

3-2012

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Recommended Citation

CSRW, "2012 "Panel Discussion of the 'The Help' Draws Large Audience to Southern Miss" (Southern Miss Now)" (2012). *CSRW Events*. 9.

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Panel Discussion of ‘The Help’ Draws Large Audience to Southern Miss

ARTICLE | THU, 03/29/2012 - 2:20PM | BY VAN ARNOLD



Forrest County Justice Court Judge Deborah Gambrell Chambers, center, makes a point as Southern Miss Gulf Coast Vice-President/Executive Officer Frances Lucas, left, and New York publicist Stella Connell look on during a panel discussion of ‘The Help.’ (University Communications photo by Van Arnold)

A large, energetic crowd turned out for a panel discussion of Kathryn Stockett’s immensely popular novel “The Help” on Wednesday, March 28 at The University of Southern Mississippi’s Thad Cochran Center.

Panelists included Forrest County Justice Court Judge Deborah Gambrell Chambers; University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Vice-President/Executive Officer Frances Lucas and New York publicist Stella Connell. Dr. Kim LeDuff, associate professor in the Southern Miss School of Mass Communication and Journalism, served as the moderator.

Gambrell Chambers and Lucas both grew up in Mississippi during the turbulent time period (1962) depicted in the book and movie. Connell, an Oxford, Miss., native, said her family

employed maids during her childhood which took place a little later than the book’s setting. All conceded that Stockett’s bestseller stirred strong emotions about that era in Mississippi history.

“I know a lot of people thought the book was funny and there were some parts where I laughed, but I certainly did not have a warm, fuzzy feeling after reading it,” said Gambrell Chambers. “When I took my 19-year-old daughters to see the movie, I left the theater crying and they couldn’t understand why. The book and the movie really captured the struggles that African-American women endured during that time.”

In “The Help,” an aspiring young author named “Skeeter” decides to write a book detailing the African-American maids’ point of view about the white families for which they work, and the hardships they go through on a daily basis. Stockett used Jackson, Miss., as the backdrop for her first book which spent more than 100 weeks on the New York Times’ bestseller list.

“I suppose I was rather oblivious growing up to what those women faced,” said Lucas. “We talked about civil rights in Sunday School, but that was just about the extent of my knowledge on the subject. But after reading the book I will say that I have a lot of guilt about the way one group of Americans were treated by other Americans.”

When asked why she thought the book had become such a phenomenon, Connell replied, “I have absolutely no idea. My guess is that word of mouth had a lot to do with it because I can tell you that after I read it I passed it along to several friends and they did the same thing.”

In the book, “Skeeter” eventually collects enough first-person accounts from African-American maids to secure a book deal with a New York publisher. The Southern Miss panelists were in agreement that an actual book of that kind could not have been written in 1962.

“It would have been too dangerous for everyone involved,” said Gambrell Chambers. “There’s simply no way a book like that would have ever been possible.”

During the question-and-answer portion of the discussion, one audience member asked the panel what advice the group might

have for young people who read the book or saw the movie?

“To show respect for one another,” said Lucas. “That immediately comes to mind. And to offer help to those who are less fortunate. We all want and deserve the same thing – to be treated equally.”

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