

The Secret Life of Bees, Summaries, by Chapter

Alternative to movie directions: Please read through each summary for *The Secret Life of Bees*. Then, complete the packet, originally designed for the movie. For the 15-minute chart (p. 2), I've split the summaries of chapters into different sections, 1–7. You are to describe what mood you think people would feel when watching a movie about the content summarized or to be read, and then why they might feel like this.

-----Section 1-----

Chapter 1:

Lying on her bed, Lily waits for the return of the bees that have begun to live in the walls of her bedroom. The year is 1964; Lily is about to turn fourteen. She lives alone with her father, Terrance Ray, and their black housekeeper and nanny, Rosaleen. Lily cannot bring herself to call her cruel, aloof father “Daddy,” so she calls him T. Ray instead. Rosaleen warns her to watch out, because “bees swarm before death.” Lily insists on telling T. Ray about the bees, so she wakes him up, even though she suspects it will only anger him. It does. Lily reminisces about her mother, who died when she was four years old. Lily intimates that she had a significant, albeit accidental, role in her mother’s death. Then Lily recounts the last memory she has of her mother: December 3, 1954—the last day her mother was alive.

In the memory, her mother begins to fight with T. Ray as she cleans out a closet. Lily distinctly remembers her mother’s smell and the overpowering feeling of wanting only to be with her. Her mother responds to T. Ray’s yelling by pulling out a gun. They tussle, and it falls to the floor. Lily remembers bending to pick up the gun and then hearing a loud noise. She goes on to explain that, without a mother, she has had a hard time making friends at school. T. Ray and Lily live just outside Sylvan, South Carolina—a town of 3,100 people. There, T. Ray owns and runs a peach farm, and Lily helps out by selling peaches at a roadside stand (a job she detests). However, T. Ray prohibits Lily from taking part in any social activities, including school-related ones, and she wears only the clothes she manages to sew herself.

The next morning, Lily catches a bee in a jar. Rosaleen disapproves, but Lily knows that Rosaleen loves her. She realized this love one Easter, when Rosaleen brought her a chick, then stood up to T. Ray when he demanded Lily get rid of it. Lily often daydreams that Rosaleen becomes her mother and that they run away together. Her father rarely talks about her real mother, Deborah. Lily keeps everything she has of Deborah’s in a small tin buried in the orchards: a photograph of her mother in front of an old car, a pair of white cotton gloves, and a small wooden picture of a black Mary with the words “Tiburon, S.C.” written on the back. She digs up this box when she is feeling lonely or sad.

Lily spends that day selling peaches out by the highway. T. Ray forbids her from reading while on the job. She likes reading and hopes to go to college, on scholarship, someday. In the peach stand, years ago, T. Ray told Lily about her mother's death—he told her that Lily killed Deborah. Back in the present, Lily returns home to find Rosaleen watching TV. A man announces the signing of the Civil Rights Act, which makes Rosaleen happy. Afterward, Lily tries to talk to T. Ray about her upcoming birthday, but he ignores her. That night, she heads out to dig up the tin box and falls asleep in the orchard. T. Ray wakes her. He thinks she was out there with a boy. For punishment, he forces her to kneel on dried grits until her knees bleed. Afterward, Lily decides to free the bees from the jar in her room, but even when she lifts the lid, the bees do not escape.

The next morning, Lily accompanies Rosaleen into town, where Rosaleen intends to register to vote. On the way, they run into three white men. The men taunt Rosaleen, who angrily spills chewing-tobacco juice on their shoes. The men accost Rosaleen and call the police, who take Rosaleen and Lily to jail.

-----Section 2-----

Chapter 2-3:

Mr. Avery Gatson, the policeman, drives Lily and Rosaleen to jail while the three white men follow in their pickup truck. Lily is impressed by how resolute and strong Rosaleen seems. When they arrive at the jail, the three men are waiting. They demand that Rosaleen apologize. When she refuses, one hits her on the head with a flashlight. Mr. Gatson then takes the two women into jail. T. Ray soon comes to take Lily out, but they leave Rosaleen behind. While driving home, T. Ray tells Lily that one of Rosaleen's three attackers—Franklin Posey—is the town's worst racist and that he will kill Rosaleen even if she does apologize. At home, T. Ray scolds Lily harshly, but she stands up to him. She tells him that her mother will not let him harm her, but he laughs at the idea that her dead mother functions as her guardian angel. He tells Lily that Deborah had already abandoned Lily when she returned home and was killed. This comment hurts Lily deeply, but she does not believe T. Ray. She notices that the bee jar next to her bed is empty, and she realizes that she too needs to escape her own jar. She needs to run away.

