

Discussion Questions for The Ice Queen by Alice Hoffman

1. *The Ice Queen* begins with a warning: “Be careful what you wish for...Wishes are brutal, unforgiving things.” Considering the power of wishes as depicted in the novel, do you agree with the narrator’s advice?
2. The narrator and her brother react quite differently to the news of their mother’s death. Discuss how their differing responses reflect their individual characters. When the narrator discovers the truth about her mother’s departure on the night she died, how does this news affect her?
3. The lines between life and death are unmistakably blurred in *The Ice Queen*. Some characters cheat death while others have difficulty embracing life. How do you think the narrator views her own mortality? In your opinion, has she cheated death?
4. Discuss the role of fairy tales in *The Ice Queen*. What kinds of tales does the narrator express a preference for? Why?
5. The physical effects of a lightning strike are unique to each victim in the novel—the narrator’s inability to see red, Lazarus’s boiling breath, Renny’s hands, the Dragon’s fire, and the Naked Man’s sleepiness. Discuss the significance of some of these physical changes.
6. The author writes that “the elements most drawn to each other are the ones that destroy each other” (page 85) How does this theory play out in her relationship with Lazarus?
7. The old man known as the Dragon is an almost mythical character in the book. What realizations do the narrator and her brother draw from their pivotal encounter with him?
8. Early in the novel, the narrator admits her fascination with death. Yet she notes that she “didn’t like stories in which Death was a major character” (page 43). Why does she draw this distinction? What does it reveal about her?
9. The narrator’s two romantic interests, Lazarus and Jack, are very different from each other. What does each of these men offer her? Do you agree with the narrator’s choice in the end? Why or why not?
10. In *The Ice Queen*, emotional scars can run far deeper than physical scars. Have the narrator’s scars truly healed? Why is the new loss she experiences at the end of the book not as devastating as the loss of her mother?
11. Why do you think the author chose not to reveal the name of the narrator in *The Ice Queen*?

The Ice Queen

STARTING POINTS FOR YOUR DISCUSSION

1. The ice queen of the title remains unnamed throughout. How does this affect our feelings towards her and does it enhance the portrayal of her personality?
2. *The Ice Queen* evokes the magic of the fairy tale tradition. It is a magical story about transformation and redemption. Look at how Alice Hoffman uses the tradition of the fairy tale to heighten the story.
3. Look at nature in the novel. You may wish to explore the fire and ice motifs used throughout, as well as the idea that nature is an independent force beyond our control which changes the pattern of our lives.
4. *'Be careful what you wish for. I knew that for a fact. Wishes... burn your tongue the moment they're spoken and you can never take them back.'*
The ice queen of the title wishes to never see her mother again - her mother dies. She wishes that her grandmothers suffering should end in death and then that she herself be struck by lightning - both wishes come true. Explore the idea of wishes in the novel and the concept of fate.
5. Hoffman's books are centred around people who are strikingly different, who are on the fringe of society, often loners standing back from the crowd. She shows us the feeling of loneliness that lies at the core of being human as well as the deep, dark secrets and pain we wish to hide from others. Discuss the themes of secrets, pain and loneliness in the novel.

Alice Hoffman

Biography

Born in the 1950s to college-educated parents who divorced when she was young, Alice Hoffman was raised by her single, working mother in a blue-collar Long Island neighborhood. Although she felt like an outsider growing up, she discovered that these feelings of not quite belonging positioned her uniquely to observe people from a distance. Later, she would hone this viewpoint in stories that captured the full intensity of the human experience.

After high school, Hoffman went to work for the Doubleday factory in Garden City. But the eight-hour, supervised workday was not for her, and she quit before lunch on her first day! She enrolled in night school at Adelphi University, graduating in 1971 with a degree in English. She went on to attend Stanford University's Creative Writing Center on a Mirrellees Fellowship. Her mentor at Stanford, the great teacher and novelist Albert Guerard, helped to get her first story published in the literary magazine *Fiction*. The story attracted the attention of legendary editor Ted Solotaroff, who asked if she had written any longer fiction. She hadn't -- but immediately set to work. In 1977, when Hoffman was 25, her first novel, *Property Of*, was published to great fanfare.

Since that remarkable debut, Hoffman has carved herself a unique niche in American fiction. A favorite with teens as well as adults, she renders life's deepest mysteries immediately understandable in stories suffused with magic realism and a dreamy, fairy-tale sensibility. (In a 1994 article for *The New York Times*, interviewer Ruth Reichl described the magic in Hoffman's books as a casual, regular occurrence -- "...so offhand that even the most skeptical reader can accept it.") Her characters' lives are transformed by uncontrollable forces -- love and loss, sorrow and bliss, danger and death.

Hoffman's 1997 novel *Here on Earth* was selected as an Oprah Book Club pick, but even without Winfrey's powerful endorsement, her books have become huge bestsellers -- including three that have been adapted for the movies: *Practical Magic* (1995), *The River King* (2000), and her YA fable *Aquamarine* (2001).

Hoffman is a breast cancer survivor; and like many people who consider themselves blessed with luck, she believes strongly in giving back. For this reason, she donated her advance from her 1999 short story collection *Local Girls* to help create the Hoffman Breast Center at Mt. Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, MA.

[Back to Top](#)



Good to Know

- Hoffman has written a number of children's books, including *Fireflies: A Winter's Tale* (1999), *Horsefly* (2000), and *Moondog* (2004).
- *Aquamarine* was written for Hoffman's best friend, Jo Ann, who dreamed of the freedom of mermaids as she battled brain cancer.
 - *Here on Earth* is a modern version of Hoffman's favorite novel, *Wuthering Heights*.
- Hoffman has been honored with the Massachusetts Book Award for her teen novel *Incantation*.

