

## [The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

[Magnetic Poetry Feature!](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Writers' Challenge!](#)

[Bullying Awareness](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

[Artists' Gallery](#)

[Indie Bookstores](#)

[Literary Arts Patrons](#)

[Scrapbook of Five Years](#)

[Archives](#)

[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

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Search



Alice Hoffman; photos by Deborah Feitold

*Far from the offices, grocery lists, daily obligations and traffic, we close our eyes to enter an untamed wood, the sort of primal place that resides within the deep realms of the subconscious, the wildest part of our dreams... Baring our feet to the harsh elements we run far into the center of the unknown discovery that awaits; what we find there, what we face is no more and no less than our truest selves. As described by Robert Frost in the poem, "Into my Own", we "should steal away" into the vastness of "those dark trees" and return "only more sure" of what we "thought was true."*

*Identity and survival are amongst the themes we delve into with NYT best-selling author Alice Hoffman. We catch up with Hoffman and discuss her most recent works, including The Red Garden and the epic portrayal of Masada in The Dovekeepers, after having first interviewed her in the pages of the autumn 2008 issue. Though exploring new territory, as a novelist of twenty-three novels, she maintains her carefully honed art of drawing out, highlighting and heightening elements of reality and character through profound symbolism, archetypes and magical/surreal qualities. In the 2008 interview she stated, "For me the magic is always a way to connect with and write about psychological and emotional truth. In fairy tales we read a story about witches, wolves, whatever, but we know all the time we're reading there's a double meaning, one that applies to our everyday lives. That's what I'm aiming for." This she continues to do with a perceptiveness in her storytelling that sets her apart.*

*We cover new ground as we discuss what we're made of, voices of history, her wise and inspirational new non-fiction title Survival Lessons, the release of a creative collaboration e-book with folk artist Maggie Stern and what's next for Alice Hoffman. Steal away with us and discover...*

Interview with Alice Hoffman by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) In your two most recent novels, *The Red Garden* and *The Dovekeepers*, deep, ardent portrayals of time and place in that they too become characters as vivid as the protagonists, the themes surrounding the color red and that of identity discovered or unearthed by the wilderness/adversity, shape the women.

Given that color can be rich with connotations depending on experience, culture, philosophy and psychology, what are your personal associations with or perspectives on red and the properties contained within it?

***Yes, the color red surfaces again and again in my work—all of the associations of passion, life and death are intertwined with that hue—blood, of course, and new life. It has never been a color I was drawn to, until I suddenly was—in a way it's a primal color—black, white, red. It feels as if these are the colors we're made of.***

In relation to strong female characters shedding outer layers to discover their true selves either in the unforgiving 'wild'erness or through adversity, do you feel that just as in earlier times when Native American tribes would place emphasis on having their young men go on vision quests (though some woman could do this as well) to find their purpose, that there is an unveiling of true nature within nature? Do you feel that women who are most self-actualized are those who have undergone some sort of a struggle towards survival?

***I do think that we are all fighting for survival—and I realize that it is the theme of my work. How we relate to the natural world is certainly the way we learn about ourselves and our own natures as well.***

2) I never forgot reading “Sustained by Fiction While Facing Life’s Facts” in *Writers on Writing: Collected Essays from The New York Times*; it was pure passion for the craft of writing seen through the lens of the most difficult circumstances. It was one of those pieces that continued to inspire years and years later. When I learned about *Survival Lessons*, I knew from that essay that this non-fiction book touching upon your battle with illness would be a gift to so many in how you would write it. My feeling wasn't wrong. *Survival Lessons* is a book that anyone at any stage of life would benefit from. Even someone in the sunshine prime of their lives could gain insight from this book about how to treat themselves and others. It's true that life doesn't come with an instruction booklet, but there are books to help light the way and this is one of them.

What led to the creation of this book and why do you think people often forget these basic but essential kindnesses to themselves as though they're not instinctual? How has the book affected others?

