

# *Magic Lessons*

ALICE HOFFMAN

*This reading group guide for Magic Lessons includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Alice Hoffman.*

*The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*



## *Introduction*

In an unforgettable novel that traces a centuries-old curse to its source, beloved author Alice Hoffman unveils the story of Maria Owens, accused of witchcraft in Salem and matriarch of the amazing Owens family featured in *Practical Magic* and *The Rules of Magic*.

Where does the story of the Owens bloodline begin? With Maria Owens, in the 1600s, when she's abandoned in a snowy field in rural England as a baby. Under the care of Hannah Owens, Maria learns about the "Nameless Art." Hannah recognizes that Maria has a gift and she teaches the girl all she knows. It is here that she learns her first important lesson: Always love someone who will love you back.

When Maria is betrayed by the man who has declared his love for her, she follows him to Salem, Massachusetts. Here she invokes the curse that will haunt her family. And it's here that she learns the rules of magic and the lesson that she will carry with her for the rest of her life: Love is the only thing that matters.

*Magic Lessons* is a celebration of life and love and a showcase of Alice Hoffman's masterful storytelling.

---

## *Topics & Questions for Discussion*

### 1.

This novel is both historical fiction and magical realism. How does Alice Hoffman blend both genres? What are examples from each genre in the book?

### 2.

Maria studies the Nameless Art under Hannah Owens and her mother, Rebecca. Hannah and Rebecca have different values. What are they? How do those differences influence what they teach Maria?

### 3.

Early in the novel, Rebecca teaches Maria, “Love could ruin your life or set you free; it could happen by chance or be a well-planned decision.” (45) How does this advice foreshadow Maria’s relationship with John Hathorne and Samuel Dias?

### 4.

There is a song that Maria recalls throughout her journey that starts with the lyric “The water is wide, I cannot get oe’r it.” Think about when the song appears in the novel. How does the meaning of the lyrics change as Maria deals with new challenges and heartache?

### 5.

In Maria’s travels, she meets Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal who have left their home countries to escape persecution. How does Alice Hoffman weave Jewish history into the story?

### 6.

Maria encounters discrimination against women in both the old world and the new. In a world where most women are illiterate and have no power Maria knows “a woman with her own beliefs who refuses to bow to those she believes to be wrong can be considered dangerous.” (107) How does Maria rebel against societal constraints? How does she create her own fate?

### 7.

On her hanging day, Maria calls down a family curse as she seeks “to protect herself and her daughter and any of their descendants from the grief she’d known.” (220) Does the curse successfully protect her and Faith from grief?

### 8.

Note Maria’s relationship to Cadin, her crow, and Faith’s to Keeper. Crows are described as “more loyal than any other man or beast” (35) and Keeper waits years for Faith to return. Have you ever had an emotional connection to an animal? Have you experienced empathy from an animal?

## 9.

Faith is a talented witch and deeply loved by her mother, but after she's kidnapped and held prisoner, she changes. Faith takes up the Dark Arts and studies *The Book of the Raven*, interested in revenge. Do you think her anger at her father is justified? Do we sometimes lash out at those we love best?

## 10.

After reading the novel, reconsider the title. What are the "magic lessons" that Maria and Faith were first taught and what are the lessons they learn to live by after overcoming suffering?

## 11.

Love is central to the story. Every character in the story is disappointed by love, but also needs love. Discuss the different types of love that are explored in this book.

## 12.

The Owens family curse continues for generations, but Maria still manages to save Samuel. How do they avoid the family curse?



## *Enhance Your Book Club*

### 1.

The Grimoire is a leather-bound book of spells that Hannah Owens gives to Maria. Collect words of wisdom, favorite sayings, and photographs to make your own scrapbook Grimoire. What words, images, mantras, or recipes do you draw strength from?

### 2.

Using a map, trace Maria's journey throughout the world. Explore the history behind each city in the same time period that Maria visits. What would she have encountered during her travels? Have you visited any of the locales yourself? Imagine what it would have been like to walk in Maria's shoes. How do you think it's different now in modern day?

