fanning), a 14-year-old girl haunted by tragedy. When she was four, Lily hid in a closet while her parents argued. The argument turned violent, then tragic, when a handgun slipped out of her mother’s hand and into the closet, ending up in the hands of a terrified little girl. The gun goes off, ending a mother’s life and changing her only child’s life forever.



**Lily's (Dakota Fanning) only real companion is her caregiver and housekeeper, Rosaleen (Jennifer Hudson).
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Raised in a loveless home by her bitter father (Paul Bettany) who seems to resent her very existence, Lily's only real companion is her caregiver and housekeeper, Rosaleen (Jennifer Hudson). Lily's few treasures—artifacts of her mother—are buried in a cigar box in her father's peach orchard. These mementos are all she has left of her mother—a pair of calfskin gloves, a lock of hair, and a mysterious paper label. The label bears the picture of a black Madonna cradling a black Christ child. In quiet evenings under the stars, Lily examines these artifacts of lost love and wonders "What if?" But the answer is always crushing guilt and shame.

Lily's inner turmoil is mirrored by the turbulent times in which she lives. Although President Johnson has just signed the Civil Rights Bill, a piece of paper in Washington cannot change generations of behavior overnight. After a nasty racist encounter while escorting Rosaleen to register to vote,

Lily flees town and her past with a reluctant Rosaleen in tow. Their journey leads them to the hospitality of the cultured, independent-minded Boatwright sisters in Tiburon, South Carolina. The sisters are beekeepers whose bottled honey bears a label adorned with a black Madonna.

By coming to Tiburon, Lily hopes to unlock the secrets of her mother's past. With the help of the beatific August Boatwright (Latifah), she discovers far more. As she learns the beekeeper's craft, she experiences patience, serenity and the rhythms of nature, including life and death. Lily begins to learn about herself, and as her friendship with the wise and reassuring August deepens, she begins to reveal more of her own painful past. The film earns kudos for featuring such rich, complex portraits of African-American women, including June Boatwright (Alicia Keys), who seems keep her emotions too tightly in check and May Boatwright (Sophie Okonedo), whose feelings run rampant.

Like the best stories, *The Secret Life of Bees* is a love story. Even the Bible has been called a love story between God and humankind. The film illustrates the importance of feeling loved, showing what love enables us to do as well as what we often resort to in its absence. The story also raises the question of whether perfect love is possible in a hateful world. In such a world, the film asks whether it's better to not take a chance on love, like June, or to feel it perhaps too deeply, like May.



As Lily (Dakota Fanning) learns the beekeeper's craft from August (Queen Latifah), she experiences patience, serenity and the rhythms of nature, including life and death. Copyright © 2008 Twentieth Century Fox.

In particular, *The Secret Life of Bees* focuses on our need to be loved as perhaps the essential human condition. And if the need for love is our most basic emotional need, then what could be more despairing than to feel, not only unloved, but also essentially unlovable? Weighed down by guilt over her mother's death and her father's insistence that her mother abandoned her, Lily believes herself to be unworthy of love. But is anyone truly unworthy of love?

Like making honey, the process of healing comes slowly for Lily. She learns that life is bittersweet: the same bees that make sweet honey also have a painful sting. Discovering the truth about her past is only the beginning of her journey toward wholeness. As Zach tells her, "Finding out the truth is only half of it. It's what you do with it that matters." Surrounded by the love of these incredible women, Lily is able to face the difficult truth of her past, to forgive herself, and open her heart to love.

With its compelling characters and rich themes, *The Secret Life of Bees* powerfully explores the redemptive power of love and the transformative power of forgiveness.

- Have you read the book? Was the film true to its source or did it “soften” the story’s hard edges?
- What is the symbolism of the bees in Lily’s bedroom? Was this a premonition? Have you ever experienced a premonition?
- Faith plays an important role in the lives of the Boatwright sisters. What did you think of the black Madonna statue in their living room? Do you find images or objects sometimes helpful in focusing your prayer and devotion?
- What was your opinion of Lily’s father? Why was he so cruel to her? Did Lily forgive him in the end? Would you have returned home with him?
- Do you think the need to feel loved is common to all people? Have you ever felt unloved? Can you imagine ever feeling essentially unworthy of love?
- Are any of us really worthy of God’s love? How does grace bridges the gap?
- Have you ever known anyone like June? Or May? Which of the sisters did you identify with the most?
- Do you have a favorite Bible passage about love? What are some famous Bible passages that center on love? (For example, see John 3:16 and 1 Cor. Chapter 13.)
- How important is forgiveness in matters of love? Has there ever been someone in your life you could not love? How does God’s forgiveness of our sins enable us to forgive others?
- June says, “Limitless love isn’t possible in a hateful world.” Do you agree? What about God’s love? What does the life and death of Jesus reveal about the depth of God’s love for us?

- [Official *The Secret Life of Bees* site](#)
- [Study Guide](#)
- [Clips for study guide](#)
- [Theatrical Trailer](#)

