



The Maid Narratives: Black Domestic Workers and White Families in the Jim Crow South (Southern Literary Studies)

By Katherine Van Wormer, David W. Jackson III, Charletta Sudduth

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The Maid Narratives shares the memories of black domestic workers and the white families they served, uncovering the often intimate relationships between maid and mistress. Based on interviews with over fifty people -- both white and black -- these stories deliver a personal and powerful message about resilience and resistance in the face of oppression in the Jim Crow South.

The housekeepers, caretakers, sharecroppers, and cooks who share their experiences in The Maid Narratives ultimately moved away during the Great Migration. Their perspectives as servants who left for better opportunities outside of the South offer an original telling of physical and psychological survival in a racially oppressive caste system: Vinella Byrd, for instance, from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, recalls how a farmer she worked for would not allow her to clean her hands in the family's wash pan. These narratives are complemented by the voices of white women, such as Flora Templeton Stuart, from New Orleans, who remembers her maid fondly but realizes that she knew little about her life. Like Stuart, many of the white narrators remain troubled by the racial norms of the time. Viewed as a whole, the book presents varied, rich, and detailed accounts, often tragic, and sometimes humorous. The Maid Narratives reveals, across racial lines, shared hardships, strong emotional ties, and inspiring strength.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This collection of oral history narratives fills a significant gap in U.S. social history. The book tells the story of those women who remember both segregation and domestic work in the South and took an active part in their migration to the Midwest. No person attempting to understand the popularity of books such as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Help* should be without it." --Susan Tucker, author of *Telling Memories Among Southern Women*

Little else grabs a human's attention like a first-person narrative: the recollection of someone who can say, "I was there. I saw it, tasted it, touched it felt it." *The Maid Narratives: Black Domestic and White Families in the Jim Crow South* gathers a group of such stories to extend the discussion about the nature of domestic work in the South in the twentieth century. The volume is composed of excerpts of oral history interview with thirteen African American women who grew up and worked as domestic servants in the South and then moved to Iowa; interviews with an essays written by fifteen white women and one white man from various places int the South, mostly New Orleans, whose families employed domestic servants; and prefatory, analytical, and summary essays by the editors. --The Journal of Southern History

Regardless of our own racial background, this volume opens our eyes to the daily lives of thousands of African American women absent from history books. Working as domestics in the North and South, women were sometimes treated with regard and even loved by their employers, but often barely respected as human beings...*The Maid Narratives* fills a great historical void. As the first sentence of the introduction says, it is 'intended to take its readers on a journey back in time to a place that, to many, will be a foreign country. We will travel there with the help of our storytellers.' --Friends Journal

About the Author

Charletta Sudduth is an early-childhood consultant for the Waterloo Community School District. She earned a master's in social work and a doctorate in education, curriculum, and instruction from the University of Northern Iowa.

David W. Jackson III is assistant professor in the Department of African and African-American Studies at Metropolitan State College of Denver. He is co-producer of the oral video history project African-American Voices of the Cedar Valley. In 2006, he received the Trio Achiever of the Year award for the State of Iowa.

Katherine van Wormer, who grew up in New Orleans, is a sociologist and professor of social work at the University of Northern Iowa. She is the author or coauthor of sixteen books, including *Death by Domestic Violence*; *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*; *Confronting Oppression, Restoring Justice*; and *Addiction Treatment: A Strengths Perspective*.

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