### 3.

Maria bakes apple pies for her daughter, Faith, but in the Boston teahouse where she works she makes bird's nest pudding. Search for a recipe and try making your version of this apple-cinnamon custard to enjoy with a pot of tea.



---

## *A Conversation with Alice Hoffman*

### 1.

*Magic Lessons* continues the story of the beloved Owens family, taking us to the origins of the family curse. What inspired you to return to the Owens family after so many years?

**AH:** My readers asked me for more of the Owens family, and I was intrigued by what their history might be. The character of Maria, who appears in the first book [*Practical Magic*], always seemed as if she might have a great deal more to say.

### 2.

You have said that you always start a novel with a question. What was the question that you asked before writing this book and did you find your answer?

**AH:** The question in *Magic Lessons* is how can those who are cursed in love manage to live a life that includes love. How can people who are hurt and vulnerable and betrayed open their hearts again?

### 3.

The story is rich with historical details, especially when Maria enters new cities throughout the world. What was the process behind your research?

**AH:** I have been researching the Owens family for twenty-five years! I read a great deal of history, went to Salem, and read extensively about the witch trials. But I'm also interested in everyday details: recipes, how houses were built, clothing—that to me is the beginning of building a world. I also do magic research, and have a magic library which I have been collecting for years. For me, that is the fun part of my research.

#### 4.

A value that Hannah Owens imparts on Maria is kindness. It is a trait that Maria's biological mother, Rebecca, does not possess but Hannah teaches Maria to value. What inspired you to emphasize this trait?

**AH:** In a cruel world it can be difficult to see that kindness is the way through the maze of uncertainty. But then and now, kindness is always a trait to value.

#### 5.

You explore the relationships between humans and animals through Maria and her crow, Cadin, and Faith and her wolf, Keeper. Can you tell us about an animal that has been special in your life?

**AH:** Witches are said to have familiars, animals or birds who are soul mates. My soul mate was a German shepherd named Houdini, my dearest companion for sixteen years.

#### 6.

There are different types of love in the novel. There is romantic love, demonstrated in the relationship between Maria and Samuel Dias. There is also familial love between Maria and Faith. What did you want readers to learn from these different relationships?

**AH:** The book is about love in its many forms. I think most readers take away what the story means to them, and what love means in their own lives.

#### 7.

Faith's journey is a realistically dark one. She is taken from her mother and held captive for years, and subsequently turns to the Dark Arts for revenge. Did you plan her story beforehand? Or did her character evolve in the process of writing the novel?

**AH:** I didn't plan Faith's story. She was such a strong character, she took charge of her own life and I just sat by and watched. She's so complicated and hurt and brave. I grew to love her, despite her turn to the Dark Arts.

#### 8.

This book thematically resonates with *Practical Magic* and *The Rules of Magic* in that powerful women are at the forefront of the story. What women have inspired you in your life?

**AH:** My mother and grandmother always inspire me. My mother was a single mother in the early sixties, a social worker, a rebel, and a wonderful friend. My grandmother was a Russian immigrant who supported her family and who loved me unconditionally. My first story was about her, and I would likely not have been a writer without her support.

## 9.

Your interest in fairy tales, myth, and fantasy comes through in many of your novels. Did you read any works which inspired you while writing *Magic Lessons*? How did this interest influence the writing of *Magic Lessons*?

**AH:** I don't read while I'm writing fiction—I don't want to be influenced by other stories or ideas. But the stories I read as a child and the books that I love are with me always. The Grimms' fairy tales, the myths and legends, and the stories my Russian grandmother told me are always a part of what I write. In this case, Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel *The Scarlet Letter* was hugely influential.

## 10.

Can you tell us what you're working on now?

**AH:** I'm working on the fourth book in the Practical Magic series, called *The Book of Magic*. It's likely the last of the series as well, and takes place in modern times, so that readers find out what happened to Sally's daughters, Kylie and Antonia, and they also discover what happened to Vincent Owens. For me, it's been a pleasure to spend more time with the Owens family.