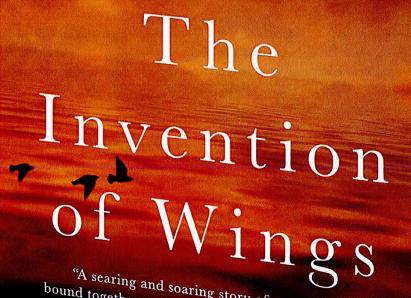
1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES

Sue Monk Kidd

A Novel



"A searing and soaring story of two women bound together as mistress and slave." -USA TODAY

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A CONVERSATION WITH SUE MONK KIDD



For discussion questions and much more from *The Invention of Wings*, check out the full Reading Group Guide on Sue Monk Kidd's website.

This is a work of historical fiction inspired by the real Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina. How did you discover them and what was it about them that you found to be interesting enough to create a story for a novel? You focus primarily on Sarah. How much of her story is fact and how much did you create?

The novel began with a vague notion that I wanted to write a story about two sisters. I didn't know initially, who the sisters might be or when and where they

lived. Then, while visiting Judy Chicago's Dinner Party exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, I came upon the names of Sarah and Angelina Grimké on the Heritage Panels, which list women who've made important contributions to history. I discovered they were sisters from Charleston, the same city in which I was living. Embarrassingly enough, I'd never heard of them. Perhaps the most radical females to come out of the antebellum south, they were the first female abolition agents in the country and among the earliest pioneers for women's rights, and yet they seemed only marginally known. As I began to read about Sarah's and Angelina's lives, I became certain they were the sisters I wanted to write about.

Gradually, I was drawn more to Sarah's story. As dramatic as her life as a reformer was, I was even more compelled by what she overcame as a woman. She belonged to a wealthy, aristocratic, slave-holding family, and before stepping onto the public stage, she experienced intense longings for freedom, for a way to make a difference in the world, and to have a voice of her own, hopes that were repeatedly crushed. She experienced betrayal, unrequited love, self-doubts, ostracism, and suffocating silence. She pressed on anyway.

The novel is a blend of fact and fiction. There's a great deal of factual detail in it, and I stayed true to the broad historical contours of Sarah's life. Most, if not all, of her significant events are included. But it was apparent to me that in order to serve the story, I would need to go my own way, as well. I never wanted to write a thinly veiled history. I'm a novelist, and I wanted room to explore and invent. I probably veered off the record as much as I adhered to it, primarily in the scenes related to Sarah's relationship with the fictional character of Handful. Sarah's history and the inner life I gleaned of her from my research is the ground floor of her story, but the only way I could bring her fully to life as a character was to find her in my own imagination.

How did you approach writing an enslaved character? How did Hetty Handful Grimké come about?

From the moment I decided to write about the historical figure of Sarah Grimké, I was compelled to also create the story of an enslaved character that could be entwined with Sarah's. In fact, I felt that I couldn't write the novel otherwise, that both worlds would have to be represented. Then I discovered that at the age of eleven, Sarah was given a ten-year-old slave named Hetty to be her handmaid. According to Sarah, they became close, and she defied the laws of South Carolina by teaching Hetty to read, for which they were both punished. Nothing further is known of Hetty except that she died

of an unspecified disease a short while later. I knew immediately that this was the other half of the story. I wanted to try to bring Hetty to life again and imagine what might have been.

There's an aphorism in writing that says you should write about what you know, and if I'd followed that rather bad piece of advice, I never would have attempted to write in the voice of a slave. That's not to say I wasn't intimidated by the prospect—it would take me further out on the writing limb than I'd ever been. It probably wasn't arbitrary that in Sarah's first chapter, I have her announce a little slogan she creates for herself that helps her over the hurdles in her world: "If you must err, do so on the side of audacity." I could only hope that writing the character of Hetty Handful Grimké was not some audacious erring.

I'd written my other two novels in first person. I love the interiority of it, how intimate it feels, nevertheless, I started off by telling myself I would write Handful from a third person perspective, which seemed a little more removed. I think the word I'm looking for here is safer. I hadn't written more than two pages, however, when Handful began talking in the first person. My need to inhabit her more fully kept breaking in. Finally, I just gave up and let her talk. While writing this novel, I read an interview with author Alice Walker, who, in speaking of her mother, said, "She was all over my heart, so why shouldn't she be in literature?" I felt that way about Handful.

With this novel, you join a tradition of depicting slavery in an open and unflinching way, though you've written about a form of it perhaps less known to most readers: urban slavery. Can you give us a glimpse of it?

When a person thinks of American slavery, probably what comes to mind are plantations, cotton fields, and slave cabins. Urban slavery, however, was quite different. In antebellum Charleston slaves worked in the city's fine houses and mansions or in the walled work yards behind them. They lived in small rooms above the work yard structures—the kitchen house, the laundry, the carriage house, and the stables. Large numbers of slaves were hired out to work away from their residences, providing labor for the wharves, the lumber yards, and other places of business. Slaves ran stalls in the city market, peddled wares on the street, and crisscrossed the city, carrying messages and running errands for their owners. On Sundays, they were often required to show up at their owners' churches and sit in the balcony. Slave auctions took place right on the street up until the late 1850s. Every day, the streets teemed with slaves, who nicked time to fraternize in alleys and on street corners. The city was alive with networks of information passed slave to slave and yard to yard, and watchful eyes were everywhere. Urban slavery was built on an intricate system of surveillance and control: curfews, passes, badges, searches, and ordinances that dictated how slaves should behave on the streets—all of it enforced by the presence of militia companies and the City Guard. Infractions could send slaves to an establishment known as the Work House, where they were whipped or otherwise punished. Even more disturbing, owners could arbitrarily send slaves to the Work House to be punished for a fee. Urban slavery might have looked and functioned differently from plantation slavery, but it was every bit as brutal.

The Invention of Wings takes place in the early part of the nineteenth century in Charleston. What was it like to write a novel set two hundred years ago? How is historical fiction relevant for readers today?

Basically, I sat down at my computer almost daily for three and half years and transported myself back in time. I would be in the grand Grimké house on East Bay Street in Charleston, or in the work

yard where the Grimké slaves carried on behind hidden walls, or I might be on a ship sailing north, or in the attic room of an abolitionist home in Philadelphia. My husband joked that I spent more time in the nineteenth century than I did in the twenty-first. My aim was to create a "world" for the reader to enter, one as richly textured, tangible, and authentic as I could make it. Of course, the way into the nineteenth century is through an awful lot of research. I spent six months reading before I began writing, and I made lots of field trips to libraries, museums, historical societies, and historic houses, all of which I may have enjoyed a little too much because I finally had to make myself stop reading and traipsing about and start writing.

It was a revelation to me that two of the great movements of the twentieth century—Civil Rights and feminism— were fueled by early nineteenth century innovations of thought about abolition and women's rights, two major motifs in my novel. I was incredibly moved by that, by the far reaching power of what took place during the thirty-five years I was writing about. That we are the sum of our history has never seemed truer to me, and I think it's why historical fiction has the potential to be sharply relevant. Sometimes the best way, even the only way, to see ourselves clearly in the present is to take a good look at where we came from. For instance, I like to imagine that people might read about the cruelties and oppressions in the 1800s and find that it opens their eyes wider to the cruelties and oppressions that exist today. As hard as it is to believe, the evils of slavery were often invisible to those who saw it as essential to their way of life. Something like that might just make us wonder about the way evil hides in plain sight today and gathers while no one is looking. Undoubtedly, the biggest revelation for me in writing this novel was that I was writing as much about the present as the past.

