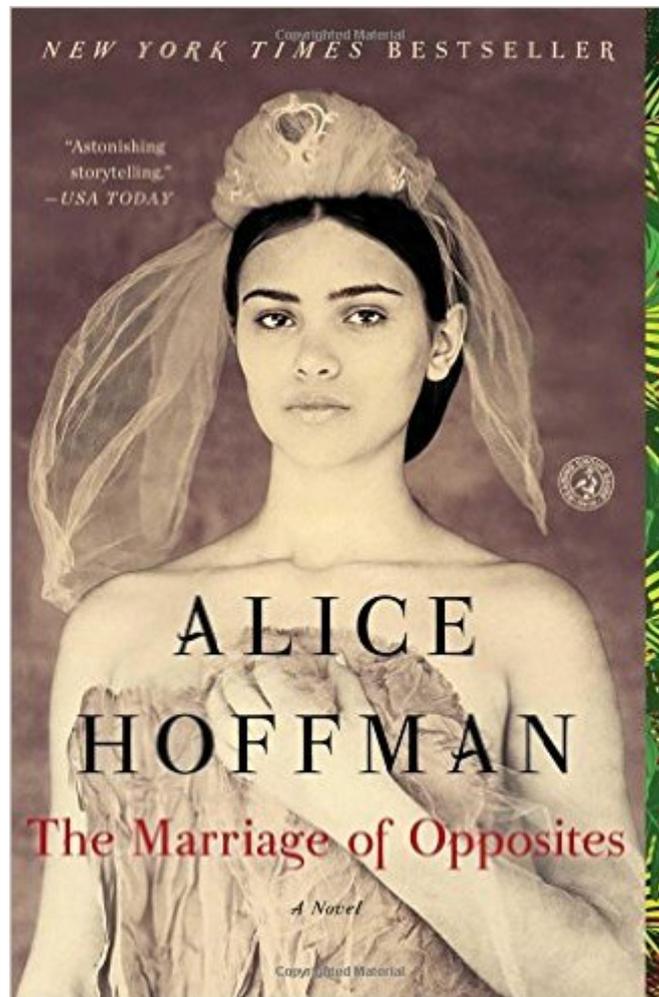


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# The Marriage Of Opposites



## Synopsis

â œA luminous, Marquez-esque taleâ • (O, The Oprah Magazine) from the New York Times bestselling author of *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*: a forbidden love story set on a tropical island about the extraordinary woman who gave birth to painter Camille Pissarroâ ”the Father of Impressionism. Growing up on idyllic St. Thomas in the early 1800s, Rachel dreams of life in faraway Paris. Rachelâ™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, Rachelâ™s salvation is their maid Adelleâ™s belief in her strengths, and her deep, life-long friendship with Jestine, Adelleâ™s daughter. But Rachelâ™s life is not her own. She is married off to a widower with three children to save her fatherâ™s business. When her older husband dies suddenly and his handsome, much younger nephew, Frédéric, 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. â œA work of artâ • (Dallas Morning News), *The Marriage of Opposites* showcases the beloved, bestselling Alice Hoffman at the height of her considerable powers. â œHer lush, seductive prose, and heart-pounding subjectâ |make this latest skinny-dip in enchanted realismâ |the Platonic ideal of the beach readâ • (Slate.com). Once forgotten to history, the marriage of Rachel and Frédéric â œwill only renew your commitment to Hoffmanâ™s astonishing storytellingâ • (USA TODAY).

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Marriage of Opposites by Alice Hoffman is a beautifully atmospheric work of historical fiction set in the 19th century on the tropical island of St. Thomas where the reader learns about the life of Rachel Pomie, who later becomes known as the mother of the famous painter Camille Pissarro, the father of Impressionism, and while I would have delighted in reading a book entirely about Pissarro's life, his mother's life is extraordinarily intriguing. I went into The Marriage of Opposites with knowledge of the Father of Impressionism, however I knew absolutely nothing about his mother and here Hoffman shines in her exceptional account of Rachel's life from childhood through her adulthood, from a young girl dreaming of Paris, to an arranged marriage, through widowhood, and finding true love in Frederick. I was hesitant that this would be a basic love story, a genre I usually do not enjoy, however Hoffman, the fabulous storyteller that she is, weaves together many forms of love into this absolutely fantastic story, pulling on the heartstrings of readers, while making history come alive in what is researched as well as imagined by such a gifted storyteller. Rachel is not an easy character to always like, however, she is one to be understood, like most people she had dreams that in her day and time were not possible and while she pushed the boundaries of convention at that time and place in history, she also knew her place and her duties. I found the telling of the multilayered characters to be exceptional and Hoffman excels at showing the reader through her elegant prose, the many facets of love. I would highly recommend The Marriage of Opposites to anyone who enjoys excellent literary and historical fiction as well as to all book discussion groups.

