

**Book review:**

# **THE MAID NARRATIVES**

by

Katherine van Wormer,  
David W. Jackson and  
Charletta Sudduth

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By **Hans-Jørgen Wallin Weihe** and **Marie Smith-Solbakken**

The Maid Narratives is a beautiful well-illustrated book paying tribute to a painful past. The topic of the book makes the design and craft put into the book important, as the haunting memories of the past need to be preserved in a respectful way.

According to the social historian Lisa Krissoff Boehm, domestic work sits outside of the purview of American historical collections because it has never been championed as an important aspect of American labour. Katherine van Wormer, David W. Jackson and Charletta Sudduth have given us valuable documentation of the stories of black women working in white households and caring for white children. The book is well documented and based upon a number of oral sources, as well as photo documentation and classical studies of the historical context and paradox of paternalism. The list of references, the impressive index and the carefully skilled use of theory, as well as the oral histories collected, truly makes the book an important scholarly contribution. Most importantly though the book is well written, and those who have contributed with their stories have been great storytellers sharing highly personal narratives of the past.

The question of how it is for the oldest generation of African American women to harbour memories of a society built on the racism and social customs of the past is important. From a psychological point of view, the question of white children being raised and cared for by black women in a racist society is part of the conflicting heritage of both the United States and the individual lives of those children. The best-selling novel and film, *The Help*, brought to the surface long-forgotten memories while encouraging reflection on aspects of the past that resulted in a number of narratives by white women who grew up with a maid in the home, as well as a number of new narratives that have greatly added to the number of stories collected and presented in the book.

Oral history is of great importance to the history of social work, as traditional archive sources have not adequately preserved the history of those discriminated against who were victims of a racist society. Moreover, archival sources most often represent the story of those in power and give a distorted picture of the past. The three authors

have used a gerontological approach to oral history in collecting histories of the older women, and the knowledge of the storytellers provides knowledge which is both personal and political. The three authors' ability to combine narrative gerontology with resilience theory helps to explain not only how the storytellers found meaning and survived their experiences, but also provides us with valuable insights into the situation of the underprivileged and discriminated. From our point of view of living in another society with a different past, those lessons are general and possible to relate to a Norwegian past that includes discriminatory practices against ethnic minorities such as the Saami.

The unwritten rules of conduct, the practices and the attitudes practiced in personal relationships will rarely be documented in archives, though the situation of live-in domestics with another ethnicity and national background is not only a thing of the past, but also one of the great challenges of today. Even if the book is related to the past, it can be read as an important political message for the present and the challenges of the future.

The stories collected in the book are highly emotional and give insight into a past that needs to be remembered. Charlotte Sudduth is an early childhood consultant with a middle-class African-American background, David Jackson is an assistant professor in African-American Studies who emphasizes how generations of women in his family worked as domestics in white families in the south and Katherine van Wormer is a professor of social work who herself grew up in a white home cared for by black women. The personal stories of the authors are important in order to understand the perspectives of the book, as well as the important lesson of cooperation across differences in family heritage.

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