

Marriage of Opposites (Hoffman)

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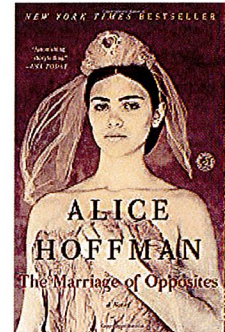
The Marriage of Opposites

Alice Hoffman, 2015

Simon & Schuster

400 pp.

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Summary

A forbidden love story set on the tropical island of St. Thomas about the extraordinary woman who gave birth to painter Camille Pissarro—the Father of Impressionism.

Growing up on idyllic St. Thomas in the early 1800s, Rachel dreams of life in faraway Paris. Rachel's mother, a pillar of their small refugee community of Jews who escaped the Inquisition, has never forgiven her daughter for being a difficult girl who refuses to live by the rules.

Growing up, Rachel's salvation is their maid Adelle's belief in her strengths, and her deep, life-long friendship with Jestine, Adelle's daughter. But Rachel's life is not her own. She is married off to a widower with three children to save her father's business.

When her husband dies suddenly and his handsome, much younger nephew, Frederick, arrives from France to settle the estate, Rachel seizes her own life story, beginning a defiant, passionate love affair that sparks a scandal that affects all of her family, including her favorite son, who will become one of the greatest artists of France.

Set in a world of almost unimaginable beauty, *The Marriage of Opposites* showcases the beloved, bestselling Alice Hoffman at the height of her considerable powers. Once forgotten to history, the marriage of Rachel and Frederick is a story that is as unforgettable as it is remarkable. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—March 16, 1952
- Where—New York, New York, USA
- Education—B.A., Adelphi University; M.A., Stanford University
- Currently—lives in Boston, Massachusetts

Alice Hoffman was born in New York City on March 16, 1952 and grew up on Long Island. After graduating from high school in 1969, she attended Adelphi University, from which she received a BA, and then received a Mirrellees Fellowship to the Stanford University Creative Writing Center, which she attended in 1973 and 74, receiving an MA in creative writing. She currently lives in Boston.

Beginnings

Hoffman's first novel, *Property Of*, was written at the age of twenty-one, while she was studying at Stanford, and published shortly thereafter by Farrar Straus and Giroux. She credits her mentor, professor and writer Albert J. Guerard, and his wife, the writer Maclin Bocock Guerard, for helping her to publish her first short story in the magazine *Fiction*. Editor Ted Solotaroff then contacted her to ask if she had a novel, at which point she quickly began to write what was to become *Property Of*, a section of which was published in Mr. Solotaroff's magazine, *American Review*.

Since that remarkable beginning, Alice Hoffman has become one of our most distinguished novelists. She has published a total of twenty-three novels, three books of short fiction, and eight books for children and young adults.

Highlights

- ♦ Her novel, *Here on Earth*, an Oprah Book Club choice, was a modern reworking of some of the themes of Emily Bronte's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights*.
- ♦ *Practical Magic* was made into a Warner film starring Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman.
- ♦ Her novel, *At Risk*, which concerns a family dealing with AIDS, can be found on the reading lists of many universities, colleges and secondary schools.
- ♦ Hoffman's advance from *Local Girls*, a collection of inter-related fictions about love and loss on Long Island, was donated to help create the Hoffman Breast Center at Mt. Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, MA.
- ♦ *Blackbird House* is a book of stories centering around an old farm on Cape Cod.
- ♦ Hoffman's recent books include *Aquamarine* and *Indigo*, novels for pre-teens, and the *New York Times* bestsellers *The River King*, *Blue Diary*, *The Probable Future*, and *The Ice Queen*.
- ♦ *Green Angel*, a post-apocalyptic fairy tale about loss and love, was published by Scholastic and *The Foretelling*, a book about an Amazon girl in the Bronze Age, was published by Little Brown. In 2007 Little Brown published the teen novel *Incantation*, a story about hidden Jews during the Spanish Inquisition, which *Publishers Weekly* has chosen as one of the best books of the year.

♦ More recent novels include *The Third Angel*, *The Story Sisters*, the teen novel, *Green Witch*, a sequel to her popular post-apocalyptic fairy tale, *Green Angel*.

♦ *The Red Garden*, published in 2011, is a collection of linked fictions about a small town in Massachusetts where a garden holds the secrets of many lives.

Recognition

Hoffman's work has been published in more than twenty translations and more than one hundred foreign editions. Her novels have received mention as notable books of the year by the *New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Library Journal*, and *People* magazine. Her short fiction and non-fiction have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe Magazine*, *Kenyon Review*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Architectural Digest*, *Harvard Review*, *Ploughshares* and other magazines.

She has also worked as a screenwriter and is the author of the original screenplay "*Independence Day*," a film starring Kathleen Quinlan and Diane Wiest. Her teen novel *Aquamarine* was made into a film starring Emma Roberts.

In 2011 Alice published *The Dovekeepers*, which Toni Morrison calls "... a major contribution to twenty-first century literature" for the past five years. The story of the survivors of Masada is considered by many to be Hoffman's masterpiece. The *New York Times* bestselling novel is slated for 2015 miniseries, produced by Roma Downey and Mark Burnett, starring Cote de Pablo of NCIS fame.

