

Insights from 1964:  
the case against  
setting 'the secret life  
of bees' in a later...



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Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd features a young, caucasian girl, Lily, who lives with three African American sisters, the Boatwrights. The novel takes place in Sylvan and Tiburon, South Carolina during 1964: high time for the civil rights movement. Throughout the novel, Lily sees a lot of racial injustice, but if the novel took place after the civil rights movement it would not have had the same effect, because the racial discrimination was not as prominent then. Even if the novel took place before the civil rights movement, there still wouldn't have been the same effect, because before then, there was little push for civil rights, and there was little talk of racial advancements in the media.

After May's death, a police officer asks Lily, " Didn't you have any white people back in Spartanburg you could stay with?" (page 197) and " These are colored people [...] it's not natural, that you shouldn't be... well, lowering yourself,"(page 198). This shows how African Americans were regarded in 1964; the police officer thought it was odd for a white person to live with a black person. On the other hand, if this took place after the civil rights movement, it would not be uncommon for black and white people to live together. Therefore, if the story was not set in that time, the police officer's words would not have had the same effect that they do. Lily's love interest, Zach, was a teenaged African American male. Throughout the novel, Zach refuses Lily's advances because he knows that society would be against them being together. For example, after Zach gets Lily a notebook, Lily throws her arms around him and leans into his chest in an embrace, but Zach takes her off and tells her, " There are people who would kill boys like me for even looking at girls like you," (page 135). Kidd's use of the phrases "

girl like you” and “ boy like me” suggest that Zach is referring to their racial differences. They can not be together because Zach is black and Lily is white. If this was written after the civil rights movement, it wouldn't be uncommon for interracial partners, so this quote would not put forth the same image of racial discrimination and Zach's concerns would not have the give the reader the same amount of understanding.

At one point, Lily says “ We had a rumor about a busload of people from New York City showing up to integrate the city pool. Talk about Panic. We has a citywide emergency in our hands, as there is no greater affliction for our southern mind than people up north coming down to fix our way of life.” (page 155) The setting of the story is essential for this quote because this was the only point in time where the Northern and Southern parts of the United States felt this way about each other. Kidd would not be able to include this part if she changed the setting. The loss of this line would have taken away from the meaning of the novel, because not only does it provide an accurate description of one of the racial issues during the time, but it also shows how Lily's point of view is changing. This line gives off a sarcastic feel to show how Lily knows what they want her to think, but she thinks it is ridiculous.

Finally, during a dinner, the characters discuss a real life person, Jack Palance. Jack Palance, a caucasian celebrity, brought a non-white woman into the white section of a theater. This enraged many of the caucasian people at the time. It was not socially acceptable for a white man to treat a black person as an equal. The time period is important for this section because Jack Palance is part of the 1960s and again, racial discrimination <https://assignbuster.com/insights-from-1964-the-case-against-setting-the-secret-life-of-bees-in-a-later-time-period/>

was not as prominent after the civil rights movement. Furthermore, it would have been difficult for Kidd to choose a time period after 1964 in general, because of the technological advancement that occurred during the industrial revolution. The whole novel is based around the premise that Lily was able to break her servant, Rosaleen, out of jail and runaway to Tiburon. If this novel occurred in modern times, Lily would not have been able to get away with what she did because it would have been easier to track them down, so they would have to stay hidden.

Regardless of the technological advancements, Sue Monk Kidd would have had to make the novel take place in South Carolina in 1964 because the racial discrimination issues were prominent at this point in time. If Kidd chose a different time period, the racial issues would not have been as essential of an issue, so it would limit Kidd's ability to discuss the problems. In order for the reader to get the most understanding and connection out of the novel, Kidd would have to choose 1964 as the time period and location of the novel.