[Back to Top](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Hoffman was born in New York City on March 16, 1952, and raised on Long Island. She graduated from high school in 1969 and attended Adelphi University from which she received a BA. She then received a Mirrielees Fellowship at the Stanford University Creative Writing Centre, which she attended in 1973 and 1974, gaining an MA in creative writing. Her first novel, *Property Of* was published in 1977 when she was twenty-five years old. Alice Hoffman is now the bestselling author of many successful novels and screenplays (see below for a complete list). Her novel *Practical Magic* was made into a film starring Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman and her novels have been widely reviewed, translated and sold all over the world. She now lives in Massachusetts.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Interview taken from

What were the books that most influenced your life or your career as a writer?

Edward Eager's brilliant series of suburban magic: *Half Magic*, *Magic by the Lake*, *Magic or Not*, *Knight's Castle*, *The Time Garden*, *Seven-Day Magic*, *The Well Wishers*. Anything by Ray Bradbury, Shirley Jackson, J. D. Salinger, Grace Paley. My favourite book is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

What are your favourite books, and what makes them special to you?

- *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë
- *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury
- *The Illustrated Man* by Ray Bradbury
- *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula LeGuin
- *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys
- *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger
- *The Collected Stories* by Grace Paley
- *We Have always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson
- Grimm's Fairy Tales
- *Half Magic* by Edward Eager

All are beautiful, essential, single voices. I love them all.

What are some of your favourite films?

- *It's a Wonderful Life*
- *Vertigo*
- *Bell, Book and Candle*
- *The Philadelphia Story*
- Anything with Jimmy Stewart
- *The Fifth Element*

- *Arsenic and Old Lace*
- *The Matrix*
- Anything with Cary Grant

What types of music do you like? Is there any particular kind you like to listen to when you're writing?

Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan.

If you had a book club, what would it be reading and why?

All the books we read as children, moving up in time.

What are your favourite kinds of books to give - and get - as gifts?

Journals, the smaller the better. Atlases, star charts, photography books.

Do you have any special writing rituals? For example, what do you have on your desk when you're writing?

On my desk: Photos of dogs, photos of kids, photos of dogs that have passed on, rocks, stones, roses. The major ritual - close the door.

Many writers are hardly 'overnight success' stories. How long did it take for you to get where you are today? Any rejection-slip horror stories or inspirational anecdotes?

I was helped enormously by the kindness of my mentor, Albert Guerard and my agent of thirty years, Elaine Markson. All luck, all kindness. Including my first rejection note, sent by Esquire when I was sixteen - hand-written, taking me seriously, and telling me to send another story when I grew up. I intend to.

If you could choose one new writer to be 'discovered', who would it be - and why?

Someone who sounds like no one else on earth; someone who doesn't know what the word irony means, or doesn't care. Someone who's fearless.

What tips or advice do you have for writers still looking to be discovered?

Discover yourself - that's all there is.

Florida is featured in several of your works, including The Ice Queen, with unlovely-sounding Orlon, Florida, lightning capital of the world. What's your relationship with Florida, and what do we need to do to redeem ourselves?

I love Florida. I used to go with my mother in the winter when I was a kid. I wish I had grown up there. I feel like I'm a little in love with Florida's landscape. It was a dream place, the only kind of bright spot in our lives. I have memories of going to Parrot Jungle, to Monkey Jungle, the pre-Disney World theme parks. Those memories of youth seem more real than my everyday life.

The narrator of The Ice Queen talks about the differences between Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm. She prefers Grimm tales. So do you. Why?

I always felt Andersen stories were really preachy, about being good and toeing the line. Grimm is the opposite. They go to some deep part you're afraid to go to, like pushing the witch into the oven. They're a way of dealing with what's scary but removed, so you don't feel like it's happening in your house. What fairy tales do is tell you the underneath of stories in psychological symbolism. They're what you really feel, the deepest darkest feelings. Kids have those feelings, too, and to pretend they don't seems so dishonest.

How does writing for children differ from writing for adults?

When I write for teens, I censor less. I get to a deeper, rawer place. I think they're willing to accept that. I wrote *Green Angel* after 9/11. I couldn't have written an adult book about 9/11. I wrote it for teenagers, for the sixteen-year-old girl I was, for what I used to know. I felt freer in a way. My new book, *The Foretelling*, is really different for me, about an Amazon girl in the Bronze Age... I just channel her.

A CONVERSATION WITH

ALICE HOFFMAN

The author of *The Ice Queen* talks with Ellen Kanner of the *Miami Herald*

Ice and its opposite figure prominently in Alice Hoffman's new novel, *The Ice Queen*, but though the author writes richly about the natural world — the world we can see — she also writes about the supernatural, the world beyond our sight, where breath can boil water.

— Hoffman believes in magic, even if we don't. The magic in her seventeen novels is not the David Blaine variety but the sort that is even harder to grasp — the magic we miss in our everyday lives. We don't see it because the enchantment is often of our own making, in the choices or the wishes we make. "I made my wish in January, the season of ice," says Hoffman's unnamed narrator and, in doing so, seals her fate.

The author, who lives outside Boston, made her debut in 1977 with *Property Of* at age twenty-five. She has since written an impressive array of bestsellers, including *Turtle Moon*, *Practical Magic*, and *Here on Earth*, plus half a dozen books for young readers.

How was writing Moondog with your son?

I did it when he was ten and I had cancer; I was really sick when we did it. I wanted him to know what I did. It was a very long process — a picture book can take six years — but it was fun.

What was the catalyst for The Ice Queen?

I'm interested in the weather, the landscape. What recently happened with the tsunami in Southeast Asia is so nightmarish. Everybody's going about their daily life, and then you realize how tiny you are and how little you can control things.

I usually don't know where a book is coming from till it's over. Then it reveals itself to me. To be honest, when I think of it now, I'm thinking *The Ice Queen* is about being a survivor. I'm a cancer survivor; the narrator of *The Ice Queen* was hit right where I was hit; so I guess I'm writing about how to survive your life.

