1960’s Relationships

**Relationships are heavily influenced by culture.** Relationships that exist today may have never been formed fifty years ago due to societal prejudices. Nevertheless, one thing has always been the same- those who someone surrounds themselves with will have a large impact on their personal growth. But, **how** exactly **do relationships help us develop?** In the movie *The Help* by Tate Taylor (based on the book written by Kathryn Stockett)and the novel *Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese,**the protagonist both face injustices due to racism. However, due to their different ethnicities their struggles manifest differently.** *The Help* is set during the 1960’s and takes place in Mississippi. It is centered primarily around the day to day lives of two black maids named Minnie and Aibileen. We see Minny and Aibileen’s relationships with their white, female employers deteriorate as Jim Crow laws counter the civil rights movement. *Indian Horse* is also set during the 1960’s, but it takes place in Ontario. Saul tells the story of his life as an Ojibway boy growing up in a residential school and playing hockey. Saul copes with an abusive childhood relationship with a priest coming to light by forming a new relationship- one with drinking. **Ultimately, both stories illustrate how toxic relationships reap havoc on a person’s wellbeing, whereas positive relationships can lessen the effects of suffering.**

**Throughout *Indian Horse* and *The Help,* the main characters struggle with escaping mistreatment from their authority figures.** These relationships eventually turn abusive, whether it be mental, physical or sexual. These power dynamics, created by either racial or gender inequality, allow the protagonists to be subjected to a variety of injustices. In *The Help*, Minnie’s oppressor is her husband. Leroy is a drunk who beats Minnie. This part of the novel is especially shocking because Minnie is painted as a strong and independent woman. By making Minnie’s character a victim of domestic abuse, the author is showing that no one is immune to toxic relationships. Even the most tenacious person can have their vulnerability manipulated into complicity. Unfortunately for Minnie, her husband is not her only oppressor. She initially works for an older lady with Alzheimer’s. However, due to a clash with her employer’s racist daughter over shared bathroom use, Minnie is fired. The issue of blacks and whites using the same toilettes is a recurring problem in the book, affecting both Minnie and Aibileen. Their once somewhat docile relationships with the white women in the households turn frigid once a local committee turns their focus on making new laws to create separate bathrooms for the help. The actions of this committee have a real impact on the day to day life of Aibileen and Minnie. But more significant than that, the effects of this change in treatment visibly influenced the self-confidence of the maids. Being made to feel dirty, unintelligent and overall “lesser” on a daily basis lead to some maids to starting to believe that some of these claims were true. While Saul is enrolled in Saint-Jerome’s residential school, he too wrestles with an abusive power dynamic. His teacher and priest Father Leboutilier molests him. He bribes Saul with the privilege of playing hockey and having a place on the school team. This is particularly disturbing because until the end of the book, the Father is painted as a wholesome character. This childhood sexual abuse is one of the leading reasons that Saul develops an alcohol addiction later in life. Having such an excess of loss, abandonment and abuse throughout Saul’s childhood created a basis of trust issues lasting the rest of his life. When Saul realizes that Father Leboutilier is not the person his mind lead him to believe, the shock is so strong that he physically reacts. His thoughts race, and he remembers everything he suppressed for so long: “He'd told me I could play when I was big enough. I loved the idea so much that I kept quiet. I loved the idea of being loved so much that I did what he asked. When I found myself liking it, I felt dirty, repulsive, sick. The secret morning practices that moved me closer to the game also moved me further away from the horror. I used the game to shelter me from seeing the truth, from having to face it every day. Later, after I was gone, the game kept me from remembering. As long as I could escape into it, I could fly away. Fly away and never have to land on the scorched earth of my boyhood.” (Wagamese) This revelation offers insight into why Saul has such psychological trauma.

**Fortunately, these two stories do not only portray negative relationships.** There is one particularly moving scene in *The Help* where the viewers are shown that not all the white characters are racist. It takes place at the home of Celia Foote, the young woman who Minnie finds employment with. Celia’s character is considered “white trash” by the other white women in the book. She lives outside of town with her husband. Celia does not treat Minnie like she is inferior. The years of being treated unequally by previous employers makes this concept completely alien to Minnie. This is expressed in a thought: “See, I think if God had intended for white people and colored people to be this close together for so much of the day, he would’ve made us color-blind. And while Miss Celia’s grinning and “good morning” and “glad to see”-ing me, I’m wondering, how did she get this far in life without knowing where the lines are drawn? I mean, a floozy calling the society ladies is bad enough. But she has sat down and eaten lunch with me every single day since I started working here. I don’t mean in the same room, I mean at the same table. That little one up under the window. Every white woman I’ve ever worked for ate in the dining room as far away from the colored help as they could. And that was fine with me…There are so many things Miss Celia is just plain ignorant about.” (Taylor) Minnie finds it so bizarre that Celia almost considers her a friend because her entire life she has been shown that black and white people are not the same. It is as if in this time, black and white people alike grew up brainwashed into accepting their given societal order. However, Ms. Foote is an exception. Her extraordinary kindness towards Minnie changes both lives for the better. Minnie receives a stable place to earn money for her family, and Celia finally makes a friend.

**In conclusion, *Indian Horse* and *The Help* focus heavily on the intricacies of relationships.** Both stories describe a variety of healthy and unhealthy bonds between humans and substances. So, how do relationships help us develop? Having positive relationships with those around you helps you grow into a stronger, happier person. Contrarily, toxic relationships are destructive to your wellbeing. Being belittled, demeaned or abused halts the possibility of having positive personal growth.

# Works Cited

*The Help*. Dir. Tate Taylor. Perf. Viola Davis Octavia Spencer. 2011. Screenplay.

Wagamese, Richard. *Indian Horse*. Mandeira Park: Douglas and McIntyre, 2012.