

A precise, devastating portrayal of white wokeness

## **Kiley Reid's novel about race, class, and good intentions that miss the point**

by [Rachel Pyle](#) in the [March 25, 2020](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **Such a Fun Age**

A Novel

By Kiley Reid

G. P. Putnam's Sons

A 25-year-old black woman is accused of kidnapping a white toddler in a high-end Philadelphia grocery store, and her exchange with the store's security officer is caught on camera by a patron. Another customer repeatedly says she had a bad feeling when she eyed the woman and child together. The young woman is allowed to leave the store only after the child's white father arrives and explains that she is the babysitter. This incident of racial profiling begins Kiley Reid's debut novel.

Reid describes the book as a comedy. Although its opening scenario doesn't sound humorous, *Such a Fun Age* is a charming examination of class and race in America, with a perspective on "wokeness" that's both precise and devastating.

Babysitting is just one of the jobs Emira Tucker juggles to make ends meet. Her boss, Alix Chamberlain, is a lifestyle influencer who prides herself on her advocacy for modern women. Alix, however, spends most of her time missing her old life in New York City. It's only after the grocery store incident that Alix vows to live happily in Philadelphia, to write a book, and to get to know the woman who has been watching her child.

Alix begins to obsess over being an influence in her babysitter's life. She routinely looks at the screen of Emira's phone to learn what music she listens to and who she's been dating, using the information to make an inventory of potential conversation topics. She tries to woo Emira into intimate conversations over bottles of wine.

Reid masterfully embodies the mind of a white woman who is convinced of her own good intentions. Alix's inner monologue reveals how consumed she is with the concern that Emira is unable to see how progressive she is in her everyday life. "Alix fantasized about Emira discovering things about her that shaped what Alix saw as the truest version of herself," Reid writes. "Like the fact that one of Alix's closest friends was also black. That Alix's new and favorite shoes were from Payless, and only cost eighteen dollars. That Alix had read everything that Toni Morrison had ever written."

Alix becomes obsessed with showcasing these signs of her wokeness. She is desperate to be seen as Emira's family. But this desire has more to do with resolving her own identity struggles than with actually knowing or helping the young woman

in front of her.

Emira is upset about the racial profiling incident, but it's only one of many concerns in her life. A college graduate with an English degree, Emira is still aimless while her friends excel. Her worry over being able to afford a vacation to Mexico a year in the future takes up a fair amount of her mental energy. She constantly stresses over the reality that "when she didn't work, she didn't get paid." While her friends are receiving promotions, enjoying paid vacation days, and advancing into adulthood, Emira is on the verge of losing her health insurance and struggling with a palpable sense of being left behind.

The differences between Emira and Alix are stark. Alix, who is desperate for others to see her as an ally, tries hard to prove that she cares for the black people in her life. But it becomes clear that Alix's care is motivated by narcissism.

Kelly, the white store patron who recorded the confrontation, eventually becomes Emira's boyfriend. It's clear that he cares for her, but he never seems to fully understand what she experiences. Kelly frequently gets worked up over the night at the grocery store; he constantly encourages Emira to release the video and get the security guard fired.

But his outrage over the incident isn't what Emira wants. "You get real fired up when we talk about that night at Market Depot. But I don't need you to be mad that it happened," she tells him after an argument. "I need you to be mad that it just like . . . happens."

I'm not a person of color, and I found it uncomfortable to see the white characters so clearly and so often miss the point. The more I read, the more I sensed the source of my discomfort: some of my past actions feel a little too similar to those on the page. No, I have never tried to infiltrate my babysitter's life. But I have been careless and narcissistic in my desire to help. How many times, I wonder, have I missed the point?

Despite the discomfort it causes, the book is actually very funny. Reid is generous as she shows the complexities that come with relationships and interactions between employers and employees, lovers and friends—especially through the lens of race. She isn't condemning, but she also doesn't absolve anyone of their actions. Self-awareness seems to be the book's main lesson for both its characters and its readers.