***It took nearly fifteen years for me to be able to write this small book about personal survival. I wrote it as if I was writing to a friend, in the most personal and intimate way. And I wrote it as if writing to myself as well—these are lessons I need to learn each and every day. The response from readers has been very emotional, and very strong, which for me has been very gratifying.***

***The book sprung from a talk I gave at a breast cancer fundraiser. My surgeon, Dr. Susan Pories's sister was in the audience—Kathy Pories is an editor at Algonquin books. After the event she suggested my talk might be part of a book, and I realized that it was.***

3) “You can't travel back in time, but you can be transported,” was the slogan I'd heard for the exhibit *Dead Sea Scrolls: Life in Ancient Times*. The history of these scrolls combined with my deep captivation with the sacred art of writing beckoned me. I went to the exhibit, lingering over objects, text and symbols, reading of the turbulent past and wanting so badly to understand more about the daily life of the people who had lived then. As writers can often imagine that which is not readily seen or heard by others, I could walk into exhibits and get a sense of those presences through what was left behind and piece together fragments of their stories. Yet in this exhibit, for the first time, I felt as though a thick, impenetrable cloak of silence had been wrapped around each item; I couldn't reach the stories as though they were protected and I, with increasing questions each moment, was not being granted access. I hadn't been consciously aware of it at the time, but a request was made and *The Dovekeepers* came to be my answer.

When I read of how Israeli paleographer Ada Yardeni discerned that the same scribe who'd written fifty Dead Sea scrolls found near Qumran also penned scrolls found at the fortress of Masada, I made the connection that this book gave me what I'd been looking for after the exhibit- a visceral idea of what life was then in terms of the struggles, losses, strengths, families and love that endures. Right down to the uses of the symbols and sculptures and putting intimate perspective to some of the historical detail, at last, I was transported.

The roles of women in *The Dovekeepers* showed in sharp relief, all that we shoulder and how we do so with births, deaths, familial survival, etc... The

women were the ‘unsung heroes’ and the perspectives of the book showed maid (from two differing sides), mother and crone to give a notion of what can come of each stage. This well-rounded view provided by these four unforgettable characters, made the story remarkably alive. Talk to us about the characters’ formation and about weaving their tales together so seamlessly.

***Writing about women in the ancient world was a challenge—there are so few details and stories, since women's stories were mostly an oral tradition, and such tales, never written down, were easily lost. For me, such stories, most often told from grandmother to granddaughters, are the beginning of storytelling itself. They are the basis for myth, fairy tale, and, of course, the stories I tell.***

***All of the artifacts in The Dovekeepers are based on archeological finds, including the magical elements such as the incantation bowls.***

***In terms of the day-to-day lives of women in the ancient world, I researched current nomadic traditions—in this way I could imagine what the domestic lives of women were like—simple acts, such as making cheese, dyeing cloth, became clear to me.***

4) Regarding the whimsical *Mother's Day* e-book with folk artist Maggie Stern, you had mentioned that it's impossible to know every side of one's mother, but that in the book, on one special night, all is revealed to the protagonist. Talk to us about the mixing of mediums in the e-book format—how the partnership came together, what you enjoyed/learned about the process of e-publishing...

***Maggie is a good friend and a wonderful folk artist—we had great fun in putting together the e-book Mother's Day. Hopefully we'll do another one sometime!***

***E-books allow more writers to reach out to readers. Before if a manuscript was rejected there was no other option and now there is. Reading is reading and to me that's always the most important thing.***

In combination with the theme of the e-book as well as the mother-daughter dynamics portrayed through the character of Shirah in *The Dovekeepers*, you wrote in the acknowledgments of the novel, "Lastly, my greatest debt is to my mother...who I miss every day. I hope you forgave me, as I have long ago forgiven you." Fiction gives distance and enough anonymity to allow the writer to access, sort through or come upon deep emotions and realizations. Though a minor example, I was able to work out some of the aspects of my grandmother's passing through a short story, which, in turn, elicited a reaction in a reader who had lost their daughter. In the fiction pieces, did you come to necessary realizations and were you able to process emotions regarding that important relationship in your life?

***The Dovekeepers is very much about the complex relationship between mothers and daughters. My relationship with my mother was complicated as well. I always admired her bravery and I do miss her every day.***

5) You stepped out into new territory with the historical *Dovekeepers*, the non-fiction *Survival Lessons* as well as the e-book of *Mother's Day*; what's next to enchant your readers (ex. the upcoming novel *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*)?

***My new novel, The Museum of Extraordinary Things, takes place in 1911 in New York City—it's a mystery that centers on the search for a missing girl after the tragic fire at the Triangle Factory—the worst workplace disaster in New York before 9/11, and much of it takes place in Chelsea and in Coney Island.***

***I'm also working on a magical novel for middle readers, which is great fun for me.***

\*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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