You've reflected on the death of many people you loved, your own breast cancer, 9/11, and a tsunami. What's still magical to you?

Writing. The weird thing is I'm really analytical, extremely analytical, but the writer in me isn't that way. It's like taking a drug or absinthe. That's the appeal for me. That's why I write so much. It's the dream that goes where the real you wouldn't go.

The complete text of Ellen Kanner's conversation with Alice originally appeared in the *Miami Herald* on April 24, 2005. Reprinted with permission.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

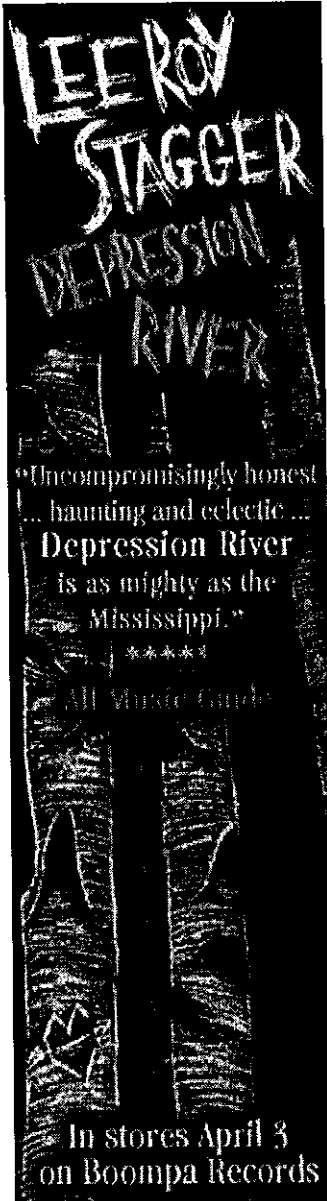
1. *The Ice Queen* begins with a warning: "Be careful what you wish for. . . . Wishes are brutal, unforgiving things." Considering the power of wishes as depicted in the novel, do you agree with the narrator's advice?
2. The narrator and her brother react quite differently to the news of their mother's death. Discuss how their differing responses reflect their individual characters. When the narrator discovers the truth about her mother's departure on the night she died, how does this news affect her?
3. The lines between life and death are unmistakably blurred in *The Ice Queen*. Some characters cheat death while others have difficulty embracing life. How do you think the narrator views her own mortality? In your opinion, has she cheated death?
4. Discuss the role of fairy tales in *The Ice Queen*. What kinds of tales does the narrator express a preference for? Why?
5. The physical effects of a lightning strike are unique to each victim in the novel — the narrator's inability to see red, Lazarus's boiling breath, Renny's hands, the Dragon's fire, and the Naked Man's sleepiness. Discuss the significance of some of these physical changes.

6. The author writes that “the elements most drawn to each other are the ones that destroy each other” (page 85). How does this theory play out in her relationship with Lazarus?
7. The old man known as the Dragon is an almost mythic character in the book. What realizations do the narrator and her brother draw from their pivotal encounter with him?
8. Early in the novel, the narrator admits her fascination with death. Yet she notes that she “didn’t like stories in which Death was a major character” (page 43). Why does she draw this distinction? What does it reveal about her?
9. The narrator’s two romantic interests, Lazarus and Jack, are very different from each other. What does each of these men offer her? Do you agree with the narrator’s choice in the end? Why or why not?
10. In *The Ice Queen*, emotional scars can run far deeper than physical scars. Have the narrator’s scars truly healed? Why is the new loss she experiences at the end of the book not as devastating as the loss of her mother?
11. Why do you think the author chose not to reveal the name of the narrator of *The Ice Queen*?



Features | Columns | Blogs | News | Music | Film | TV | DVDs | Books | Comics | Multimedia | Events | Pop
about contributors submissions book imprint advertising contests PopShop Media Center Listen Up!

CALL FOR PAPERS: *PopMatters* seeks feature essays about any aspect of popular c



[PopWire: News, Reviews and Commentary](#)

Practically magic: Novelist Alice Hoffman conjures threads of hope from her tightly knit plots

by **Allen Pierleoni**
McClatchy Newspapers (MCT)
28 February 2007

[Email](#) [Print](#) [Comments \(0\)](#)

"I write from such a subconscious place, it's almost like the elements of a dream," said novelist Alice Hoffman on the phone from her Boston home. "I don't understand what it means until I'm done. Sometimes I still don't understand it. That's where the readers put things together more quickly than the writer does."

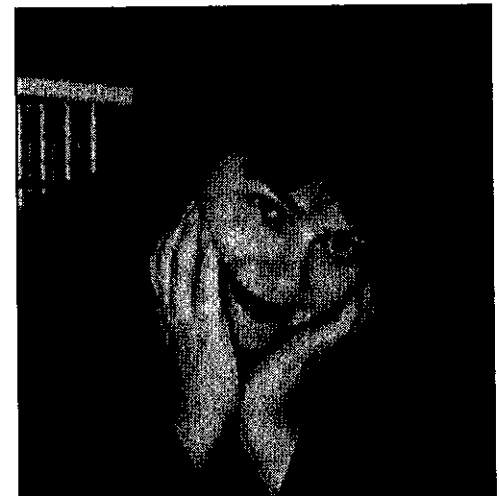
Hoffman is being modest again. Her well-crafted, fast-moving tales are lecture-hall examples of structure, plot and imagery. Just ask anyone—except maybe Hoffman herself.

Hoffman just published her 19th novel for adults (she's written nine books for young readers), "Skylight Confessions" (Little, Brown, \$24.99). It's a rich, heavily symbolic story of family relationships, bad choices, love gone wrong and right, and how, despite everything, we still can salvage redemption of a sort.