In both *The Invention of Wings* and *Bees* you address issues of and explore racial relations. What inspires this interest?

During my childhood in the South in the fifties and sixties, I witnessed terrible racial injustices and divides. I grew up amid the backdrop of separate water fountains, black maids riding in the back seats of white ladies' cars, Rosa Parks, and Civil Rights marches. One of my earliest memories is seeing the Ku Klux Klan on the street in my small hometown in Georgia and the absolute terror I felt. I was thirteen when Martin Luther King, Jr. was jailed in the town where I was born, twenty miles from where I then lived. I graduated from the first integrated class at my high school, and I can still see the barrage of balled up notebook paper that was thrown at black students as they walked to class, a scene that ended up in the pages of *The Secret Life of Bees*. This is the stuff of my childhood and adolescence; it's the stuff of my history.

I imagine there's always some mystery involved in why novelists gravitate to certain subjects, but I believe I've been drawn to write about racial themes because they are part of me, and also because they matter deeply to me. I can't help but feel a social responsibility about it as a writer. Racism is the great wound and sin of the South and indeed, the great wound and original sin of America. Two hundred and forty-six years of slavery was an American holocaust, and its legacy is racism. I don't think we've fully healed the wound or eradicated the sin. For all the great strides we've made, that legacy still lingers.

You have a theme of young girls and women asserting their voices and thinking beyond the time in which they live—like Lily in *Bees*, and Sarah, Angelina, and Handful in *The Invention of Wings*. What stirs your interest in such forward thinking women?

Empowering girls and women feels very personal to me. Just as I grew up in a time and place of racial

injustice and divides, I also came of age in pre-feminist America. In the South, that was saying a great deal. In 1963, the same year Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* and reignited the women's revolution, I sat in a home economics class in high school, hemming skirts and learning how to make a home into a man's castle. I still recall the list of occupations for women I copied off the blackboard: teacher, nurse, secretary, sales clerk, homemaker... There were less than twenty of them. I remember this moment quite well because I harbored a deep and formidable desire to be a writer, and it was nowhere on the roster. When I headed to college, I studied nursing. That was a colossal failure of courage on my part, mine alone. I hadn't yet figured out how to think and act outside the confines of the world that shaped me. It took eight years after graduating from college for me to break out, pursue writing and find a voice of my own. Oddly enough, it wasn't Friedan's book that shook me. It was Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*. Even though it's set in the 19th century or maybe *because* it's set there, the story of Edna Pontellier's agonizing struggle against the limits her culture placed on women nearly leveled me. The lives of Sarah and Angelina Grimké affected me in a similar way. I fell in love with their bravery. They started at ground zero with women's rights. At twelve, Sarah, bless her, earnestly believed she could become the first female lawyer in America.

I know, the world is radically different now, but there is something global, resounding and even urgent about empowering girls and women. We seem to understand now that the world is going to hell in a hand basket without them, that there are still boundaries out there, whether poverty, or cultural expectations, or political and religious restrictions, or their own lack of selfhood and vision. I'm a believer that girls and women need all the stories of courage and daring they can get.

The relationships between mothers and daughters are a common thread in your work. In *The Invention of Wings*, you present two parallel mother/daughter narratives, as well as a sister narrative. Did you have this in mind from the start or did it develop as you wrote?

I intended from the outset to write a story about sisters. I never had a sister; I have three brothers. I once heard novelist Lee Smith say, tongue-in-cheek, that writers don't write autobiographically, they write about things they want to try out. Maybe that's what I was doing. Sarah and Angelina's sister-hood was remarkable from the start. Sarah, twelve years older than Angelina, was also her godmother. She acted as both a mother and a sister to the child, creating an exceptionally complex relationship. The two were alike in thought, but different in nature. Sarah was the introvert, the writer, the thinker, a brilliant theoretician, and the plainer looking. Angelina was the extrovert, the orator, the doer, the dazzler, leading the charge. "Nina was one wing, I was the other," Sarah says in the novel.

As for the parallel mother-daughter relationships in the story, I didn't plan them at all. I seem to end up writing about mothers and daughters, perhaps because the relationships between them are seeded with so much potential for intimacy, separation, love, and conflict. They are rarely casual, irrelevant, or finished. In the novel, there's a vivid contrast between the relationship Sarah has with her mother and the one Handful has with hers. From historical accounts, Mrs. Grimké was a stern, distant mother, though she clearly loved all of her children, eleven of whom survived, all cared for by a slave known as the nursery mauma. Sarah and Angelina were her two "foreign" children, as she called them. They didn't see eye to eye with their mother on much of anything. Handful, however, slept in the same bed with her mother, Charlotte, a metaphor, perhaps, for the closeness that sustained them in a place that was filled with the threat of separation. Handful took her solace, her shelter, and her strength from her mother.

I might add that developing Sarah's relationship to her father and to her brother, Thomas, was just as important to me as creating the one she had with her mother, perhaps even more so. Her father was a judge on South Carolina's Supreme Court and her brother was an esteemed lawyer, and I wanted to show the enormity of their presence in her life as she grew up. I tried to portray what a father's daughter Sarah truly was, emulating him and identifying with both him and her brother over and against her mother.

Storytelling happens in many ways in your new novel. Handful's mother, Charlotte, tells her story through a quilt. What inspired you to portray her story in this way?

I was inspired by the magnificent quilts of Harriet Powers, who was born into slavery in 1837 in Georgia. She used West African appliqué technique and designs to tell stories, mostly about Biblical events, legends, and astronomical occurrences. One of her two surviving quilts resides at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. A textile specialist at the museum graciously led me back into the labyrinth of the Smithsonian archives to view it. Gazing at the fifteen squares on Power's quilt struck me like looking at the pages of an ancient, illumined book. They were each a masterpiece of art and narration.

It seemed more than plausible to me that many enslaved women, forbidden to read and write, would have devised subversive ways to voice themselves, to keep their memories alive, and to preserve their African heritage. In my novel, Charlotte is the Grimké's rebellious and accomplished seamstress, and I envisioned her using needle and cloth the way others use paper and pen, attempting to set down the events of her life in a single quilt. She appliqués it with strange, beautiful images—slaves flying through the air, spirit trees with their trunks wrapped in red thread—but she also sews violent and painful images of her punishments and loss. The quilt in the novel is meant to be more than a warm blanket or an artful piece of handiwork. It is Charlotte's story. As she tells her daughter, Handful, the quilt squares are pieces of her, the same as the meat on her bones.

You've managed to capture the voice of the period. You get the idiom, dialect, and cadence of the language of the day on paper. How did you find the voices of your two narrators?

The voice of Sarah turned out to be one of my biggest challenges. I rewrote her chapters in the early part of the book over and over before I felt like I found her voice. I'd read the real life Grimké sisters' diaries and essays, and they gave me an extraordinary glimpse into their lives, but their writing was rendered in nineteenth century language, wrapped in rhetoric, piety and stilted phrases. I wanted Sarah's voice in my novel to feel authentic and carry some of the vernacular of the time, but I knew I had to bring some modern sensibility to it. Writing her voice was all about loosening it. I decided that my task was to tap into her inner life and set her free to speak from that timeless place, as well as from the time in which she lived.

