

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Sue Monk Kidd was raised in the small town of Sylvester, Georgia, a place that deeply influenced the writing of her first novel *The Secret Life of Bees*. She graduated from Texas Christian University in 1970 and later took creative writing courses at Emory University and Anderson College, as well as studying at Sewanee, Bread Loaf, and other writers conferences. In 2016, TCU conferred on her an honorary doctor of letters degree.

Her book *When the Heart Waits*, published by Harper San Francisco in 1990 has become a touchstone on contemplative spirituality. In 1996, Harper published *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, describing Kidd's journey into feminist theology, a memoir that had a groundbreaking effect within religious circles.

In her forties, Kidd turned her attention to writing fiction, winning the South Carolina Fellowship in Literature and the 1996 Poets & Writers Exchange Program in Fiction. Her short stories appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Nimrod*, and other literary journals and received a Katherine Anne Porter award and citations in *Best American Short Stories'* 100 Distinguished Stories.

When her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, was published by Viking in 2002, it became a genuine literary phenomenon, spending more than 2½ years on the *New York Times* bestseller list. It has been translated into 36 languages and sold more than 8 million copies worldwide. *Bees* was named the Book Sense Paperback Book of the Year in 2004, long-listed for the 2002 Orange Prize in England, and won numerous awards. For over a decade, the novel was produced on stage by The American Place Theater, and in 2008 it was adapted into a movie by Fox Searchlight, which won the People's Choice award for best movie and the NAACP Image award for best picture. The 2019 off-broadway production at The Atlantic Theater won the AUDELCO VIV award for best musical. The novel is taught widely in middle school, high school, and college classrooms.

Kidd's second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, has sold well over a million copies since its publication by Viking in 2005, reaching #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list and remaining on the hardcover and paperback lists for nine months. Winner of the 2005 Quill Award for General Fiction, the novel was longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, translated into 24 languages, and made into a television movie by Lifetime.

The spiritual essays, meditations, and inspirational stories Kidd wrote in her thirties were collected into a single volume, *Firstlight: The Early Inspiration Writings* and published by Guideposts Books in 2006 and Penguin in 2007.

After traveling with her daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor, to sacred sites in Greece, Turkey, and France, Kidd and Taylor co-authored a memoir, *Traveling with Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story*. Published by Viking in 2009, it appeared on numerous bestseller lists, including the *New York Times* list and has been published in several languages.

*The Invention of Wings*, Kidd's third novel was published in 2014 by Viking. It debuted at #1 on the New York Times bestseller list where it spent a total of 9 months. It has sold over a million copies and been translated into over 20+ languages thus far. The novel has won several literary awards, including the Florida Book of Year Award and the SIBA Book Award. It was also nominated for the International Dublin Literary Award and was chosen for Oprah's Book Club 2.0.

Kidd's much anticipated fourth novel, *The Book of Longings*, was published on April 21, 2020 to widespread critical and reader acclaim. It immediately landed at the top of the bestseller lists, reaching #5 on The New York Times Hardcover Fiction list, #1 on the IndieBound bestseller list, and #2 on the Associated Press bestseller List. The novel was a Book-of-the-Month Selection, Heather's Pick (Indigo Books) in Canada, and Australian Women's Day Great Read Pick. It has been translated into 17 languages thus far.

Kidd serves on the Writers Council for Poets & Writers, Inc. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, Sandy, and dog, Barney. - Author's website

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the title of the novel. Ana is a character defined by her longings and aspirations. She is passionate about the power of writing, of narratives, of having a voice, as well as lifting up the voices of other women. How does the novel's theme of finding and expressing one's authentic voice unfold in the story? What forces work to silence contemporary women and what emboldens them?
2. What role does Ana's incantation bowl play in her quest to realize her longing? What is the importance of ritualizing one's faith or longings? If you were given an incantation bowl in which to inscribe your deepest longing, what might you write? What can our longings teach us?
3. Though fictional, *The Book of Longings* is also a deeply researched account of life two thousand years ago. What rules and customs surprised you? Which parts of the story feel especially relevant to modern-day life? Did you identify with Ana in any way?
4. Ana's aunt Yaltha is described as being as tough, clever, defiant, and daring as she is nurturing: "Her mind was an immense feral country that spilled its borders. She trespassed everywhere" (page 4). What do you think is Yaltha's most profound influence on Ana? Has there been anyone in your life like Yaltha? How do you think you have been shaped by the older women in your life?
5. Though Ana is born to a wealthy family and has been afforded some education, her parents have arranged for her to marry an older man whom she despises, and they expect her to give up her

scholarly ambitions. Are there inhibiting cultural expectations placed on women today, and if so, how much do they differ depending on other factors such as race, class, and birthplace? How are these expectations represented in marriage ceremonies, then and now?