Most recent

The Museum of Extraordinary Things was released in 2014 and was an immediate bestseller, the *New York Times Book Review* noting, "A lavish tale about strange yet sympathetic people, haunted by the past and living in bizarre circumstances... Imaginative..."

Nightbird, a Middle Reader, was released in March of 2015. In August of 2015, *The Marriage Opposites*, Alice's latest novel, was an immediate *New York Times* bestseller. "Hoffman is the prolific Boston-based magical realist, whose stories fittingly play to the notion that love—both romantic and platonic—represents a mystical meeting of perfectly paired souls," said *Vogue* magazine. (Adapted from the *author's website* (<http://alicehoffman.com>) .)

Book Reviews

Hoffman mixes fact and fiction to produce a richly imagined tapestry shot through with her signature blend of folklore, fairy dust and romantic passion.

Washington Post

As lush and evocative as one of Pissarro's paintings.

USA Today

Jacob Pizzarro was the given name of Camille Pissarro, a master of the 19th century's Impressionism movement that valued color over lines and contours. His life is brilliantly imagined in *The Marriage of Opposites*, and Hoffman, to great effect, tells much of the story through his mother's eyes.

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

Hoffman finds inspiration for her particular brand of magical realism in the Caribbean island of St. Thomas.... Hoffman's subject matter and her evocative writing style are a wonderful fit for this moving story, which illuminates a historical period and women whose lives were colored by hardships, upheavals, and the subjugation of personal desires.

Publishers Weekly

In this lovely and imaginative fictionalized biography,... Hoffman brings into focus the birth of impressionism and the forces that shaped Pissarro's artistic drive through the complicated, rich, adventure-filled life story of his fiery mother, fueled by her love for her family, her stubborn flaunting of society's rules, and her deep loyalty to her friends. —*Beth Andersen, formerly with Ann Arbor Dist. Lib., MI*

Library Journal

Hoffman's fans and those of historical fiction in general will savor *The Marriage of Opposites*, a vividly rendered account of how one woman's refusal to deny true love ultimately helped lead to an artistic revolution.... [A] story as sublime as an Impressionist painting.

Shelf Awareness

(*Starred review.*) [A] rhapsodic blend of keenly observed historical elements and vibrantly fabulistic invention generates an entrancing saga of sacrifice, forbidden loves, betrayals, and family tragedies endured in a world fractured by religion, class, and race, and redeemed by art and by love. Hoffman is at her resplendent best in this trenchant and revelatory tale of a heroic woman and her world-altering artist son.

Booklist

(*Starred review.*) A ghost wife, a stolen child, wandering eyes, hidden ledgers—and more—bind the 19th-century Jewish community on a paradisiacal island in the West Indies.... Lilted prose, beautifully meted out folklore and historical references, and Hoffman's deep conviction in her characters...[make this] a total pleasure.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the title—which marriage or relationship does "The Marriage of Opposites" refer to? Where in the novel do you first recognize the title's significance?
2. In Chapter 1, Rachel says, "Perhaps that was what my mother disliked most. I resembled her. I could not help but wonder if for some women, that was the worst sin of all." Discuss Rachel's relationship with her mother, her own stepchildren, and female relationships around her. What sort of resemblance does she mean? Compare these relationships with the one Rachel has with her son, Camille.
3. "...on this island, strength was a necessity" (page 22). Consider the power dynamics in the novel, from mental strength to willpower, physical strength versus financial dominance. Discuss what is meant when Rachel's father tells her that her marriage is "a combining of strengths" (page 27). For these characters, which strength is most valuable?
4. Discuss the importance of identity in the novel. What are the roles of religion, race, and class as they contribute to each character's definition of self?
5. Weather and the natural world figure strongly in *The Marriage of Opposites*. Consider how Rachel, Frederic, and Camille view the rain and the heat. Discuss the differences or similarities in their points of view. How do descriptions of weather define life on St. Thomas and life in Paris?
6. There are many sorts of love that are "forbidden" in the novel. Why does the community disapprove of Rachel and Frederic's relationship? Why does Rachel later disapprove of her son's relationship with a working member of her household, when she herself has been so close to Adelle and Jestine?
7. The mystical world plays a key part in life on the island. Often, characters speak of spells, spirits, and ghosts and use herbs to cure emotional and physical distress. Compare the role of spirituality on St. Thomas and in Paris. At what point does the mystical distinguish itself from Jewish tradition?
8. The relationship Madame Halevy forms with Camille? Why do you think he is so interested in her and the stories she has to tell?
9. Discuss this line from page 272: "But a servant, no matter how beloved, was not a friend, and a slave was a shadow, nothing more." What did you learn about slavery and servant culture in St. Thomas in this novel? Do you feel it is similar to American slave-owner, servant-worker relationships? Can there be true friendships in a relationship where one person has more power than the other?
10. "Always pay heed to the woman who comes before you. If he's treated her badly, he will treat you much the same" (page 231). How does Rachel's understanding of Madame Petit affect the way she raises her children? Does this statement grant Lydia any sense of clarity on her father? Discuss how Rachel, Lydia,

and other women understand the roles of the women who came before them.

11. *The Marriage of Opposites* contains a fluid definition of family. Many characters, both male and female, have illegitimate children who are unacknowledged, abandoned, or cast off. Discuss the different manifestations of family in this novel. Were you surprised to learn who Aaron and Jistine really are? Why or why not?