On the road, Lily decides to head toward Tiburon, the town written on the back of her mother's black Mary picture. Lily sets out to go to the jail. Halfway, Brother Gerald picks her up. Lily lies to him about Rosaleen's actions. At the jail, Lily learns that Rosaleen has been taken to the hospital, and she leaves the jail to go there instead. In the black patient wing of the Sylvan

Memorial Hospital, she discovers that the three men were allowed into the jail to beat Rosaleen further—which is why Rosaleen is in the hospital. Lily tricks the security guard with a phony phone call and slips out of the hospital with Rosaleen. They head to Highway 40 and begin to hitchhike. A black man driving a truck full of cantaloupe picks them up. He drives them within three miles of Tiburon and gives them each a cantaloupe for dinner. Under a full moon, they head into a forest that reminds Lily of a setting from a Brother's Grimm fairy tale. There, Lily tells Rosaleen what T. Ray said about her mother. Lily then tells Rosaleen why they are heading to Tiburon and Rosaleen gets upset—accusing Lily of not taking Rosaleen into account when she ran off. They fight and split apart. Later, however, Lily comes across Rosaleen bathing in the river. Together, under the moonlight, they strip naked and cleanse themselves.

The next day, Lily awakes feeling as if she slept next to Thoreau's Walden Pond. She feels as if today is the first day of her new life. As she contemplates the black Mary picture, she realizes that not only does she not know much about Mary, she has never met a Catholic. She soon wakes Rosaleen, who says she dreamed about Martin Luther King Jr., imagining that she painted her toenails with his spit. They begin to walk toward town—both anointed in their new lives. Lily, looking for a sign to offer her guidance, spots the Frogmore General Store and heads in to buy some food for her and Rosaleen. Inside, she tells the clerk that she has arrived in town to visit her grandma, orders two pork meals and two cokes, and steals some snuff for Rosaleen. She then notices a selection of Black Madonna Honey jars. On them is the picture of the black Mary picture she has from her mother. The clerk tells her that the maker of this honey, August Boatwright, lives on the other side of Tiburon. Convinced that she is somewhere her mother once was, Lily goes outside to tell Rosaleen about her discovery. They also buy a paper to see if their disappearance has made the news, and discover that it has not.

-----Section 3-----

Chapters 4-5:

Lily and Rosaleen arrive at the Boatwright house, which is painted bright pink. August stands out front, wearing a beekeeper's helmet and working with the beehives. June Boatwright answers the door, with May Boatwright behind her. Lily finds May to be not "altogether normal" and finds June to be a bit harsh, but August, who soon comes in, is very warm. Lily notices a three-foot-tall statue of a black Mary known as "Our Lady of Chains" in the corner of the living room. She senses its spiritual power. Lily tells August that she and Rosaleen have run away, because her father has died in a tractor accident. She claims that they are headed to Virginia to be with her aunt Bernie. Lily thinks that August has seen right through her lies and feels a twinge of guilt. However, she wants to be accepted into the house too badly to risk being honest. Rosaleen gets irritated at Lily not only for lying but also because Lily keeps speaking for Rosaleen, as if she were not there. August welcomes Rosaleen and Lily, even though June

has reservations about letting them stay. Lily and Rosaleen are taken to the honey house, where they will be staying. A storm hits, and they stay inside. At dinner, August explains that she inherited the twenty-eight-acre bee farm from her grandfather. Outside, Lily finds a wall filled with mysterious slips of paper and walks to the stream nearby, where she wets her feet.