This being a Hoffman novel, there's magical realism sprinkled throughout like pixie dust, along with the sense that we're at least partly inside a fairy tale. A ghost is involved, of course, one that breaks dishes, leaves trails of soot and haunts one character in particular.

If you're not a Hoffman fan, you still might recognize some of her bigger titles, including "Here on Earth," "The Probable Future" and "Blackbird House." Three of her titles have been made into movies: "Aquamarine" wit Emma Roberts, Joanna Levesque and Sara Paxton (2006); "The River King" with Edward Burns and Jennifer Ehle (2005); and "Practical Magic" with Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman and Stockard Channing (1998).

Hoffman, 54, grew up on Long Island and earned degrees in English and



ADRIENNE PIERCE



Ads by Google

Literature

Search books for anything - from topics to specific keywords.
books.google.com

Book Writing Software

Download the Free Trial software. Visualize, Organize, Outline, Write
www.WritersBlocks.com

Self Publish Books

Today
Learn How to Self Publish your Book Today. Download a Free Guide Now!
www.BeginPublishing.com

Electrical Books

Save on Books. Compare products, prices & stores.
www.Shopping.com

Winning at Roulette

Winning is a percentage game Roulette - Playing to Win
www.DouglasStewartBooks.com

anthropology from Adelphi University there. Later, she graduated with a master of arts degree in creative writing from Stanford University. She and her husband, Tom (a former teacher turned writer), have two sons, 18 and 23.

Q: You wrote your first novel, "Property Of," when you were 21 and attending Stanford.

A: I'd never heard of Stanford until (an Adelphi professor) got me a fellowship to go there. I was a working-class girl who never thought about going to college at all. I got a job at the Doubleday book factory on Long Island, and I worked until lunch and quit. Something had to be easier than factory work, so I signed up for a college course at night.

Q: Is your family anything like the one in "Skylight Confessions"?

A: No, I write to create something different. Fiction writers are writing either to write about their lives, or they're writing to create a different reality. Even though all of my characters contain bits and pieces of me, they're not me.

Q: You're big on ghosts, and there's one in "Skylight Confessions."

A: I think what happens with ghosts is they haunt people who won't let them go. In the book, what it means to be haunted is that you take your past with you. Unless you learn in some way to deal with it and let it go, it's going to haunt you.

Q: The ferry boat captain tells his daughter about a race of people who have wings and can fly away from impending disaster. In one way or another, most of the characters in "Skylight Confessions" metaphorically fly away but later end up having to confront their issues.

A: You can have a fantasy about being able to run away, but if you do, it's not necessarily a positive thing. You really have to stand and face whatever it is. There's no way to fly away from it. That's what the book is about.

Q: Certainly the children and teens in your stories have a hard time, due to the behavior of the adults in their lives.

A: That's true. As adults, we know that we mess up things. Children don't really know that until they're adults themselves. A lot of this book is about surviving tragic circumstances. At the end, though, I hope there's a feeling of hope.

Q: The last line is, "... she rang the (door) bell and then she waited for whatever would happen next." That sounds like hope.

A: Yeah, but doesn't that also feel like what we're all doing all of the time? We have to.

Q: Most of your books impart lessons to young adults. What wisdom did you share with your own sons?

verizon

verizon
SURROUND
presents

Hot-off-the-web
exclusives from

gwen stefani
The Sweet Escape

Get the latest ▶



A: I hope what I showed them is that if you want something enough, you can make it happen. Also, I hope I showed them that whoever you are, you have to be true to yourself.

Q: Another theme in your stories is one of seemingly ordinary lives that turn out to be surprisingly multilayered.

A: I do like the idea that people are not always what they seem to be. I grew up in a neighborhood where every house was exactly the same, but there was a sense that you didn't know what was going on inside the houses.

One of the reasons I saw the world that way was because I was a huge fan of "The Twilight Zone." Rod Serling was a genius who influenced a whole generation. A lot of his stuff was so political and social and ahead of its time, and so much about how you think something is one way but it's really another.

Then there's Ray Bradbury, who is so positive. After 9/11 I was extremely blocked and thought I'd never write again.

I was thinking about the books I had loved as a kid and was somehow smart enough to reread "Fahrenheit 451," and it made me remember how incredibly important books are and allowed me to write again. Ray Bradbury had a huge influence on my life.

Q: Many of your books hark back to fairy tales and fables, magic and the supernatural. Why is that?

A: Because I think that's the most interesting part of literature. All those things are what literature is made out of—folk tales, fairy tales, fantasy. For me, realism isn't that interesting. I'm much more interested in mythic, psychological literature.

Q: Like fairy tales, which dwell on the worst parts of human nature.

A: Yes, they're brutal and raw. They originally were part of the oral tradition of women telling stories to children. They were moral stories that dealt with the psychology of childhood. As a kid, I loved them because they weren't sugar-coated. When you're a child and you read gruesome stuff about families and parents and being lost in the woods, you feel the emotional truth of it.

Q: In addition to the books, you've also written screenplays for 25 years. One of them was made into the movie "Independence Day" (1983), about spousal abuse and starring Kathleen Quinlan, David Keith and Dianne Wiest. Will you name some others?

A: No, because nothing else ever got made. I worked on so many projects with so many great people. One or two a year for all that time, and nothing ever got the go-ahead from the movie studios.

Q: Were you happy with the movie versions of your three books?

A: "Aquamarine" was a terrific movie for preteen girls, with a lot of good messages. You don't see movies about friendships too often.

"Practical Magic" had a lot of great actresses in it, but (the filmmakers) veered from the book too much. I'm sure every novelist says that, though.

As for "The River King," they radically changed the story, so it was very disappointing.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: A new novel that's going to be out next January. I'm starting to do the serious revisions, which is the part I hate. It's about three different weddings and three different love affairs.