12. In the afterword, Alice Hoffman explains briefly how she came across the story of Pissarro's mother. How was your reading of the novel or opinion of it affected by the knowledge that this is based on a true story?

(Questions issued by the publisher.)

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About the Author



about this author

Full text biography:**Alice Hoffman****Birth Date :** 1952**Place of Birth :** United States, New York, New York**Nationality:** American**Occupation :** Novelist**Table of Contents:**[Awards](#)[Personal Information](#)[Career](#)[Writings](#)[Media Adaptions](#)[Sidelights](#)[Related Information](#)

Awards:

Mirrelles fellow, Stanford University, 1975; Bread Loaf fellowship, summer, 1976; Notable Books of 1979 list, *Library Journal*, for *The Drowning Season*.

Personal Information:

Born March 16, 1952, in New York, NY; married Tom Martin (a writer); children: Jake, Zack. **Education:** Adelphi University, B.A., 1973; Stanford University, M.A., 1975. **Addresses:** Home: Boston, MA. Agent: Amanda Urban, ICM Partners, 730 5th Ave., New York, NY 10019.

Career Information:

Writer. Doubleday, former staff; Hoffman Breast Center, cofounder; Brandeis University, Women's Studies Research Center, visiting research associate.

Writings:

- *Independence Day* (screenplay), Warner Bros. (Burbank, CA), 1983.
- *Survival Lessons*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill, NC), 2013.

NOVELS

- *Property Of*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1977, reprinted, 2009.
- *The Drowning Season*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1979.
- *Angel Landing*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1980.
- *White Horses*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1982, reprinted, Berkley Books (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Fortune's Daughter*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1985.
- *Illumination Night*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1987.
- *At Risk*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1988.
- *Seventh Heaven*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Turtle Moon*, Berkley (New York, NY), 1993.
- *Second Nature*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Practical Magic*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1995.

- *Here on Earth*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1997.
- *The River King*, Putnam (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Blue Diary*, Putnam (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Probable Future*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Ice Queen*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Skylight Confessions*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2007.
- *The Third Angel*, Shaye Areheart (New York, NY), 2008.
- *The Story Sisters*, Shaye Areheart (New York, NY), 2009.
- *The Dovekeepers*, Scribner (New York, NY), 2011.
- *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*, Scribner (New York, NY), 2014.
- *The Marriage of Opposites*, Simon and Schuster (New York, NY), 2015.
- *Faithful*, Simon and Schuster (New York, NY), 2016.

SHORT STORIES

- *Local Girls*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Blackbird House*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Red Garden*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2010.

YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

- *Aquamarine*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Indigo*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Green Angel*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Foretelling*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Incantation*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Green Witch* (sequel to *Green Angel*), Scholastic Press (New York, NY), 2010.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

- *Fireflies*, illustrated by Wayne McLoughlin, Hyperion (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Horsefly*, illustrated by Steve Johnson, Hyperion (New York, NY), 2000.
- (With Wolfe Martin) *Moondog*, illustrated by Yumi Heo, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Nightbird*, Wendy Lamb Books (New York, NY), 2015.

Also author of other screenplays. Author of the *Alice Hoffman Blog*. Contributor of stories to periodicals, including *Ms.*, *Redbook*, *Fiction*, *American Review*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe* magazine, *Kenyon Review*, *Architectural Digest*, *Gourmet*, *Self*, and *Playgirl*.

Media Adaptions:

Practical Magic was adapted by Robin Swicord, Akiva Goldsman, and Adam Brooks into a film directed by Griffin Dunne, starring Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman, and Aidan Quinn, and released by Warner Bros., 1998; *Aquamarine* was made into a film directed by Elizabeth Allen, produced by Susan Cartsonis, and released by Twentieth Century-Fox, 2006; *The Dovekeepers* has been optioned for a miniseries; sound recordings were made of *Local Girls* and *Skylight Confessions*.

Sidelights:

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 continued. "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."

The protagonist of Hoffman's first novel, *Property Of*, 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 yearlong relationship is what London *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." Lingeman went on to write: "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 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* has "speed, wit, and a mordant lyricism," Margo Jefferson remarked in *Ms.* that "*The Drowning Season* has extravagance and generosity as well." *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 reviewer commented 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* contributor 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 reviewer 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. 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 wrote, "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*, 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.

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 acknowledged, as Klass wrote, that "the peculiar offbeat humor keeps the narrative from drifting into melodrama." Spacks 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," *Boston Review* contributor Alexandra 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* contributor 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 commented in the *Washington Post Book World*.

"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* contributor 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 reviewer commented, "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* contributor 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."

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* contributor 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." The author explained to London *Times* contributor Catherine Bennett that "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, wrote 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 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-50's melodrama," the reviewer 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 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. *People* contributor Ralph Novak commented that 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," Sybil Steinberg noted in a review in *Publishers Weekly*, 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* contributor Michiko Kakutani had a less enthusiastic view of the book, however, stating 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." Lehmann-Haupt, writing in the *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 Owens. 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," London *Times Literary Supplement* contributor Lorna Sage wrote 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 Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Hollis, for instance, resembles Brontë'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* contributor 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," remarked Barbara Hoffert in a *Library Journal* review. *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."