By comparison, Handful's voice came with considerable more ease. I was certain only that I didn't want it to be weighed heavily with dialect, and that it must have traces of humor. I read a great many first person slave narratives from the nineteenth century, as well as the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s, and they gave me a lot of valuable insights. And I think Handful's voice must surely carry traces of the African-American women from my own childhood whose voices go on resonating in me, and also of the quilting women of Gee's Bend, whose voices I read and reread. But in the end, what I most wanted was for Handful's voice to be all her own—the voice of a slave who has learned to read

and write, one marked with Handful's particular idiosyncrasies and formed from the workings of her character.

Sarah and Handful's relationship begins when they are children. How did you go about writing the relationship between these two characters?

It's hard to come up with a relationship between characters more troubling to write about than that of an owner and a slave. Even if the owner is an unwilling one, even if she has an abolitionist's heart beating in her chest, as Sarah does, it's still a problematic situation. It was the thing that kept me up at nights—Handful and Sarah's complicated connection and whether I was getting it right. In the novel, their relationship spans three and half decades, many of which they spend as constant companions. To a large extent, they mold one another's lives and shape each other's destinies. There's an undeniable caring between them, but also the built-in gulf of slavery. Their relationship is disfigured by so many things: guilt, shame, pity, resentment, defiance, estrangement... I tried to create a relationship that allows for all of that, yet also has room for surprise, redemption, and even love. Someone who read an early copy of the novel commented that the two women create a sisterhood against all odds. Perhaps they do—an uneasy, but saving sisterhood.

Sarah and Handful battle for different kinds of freedom. Handful remarks to Sarah, "My body might be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it's the other way around." How did you develop the issue of freedom in these two characters?

Handful and Sarah are both imprisoned in their own particular way. As a white woman in South Carolina in the early 1800s, Sarah's life was vastly curtailed. Women then had few rights, not to property or even to their own children. They couldn't vote, testify in court, or make a will. Essentially, they were the property of their husbands. Their singular purpose in life was to marry, have children, and live their lives in the domestic sphere. And yet, their lack of freedom could not compare to the horrific subjugation of enslaved women, whose entire lives were determined by their owners and whose suffering was far worse. I felt like the main thing in developing Handful's and Sarah's quests for freedom was to never lose sight of that.

As I wrote, I came to see that freedom has all sorts of nuances and dimensions. Handful's assertion that her body is a slave, but not her mind, and that for Sarah it's the other way around, comes at a certain looming moment in the story, as Sarah struggles with the dictates of her family, her society, and her religion. Handful is trying to tell Sarah a truth she knows only too well herself, that one's mind can become a cage, too. There's an earlier scene in the novel in which Handful willfully locks the door and takes a bath in the Grimké's majestic copper bathtub. I can't tell you how much sheer pleasure I derived from writing this scene. Handful's bath is tinged with defiance, but it becomes a baptism into her own worth, a kind of coming to herself. She begins to understand that even though her body is trapped in slavery, her mind is her own. Finding one's sense of self, and the boldness to express that self, is one form of freedom that needed to be developed in both characters. Handful just found it much sooner than Sarah.

A number of your characters were actual people, Denmark Vesey among them. How did he come into the story?

As I began my research, I realized that the time frame of the novel overlapped with one of the largest

and most daring slave plots in American history. It unfolded in the heart of Charleston in the early 1820s and was led by ex-slave Denmark Vesey, whose name has remained more or less buried. I became absorbed by his story and immediately began to weave him into the novel, intersecting his life with Handful's and Charlotte's. His presence in the novel was a serendipity for me. It brought another male character into the center of the story, as well as adding some intrigue and drama. And it allowed me a way to acknowledge the enslaved and free black Americans who fought, plotted, resisted, and died for the sake of freedom. Depicting all slaves as passive, compliant, and happy is a travesty that was perpetuated for a long time, and even in the course of writing this novel, I encountered people who expressed that opinion to me. The truth is, slaves rebelled and subverted the system in all sorts of cunning and courageous ways. I tried to capture some of that through Handful and Charlotte, as well as Vesey and his lieutenants.

Without revealing too much, what does the title The Invention of Wings symbolize?

I'm one of those writers who likes to have a title before I begin to write. A title helps me to shape my intention and my understanding of what I'm doing. It provides a focus, as well as giving me something concrete and visual I can play with. For me, the most important thing to keep in mind about the imagination is that it wants to play. I will spend an inordinate amount of time writing down possible titles until I find one my imagination seizes upon. When The Invention of Wings popped into my head, my imagination sort of lit up. Wings, of course, symbolize flight and freedom, and they became a central metaphor in the story. I discovered an American black folktale about people in Africa being able to fly and then losing their wings when captured into slavery, and that notion began to slip into the story in different ways. Sometimes, while writing, I listened to songs the slaves sang: "Now let me fly... now let me fly, now let me fly way up high." The title, The Invention of Wings, suggests the sweeping social movements toward freedom that began erupting at the time—abolition and women's rights—but the real essence of the title for me is the individual and personal ways my characters invented their wings.

What do you want people to take away from reading The Invention of Wings?

I most want the reader to take away a *felt* experience of the story, of what slavery might have been like for someone or what it was like for a woman before she had any rights. I want the reader to feel as if he or she has participated in the interior lives of the characters and felt something of their yearnings, sufferings, joys, and braveries. That's a large hope. Empathy—taking another's experience and making it one's own—is one of the most mysterious and noble transactions a human can have. It's the real power of fiction. In the Author's Note at the end of the novel, I quote some words by Professor Julius Lester, words I kept visible on my desk as I wrote: "History is not just facts and events. History is also a pain in the heart and we repeat history until we are able to make another's pain in the heart our own."







Huguenot Torte

This quintessential old Charleston delicacy will provide the perfect complement to your book club's discussion.

Ingredients

- 4 eggs
- 3 cups sugar
- 8 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 5 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 large tart apples, cored and chopped (about 2 cups)
- 2 cups chopped pecans
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- Whipped cream for serving

Directions

Preheat oven to 325°F. Grease two 17¼ x 11½ inch baking pans. Beat eggs in electric mixer on medium speed until frothy and lemon-colored, about 4 minutes. Gradually add sugar, flour, baking powder, and salt, beat until incorporated. Divide mixture between baking pans, and bake about 45 minutes or until crusty and golden brown. To serve, cut into pieces and scoop up with a spatula; stack on a large plate. Cover with whipped cream and a sprinkling of the chopped nuts.

Blackbird Cocktail

If your book club enjoys cocktails with their book discussion, try this delicious Blackbird while you talk about *The Invention of Wings*.

Ingredients

- 2 parts whiskey or bourbon
- 1 part half and half or light cream
- l part egg white

To make

Fill a cocktail shaker with ice cubes. Add all other ingredients. Shake and strain into a chilled old-fashioned glass. Enjoy responsibly.

How to Brew a Terfect Tot of Tea

For your next book club meeting, brew tea the old-fashioned way using loose leaf tea and a beautiful teapot. Here's a step-by-step guide to making a perfect pot.

What you'll need:

Loose leaf black tea. Darjeeling and Earl Grey are classic choices.

