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Reid, K. (2021). *Such a fun age*. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

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Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age* is often described as a sharp, entertaining novel about race, class, and contemporary liberalism in the United States. But for me—as an educational worker at ella vzw, knowledge centre on gender and ethnicity—the book is also a reminder of how we need to keep reinventing and rethinking ways of talking about inequality. Concepts like intersectionality or privilege are not only easily perceived as 'academic'; in today's political climate, they increasingly provoke resistance. People deny the presence of racism, dismiss structural inequality as 'woke ideology', or cling to a meritocratic worldview that obscures unequal starting positions. Reid navigates this resistance with remarkable skill. She does not lecture or correct. Instead, she tells a story about ordinary people whose interactions quietly expose the structures they live in.

Reid writes from lived experience: as a Black woman who worked for six years as a babysitter, she knows the terrain she describes. That matters. In intersectional knowledge work, we often emphasise the *sources* of knowledge—lived experience, embodied expertise, and situated perspectives. But we speak less often about the *forms* through which such knowledge travels. How do we reach those who do not read academic journals? How do we invite them into conversations about racialised labour markets, white feminism, or the devaluation of care work? Reid's answer is simple: you tell a story.

The novel follows Emira Tucker, a 25-year-old Black babysitter juggling precarious jobs, and Alix Chamberlain, her wealthy white employer, both living in Philadelphia. Alix is a social media entrepreneur whose brand, LetHer Speak, markets a glossy, confidence-driven feminism to other privileged women. Her public persona—stylish, progressive, self-made—depends on the very labour she outsources to women like Emira. Reid makes this tension visible early on: 'I will never be able to finish my book without her,' Alix states (p. 44). When Emira is racially profiled in a supermarket while caring for Alix's toddler, Alix suddenly feels compelled to set things right. But instead of improving Emira's working conditions, she inserts herself into Emira's private life—reading her messages, showing up uninvited at her boyfriend's workplace, and insisting she knows what is best for her. Their relationship becomes a study in how good intentions (combined with oblivion) can perpetuate, rather than challenge, structural inequality.

Domestic work and the question of 'real work'

One of the novel's most compelling threads is Emira's ambivalence about her job. She enjoys caring for Briar, the child she babysits, finding meaning and competence in the work. Yet she also internalises society's devaluation of reproductive labour. Reid captures this tension with precision, showing the Chamberlain household as a microcosm of the broader inequalities that shape domestic labour. As such, she exposes how reproductive work is framed as a 'labour of love,' as when Alix thinks about 'Her chatty and nervous daughter, and the quiet, thoughtful person she paid to love her' (p. 188). In one sentence, Reid reveals the emotional labour expected of domestic workers and the blurred boundaries between paid care and 'family'. This framing often becomes a gateway to dismiss domestic work as not *real* work, legitimising its status as underpaid and informal. Reid also challenges this frame through Emira's own reflections: 'People do pay other people to act like part of the family. That doesn't mean it is not a transaction.' and 'The Thanksgiving invitation didn't make her feel like family. What did was receiving a contract and a 1095 tax form.'

In my opinion, the relevance of thinking—and speaking—about paid domestic work is only growing. As more middle-class women participate in the labour market (and are expected to do so), the unequal division of reproductive labour at home becomes pressing in new ways. Public services such as childcare are often insufficient or inaccessible, leaving many women facing a 'double shift' and higher rates of burnout. When societal support systems fall short, families turn to private solutions: babysitters, cleaners, nannies or au pairs, oftentimes performed by migrant and/or racialized women (Anderson, 2000; Duffy, 2005;

Macdonald, 2010). This dynamic is not limited to the United States. A recent Belgian example illustrates it vividly: a *Real Housewives of Antwerp* cast member casually praises the affordability of hiring an au pair, framing it as a simple solution to being 'a better mother' (Veppi, 2026, p.49-35). Two other cast members recently received criticism for starting their own au pair company (Grommen, 2026). The normalisation of such arrangements—often without acknowledging the precarious conditions of the workers involved— proves why this topic belongs in contemporary gender and diversity work.

When domestic work takes place inside the private home, specific dynamics between employer and employee become possible. One of these is *maternalism*: research by scholars such as Rollins (1985), Romero (2002), Lan (2003) and Moras (2013) describes how employers may frame their relationship with domestic workers as nurturing or family-like, while still maintaining control and hierarchy. Reid's portrayal of Alix resonates strongly with this literature. At one point, she reflects: 'It felt like Emira really was hers.' Another moment is as telling: 'Emira is a grown woman,' a friend says. 'But she's not though!' Alix insists.

Alix embodies this dynamic with painful accuracy. She wants to help Emira, to guide her, but her support slides easily into surveillance and domination. Reid shows this happening in real time, in the small gestures that accumulate into a pattern: unsolicited gifts, reading private text messages without consent and interrogating her boyfriend behind her back. This is all based on the assumption that Emira needs protection rather than autonomy.

Such a Fun Age offers a bridge between the fictional and the real world, and from the private to the structural sphere. It demonstrates how you can talk about segregation in the labour market, white privilege, or the commodification of care work without alienating readers. Much like Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2020), it models a form of knowledge dissemination that is accessible, emotionally resonant, and grounded in lived experience. By writing this kind of book, Reid descends from the ivory tower not by simplifying the issues, but by embedding them in characters who are flawed, funny, and painfully recognisable.

For my work at ella vzw, the novel is a reminder that intersectional knowledge work is not only about producing insights or conducting research with intersectional methods—it is also about finding ways to share these insights. Reid's novel is a masterclass in doing exactly that: showing stories as both a source and a means of disseminating intersectional knowledge.

Helena Baeck

Helena Baeck studied international and constitutional law at KU Leuven. She worked and volunteered in tenant law in Belgium and migration law in Greece before joining ella vzw – knowledge centre on gender and ethnicity. Her work focuses on educational activities concerning intersectionality, Black feminism and social justice, offering both theoretical and practice-oriented insights for social professionals. Subjects that she recently worked on are activism and resistance, women and precarity and diversity in organisations. In the coming year, she aims to explore the topic of intersectional knowledge work in times of social media and AI.

Helena is part of the 8 Maars coalition, active around International Women's Rights Day, and is testing the waters as a beginning freelance writer. She is currently looking forward to the publication of the action-research on disability, gender and ethnicity conducted by her colleague Fatma Arikoglu.

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