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* contributor George Hodgman noted. 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* contributor praised *The River King* as "a many-layered morality tale" and Hoffman as "an inventive author with a distinctive touch." *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* contributor 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."

Blue Diary takes a once happy family and puts a nonremovable scar on each of the members. When Ethan, a carpenter, baseball coach, and volunteer fireman, confesses to his wife, Jorie, that he is guilty of the rape and murder charges against him, she vows to learn the whole truth despite the pain she knows it will cause her. Reviews for the novel were mostly positive. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor recalled that Hoffman often creates a rosy picture at the start of her stories before turning things around completely. For *Blue Diary*, the contributor noted, "Hoffman's strategy is effective." Connie Ogle, writing in the *Miami Herald*, described Hoffman's writing as "lyrical." *Booklist* contributor Seaman wrote that this "tale of abrupt reversals and courageous, unpopular choices is as suspenseful as it is lyrical and provocative."

The Probable Future revolves around a clan of women in Unity, Massachusetts, who trace their ancestry back to Rebecca Sparrow, a woman who was tried and executed in the mid-1600s for being a witch. The Sparrow girls, upon

turning thirteen years old, all come into their unique powers. Their personal lives, however, do not benefit from these powers until the thirteenth-generation daughter is born. Reviewers were mostly positive. Seaman, again writing in *Booklist*, noted that Hoffman's "cast of characters is unfailingly magnetic, from her eye-rolling teenagers to her wryly in-love seniors to her suddenly aflame fortysomethings." *Kliatt* contributor Janet Julian described the story as one "of love and graceful death, of mistakes and forgiveness, of willowy prose and life reflected in nature." Janice P. Nimura, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, stated: "Hoffman's greatest strength here is her ability to keep the boundaries of magic indistinct." Nimura went on to conclude that "Hoffman's fans will not be disappointed."

As in *Local Girls*, Hoffman again uses 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 in *People*, this device was problematic: "When all the dust settles, it is the house itself that emerges as the book's enduring--and inspiring--character." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor praised the book: "Hoffman's lyrical prose weaves an undeniable spell."

Hoffman's 2005 novel, *The Ice Queen*, features an eight-year-old, unnamed protagonist who 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 the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. "Hoffman incorporates elements of fairy tales, ... chaos theory, and magic realism," Sandy Freund wrote in *School Library Journal*.

Hoffman's 2007 novel, *Skylight Confessions*, tells the story of a family and the loves that have shaped their lives and haunted them, both metaphorically and literally. "Through the use of spare, almost simplistic language and sentence structure, as well as concrete images, Hoffman constructs a narrative that elevates a family drama filled with tragedy and loss into a saga worthy of Icarus himself," wrote Norah Piehl in a review in *Bookreporter.com*. "This is a mythic tale that ... offers tentative reconciliation, cautious forgiveness and a belief that people just might be able to fly."

The story revolves around the meeting and marriage of Arlyn Singer and John Moody. The two meet when Arlyn, grieving over the death of her father, expects someone to show up on her street and change her life. When John stops at the family's house to ask for directions, Arlyn believes he is the one and quickly seduces him. However, years later, after the birth of their morose son, Sam, the two find little comfort in each other as they both realize that they are opposites in far too many ways. John commits himself to his work while Arlyn goes on to have an affair. Arlyn eventually gives birth to a second child, Blanca. She eventually leaves Arlyn. The children, meanwhile, are brought up their stepmother and Meredith, their nanny. As Sam succumbs to drug addiction, both Blanca, who is estranged from the family, and Meredith, are determined to save him, facing their own demons from the past in the process.

"Among the many pleasures of *Skylight Confessions* is a sense of continuous corner-turning, a chain of surprises," wrote Ann Harleman in her *Boston Globe* critique. "As in fairy tales, the narrating voice is often remote, giving us summaries of the action, so that it feels as if we see the characters through the wrong end of a telescope. But then, at rhythmic intervals, the sudden intimacy of a scene delivers them to us in vivid three-dimensional reality." *BookLoons* Web site contributor Lyn Seippel called the novel "a moving story with touchingly tender characters who demand sympathy no matter how flawed they appear."

The Third Angel features three interlocking tales set in 1952, 1966, and 1999. The stories are told in reverse chronology, noted *Seattle Times* contributor Melinda Bargreen, so that "the reader travels back in time and learns why Room 707 of the Lion Park Hotel in London is haunted." Writing on the *Curled Up with a Good Book* Web site, Michael Leonard commented that the author "explores the interrelationships between reality and fantasy even as she interlocks her narrative with the ancient and mysterious powers of love," adding that Hoffman "also [provides] a smorgasbord of finely wrought observations on life and death."

The story begins in 1999 with Maddie, an American attorney arriving at the hotel. Readers learn about her love for Paul, her sister Allie's fiancé; Paul's illness; and the traumatic death of the sister's mother. In 1966, the story focuses on Paul's future mother, Frieda, who decides not to attend college and instead takes a job as a chambermaid at the

Lion Park Hotel and becomes involved with a rock musician addicted to heroin. Frieda's father is a doctor who talks to her about his belief in angels, including the Third Angel who, as described by the author is "the one who walked among us, who sometimes lay sick in bed, begging for human compassion." The last story, which takes place in 1952, revolves around twelve-year-old Lucy, who is the mother of Maddie and Allie. Lucy's story ultimately reveals why Room 707 is haunted.