Add-ins: Milk, lemon slices, and sugar cubes (all optional)

Tea kettle

Teapot—you'll need one large enough to serve all your guests

Strainer—if your teapot doesn't have a built in strainer, you'll need one

Spoons, cups, and napkins

Tea towel or tea cozy-you can also use a regular kitchen towel

Creamer

Tray and sugar cube tongs (optional)

Preparing

- If you're using milk, start warming it on the stove. Warm milk is wonderful with freshly brewed tea!
- Warm your teapot by running it (and the lid) under very hot water. You can also warm your tea cups this way.
- Get your cups, strainer, and add-ins ready. Putting everything on a tray adds convenience and style.
- Add your tea to the teapot. Use roughly one teaspoon of tea for every 8 oz of water. Your tea packaging should also have instructions on how much to use. If your teapot has a strainer, add the loose tea into the strainer. If not, simply add the tea directly into the pot.
- When your water has reached a boil, turn off the stove and pour the water over the tea. Put the lid on the teapot and wrap it with a towel or a cozy to prevent cooling.
- Steep tea anywhere from 3-5 minutes, depending on how strong you like it.
- Pour the warm milk into your creamer or other pitcher. Remove the strainer from the tea (if applicable). If you're using a separate strainer, place it over the tea cup before pouring the tea.
- Add milk or lemon to your cup first and then add the tea. Breathe deeply and enjoy with your Huguenot Torte or other treats!



AUTHOR'S NOTE

The following is a portion of the Author's Note.

The full version can be found on page 361 of *The Invention of Wings*.

In 2007, I traveled to New York to see Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum. At the time, I was in the midst of writing a memoir, *Traveling with Pomegranates*, with my daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor, and I wasn't thinking about my next novel. I had no idea what it might be about, only a vague notion that I wanted to write about two sisters. Who those sisters were, when and where they lived, and what their story might be had not yet occurred to me.

The Dinner Party is a monumental piece of art, celebrating women's achievements in Western civilization. Chicago's banquet table with its succulent place settings honoring 39 female guests of honor rests upon a porcelain tiled floor inscribed with the names of 999 other women who have made important contributions to history. It was while reading those 999 names on the Heritage Panels in the Biographic Gallery that I stumbled upon those of Sarah and Angelina Grimké, sisters from Charleston, South Carolina, the same city in which I then lived. How could I have not heard of them?

Leaving the museum that day, I wondered if I'd discovered the sisters I wanted to write about. Back home in Charleston, as I began to explore their lives, I became passionately certain.



Sarah and Angelina were born into the power and wealth of Charleston's aristocracy, a social class that derived from English concepts of landed gentry. They were ladies of piety and gentility, who moved in the elite circles of society, and yet few nineteenth-century women ever "misbehaved" so thoroughly. They underwent a long, painful metamorphosis, breaking from their family, their religion, their homeland, and their traditions, becoming exiles and eventually pariahs in Charleston. Fifteen years before Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was wholly influenced by *American Slavery As It Is*, a pamphlet written by Sarah, Angelina, and Angelina's husband, Theodore Weld, and published in 1839, the Grimké sisters were out crusading not only for the immediate emancipation of slaves, but for racial equality, an idea that was radical even among abolitionists. And ten years before the Seneca Falls Convention, initiated by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Grimkés were fighting a bruising battle for women's rights, taking the first blows of backlash.



My aim was not to write a thinly fictionalized account of Sarah Grimké's history, but a thickly imagined story inspired by her life. During my research, delving into diaries, letters, speeches, newspaper accounts, and Sarah's own writing, as well as a huge amount of biographical material, I formed my own understanding of her desires, struggles, and motivations. The voice and inner life I've given Sarah are my own interpretation.



All of the enslaved characters in the novel are conjured from my imagination, with the exception of Denmark Vesey's lieutenants, who were actual figures: Gullah Jack, Monday Gell, Peter Poyas, and Rolla and Ned Bennett. All but Gell were hanged for their roles in the plotted revolt. Vesey himself was a free black carpenter, whose life, plot, arrest, trial, and execution I've tried to represent relatively close to historical accounts. I didn't concoct that odd detail about Vesey winning the lottery with ticket number 1884, then using the payoff to buy both his freedom and a house on Bull Street. Frankly, I wonder if I would've had the courage to make such a thing up. In public reports, Vesey was said to have been hanged at Blake's Lands along with five of his conspirators, but I chose to portray an oral tradition that has persisted among some black citizens of Charleston since the 1820s, which states that Vesey was hanged alone from an oak tree in order to keep his execution shrouded in anonymity. Vesey was said to have kept a number of "wives" around the city and to have fathered a number of children with them, so I took the liberty of making Handful's mother one of these "wives" and Sky his daughter.

Some historians have doubts about whether Vesey's planned slave insurrection truly existed or to what extent, but I have followed the opinion that not only was Vesey more than capable of creating such a plot, he attempted it. I wanted this work to acknowledge the many enslaved and free black Americans who fought, plotted, resisted, and died for the sake of freedom. Reading about the protest and escapes of various actual female slaves helped me to shape the characters and stories of Charlotte and Handful.

The story quilt in the novel was inspired by the magnificent quilts of Harriet Powers, an enslaved woman from Georgia who used African appliqué technique to tell stories about biblical events and historical legends. Her two surviving quilts are archived at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D. C., and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I made a pilgrimage to Washington to see Powers' quilt, and after viewing it, it seemed plausible that enslaved women, forbidden to read and write, could have devised subversive ways to voice themselves, to keep their memories alive, and to preserve the heritage of their African traditions. I envisioned Charlotte using cloth and needle as others use paper and pen, creating a visual memoir, attempting to set down the events of her life in a single quilt. One of the most fascinating parts of my research had to be the hours I spent reading about slave quilts and the symbols and imagery in African textiles, which introduced me to the notion of black triangles representing blackbird wings.



In writing *The Invention of Wings*, I was inspired by the words of Professor Julius Lester, which I kept propped on my desk: "History is not just facts and events. History is also a pain in the heart and we repeat history until we are able to make another's pain in the heart our own."





Words of Wisdom from THE INVENTION OF WINGS

"If you must err, do so on the side of audacity."

"Press on, my sisters."

"My body might be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it's the other way round."

"Be consoled in knowing the world depends upon the small beating in your heart."

"I felt my spirit rise to meet my will. I would not give up."

"Increasingly... longings had seized me, foreign, torrential aches that overran my heart. I wanted to know things, to become someone."

"She loved me and pitied me. And I loved her and used her. It never was a simple thing."

"I was meant to do something in the world, something larger than myself. ...How can I explain such a thing? I simply know it the way I know there's an oak tree inside an acorn. I've been filled with a hunger to grow this seed my whole life."

"Every girl comes into the world with varying degrees of ambition, even if it's only the hope of not belonging body and soul to her husband."

"To remain silent in the face of evil is itself a form of evil."

"When you think of me, you say, she never did belong to those people. She never belong to nobody but herself... You remember that."

"I wanted freedom more than the next breath."

"You got to figure out which end of the needle you're gon be, the one that's fastened to the thread or the end that pierces the cloth."

"Whiteness is not sacred. It can't go on defining everything."

"Mauma had sewed where she came from, who she was, what she loved, the things she'd suffered, and the things she hoped. She'd found a way to tell it."

"I'd been afflicted with the worst female curse on earth, the need to mold myself to expectations."

"We won't be silent anymore. We women will declare ourselves..."





