

THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES

A visit to
the movie set

In 2008, I spent three days on the movie set for *The Secret Life of Bees*. What follows are some of my thoughts and observations about the visit.

January 25

“We’re not lost, are we?” I ask my husband, Sandy.

“No,” he tells me. “It just looks like we are.”

We are on our way to tiny Watha, North Carolina to visit the movie set for *The Secret Life of Bees*, driving through the winter-brown countryside north of Wilmington. It is so cold the horses in the fields are wearing blankets and the rain puddles have edges of ice. In the movie, it is supposed to be July.



Sue with husband, son and daughter

I’ve brought along the family: Sandy, my son, Bob, his wife, Kellie; my daughter, Ann, her husband, Scott. They joke they were invited only because I want an “entourage.” They ask me how I feel about the movie being made, and reflexively I say it’s exciting. Which it is, but it hasn’t quite hit me yet. The novel was optioned for film nearly seven years ago, before it was even published. I was excited then, but after three years, I began to feel somewhat like I do now driving to Watha— unsure if the movie was lost or whether it just looked that way. I decided to put it out of mind. Even over the past year, as I read drafts of the script, it was questionable whether anything would come of it. But here we are, looking for Watha.



The Pink House

Eventually, we find dozens of movie trailers across from the Town Hall and just down the road, the pinkest house I’ve ever seen. Later, I will be told it took three tries to get the house this particular Pepto Bismol shade. So, this is where the calendar sisters live – August, May and June. At the driveway, an escort appears and guides us around the grass, which has been dyed summer green. The trees are mysteriously in full leaf half way up the branches and

gorgeous fake flowers bloom everywhere. We walk quickly through the Pink House, stealing glances at August’s blue room, the parlor with the masthead statue of Black Mary, the back porch with the wringer washer. It is a little like stumbling into my imagination as a real place.

The backyard is populated with a lot of purposeful-looking people in headsets. They are filming Scene 91B amid a morass of lights, cameras, video monitors, sound equipment, propane heaters and directors’ chairs with people’s names on them. In the midst of all this, May’s stone wall curves through the grass and off into the woods.



Sue and Director Gina Prince-Blythewood

I’m ushered to a chair that has Sue Monk Kidd printed on it. Before I can play this up for the sake of the “entourage,” a young woman in a green North Face jacket comes over briefly to say hello. She’s the director, Gina Prince-Bythewood, and also the one who took my 301 page book and turned it into 106 pages of dialogue. When the script first arrived, I found I could not immediately read it. I hadn’t expected to be so nervous. I finally picked it up one night as I went to bed, thinking I would only read the opening scene. At 2:00 AM, I had finished the whole thing. I was bowled over by how good it was. Since then, I’ve had many conversations with Gina by phone and email, conferring, brainstorming, and in some cases, debating.



May's Wall

“Quiet on the set,” someone yells, and we rummage through our pockets and purses to turn off cell phones. Gina’s voice booms across the yard, “Action!” and Queen Latifah, who plays August, walks beside the wall with May’s crumpled suicide note in her hand. Her hair is pulled back in a bun and she wears wire-rimmed glasses. Tears slide down her cheeks.

Filming moves across the street to shoot Scene 36– Lily and Rosaleen arriving at the Pink House. The light is

falling, along with the temperature and everyone is in a rush. As the scene is set up, I talk with thirteen-year-old Dakota Fanning, who tells me her grandmother introduced her to *The Secret Life of Bees* before she knew she would play Lily. The crew has been telling me that she is brilliant. One of the camera guys showed me the video of her kneeling on grits, and I found her mesmerizing. After it was filmed, the set medic had to ice Dakota's knees.

Jennifer Hudson, the Academy Award-winning *Dream Girl*, who plays Rosaleen, has a row of artificial stitches on her forehead. She and Dakota peel off their coats and pop ice into their mouths, sucking on it for a moment so their breath won't fog when they say their lines. "Action!" The two of them sit beside a ditch in summer cotton and short sleeves, managing not to shiver, as they watch the *Daughters of Mary* stream out of the Pink House.

Lily: "You think one of them is August?"

Rosaleen: "Whoever she is, I hope she makes honey better'n she picks out paint."



Sue with Alicia Keys as June

I smile, remembering when I wrote that last line for the novel. Jennifer delivers it with flawless deadpan. She has found the magic combination of self-possession and quiet vulnerability that defines Rosaleen.

Afterward, everyone crowds into the Pink House to sing happy birthday to Alicia Keys, who plays June and wears a short, Afro wig as part of her costume. The cake is bordered with corn fritters and decorated with bees. As I stare at it, Queen Latifah appears at my side and says, "Thanks for writing the book, Sue Monk Kidd," and gives me an unexpected hug.

They begin shooting Scene 60 somewhere around 7:00 PM. It starts like this: Irma Thomas' song, *Break-A-Way* blasts from the radio in the kitchen and Jennifer and Sophie Okonedo dance along as they scramble eggs. Sophie, who I remember from the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, plays May, which is a tricky role. In the novel, Lily describes May as smart in some ways, simple-minded in others, a grown-up in a child's body, naive, and a touch crazy. Sophie has got it down perfectly. At 10:00 PM, they are still shooting the scene and the dancing has become more entertaining. Jennifer does the Twist, and Sophie holds her nose like she's going underwater, a move from the old sixties dance, the Swim. I wonder if it's an unconscious foreshadowing of what's ahead for May.