"If the first section is somewhat heavy going, the second and third sections of *The Third Angel* amply reward the persevering reader," noted Harleman the *Boston Globe*. "Hoffman's luminous language bounces us into accepting not only coincidence but also its consequences." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* contributor Gail Pennington observed: "In the end, *The Third Angel* is a book that's hard to put away completely. Even long after it's finished, you may find its characters sneaking, like ghosts, back into your head."

Hoffman's next novel, *The Story Sisters*, features the sisters Ely, Meg, and Claire. The girls range from age twelve to age fifteen and, together, they create a secret world for themselves, speaking in a language only they can understand. Although the sisters' parents are divorced, they are happy children who spend each spring in Paris with their grandparents. However, Ely begins to seek more and more refuge in her and her sisters' secret world, eventually resorting to stealing and drug use. Her mother responds by sending her to reform school, but Ely falls in love with a heroin addict while she is there. Claire is so upset by these events that she refuses to speak. The book "is one of Hoffman's darkest novels yet, and some of Hoffman's readers may find it too dark," Keddy Ann Outlaw wrote in her *Library Journal* review. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic was also ambivalent, noting that the "radiant denouement shows love redeeming the surviving sisters, and there are beautiful moments throughout, but they don't entirely compensate for Hoffman's excesses of plot and tone." However, *Booklist* contributor Seaman found that "this is an entrancing and romantic drama shot through with radiant beauty and belief in human resilience and transformation."

Returning to short stories in *The Red Garden*, Hoffman presents another linked short story collection. Much like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, the tales in *The Red Garden*, revolve around the people of one town, Blackwell, Massachusetts. Hoffman's stories encompass the town's 300-year history; they linger equally on Hallie Brady, the town founder, and James Molt, a contemporary town resident and EMT. The collection provides "a transforming glimpse into small-town America," a *Library Journal* contributor wrote. Jeanne Bogino, also writing in *Library Journal*, declared: "Hoffman has done it again, crafting a poignant, compelling collection ... suffused with pathos and brightened by flashes of magic." Seconding this opinion in *Publishers Weekly*, reviewer Jessilyn Norcross asserted that "Hoffman's characters are rich," and "her setting vivid." Seaman, again writing in *Booklist*, applauded the book's "increasingly nuanced and intricate prose," which captures "the burgeoning social and psychological complexities her passionate and searching characters face in an ever-changing world." In another *Publishers Weekly* review, a critic proffered additional praise, noting: "The prose is beautiful, the characters drawn sparsely but with great compassion."

In 2011, Hoffman published an immense historical novel, *The Dovekeepers*. The time of the novel is the year 70. The place is Masada, a Jewish stronghold holding out against the Roman legions on the eastern edge of the Judean desert. The dovekeepers of the title are a group of women who literally look after doves in the late King Herod's palace at Masada. The story is based on the historical account of Flavius Josephus, who recorded how some 900 Jews held out against Roman invaders during a long siege, and when they could do so no longer, they committed suicide rather than submit to Roman authority, at least according to Josephus.

The novel focuses on the interlinked stories of several of these indomitable women, who form a community within a community. One is Yael, the daughter of a ruthless assassin who has never forgiven her for her mother's death in childbirth. Revka was a village baker who lost her husband to the Romans. She is a grandmother, and her two young grandsons became mute after witnessing the brutal murder of their mother at the hands of Roman soldiers. Shirah, from Alexandria, is a medicine woman who lives according to her own code of sexual conduct. She nurses a frightened woman through childbirth, but she is eventually accused of witchcraft. Finally, Aziza, one of Shirah's daughters, is a warrior. She poses as a man and tries to assume her brother's place in battle.

The Dovekeepers was greeted with some harsh reviews. Ron Charles, for example, reviewing the novel in the *Washington Post Book World*, found it "tiresome" and "relentless." He faulted the novel for what he regarded as its anachronistic characterization, writing: "For all Hoffman's commendable attention to physical details, her heroines' values seem closer to modern-day New Yorkers' than ancient Jews': sexual freedom, gender equality, emancipation." Charles continued: "These four women are too often cast as their own Greek chorus: reviewing, summarizing, filling us in. A more wearing problem stems from the fact that these four intriguingly diverse narrators speak in a fairly similar, narrow range, holed up between stoic lamentation and portentous declaration." Clare Clark, writing for the *Guardian Online*, had mixed reactions to the novel. On the one hand, she praised it for "moments of startling beauty," and she praised the author in this way: "Hoffman is a writer of great perception and she captures with precision the complexity of the relationships between the women, their fear and guilt, their courage, their hunger for consolation and companionship." Yet in the same review, Clark objected to the novel's length, which she found excessive, and its "archaic prose": "She adopts ... a leaden faux-biblical argot that, combined with a surfeit of historical detail, prevents the story from taking flight." Writing in the *New York Times Book Review Online*, Sarah Fay was particularly harsh, faulting the book for "hyperbole and forced metaphor," "overstatement," and "clumsy description." In Fay's view the book is "a long novel full of middling descriptions, hackneyed characters and histrionic plot twists."

