

'Maid Narratives' provides a better look at Jim Crow South

"I wish I was like you – easily amused." – Kurt Cobain

This line from "All Apologies" by Nirvana could easily be used to describe anyone who thought "The Help" was an accurate depiction of what it was like to be an African-American "domestic" during the late '50s and early '60s. For the most part, the film was pure fiction. If you want the real story, you'll need to pick up a copy of "The Maid Narratives: Black Domestic Workers and White Families in the Jim Crow South" by Katherine van Wormer, David W. Jackson III and Charletta Sudduth.

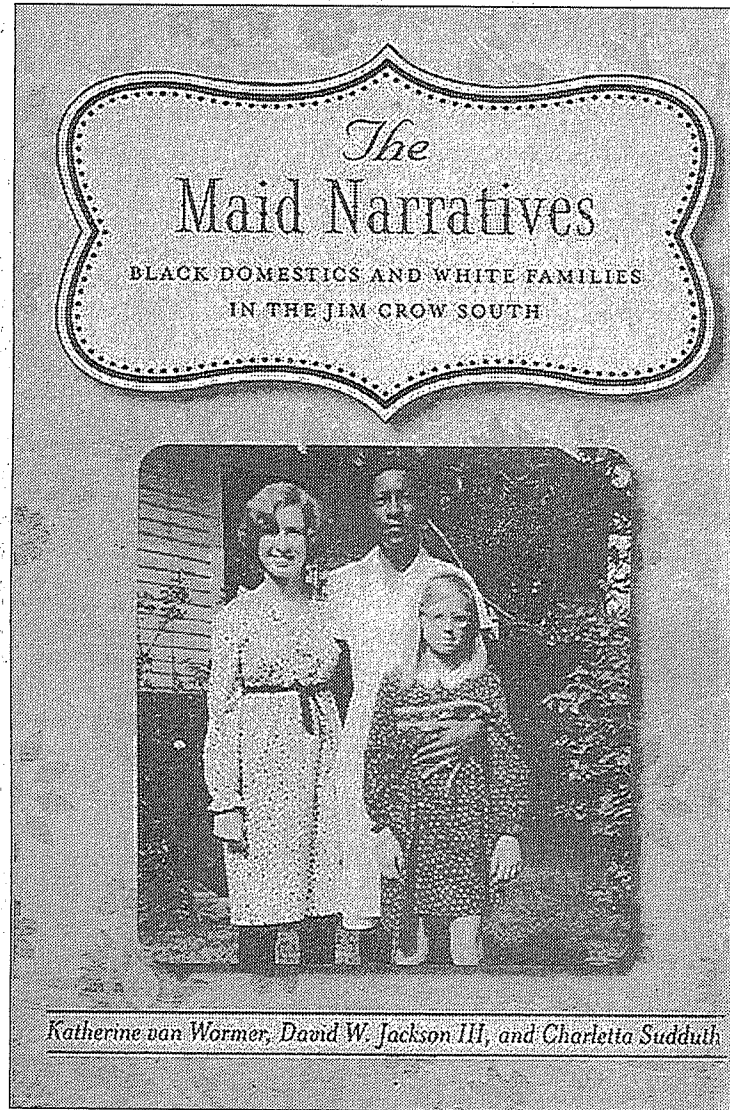
"Aligning themselves with whites of the professional class, black women often earned the respect of members of the white community and formed alliances that could render them and their families a certain degree of protection," the authors note. "Black domestic workers moved freely between the white and black communities. Dressed in a maid's uniform, they had a mobility denied to others of their race. Domestic workers often fell into the role of go-betweens, as interpreters of black life to white people and of white life to black people."

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The Maid Narratives is based on interviews with more than 50 people with intimate knowledge of what it was like to live in the Jim Crow South. "Part I: The Background" consists of three chapters that provide a historical and cultural context for what follows in the next two sections. "Part II: The Maid Narratives" is made up of interviews and personal statements from women who served as domestics – African-American women who worked for white families primarily through the 1950s. "Part III: The White Family Narratives" gives the perspective of those who were served by the domestics.

One of the passages I found especially interesting was from Pearlina Sisk Jones, who lived most of her life in Taylor and Oxford, Miss. Ms. Jones was born in 1918 and had the distinction of working in the home of William Faulkner for about six months.

"I remember Mr. Faulkner wearing brim hats, walking very straight and leveled," Ms. Jones recounted in an interview with Sudduth. "At that time, maids



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were being paid about two dollars an hour, but Mr. Faulkner paid more – about three dollars an hour. Some of the chores I had to do were: I cleaned everything, had to go over them floors, get some oil to make them floors shine, wash the dishes, clean the bathroom with Clorox and Comet, wipe them door knobs and make them shine. I worked so hard.

"The way I got through all this was I made poems; I wrote poetry out of them jobs," she added. "I am old now, but I have some poems at the house."

Many readers will no doubt be fascinated by accounts provided by members of the local community. Bowling Green attorney Flora Templeton Stuart, for example, offers the following recollection of Celestine Holmes, who she remembers as "Teen." Teen was her nanny when she was a young girl growing up in New Orleans in the 1950s.

"Teen referred to me as Miss Flora and my mother as Miss Elise," Stuart explained. "Even when married, black nannies had nicknames given to them by the white folks like Teen, Bea and even my grandmother's maid, Nicey, who lived in Amite. As strange as it seems now, I never saw the home where Teen lived although it was close to our neighborhood; nor do I know which church Teen attended or anything about her family. I asked my mother, now 89 years old, to tell me about Teen's family. She knew very little about her background."

By providing narratives from

both sides of the equation – i.e., giving the perspective of the domestics followed by the perspective of those they served – the book has an irrefutable quality of completeness to it. It is very enlightening to reflect on how the same activities and events were perceived differently depending on what your role was at the time.

"Common to the narratives of the 27 white women and the two white men who were willing to share their memories is the expression of ambivalence," the authors conclude in the last chapter of the book. "On the one hand, there is a sense of love and devotion to the women who helped raise them and/or members of their family. On the other hand, there is an indomitable sense of regret punctuated by grief, regret for words unspoken, stories unshared, and grief over the maid's death."

Understanding our past is essential if we are to effectively deal with the challenges we still face as an increasingly diverse and conflicted society. The cultural differences so exquisitely articulated in this excellent volume continue to be a part of who we are as a society. So if you saw "The Help" and thought you had a clue about what the Jim Crow South was really like, think again. Pick up a copy of "The Maid Narratives." It is one of those rare books with the potential to change your worldview.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.