Rosaleen and Lily spend a week at the Boatwright house. Lily feels at ease; Rosaleen gets a new wardrobe. Lily feels very conscious of her white skin. She overhears June making comments about her skin color. She also learns that June plays cello for dying people, May sings “Oh! Susanna” whenever she gets upset, and August runs the bee farm with the help of someone named Zach. One night May has a breakdown and must be escorted to her special wall. Lily is told she will help August and Zach with the bees, while Rosaleen will help May with the household chores. The television reports constantly about the process of desegregation going on around the country, which makes Lily very self-conscious about her race. At night, they pray to the black Mary statue. August explains that their religion is partly Catholic, partly self-invented. Then August tells Lily a story about a nun named Beatrix who runs away but is replaced by a stand-in Mary while she is gone. Lily wonders if Mary is standing in for her back in Sylvan with T. Ray but doubts that something like that could be true.

On their first Friday together, August teaches Lily about honey farming. She urges her to send the bees love, saying that everything needs and wants to feel loved, and explains that females make up the bee community about 90 percent of the time. Lily longs to make Rosaleen love her. That night, August explains about May’s condition—that she feels the wrongs of the world as if they were her own—and the therapeutic purpose of May’s wailing wall, where she goes to cry. She then tells Lily the story of their fourth sister, April, and her early depression and suicide. In the honey house later that evening, Lily wonders if T. Ray misses her and she feels a bit of nostalgia for her home in Sylvan. However, her most intense sadness comes from missing her mother. Also, Rosaleen expresses some jealousy over all the time Lily is spending with August. Lily falls asleep hoping she can figure out a way to discover some information about her mother without revealing the truth—that is, that she and Rosaleen ran away.

-----Section 4-----

Chapter 6–7:

When Lily wakes, she discovers a very tall black man named Neil hanging around at the Boatwright house. He is June’s sweetheart. June refuses to marry him, although he continues to ask for her hand. Lily wonders why none of the three sisters is married. Later that day, the Daughters of Mary—August’s spiritual community—arrive for services. The Daughters are a group of six women (and one man) who wear elaborate hats. The service, which focuses on the black Mary statue, involves much singing and dancing and praying aloud. In the middle, August begins

to tell the story of the black Mary statue, referring to it as “Our Lady of Chains.” The story describes how the statute was found in a river, then brought into a community of black slaves. The slaves began to worship it, until their owner took it. The owner, intending to keep it away from the slaves, chained the statue up, but it miraculously, and continually, escaped. The statue offered the slave group spiritual unity and power and began to be passed down through generations. After the story has been told, the Daughters of Mary take turns touching the statue’s painted heart while singing and dancing together. When Lily’s turn comes, however, she feels overwhelmed and blacks out. Everybody blames the fainting spell on the heat. Later that night, while watching television, they see a report on an impending lunar rocket landing.

Lily has relaxed somewhat into the Boatwright routine but still feels nervous whenever she hears the wail of a police siren. Lily recounts meeting Zach for the first time, after she and Rosaleen had have been at the Boatwright house for eight days. An African American high school junior, Zach makes Lily feel things she had never felt before, including sexual attraction. They begin to flirt and become friends while working together in the honey house. Zach tells Lily that he wants to be a lawyer, and Lily admits to him that she wants to be an English teacher and writer. Lily begins to call Zach an “ass-busting lawyer.” Later, Rosaleen confronts Lily and asks her what she thinks she is doing at the Boatwright house. She accuses her of living in a fantasy. Lily wonders how long she can stay in this imaginary world but also longs to tell August the truth. The next day, Lily and Zach are sent six miles out to get the last batch of honey to harvest. The day is very hot and Lily gets overly emotional: laughing hysterically, then crying uncontrollably. Lily realizes she has developed romantic feelings for Zach, and she suspects he feels the same for her. That day, Lily also learns about the town’s most prized writer, Willifred Marchant.

Back at the honey house, Lily comes upon Rosaleen moving out. Later, Rosaleen tells Lily that she is going to be moving into the main house to share a room with May. She tells Lily that Rosaleen’s presence will make May feel safer. Lily understands but feels jealous and abandoned. Walking Rosaleen upstairs to her new room, Lily crosses August reading a book called *Jane Eyre*. The book, August tells her, is about a girl whose mother died when she was very young. Hearing this makes Lily panic—she assumes August knows everything and longs even more to tell her the truth. Meanwhile, Neil and June continue to fight, and the tension between June and Lily continues to grow. The next day, Zach brings Lily a notebook for her to use to work on her stories. He explains that society will never allow them to be together. Lily begins writing immediately.