Other critics were much more positive in their assessment. In the *Independent Online*, Leslie McDowell praised the book for its "contemporary resonances" and called it a "tour de force." Roberta O'Hara, writing in *Bookreporter.com*, enthused: "Literature has rarely seen such a powerful tale of four unique women vested in love, shrouded in secrets, and urged on by boundless faith." O'Hara added that the novel is "lush in detail, evocative in memory, and authentic in its research and retelling."

In addition to covering a wide range of adult themes in her novels, Hoffman is an accomplished author of children's and young adult books. One such book is *Aquamarine*, published in 2001 and later turned into a feature film. Two best friends cope with loss as Hailey's parents go through a divorce and Claire, who is learning to accept the death of both of her parents, prepares to move in with her grandparents far away from Hailey. The girls spend their last summer at a soon-to-be-destroyed beach club and receive the help of a mermaid in coping with their separate futures. Reviewers were mostly positive. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Jan Benzel noted that the book is "a lovely introduction to the author's storytelling genius and matter-of-fact, lyrical style." Hazel Rochman, writing in *Booklist*, commented that "Hoffman's spare words reveal the magic and the gritty realism in daily life." In a *School Library Journal* review, De Lint noted that "Hoffman breathes full life into her characters; her prose is simple but gorgeous."

Written and published shortly after the September 11th terrorist attacks, *Green Angel* tells the story of an orphan who gives to others in the aftermath of a disaster. Green loses her parents in an apartment fire and becomes bitter toward life and the world around her. She eventually comes around, making new friends and caring for animals. A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* wrote that readers "will be moved by the powerful imagery in Green's spare, haunting narrative." Jean Boreen, writing in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, called the book "one of those wonderful stories that blend magical realism and metaphor to provide readers with much to consider about family, friendship, and finding one's identity after it has been stripped away."

In 2005 Hoffman penned the 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."

Incantation takes place in sixteenth-century Spain in the midst of the Inquisition. Teenage Estrella, who learns of her family's Jewish lineage, copes with the world around her when her jealous best friend turns the Inquisition on Estrella's family out of revenge. Estrella takes life as it comes, remembering from her childhood the mystical healings of the Kabbalah her grandfather taught her. Reviews of *Incantation* were mixed. Rochman, writing in *Booklist*,

described Estrella's narrative as "intense." Reviewing the book in *Kliatt*, Myrna Marler noted that "Hoffman's signature lyricism is much in evidence but her prose is not as rich in detail as in her other books." Joanna Rudge Long, writing in *Horn Book*, called it "a powerfully told story of familial love and transcendence of the cruelest kind of experience."

Green Witch, the sequel to *Green Angel*, revisits Green a year after the cataclysmic events that left her family dead. Survivors like Green have assembled a small village and are struggling to get by. Those who keep to themselves are said to be witches, and Green is captivated by these outsiders. She also hopes to learn whether her school friend, Heather, is still alive, and she wants to know if Diamond, a mute boy she has fallen for, has survived. Her search for them leads her to an island prison, where Green encounters several old acquaintances. Critics applauded the sequel as a welcome reintroduction to Green and her struggles. For instance, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor called the novel "haunting, philosophical, and filled with poetic imagery." The contributor added that "this book will leave an indelible mark." In another laudatory critique, *Booklist* reviewer Gillian Engberg remarked that "teens will want to talk about everything here: the potent emotion and loss" and "the 9/11 parallels." Tracy Weiskind, writing in *School Library Journal*, proffered additional praise, observing that "Hoffman's spare language leads to a story sounding as if it were being told by a sage." A *Kirkus Reviews* writer recommended the story "for readers eager to be captured by a tale of Sundered hearts rendered in lyrical prose."

Hoffman once told *CA*: "I suppose my main concern is the search for identity and continuity, and the struggle inherent in that search."

In 2014, Hoffman published *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*, a return to fiction laced with magic realism. Set in 1911 New York City, this novel features two protagonists. The first is Coralie Sardie, a girl born with webbed fingers who performs as a mermaid in her father's Coney Island freak show, called the Museum of Extraordinary Things. The second is Eddie Cohen, a Russian Orthodox Jewish immigrant who has fled his father and his community in the Lower East Side to become a photographer. His sense of artistic purpose is further galvanized by documenting the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in Greenwich Village, and trying to discover what happened to a woman gone missing. Soon their worlds collide as a nearby amusement park called Dreamland succumbs to flames.

"Hoffman is expert at depicting people who are often considered life's 'others': outsiders, the lonely, the grief-stricken," observed Patty Rhule in a review for *USA Today*. "If you're looking for an enchanting love story rich with history and a sense of place, step right up."

"*The Museum of Extraordinary Things* will not disappoint readers longing to be swept up by a lavish tale about strange yet sympathetic people, haunted by the past and living in bizarre circumstances," wrote Katharine Weber in the *New York Times Book Review*. "But those who have admired Hoffman's best and most gracefully literary novels ... will be less enchanted, unable to ignore the hackneyed and thinly sketched writing that diminishes many scenes in these pages." Weber concluded that "*The Museum of Extraordinary Things* is, in a way, a museum of Alice Hoffman's bag of plot tricks: girls with unusual talents, love at first sight, mysterious parents, addiction and alcoholism, orphans raised by unsuitable people."