FURTHER READING

The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition by Gerda Lerner

The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimke by Gerda Lerner

Lift Up Thy Voice: The Grimké Family's Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders by Mark Perry

> The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston by Maurie D. McInnis

Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It by David Robertson

Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery by Charles Johnson, Patricia Smith and WGBH Series Research Team

Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers by Mary Lyons (ALA Notable Book for Children)

Please click on the name of the organizations below to visit their websites.

National Women's History Museum

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

South Carolina Historical Society

Cornell Library's Abolitionism in America

Historical Society of Pennsylvania



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CRITICAL ACCLAIM

"Sue Monk Kidd has written a conversation changer. It is impossible to read this book and not come away thinking differently about our status as women and about all the unsung heroines who played a role in getting to where we are." —O, The Oprah Magazine

"If this isn't an American classic-to-be, I don't know what is...This book is as close to perfect as any I've ever read." —Dallas Morning News

"...a total revelation." —Essence

"Epic, affecting tale." —People (4 stars)

"Alternating between Sarah's and Handful's contrasting perspectives on their oddly conjoined worlds allows Kidd to generate unstoppable narrative momentum as she explores the troubled terrain that lies between white and black women in a slaveholding society. . . Kidd never lets us forget that true liberation always comes with painful losses. . . the novel's language can be as exhilarating as its powerful story. . . by humanizing these formidable women, *The Invention of Wings* furthers our essential understanding of what has happened among us as Americans – and why it still matters."

—The Washington Post

"Tells a searing and soaring story of two women bound together as mistress and slave...a beautifully written book about the awe-inspiring resilience of America's enslaved people. It's a provocative reminder of why slavery's wounds still scar the country 250 years later." —USA Today

"The novel is a textured masterpiece... I am appalled that I had never heard of the Grimkés before, and thank the author sincerely for allowing me to make their acquaintance." —NPR.Org

"The Invention of Wings has a worthy tale to tell. But damned if it isn't uplifting, too."

-New York Daily News

"The Invention of Wings isn't just the story of a friendship that defies an oppressive society; it's a much more satisfying story of two people discovering together that their lives are worth the fight."

-Entertainment Weekly

"Masterly work...With historical bedrock as her foundation for a compelling narrative, Kidd serves up a remarkable novel about finding your voice." —Chicago Tribune

"Kidd writes beautifully and the book shines brightest in illuminating the daily humiliations and abuse of slavery...an absorbing, illuminating, enjoyable read." —Associated Press

"Exquisitely nuanced...a page turner in the most resonant and satisfying of ways." — More

"The novel stands out in the crush of new releases thanks to its artful mix of fact and fiction, a powerful reminder of how much official history has neglected the people who changed it."

-Los Angeles Times

"A novel that educates you without preaching: about history, about relationships, about life."

—Huffington Post

"A sensitive and intense work about a shameful period of American history..."

-Charleston Post & Courier



Reading Groups - Sue Monk Kidd

See Penguin's **Book Club Kit** for additional material, including selected "Words of Wisdom" from the novel, recipes, and more.

Reading Group Guide

- Introduction to The Invention of Wings
- · About Sue Monk Kidd
- A Conversation with Sue Monk Kidd
- Discussion Questions

Introduction to The Invention of Wings

The Invention of Wings, a powerful and sweeping historical novel by Sue Monk Kidd, begins, fittingly, with an image of flight: Hetty "Handful", who has grown up as a slave in early nineteenth century Charleston, recalls the night her mother told her that her ancestors in Africa could fly over trees and clouds. That day, Handful's mother, Charlotte, gave her daughter the gift of hope— the possibility that someday she might regain her wings and fly to freedom. Throughout Kidd's exquisitely written story, Handful struggles, sometimes with quiet dissidence, sometimes with open rebellion, to cultivate a belief in the invincibility of her spirit and in the sacred truth that one does not need actual wings in order to rise.

Barely a stone's throw from the slave quarters where Handful and her mother share a room behind the grand Grimké house, another young woman fights a different battle with the constraints of her society. Sarah Grimké is the middle daughter of a wealthy and prominent family at the pinnacle of Charleston's social hierarchy—the daughter her mother calls difficult and her father calls remarkable. From the time of her first violent childhood confrontation with slavery, Sarah is unable to abide the oppression and brutality of the slave system that surrounds her. Ambitious and keenly intelligent, she harbors an intense longing to have a voice in the world and to follow her father and brothers' footsteps to a profession in the law. Crushed by the strictures that her family and society impose on women, Sarah forges a tortuous, yet brave path toward abolition and women's rights—a crusade in which she will be joined by her fiery sister Angelina.

The story begins on Sarah's eleventh birthday, when ten-year-old Handful is abruptly pulled from the Grimké's work yard, adorned in lavender ribbons, and presented to Sarah as a gift. Sarah tries in vain to decline, but over time, the two create a bond that will ultimately and dramatically shape their destinies.

As their intertwined stories unfold in their own voices, Sarah will eventually break from the only life she knows and go north to become an exile, encountering love and heartbreak, repression and renaissance as she searches for her voice and her place of belonging. Back home, Handful will experience her

mother's mysterious disappearance, finding strength and answers in the story quilt she leaves behind. When Denmark Vesey, a free black man with messianic charisma, plots a dangerous slave insurrection in the heart of Charleston, Handful becomes embroiled in a conspiracy that threatens to shake the city to its foundations.

Inspired by actual historical figures like Sarah and Angelina Grimké and Denmark Vesey, and enlivened by original creations like Charlotte and Handful, *The Invention of Wings* is the extraordinary story of two struggles for freedom: the battle of Handful to find the wings her mother promised and the equally intense quest of Sarah to liberate her mind and spirit. This triumphant novel also speaks with wisdom about the nature of evil and injustice, the courage to dare what seems unattainable, and the hope inside of us that the worst darkness can't extinguish.

About Sue Monk Kidd

Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), became a genuine literary phenomenon, selling over six million copies in the U.S. and remaining on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than two years. Named Book Sense Book of the Year in 2004, it was adapted into an award-winning movie. Kidd's second novel, *The Mermaid Chair* (2005), sold over a million copies and garnered the Quill Award for General Fiction. She has co-written a bestselling memoir with her daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor, titled *Traveling with Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story* (2009), as well as authoring several acclaimed memoirs, including *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996). Kidd lives in southwest Florida with her husband, Sandy and their black Labrador retriever.

A Conversation with Sue Monk Kidd

1. You had never heard of the Grimké sisters before you received the inspiration for *The Invention of Wings*. How did you first hear about them, and what was it about their story that captivated you?

I first came upon the Grimké sisters in 2007 while visiting Judy Chicago's Dinner Party exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Their names were listed on the Heritage Panels, which honor 999 women who've made important contributions to western history. Later, I was astonished to discover they were from Charleston, South Carolina, the same city in which I was then living. Somehow I'd never heard of these two amazing women, but I immediately dove in, learning everything I could, and the more I learned, the more excited I became. I discovered that Sarah and Angelina were from a wealthy slave-holding family, at the top of the planter class, moving in the elite circles of society, and yet they broke with everything, their family, religion, homeland and traditions, and became the first female abolition agents in America and among the earliest feminist thinkers. They were, arguably, the most radical females to ever come out of the antebellum South. I fell in love with their story. I was especially drawn to Sarah. I was moved by how thoroughly life was arranged against her and what she overcame, by how deeply she yearned to have a voice in the world, by how utterly human she was, and how determinedly she invented her wings.