-----Section 5-----

Chapter 8:

When a new shipment of Black Madonna labels for the honey jars arrives, August asks Lily to help her apply them. During their work, they begin to talk about the things they love. August explains the symbolism behind the black Mary and talks about how the statue entered her possession. In addition, they talk more generally about female strength, and August explains to Lily why she decided to never get married: she did not want to give up her autonomy. Afterward, they go to the hives and listen to the secret sounds bees make while inside their homes. Lily learns that the queen bee is the mother of thousands and that the bees fly out and cover her body. Lily stays calm while the bees dance on her skin. August tells Lily that they need to have a talk. Lily knows why, and she gets nervous. At home, May makes a special lunch because she has avoided the wailing wall for five straight days. At lunch, Zach reports on a rumor: a white movie star is coming to town and intends to see a movie with his black girlfriend. No one is sure whether to believe this rumor, but everyone agrees the rumor itself could cause some serious unrest in town.

After lunch, Zach goes to drop off honey at the office of Clayton Forrest, and Lily asks to go with him. Hesitating, August lets her. At the office, Zach introduces Lily to Mr. Forrest's secretary, Ms. Lacy, who is surprised to learn Lily is staying at the home of a black person. When she leaves, Mr. Forrest introduces himself to Lily and calls her pretty. Startled, Lily almost forgets her made-up last name. Zach and Mr. Forrest go into Mr. Forrest's office to look at some cases, leaving Lily alone. Lily begins to look around and finds a picture of Mr. Forrest with his daughter. In it, both look very happy. Lily begins to think about her father and decides to call him. Upon hearing his voice, she gets emotional. But T. Ray gets hostile, scolds her for running away, and demands to know where she is. Lily refuses, tries to apologize, and asks T. Ray if he knows her favorite color. He doesn't answer her question but threatens to hurt her when he finds her. She hangs up.

Zach returns, looking proud and holding a large law book. He calls it the beginning of his law library. Mr. Forrest then begins to ask Lily personal questions, about her family and hometown. Lily, faking "female trouble," tells Zach that she needs to go, and they say goodbye to Mr. Forrest. Back at the honey house, Lily writes T. Ray a letter she knows she could never send. In it, she tells T. Ray that she does not love him and describes how horrible he has been toward her. She also tells him that she does not believe that her mother left her. After writing it, she rips the letter up. That night, after coming into the main house to use the bathroom, Lily goes

into the parlor, where the black Mary statue was sitting in the corner. Kneeling before it, she asks it for help, affectionately referring to it as her “mother.”

Chapter 9:

August wakes Lily up. It is extremely hot, and they need to water the bees to keep them cool. Lily gets stung while replacing a lid on a hive box. August tells her she could not be a true beekeeper without getting stung. Lily feels proud of the fact that, in August’s eyes, she has become a true beekeeper. “A writer, an English teacher, and a beekeeper,” she thinks. When they get back to the house, they find Rosaleen and May having a water fight with the sprinkler outside. They are laughing and giggling like children. May taunts August and Lily, and eventually they join in the games. Later, June comes down angrily and tries to pry the sprinkler from Lily. But their tussle of frustration becomes one of love, and they begin to laugh together. Afterward, Lily goes to take a nap to escape the heat but is haunted by thoughts of her mother. Going into the pink house, she finds May on the ground with marshmallows and graham crackers, a technique her mother also used for getting rid of roaches.

This scene strikes Lily. She becomes convinced that it means her mother once lived in the Boatwright house. She asks May if she ever knew anybody named Deborah Fontanel. May says she has. Overwhelmed by the news, Lily goes to the honey house to be alone. She falls asleep and dreams about her mother. First, her mother is searching for her, then her mother has roach legs and frightens Lily. For the next few days, Lily walks around in a stupor. She spends a great deal of time imagining her mother around the house. She longs to confront August with this new information, but she is also afraid to learn the full truth of her mother’s time at the house. Late that Friday, Lily comes to the conclusion that she is ready to talk to August—that whatever the truth is, it would be best to just learn it and be done. But when Lily goes to speak to August, she learns August is busy.