January 26

This morning the crew sets up in the yard for the scene in which Alicia and Nate Parker, who plays Neil, get into a major argument. He wants to get married. She doesn't. He calls her a "bitch" and storms off to his car. There are fat, store-bought tomatoes wired onto the plants in the garden, and June has what Lily refers to in the book as a "tomato-throwing fit." Alicia sends one of the tomatoes a good 30 yards, where it splats on the hood of the car. Another flies into the open window and smacks Nate in the shoulder. It's clear that Alicia has completely owned the character of June. "Everyone thinks of her as a singer," one of the crew whispers to me, "but just wait."



Sue in her "Director's Chair"

During lunch, I read over the dialect coach's pronunciation sheet which contains practice lines like: July- JOO-lye (He told a true lie last July.); Rosaleen- Roze-a-leen (I froze a bean with Valvoline for Rosaleen). I've been quietly relieved to hear the cast sounding like they were all born in South Carolina. When I compliment the dialect coach and ask where he's from, he tells me, "Southern Connecticut."

That afternoon Sophie, Queen Latifah, Jennifer, Alicia, Nate, and Dakota sit on the back porch in a scene that has no dialogue, but shows the connections between the women in the Pink House. Even before I got here, I heard about the bond the female cast had formed. It comes through both in front of the camera and behind it— the way they tease, play, hug, laugh, and defer to one other. As the camera rolls, May sings the Bee Song, while August removes Rosaleen's fake stitches, June and Neil rock in the porch swing, and Lily takes it all in. The Bee Song is a little ditty I made up for the novel. Not long ago, Gina asked if they could record me singing it, so the cast could learn the tune. Since I cannot sing whatsoever, I pointed out that she had vocalists like Alicia, Queen Latifah and Jennifer who could compose a tune, but no, she wanted my version. I sang it over the phone to a person in a recording studio in Los Angeles. When I finished, there was a pause. Then he said, "Well, Oka-ay." Now, after the porch scene, Alicia says, "Hey Sue, I loved hearing you sing the Bee Song on that tape," and flashes me her beautiful smile. I'm starting to feel like I'm part of their hive.

Between takes, I peer into the Honey House. Jars of honey sit on shelves in front of the windows, lit with sunlight. In the novel there are no jars before the windows, but the sight is so lovely I wish I'd thought of it myself. In fact, several things have been added to the script I wish I'd thought of. In the novel, for instance, innocent-minded



Inside the Honey House

May serves Lily and Zach a candlestick salad composed of half a banana, standing in a pineapple slice with a cherry on top, which they receive without comment. But in the script, a shocked Lily says, "It looks like a" And Zach replies, "I know." Then they crack up. It's exactly what two adolescents would say, and it's funny, and I couldn't believe I didn't think of it.

An adaptation is not a clone of the novel. It's the story rendered in a different artistic medium, and in order to translate it from one to the other, changes are needed. Perhaps the biggest one is that Zach, played by Tristan Wilds, is not jailed after his encounter with the racist men, but he's abducted for a short while (though physically unharmed). It enhances the drama considerably. It wasn't one of those things I wished I'd thought of, but I didn't mind it. I could see the wisdom in it for the movie. All in all, though, Gina has been remarkably faithful to the story. In her note that accompanied the script, she wrote: "Your novel was my bible."

January 27

The production has been moved from the Pink House ten miles into the woods. Warming myself beside a propane heater, I watch the scene of Lily and Zach checking hives, dressed in white suits with pith helmets and veils. The bees



Sue with Dakota Fanning and Tristan Wilds

have been imported from Florida since Carolina bees are too sluggish from the cold. As they fly from the hive box, bee hum floats overhead and the air grows thick as Dakota waves the smoker.

Tristan pulls out a frame covered with plum-colored honey. Dipping his finger in it, he gives her a taste, and you can't miss the fireworks going off between Lily and Zach.

As dusk comes, the crew prepares for May's drowning scene. A temperature-controlled hydro-tank has been sunk into the ground, and at the moment, it's being transformed into a river with the addition of rocks, plants, branches and moss. May's stunt double lies under the water with a snorkel, while cameras train on her. A man with a long paddle practices making water currents. Lights are hoisted onto cranes higher than the pine trees. Darkness falls. When the water temperature hits 78 degrees, vapor rises in thick curls on the surface, resembling a Turkish bath.

At midnight, I'm sitting beside Gina, in a front row seat at the "river," wearing two coats, gloves, and hand warmers under my earphones to keep my ears from going numb.

When Gina calls "Action," flashlights begin to shine through the trees. "May!" shouts Queen Latifah, followed by Alicia, Dakota and Jennifer. Queen Latifah poises at the edge of the river and sends her beam through the mist, freezing as she sees Sophie under the surface with a stone on her chest and her white dress billowing out. This is where Gina usually calls "Cut!" and Sophie is scooped out of the water, wrapped in blankets, and they are all shuttled off to the warming tent. This time, however, Queen Latifah and Alicia will go into the water themselves and pull Sophie out, just as August and June did in the novel. Earlier I observed Queen Latifah off by herself, looking pre-occupied and somber, preparing for the moment. Now, when she sees Sophie in the water, she plunges in, Alicia right behind her. Dakota was supposed to stay on the bank, but somehow she has catapulted herself into the water, too. Queen Latifah grabs her "sister's" body, and holding it against her chest, rocks back and forth, as her wails fill the woods. The sound will haunt me for days.



May's Stunt Double in the River

Leaving the set, I realize the excitement I banished four years ago has returned. Not only because of what I've seen, but because now I will go home and anticipate something that doesn't come along that often—a movie about a real girl-quest and a stronghold of wise, powerful women during a turning point in American history.