I came of age in pre-feminist America. In 1963, the same year Betty Friedan published *The Feminine*

Mystique and reignited the women's revolution, I sat in a home economics class in high school, hemming skirts and learning how to make a home into a man's castle. I still recall the list of occupations for women I copied off the blackboard: teacher, nurse, secretary, sales clerk, homemaker... As I recall, there were less than twenty of them. I remember this moment quite well because I harbored a deep and formidable desire to be a writer, and it was nowhere on the roster. When I headed to college, I studied nursing, a noble profession, but it wasn't my place of belonging. I hadn't yet figured out how to think and act outside the confines of the world that shaped me. It took eight years after graduating from college for me to break out and pursue writing. Today, that reminds me a little of Sarah, who also had failures of courage and who was sometimes slow to take her leap. Oddly enough, it wasn't Friedan's book that shook me. It was Kate Chopin's novel, The Awakening. Edna Pontellier's agonizing struggle against the limits her culture placed on women nearly leveled me. The lives of Sarah and Angelina Grimke affected me in a similar way. I know the world is radically different now, but I'm a believer that girls and women, and all of us, really, need all the stories of courage and daring we can get.

2. **The Invention of Wings** is voiced by two verbally powerful narrators: Sarah Grimké, who is inspired by the real-life abolitionist and feminist of the same name, and Hetty Handful, who is the child of your imagination. How does creating a character from the ground up differ from adapting a real person into a fictional persona, and which do you find more challenging?

One of the more unexpected things I experienced in writing the novel was that Handful's character and voice came to me with more ease than Sarah's. Handful would talk, talk, talk. Often I couldn't keep up with her. When I first began writing in her voice, the only parameters I gave myself were that I didn't want her voice to be weighed down with dialect and it must have traces of humor. I'd read a great many first person slave narratives from the nineteenth century, as well as the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s, and I had the voices of African-American women from my own childhood still resonating in me, along with the those of the quilting women of Gee's Bend, but I think what made Handful so accessible to me was her free, unrestricted reign in my imagination. She did not come with the fetters of a previous history. She could speak and do as she wished.

Sarah, on the other hand, came with a big historical script, and that turned out to be one of my biggest challenges. I revered Sarah's history to the point I initally became boxed-in by it. In the beginning, I had a hard time letting her venture outside factual borders. The longer she was cooped up by the facts, the quieter she got. I'd read the Grimke sisters' diaries and essays, and while they gave me an extraordinary glimpse into their lives, their writing was rendered in nineteenth century language, wrapped in rhetoric, piety and stilted phrases. I wanted Sarah's voice in my novel to feel authentic and carry some of the vernacular of the time, but I knew I had to bring some modern sensibility to it. I rewrote her first chapters over and over, before I felt like I'd found her voice. Finding it was all about loosening it. I realized I had to tap into Sarah's inner life and set her free to speak from that timeless lace, as well as from the time in which she lived. I needed to let her veer off script. I had to find Sarah in my imagination, as well as in history. Doing so brought her alive for me.

3. What was the process of writing the novel like for you? How did you go about your research? You've commented that you went further out on the writing limb with this novel than you've been before. What did you mean?

It took four years to write *The Invention of Wings*— three and a half years of writing, following six months of research. I'm not the fastest writer on the block. I spent a lot of protracted time sitting at the computer screen just contemplating the story, letting my imagination browse, trying to connect little dots, allowing ideas and revelations to come to me. Plus, I was constantly stopping to look up something in a book—what sort of mourning dress did women wear in 1819? What book titles would be on a library shelf in 1804? What were the emancipation laws in South Carolina? When I wasn't ruminating or scouring books, I was writing, and then rewriting as I went, rarely moving to the next chapter until I felt I'd rendered the last one as close as possible to the final draft. I would easily spend an entire day tinkering with the prose on a single page.

The way into the early nineteenth century, of course, is through an awful lot of research. My husband joked I spent more time in the nineteenth century than I did in the twenty-first. My aim was to create a "world" for the reader to enter, one as richly textured, tangible, and authentic as I could make it. I read and read, filling up five big notebooks with details and ideas. I drew maps of the interior of the Grimké house and the work yard, and etched a loose outline of the thirty-five year span of the story on large sheets of paper, one for each of the book's six parts. I hung them in my study, using them to map the flow of events. I also made lots of field trips, visiting libraries, museums, historical societies, and historic houses, all of which I may have enjoyed a little too much because I finally had to make myself stop reading, mapping and traipsing about and start writing.

It's hard to articulate why it seemed this book took me further out on a limb. Maybe because the story had to accommodate such a sweeping amount of time. Maybe because it had two different narrators whose stories needed to be a match for one another, whose voices had to be distinct, and whose journeys had to be synchronized. I was challenged, as I've already mentioned, by writing from the complicated intersection of imagination and history, and quite honestly, it was unnerving to take on something as big as slavery. Most daunting, though, was the notion of writing from the mind, heart and persona of an enslaved person. I wanted to create Handful in a way that was convincing and respectful. It may have been safer to write her character from a third person perspective, and I did actually start off that way, but I hadn't written two pages before her first person voice broke in, and that was that. I'm forever plastering quotes and evocations about my study. One that I kept on my desk as I wrote this novel simply said: Be fearless on the page. I often paused to read it. It caused me to at least try.

4. For us, one of the pivotal moments in the story comes when Handful reads the ledger on which she and her mother are listed and appraised as part of the Grimké family's property. What does that moment in the novel mean to you?

During my research, I came upon a thesis about the Grimké's Charleston house that included a

transcript of a legally executed inventory and appraisal of all the "goods and chattels" in the house at the time of Sarah's father's death in 1819. As I read through this long and detailed list, I was shocked to come upon the names of seventeen slaves. They were inserted between a Brussels staircase carpet and eleven yards of cotton and flax. I read their names, their ages, the roles they performed—coachman, cook, waiting maid, washer, house servant, seamstress, etc.—and I read what they were supposedly worth. One slave, Diana, thirty-six, was listed as "useless" and valued at \$1. There were four children included, ages eight, six, four, and three months. The eight year old was named Ben, the same as my grandson. Their mother was Bess, age thirty. Together the five of them had been valued at \$1500.

The moment hit me close to the bone, in part because of how real and close these human beings suddenly seemed, but also because of the sheer banality and acceptability of listing them as possessions among the carpets and cloth. Here was not just our human capacity for cruelty, but our ability to render it invisible. How do such things happen? How do we grow comfortable with the particulars of evil? How are we able to normalize it? How does evil gather when no one is looking? Discovering the seventeen names on the ledger was when I understood how dangerous it is to separate ourselves from our history, even when it's unspeakably painful.

Of course, the inventory found its way into the novel with Handful unearthing it in the library and finding her and her mother's names and appraised values. I suppose, for me, the scene represents the inevitable confrontation with the trauma of slavery, one that's all the more necessary because we have two hundred and forty-six years of slavery embedded in our history, and we can still hardly bear to look at it.

5. **The Invention of Wings** is about several simultaneous struggles for freedom. How did you develop the movements toward freedom in Handful's and Sarah's characters?

Handful and Sarah are both imprisoned in their own particular way. As a white woman in South Carolina in the early 1800s, even a privileged one, Sarah's life was vastly limited. Women had few rights, not to property or even to their own children. Essentially, they were the property of their husbands, and their purpose in life was to marry, have children, and live their lives within the domestic sphere. And yet, their lack of freedom could not compare to the horrific subjugation of enslaved women, whose entire lives were determined by their owners and whose suffering was infinitely worse. I felt like the primary thing I had to do was never lose sight of that.