6. Discuss the relationship between Ana and Jesus. Were there moments they shared in the story that particularly resonated with you? What compromises did Ana make within the marriage? What does it mean to "belong" to someone? What does it mean to belong to oneself?
7. *The Book of Longings* renders Jesus in a way that foregrounds his humanity, from his struggle with the stigma conferred upon him by the circumstances of his birth to his smile, which is "a broad, crooked arrangement on his face" (page 86). Ana also finds him to be "a peacemaker and provocateur in equal measures" (page 143), a man who both enlivens and emboldens her—even as his audacity also reminds her of her own comparatively marginal place in society. Do you think mainstream depictions of Jesus emphasize his divinity at the expense of allowing for his authentic humanity? Did the novel alter your perception of his character and his life on earth or enhance your existing idea of him in some way?
8. Likewise, discuss the novel's portrayal of Jesus's mother, Mary, a character the author describes, endearingly, as "a kind woman with graying hair, who is often weary from chores, a mother who did a superb job on her son, who taught him a lot that she didn't get credit for." How does Mary capture the mystery of the dual nature of being both human and divine?
9. Sue Monk Kidd has explored feminist theology for years, along with what she calls "the missing feminine within religion," which eventually finds expression through the character of Ana. What do you think about the relationship between feminism and religious belief? In what ways can feminism become a spiritual quest?
10. How do you think Ana's and Jesus's relationships to holiness differ, and how are they alike? Consider the significance of their names for God—Jesus speaks of "Father," while Ana speaks of "I Am Who I Am." How does Ana's concept of the divine evolve as the story develops? What power and allure does the feminine spirit of God, known as Sophia, hold for her?
11. When Yaltha confesses her private loss to Ana, Ana thinks to herself, "We women harbor our intimacies in locked places in our bodies. They are ours to relinquish when we choose" (page 186). What are some of the different ways the characters cope with loss and injustice? Consider the behavioral differences and the variety of coping mechanisms employed by the men and women in the novel. How do grief and grievance manifest differently in characters such as Ana, Judas, Yaltha, and Jesus?
12. When Ana is confronting motherhood and the choice to bear children, Yaltha tells her, "I don't doubt you should give yourself to motherhood. I only question what it is you're meant to mother" (page 196). How much do you think the idea that a woman's purpose is fulfilled by having children persists today? Are women's creative ambitions outside of the family still viewed as less fundamentally fulfilling somehow? Has motherhood impacted your passions and pursuits?

13. Kidd revisits a theme she first wrote about in *The Secret Life of Bees*: finding a family where one least expects. Discuss the ways that Ana, Yaltha, Tabitha, and Diodora come together to form a family after Jesus's death. In what ways do the Therapeutae become Ana's place of belonging?
14. At the beginning of the novel, Ana writes in her incantation bowl, "When I am dust, sing these words over my bones: she was a voice" (page 13). Near the story's end, she composes her opus, Thunder: Perfect Mind (a historically real document that was found in the Egyptian desert in 1945). Later, Ana buries copies of it and all her narratives on the side of a cliff to preserve them for future generations. Do you feel she realized her longing to become a voice? What thoughts and feelings did the excerpts from Thunder: Perfect Mind (pages 335–36) stir in you? Could Ana's writings be considered sacred texts?
15. At the end of the novel, Ana ponders why Jesus's followers have removed her from the story of his life: "Was it because I was absent when he traveled about Galilee during his ministry? Was it because women were so often invisible? Did they believe making him celibate rendered him more spiritual?" (page 407). Why do you think Ana would have been silenced and erased?
16. If Jesus having a wife were a more accepted narrative, how do you think it would affect the religious and cultural legacy of Christianity?
17. Over the course of Ana's journey, *The Book of Longings* returns to the idea of the largeness within people. How do you conceive of your own largeness? What inspires it? What inhibits it? Do you agree with Yaltha that "it isn't the largeness in you that matters most, it's your passion to bring it forth" (page 353)?