Q: Is there a common thread that runs through the fabric of your books?

A: I always feel like I'm writing a message, but I don't know what that message is until I'm done with the book. But I think the message has to do with having hope. It's a message (that says), "You have to go on. These are the possibilities and you can survive." I think that's my reason for writing.

Q: As a writer, you assume many guises.

A: That's the great thing about fiction:

You get to live all these different lives that aren't yours. It's almost like being an actor, where you put on all these different roles and become other people. I wrote a book called "The Ice Queen," about the survivor of a lightning strike. I knew so much about lightning and weather then, but now I don't remember a thing. (Becoming an instant expert) is just for the period of the book, and then I go on to the next thing. It's not me, it's not my life, but I get to kind of experience it.

Q: Last question: If you were interviewing yourself, what would be the last question you would ask?

A: I would ask, "Are you happy that you spent your life as a writer?"

Q: That's a key question.

A: I think about it all the time. I've spent so much of my life being in other worlds, and I have to say I don't think there was a choice; it's who I am. And if that's true, then I have to be happy about it and feel really lucky that I got to do it.

DELICIOUS DIGG REDDIT NEWSVINE

SIA LADY CROISSANT (LIVE)

Performing "Breathe Me" and "Numb" plus "Destiny" and "Distractions" from her *Zero 7* career. Also contains new studio song "Pictures".

IN STORES 4 3 07



The Ice Queen, by Alice Hoffman,
Little, Brown, 2005, \$23.95.

Regular readers of this column already know of my fondness for Hoffman's writing. Whenever I get a new book by her, everything else gets put aside and I allow myself the pleasure of being swept away for an evening, transported into the lives of her multifaceted characters through her luminous prose.

She has more than twenty books to her credit — many of them ranking among my all-time favorites — and one of the things that constantly surprises me is how she still manages to outdo herself from novel to novel. To be honest, I'm a little in awe of her talent, though happily that doesn't interfere with my enjoyment of the books.

An aspect of *The Ice Queen* approaches that age-old fairy tale question: what if you get what you wish for?

As a young girl, our unnamed protagonist tells her mother, in a fit of petulant anger, "I wish you were dead." The mother is on her way out to see some friends, but she never makes it, dying in a car crash en route to the diner where she was supposed to meet up with them.

Coincidence, of course, but that little eight-year-old girl grows up being very, very careful about what she wishes for in the future. She sees herself as an ice queen, who can feel nothing. Who must do nothing, form no relationships, in case she repeats her terrible misuse of power with other wishes.

Fast forward from New England — where she and her brother Ned were raised by their grandmother and she became a librarian obsessed with books about death — to Florida, where her brother is now a meteorologist and she is struck by lightning. When she recovers, she suffers neurological damage and can no longer see the color red.

Her brother gets her to take part in a study group of lightning strike victims (Orlon County, where she now lives, apparently gets two-thirds of the state's lightning strikes), and that leads her to the mysterious Lazarus Jones, who was dead for forty minutes after his own lightning strike.

There's little in the way of the supernatural in this book — or at least little for which other explanations can't be found — but its atmosphere and all its underpinnings are rife with the dark blood of fairy tales, from "The Snow Queen" to "Bluebeard," with many a way stop in between. Hoffman balances the matter-of-fact first person voice and temperament of her protagonist with events and characters that become increasingly mystical and off-kilter.

The journey takes us through the dark woods that all fairy tales do while also providing us with a bounty of lore surrounding the effects of lightning. The characters interact with a crackle of electricity, and the book's payoffs are subtle and insightful, and while unexpected, not unearned.

The Ice Queen shows us an artist at the top of her game.

Did I mention that Hoffman's pretty much my favorite author writing today? Read this book and you'll see why.

Through the course of numerous novels, Alice Hoffman's work has been characterized by "a shimmering prose style, the fusing of fantasy and realism, [and] the preoccupation with the way the mythic weaves itself into the everyday," Alexandra Johnson summarized in the *Boston Review*. "Hoffman's narrative domain is the domestic, the daily. Yet her vision--and voice--are lyrical," the critic continues. "She is a writer whose prose style is often praised as painterly, and, indeed, Hoffman's fictional world is like a Vermeer: a beautifully crafted study of the interior life." Hoffman's characters "tend to be rebels and eccentrics," Stella Dong stated in a *Publishers Weekly* interview with the author. Hoffman explained that she writes about such people "because they're outsiders and to some extent, we all think of ourselves as outsiders. We're looking for that other person--man, woman, parent or child--who will make us whole." As the author once told *CA*: "I suppose my main concern is the search for identity and continuity, and the struggle inherent in that search."

The protagonist of Hoffman's first novel, *Property Of*, for instance, is an unnamed seventeen-year-old girl enamored of McKay, the leader of an urban gang involved in violence and drugs; the story of their year-long relationship is what *Times Literary Supplement* contributor Zachary Leader called "a sort of punk or pop-gothic *Jane Eyre*." Despite the "harsh and gritty" quality of the world it portrays, *Property Of* is nevertheless "a remarkably envisioned novel, almost mythic in its cadences, hypnotic," Richard R. Lingeman observed in the *New York Times*. "McKay and the heroine are like tragic lovers in a courtly romance played out in candy stores, clubhouses and mean streets Hoffman imbues her juvenile delinquents with a romantic intensity that lifts them out of sociology." Edith Milton offered a similar assessment, commenting in the *Yale Review* that "the narrative is engrossing because Hoffman creates characters touched by legend." The critic further elaborated that Hoffman is able to balance "parody and sentiment, cutting her own flights of panting prose with acid self-mockery."