As for how I developed Handful and Sarah's individual quests for freedom, I'm reminded of a certain looming moment in the story when Handful says to Sarah, "My body might be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it's the other way round." Handful is conveying a truth she knows only too well herself, that one's mind can become a cage, too. Finding their freedom had to do with liberating themselves internally, discovering a sense of self, and the boldness to express that self. There's a scene in which Handful willfully takes a bath in the Grimké's majestic copper bathtub. I can't tell you how much pleasure

I derived from writing this scene. Handful's bath is tinged with defiance, but it becomes a baptism into her own worth. Observing her in the aftermath of it, Sarah says, "She had the look of someone who'd declared herself." Handful has begun to understand that even though her body is trapped in slavery, her mind is her own. The question then became how to emancipate herself physically. What needed to transpire inside of her to bring her to the crucial moment of risking everything? I felt that the moment occurs near the end of the story, when little missus disparages the story portrayed in her Charlotte's quilt and Handful fears she may burn it. I saw this moment as a kind of watershed in which all the accumulated sorrows and deprivations of Handful's life, and even of her mother's life, come together, causing her to want freedom more than the next breath. "To leave or die trying."

Sarah was steeped in family and cultural expectations for women, which crashed over and over against her ravenous intellect and hunger for an education, her passion for a vocation, her indomitable moral compass, and her courage—qualities that came to be reflected in her silver fleur de lis button, an object she would lose and re-find, figuratively, many times. The development of Sarah's freedom necessitated a whole series of "copper tub moments," each one bringing her a little closer to breaking fully free. My favorite such moment may be when she's caring for her dying father at the Jersey shore, and she wades into the ocean. Turning loose of the sea-rope, to which all the women grasp, she strides off on her own into the waves. Floating alone in the water, far from the tether, became her own baptism into her apartness and independence. It was a small beginning. Later, she would have another moment when the inner voice showed up, telling her to go north. They go on and on, but the final piece of her liberation doesn't come, perhaps, until the end, when she's able to speak her mind in the house where she was born.

6. Sarah shared a close friendship with Lucretia Mott. What motivated you to include this relationship in the story?

It was a surprise for me when Lucretia Mott turned up as a character. I knew from my research that Mott, a famous abolitionist and women's rights pioneer herself, had attended the same meetinghouse in Philadelphia as Sarah, at least for a time, but I didn't know she would step into the pages of my story until the very moment she did so. It was a relief to me when she turned up. At this juncture, Sarah is alone in the North, and the only female presence in her life is Israel's sister, who is hardly a friend to her. Inevitably, a community of women will show up in my fiction, even if it's a community of two.

Many years ago, when I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, I was captivated by the idea of a woman having an independent space that belongs to her, that's devoted to her creative life and her intellectual and spiritual liberation. I rather loved creating such a room in Lucretia's house, a place where she and Sarah could spend time together. It is cozy, full of books, journals, art palettes, and velvet squares pinned with luna moths, which Lucretia finds lifeless in the garden, and it looks out over a copse of trees. Sarah calls it a studio, but it's inspired by Woolf's "room of one's own." So much of Sarah's life is about exile and seeking her place of belonging in the world, and it seemed that the studio would offer her a taste of what belonging to one's self could be like. The studio wasn't on the pages of the novel for

very long, but the time the two women spent there was distilled and transforming for Sarah.

It was in the studio that Sarah poured out her story to Lucretia and had it truly received. At one point, Sarah asks Lucretia, "Do you think I could become a Quaker minister?" and Lucretia responds, "Sarah Grimké, you're the most intelligent person I know. Of course you could." Sarah had never really known this kind of listening, validation and encouragement. The scene brought to my mind theologian Nelle Morton's words, that women "hear one another into speech," and I thought, too, of theologian, Mary Daly, who said, "Only women hearing each other can create a counterworld to the prevailing reality."

There's a line in the novel that I truly loved writing, which actually thrilled me to write—it was four words that I had Lucretia send in a letter to Sarah and Angelina during their public crusade and which arrived at the height of backlash against them. It said, simply: "Press on, my sisters." Honestly, I think it was I who wanted to say those words to Sarah and Angelina, every bit as much as Lucretia did.

7. One of the more unique and striking aspects of the novel is Charlotte's story quilt. What drew you to include it in the story? What meaning did you want it to carry?

I was inspired by the quilts of Harriet Powers, who was born into slavery in 1837 in Georgia. She used West African applique technique and designs to tell stories, mostly about Biblical events, legends, and astronomical occurrences. Each of the squares on her two surviving quilts is a masterpiece of art and narration. After viewing her quilt in the archives of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., it seemed more than plausible to me that many enslaved women, who were forbidden to read and write, would have devised subversive ways to voice themselves, to keep their memories alive, and to preserve their African heritage. In the novel, Charlotte is the Grimke's rebellious and accomplished seamstress, and I envisioned her using needle and cloth the way others use paper and pen, attempting to set down the events of her life in a single quilt. She appliques it with strange, beautiful images—slaves flying through the air, spirit trees with their trunks wrapped in red thread—but she also sews violent and painful images of her punishments and loss. The quilt in the novel is meant to be more than a warm blanket or a nice piece of handiwork. It is Charlotte's *story*. As Handful says, "Mauma had sewed where she came from, who she was, what she loved, the things she'd suffered and the things she hoped. She'd found a way to tell it."

Above all, I wanted Charlotte's story quilt to speak about the deep need we have to make meaning out of what befalls us. I wanted it to suggest how important it is to take the broken, painful, and discarded fragments of our lives and piece them into something whole. There can be healing, and power, too, in giving expression to what's inside of us, in having our voices heard and our pain witnessed. As writer Isak Dinesen put it, "All sorrows can be borne if we put them in a story or tell a story about them."

8. How did you go about writing the complicated relationship between Handful and Sarah? It's hard to come up with a relationship between characters more challenging to write about than that of an owner and a slave. Even if the owner is an unwilling one, even if she has an abolitionist's heart beating in her

chest, as Sarah does, it's still a problematic situation. It was the thing that kept me up at nights—Handful and Sarah's fraught connection and whether I was getting it right. In the novel, their relationship spans three and half decades, much of which they spend as constant companions. To a large extent, they mold one another's lives and shape each other's destinies. There's an undeniable caring between them, but also the built-in gulf of slavery. Handful tries to capture it when she says, "People say love gets fouled by a difference big as ours. I didn't know for sure whether Miss Sarah's feelings came from love or guilt. I didn't know whether mine came from love or a need to be safe. She loved me and pitied me. And I loved her and used her. It never was a simple thing."

Their relationship is disfigured by so many things: guilt, shame, pity, resentment, defiance, estrangement. I tried to create a relationship between them that allows for all of that, yet also has room for surprise, redemption, and even love. Someone who read an early copy of the novel commented that the two women create a sisterhood against all odds. I think they do—an uneasy, but saving sisterhood.

9. Sarah Grimké was both attracted by and repelled by organized religion. What role does it play in Sarah's life? How, if at all, does religion influence Handful? How would you describe Handful's spirituality?