- Questions issued by publisher

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

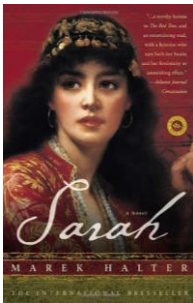
Historical novelists build their works around recorded history, creatively inventing characters and scenarios to fill liminal spaces. Along these lines, in a daring what-if, Kidd (*The Invention of Wings*, 2014) imagines Jesus Christ's missing years and speculates that he followed Jewish tradition and therefore was married. The daughter of Herod Antipas' head scribe, Ana, narrates her engrossing, briskly paced story in an appealing voice. Well-educated and impetuous, she loves to write, learns about women's secret histories from her courageous aunt Yaltha, and chafes against gender restrictions. Shared intellectual curiosity and mutual respect mark her marriage to Jesus, a caring, devout stonemason who champions the downtrodden, and Kidd warmly presents their relationship. When God calls Jesus, however, Ana must, sadly, be left behind. From wealthy Sepphoris to humble Nazareth to Alexandria and beyond, Kidd describes a first-century world full of political and religious tensions, which feels simultaneously ancient and freshly awake with spiritual possibility. Ana's feminist beliefs and pursuits may stretch credulity at times, but the message about the importance of kindness and the power of women's voices should resonate strongly with today's readers. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Kidd is a library favorite, and the bold subject of this novel will increase buzz tenfold. -- Sarah Johnson (Reviewed 2/15/2020) (Booklist, vol 116, number 12, p26).

## Kirkus Reviews

In Kidd's (*The Invention of Wings*, 2014, etc.) feminist take on the New Testament, Jesus has a wife whose fondest longing is to write. Ana is the daughter of Matthias, head scribe to Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee. She demonstrates an exceptional aptitude for writing, and Matthias, for a time, indulges her with reed pens, papyri, and other 16 C.E. office supplies. Her mother disapproves, but her aunt, Yaltha, mentors Ana in the ways of the enlightened women of Alexandria, from whence Yaltha, suspected of murdering her brutal husband, was exiled years before. Yaltha was also forced to give up her daughter, Chaya, for adoption. As Ana reaches puberty, parental tolerance of her nonconformity wanes, outweighed by the imperative to marry her off. Her adopted brother, Judas—yes, that Judas—is soon disowned for his nonconformity—plotting against Antipas. On the very day Ana, age 14, meets her prospective betrothed, the repellent Nathaniel, in the town market, she also encounters Jesus, a young tradesman, to whom she's instantly drawn. Their connection deepens after she encounters Jesus in the cave where she is concealing her writings about oppressed women. When Nathaniel dies after his betrothal to Ana but before their marriage, Ana is shunned for insufficiently mourning him—and after refusing to become Antipas' concubine, she is about to be stoned until Jesus defuses the situation with that famous admonition. She marries Jesus and moves into his widowed mother's humble compound in Nazareth, accompanied by Yaltha. There, poverty, not sexism, prohibits her from continuing her writing—office supplies are expensive. Kidd skirts the issue of miracles, portraying Jesus as a fully human and, for the period, accepting husband—after a stillbirth, he condones Ana's practice of herbal birth control. A structural problem is posed when Jesus' active ministry begins—what will Ana's role be? Problem avoided when, notified by Judas that Antipas is seeking her arrest, she and Yaltha journey to Alexandria in search of Chaya. In addition to depriving her of the opportunity to write the first and only contemporaneous gospel, removing Ana from the main action destroys the novel's momentum. A daring concept not so daringly developed. (Kirkus Reviews, February 15, 2020).

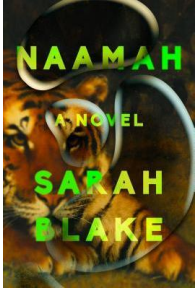
## READALIKES

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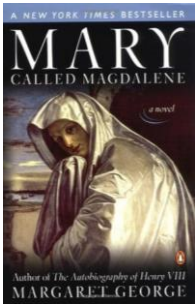
### ***Sarah* by Marek Halter**

Born into a world of luxury in the ancient Sumerian city of Ur, Sarah flees the arranged marriage planned by her father, a decision that leads to an encounter with Abram, a member of a nomadic tribe of outsiders.



***Naamah* by Sarah Blake**

Imagines the life of Noah's wife, Naamah, a woman torn between faith and fury, lending her strength to her sons and their wives, caring for an unruly menagerie of restless creatures and silently mourning the lover she left behind.



***Mary, Called Magdalene* by Margaret George**

Today, Mary continues to spark controversy, curiosity, and veneration. In a vivid re-creation of Mary Magdalene's life story, Margaret George convincingly captures this renowned woman's voice as she moves from girlhood to womanhood, becomes part of the circle of disciples, and comes to grips with the divine. A fictionalized account of the life of Mary Magdalene which is grounded in both biblical and secular research.