
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

◀ SKYLIGHT ▶
CONFESSIONS

a novel by

ALICE
HOFFMAN

A conversation with the author of *Skylight Confessions*

Alice Hoffman talks with Allen Pierleoni
of the *Sacramento Bee*

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

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

Hoffman just published her seventeenth novel for adults (she’s written eight books for young readers), *Skylight Confessions*. It’s a rich, heavily symbolic story of family relationships, bad choices, love gone wrong and right, and how, despite everything, we still can salvage redemption of a sort.

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

Hoffman, fifty-four, grew up on Long Island and earned degrees in English and anthropology from Adelphi University there. Later, she graduated with a master of arts degree

in creative writing from Stanford University. She and her husband, Tom (a former teacher turned writer), have two sons, eighteen and twenty-three.

You wrote your first novel, Property Of, when you were twenty-one and attending Stanford.

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

Is your family anything like the one in Skylight Confessions?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, they're brutal and raw. They originally were part of the oral tradition of women telling stories to children. They were moral stories that dealt with the psychology of childhood. As a kid, I loved them because they weren't sugar coated. When you're a child and you read gruesome stuff

about families and parents and being lost in the woods, you feel the emotional truth of it.

What are you working on now?

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

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

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

As a writer, you assume many guises.

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

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

I would ask, “Are you happy that you spent your life as a writer?”

That’s a key question.

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

The complete text of Allen Pierleoni’s interview with Alice Hoffman originally appeared in the *Sacramento Bee* on Monday, January 29, 2007. Reprinted with permission.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. There is much speculation by characters in the novel as to whether John and Arlyn were fated to find each other. Do you think they were destined to be together? Or do you think that Arlyn was meant to be with George Snow? Would Arlyn ever have met George if she hadn't first fallen in love with John?
2. Arlyn's hair is described as being several different shades of red in the book, from fire-red to blood-red. How do you think these varying descriptions affect the way you perceive Arlyn in these scenes?
3. Why is it significant that the Moodys live in a glass house, and that the design of this house is the crowning achievement of John's father's career?
4. Why do you think Arlyn haunts John Moody for so long after her death?
5. After Arlyn's death, John and his son, Sam, manage to clash on just about everything. Is there anything besides Arlyn that you think these two have in common?

6. Birds make notable appearances in several scenes in the novel. Identify a few such scenes and discuss the role that birds play in the story.
7. Arlyn passes on to her children specific items that they wear like talismans: Sam gets her gray coat and Blanca her pearls. In what ways is each of these gifts appropriate for its recipient?
8. “Sam Moody wasn’t like other people. The things he thought most often about were dishes, bones, vases, model planes, buildings made of blocks — things that could be broken” (page 44). What do you think this passage says about Sam’s personality? To what do you attribute Sam’s addiction to drugs?
9. Discuss the role that Meredith, as an outsider to the family, plays in the novel.
10. How do you think Blanca’s life will change after the novel ends? What do you hope will happen for her? What effect will the revelation of her true father’s identity ultimately have on Blanca?

ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNG READERS

The Foretelling

A novel by Alice Hoffman

Rain is a girl with a certain destiny, living in an ancient time of blood, raised on mares' milk, nurtured with the strength of a thousand Amazon sisters. A girl of power, stronger than fifty men, she rides her white horse as fierce as a demon.

But then there is the foretelling. *The black horse*.

In truth, Rain tastes a different future in her dreams. She is touched by the stirrings of emotions unknown. She begins to see beyond a life of war . . . and wonders — about mercy and men, about hope and love.

“Hoffman’s prose eloquently expresses the beliefs and rituals of a lost civilization and offers a sympathetic portrait of a young leader who chooses kindness over cruelty.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“A subtly inflected characterization . . . holds the center of this high-action survival and battle drama.”

— *The Horn Book*

“A spare, compelling coming-of-age story.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*



Published by Little, Brown and Company

Available wherever books are sold

ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNG READERS

Incantation

A novel by Alice Hoffman

Estrella de Madrigal thought she knew herself: daughter, granddaughter, dearest friend. But truth is rare in this cruel and unforgiving century in Spain, when Jews who refused conversion to Christianity risked everything — love, life, family, faith.

Then: a startling discovery shakes Estrella's world to the core. Emerging from a cocoon of secrets, new love burns brightly, but betrayal unleashes a monstrous evil upon her. Estrella must find the strength — despite grave consequences — to become the person she is destined to be.

“Riveting.”

— *School Library Journal*

“Hoffman tears a horrific page from history and melds it with mysticism to create a spellbinding tale.” — *VOYA*

“Alice Hoffman's books of magical realism and even more magical language have great appeal to teens. . . . Her signature lyricism is much in evidence.” — *KLIATT*



Published by Little, Brown and Company

Available wherever books are sold

ALSO BY ALICE HOFFMAN

The Ice Queen

“A moving tale of love, loss, forgiveness, and spiritual renewal, *The Ice Queen* is one of Alice Hoffman’s finest novels.”

— Dorman T. Shindler, *Denver Post*

“Magic with intermittent flashes of reality. . . . The transformation of a woman through passion is at the heart of *The Ice Queen*.”

— Anita Sama, *USA Today*

“Stunning. . . . An electrifying novel. . . . Hoffman explores the consequences of both magic and lightning with luminous clarity. It is a stunning feat.”

— Melissa Mia Hall, *Chicago Sun-Times*

“Nothing less than stellar. . . . A lush tale of loss and redemption. . . . Whether evoking the sultry landscape of southern Florida or the layers of ice around the librarian’s heart, Hoffman reminds us how little distance there is between magic and mundane.”

— Amy Waldman, *People*

“Alice Hoffman sets in motion another of her modern-day fairy tales, and in so doing she mesmerizes the reader. Clear your calendar before picking up *The Ice Queen*. You will get nothing else done during the day or two it will take you to finish this fluid, lovely novel.”

— Lisa Jennifer Selzman, *Houston Chronicle*



Back Bay Books • Available wherever paperbacks are sold