Finding that the novel "descends into high corn" near the end, *Boston Globe* critic Jan Stuart nonetheless concluded: "You can't help but admire the author's fervor for telling stories and the democratic manner in which she disseminates the love of reading: Fiends and heroines alike lose themselves in great literature. A special place in her protagonist Coralie's heart is reserved for Edgar Allen Poe, whose ghost hovers over the novel's fiery climax with detectable satisfaction."

Despite some criticisms, *Toronto Star* reviewer Deborah Dundas praised Hoffman's likewise storytelling, calling *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* "a sweeping narrative that keeps the reader interested--paying homage to the darkness that can motivate the creative process. As a true attempt to reflect her art, this book is an exploration of how to create a world one wants to live in; a world created for the right reasons. 'The world is ours,' Eddie seems to whisper to Cora at the end. Theirs, Hoffman is saying, is a world built on love."

The 2015 children's book *Nightbird* features the descendants of two families and the curse they've inherited. Hundreds of years ago, the witch Agnes Early cursed the Fowler family, ensuring that all of their male children are born with wings. The Fowler men hide their deformity, and the family avoids the rest of the town to protect their supernatural secret. Yet, Twig Fowler ignores her mother's admonitions and befriends a girl named Julia, who happens to be one of Agnes's descendants. Twig's older brother, James, then falls for Julia's sister, Agate. Could their love free James from the curse? "The book's evocative setting and distinctive characters will immediately hook readers," a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer declared. Sarah Hunter, writing in *Booklist*, was also laudatory, and she found that "Hoffman offers a quiet, gentle fantasy where crossroads and moonlight have magical uses." Indeed, a *Kirkus Reviews* critic felt that "the mix of romance and magic is irresistible and the tension, compelling."

The Marriage of Opposites, also published in 2015, is set in the early nineteenth century, and it is based on historical characters. In 1795, Rachel's family flees anti-Semitism in Europe and settles in St. Thomas, and she is born soon thereafter. When Rachel is seventeen, her parents make her marry a widower in order to secure the family's finances. She raises her new husband's children and has a few more. One of her children is Camille Pissarro, the painter hailed as the inventor of French impressionism. When Rachel's husband finally dies, she is freed from a loveless marriage, but she is also legally barred from managing her estate. Instead, Rachel's finances are managed by her dead husband's nephew, Frederick. The two fall in love, but their union is forbidden by Jewish law. As Rachel hides her affair, Camille grows up in the shadow of a distant and dismissive mother.

Sharing her inspiration for the novel in a *Guardian Online* interview with Anita Sethi, Hoffman remarked: "I'm very interested in what conditions make a great artist--how did Camille Pissarro become the father of impressionism? I wanted to get inside his head and the head of his mother. Because Rachel was an outcast and outsider, what else could she expect her son to be? He grew up to be an anarchist and atheist and very much on the side of the working man and woman. I didn't want it to feel like a history book, though, I wanted it to feel alive." This approach was largely praised by critics, and *BookPage* correspondent Maude McDaniel declared that *The Marriage of Opposites* is "atmospheric, moody and evocative." McDaniel went on to conclude that "this subject has found the right author at the right time, and no one who reads this story will forget it." Echoing this sentiment in *Publishers Weekly*, a reviewer advised: "Hoffman's subject matter and her evocative writing style are a wonderful fit for this moving story." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor was equally laudatory, commending the "lilting prose, beautifully meted out folklore and historical references, and Hoffman's deep conviction in her characters." Offering further applause in the *Independent Online*, Amanda Craig declared: "So much is packed into this novel that it could have been twice its length; what it tells us is that marriage is a mystery based on love rather than convention or money. You may or may not believe this to be true, but its effect is as intoxicating as the finest island rum."

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A Discussion with Alice Hoffman

Alice Hoffman is the author of 30 acclaimed works of fiction including *Practical Magic*, *The Dovekeepers* and *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*. Her new novel, *The Marriage of Opposites*, is set in the 1800s in Paris and on the tropical island of St Thomas and tells the story of the rebellious Rachel, and how her son, Camille Pissarro, became a great artist. Hoffman was born in New York and now lives near Boston.

It's clear that you wanted to get into the mindset of what it was like to be a woman in the 1800s.

I really did. When I first read *Wuthering Heights* I didn't understand why Cathy couldn't marry the person she loved. I didn't understand the property laws, and the constraints on women. Even though laws have changed we still have so many social constraints and so many rules that we set for ourselves and that society sets for us. It's very difficult still to be a woman.

Whether characters conform or break the rules shapes the plot of the book...

What interested me most about Rachel is that she was such a rebel, she was willing to break the rules, no matter the price. She's the woman I wish I was – I wish I had her courage and bravery.

Do you set yourself rules in your writing life?

I don't think about rules when I'm writing – that's the great thing about writing: it's the one place in my life that I can do whatever I want.

Class and racial conflict are compelling themes...

Yes – I wanted to explore how class and race and religion are human constructs that don't really exist when we take them away.

What was your motivation in fictionalising the life of an artist?

I'm very interested in what conditions make a great artist – how did Camille Pissarro become the father of impressionism? I wanted to get inside his head and the head of his mother. Because Rachel was an outcast and outsider, what else could she expect her son to be? He grew up to be an anarchist and atheist and very much on the side of the working man and woman. I didn't want it to feel like a history book, though, I wanted it to feel alive.