The real-life Sarah Grimké was more pious than my version of her in the novel. During her Presbyterian and Quaker years, her devoutness seemed, at times, to border on asceticism. There's speculation among her biographers that her self-denial may have influenced her refusal to marry as much as her desire for independence. Both Sarahs, though, the one in history and the one in my story, carry on an intricate relationship with church and faith that was as conflicted as it was compatible. In the novel, it begins as twelve-year-old Sarah sits in church listening to the minister defend slavery. I felt it was important to acknowledge that slavery was supported not just by the government, but largely by the Church. The scene in St. Philip's precipitates Sarah's first crisis of faith. Did I make up my God, she asks, or did the reverend make up his? Later, in the wake of her heartbreak from her first love, Burke Williams, she leaves the Anglicans for the Presbyterians. She was genuinely in pursuit of God, but I muddied the water a bit, suggesting she was also in pursuit of a way out of the miseries she experienced in Charleston society.

From the time Sarah is four and witnesses a slave whipping—the "unspeakable" thing that mutes her voice—she moves between voice and voiceless-ness, her words often stuck in her throat. It struck me as fascinating and more than coincidental that she gives herself to the Quakers, a religion centered on the inner voice. As a Quaker, she's compelled to listen for a voice inside, a true one, and find a way to articulate it on her tongue. This, of course, is the large and ongoing struggle of her own life. Her audacious move to the Quakers gave her a way out of the South, just as the Presbyterians had given her a way out of society, and their doctrines supported and emboldened her antislavery beliefs and opened up the possibility of a vocation as a minister. She would pin all her hopes on the latter. She lands, however, in a branch of Quakerism that takes a highly conservative approach, and she often finds herself at odds with it. Her conflict with organized religion is nowhere more pronounced that in the

scripture verse: "I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence," a verse that was hauled out and used against her by New England ministers during her public crusade. After her expulsion from the Quakers, organized religion held less sway over her, and she came to rely more on her own spiritual core.

As a child, Handful compared God to master Grimké and wondered if there was a black God, too. Like many slaves in Charleston, she participated in house devotions, which helped to Christianize the slaves, but it was also a means of controlling them. Accentuating Bible verses on obedience, submission, and long-suffering was common. On this score, though, Handful learned how to give almost as good as she got. She learned the "Jesus-act" from her mother, which she used to her advantage. It got her permission to attend the African church, where she hoped to obtain information about her mother, but surprisingly enough to her, she found herself drawn into the church's message of hope and deliverance. She found strength in the solidarity of the congregation. But I think, at heart, Handful was an animist, finding her connection with the divine through natural objects like the water she watched with such devotion from the alcove, making up songs to it. Her belief that God animated nature seems present, too, in her devotion to the spirit tree. In some ways, the tree, which she tended with red thread and wore pieces of about her neck, was her real "church." It was a sort of sanctuary, a place of ritual, a place that held her spirit, her pain and her hope. The water and the tree, and perhaps even the birds in the branches, seemed to mediate God to her. They became Handful's primary scripture.

10. Your writing tends to do more for your readers than simply entertain them. Reading one of your novels can be a kind of transformation. How do you hope that *The Invention of Wings* might affect someone who reads it?

It would certainly please me if readers finished the novel having learned something new about slavery, about the history of the early nineteenth century and the innovations of thought that helped to create the abolition and women's rights movements. I would definitely be happy if it helped readers discover or rediscover Sarah and Angelina Grimké and the roles they played. I think every novelist wants her book to enlighten the mind in some way and be a carrier of ideas. My greatest hope, however, is for readers to take away a *felt* experience of the story, of what slavery might have been like for someone or what it was like back then for a woman without rights. I want the reader to feel as if he or she has participated in the interior lives of the characters and felt something of their yearnings, sufferings, joys, and braveries. Empathy—taking another's experience and making it one's own—is one of the most mysterious and noble transactions a human can have. It's the real power of fiction. While in college, I studied Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of "the common heart," a place inside of us where we share an intrinsic unity with all humanity. The idea has remained with me all these years. As a writer, I believe in it. The hope that this story would help us find a portal into that place is the most I could hope.

Discussion Questions

1. The title *The Invention of Wings* was one of the first inspirations that came to Sue Monk Kidd as she began the novel. Why is the title an apt one for Kidd's novel? What are some of the ways that the author

uses the imagery and symbolism of birds, wings, and flight?

- 2. What were the qualities in Handful that you most admired? As you read the novel, could you imagine yourself in her situation? How did Handful continue her relentless pursuit of self and freedom in the face of such a brutal system?
- 3. After laying aside her aspirations to become a lawyer, Sarah remarks that the Graveyard of Failed Hopes is "an all-female establishment." What makes her say so? What was your experience of reading Kidd's portrayal of women's lives in the nineteenth century?
- 4. In what ways does Sarah struggle against the dictates of her family, society and religion? Can you relate to her need to break away from the life she had in order to create a new and unknown life? What sort of risk and courage does this call for?
- 5. The story of *The Invention of Wing*s includes a number of physical objects that have a special significance for the characters: Sarah's fleur de lis button, Charlotte's story quilt, the rabbit-head cane that Handful receives from Goodis, and the spirit tree. Choose one or more of these objects and discuss their significance in the novel.
- 6. Were you aware of the role that Sarah and Angelina Grimke played in abolition and women's rights? Have women's achievements in history been lost or overlooked? What do you think it takes to be a reformer today?
- 7. How would you describe Sarah and Angelina's unusual bond? Do you think either one of them could have accomplished what they did on their own? Have you known women who experienced this sort of relationship as sisters?
- 8. Some of the staunchest enemies of slavery believed the time had not yet come for women's rights and pressured Sarah and Angelina to desist from the cause, fearing it would split the cause of abolition. How do you think the sisters should have responded to their demand? At the end of the novel, Sarah asks, "Is it ever right to sacrifice one's truth for expedience?"
- 9. What are some of the examples of Handful's wit and sense of irony, and how do they help her cope with the burdens of slavery?
- 10. Contrast Handful's relationship with her mother with the relationship between Sarah and the elder Mary Grimké. How are the two younger women formed—and malformed—by their mothers?
- 11. Kidd portrays an array of male characters in the novel: Sarah's father; Sarah's brother Thomas; Theodore Weld; Denmark Vesey; Goodis Grimke, Israel Morris, Burke Williams. Some of them are men of their time, some are ahead of their time. Which of these male characters did you find most compelling? What positive and negative roles did they play in Sarah and Handful's evolvement?

- 12. How has your understanding of slavery been changed by reading *The Invention of Wings*? What did you learn about it that you didn't know before?
- 13. Sarah believed she could not have a vocation and a marriage, both. Do you think she made the right decision in turning down Israel's proposal? How does her situation compare to Angelina's marriage to Theodore? In what way are women today still asking the question of whether they can have it all?
- 14. How does the spirit tree function in Handful's life? What do you think of the rituals and meanings surrounding it?
- 15. Had you heard of the Denmark Vesey slave plot before reading this novel? Were you aware of the extent that slaves resisted? Why do you think the myth of the happy, compliant slave endured? What were some of the more inventive or cunning ways that Charlotte, Handful and other characters rebelled and subverted the system?
- 16. **The Invention of Wings** takes the reader back to the roots of racism in America. How has slavery left its mark in American life? To what extent has the wound been healed? Do you think slavery has been a taboo topic in American life?
- 17. Are there ways in which Kidd's novel can help us see our own lives differently? How is this story relevant for us today?