Instead, Lily rides into town with Zach to buy a new radiator. At the store, a crowd of white men waits in front of the movie theater for the movie star and his black girlfriend. Zach’s friends are also there. They are three black teenagers like Zach. After taunting the white men, one boy throws a bottle at them. He hits a man in the nose. Zach and his friends will not reveal which boy threw the bottle and they are all taken to jail. Lily, left alone in the truck, walks home. There, Clayton Forrest is with August. He has been to the jail and is in charge of Zach’s case. They all decide to not tell May about the incident while Clayton works to get Zach out of jail. Later, Lily goes with August to visit Zach in jail. She does not know how to console him but tells him she will write his story down. At home, Zach’s mother calls and tells May what happened, but she does not appear upset. Instead, she heads out to the wailing wall alone, much more collected than the sisters expected she would be at hearing the news.

-----Section 6-----

Chapters 10–11:

While Lily sits with August, Rosaleen, and June in the kitchen, May goes out by herself and does not return. Eventually, the other women go out to find her. She is not by the wailing wall. They call the police, but, before the police arrive, they find May's body drowned in the river. She has committed suicide. When the police come, they interrogate Lily and tell her that living with black women is beneath her dignity. Everyone prepares to hold a vigil, and the Daughters of Mary arrive with a large amount of food. The next day, Zach is freed from jail and comes to pay his respects to May's body. Lily feels very close to the whole community—sensing that there is no difference between her and the others, even though she is white. August and Lily drape the hives in black cloth so that the bees can mourn symbolically. On the second day of the vigil, August finds May's suicide note and reads it with June. It urges them both to live their lives fully. August interprets this to mean that May wants June to marry Neil. They hold the vigil for four days straight. It is the end of Lily's first month in Tiburon.

May's funeral changes Lily's entire routine. Lily finds herself missing the usual daily activities. She also notices a subtle change in Zach after his time in jail. She begs him to not end up angry and violent, as bad as a white racist. He promises that he will not. After a week of mourning, things begin to return to normal. For dessert, August serves Lily and her favorite: Coca-Cola with peanuts in it. Lily, who was staying in May's bed during the vigil, decides to move back into the honey house, where she can have more privacy. The next morning, Lily wakes to find the other women in a celebratory mood. They inform her that today is Mary Day and that they are going to bake cakes, hang lights, and pray to Our Lady of Chains during a two-day feast and festival in honor of the Assumption of Mary. In the middle of all their preparations, Neil arrives and in front of everyone asks for June's hand in marriage. She says yes immediately.

The rest of the day is spent getting ready, decorating, and baking. At 6 P.M., June returns with a very pretty, albeit small, engagement ring. Soon after, the Daughters of Mary arrive along with Zach and Neil. Lily fills with love for all those around her and for the Boatwright house, which truly feels like home. Lunelle offers to make her a hat. Then the service begins: they all stand in a circle and feed one another cake, wrap the Our Lady of Chains sculpture in actual chains, and bring it into the honey house. There, they pray to Mary and celebrate her love for their community. After a while, Lily grows tired of the praying and heads outside by herself, but Zach follows. Outside, under the light of the moon, they begin to talk, and Zach kisses Lily

gently. They express their feelings for each other, promising that they will try to find a way to be together in the future.

-----Section 7-----

Chapters 12–13:

After her talk with Zach, Lily goes directly to August’s room and waits for her. She decides the time has come for them to talk about her mother. In her room, she feels comfortable and takes note of the décor, which is all blue and features a picture of the angel Gabriel offering a white lily to Mary. When August arrives, they begin to talk at once. Lily learns that August has known her identity for the entire time that Lily has lived in the house and that August once knew Deborah. August explains that she worked as a housekeeper in Deborah’s childhood home and helped raise Deborah from age 4 to age 19. August talks about Deborah as a child, and Lily eagerly listens to every detail. Lily tells August that her father is not really dead, but that he treated her very badly. After Lily explains to August what T. Ray had said—that her mother had left Lily behind when she ran away—Lily begins to cry uncontrollably. August urges her to cry as much as she needs, to let it all out, and Lily does. After she is done crying, Lily explains to August why she ran away with Rosaleen. Finally, she tells August about her role in the death of her mother. Hearing it all, August tells her that she loves her, and they move into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, August pours Lily some ice water, and they continue to talk. Lily shows August her mother’s black Mary picture, explaining how Lily ended up in Tiburon and at August’s house. August continues to tell Lily stories about her mother’s childhood, teenage years, and marriage to T. Ray. She explains that Deborah met T. Ray after moving to Sylvan and that he was very dedicated to her for the first few years of their marriage. After she was married to T. Ray for a while, however, she grew depressed. Eventually, she contacted August and asked if she could spend some time at the honey farm with her. August tells Lily that when she agreed, she expected Deborah would come visit with the baby—the young Lily. When she arrived, however, August explains, she was alone. Lily is very disturbed by the idea that her mother left her behind. Lily says that she hates her mother, which upsets August. She feels very disappointed in her mother and tells August the story of her mother’s death. As their conversation ends, all Lily can think about is how her mother left her behind. “Left you, left you,” Lily repeats to herself.