Like much of your work, the novel is wonderfully rich in magic, folklore and fairy tale. Why is that?

For me, reading and magic always went together. In childhood I was reading all the time; I was very much an escapist reader, in that reading saved my life. I started reading folklore and fairytales and heard stories from my Russian grandmother. Those are the original stories, this oral tradition. I read a lot of magic. My favourite writer was Edward Eager – he was a huge fan of E Nesbit and wrote his own magical books. For me, literature and magic have always gone together in terms of subject matter but also in what literature does to a reader – it casts a magic spell.

What kind of stories did your grandmother tell you?

When she talked about her life it seemed like a fairytale to me: she came from Russia, from a place where the river was frozen all year round and men went down it on rafts and got stuck in the ice and couldn't come back. If you don't write them down, stories can get lost and there's no one left to tell them.

Where does your interest in the theme of survival come from?

I'm a breast cancer survivor – that happened to me about 17 years ago, but even before that I'd always been interested in survivors. For me, it's trying to learn the lessons of survivorship, because I've had a hard time surviving trauma, and I'm so in awe of the things that people experience and manage to survive. Rachel's community were Jews who escaped the Inquisition, then moved from Spain to Portugal to the New World. I'm in awe of what they did in order to survive and to keep going, and to keep the faith. In a way, I feel survival is always my subject matter. **Anita Sethi**

Enhance Your Book Club

1. "Like the breakfast he'd had, the landscape was a familiar part of him that surfaced in his dreams and in his art" (page 257). With your book club, research Camille Pissarro's artwork on the Internet or, if you are able, visit a local museum that features his work. Discuss how the novel's setting is manifested in his work. Is *THE MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES* characteristic of Pissarro's style? Are there paintings that remind you of scenes in the novel?
2. Select one of Alice Hoffman's other works, such as *THE MUSEUM OF EXTRAORDINARY THINGS* or *THE DOVEKEEPERS*, for your next book club meeting. How are these works similar or dissimilar to *THE MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES*?
3. Research the colonization of St. Thomas --- especially the history of the Jews there --- and native spiritual culture. Does anything in your research surprise you?
4. For your next book group, select a book about other "invisible" women in history.

Try to discover the stories of women in your own family. Interview older relatives or read about history of women in your own culture.
5. To learn more about Alice Hoffman, visit her website at www.alicehoffman.com or connect with her on Facebook at www.facebook.com/alicehoffmanauthor.

Camille Pissarro

📖 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2007

Born: July 10, 1830 in St. Thomas, United States Virgin Islands

Died: November 12, 1903 in Paris, France

Other Names: Pissarro, Camille Jacob

Nationality: French

Occupation: Painter (Artist)

PISSARRO, CAMILLE (1830–1903), French painter. Born into a Sephardi family which had migrated from Bordeaux to the Virgin Islands, he was sent to a boarding school in Paris at the age of 12. At 17 he returned to St. Thomas to become a clerk in his father's general store, but he wanted to be an artist, and ran away to Caracas, Venezuela. After a while he obtained his father's permission to study in France, and from 1855 until his death, he remained in, or near, Paris.

With his socialist-anarchist convictions, he regarded himself a citizen of the world, with no particular religious, racial, or national ties. His wife was of Catholic peasant stock. He was shocked and hurt by the *Dreyfus case, but more as a man of progressive political ideals than as a Jew. Pissarro became a staunch member of a loosely organized group that came into being in 1874 under the name of "Société anonyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, et graveurs" which soon became better known as the "Impressionists." He participated in all of the Impressionists' eight group shows, received his share of abuse from public and press, and held the group together until 1886, after Cézanne, Renoir, and even the prime mover, Monet, had lost interest.

He took his guidance from Corot and Courbet, blending Corot's subtlety of atmospheric effect with the strength and solidity of Courbet. In 1865 he came under the spell of Manet. By that time he had already eliminated black and the siennas and ochers from his palette. In his mid-fifties, he was greatly influenced by Georges Seurat's pointillist technique, and for several years he experimented with the "divisionist" method of painting with little dots of primary color. Yet, he is chiefly known for his Impressionist landscapes and cityscapes. Pissarro thought he saw nature objectively but actually he rendered it just as much from feeling and knowledge as from dispassionate sight – rendered it in solidly constructed, architectural forms. Most of his canvases show a definite desire for order and organization, and a feeling for design. His work is uneven – perhaps more uneven than that of other artists, since he was forced to overproduce in his efforts to keep his family of eight from starvation.

All of Pissarro's sons – Lucien (1863–1944), Georges (1871–1961), Félix (1874–1897), Ludovic-Rudolpe (1878–1952), and Paul-Emile (1884–1972) – were gifted artists, but only one, LUCIEN PISSARRO, achieved a modicum of fame for his Impressionist landscapes and his woodcuts. Lucien played a major part in the introduction of Impressionist painting to England. Educated in France, he was trained by his father and in 1890 went to England, where he met William Morris, Charles Ricketts, and Charles Shannon who interested him in the art of book design. He later set up his own publishing firm, the Eragny Press, and collaborated with his wife in the production of beautifully illustrated books. Among his book productions was *The Book of Ruth and Esther*. Lucien's daughter Orovida (1893–1968) inherited his talent. She signed her work with her first name, and became known for her studies of animals.

[Alfred Werner]