The Marriage of Opposites is an absorbing book that follows the life of Rachel Pomie Petit Pizarro from childhood on the Caribbean Island of St. Thomas through widowhood in Paris, a span of sixty years. In many ways, this book adheres to the formula established in Dovekeepers and Museum with a Jewish framework, scrupulous historical research, a touch of mysticism, lush images, and impassioned love. My comparisons here will be superficial as I have not read those first two books, having been too easily discouraged by the opening chapters, as I was when I first picked up Marriage. The book begins with a discussion of mosquitoes, abruptly transitions to an overview of Jewish expulsion, then a description of the island of St. Thomas. I felt overwhelmed, as though I'd fallen into a vat of watercolors, but once I settled into the story, I was duly mesmerized (being the most common adjective to appear in reviews of Hoffman's books). We see the world from the perspective of Rachel, born and raised on St. Thomas, a headstrong girl with profound self-awareness who spends her time battling the constraints imposed by a fierce mother, trying to adapt to a society that requires women to remain in

circumscribed roles, and dreaming of Paris. Along the way she marries a couple of times, has a bunch of mostly interchangeable kids (some step, some her own), talks to the spirits, and hangs out with all kinds of intriguing friends. The most enchanting aspect of this book, at least the first half, is the setting. By page 100, I was ready to book a trip to St. Thomas, a place I've never visited, just to see the colors and try the native delicacies. (Further research suggests that the island has changed substantially in the last 200 years, though you can get great deals on duty free jewelry.) Suddenly, almost exactly halfway through the book, the perspective switches to that of Jacobo, Rachel's son. He's supposed to be about 11 years old, but he doesn't sound like any preteen boy I've ever met. Why write this chapter in first person? Why not third? At that moment I realized that the central character was never meant to be Rachel but rather Jacobo, destined to become the famous impressionist Camille Pissarro. And at this juncture, Hoffman stumbles. When you're writing about a historical figure, you need to stick to facts, and the book starts to feel like one of those famous person biographies I devoured in fifth grade. I loved those books, don't get me wrong, but I didn't expect one to pop up in the middle of an Alice Hoffman novel. Once the focus returns to Rachel, some of the magic returns, but the second half of the book has an uneven pace, and also shows Rachel behaving in ways that seem inconsistent with the protagonist who illuminated the first half. Harsh, judgmental, is this our Rachel, or has she inexplicably become her mother? Along the way, a few family mysteries are revealed, none of them particularly momentous, and a half-observant reader will have guessed at the resolution already. My copy was an Advance Reader's Edition, and there were a few jarring issues, including one cringeworthy mistake, that I hope will be fixed before the book hits the bookstores in August.

This is a pleasant enough novel to read, that will probably please fans of historical romance, but it doesn't really go anywhere. It is a problem that arises, I think, partly from the rather anodyne quality of Alice Hoffman's writing, partly from the lack of focus inherent in her choice of subject: is this a book about an unknown mother or her famous son? Camille Pissarro, the son in question, was arguably the central figure of the Impressionist movement. He was the only artist to exhibit in all eight group exhibitions, and he served as mentor to many of his younger colleagues. But I am prepared to bet that he is not the first, second, or even third name to spring to mind when most people think of the Impressionists. Just being a great painter does not make him an interesting figure for a novel. But there are certainly interesting points in his childhood that you can see a novelist wanting to pick up on. He was born in 1830 on St. Thomas, now one of the US Virgin

Islands but at that time a Danish possession. His parents were both Jewish, but their marriage was not at first sanctioned by the local synagogue, since his mother was the young widow of her new husband's uncle; as a result, the family was ostracized and Camille (then called Jacobo Pizarro) and his brothers were sent to the charity school for the local children of color. I can see that the colorful setting and the hint of incest might give spice to the story, but at this remove the scandal seems largely innocuous. Besides, it affects mainly the two parents, whom Hoffman sees as preferring love over social acceptance; it is less a factor in the lives of their offspring. Accordingly, the first half of the book is the story of Rachel Monsanto Pomi, Camille's mother, whom Hoffman sees as a strong-minded woman. It tells of her childhood in the idyllic Caribbean setting (rather like the opening of *WIDE SARGASSO SEA* by Jean Rhys), her love of reading, her childhood friendship with the half-caste daughter of their maid, her problems with her mother, and her acceptance of early marriage to a widowed merchant in order to shore up the failing business of her beloved father. Hoffman knows the tropes of romantic literature from *JANE EYRE* onwards, and she tells the story in a mildly interesting, though seldom exciting way. I found her best in describing Rachel's first marriage, to this much older man still in thrall to his dead wife, who nonetheless treats Rachel with kindness and understanding. The start of her supposedly passionate affair with Frederic, her late husband's Parisian nephew, is surprisingly tame. Almost exactly half-way through the book, their third son, Camille, is born, and Rachel's story virtually stops. Of course Hoffman has to make him as much a problem for his mother as she was for hers, and of course everything is now described in terms of the colors seen by the budding artist's eye. But the momentum of the book, such as it was, is broken. Although there are occasional points of interest between there and the end, the story loses much sense of organic development. Instead of a true novel, I would call it a mildly pleasing confection assembled from a few facts and a lot of random invention.

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