While the writing in *Property Of* "had speed, wit, and a mordant lyricism," Margo Jefferson remarked in *Ms.* that " *The Drowning Season* has extravagance and generosity as well." Tracing "a legacy of lovelessness from frozen White Russia to modern New York," as *Newsweek* contributor Jean Strouse described it, *The Drowning Season* follows Esther the White and Esther the Black, a grandmother and granddaughter who overcome a past of failed communication to slowly establish a relationship. Like Hoffman's first novel, *The Drowning Season* functions on two levels, as Susan Wood suggested in the *Washington Post*: "*The Drowning Season*, just as hypnotic and mythic in its language and rhythms, reverberates with situations and characters that suggest ancient myths and European folk tales and seems on one level to function as a symbolic, allegorical tale in a modern setting. Yet it is very much a novel about believable and imperfect human beings, as concrete and individualized as the family next door." Barry Siegel found Esther the White in particular "a truly compelling character," writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that while "she is the source of her family's malaise ... Hoffman sees in her something much more complex than a villain." The critic concluded that Hoffman "is a superb writer who brings us to understand and to care about all her characters Hoffman at all times remains in control of her fine narrative."

Hoffman followed *The Drowning Season* with *Angel Landing*, a romance set near a nuclear power plant, and *White Horses*, the story of a young girl's obsession with her older brother. Teresa, the protagonist of *White Horses*, has been brought up hearing the family legend of the *Arias*, dangerous and beautiful young outlaws who carry women off to exciting lives; this legend led Teresa's mother into an unhappy marriage, and Teresa herself into an incestuous love for Silver, whom she sees as her ideal *Aria*. "Incest may be the most difficult theme for a novelist to undertake," stated *Newsweek* reviewer Peter S. Prescott, "yet Hoffman here makes it tolerable by the mythic mold in which she has cast her story." *New York Times Book Review* contributor Anne Tyler likewise saw a mythic dimension in the novel: "*White Horses* combines the concrete and the dreamlike. Its characters are people we think we recognize at first; but then on second thought we're not so sure." The critic continued, "There's an almost seamless transition from the real to the unreal, back and forth and back again." Stephanie Vaughn, however, faulted the novel's symbolism as "ask[ing] us to see an epic dimension that the story does not quite deliver," as she remarked in her *Washington Post* review. And while Tyler also thought that the novel is at times "burdened by the very musicality that was so appealing in the beginning," she admitted that "these are quibbles, and very minor quibbles at that. The overall impression is one of abundant life, masterfully orchestrated by the author." *White Horses*, Tyler concluded, "is a satisfying novel, at the same time mysterious and believable, and it marks a significant advance for Alice Hoffman."

While *Fortune's Daughter*, in the vein of Hoffman's earlier novels, "has the quality of folk tale--of amazing events calmly recounted," Perri Klass asserted in the *New York Times Book Review* that unlike *White Horses* it has "no ... explicit myth. Instead, the sense of magic and elemental force arises from the central mystery of childbirth." Klass continued, "This novel's great strength lies in its two heroines, who both find themselves drawn, without plans, hopes or full understanding, into the inevitably mythological process of pregnancy and childbirth." Rae, pregnant with her first child, has just been deserted by the man for whom she left her home and traveled across a continent. Seeking reassurance, she finds Lila, a fortune teller who reads a child's death in Rae's tea leaves. Against Lila's wishes, Rae enlists the older woman's assistance with her pregnancy, evoking Lila's memories of the child she gave up for adoption over twenty years ago. The result, observed Robin Hemley in the *Chicago Tribune Book World*, is "an elegant and evocative novel that conjures up a kind of modern-day female mythology."

Some critics, however, such as *Boston Review* contributor Patricia Meyer Spacks, felt the plot of *Fortune's Daughter* verges on "soap-opera sentimentalities." Nevertheless, they acknowledge, as Klass wrote, that "the peculiar offbeat humor keeps the narrative from drifting into melodrama." The critic elaborated, "It is in its juxtaposition of the mythic, the apocalyptic, with the resolutely ordinary, in its portrait of eccentric characters living in a very familiar world, that this novel finds its unique voice. It is beautifully and matter-of-factly told, and it leaves the reader with an almost bewildered sense that this primal mythological level does exist in everyday reality, and that there is no event, from the standard miracle of childbirth to the most bizarre magic imaginable, that cannot occur in a setting of familiar, everyday details."

"*Illumination Night*, Hoffman's sixth novel, is in many ways her most subtle," Johnson claimed, describing it as "a powerful if often disturbing look at the interior lives, domestic and emotional, of a young family and the teenage girl set on destroying them all." Andre and Vonny are a young couple concerned about their son's lack of growth and the tension in their marriage caused by the unwanted attentions of Jody, a neighboring sixteen-year-old, towards Andre. "This may sound like soap opera," *New York Times* critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt declared, but Hoffman "has enough power of empathy to make her characters matter to us. Daringly mixing comedy with tragedy, and the quotidian with the fabulous, she has created a narrative that somehow makes myth out of the sticky complexities of contemporary marriage." Hoffman "has a penchant for finding a near-gothic strangeness and enchantment on the edges of everyday experience," Jack Sullivan likewise commented in the *Washington Post Book World*. Throughout the book "is the sure sense that magic and spirituality infuse our lives, and that this magic is as readily available to the poor as to the rich," *Los Angeles Times* critic Carolyn See similarly reported.

"Subtle touches here and there make this intelligent novel shine," Gwyneth Cravens maintained in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Ms. Hoffman knows how to tell a story in clear language and how to avoid subordinating the meanderings of temperament to logic or plot. The characters suddenly, and believably, change their behavior toward one another in the presence of the irrational." Other critics have also remarked on the quality of the author's characterizations. Lehmann-Haupt, for example, observed that "Hoffman writes so simply about human passions that her characters are branded onto one's memory," while London *Times* reviewer Philip Howard stated that Hoffman "hits bull's eyes on the incomprehensions between the young and the old, on the magic and pain of ordinary life." As Candice Russell noted in her *Chicago Tribune* review, the author's "omniscient voice ... explores the underpinnings of her characters, who become increasingly connected and interdependent." Sullivan similarly praised Hoffman's narrative for its "unusually fluid form of subjectivity that becomes a kind of total omniscience ... without breaking the rhythm of her prose or storyline. From a technical as well as emotional standpoint," the critic concluded, "this is an impressive, stirring performance."

