

Marriage of Opposites (Hoffman)

[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)

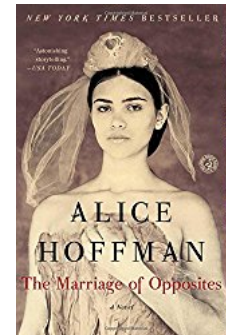
The Marriage of Opposites

Alice Hoffman, 2015

Simon & Schuster

400 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781451693607



[Purchase Book Here](#)

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 Boccock 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) (<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 Pizarro 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.)

[top of page \(summary\)](#)