Lily lies in bed trying to sleep. She is very upset about her conversation with August. She goes to visit the black Mary statue, hoping to be able to pray. Instead, she grabs a bunch of honey jars and smashes them against the wall. When she wakes the next morning, Rosaleen is there. She helps her clean the honey and glass and consoles her, bandaging her wounds. Lily explains to Rosaleen what she did and why. Rosaleen is very sensitive but admits she knew things and

never told Lily because she did not want to hurt her. At noon, the Daughters of Mary arrive with food for the second day of the Mary Day ritual. Lily asks August to tell Zach her true story. Everybody bathes the statue in honey, a preservative, to keep it safe. After the ceremony, August brings Lily a box of her mother's belongings. Included are a mirror, a comb with Deborah's hair still in it, and a book of poetry. There is also a picture of Lily as a child with her mother as a young woman. Looking at the picture, Lily comes to realize that maybe her mother did love her after all, although in a more complicated way than Lily originally imagined.

Chapter 14:

After her conversation with August, Lily spends some time alone. She struggles to forgive her mother but finds it incredibly difficult. August realizes that Lily needs time to grieve for her mother, just as everybody recently needed time to grieve for May. Rosaleen and the Boatwright sisters, conscious of Lily's need to grieve, stay out of Lily's way. Meanwhile, June prepares for her wedding, which is set for October 10. When Lily finally gains enough strength to reenter the social world, she comes upon Rosaleen in a new dress. Rosaleen tells Lily that she is wearing the dress because she is going to register to vote. Lily is shocked and worried, because of what happened the last time Rosaleen tried to register, but August assuages her. Lily realizes she is proud of Rosaleen. Later, Lily runs into Zach, who tells her he is headed to the white high school the upcoming year. Lily commiserates, telling him she most likely will have to go back to Sylvan.

Later, Lily finally begins to consider forgiving her mother. The next morning, Lily and August head to work on the bees. Because one hive is missing its queen, they must get it a new one. August reveals that she was hoping Our Lady would stand in for Lily's mother, just as Lily had imagined she would. August then explains the nature of Our Lady, how she is a presence in every part of the world and not an actual being in heaven. She explains that Lily must find a mother inside herself, and she should not expect an outside force to mother her. August explains that the mother acts as a power inside of her, one that she can rely on when she is feeling weak or alone, sad or tired. Lily appreciates this sentiment and takes it to heart. It comes in useful almost immediately. A few hours later, Lily answers a knock on the door, only to discover T. Ray standing there.

T. Ray arrives in a controlled but angry state and immediately begins to scold Lily. (He discovered Lily's location by calling a strange number that appeared on his phone bill; Ms. Lacy answered, and told T. Ray about Lily. Confused by how much more mature she looks, T. Ray begins to yell at her as if she were Deborah. Frightened, Lily calls him "Daddy," and he stops pushing her around. Lily feels now that she understands him more than ever. However, he still

demands that she return to Sylvan with him. As T. Ray is about to drag Lily off, August and Rosaleen show up. August gives him a way to save face, telling T. Ray that he would help her out greatly if he would leave Lily at the house. He recants and agrees to leave. As his truck is driving away, Lily yells for him to stop and asks him who really shot Deborah. He tells her, again, that she did. In the end, Lily stays at August's house, goes to school with Zach, and remains a part of the Boatwright family. She even forgives her mother and she realizes that she has gained many mothers in the Boatwright sisters and the Daughters of Mary.