With *At Risk*, the story of a young girl whose AIDS precipitates a family crisis, Hoffman "is mainstreaming a refined literary talent," *Time* writer R.Z. Sheppard recounted. By taking as her subject such a topical social concern, however, Hoffman has drawn criticism from some reviewers for letting the issue of AIDS overcome the story. *Washington Post* writer Jonathan Yardley, for example, contended that the novel "is very much wrought from material offered by the headlines, yet it fails to shape that material into anything approximating life." But Lehmann-Haupt believed that *At Risk* "does succeed in overcoming these obstacles [of topicality]. From its opening sentence, we know we are in a world that is specific and alive."

Because the issues in *At Risk* are more self-evident than in the author's other work, some reviewers have suggested that the novel does not contain as much of a "magical" element as do her other books. But *Newsweek* critic Laura Shapiro contended that "this wonderful book isn't markedly different in style or imagination from Hoffman's last novel." As *Chicago Tribune Books* contributor Michele Souda observed, the novel contains many "dark and bizarre experiences that remind us how much Hoffman has always trusted her characters' dreams and how well she has invented them." And, as the author explained to *London Times* writer Catherine Bennett, "part of the reason [for the diminished emphasis on magic] is that AIDS took the place of that, that was the inexplicable part of it. AIDS is like something you'd invent, it's bizarre, it's horrible, it's kind of like a spaceship--this disease just landing. I felt that anything else I was going to add was going to reduce it." The result, concluded Souda, is that Hoffman "has taken the nightmare of our time, stripped it of statistics and social rhetoric, and placed it in the raw center of family life."

In *Seventh Heaven* Hoffman returns again to the illusive quiet of suburbia, this time in 1959--the cusp of a new, noisier era. Into a seemingly idyllic New York community comes Nora Silk, a divorced woman whose unconventional manner disturbs the peaceful facade of the neighborhood. Nora is struggling to begin a new life and be a good mother to her children; she has little concern for what her neighbors think of her, giving her a freedom others resent. But as she gradually adjusts to her surroundings, so does the community begin to accept her and overcome their own inhibitions. "Hoffman is out to remind us that all those suburban stereotypes, creaky facades though they may often be, are propped up by some very real, and very basic, hopes and fears," Alida Becker remarked in the *New York Times Book Review*. The novel contains "many of the plot twists you'd expect from a late-fifties's melodrama," the critic continued, adding that "what's unexpected, though, is the wonderful blend of humor, shrewdness and compassion that Ms. Hoffman brings to these familiar scenes."

Detroit News contributor Alice Vachss likewise praised the author's writing: "Hoffman's usual abilities--her enchanting storytelling and her gift for interweaving magic and realism--are even more finely honed than in her previous novels." Hoffman's mystical elements are effectively incorporated into *Seventh Heaven*, according to some critics. As *People* reviewer Ralph Novak commented, the author "makes greater use of the supernatural--or the allure of the supernatural--without compromising her insight into human behavior." This insight is considerable, for "Hoffman has intuitive grasp of the thoughts and feelings that are masked by conventional behavior," a *Publishers Weekly* critic noted, commending in particular the author's "unerring understanding of people of nearly every age and across a broad social spectrum." *Seventh Heaven*, asserted Shapiro, "is one of the rare novels so abundant with life it seems to overflow its own pages Hoffman has always enjoyed a coterie of devoted fans, but her immensely winning novels deserve a much wider readership. *Seventh Heaven*, her eighth and best, confirms her place as one of the finest writers of her generation."

Turtle Moon and *Second Nature*, Hoffman's next two novels, again feature single women struggling to define life on their own terms. The novels are also infused with Hoffman's trademark use of magic and heightened realism. *Turtle Moon* is set in a sleepy Florida town with a large population of divorced women and follows the exploits of Bethany, a woman who has fled with her infant daughter from a child-custody fight; Lucy Rosen, a single mother; her son, Keith, a mean boy who bullies his peers and who steals at will; Julian Cash, an acerbic, taciturn policeman; and Julian's dog, Arrow, who shares his owner's temperament. The story revolves around the disappearance of Keith with Bethany's baby and the quest to solve a local murder. Reviewing the work in the *New York Times Book Review*, Frederick Busch averred that "Hoffman writes quite wonderfully about the magic in our lives and in the battered, indifferent world. I don't know that she's written better." *New York Times* daily reviewer Michiko Kakutani had a less enthusiastic view of the book, however, saying that it "showcases Hoffman's assurance as a writer, and her less admirable penchant for situating her characters in a slick, tricked-up plot that's decorated with pointlessly whimsical asides."

Second Nature is a tale about a wild man raised by wolves who brings love and joy to a lonely woman's suburban world. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Howard Frank Mosher called the novel "magical and daring" and commented that the book is written "with grace and beauty, making it at once [Hoffman's] richest and wisest, as well as her boldest, novel to date." Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, another critic for the daily *New York Times*, thought *Second Nature's* premise about the conflict between nature and so-called civilization "familiar almost to the point of cliché," but liked some aspects of the story, "many of whose complications are richly ambiguous."

