



***The Invention of Wings* (2014)** by Sue Monk Kidd

Discussion Questions (Taken from Lit Lovers)

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 Wings* 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, "Was 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 Grimke. 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 evolvment?

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 marriage, both. Do you think she made the right decision in turning down Israel's proposal? How does her situation compare with Angelina's marriage to Theodore? In what ways 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 on 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?
(Questions issued by publisher.)

Summary

Writing at the height of her narrative and imaginative gifts, Sue Monk Kidd presents a masterpiece of hope, daring, the quest for freedom, and the desire to have a voice in the world—and it is now the newest Oprah's Book Club 2.0 selection.

Hetty "Handful" Grimke, an urban slave in early nineteenth century Charleston, yearns for life beyond the suffocating walls that enclose her within the wealthy Grimke household. The Grimke's daughter, Sarah, has known from an early age she is meant to do something large in the world, but she is hemmed in by the limits imposed on women.

Kidd's sweeping novel is set in motion on Sarah's eleventh birthday, when she is given ownership of ten year old Handful, who is to be her handmaid. We follow their remarkable journeys over the next thirty five years, as both strive for a life of their own, dramatically shaping each other's destinies and forming a complex relationship marked by guilt, defiance, estrangement and the uneasy ways of love.

As the stories build to a riveting climax, Handful will endure loss and sorrow, finding courage and a sense of self in the process. Sarah will experience crushed hopes, betrayal, unrequited love, and ostracism before leaving Charleston to find her place alongside her fearless younger sister, Angelina, as one of the early pioneers in the abolition and women's rights movements.

Inspired by the historical figure of Sarah Grimke, Kidd goes beyond the record to flesh out the rich interior lives of all of her characters, both real and invented, including Handful's cunning mother, Charlotte, who courts danger in her search for something better.

This exquisitely written novel is a triumph of storytelling that looks with unswerving eyes at a devastating wound in American history, through women whose struggles for liberation, empowerment, and expression will leave no reader unmoved. *(From the publisher.)*

Author Bio

- Birth—August 12, 1948
- Where—Sylvester, Georgia, USA

- Education—B.S., Texas Christian University
- Awards—Poets and Writers Award; Katherine Anne Porter Award
- Currently—lives near Charleston, South Carolina

Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, spent more than one hundred weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, has sold more than four million copies, and was chosen as the 2004 Book Sense Paperback Book of the Year and *Good Morning America's* "Read This!" Book Club pick. She is also the author of several acclaimed memoirs and the recipient of numerous awards, including a Poets & Writers award. She lives near Charleston, South Carolina.

More

Sue Monk Kidd first made her mark on the literary circuit with a pair of highly acclaimed, well-loved memoirs detailing her personal spiritual development. However, it was a work of fiction, *The Secret Life of Bees*, that truly solidified her place among contemporary writers. Although Kidd is no longer writing memoirs, her fiction is still playing an important role in her on-going journey of spiritual self-discovery.

Despite the fact that Kidd's first published books were nonfiction works, her infatuation with writing grew out of old-fashioned, Southern-yarn spinning. As a little girl in the little town of Sylvester, Georgia, Kidd thrilled to listen to her father tell stories about "mules who went through cafeteria lines and a petulant boy named Chewing Gum Bum," as she says on her web site. Inspired by her dad's tall tales, Kidd began keeping a journal that chronicled her everyday experiences.

Such self-scrutiny surely gave her the tools she needed to pen such keenly insightful memoirs as *When the Hearts Waits* and *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, both tracking her development as both a Christian and a woman. "I think when you have an impulse to write memoir you are having an opportunity to create meaning of your life," she told Barnes & Noble.com, "to articulate your experience; to understand it in deeper ways... And after a while, it does free you from yourself, of having to write about yourself, which it eventually did for me."

Once Kidd had worked the need to write about herself out of her system, she decided to get back to the kind of storytelling that inspired her to become a writer in the first place. Her debut novel *The Secret Life of Bees* showed just how powerfully the gift of storytelling charges through Kidd's veins. The novel has sold more than 4.5 million copies, been published in over twenty languages, and spent over two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Even as Kidd has shifted her focus from autobiography to fiction, she still uses her writing as a means of self-discovery. This is especially evident in her latest novel *The Mermaid Chair*, which tells the story of a woman named Jessie who lives a rather ordinary life with her husband Hugh until she meets a man about to take his final vows at a Benedictine monastery. Her budding infatuation with Brother Thomas leads Jessie to take stock of her life and resolve an increasingly intense personal tug-of-war between marital fidelity and desire.

Kidd feels that through telling Jessie's story, she is also continuing her own journey of self-discovery, which she began when writing her first books. "I think there is some part of that journey towards one's self that I did experience. I told that particular story in my book *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* and it is the story of a woman's very-fierce longing for herself. The character in *The Mermaid Chair* Jessie has this need to come home to herself in a much deeper way," Kidd said, "to define herself, and I certainly know that longing."

Kidd lives beside a salt marsh near Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband, Sandy, a marriage and individual counselor in private practice. (*From Barnes & Noble.*)

Book Reviews

A remarkable novel that heightened my sense of what it meant to be a woman - slave or free. . .will resonate with anyone who has ever struggled to find her power and her voice. . .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 us to where we are.

O, The Oprah Magazine

A searing historical novel. . .these two women's relationship with each other grows more complex while the culture shape-shifts around them. Their bold individual requests for independence are explored by Kidd in exquisitely nuanced language that makes this book a page turner in the most resonant and satisfying of ways.

Kidd...is no stranger to strong female characters. Here, her inspiration is the real Sarah Grimke, daughter of an elite Charleston family, who fought for abolition and women's rights. Handful, Kidd's creation, is Sarah's childhood handmaid.... Bolstered by female mentors, Kidd's heroines finally act on Sarah's blunt realization: "We can do little for the slave as long as we're under the feet of men."

Publishers Weekly

(Starred review.) Women played a large role in the fledgling abolitionist movement preceding the Civil War by several decades but were shushed by their male compatriots if they pointed out their own subservient status.... Monk's compelling work of historical fiction stands out...because of its layers of imaginative details.... [A] richly imagined narrative...of two women who became sisters under the skin. —Laurie Cavanaugh, *Holmes P.L., Halifax, MA*

Library Journal

(Starred review.) [A] moving portrait of two women inextricably linked by the horrors of slavery..... While their pain and struggle cannot be equated, both women strive to be set free—Sarah from the bonds of patriarchy and Southern bigotry, and Handful from the inhuman bonds of slavery. Kidd is a master storyteller...with smooth and graceful prose. —Kerri Price

(Starred review.) Kidd hits her stride and avoids sentimental revisionism with this historical novel about the relationship between a slave and the daughter of slave owners in antebellum Charleston...Kidd's portrait of white slave-owning southerners is all the more harrowing for showing them as morally complicated while she gives Handful the dignity of being not simply a victim, but a strong, imperfect woman.

Kirkus Reviews

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