Hoffman's eleventh novel, *Practical Magic*, is set in a small Massachusetts town and features a matriarchal dynasty, the Owensens. Specifically, the novel focuses on two Owens sisters, Gillian and Sally, and the aunts who raise them. As children, Gillian and Sally sneak down from bed to listen as their aunts prescribe love potions for the town women. Determined not to suffer from any such lovesickness when they grow older, the girls take differing paths. Gillian becomes a promiscuous vagabond who never marries or has children, while dutiful Sally survives the death of her husband and subordinates her own desires to those of her daughters. Terming *Practical Magic* "a particularly arch and dexterous example of [Hoffman's] narrative powers," *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Lorna Sage concluded that "Hoffman spins out the intrigue with show-off skill." Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Mark Childress noted that "Hoffman's trademark narrative voice is upbeat, breathless and rather bouncy. She creates vivid characters, she keeps things moving along, and she's not above using sleight of hand and prestidigitation to achieve her considerable effects."

Here on Earth deals with a married woman, March Murray, who becomes involved with an old lover, Hollis, when she comes back from California to her native Massachusetts for a funeral. It has echoes of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Hollis, for instance, resembles Bronte's dark, brooding Heathcliff. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Karen Karbo found it implausible that a smart, modern woman like March would resume a relationship with Hollis, and thought the course of their affair sadly predictable. "The madness of being madly in love is one of the most difficult subjects to write about convincingly," Karbo observed. "And you've got to give Hoffman points for trying. Unfortunately, just as March is too good for Hollis, Hoffman is too good for a story like this."

Local Girls is Hoffman's first collection of short stories, which are linked by their characters, members of a dysfunctional Long Island family, the Samuelsons. They follow the key character, Gretel, over roughly a decade of her life, beginning in her teen years. As she grows to womanhood, the intelligent, observant Gretel has to cope with troubles, including her parents' bitter divorce, her brother's drug addiction, and her mother's serious illness. Like many of Hoffman's other works, *Local Girls* has a strong element of female bonding--Gretel's best friend, Jill, and cousin Margot are her main sources of emotional support--and touches of magical realism. *Redbook* contributor Rose Martelli observed that Hoffman "turns [the Samuelsons'] trials into a celebration of family, revealing what it takes to brave real crises together." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted that Hoffman's "disarming wit" keeps the tales from becoming depressing, adding, "she indicates that the human spirit can survive despite the cruel workings of fate." "These stories sometimes have a sketchy feel," noted *Library Journal* critic Barbara Hoffert. *New York Times Book Review* commentator Sarah Ferguson stated, "The stories suffer from a debilitating overlap when they're read as a collection. As in a soap opera, where any episode may be the viewer's first, background information is repeated and characters are reintroduced ad nauseam."

Hoffman again used interconnected stories in *Blackbird House*, a book in which the common bond of the stories is a Cape Cod farmhouse. For reviewer Ellen Shapiro, writing for *People*, this was problematic, "When all the dust settles, it is the house itself that emerges as the book's enduring--and inspiring--character." Other reviews, such as the one in *Publishers Weekly* praised the book: "Hoffman's lyrical prose weaves an undeniable spell."

The River King revolves around Haddan School, an exclusive preparatory academy in a picturesque small town in Massachusetts. The plot turns on an investigation into the death of a student named Gus Pierce, a "Holden Caulfield-like misfit," as *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer George Hodgman put it. Local police officer Abel Grey suspects that Gus's drowning was no accident or suicide, but murder, and in the course of his detective work he becomes attracted to photography teacher Betsy Chase, who is engaged to another Haddan faculty member. Meanwhile, Carlin Leander, a scholarship student who had befriended Gus, encounters what she believes to be his ghost. "The puzzle of the drowning helps propel Hoffman's at times meandering narrative, but she's more interested in the mysteries of love, the crimes of the heart," observed Nancy Pate in the *Orlando Sentinel*. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer praised *The River King* as "a many-layered morality tale" and Hoffman as "an inventive author with a distinctive touch," while *Booklist* contributor Donna Seaman credited the author with "illuminating the power of emotion and the exquisite mysteries of life." Hodgman, however, was less impressed, finding some of the characters sketchily drawn, "basic romantic types," although he felt Hoffman "does a nice job of weaving together a meandering tapestry of plots." Amanda Fortini, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, had a similar take, applauding Hoffman's "good old-fashioned storytelling" but deeming her characters "so numerous that she rarely has time to develop them beyond mere tag lines." *Library Journal* critic Reba

Leiding deemed the novel a bit too atmospheric: "One wishes Hoffman had pared down the precious local descriptions and allowed the plot, which has some unexpected twists, to shine through." Pate, though, concluded that Hoffman "is a writer who can cast a spell."

In 2005, Hoffman published her next novel, *The Ice Queen*. At eight years old, the unnamed protagonist of the story wishes her mother dead during a fight, and to her horror, the wish comes true. She grows up unfeeling, with a heart made of what she imagines to be ice, until, as an adult, she is struck by lightning. She seeks out a fiery man who also survived a strike and the opposites fall passionately in love. "The characters interact with a crackle of electricity, and the book's payoffs are subtle and insightful, and while unexpected, not unearned," stated Charles De Lint in *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. "Hoffman incorporates elements of fairy tales ..., chaos theory, and magic realism," Sandy Freund wrote in *School Library Journal*. Amy Waldman called the language in the novel, "nothing less than stellar," and commented that "Hoffman reminds us how little distance there is between magic and mundane."

In the same year, Hoffman penned a young adult book, *The Foretelling*. In the story, Rain is a young girl who lives in a female-dominated Amazon community. She is shunned by her mother, the queen, because she is the product of rape. When her mother dies during the childbirth that she thought would bring her a new heir, Rain ascends to the throne and tries to protect the newborn son her mother left behind. "Many teens, particularly girls, will identify with Rain's self-doubt," noted Jennifer Mattson in *Booklist*. Claire Rosser, writing in *Kliatt*, stated that the story "holds the power of myth" and "examines what a society dominated by strong women would be like."